

THOMAS HARDY

THE RETURN
OF THE
NATIVE

Thomas Hardy
The Return of the Native

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PREFACE

The date at which the following events are assumed to have occurred may be set down as between 1840 and 1850, when the old watering place herein called “Budmouth” still retained sufficient afterglow from its Georgian gaiety and prestige to lend it an absorbing attractiveness to the romantic and imaginative soul of a lonely dweller inland.

Under the general name of “Egdon Heath,” which has been given to the sombre scene of the story, are united or typified heaths of various real names, to the number of at least a dozen; these being virtually one in character and aspect, though their original unity, or partial unity, is now somewhat disguised by intrusive strips and slices brought under the plough with varying degrees of success, or planted to woodland.

It is pleasant to dream that some spot in the extensive tract whose southwestern quarter is here described, may be the heath of that traditionary King of Wessex – Lear.

July, 1895.

“To sorrow
I bade good morrow,
And thought to leave her far away behind;
But cheerly, cheerly,
She loves me dearly;
She is so constant to me, and so kind.
I would deceive her,
And so leave her,
But ah! she is so constant and so kind.”

BOOK ONE – THE THREE WOMEN

1 – A Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression

A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor.

The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the earth with the darkest vegetation, their meeting-line at the horizon was clearly marked. In such contrast the heath wore the appearance of an instalment of night which had taken up its place before its astronomical hour was come: darkness had to a great extent arrived hereon, while day stood distinct in the sky. Looking upwards, a furze-cutter would have been inclined to continue work; looking down, he would have decided to finish his faggot and go home. The distant rims of the world and of the firmament seemed to be a division in time no less than a division in matter. The face of the heath by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening; it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread.

In fact, precisely at this transitional point of its nightly roll into darkness the great and particular glory of the Egdon waste began, and nobody could be said to understand the heath who had not been there at such a time. It could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen, its complete effect and explanation lying in this and the succeeding hours before the next dawn; then, and only then, did it tell its true tale. The spot was, indeed, a near relation of night, and when night showed itself an apparent tendency to gravitate together could be perceived in its shades and the scene. The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it. And so the obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced halfway.

The place became full of a watchful intentness now; for when other things sank blooding to sleep the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen. Every night its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one last crisis – the final overthrow.

It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity. Smiling champaigns of flowers and fruit hardly do this, for they are permanently harmonious only with an existence of better reputation as to its issues than the present. Twilight combined with the scenery of Egdon Heath to evolve a thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity. The qualifications which frequently invest the facade of a prison with far more dignity than is found in the facade of a palace double its size lent to this heath a sublimity in which spots renowned for beauty of the accepted kind are utterly wanting. Fair prospects wed happily with fair times; but alas, if times be not fair! Men have oftener suffered from, the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than from the oppression of surroundings oversadly tinged. Haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter. The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule; human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony with external things wearing a sombreness distasteful to our race when it was young. The time seems near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind. And ultimately, to the commonest tourist, spots like Iceland may

become what the vineyards and myrtle gardens of South Europe are to him now; and Heidelberg and Baden be passed unheeded as he hastens from the Alps to the sand dunes of Scheveningen.

The most thoroughgoing ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon – he was keeping within the line of legitimate indulgence when he laid himself open to influences such as these. Colours and beauties so far subdued were, at least, the birthright of all. Only in summer days of highest feather did its mood touch the level of gaiety. Intensity was more usually reached by way of the solemn than by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. Then it became the home of strange phantoms; and it was found to be the hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster, and are never thought of after the dream till revived by scenes like this.

It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature – neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities.

This obscure, obsolete, superseded country figures in Domesday. Its condition is recorded therein as that of heathy, furzy, briary wilderness – “Bruaria.” Then follows the length and breadth in leagues; and, though some uncertainty exists as to the exact extent of this ancient lineal measure, it appears from the figures that the area of Egdon down to the present day has but little diminished. “Turbaria Bruaria” – the right of cutting heath-turf – occurs in charters relating to the district. “Overgrown with heth and mosse,” says Leland of the same dark sweep of country.

Here at least were intelligible facts regarding landscape – far-reaching proofs productive of genuine satisfaction. The untameable, Ishmaelitic thing that Egdon now was it always had been. Civilization was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation. In its venerable one coat lay a certain vein of satire on human vanity in clothes. A person on a heath in raiment of modern cut and colours has more or less an anomalous look. We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive.

To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New. The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained. Those surfaces were neither so steep as to be destructible by weather, nor so flat as to be the victims of floods and deposits. With the exception of an aged highway, and a still more aged barrow presently to be referred to – themselves almost crystallized to natural products by long continuance – even the trifling irregularities were not caused by pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change.

The above-mentioned highway traversed the lower levels of the heath, from one horizon to another. In many portions of its course it overlaid an old vicinal way, which branched from the great Western road of the Romans, the Via Iceniana, or Ikenild Street, hard by. On the evening under consideration it would have been noticed that, though the gloom had increased sufficiently to confuse the minor features of the heath, the white surface of the road remained almost as clear as ever.

2 – Humanity Appears upon the Scene, Hand in Hand with Trouble

Along the road walked an old man. He was white-headed as a mountain, bowed in the shoulders, and faded in general aspect. He wore a glazed hat, an ancient boat-cloak, and shoes; his brass buttons bearing an anchor upon their face. In his hand was a silver-headed walking stick, which he used as a veritable third leg, perseveringly dotting the ground with its point at every few inches' interval. One would have said that he had been, in his day, a naval officer of some sort or other.

Before him stretched the long, laborious road, dry, empty, and white. It was quite open to the heath on each side, and bisected that vast dark surface like the parting-line on a head of black hair, diminishing and bending away on the furthest horizon.

The old man frequently stretched his eyes ahead to gaze over the tract that he had yet to traverse. At length he discerned, a long distance in front of him, a moving spot, which appeared to be a vehicle, and it proved to be going the same way as that in which he himself was journeying. It was the single atom of life that the scene contained, and it only served to render the general loneliness more evident. Its rate of advance was slow, and the old man gained upon it sensibly.

When he drew nearer he perceived it to be a spring van, ordinary in shape, but singular in colour, this being a lurid red. The driver walked beside it; and, like his van, he was completely red. One dye of that tincture covered his clothes, the cap upon his head, his boots, his face, and his hands. He was not temporarily overlaid with the colour; it permeated him.

The old man knew the meaning of this. The traveller with the cart was a reddleman – a person whose vocation it was to supply farmers with redding for their sheep. He was one of a class rapidly becoming extinct in Wessex, filling at present in the rural world the place which, during the last century, the dodo occupied in the world of animals. He is a curious, interesting, and nearly perished link between obsolete forms of life and those which generally prevail.

The decayed officer, by degrees, came up alongside his fellow-wayfarer, and wished him good evening. The reddleman turned his head, and replied in sad and occupied tones. He was young, and his face, if not exactly handsome, approached so near to handsome that nobody would have contradicted an assertion that it really was so in its natural colour. His eye, which glared so strangely through his stain, was in itself attractive – keen as that of a bird of prey, and blue as autumn mist. He had neither whisker nor moustache, which allowed the soft curves of the lower part of his face to be apparent. His lips were thin, and though, as it seemed, compressed by thought, there was a pleasant twitch at their corners now and then. He was clothed throughout in a tight-fitting suit of corduroy, excellent in quality, not much worn, and well-chosen for its purpose, but deprived of its original colour by his trade. It showed to advantage the good shape of his figure. A certain well-to-do air about the man suggested that he was not poor for his degree. The natural query of an observer would have been, Why should such a promising being as this have hidden his prepossessing exterior by adopting that singular occupation?

After replying to the old man's greeting he showed no inclination to continue in talk, although they still walked side by side, for the elder traveller seemed to desire company. There were no sounds but that of the booming wind upon the stretch of tawny herbage around them, the crackling wheels, the tread of the men, and the footsteps of the two shaggy ponies which drew the van. They were small, hardy animals, of a breed between Galloway and Exmoor, and were known as "heath-croppers" here.

Now, as they thus pursued their way, the reddleman occasionally left his companion's side, and, stepping behind the van, looked into its interior through a small window. The look was always anxious. He would then return to the old man, who made another remark about the state of the country and so on, to which the reddleman again abstractedly replied, and then again they would lapse into silence. The silence conveyed to neither any sense of awkwardness; in these lonely places wayfarers, after a

first greeting, frequently plod on for miles without speech; contiguity amounts to a tacit conversation where, otherwise than in cities, such contiguity can be put an end to on the merest inclination, and where not to put an end to it is intercourse in itself.

Possibly these two might not have spoken again till their parting, had it not been for the reddleman's visits to his van. When he returned from his fifth time of looking in the old man said, "You have something inside there besides your load?"

"Yes."

"Somebody who wants looking after?"

"Yes."

Not long after this a faint cry sounded from the interior. The reddleman hastened to the back, looked in, and came away again.

"You have a child there, my man?"

"No, sir, I have a woman."

"The deuce you have! Why did she cry out?"

"Oh, she has fallen asleep, and not being used to traveling, she's uneasy, and keeps dreaming."

"A young woman?"

"Yes, a young woman."

"That would have interested me forty years ago. Perhaps she's your wife?"

"My wife!" said the other bitterly. "She's above mating with such as I. But there's no reason why I should tell you about that."

"That's true. And there's no reason why you should not. What harm can I do to you or to her?"

The reddleman looked in the old man's face. "Well, sir," he said at last, "I knew her before today, though perhaps it would have been better if I had not. But she's nothing to me, and I am nothing to her; and she wouldn't have been in my van if any better carriage had been there to take her."

"Where, may I ask?"

"At Anglebury."

"I know the town well. What was she doing there?"

"Oh, not much – to gossip about. However, she's tired to death now, and not at all well, and that's what makes her so restless. She dropped off into a nap about an hour ago, and 'twill do her good."

"A nice-looking girl, no doubt?"

"You would say so."

The other traveller turned his eyes with interest towards the van window, and, without withdrawing them, said, "I presume I might look in upon her?"

"No," said the reddleman abruptly. "It is getting too dark for you to see much of her; and, more than that, I have no right to allow you. Thank God she sleeps so well, I hope she won't wake till she's home."

"Who is she? One of the neighbourhood?"

"'Tis no matter who, excuse me."

"It is not that girl of Blooms-End, who has been talked about more or less lately? If so, I know her; and I can guess what has happened."

"'Tis no matter... Now, sir, I am sorry to say that we shall soon have to part company. My ponies are tired, and I have further to go, and I am going to rest them under this bank for an hour."

The elder traveller nodded his head indifferently, and the reddleman turned his horses and van in upon the turf, saying, "Good night." The old man replied, and proceeded on his way as before.

The reddleman watched his form as it diminished to a speck on the road and became absorbed in the thickening films of night. He then took some hay from a truss which was slung up under the van, and, throwing a portion of it in front of the horses, made a pad of the rest, which he laid on the ground beside his vehicle. Upon this he sat down, leaning his back against the wheel. From the

interior a low soft breathing came to his ear. It appeared to satisfy him, and he musingly surveyed the scene, as if considering the next step that he should take.

To do things musingly, and by small degrees, seemed, indeed, to be a duty in the Egdon valleys at this transitional hour, for there was that in the condition of the heath itself which resembled protracted and halting dubiousness. It was the quality of the repose appertaining to the scene. This was not the repose of actual stagnation, but the apparent repose of incredible slowness. A condition of healthy life so nearly resembling the torpor of death is a noticeable thing of its sort; to exhibit the inertness of the desert, and at the same time to be exercising powers akin to those of the meadow, and even of the forest, awakened in those who thought of it the attentiveness usually engendered by understatement and reserve.

The scene before the reddleman's eyes was a gradual series of ascents from the level of the road backward into the heart of the heath. It embraced hillocks, pits, ridges, acclivities, one behind the other, till all was finished by a high hill cutting against the still light sky. The traveller's eye hovered about these things for a time, and finally settled upon one noteworthy object up there. It was a barrow. This bossy projection of earth above its natural level occupied the loftiest ground of the loneliest height that the heath contained. Although from the vale it appeared but as a wart on an Atlantean brow, its actual bulk was great. It formed the pole and axis of this heathery world.

As the resting man looked at the barrow he became aware that its summit, hitherto the highest object in the whole prospect round, was surmounted by something higher. It rose from the semiglobular mound like a spike from a helmet. The first instinct of an imaginative stranger might have been to suppose it the person of one of the Celts who built the barrow, so far had all of modern date withdrawn from the scene. It seemed a sort of last man among them, musing for a moment before dropping into eternal night with the rest of his race.

There the form stood, motionless as the hill beneath. Above the plain rose the hill, above the hill rose the barrow, and above the barrow rose the figure. Above the figure was nothing that could be mapped elsewhere than on a celestial globe.

Such a perfect, delicate, and necessary finish did the figure give to the dark pile of hills that it seemed to be the only obvious justification of their outline. Without it, there was the dome without the lantern; with it the architectural demands of the mass were satisfied. The scene was strangely homogeneous, in that the vale, the upland, the barrow, and the figure above it amounted only to unity. Looking at this or that member of the group was not observing a complete thing, but a fraction of a thing.

The form was so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure that to see it move would have impressed the mind as a strange phenomenon. Immobility being the chief characteristic of that whole which the person formed portion of, the discontinuance of immobility in any quarter suggested confusion.

Yet that is what happened. The figure perceptibly gave up its fixity, shifted a step or two, and turned round. As if alarmed, it descended on the right side of the barrow, with the glide of a water-drop down a bud, and then vanished. The movement had been sufficient to show more clearly the characteristics of the figure, and that it was a woman's.

The reason of her sudden displacement now appeared. With her dropping out of sight on the right side, a newcomer, bearing a burden, protruded into the sky on the left side, ascended the tumulus, and deposited the burden on the top. A second followed, then a third, a fourth, a fifth, and ultimately the whole barrow was peopled with burdened figures.

The only intelligible meaning in this sky-backed pantomime of silhouettes was that the woman had no relation to the forms who had taken her place, was sedulously avoiding these, and had come thither for another object than theirs. The imagination of the observer clung by preference to that vanished, solitary figure, as to something more interesting, more important, more likely to have a history worth knowing than these newcomers, and unconsciously regarded them as intruders. But

they remained, and established themselves; and the lonely person who hitherto had been queen of the solitude did not at present seem likely to return.

3 – The Custom of the Country

Had a looker-on been posted in the immediate vicinity of the barrow, he would have learned that these persons were boys and men of the neighbouring hamlets. Each, as he ascended the barrow, had been heavily laden with furze faggots, carried upon the shoulder by means of a long stake sharpened at each end for impaling them easily – two in front and two behind. They came from a part of the heath a quarter of a mile to the rear, where furze almost exclusively prevailed as a product.

Every individual was so involved in furze by his method of carrying the faggots that he appeared like a bush on legs till he had thrown them down. The party had marched in trail, like a travelling flock of sheep; that is to say, the strongest first, the weak and young behind.

The loads were all laid together, and a pyramid of furze thirty feet in circumference now occupied the crown of the tumulus, which was known as Rainbarrow for many miles round. Some made themselves busy with matches, and in selecting the driest tufts of furze, others in loosening the bramble bonds which held the faggots together. Others, again, while this was in progress, lifted their eyes and swept the vast expanse of country commanded by their position, now lying nearly obliterated by shade. In the valleys of the heath nothing save its own wild face was visible at any time of day; but this spot commanded a horizon enclosing a tract of far extent, and in many cases lying beyond the heath country. None of its features could be seen now, but the whole made itself felt as a vague stretch of remoteness.

While the men and lads were building the pile, a change took place in the mass of shade which denoted the distant landscape. Red suns and tufts of fire one by one began to arise, flecking the whole country round. They were the bonfires of other parishes and hamlets that were engaged in the same sort of commemoration. Some were distant, and stood in a dense atmosphere, so that bundles of pale straw-like beams radiated around them in the shape of a fan. Some were large and near, glowing scarlet-red from the shade, like wounds in a black hide. Some were Maenades, with winy faces and blown hair. These tintured the silent bosom of the clouds above them and lit up their ephemeral caves, which seemed thenceforth to become scalding caldrons. Perhaps as many as thirty bonfires could be counted within the whole bounds of the district; and as the hour may be told on a clock-face when the figures themselves are invisible, so did the men recognize the locality of each fire by its angle and direction, though nothing of the scenery could be viewed.

The first tall flame from Rainbarrow sprang into the sky, attracting all eyes that had been fixed on the distant conflagrations back to their own attempt in the same kind. The cheerful blaze streaked the inner surface of the human circle – now increased by other stragglers, male and female – with its own gold livery, and even overlaid the dark turf around with a lively luminousness, which softened off into obscurity where the barrow rounded downwards out of sight. It showed the barrow to be the segment of a globe, as perfect as on the day when it was thrown up, even the little ditch remaining from which the earth was dug. Not a plough had ever disturbed a grain of that stubborn soil. In the heath's barrenness to the farmer lay its fertility to the historian. There had been no obliteration, because there had been no tending.

It seemed as if the bonfire-makers were standing in some radiant upper story of the world, detached from and independent of the dark stretches below. The heath down there was now a vast abyss, and no longer a continuation of what they stood on; for their eyes, adapted to the blaze, could see nothing of the deeps beyond its influence. Occasionally, it is true, a more vigorous flare than usual from their faggots sent darting lights like aides-de-camp down the inclines to some distant bush, pool, or patch of white sand, kindling these to replies of the same colour, till all was lost in darkness again. Then the whole black phenomenon beneath represented Limbo as viewed from the brink by the sublime Florentine in his vision, and the muttered articulations of the wind in the hollows were as complaints and petitions from the "souls of mighty worth" suspended therein.

It was as if these men and boys had suddenly dived into past ages, and fetched therefrom an hour and deed which had before been familiar with this spot. The ashes of the original British pyre which blazed from that summit lay fresh and undisturbed in the barrow beneath their tread. The flames from funeral piles long ago kindled there had shone down upon the lowlands as these were shining now. Festival fires to Thor and Woden had followed on the same ground and duly had their day. Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot.

Moreover to light a fire is the instinctive and resistant act of man when, at the winter ingress, the curfew is sounded throughout Nature. It indicates a spontaneous, Promethean rebelliousness against that fiat that this recurrent season shall bring foul times, cold darkness, misery and death. Black chaos comes, and the fettered gods of the earth say, Let there be light.

The brilliant lights and sooty shades which struggled upon the skin and clothes of the persons standing round caused their lineaments and general contours to be drawn with Dureresque vigour and dash. Yet the permanent moral expression of each face it was impossible to discover, for as the nimble flames towered, nodded, and swooped through the surrounding air, the blots of shade and flakes of light upon the countenances of the group changed shape and position endlessly. All was unstable; quivering as leaves, evanescent as lightning. Shadowy eye-sockets, deep as those of a death's head, suddenly turned into pits of lustre: a lantern-jaw was cavernous, then it was shining; wrinkles were emphasized to ravines, or obliterated entirely by a changed ray. Nostrils were dark wells; sinews in old necks were gilt mouldings; things with no particular polish on them were glazed; bright objects, such as the tip of a furze-hook one of the men carried, were as glass; eyeballs glowed like little lanterns. Those whom Nature had depicted as merely quaint became grotesque, the grotesque became preternatural; for all was in extremity.

Hence it may be that the face of an old man, who had like others been called to the heights by the rising flames, was not really the mere nose and chin that it appeared to be, but an appreciable quantity of human countenance. He stood complacently sunning himself in the heat. With a speaker, or stake, he tossed the outlying scraps of fuel into the conflagration, looking at the midst of the pile, occasionally lifting his eyes to measure the height of the flame, or to follow the great sparks which rose with it and sailed away into darkness. The beaming sight, and the penetrating warmth, seemed to breed in him a cumulative cheerfulness, which soon amounted to delight. With his stick in his hand he began to jig a private minuet, a bunch of copper seals shining and swinging like a pendulum from under his waistcoat: he also began to sing, in the voice of a bee up a flue —

“The king’ call’d down’ his no-bles all’,
 By one’, by two’, by three’;
 Earl Mar’-shal, I’ll’ go shrive’-the queen’,
 And thou’ shalt wend’ with me’.

“A boon’, a boon’, quoth Earl’ Mar-shal’,
 And fell’ on his bend’-ded knee’,
 That what’-so-e’er’ the queen’ shall say’,
 No harm’ there-of’ may be’.”

Want of breath prevented a continuance of the song; and the breakdown attracted the attention of a firm-standing man of middle age, who kept each corner of his crescent-shaped mouth rigorously drawn back into his cheek, as if to do away with any suspicion of mirthfulness which might erroneously have attached to him.

“A fair stave, Grandfer Cattle; but I am afeard ‘tis too much for the mouldy weasand of such a old man as you,” he said to the wrinkled reveller. “Dostn’t wish th’ wast three sixes again, Grandfer, as you was when you first learnt to sing it?”

“Hey?” said Grandfer Cattle, stopping in his dance.

“Dostn’t wish wast young again, I say? There’s a hole in thy poor bellows nowadays seemingly.”

“But there’s good art in me? If I couldn’t make a little wind go a long ways I should seem no younger than the most aged man, should I, Timothy?”

“And how about the new-married folks down there at the Quiet Woman Inn?” the other inquired, pointing towards a dim light in the direction of the distant highway, but considerably apart from where the reddleman was at that moment resting. “What’s the rights of the matter about ‘em? You ought to know, being an understanding man.”

“But a little rakish, hey? I own to it. Master Cattle is that, or he’s nothing. Yet ‘tis a gay fault, neighbour Fairway, that age will cure.”

“I heard that they were coming home tonight. By this time they must have come. What besides?”

“The next thing is for us to go and wish ‘em joy, I suppose?”

“Well, no.”

“No? Now, I thought we must. I must, or ‘twould be very unlike me – the first in every spree that’s going!

“Do thou’ put on’ a fri’-ar’s coat’,
And I’ll’ put on’ a-no’-ther,
And we’ will to’ Queen Ele’anor go’,
Like Fri’ar and’ his bro’ther.

I met Mis’ess Yeobright, the young bride’s aunt, last night, and she told me that her son Clym was coming home a’ Christmas. Wonderful clever, ‘a believe – ah, I should like to have all that’s under that young man’s hair. Well, then, I spoke to her in my well-known merry way, and she said, ‘O that what’s shaped so venerable should talk like a fool!’ – that’s what she said to me. I don’t care for her, be jowned if I do, and so I told her. ‘Be jowned if I care for ‘ee,’ I said. I had her there – hey?”

“I rather think she had you,” said Fairway.

“No,” said Grandfer Cattle, his countenance slightly flagging. “‘Tisn’t so bad as that with me?”

“Seemingly ‘tis, however, is it because of the wedding that Clym is coming home a’ Christmas – to make a new arrangement because his mother is now left in the house alone?”

“Yes, yes – that’s it. But, Timothy, hearken to me,” said the Grandfer earnestly. “Though known as such a joker, I be an understanding man if you catch me serious, and I am serious now. I can tell ‘ee lots about the married couple. Yes, this morning at six o’clock they went up the country to do the job, and neither vell nor mark have been seen of ‘em since, though I reckon that this afternoon has brought ‘em home again man and woman – wife, that is. Isn’t it spoke like a man, Timothy, and wasn’t Mis’ess Yeobright wrong about me?”

“Yes, it will do. I didn’t know the two had walked together since last fall, when her aunt forbad the banns. How long has this new set-to been in mangling then? Do you know, Humphrey?”

“Yes, how long?” said Grandfer Cattle smartly, likewise turning to Humphrey. “I ask that question.”

“Ever since her aunt altered her mind, and said she might have the man after all,” replied Humphrey, without removing his eyes from the fire. He was a somewhat solemn young fellow, and carried the hook and leather gloves of a furze-cutter, his legs, by reason of that occupation, being sheathed in bulging leggings as stiff as the Philistine’s greaves of brass. “That’s why they went away to be married, I count. You see, after kicking up such a nunny-watch and forbidding the banns ‘twould

have made Mis'ess Yeobright seem foolish-like to have a banging wedding in the same parish all as if she'd never gainsaid it."

"Exactly – seem foolish-like; and that's very bad for the poor things that be so, though I only guess as much, to be sure," said Grandfer Cattle, still strenuously preserving a sensible bearing and mien.

"Ah, well, I was at church that day," said Fairway, "which was a very curious thing to happen."

"If 'twasn't my name's Simple," said the Grandfer emphatically. "I ha'n't been there to-year; and now the winter is a-coming on I won't say I shall."

"I ha'n't been these three years," said Humphrey; "for I'm so dead sleepy of a Sunday; and 'tis so terrible far to get there; and when you do get there 'tis such a mortal poor chance that you'll be chose for up above, when so many bain't, that I bide at home and don't go at all."

"I not only happened to be there," said Fairway, with a fresh collection of emphasis, "but I was sitting in the same pew as Mis'ess Yeobright. And though you may not see it as such, it fairly made my blood run cold to hear her. Yes, it is a curious thing; but it made my blood run cold, for I was close at her elbow." The speaker looked round upon the bystanders, now drawing closer to hear him, with his lips gathered tighter than ever in the rigorousness of his descriptive moderation.

"'Tis a serious job to have things happen to 'ee there," said a woman behind.

"'Ye are to declare it,' was the parson's words," Fairway continued. "And then up stood a woman at my side – a-touching of me. 'Well, be damned if there isn't Mis'ess Yeobright a-standing up,' I said to myself. Yes, neighbours, though I was in the temple of prayer that's what I said. 'Tis against my conscience to curse and swear in company, and I hope any woman here will overlook it. Still what I did say I did say, and 'twould be a lie if I didn't own it."

"So 'twould, neighbour Fairway."

"'Be damned if there isn't Mis'ess Yeobright a-standing up,' I said," the narrator repeated, giving out the bad word with the same passionless severity of face as before, which proved how entirely necessity and not gusto had to do with the iteration. "And the next thing I heard was, 'I forbid the banns,' from her. 'I'll speak to you after the service,' said the parson, in quite a homely way – yes, turning all at once into a common man no holier than you or I. Ah, her face was pale! Maybe you can call to mind that monument in Weatherbury church – the cross-legged soldier that have had his arm knocked away by the schoolchildren? Well, he would about have matched that woman's face, when she said, 'I forbid the banns.'"

The audience cleared their throats and tossed a few stalks into the fire, not because these deeds were urgent, but to give themselves time to weigh the moral of the story.

"I'm sure when I heard they'd been forbid I felt as glad as if anybody had gied me sixpence," said an earnest voice – that of Olly Dowden, a woman who lived by making heath brooms, or besoms. Her nature was to be civil to enemies as well as to friends, and grateful to all the world for letting her remain alive.

"And now the maid have married him just the same," said Humphrey.

"After that Mis'ess Yeobright came round and was quite agreeable," Fairway resumed, with an unheeding air, to show that his words were no appendage to Humphrey's, but the result of independent reflection.

"Supposing they were ashamed, I don't see why they shouldn't have done it here-right," said a wide-spread woman whose stays creaked like shoes whenever she stooped or turned. "'Tis well to call the neighbours together and to hae a good racket once now and then; and it may as well be when there's a wedding as at tide-times. I don't care for close ways."

"Ah, now, you'd hardly believe it, but I don't care for gay weddings," said Timothy Fairway, his eyes again travelling round. "I hardly blame Thomasin Yeobright and neighbour Wildeve for doing it quiet, if I must own it. A wedding at home means five and six-handed reels by the hour; and they do a man's legs no good when he's over forty."

“True. Once at the woman’s house you can hardly say nay to being one in a jig, knowing all the time that you be expected to make yourself worth your victuals.”

“You be bound to dance at Christmas because ‘tis the time o’ year; you must dance at weddings because ‘tis the time o’ life. At christenings folk will even smuggle in a reel or two, if ‘tis no further on than the first or second chiel. And this is not naming the songs you’ve got to sing... For my part I like a good hearty funeral as well as anything. You’ve as splendid victuals and drink as at other parties, and even better. And it don’t wear your legs to stumps in talking over a poor fellow’s ways as it do to stand up in hornpipes.”

“Nine folks out of ten would own ‘twas going too far to dance then, I suppose?” suggested Grandfer Cattle.

“‘Tis the only sort of party a staid man can feel safe at after the mug have been round a few times.”

“Well, I can’t understand a quiet ladylike little body like Tamsin Yeobright caring to be married in such a mean way,” said Susan Nunsuch, the wide woman, who preferred the original subject. “‘Tis worse than the poorest do. And I shouldn’t have cared about the man, though some may say he’s good-looking.”

“To give him his due he’s a clever, learned fellow in his way – a’most as clever as Clym Yeobright used to be. He was brought up to better things than keeping the Quiet Woman. An engineer – that’s what the man was, as we know; but he threw away his chance, and so ‘a took a public house to live. His learning was no use to him at all.”

“Very often the case,” said Olly, the besom-maker. “And yet how people do strive after it and get it! The class of folk that couldn’t use to make a round O to save their bones from the pit can write their names now without a sputter of the pen, oftentimes without a single blot – what do I say? – why, almost without a desk to lean their stomachs and elbows upon.”

“True – ‘tis amazing what a polish the world have been brought to,” said Humphrey.

“Why, afore I went a soldier in the Bang-up Locals (as we was called), in the year four,” chimed in Grandfer Cattle brightly, “I didn’t know no more what the world was like than the commonest man among ye. And now, jown it all, I won’t say what I bain’t fit for, hey?”

“Couldst sign the book, no doubt,” said Fairway, “if wast young enough to join hands with a woman again, like Wildeve and Mis’ess Tamsin, which is more than Humph there could do, for he follows his father in learning. Ah, Humph, well I can mind when I was married how I zid thy father’s mark staring me in the face as I went to put down my name. He and your mother were the couple married just afore we were and there stood they father’s cross with arms stretched out like a great banging scarecrow. What a terrible black cross that was – thy father’s very likeness in en! To save my soul I couldn’t help laughing when I zid en, though all the time I was as hot as dog-days, what with the marrying, and what with the woman a-hanging to me, and what with Jack Changley and a lot more chaps grinning at me through church window. But the next moment a strawmote would have knocked me down, for I called to mind that if thy father and mother had had high words once, they’d been at it twenty times since they’d been man and wife, and I zid myself as the next poor stunpoll to get into the same mess... Ah – well, what a day ‘twas!”

“Wildeve is older than Tamsin Yeobright by a good-few summers. A pretty maid too she is. A young woman with a home must be a fool to tear her smock for a man like that.”

The speaker, a peat- or turf-cutter, who had newly joined the group, carried across his shoulder the singular heart-shaped spade of large dimensions used in that species of labour, and its well-whetted edge gleamed like a silver bow in the beams of the fire.

“A hundred maidens would have had him if he’d asked ‘em,” said the wide woman.

“Didst ever know a man, neighbour, that no woman at all would marry?” inquired Humphrey.

“I never did,” said the turf-cutter.

“Nor I,” said another.

“Nor I,” said Grandfer Cattle.

“Well, now, I did once,” said Timothy Fairway, adding more firmness to one of his legs. “I did know of such a man. But only once, mind.” He gave his throat a thorough rake round, as if it were the duty of every person not to be mistaken through thickness of voice. “Yes, I knew of such a man,” he said.

“And what ghastly gallicrow might the poor fellow have been like, Master Fairway?” asked the turf-cutter.

“Well, ‘a was neither a deaf man, nor a dumb man, nor a blind man. What ‘a was I don’t say.”

“Is he known in these parts?” said Olly Dowden.

“Hardly,” said Timothy; “but I name no name... Come, keep the fire up there, youngsters.”

“Whatever is Christian Cattle’s teeth a-chattering for?” said a boy from amid the smoke and shades on the other side of the blaze. “Be ye a-cold, Christian?”

A thin jibbering voice was heard to reply, “No, not at all.”

“Come forward, Christian, and show yourself. I didn’t know you were here,” said Fairway, with a humane look across towards that quarter.

Thus requested, a faltering man, with reedy hair, no shoulders, and a great quantity of wrist and ankle beyond his clothes, advanced a step or two by his own will, and was pushed by the will of others half a dozen steps more. He was Grandfer Cattle’s youngest son.

“What be ye quaking for, Christian?” said the turf-cutter kindly.

“I’m the man.”

“What man?”

“The man no woman will marry.”

“The deuce you be!” said Timothy Fairway, enlarging his gaze to cover Christian’s whole surface and a great deal more, Grandfer Cattle meanwhile staring as a hen stares at the duck she has hatched.

“Yes, I be he; and it makes me afeard,” said Christian. “D’ye think ‘twill hurt me? I shall always say I don’t care, and swear to it, though I do care all the while.”

“Well, be damned if this isn’t the queerest start ever I know’d,” said Mr. Fairway. “I didn’t mean you at all. There’s another in the country, then! Why did ye reveal yer misfortune, Christian?”

“‘Twas to be if ‘twas, I suppose. I can’t help it, can I?” He turned upon them his painfully circular eyes, surrounded by concentric lines like targets.

“No, that’s true. But ‘tis a melancholy thing, and my blood ran cold when you spoke, for I felt there were two poor fellows where I had thought only one. ‘Tis a sad thing for ye, Christian. How’st know the women won’t hae thee?”

“I’ve asked ‘em.”

“Sure I should never have thought you had the face. Well, and what did the last one say to ye? Nothing that can’t be got over, perhaps, after all?”

“Get out of my sight, you slack-twisted, slim-looking maphrotight fool,’ was the woman’s words to me.”

“Not encouraging, I own,” said Fairway. “Get out of my sight, you slack-twisted, slim-looking maphrotight fool,’ is rather a hard way of saying No. But even that might be overcome by time and patience, so as to let a few grey hairs show themselves in the hussy’s head. How old be you, Christian?”

“Thirty-one last tatie-digging, Mister Fairway.”

“Not a boy – not a boy. Still there’s hope yet.”

“That’s my age by baptism, because that’s put down in the great book of the Judgment that they keep in church vestry; but Mother told me I was born some time afore I was christened.”

“Ah!”

“But she couldn’t tell when, to save her life, except that there was no moon.”

“No moon – that’s bad. Hey, neighbours, that’s bad for him!”

“Yes, ‘tis bad,” said Grandfer Cante, shaking his head.

“Mother know’d ‘twas no moon, for she asked another woman that had an almanac, as she did whenever a boy was born to her, because of the saying, ‘No moon, no man,’ which made her afeared every man-child she had. Do ye really think it serious, Mister Fairway, that there was no moon?”

“Yes. ‘No moon, no man.’ ‘Tis one of the truest sayings ever spit out. The boy never comes to anything that’s born at new moon. A bad job for thee, Christian, that you should have showed your nose then of all days in the month.”

“I suppose the moon was terrible full when you were born?” said Christian, with a look of hopeless admiration at Fairway.

“Well, ‘a was not new,” Mr. Fairway replied, with a disinterested gaze.

“I’d sooner go without drink at Lammas-tide than be a man of no moon,” continued Christian, in the same shattered recitative. “‘Tis said I be only the rames of a man, and no good for my race at all; and I suppose that’s the cause o’t.”

“Ay,” said Grandfer Cante, somewhat subdued in spirit; “and yet his mother cried for scores of hours when ‘a was a boy, for fear he should outgrow hisself and go for a soldier.”

“Well, there’s many just as bad as he.” said Fairway.

“Wethers must live their time as well as other sheep, poor soul.”

“So perhaps I shall rub on? Ought I to be afeared o’ nights, Master Fairway?”

“You’ll have to lie alone all your life; and ‘tis not to married couples but to single sleepers that a ghost shows himself when ‘a do come. One has been seen lately, too. A very strange one.”

“No – don’t talk about it if ‘tis agreeable of ye not to! ‘Twill make my skin crawl when I think of it in bed alone. But you will – ah, you will, I know, Timothy; and I shall dream all night o’t! A very strange one? What sort of a spirit did ye mean when ye said, a very strange one, Timothy? – no, no – don’t tell me.”

“I don’t half believe in spirits myself. But I think it ghostly enough – what I was told. ‘Twas a little boy that zid it.”

“What was it like? – no, don’t – ”

“A red one. Yes, most ghosts be white; but this is as if it had been dipped in blood.”

Christian drew a deep breath without letting it expand his body, and Humphrey said, “Where has it been seen?”

“Not exactly here; but in this same heth. But ‘tisn’t a thing to talk about. What do ye say,” continued Fairway in brisker tones, and turning upon them as if the idea had not been Grandfer Cante’s – “what do you say to giving the new man and wife a bit of a song tonight afore we go to bed – being their wedding-day? When folks are just married ‘tis as well to look glad o’t, since looking sorry won’t unjoin ‘em. I am no drinker, as we know, but when the womenfolk and youngsters have gone home we can drop down across to the Quiet Woman, and strike up a ballet in front of the married folks’ door. ‘Twill please the young wife, and that’s what I should like to do, for many’s the skinful I’ve had at her hands when she lived with her aunt at Blooms-End.”

“Hey? And so we will!” said Grandfer Cante, turning so briskly that his copper seals swung extravagantly. “I’m as dry as a kex with biding up here in the wind, and I haven’t seen the colour of drink since nammet-time today. ‘Tis said that the last brew at the Woman is very pretty drinking. And, neighbours, if we should be a little late in the finishing, why, tomorrow’s Sunday, and we can sleep it off?”

“Grandfer Cante! you take things very careless for an old man,” said the wide woman.

“I take things careless; I do – too careless to please the women! Klk! I’ll sing the ‘Jovial Crew,’ or any other song, when a weak old man would cry his eyes out. Jown it; I am up for anything.

“The king’ look’d o’-ver his left’ shoul-der’,
And a grim’ look look’-ed hee’,

Earl Mar'-shal, he said', but for' my oath'
Or hang'-ed thou' shouldst bee'."

"Well, that's what we'll do," said Fairway. "We'll give 'em a song, an' it please the Lord. What's the good of Thomasin's cousin Clym a-coming home after the deed's done? He should have come afore, if so be he wanted to stop it, and marry her himself."

"Perhaps he's coming to bide with his mother a little time, as she must feel lonely now the maid's gone."

"Now, 'tis very odd, but I never feel lonely – no, not at all," said Grandfer Cattle. "I am as brave in the nighttime as a' admiral!"

The bonfire was by this time beginning to sink low, for the fuel had not been of that substantial sort which can support a blaze long. Most of the other fires within the wide horizon were also dwindling weak. Attentive observation of their brightness, colour, and length of existence would have revealed the quality of the material burnt, and through that, to some extent the natural produce of the district in which each bonfire was situate. The clear, kingly effulgence that had characterized the majority expressed a heath and furze country like their own, which in one direction extended an unlimited number of miles; the rapid flares and extinctions at other points of the compass showed the lightest of fuel – straw, beanstalks, and the usual waste from arable land. The most enduring of all – steady unaltering eyes like Planets – signified wood, such as hazel-branches, thorn-faggots, and stout billets. Fires of the last-mentioned materials were rare, and though comparatively small in magnitude beside the transient blazes, now began to get the best of them by mere long continuance. The great ones had perished, but these remained. They occupied the remotest visible positions – sky-backed summits rising out of rich coppice and plantation districts to the north, where the soil was different, and heath foreign and strange.

Save one; and this was the nearest of any, the moon of the whole shining through. It lay in a direction precisely opposite to that of the little window in the vale below. Its nearness was such that, notwithstanding its actual smallness, its glow infinitely transcended theirs.

This quiet eye had attracted attention from time to time; and when their own fire had become sunken and dim it attracted more; some even of the wood fires more recently lighted had reached their decline, but no change was perceptible here.

"To be sure, how near that fire is!" said Fairway. "Seemingly. I can see a fellow of some sort walking round it. Little and good must be said of that fire, surely."

"I can throw a stone there," said the boy.

"And so can I!" said Grandfer Cattle.

"No, no, you can't, my sonnies. That fire is not much less than a mile off, for all that 'a seems so near."

"'Tis in the heath, but no furze," said the turf-cutter.

"'Tis cleft-wood, that's what 'tis," said Timothy Fairway. "Nothing would burn like that except clean timber. And 'tis on the knap afore the old captain's house at Mistover. Such a queer mortal as that man is! To have a little fire inside your own bank and ditch, that nobody else may enjoy it or come anigh it! And what a zany an old chap must be, to light a bonfire when there's no youngsters to please."

"Cap'n Vye has been for a long walk today, and is quite tired out," said Grandfer Cattle, "so 'tisn't likely to be he."

"And he would hardly afford good fuel like that," said the wide woman.

"Then it must be his granddaughter," said Fairway. "Not that a body of her age can want a fire much."

"She is very strange in her ways, living up there by herself, and such things please her," said Susan.

“She’s a well-favoured maid enough,” said Humphrey the furze-cutter, “especially when she’s got one of her dandy gowns on.”

“That’s true,” said Fairway. “Well, let her bonfire burn an’t will. Ours is well-nigh out by the look o’t.”

“How dark ‘tis now the fire’s gone down!” said Christian Cattle, looking behind him with his hare eyes. “Don’t ye think we’d better get home-along, neighbours? The heth isn’t haunted, I know; but we’d better get home... Ah, what was that?”

“Only the wind,” said the turf-cutter.

“I don’t think Fifth-of-Novembers ought to be kept up by night except in towns. It should be by day in outstep, ill-accounted places like this!”

“Nonsense, Christian. Lift up your spirits like a man! Susy, dear, you and I will have a jig – hey, my honey? – before ‘tis quite too dark to see how well-favoured you be still, though so many summers have passed since your husband, a son of a witch, snapped you up from me.”

This was addressed to Susan Nunsuch; and the next circumstance of which the beholders were conscious was a vision of the matron’s broad form whisking off towards the space whereon the fire had been kindled. She was lifted bodily by Mr. Fairway’s arm, which had been flung round her waist before she had become aware of his intention. The site of the fire was now merely a circle of ashes flecked with red embers and sparks, the furze having burnt completely away. Once within the circle he whirled her round and round in a dance. She was a woman noisily constructed; in addition to her enclosing framework of whalebone and lath, she wore pattens summer and winter, in wet weather and in dry, to preserve her boots from wear; and when Fairway began to jump about with her, the clicking of the pattens, the creaking of the stays, and her screams of surprise, formed a very audible concert.

“I’ll crack thy numskull for thee, you mandy chap!” said Mrs. Nunsuch, as she helplessly danced round with him, her feet playing like drumsticks among the sparks. “My ankles were all in a fever before, from walking through that prickly furze, and now you must make ‘em worse with these vlinkers!”

The vagary of Timothy Fairway was infectious. The turf-cutter seized old Olly Dowden, and, somewhat more gently, poussetted with her likewise. The young men were not slow to imitate the example of their elders, and seized the maids; Grandfer Cattle and his stick jiggled in the form of a three-legged object among the rest; and in half a minute all that could be seen on Rainbarrow was a whirling of dark shapes amid a boiling confusion of sparks, which leapt around the dancers as high as their waists. The chief noises were women’s shrill cries, men’s laughter, Susan’s stays and pattens, Olly Dowden’s “heu-heu-heu!” and the strumming of the wind upon the furze-bushes, which formed a kind of tune to the demoniac measure they trod. Christian alone stood aloof, uneasily rocking himself as he murmured, “They ought not to do it – how the vlinkers do fly! ‘tis tempting the Wicked one, ‘tis.”

“What was that?” said one of the lads, stopping.

“Ah – where?” said Christian, hastily closing up to the rest.

The dancers all lessened their speed.

“‘Twas behind you, Christian, that I heard it – down here.”

“Yes – ‘tis behind me!” Christian said. “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, bless the bed that I lie on; four angels guard – ”

“Hold your tongue. What is it?” said Fairway.

“Hoi-i-i-i!” cried a voice from the darkness.

“Halloo-o-o-o!” said Fairway.

“Is there any cart track up across here to Mis’ess Yeobright’s, of Blooms-End?” came to them in the same voice, as a long, slim indistinct figure approached the barrow.

“Ought we not to run home as hard as we can, neighbours, as ‘tis getting late?” said Christian. “Not run away from one another, you know; run close together, I mean.”

“Scrape up a few stray locks of furze, and make a blaze, so that we can see who the man is,” said Fairway.

When the flame arose it revealed a young man in tight raiment, and red from top to toe. “Is there a track across here to Mis’ess Yeobright’s house?” he repeated.

“Ay – keep along the path down there.”

“I mean a way two horses and a van can travel over?”

“Well, yes; you can get up the vale below here with time. The track is rough, but if you’ve got a light your horses may pick along wi’ care. Have ye brought your cart far up, neighbour reddleman?”

“I’ve left it in the bottom, about half a mile back, I stepped on in front to make sure of the way, as ‘tis night-time, and I han’t been here for so long.”

“Oh, well you can get up,” said Fairway. “What a turn it did give me when I saw him!” he added to the whole group, the reddleman included. “Lord’s sake, I thought, whatever fiery mommet is this come to trouble us? No slight to your looks, reddleman, for ye bain’t bad-looking in the groundwork, though the finish is queer. My meaning is just to say how curious I felt. I half thought it ‘twas the devil or the red ghost the boy told of.”

“It gied me a turn likewise,” said Susan Nunsuch, “for I had a dream last night of a death’s head.”

“Don’t ye talk o’t no more,” said Christian. “If he had a handkerchief over his head he’d look for all the world like the Devil in the picture of the Temptation.”

“Well, thank you for telling me,” said the young reddleman, smiling faintly. “And good night t’ye all.”

He withdrew from their sight down the barrow.

“I fancy I’ve seen that young man’s face before,” said Humphrey. “But where, or how, or what his name is, I don’t know.”

The reddleman had not been gone more than a few minutes when another person approached the partially revived bonfire. It proved to be a well-known and respected widow of the neighbourhood, of a standing which can only be expressed by the word genteel. Her face, encompassed by the blackness of the receding heath, showed whitely, and with-out half-lights, like a cameo.

She was a woman of middle-age, with well-formed features of the type usually found where perspicacity is the chief quality enthroned within. At moments she seemed to be regarding issues from a Nebo denied to others around. She had something of an estranged mien; the solitude exhaled from the heath was concentrated in this face that had risen from it. The air with which she looked at the heathmen betokened a certain unconcern at their presence, or at what might be their opinions of her for walking in that lonely spot at such an hour, thus indirectly implying that in some respect or other they were not up to her level. The explanation lay in the fact that though her husband had been a small farmer she herself was a curate’s daughter, who had once dreamt of doing better things.

Persons with any weight of character carry, like planets, their atmospheres along with them in their orbits; and the matron who entered now upon the scene could, and usually did, bring her own tone into a company. Her normal manner among the heathfolk had that reticence which results from the consciousness of superior communicative power. But the effect of coming into society and light after lonely wandering in darkness is a sociability in the comer above its usual pitch, expressed in the features even more than in words.

“Why, ‘tis Mis’ess Yeobright,” said Fairway. “Mis’ess Yeobright, not ten minutes ago a man was here asking for you – a reddleman.”

“What did he want?” said she.

“He didn’t tell us.”

“Something to sell, I suppose; what it can be I am at a loss to understand.”

“I am glad to hear that your son Mr. Clym is coming home at Christmas, ma’am,” said Sam, the turf-cutter. “What a dog he used to be for bonfires!”

“Yes. I believe he is coming,” she said.

“He must be a fine fellow by this time,” said Fairway.

“He is a man now,” she replied quietly.

“‘Tis very lonesome for ‘ee in the heth tonight, mis’ess,” said Christian, coming from the seclusion he had hitherto maintained. “Mind you don’t get lost. Egdon Heth is a bad place to get lost in, and the winds do huffle queerer tonight than ever I heard ‘em afore. Them that know Egdon best have been pixy-led here at times.”

“Is that you, Christian?” said Mrs. Yeobright. “What made you hide away from me?”

“‘Twas that I didn’t know you in this light, mis’ess; and being a man of the mournfullest make, I was scared a little, that’s all. Oftentimes if you could see how terrible down I get in my mind, ‘twould make ‘ee quite nervous for fear I should die by my hand.”

“You don’t take after your father,” said Mrs. Yeobright, looking towards the fire, where Grandfer Cante, with some want of originality, was dancing by himself among the sparks, as the others had done before.

“Now, Grandfer,” said Timothy Fairway, “we are ashamed of ye. A reverent old patriarch man as you be – seventy if a day – to go hornpiping like that by yourself!”

“A harrowing old man, Mis’ess Yeobright,” said Christian despondingly. “I wouldn’t live with him a week, so playward as he is, if I could get away.”

“‘Twould be more seemly in ye to stand still and welcome Mis’ess Yeobright, and you the venerablest here, Grandfer Cante,” said the besom-woman.

“Faith, and so it would,” said the reveller checking himself repentantly. “I’ve such a bad memory, Mis’ess Yeobright, that I forget how I’m looked up to by the rest of ‘em. My spirits must be wonderful good, you’ll say? But not always. ‘Tis a weight upon a man to be looked up to as commander, and I often feel it.”

“I am sorry to stop the talk,” said Mrs. Yeobright. “But I must be leaving you now. I was passing down the Anglebury Road, towards my niece’s new home, who is returning tonight with her husband; and seeing the bonfire and hearing Olly’s voice among the rest I came up here to learn what was going on. I should like her to walk with me, as her way is mine.”

“Ay, sure, ma’am, I’m just thinking of moving,” said Olly.

“Why, you’ll be safe to meet the reddleman that I told ye of,” said Fairway. “He’s only gone back to get his van. We heard that your niece and her husband were coming straight home as soon as they were married, and we are going down there shortly, to give ‘em a song o’ welcome.”

“Thank you indeed,” said Mrs. Yeobright.

“But we shall take a shorter cut through the furze than you can go with long clothes; so we won’t trouble you to wait.”

“Very well – are you ready, Olly?”

“Yes, ma’am. And there’s a light shining from your niece’s window, see. It will help to keep us in the path.”

She indicated the faint light at the bottom of the valley which Fairway had pointed out; and the two women descended the tumulus.

4 – The Halt on the Turnpike Road

Down, downward they went, and yet further down – their descent at each step seeming to outmeasure their advance. Their skirts were scratched noisily by the furze, their shoulders brushed by the ferns, which, though dead and dry, stood erect as when alive, no sufficient winter weather having as yet arrived to beat them down. Their Tartarean situation might by some have been called an imprudent one for two unattended women. But these shaggy recesses were at all seasons a familiar surrounding to Olly and Mrs. Yeobright; and the addition of darkness lends no frightfulness to the face of a friend.

“And so Tamsin has married him at last,” said Olly, when the incline had become so much less steep that their foot-steps no longer required undivided attention.

Mrs. Yeobright answered slowly, “Yes; at last.”

“How you will miss her – living with ‘ee as a daughter, as she always have.”

“I do miss her.”

Olly, though without the tact to perceive when remarks were untimely, was saved by her very simplicity from rendering them offensive. Questions that would have been resented in others she could ask with impunity. This accounted for Mrs. Yeobright’s acquiescence in the revival of an evidently sore subject.

“I was quite strook to hear you’d agreed to it, ma’am, that I was,” continued the besom-maker.

“You were not more struck by it than I should have been last year this time, Olly. There are a good many sides to that wedding. I could not tell you all of them, even if I tried.”

“I felt myself that he was hardly solid-going enough to mate with your family. Keeping an inn – what is it? But ‘a’s clever, that’s true, and they say he was an engineering gentleman once, but has come down by being too outwardly given.”

“I saw that, upon the whole, it would be better she should marry where she wished.”

“Poor little thing, her feelings got the better of her, no doubt. ‘Tis nature. Well, they may call him what they will – he’ve several acres of heth-ground broke up here, besides the public house, and the heth-croppers, and his manners be quite like a gentleman’s. And what’s done cannot be undone.”

“It cannot,” said Mrs. Yeobright. “See, here’s the wagon-track at last. Now we shall get along better.”

The wedding subject was no further dwelt upon; and soon a faint diverging path was reached, where they parted company, Olly first begging her companion to remind Mr. Wildeve that he had not sent her sick husband the bottle of wine promised on the occasion of his marriage. The besom-maker turned to the left towards her own house, behind a spur of the hill, and Mrs. Yeobright followed the straight track, which further on joined the highway by the Quiet Woman Inn, whither she supposed her niece to have returned with Wildeve from their wedding at Anglebury that day.

She first reached Wildeve’s Patch, as it was called, a plot of land redeemed from the heath, and after long and laborious years brought into cultivation. The man who had discovered that it could be tilled died of the labour; the man who succeeded him in possession ruined himself in fertilizing it. Wildeve came like Amerigo Vespucci, and received the honours due to those who had gone before.

When Mrs. Yeobright had drawn near to the inn, and was about to enter, she saw a horse and vehicle some two hundred yards beyond it, coming towards her, a man walking alongside with a lantern in his hand. It was soon evident that this was the reddleman who had inquired for her. Instead of entering the inn at once, she walked by it and towards the van.

The conveyance came close, and the man was about to pass her with little notice, when she turned to him and said, “I think you have been inquiring for me? I am Mrs. Yeobright of Blooms-End.”

The reddleman started, and held up his finger. He stopped the horses, and beckoned to her to withdraw with him a few yards aside, which she did, wondering.

“You don’t know me, ma’am, I suppose?” he said.

“I do not,” said she. “Why, yes, I do! You are young Venn – your father was a dairyman somewhere here?”

“Yes; and I knew your niece, Miss Tamsin, a little. I have something bad to tell you.”

“About her – no! She has just come home, I believe, with her husband. They arranged to return this afternoon – to the inn beyond here.”

“She’s not there.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she’s here. She’s in my van,” he added slowly.

“What new trouble has come?” murmured Mrs. Yeobright, putting her hand over her eyes.

“I can’t explain much, ma’am. All I know is that, as I was going along the road this morning, about a mile out of Anglebury, I heard something trotting after me like a doe, and looking round there she was, white as death itself. ‘Oh, Diggory Venn!’ she said, ‘I thought ‘twas you – will you help me? I am in trouble.’”

“How did she know your Christian name?” said Mrs. Yeobright doubtfully.

“I had met her as a lad before I went away in this trade. She asked then if she might ride, and then down she fell in a faint. I picked her up and put her in, and there she has been ever since. She has cried a good deal, but she has hardly spoke; all she has told me being that she was to have been married this morning. I tried to get her to eat something, but she couldn’t; and at last she fell asleep.”

“Let me see her at once,” said Mrs. Yeobright, hastening towards the van.

The reddleman followed with the lantern, and, stepping up first, assisted Mrs. Yeobright to mount beside him. On the door being opened she perceived at the end of the van an extemporized couch, around which was hung apparently all the drapery that the reddleman possessed, to keep the occupant of the little couch from contact with the red materials of his trade. A young girl lay thereon, covered with a cloak. She was asleep, and the light of the lantern fell upon her features.

A fair, sweet, and honest country face was revealed, reposing in a nest of wavy chestnut hair. It was between pretty and beautiful. Though her eyes were closed, one could easily imagine the light necessarily shining in them as the culmination of the luminous workmanship around. The groundwork of the face was hopefulness; but over it now I lay like a foreign substance a film of anxiety and grief. The grief had been there so shortly as to have abstracted nothing of the bloom, and had as yet but given a dignity to what it might eventually undermine. The scarlet of her lips had not had time to abate, and just now it appeared still more intense by the absence of the neighbouring and more transient colour of her cheek. The lips frequently parted, with a murmur of words. She seemed to belong rightly to a madrigal – to require viewing through rhyme and harmony.

One thing at least was obvious: she was not made to be looked at thus. The reddleman had appeared conscious of as much, and, while Mrs. Yeobright looked in upon her, he cast his eyes aside with a delicacy which well became him. The sleeper apparently thought so too, for the next moment she opened her own.

The lips then parted with something of anticipation, something more of doubt; and her several thoughts and fractions of thoughts, as signalled by the changes on her face, were exhibited by the light to the utmost nicety. An ingenuous, transparent life was disclosed, as if the flow of her existence could be seen passing within her. She understood the scene in a moment.

“O yes, it is I, Aunt,” she cried. “I know how frightened you are, and how you cannot believe it; but all the same, it is I who have come home like this!”

“Tamsin, Tamsin!” said Mrs. Yeobright, stooping over the young woman and kissing her. “O my dear girl!”

Thomasin was now on the verge of a sob, but by an unexpected self-command she uttered no sound. With a gentle panting breath she sat upright.

“I did not expect to see you in this state, any more than you me,” she went on quickly. “Where am I, Aunt?”

“Nearly home, my dear. In Egdon Bottom. What dreadful thing is it?”

“I’ll tell you in a moment. So near, are we? Then I will get out and walk. I want to go home by the path.”

“But this kind man who has done so much will, I am sure, take you right on to my house?” said the aunt, turning to the reddleman, who had withdrawn from the front of the van on the awakening of the girl, and stood in the road.

“Why should you think it necessary to ask me? I will, of course,” said he.

“He is indeed kind,” murmured Thomasin. “I was once acquainted with him, Aunt, and when I saw him today I thought I should prefer his van to any conveyance of a stranger. But I’ll walk now. Reddleman, stop the horses, please.”

The man regarded her with tender reluctance, but stopped them

Aunt and niece then descended from the van, Mrs. Yeobright saying to its owner, “I quite recognize you now. What made you change from the nice business your father left you?”

“Well, I did,” he said, and looked at Thomasin, who blushed a little. “Then you’ll not be wanting me any more tonight, ma’am?”

Mrs. Yeobright glanced around at the dark sky, at the hills, at the perishing bonfires, and at the lighted window of the inn they had neared. “I think not,” she said, “since Thomasin wishes to walk. We can soon run up the path and reach home – we know it well.”

And after a few further words they parted, the reddleman moving onwards with his van, and the two women remaining standing in the road. As soon as the vehicle and its driver had withdrawn so far as to be beyond all possible reach of her voice, Mrs. Yeobright turned to her niece.

“Now, Thomasin,” she said sternly, “what’s the meaning of this disgraceful performance?”

5 – Perplexity among Honest People

Thomasin looked as if quite overcome by her aunt's change of manner. "It means just what it seems to mean: I am – not married," she replied faintly. "Excuse me – for humiliating you, Aunt, by this mishap – I am sorry for it. But I cannot help it."

"Me? Think of yourself first."

"It was nobody's fault. When we got there the parson wouldn't marry us because of some trifling irregularity in the license."

"What irregularity?"

"I don't know. Mr. Wildeve can explain. I did not think when I went away this morning that I should come back like this." It being dark, Thomasin allowed her emotion to escape her by the silent way of tears, which could roll down her cheek unseen.

"I could almost say that it serves you right – if I did not feel that you don't deserve it," continued Mrs. Yeobright, who, possessing two distinct moods in close contiguity, a gentle mood and an angry, flew from one to the other without the least warning. "Remember, Thomasin, this business was none of my seeking; from the very first, when you began to feel foolish about that man, I warned you he would not make you happy. I felt it so strongly that I did what I would never have believed myself capable of doing – stood up in the church, and made myself the public talk for weeks. But having once consented, I don't submit to these fancies without good reason. Marry him you must after this."

"Do you think I wish to do otherwise for one moment?" said Thomasin, with a heavy sigh. "I know how wrong it was of me to love him, but don't pain me by talking like that, Aunt! You would not have had me stay there with him, would you? – and your house is the only home I have to return to. He says we can be married in a day or two."

"I wish he had never seen you."

"Very well; then I will be the miserablest woman in the world, and not let him see me again. No, I won't have him!"

"It is too late to speak so. Come with me. I am going to the inn to see if he has returned. Of course I shall get to the bottom of this story at once. Mr. Wildeve must not suppose he can play tricks upon me, or any belonging to me."

"It was not that. The license was wrong, and he couldn't get another the same day. He will tell you in a moment how it was, if he comes."

"Why didn't he bring you back?"

"That was me!" again sobbed Thomasin. "When I found we could not be married I didn't like to come back with him, and I was very ill. Then I saw Diggory Venn, and was glad to get him to take me home. I cannot explain it any better, and you must be angry with me if you will."

"I shall see about that," said Mrs. Yeobright; and they turned towards the inn, known in the neighbourhood as the Quiet Woman, the sign of which represented the figure of a matron carrying her head under her arm, beneath which gruesome design was written the couplet so well known to frequenters of the inn: —

SINCE THE WOMAN'S QUIET LET NO MAN BREED A RIOT.¹

The front of the house was towards the heath and Rainbarrow, whose dark shape seemed to threaten it from the sky. Upon the door was a neglected brass plate, bearing the unexpected inscription, "Mr. Wildeve, Engineer" – a useless yet cherished relic from the time when he had been started in that profession in an office at Budmouth by those who had hoped much from him, and had

¹ The inn which really bore this sign and legend stood some miles to the northwest of the present scene, wherein the house more immediately referred to is now no longer an inn; and the surroundings are much changed. But another inn, some of whose features are also embodied in this description, the RED LION at Winfrith, still remains as a haven for the wayfarer (1912).

been disappointed. The garden was at the back, and behind this ran a still deep stream, forming the margin of the heath in that direction, meadow-land appearing beyond the stream.

But the thick obscurity permitted only skylines to be visible of any scene at present. The water at the back of the house could be heard, idly spinning whirlpools in its creep between the rows of dry feather-headed reeds which formed a stockade along each bank. Their presence was denoted by sounds as of a congregation praying humbly, produced by their rubbing against each other in the slow wind.

The window, whence the candlelight had shone up the vale to the eyes of the bonfire group, was uncurtained, but the sill lay too high for a pedestrian on the outside to look over it into the room. A vast shadow, in which could be dimly traced portions of a masculine contour, blotted half the ceiling.

“He seems to be at home,” said Mrs. Yeobright.

“Must I come in, too, Aunt?” asked Thomasin faintly. “I suppose not; it would be wrong.”

“You must come, certainly – to confront him, so that he may make no false representations to me. We shall not be five minutes in the house, and then we’ll walk home.”

Entering the open passage, she tapped at the door of the private parlour, unfastened it, and looked in.

The back and shoulders of a man came between Mrs. Yeobright’s eyes and the fire. Wildeve, whose form it was, immediately turned, arose, and advanced to meet his visitors.

He was quite a young man, and of the two properties, form and motion, the latter first attracted the eye in him. The grace of his movement was singular – it was the pantomimic expression of a lady-killing career. Next came into notice the more material qualities, among which was a profuse crop of hair impending over the top of his face, lending to his forehead the high-cornered outline of an early Gothic shield; and a neck which was smooth and round as a cylinder. The lower half of his figure was of light build. Altogether he was one in whom no man would have seen anything to admire, and in whom no woman would have seen anything to dislike.

He discerned the young girl’s form in the passage, and said, “Thomasin, then, has reached home. How could you leave me in that way, darling?” And turning to Mrs. Yeobright – “It was useless to argue with her. She would go, and go alone.”

“But what’s the meaning of it all?” demanded Mrs. Yeobright haughtily.

“Take a seat,” said Wildeve, placing chairs for the two women. “Well, it was a very stupid mistake, but such mistakes will happen. The license was useless at Anglebury. It was made out for Budmouth, but as I didn’t read it I wasn’t aware of that.”

“But you had been staying at Anglebury?”

“No. I had been at Budmouth – till two days ago – and that was where I had intended to take her; but when I came to fetch her we decided upon Anglebury, forgetting that a new license would be necessary. There was not time to get to Budmouth afterwards.”

“I think you are very much to blame,” said Mrs. Yeobright.

“It was quite my fault we chose Anglebury,” Thomasin pleaded. “I proposed it because I was not known there.”

“I know so well that I am to blame that you need not remind me of it,” replied Wildeve shortly.

“Such things don’t happen for nothing,” said the aunt. “It is a great slight to me and my family; and when it gets known there will be a very unpleasant time for us. How can she look her friends in the face tomorrow? It is a very great injury, and one I cannot easily forgive. It may even reflect on her character.”

“Nonsense,” said Wildeve.

Thomasin’s large eyes had flown from the face of one to the face of the other during this discussion, and she now said anxiously, “Will you allow me, Aunt, to talk it over alone with Damon for five minutes? Will you, Damon?”

“Certainly, dear,” said Wildeve, “if your aunt will excuse us.” He led her into an adjoining room, leaving Mrs. Yeobright by the fire.

As soon as they were alone, and the door closed, Thomasin said, turning up her pale, tearful face to him, “It is killing me, this, Damon! I did not mean to part from you in anger at Anglebury this morning; but I was frightened and hardly knew what I said. I’ve not let Aunt know how much I suffered today; and it is so hard to command my face and voice, and to smile as if it were a slight thing to me; but I try to do so, that she may not be still more indignant with you. I know you could not help it, dear, whatever Aunt may think.”

“She is very unpleasant.”

“Yes,” Thomasin murmured, “and I suppose I seem so now... Damon, what do you mean to do about me?”

“Do about you?”

“Yes. Those who don’t like you whisper things which at moments make me doubt you. We mean to marry, I suppose, don’t we?”

“Of course we do. We have only to go to Budmouth on Monday, and we marry at once.”

“Then do let us go! – O Damon, what you make me say!” She hid her face in her handkerchief. “Here am I asking you to marry me, when by rights you ought to be on your knees imploring me, your cruel mistress, not to refuse you, and saying it would break your heart if I did. I used to think it would be pretty and sweet like that; but how different!”

“Yes, real life is never at all like that.”

“But I don’t care personally if it never takes place,” she added with a little dignity; “no, I can live without you. It is Aunt I think of. She is so proud, and thinks so much of her family respectability, that she will be cut down with mortification if this story should get abroad before – it is done. My cousin Clym, too, will be much wounded.”

“Then he will be very unreasonable. In fact, you are all rather unreasonable.”

Thomasin coloured a little, and not with love. But whatever the momentary feeling which caused that flush in her, it went as it came, and she humbly said, “I never mean to be, if I can help it. I merely feel that you have my aunt to some extent in your power at last.”

“As a matter of justice it is almost due to me,” said Wildeve. “Think what I have gone through to win her consent; the insult that it is to any man to have the banns forbidden – the double insult to a man unlucky enough to be cursed with sensitiveness, and blue demons, and Heaven knows what, as I am. I can never forget those banns. A harsher man would rejoice now in the power I have of turning upon your aunt by going no further in the business.”

She looked wistfully at him with her sorrowful eyes as he said those words, and her aspect showed that more than one person in the room could deplore the possession of sensitiveness. Seeing that she was really suffering he seemed disturbed and added, “This is merely a reflection you know. I have not the least intention to refuse to complete the marriage, Tamsie mine – I could not bear it.”

“You could not, I know!” said the fair girl, brightening. “You, who cannot bear the sight of pain in even an insect, or any disagreeable sound, or unpleasant smell even, will not long cause pain to me and mine.”

“I will not, if I can help it.”

“Your hand upon it, Damon.”

He carelessly gave her his hand.

“Ah, by my crown, what’s that?” he said suddenly.

There fell upon their ears the sound of numerous voices singing in front of the house. Among these, two made themselves prominent by their peculiarity: one was a very strong bass, the other a wheezy thin piping. Thomasin recognized them as belonging to Timothy Fairway and Grandfer Cantle respectively.

“What does it mean – it is not skimmity-riding, I hope?” she said, with a frightened gaze at Wildeve.

“Of course not; no, it is that the heath-folk have come to sing to us a welcome. This is intolerable!” He began pacing about, the men outside singing cheerily —

“He told’ her that she’ was the joy’ of his life’, And if’ she’d con-sent’ he would make her his wife’; She could’ not refuse’ him; to church’ so they went’, Young Will was forgot’, and young Sue’ was content’; And then’ was she kiss’d’ and set down’ on his knee’, No man’ in the world’ was so lov’-ing as he’!”

Mrs. Yeobright burst in from the outer room. “Thomasin, Thomasin!” she said, looking indignantly at Wildeve; “here’s a pretty exposure! Let us escape at once. Come!”

It was, however, too late to get away by the passage. A rugged knocking had begun upon the door of the front room. Wildeve, who had gone to the window, came back.

“Stop!” he said imperiously, putting his hand upon Mrs. Yeobright’s arm. “We are regularly besieged. There are fifty of them out there if there’s one. You stay in this room with Thomasin; I’ll go out and face them. You must stay now, for my sake, till they are gone, so that it may seem as if all was right. Come, Tamsie dear, don’t go making a scene – we must marry after this; that you can see as well as I. Sit still, that’s all – and don’t speak much. I’ll manage them. Blundering fools!”

He pressed the agitated girl into a seat, returned to the outer room and opened the door. Immediately outside, in the passage, appeared Grandfer Cattle singing in concert with those still standing in front of the house. He came into the room and nodded abstractedly to Wildeve, his lips still parted, and his features excruciatingly strained in the emission of the chorus. This being ended, he said heartily, “Here’s welcome to the new-made couple, and God bless ‘em!”

“Thank you,” said Wildeve, with dry resentment, his face as gloomy as a thunderstorm.

At the Grandfer’s heels now came the rest of the group, which included Fairway, Christian, Sam the turf-cutter, Humphrey, and a dozen others. All smiled upon Wildeve, and upon his tables and chairs likewise, from a general sense of friendliness towards the articles as well as towards their owner.

“We be not here afore Mrs. Yeobright after all,” said Fairway, recognizing the matron’s bonnet through the glass partition which divided the public apartment they had entered from the room where the women sat. “We struck down across, d’ye see, Mr. Wildeve, and she went round by the path.”

“And I see the young bride’s little head!” said Grandfer, peeping in the same direction, and discerning Thomasin, who was waiting beside her aunt in a miserable and awkward way. “Not quite settled in yet – well, well, there’s plenty of time.”

Wildeve made no reply; and probably feeling that the sooner he treated them the sooner they would go, he produced a stone jar, which threw a warm halo over matters at once.

“That’s a drop of the right sort, I can see,” said Grandfer Cattle, with the air of a man too well-mannered to show any hurry to taste it.

“Yes,” said Wildeve, “‘tis some old mead. I hope you will like it.”

“O ay!” replied the guests, in the hearty tones natural when the words demanded by politeness coincide with those of deepest feeling. “There isn’t a prettier drink under the sun.”

“I’ll take my oath there isn’t,” added Grandfer Cattle. “All that can be said against mead is that ‘tis rather heady, and apt to lie about a man a good while. But tomorrow’s Sunday, thank God.”

“I feel’d for all the world like some bold soldier after I had had some once,” said Christian.

“You shall feel so again,” said Wildeve, with condescension, “Cups or glasses, gentlemen?”

“Well, if you don’t mind, we’ll have the beaker, and pass ‘en round; ‘tis better than heling it out in dribbles.”

“Jown the slippery glasses,” said Grandfer Cattle. “What’s the good of a thing that you can’t put down in the ashes to warm, hey, neighbours; that’s what I ask?”

“Right, Grandfer,” said Sam; and the mead then circulated.

“Well,” said Timothy Fairway, feeling demands upon his praise in some form or other, “’tis a worthy thing to be married, Mr. Wildeve; and the woman you’ve got is a dimant, so says I. Yes,” he continued, to Grandfer Cante, raising his voice so as to be heard through the partition, “her father (inclining his head towards the inner room) was as good a feller as ever lived. He always had his great indignation ready against anything underhand.”

“Is that very dangerous?” said Christian.

“And there were few in these parts that were upsides with him,” said Sam. “Whenever a club walked he’d play the clarinet in the band that marched before ‘em as if he’d never touched anything but a clarinet all his life. And then, when they got to church door he’d throw down the clarinet, mount the gallery, snatch up the bass viol, and rozum away as if he’d never played anything but a bass viol. Folk would say – folk that knowed what a true stave was – ‘Surely, surely that’s never the same man that I saw handling the clarinet so masterly by now!’”

“I can mind it,” said the furze-cutter. “’Twas a wonderful thing that one body could hold it all and never mix the fingering.”

“There was Kingsbere church likewise,” Fairway recommenced, as one opening a new vein of the same mine of interest.

Wildeve breathed the breath of one intolerably bored, and glanced through the partition at the prisoners.

“He used to walk over there of a Sunday afternoon to visit his old acquaintance Andrew Brown, the first clarinet there; a good man enough, but rather screechy in his music, if you can mind?”

“A was.”

“And neighbour Yeobright would take Andrey’s place for some part of the service, to let Andrey have a bit of a nap, as any friend would naturally do.”

“As any friend would,” said Grandfer Cante, the other listeners expressing the same accord by the shorter way of nodding their heads.

“No sooner was Andrey asleep and the first whiff of neighbour Yeobright’s wind had got inside Andrey’s clarinet than everyone in church feeled in a moment there was a great soul among ‘em. All heads would turn, and they’d say, ‘Ah, I thought ‘twas he!’ One Sunday I can well mind – a bass viol day that time, and Yeobright had brought his own. ‘Twas the Hundred-and-thirty-third to ‘Lydia’; and when they’d come to ‘Ran down his beard and o’er his robes its costly moisture shed,’ neighbour Yeobright, who had just warmed to his work, drove his bow into them strings that glorious grand that he e’en a’most sawed the bass viol into two pieces. Every winder in church rattled as if ‘twere a thunderstorm. Old Pa’son Williams lifted his hands in his great holy surplice as natural as if he’d been in common clothes, and seemed to say hisself, ‘O for such a man in our parish!’ But not a soul in Kingsbere could hold a candle to Yeobright.”

“Was it quite safe when the winder shook?” Christian inquired.

He received no answer, all for the moment sitting rapt in admiration of the performance described. As with Farinelli’s singing before the princesses, Sheridan’s renowned Begum Speech, and other such examples, the fortunate condition of its being for ever lost to the world invested the deceased Mr. Yeobright’s tour de force on that memorable afternoon with a cumulative glory which comparative criticism, had that been possible, might considerably have shorn down.

“He was the last you’d have expected to drop off in the prime of life,” said Humphrey.

“Ah, well; he was looking for the earth some months afore he went. At that time women used to run for smocks and gown-pieces at Greenhill Fair, and my wife that is now, being a long-legged slithering maid, hardly husband-high, went with the rest of the maidens, for ‘a was a good, runner afore she got so heavy. When she came home I said – we were then just beginning to walk together – ‘What have ye got, my honey?’ ‘I’ve won – well, I’ve won – a gown-piece,’ says she, her colours coming up in a moment. ‘Tis a smock for a crown, I thought; and so it turned out. Ay, when I think what she’ll say to me now without a mossel of red in her face, it do seem strange that ‘a wouldn’t say

such a little thing then... However, then she went on, and that's what made me bring up the story. Well, whatever clothes I've won, white or figured, for eyes to see or for eyes not to see' ('a could do a pretty stroke of modesty in those days), 'I'd sooner have lost it than have seen what I have. Poor Mr. Yeobright was took bad directly he reached the fair ground, and was forced to go home again.' That was the last time he ever went out of the parish."

"A faltered on from one day to another, and then we heard he was gone."

"D'ye think he had great pain when 'a died?" said Christian.

"O no – quite different. Nor any pain of mind. He was lucky enough to be God A'mighty's own man."

"And other folk – d'ye think 'twill be much pain to 'em, Mister Fairway?"

"That depends on whether they be afeard."

"I bain't afeard at all, I thank God!" said Christian strenuously. "I'm glad I bain't, for then 'twon't pain me... I don't think I be afeard – or if I be I can't help it, and I don't deserve to suffer. I wish I was not afeard at all!"

There was a solemn silence, and looking from the window, which was unshuttered and unblinded, Timothy said, "Well, what a fess little bonfire that one is, out by Cap'n Vye's! 'Tis burning just the same now as ever, upon my life."

All glances went through the window, and nobody noticed that Wildeve disguised a brief, telltale look. Far away up the sombre valley of heath, and to the right of Rainbarrow, could indeed be seen the light, small, but steady and persistent as before.

"It was lighted before ours was," Fairway continued; "and yet every one in the country round is out afore 'n."

"Perhaps there's meaning in it!" murmured Christian.

"How meaning?" said Wildeve sharply.

Christian was too scattered to reply, and Timothy helped him.

"He means, sir, that the lonesome dark-eyed creature up there that some say is a witch – ever I should call a fine young woman such a name – is always up to some odd conceit or other; and so perhaps 'tis she."

"I'd be very glad to ask her in wedlock, if she'd hae me and take the risk of her wild dark eyes ill-wishing me," said Grandfer Cante staunchly.

"Don't ye say it, Father!" implored Christian.

"Well, be dazed if he who do marry the maid won't hae an uncommon picture for his best parlour," said Fairway in a liquid tone, placing down the cup of mead at the end of a good pull.

"And a partner as deep as the North Star," said Sam, taking up the cup and finishing the little that remained. "Well, really, now I think we must be moving," said Humphrey, observing the emptiness of the vessel.

"But we'll gie 'em another song?" said Grandfer Cante. "I'm as full of notes as a bird!"

"Thank you, Grandfer," said Wildeve. "But we will not trouble you now. Some other day must do for that – when I have a party."

"Be jown'd if I don't learn ten new songs for't, or I won't learn a line!" said Grandfer Cante. "And you may be sure I won't disappoint ye by biding away, Mr. Wildeve."

"I quite believe you," said that gentleman.

All then took their leave, wishing their entertainer long life and happiness as a married man, with recapitulations which occupied some time. Wildeve attended them to the door, beyond which the deep-dyed upward stretch of heath stood awaiting them, an amplitude of darkness reigning from their feet almost to the zenith, where a definite form first became visible in the lowering forehead of Rainbarrow. Diving into the dense obscurity in a line headed by Sam the turf-cutter, they pursued their trackless way home.

When the scratching of the furze against their leggings had faded upon the ear, Wildeve returned to the room where he had left Thomasin and her aunt. The women were gone.

They could only have left the house in one way, by the back window; and this was open.

Wildeve laughed to himself, remained a moment thinking, and idly returned to the front room. Here his glance fell upon a bottle of wine which stood on the mantelpiece. "Ah – old Dowden!" he murmured; and going to the kitchen door shouted, "Is anybody here who can take something to old Dowden?"

There was no reply. The room was empty, the lad who acted as his factotum having gone to bed. Wildeve came back put on his hat, took the bottle, and left the house, turning the key in the door, for there was no guest at the inn tonight. As soon as he was on the road the little bonfire on Mistover Knap again met his eye.

"Still waiting, are you, my lady?" he murmured.

However, he did not proceed that way just then; but leaving the hill to the left of him, he stumbled over a rutted road that brought him to a cottage which, like all other habitations on the heath at this hour, was only saved from being visible by a faint shine from its bedroom window. This house was the home of Olly Dowden, the besom-maker, and he entered.

The lower room was in darkness; but by feeling his way he found a table, whereon he placed the bottle, and a minute later emerged again upon the heath. He stood and looked northeast at the undying little fire – high up above him, though not so high as Rainbarrow.

We have been told what happens when a woman deliberates; and the epigram is not always terminable with woman, provided that one be in the case, and that a fair one. Wildeve stood, and stood longer, and breathed perplexedly, and then said to himself with resignation, "Yes – by Heaven, I must go to her, I suppose!"

Instead of turning in the direction of home he pressed on rapidly by a path under Rainbarrow towards what was evidently a signal light.

6 – The Figure against the Sky

When the whole Egdon concourse had left the site of the bonfire to its accustomed loneliness, a closely wrapped female figure approached the barrow from that quarter of the heath in which the little fire lay. Had the reddleman been watching he might have recognized her as the woman who had first stood there so singularly, and vanished at the approach of strangers. She ascended to her old position at the top, where the red coals of the perishing fire greeted her like living eyes in the corpse of day. There she stood still around her stretching the vast night atmosphere, whose incomplete darkness in comparison with the total darkness of the heath below it might have represented a venial beside a mortal sin.

That she was tall and straight in build, that she was lady-like in her movements, was all that could be learnt of her just now, her form being wrapped in a shawl folded in the old cornerwise fashion, and her head in a large kerchief, a protection not superfluous at this hour and place. Her back was towards the wind, which blew from the northwest; but whether she had avoided that aspect because of the chilly gusts which played about her exceptional position, or because her interest lay in the southeast, did not at first appear.

Her reason for standing so dead still as the pivot of this circle of heath-country was just as obscure. Her extraordinary fixity, her conspicuous loneliness, her heedlessness of night, betokened among other things an utter absence of fear. A tract of country unaltered from that sinister condition which made Caesar anxious every year to get clear of its glooms before the autumnal equinox, a kind of landscape and weather which leads travellers from the South to describe our island as Homer's Cimmerian land, was not, on the face of it, friendly to women.

It might reasonably have been supposed that she was listening to the wind, which rose somewhat as the night advanced, and laid hold of the attention. The wind, indeed, seemed made for the scene, as the scene seemed made for the hour. Part of its tone was quite special; what was heard there could be heard nowhere else. Gusts in innumerable series followed each other from the northwest, and when each one of them raced past the sound of its progress resolved into three. Treble, tenor, and bass notes were to be found therein. The general ricochet of the whole over pits and prominences had the gravest pitch of the chime. Next there could be heard the baritone buzz of a holly tree. Below these in force, above them in pitch, a dwindled voice strove hard at a husky tune, which was the peculiar local sound alluded to. Thinner and less immediately traceable than the other two, it was far more impressive than either. In it lay what may be called the linguistic peculiarity of the heath; and being audible nowhere on earth off a heath, it afforded a shadow of reason for the woman's tenseness, which continued as unbroken as ever.

Throughout the blowing of these plaintive November winds that note bore a great resemblance to the ruins of human song which remain to the throat of fourscore and ten. It was a worn whisper, dry and papery, and it brushed so distinctly across the ear that, by the accustomed, the material minutiae in which it originated could be realized as by touch. It was the united products of infinitesimal vegetable causes, and these were neither stems, leaves, fruit, blades, prickles, lichen, nor moss.

They were the mummied heathbells of the past summer, originally tender and purple, now washed colourless by Michaelmas rains, and dried to dead skins by October suns. So low was an individual sound from these that a combination of hundreds only just emerged from silence, and the myriads of the whole declivity reached the woman's ear but as a shrivelled and intermittent recitative. Yet scarcely a single accent among the many afloat tonight could have such power to impress a listener with thoughts of its origin. One inwardly saw the infinity of those combined multitudes; and perceived that each of the tiny trumpets was seized on entered, scoured and emerged from by the wind as thoroughly as if it were as vast as a crater.

“The spirit moved them.” A meaning of the phrase forced itself upon the attention; and an emotional listener’s fetichistic mood might have ended in one of more advanced quality. It was not, after all, that the left-hand expanse of old blooms spoke, or the right-hand, or those of the slope in front; but it was the single person of something else speaking through each at once.

Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally into the rest that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished. The bluffs, and the bushes, and the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs. Thrown out on the winds it became twined in with them, and with them it flew away.

What she uttered was a lengthened sighing, apparently at something in her mind which had led to her presence here. There was a spasmodic abandonment about it as if, in allowing herself to utter the sound the woman’s brain had authorized what it could not regulate. One point was evident in this; that she had been existing in a suppressed state, and not in one of languor, or stagnation.

Far away down the valley the faint shine from the window of the inn still lasted on; and a few additional moments proved that the window, or what was within it, had more to do with the woman’s sigh than had either her own actions or the scene immediately around. She lifted her left hand, which held a closed telescope. This she rapidly extended, as if she were well accustomed to the operation, and raising it to her eye directed it towards the light beaming from the inn.

The handkerchief which had hooded her head was now a little thrown back, her face being somewhat elevated. A profile was visible against the dull monochrome of cloud around her; and it was as though side shadows from the features of Sappho and Mrs. Siddons had converged upwards from the tomb to form an image like neither but suggesting both. This, however, was mere superficiality. In respect of character a face may make certain admissions by its outline; but it fully confesses only in its changes. So much is this the case that what is called the play of the features often helps more in understanding a man or woman than the earnest labours of all the other members together. Thus the night revealed little of her whose form it was embracing, for the mobile parts of her countenance could not be seen.

At last she gave up her spying attitude, closed the telescope, and turned to the decaying embers. From these no appreciable beams now radiated, except when a more than usually smart gust brushed over their faces and raised a fitful glow which came and went like the blush of a girl. She stooped over the silent circle, and selecting from the brands a piece of stick which bore the largest live coal at its end, brought it to where she had been standing before.

She held the brand to the ground, blowing the red coal with her mouth at the same time; till it faintly illuminated the sod, and revealed a small object, which turned out to be an hourglass, though she wore a watch. She blew long enough to show that the sand had all slipped through.

“Ah!” she said, as if surprised.

The light raised by her breath had been very fitful, and a momentary irradiation of flesh was all that it had disclosed of her face. That consisted of two matchless lips and a cheek only, her head being still enveloped. She threw away the stick, took the glass in her hand, the telescope under her arm, and moved on.

Along the ridge ran a faint foot-track, which the lady followed. Those who knew it well called it a path; and, while a mere visitor would have passed it unnoticed even by day, the regular haunters of the heath were at no loss for it at midnight. The whole secret of following these incipient paths, when there was not light enough in the atmosphere to show a turnpike road, lay in the development of the sense of touch in the feet, which comes with years of night-rambling in little-trodden spots. To a walker practised in such places a difference between impact on maiden herbage, and on the crippled stalks of a slight footway, is perceptible through the thickest boot or shoe.

The solitary figure who walked this beat took no notice of the windy tune still played on the dead heathbells. She did not turn her head to look at a group of dark creatures further on, who fled

from her presence as she skirted a ravine where they fed. They were about a score of the small wild ponies known as heath-croppers. They roamed at large on the undulations of Egdon, but in numbers too few to detract much from the solitude.

The pedestrian noticed nothing just now, and a clue to her abstraction was afforded by a trivial incident. A bramble caught hold of her skirt, and checked her progress. Instead of putting it off and hastening along, she yielded herself up to the pull, and stood passively still. When she began to extricate herself it was by turning round and round, and so unwinding the prickly switch. She was in a desponding reverie.

Her course was in the direction of the small undying fire which had drawn the attention of the men on Rainbarrow and of Wildeve in the valley below. A faint illumination from its rays began to glow upon her face, and the fire soon revealed itself to be lit, not on the level ground, but on a salient corner or redan of earth, at the junction of two converging bank fences. Outside was a ditch, dry except immediately under the fire, where there was a large pool, bearded all round by heather and rushes. In the smooth water of the pool the fire appeared upside down.

The banks meeting behind were bare of a hedge, save such as was formed by disconnected tufts of furze, standing upon stems along the top, like impaled heads above a city wall. A white mast, fitted up with spars and other nautical tackle, could be seen rising against the dark clouds whenever the flames played brightly enough to reach it. Altogether the scene had much the appearance of a fortification upon which had been kindled a beacon fire.

Nobody was visible; but ever and anon a whitish something moved above the bank from behind, and vanished again. This was a small human hand, in the act of lifting pieces of fuel into the fire, but for all that could be seen the hand, like that which troubled Belshazzar, was there alone. Occasionally an ember rolled off the bank, and dropped with a hiss into the pool.

At one side of the pool rough steps built of clods enabled everyone who wished to do so to mount the bank; which the woman did. Within was a paddock in an uncultivated state, though bearing evidence of having once been tilled; but the heath and fern had insidiously crept in, and were reasserting their old supremacy. Further ahead were dimly visible an irregular dwelling-house, garden, and outbuildings, backed by a clump of firs.

The young lady – for youth had revealed its presence in her buoyant bound up the bank – walked along the top instead of descending inside, and came to the corner where the fire was burning. One reason for the permanence of the blaze was now manifest: the fuel consisted of hard pieces of wood, cleft and sawn – the knotty boles of old thorn trees which grew in twos and threes about the hillsides. A yet unconsumed pile of these lay in the inner angle of the bank; and from this corner the upturned face of a little boy greeted her eyes. He was dilatorily throwing up a piece of wood into the fire every now and then, a business which seemed to have engaged him a considerable part of the evening, for his face was somewhat weary.

“I am glad you have come, Miss Eustacia,” he said, with a sigh of relief. “I don’t like biding by myself.”

“Nonsense. I have only been a little way for a walk. I have been gone only twenty minutes.”

“It seemed long,” murmured the sad boy. “And you have been so many times.”

“Why, I thought you would be pleased to have a bonfire. Are you not much obliged to me for making you one?”

“Yes; but there’s nobody here to play wi’ me.”

“I suppose nobody has come while I’ve been away?”

“Nobody except your grandfather – he looked out of doors once for ‘ee. I told him you were walking round upon the hill to look at the other bonfires.”

“A good boy.”

“I think I hear him coming again, miss.”

An old man came into the remoter light of the fire from the direction of the homestead. He was the same who had overtaken the reddleman on the road that afternoon. He looked wistfully to the top of the bank at the woman who stood there, and his teeth, which were quite unimpaired, showed like parian from his parted lips.

“When are you coming indoors, Eustacia?” he asked. “’Tis almost bedtime. I’ve been home these two hours, and am tired out. Surely ’tis somewhat childish of you to stay out playing at bonfires so long, and wasting such fuel. My precious thorn roots, the rarest of all firing, that I laid by on purpose for Christmas – you have burnt ’em nearly all!”

“I promised Johnny a bonfire, and it pleases him not to let it go out just yet,” said Eustacia, in a way which told at once that she was absolute queen here. “Grandfather, you go in to bed. I shall follow you soon. You like the fire, don’t you, Johnny?”

The boy looked up doubtfully at her and murmured, “I don’t think I want it any longer.”

Her grandfather had turned back again, and did not hear the boy’s reply. As soon as the white-haired man had vanished she said in a tone of pique to the child, “Ungrateful little boy, how can you contradict me? Never shall you have a bonfire again unless you keep it up now. Come, tell me you like to do things for me, and don’t deny it.”

The repressed child said, “Yes, I do, miss,” and continued to stir the fire perfunctorily.

“Stay a little longer and I will give you a crooked six-pence,” said Eustacia, more gently. “Put in one piece of wood every two or three minutes, but not too much at once. I am going to walk along the ridge a little longer, but I shall keep on coming to you. And if you hear a frog jump into the pond with a flounce like a stone thrown in, be sure you run and tell me, because it is a sign of rain.”

“Yes, Eustacia.”

“Miss Vye, sir.”

“Miss Vy – stacia.”

“That will do. Now put in one stick more.”

The little slave went on feeding the fire as before. He seemed a mere automaton, galvanized into moving and speaking by the wayward Eustacia’s will. He might have been the brass statue which Albertus Magnus is said to have animated just so far as to make it chatter, and move, and be his servant.

Before going on her walk again the young girl stood still on the bank for a few instants and listened. It was to the full as lonely a place as Rainbarrow, though at rather a lower level; and it was more sheltered from wind and weather on account of the few firs to the north. The bank which enclosed the homestead, and protected it from the lawless state of the world without, was formed of thick square clods, dug from the ditch on the outside, and built up with a slight batter or incline, which forms no slight defense where hedges will not grow because of the wind and the wilderness, and where wall materials are unattainable. Otherwise the situation was quite open, commanding the whole length of the valley which reached to the river behind Wildeve’s house. High above this to the right, and much nearer thitherward than the Quiet Woman Inn, the blurred contour of Rainbarrow obstructed the sky.

After her attentive survey of the wild slopes and hollow ravines a gesture of impatience escaped Eustacia. She vented petulant words every now and then, but there were sighs between her words, and sudden listenings between her sighs. Descending from her perch she again sauntered off towards Rainbarrow, though this time she did not go the whole way.

Twice she reappeared at intervals of a few minutes and each time she said —

“Not any flounce into the pond yet, little man?”

“No, Miss Eustacia,” the child replied.

“Well,” she said at last, “I shall soon be going in, and then I will give you the crooked sixpence, and let you go home.”

“Thank’ee, Miss Eustacia,” said the tired stoker, breathing more easily. And Eustacia again strolled away from the fire, but this time not towards Rainbarrow. She skirted the bank and went round to the wicket before the house, where she stood motionless, looking at the scene.

Fifty yards off rose the corner of the two converging banks, with the fire upon it; within the bank, lifting up to the fire one stick at a time, just as before, the figure of the little child. She idly watched him as he occasionally climbed up in the nook of the bank and stood beside the brands. The wind blew the smoke, and the child’s hair, and the corner of his pinafore, all in the same direction; the breeze died, and the pinafore and hair lay still, and the smoke went up straight.

While Eustacia looked on from this distance the boy’s form visibly started – he slid down the bank and ran across towards the white gate.

“Well?” said Eustacia.

“A hopfrog have jumped into the pond. Yes, I heard ‘en!”

“Then it is going to rain, and you had better go home. You will not be afraid?” She spoke hurriedly, as if her heart had leapt into her throat at the boy’s words.

“No, because I shall hae the crooked sixpence.”

“Yes, here it is. Now run as fast as you can – not that way – through the garden here. No other boy in the heath has had such a bonfire as yours.”

The boy, who clearly had had too much of a good thing, marched away into the shadows with alacrity. When he was gone Eustacia, leaving her telescope and hourglass by the gate, brushed forward from the wicket towards the angle of the bank, under the fire.

Here, screened by the outwork, she waited. In a few moments a splash was audible from the pond outside. Had the child been there he would have said that a second frog had jumped in; but by most people the sound would have been likened to the fall of a stone into the water. Eustacia stepped upon the bank.

“Yes?” she said, and held her breath.

Thereupon the contour of a man became dimly visible against the low-reaching sky over the valley, beyond the outer margin of the pool. He came round it and leapt upon the bank beside her. A low laugh escaped her – the third utterance which the girl had indulged in tonight. The first, when she stood upon Rainbarrow, had expressed anxiety; the second, on the ridge, had expressed impatience; the present was one of triumphant pleasure. She let her joyous eyes rest upon him without speaking, as upon some wondrous thing she had created out of chaos.

“I have come,” said the man, who was Wildeve. “You give me no peace. Why do you not leave me alone? I have seen your bonfire all the evening.” The words were not without emotion, and retained their level tone as if by a careful equipoise between imminent extremes.

At this unexpectedly repressing manner in her lover the girl seemed to repress herself also. “Of course you have seen my fire,” she answered with languid calmness, artificially maintained. “Why shouldn’t I have a bonfire on the Fifth of November, like other denizens of the heath?”

“I knew it was meant for me.”

“How did you know it? I have had no word with you since you – you chose her, and walked about with her, and deserted me entirely, as if I had never been yours life and soul so irretrievably!”

“Eustacia! could I forget that last autumn at this same day of the month and at this same place you lighted exactly such a fire as a signal for me to come and see you? Why should there have been a bonfire again by Captain Vye’s house if not for the same purpose?”

“Yes, yes – I own it,” she cried under her breath, with a drowsy fervour of manner and tone which was quite peculiar to her. “Don’t begin speaking to me as you did, Damon; you will drive me to say words I would not wish to say to you. I had given you up, and resolved not to think of you any more; and then I heard the news, and I came out and got the fire ready because I thought that you had been faithful to me.”

“What have you heard to make you think that?” said Wildeve, astonished.

“That you did not marry her!” she murmured exultingly. “And I knew it was because you loved me best, and couldn’t do it... Damon, you have been cruel to me to go away, and I have said I would never forgive you. I do not think I can forgive you entirely, even now – it is too much for a woman of any spirit to quite overlook.”

“If I had known you wished to call me up here only to reproach me, I wouldn’t have come.”

“But I don’t mind it, and I do forgive you now that you have not married her, and have come back to me!”

“Who told you that I had not married her?”

“My grandfather. He took a long walk today, and as he was coming home he overtook some person who told him of a broken-off wedding – he thought it might be yours, and I knew it was.”

“Does anybody else know?”

“I suppose not. Now Damon, do you see why I lit my signal fire? You did not think I would have lit it if I had imagined you to have become the husband of this woman. It is insulting my pride to suppose that.”

Wildeve was silent; it was evident that he had supposed as much.

“Did you indeed think I believed you were married?” she again demanded earnestly. “Then you wronged me; and upon my life and heart I can hardly bear to recognize that you have such ill thoughts of me! Damon, you are not worthy of me – I see it, and yet I love you. Never mind, let it go – I must bear your mean opinion as best I may... It is true, is it not,” she added with ill-concealed anxiety, on his making no demonstration, “that you could not bring yourself to give me up, and are still going to love me best of all?”

“Yes; or why should I have come?” he said touchily. “Not that fidelity will be any great merit in me after your kind speech about my unworthiness, which should have been said by myself if by anybody, and comes with an ill grace from you. However, the curse of inflammability is upon me, and I must live under it, and take any snub from a woman. It has brought me down from engineering to innkeeping – what lower stage it has in store for me I have yet to learn.” He continued to look upon her gloomily.

She seized the moment, and throwing back the shawl so that the firelight shone full upon her face and throat, said with a smile, “Have you seen anything better than that in your travels?”

Eustacia was not one to commit herself to such a position without good ground. He said quietly, “No.”

“Not even on the shoulders of Thomasin?”

“Thomasin is a pleasing and innocent woman.”

“That’s nothing to do with it,” she cried with quick passionateness. “We will leave her out; there are only you and me now to think of.” After a long look at him she resumed with the old quiescent warmth, “Must I go on weakly confessing to you things a woman ought to conceal; and own that no words can express how gloomy I have been because of that dreadful belief I held till two hours ago – that you had quite deserted me?”

“I am sorry I caused you that pain.”

“But perhaps it is not wholly because of you that I get gloomy,” she archly added. “It is in my nature to feel like that. It was born in my blood, I suppose.”

“Hypochondriasis.”

“Or else it was coming into this wild heath. I was happy enough at Budmouth. O the times, O the days at Budmouth! But Egdon will be brighter again now.”

“I hope it will,” said Wildeve moodily. “Do you know the consequence of this recall to me, my old darling? I shall come to see you again as before, at Rainbarrow.”

“Of course you will.”

“And yet I declare that until I got here tonight I intended, after this one good-bye, never to meet you again.”

“I don’t thank you for that,” she said, turning away, while indignation spread through her like subterranean heat. “You may come again to Rainbarrow if you like, but you won’t see me; and you may call, but I shall not listen; and you may tempt me, but I won’t give myself to you any more.”

“You have said as much before, sweet; but such natures as yours don’t so easily adhere to their words. Neither, for the matter of that, do such natures as mine.”

“This is the pleasure I have won by my trouble,” she whispered bitterly. “Why did I try to recall you? Damon, a strange warring takes place in my mind occasionally. I think when I become calm after you woundings, ‘Do I embrace a cloud of common fog after all?’ You are a chameleon, and now you are at your worst colour. Go home, or I shall hate you!”

He looked absently towards Rainbarrow while one might have counted twenty, and said, as if he did not much mind all this, “Yes, I will go home. Do you mean to see me again?”

“If you own to me that the wedding is broken off because you love me best.”

“I don’t think it would be good policy,” said Wildeve, smiling. “You would get to know the extent of your power too clearly.”

“But tell me!”

“You know.”

“Where is she now?”

“I don’t know. I prefer not to speak of her to you. I have not yet married her; I have come in obedience to your call. That is enough.”

“I merely lit that fire because I was dull, and thought I would get a little excitement by calling you up and triumphing over you as the Witch of Endor called up Samuel. I determined you should come; and you have come! I have shown my power. A mile and half hither, and a mile and half back again to your home – three miles in the dark for me. Have I not shown my power?”

He shook his head at her. “I know you too well, my Eustacia; I know you too well. There isn’t a note in you which I don’t know; and that hot little bosom couldn’t play such a cold-blooded trick to save its life. I saw a woman on Rainbarrow at dusk looking down towards my house. I think I drew out you before you drew out me.”

The revived embers of an old passion glowed clearly in Wildeve now; and he leant forward as if about to put his face towards her cheek.

“O no,” she said, intractably moving to the other side of the decayed fire. “What did you mean by that?”

“Perhaps I may kiss your hand?”

“No, you may not.”

“Then I may shake your hand?”

“No.”

“Then I wish you good night without caring for either. Good-bye, good-bye.”

She returned no answer, and with the bow of a dancing-master he vanished on the other side of the pool as he had come.

Eustacia sighed – it was no fragile maiden sigh, but a sigh which shook her like a shiver. Whenever a flash of reason darted like an electric light upon her lover – as it sometimes would – and showed his imperfections, she shivered thus. But it was over in a second, and she loved on. She knew that he trifled with her; but she loved on. She scattered the half-burnt brands, went indoors immediately, and up to her bedroom without a light. Amid the rustles which denoted her to be undressing in the darkness other heavy breaths frequently came; and the same kind of shudder occasionally moved through her when, ten minutes later, she lay on her bed asleep.

7 – Queen of Night

Eustacia Vye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have done well with a little preparation. She had the passions and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a model woman. Had it been possible for the earth and mankind to be entirely in her grasp for a while, she had handled the distaff, the spindle, and the shears at her own free will, few in the world would have noticed the change of government. There would have been the same inequality of lot, the same heaping up of favours here, of contumely there, the same generosity before justice, the same perpetual dilemmas, the same captious alteration of caresses and blows that we endure now.

She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without ruddiness, as without pallor; and soft to the touch as a cloud. To see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow – it closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow.

Her nerves extended into those tresses, and her temper could always be softened by stroking them down. When her hair was brushed she would instantly sink into stillness and look like the Sphinx. If, in passing under one of the Egdon banks, any of its thick skeins were caught, as they sometimes were, by a prickly tuft of the large *Ulex Europoeus* – which will act as a sort of hairbrush – she would go back a few steps, and pass against it a second time.

She had pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries, and their light, as it came and went, and came again, was partially hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes; and of these the under lid was much fuller than it usually is with English women. This enabled her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so – she might have been believed capable of sleeping without closing them up. Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences, you could fancy the colour of Eustacia's soul to be flamelike. The sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impression.

The mouth seemed formed less to speak than to quiver, less to quiver than to kiss. Some might have added, less to kiss than to curl. Viewed sideways, the closing-line of her lips formed, with almost geometric precision, the curve so well known in the arts of design as the *cima-recta*, or ogee. The sight of such a flexible bend as that on grim Egdon was quite an apparition. It was felt at once that the mouth did not come over from Sleswig with a band of Saxon pirates whose lips met like the two halves of a muffin. One had fancied that such lip-curves were mostly lurking underground in the South as fragments of forgotten marbles. So fine were the lines of her lips that, though full, each corner of her mouth was as clearly cut as the point of a spear. This keenness of corner was only blunted when she was given over to sudden fits of gloom, one of the phases of the night-side of sentiment which she knew too well for her years.

Her presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnight; her moods recalled lotus-eaters and the march in *Athalie*; her motions, the ebb and flow of the sea; her voice, the viola. In a dim light, and with a slight rearrangement of her hair, her general figure might have stood for that of either of the higher female deities. The new moon behind her head, an old helmet upon it, a diadem of accidental dewdrops round her brow, would have been adjuncts sufficient to strike the note of Artemis, Athena, or Hera respectively, with as close an approximation to the antique as that which passes muster on many respected canvases.

But celestial imperiousness, love, wrath, and fervour had proved to be somewhat thrown away on netherward Egdon. Her power was limited, and the consciousness of this limitation had biased her development. Egdon was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto. Her appearance accorded well with this smouldering rebelliousness, and the shady splendour of her beauty was the real surface of the sad and stifled warmth within her. A true Tartarean dignity sat upon her brow, and not factitiously or with marks of constraint, for it had grown in her with years.

Across the upper part of her head she wore a thin fillet of black velvet, restraining the luxuriance of her shady hair, in a way which added much to this class of majesty by irregularly clouding her forehead. “Nothing can embellish a beautiful face more than a narrow band drawn over the brow,” says Richter. Some of the neighbouring girls wore coloured ribbon for the same purpose, and sported metallic ornaments elsewhere; but if anyone suggested coloured ribbon and metallic ornaments to Eustacia Vye she laughed and went on.

Why did a woman of this sort live on Egdon Heath? Budmouth was her native place, a fashionable seaside resort at that date. She was the daughter of the bandmaster of a regiment which had been quartered there – a Corfiote by birth, and a fine musician – who met his future wife during her trip thither with her father the captain, a man of good family. The marriage was scarcely in accord with the old man’s wishes, for the bandmaster’s pockets were as light as his occupation. But the musician did his best; adopted his wife’s name, made England permanently his home, took great trouble with his child’s education, the expenses of which were defrayed by the grandfather, and thrived as the chief local musician till her mother’s death, when he left off thriving, drank, and died also. The girl was left to the care of her grandfather, who, since three of his ribs became broken in a shipwreck, had lived in this airy perch on Egdon, a spot which had taken his fancy because the house was to be had for next to nothing, and because a remote blue tinge on the horizon between the hills, visible from the cottage door, was traditionally believed to be the English Channel. She hated the change; she felt like one banished; but here she was forced to abide.

Thus it happened that in Eustacia’s brain were juxtaposed the strangest assortment of ideas, from old time and from new. There was no middle distance in her perspective – romantic recollections of sunny afternoons on an esplanade, with military bands, officers, and gallants around, stood like gilded letters upon the dark tablet of surrounding Egdon. Every bizarre effect that could result from the random intertwining of watering-place glitter with the grand solemnity of a heath, was to be found in her. Seeing nothing of human life now, she imagined all the more of what she had seen.

Where did her dignity come from? By a latent vein from Alcinous’ line, her father hailing from Phaeacia’s isle? – or from Fitzalan and De Vere, her maternal grandfather having had a cousin in the peerage? Perhaps it was the gift of Heaven – a happy convergence of natural laws. Among other things opportunity had of late years been denied her of learning to be undignified, for she lived lonely. Isolation on a heath renders vulgarity well-nigh impossible. It would have been as easy for the heath-ponies, bats, and snakes to be vulgar as for her. A narrow life in Budmouth might have completely demeaned her.

The only way to look queenly without realms or hearts to queen it over is to look as if you had lost them; and Eustacia did that to a triumph. In the captain’s cottage she could suggest mansions she had never seen. Perhaps that was because she frequented a vaster mansion than any of them, the open hills. Like the summer condition of the place around her, she was an embodiment of the phrase “a populous solitude” – apparently so listless, void, and quiet, she was really busy and full.

To be loved to madness – such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover.

She could show a most reproachful look at times, but it was directed less against human beings than against certain creatures of her mind, the chief of these being Destiny, through whose interference she dimly fancied it arose that love alighted only on gliding youth – that any love she might win would sink simultaneously with the sand in the glass. She thought of it with an ever-growing consciousness of cruelty, which tended to breed actions of reckless unconventionality, framed to snatch a year’s, a week’s, even an hour’s passion from anywhere while it could be won. Through want of it she had sung without being merry, possessed without enjoying, outshone without triumphing. Her loneliness deepened her desire. On Egdon, coldest and meanest kisses were at famine prices, and where was a mouth matching hers to be found?

Fidelity in love for fidelity's sake had less attraction for her than for most women; fidelity because of love's grip had much. A blaze of love, and extinction, was better than a lantern glimmer of the same which should last long years. On this head she knew by prevision what most women learn only by experience – she had mentally walked round love, told the towers thereof, considered its palaces, and concluded that love was but a doleful joy. Yet she desired it, as one in a desert would be thankful for brackish water.

She often repeated her prayers; not at particular times, but, like the unaffectedly devout, when she desired to pray. Her prayer was always spontaneous, and often ran thus, “O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness; send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die.”

Her high gods were William the Conqueror, Strafford, and Napoleon Buonaparte, as they had appeared in the Lady's History used at the establishment in which she was educated. Had she been a mother she would have christened her boys such names as Saul or Sisera in preference to Jacob or David, neither of whom she admired. At school she had used to side with the Philistines in several battles, and had wondered if Pontius Pilate were as handsome as he was frank and fair.

Thus she was a girl of some forwardness of mind, indeed, weighed in relation to her situation among the very rearward of thinkers, very original. Her instincts towards social non-conformity were at the root of this. In the matter of holidays, her mood was that of horses who, when turned out to grass, enjoy looking upon their kind at work on the highway. She only valued rest to herself when it came in the midst of other people's labour. Hence she hated Sundays when all was at rest, and often said they would be the death of her. To see the heathmen in their Sunday condition, that is, with their hands in their pockets, their boots newly oiled, and not laced up (a particularly Sunday sign), walking leisurely among the turves and furze-faggots they had cut during the week, and kicking them critically as if their use were unknown, was a fearful heaviness to her. To relieve the tedium of this untimely day she would overhaul the cupboards containing her grandfather's old charts and other rubbish, humming Saturday-night ballads of the country people the while. But on Saturday nights she would frequently sing a psalm, and it was always on a weekday that she read the Bible, that she might be unoppressed with a sense of doing her duty.

Such views of life were to some extent the natural begettings of her situation upon her nature. To dwell on a heath without studying its meanings was like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue. The subtle beauties of the heath were lost to Eustacia; she only caught its vapours. An environment which would have made a contented woman a poet, a suffering woman a devotee, a pious woman a psalmist, even a giddy woman thoughtful, made a rebellious woman saturnine.

Eustacia had got beyond the vision of some marriage of inexpressible glory; yet, though her emotions were in full vigour, she cared for no meaner union. Thus we see her in a strange state of isolation. To have lost the godlike conceit that we may do what we will, and not to have acquired a homely zest for doing what we can, shows a grandeur of temper which cannot be objected to in the abstract, for it denotes a mind that, though disappointed, forswears compromise. But, if congenial to philosophy, it is apt to be dangerous to the commonwealth. In a world where doing means marrying, and the commonwealth is one of hearts and hands, the same peril attends the condition.

And so we see our Eustacia – for at times she was not altogether unlovable – arriving at that stage of enlightenment which feels that nothing is worth while, and filling up the spare hours of her existence by idealizing Wildeve for want of a better object. This was the sole reason of his ascendancy: she knew it herself. At moments her pride rebelled against her passion for him, and she even had longed to be free. But there was only one circumstance which could dislodge him, and that was the advent of a greater man.

For the rest, she suffered much from depression of spirits, and took slow walks to recover them, in which she carried her grandfather's telescope and her grandmother's hourglass – the latter because of a peculiar pleasure she derived from watching a material representation of time's gradual glide away. She seldom schemed, but when she did scheme, her plans showed rather the comprehensive

strategy of a general than the small arts called womanish, though she could utter oracles of Delphian ambiguity when she did not choose to be direct. In heaven she will probably sit between the Heloises and the Cleopatras.

8 – Those Who Are Found Where There Is Said to Be Nobody

As soon as the sad little boy had withdrawn from the fire he clasped the money tight in the palm of his hand, as if thereby to fortify his courage, and began to run. There was really little danger in allowing a child to go home alone on this part of Egdon Heath. The distance to the boy's house was not more than three-eighths of a mile, his father's cottage, and one other a few yards further on, forming part of the small hamlet of Mistover Knap: the third and only remaining house was that of Captain Vye and Eustacia, which stood quite away from the small cottages and was the loneliest of lonely houses on these thinly populated slopes.

He ran until he was out of breath, and then, becoming more courageous, walked leisurely along, singing in an old voice a little song about a sailor-boy and a fair one, and bright gold in store. In the middle of this the child stopped – from a pit under the hill ahead of him shone a light, whence proceeded a cloud of floating dust and a smacking noise.

Only unusual sights and sounds frightened the boy. The shrivelled voice of the heath did not alarm him, for that was familiar. The thornbushes which arose in his path from time to time were less satisfactory, for they whistled gloomily, and had a ghastly habit after dark of putting on the shapes of jumping madmen, sprawling giants, and hideous cripples. Lights were not uncommon this evening, but the nature of all of them was different from this. Discretion rather than terror prompted the boy to turn back instead of passing the light, with a view of asking Miss Eustacia Vye to let her servant accompany him home.

When the boy had reascended to the top of the valley he found the fire to be still burning on the bank, though lower than before. Beside it, instead of Eustacia's solitary form, he saw two persons, the second being a man. The boy crept along under the bank to ascertain from the nature of the proceedings if it would be prudent to interrupt so splendid a creature as Miss Eustacia on his poor trivial account.

After listening under the bank for some minutes to the talk he turned in a perplexed and doubting manner and began to withdraw as silently as he had come. That he did not, upon the whole, think it advisable to interrupt her conversation with Wildeva, without being prepared to bear the whole weight of her displeasure, was obvious.

Here was a Scyllaeo-Charybdean position for a poor boy. Pausing when again safe from discovery, he finally decided to face the pit phenomenon as the lesser evil. With a heavy sigh he retraced the slope, and followed the path he had followed before.

The light had gone, the rising dust had disappeared – he hoped for ever. He marched resolutely along, and found nothing to alarm him till, coming within a few yards of the sandpit, he heard a slight noise in front, which led him to halt. The halt was but momentary, for the noise resolved itself into the steady bites of two animals grazing.

“Two he'th-croppers down here,” he said aloud. “I have never known 'em come down so far afore.”

The animals were in the direct line of his path, but that the child thought little of; he had played round the fetlocks of horses from his infancy. On coming nearer, however, the boy was somewhat surprised to find that the little creatures did not run off, and that each wore a clog, to prevent his going astray; this signified that they had been broken in. He could now see the interior of the pit, which, being in the side of the hill, had a level entrance. In the innermost corner the square outline of a van appeared, with its back towards him. A light came from the interior, and threw a moving shadow upon the vertical face of gravel at the further side of the pit into which the vehicle faced.

The child assumed that this was the cart of a gipsy, and his dread of those wanderers reached but to that mild pitch which titillates rather than pains. Only a few inches of mud wall kept him and his family from being gipsies themselves. He skirted the gravel pit at a respectful distance, ascended

the slope, and came forward upon the brow, in order to look into the open door of the van and see the original of the shadow.

The picture alarmed the boy. By a little stove inside the van sat a figure red from head to heels – the man who had been Thomasin's friend. He was darning a stocking, which was red like the rest of him. Moreover, as he darned he smoked a pipe, the stem and bowl of which were red also.

At this moment one of the heath-croppers feeding in the outer shadows was audibly shaking off the clog attached to its foot. Aroused by the sound, the reddleman laid down his stocking, lit a lantern which hung beside him, and came out from the van. In sticking up the candle he lifted the lantern to his face, and the light shone into the whites of his eyes and upon his ivory teeth, which, in contrast with the red surrounding, lent him a startling aspect enough to the gaze of a juvenile. The boy knew too well for his peace of mind upon whose lair he had lighted. Uglier persons than gipsies were known to cross Egdon at times, and a reddleman was one of them.

“How I wish 'twas only a gipsy!” he murmured.

The man was by this time coming back from the horses. In his fear of being seen the boy rendered detection certain by nervous motion. The heather and peat stratum overhung the brow of the pit in mats, hiding the actual verge. The boy had stepped beyond the solid ground; the heather now gave way, and down he rolled over the scarp of grey sand to the very foot of the man.

The red man opened the lantern and turned it upon the figure of the prostrate boy.

“Who be ye?” he said.

“Johnny Nunsuch, master!”

“What were you doing up there?”

“I don't know.”

“Watching me, I suppose?”

“Yes, master.”

“What did you watch me for?”

“Because I was coming home from Miss Vye's bonfire.”

“Beest hurt?”

“No.”

“Why, yes, you be – your hand is bleeding. Come under my tilt and let me tie it up.”

“Please let me look for my sixpence.”

“How did you come by that?”

“Miss Vye gied it to me for keeping up her bonfire.”

The sixpence was found, and the man went to the van, the boy behind, almost holding his breath.

The man took a piece of rag from a satchel containing sewing materials, tore off a strip, which, like everything else, was tinged red, and proceeded to bind up the wound.

“My eyes have got foggy-like – please may I sit down, master?” said the boy.

“To be sure, poor chap. 'Tis enough to make you feel fainty. Sit on that bundle.”

The man finished tying up the gash, and the boy said, “I think I'll go home now, master.”

“You are rather afraid of me. Do you know what I be?”

The child surveyed his vermilion figure up and down with much misgiving and finally said, “Yes.”

“Well, what?”

“The reddleman!” he faltered.

“Yes, that's what I be. Though there's more than one. You little children think there's only one cuckoo, one fox, one giant, one devil, and one reddleman, when there's lots of us all.”

“Is there? You won't carry me off in your bags, will ye, master? 'Tis said that the reddleman will sometimes.”

“Nonsense. All that reddlemen do is sell reddle. You see all these bags at the back of my cart? They are not full of little boys – only full of red stuff.”

“Was you born a reddleman?”

“No, I took to it. I should be as white as you if I were to give up the trade – that is, I should be white in time – perhaps six months; not at first, because ‘tis grow’d into my skin and won’t wash out. Now, you’ll never be afraid of a reddleman again, will ye?”

“No, never. Willy Orchard said he seed a red ghost here t’other day – perhaps that was you?”

“I was here t’other day.”

“Were you making that dusty light I saw by now?”

“Oh yes, I was beating out some bags. And have you had a good bonfire up there? I saw the light. Why did Miss Vye want a bonfire so bad that she should give you sixpence to keep it up?”

“I don’t know. I was tired, but she made me bide and keep up the fire just the same, while she kept going up across Rainbarrow way.”

“And how long did that last?”

“Until a hopfrog jumped into the pond.”

The reddleman suddenly ceased to talk idly. “A hopfrog?” he inquired. “Hopfrogs don’t jump into ponds this time of year.”

“They do, for I heard one.”

“Certain-sure?”

“Yes. She told me afore that I should hear’n; and so I did. They say she’s clever and deep, and perhaps she charmed ‘en to come.”

“And what then?”

“Then I came down here, and I was afeard, and I went back; but I didn’t like to speak to her, because of the gentleman, and I came on here again.”

“A gentleman – ah! What did she say to him, my man?”

“Told him she supposed he had not married the other woman because he liked his old sweetheart best; and things like that.”

“What did the gentleman say to her, my sonny?”

“He only said he did like her best, and how he was coming to see her again under Rainbarrow o’ nights.”

“Ha!” cried the reddleman, slapping his hand against the side of his van so that the whole fabric shook under the blow. “That’s the secret o’t!”

The little boy jumped clean from the stool.

“My man, don’t you be afraid,” said the dealer in red, suddenly becoming gentle. “I forgot you were here. That’s only a curious way reddlemen have of going mad for a moment; but they don’t hurt anybody. And what did the lady say then?”

“I can’t mind. Please, Master Reddleman, may I go home-along now?”

“Ay, to be sure you may. I’ll go a bit of ways with you.”

He conducted the boy out of the gravel pit and into the path leading to his mother’s cottage. When the little figure had vanished in the darkness the reddleman returned, resumed his seat by the fire, and proceeded to darn again.

9 – Love Leads a Shrewd Man into Strategy

Reddlemen of the old school are now but seldom seen. Since the introduction of railways Wessex farmers have managed to do without these Mephistophelian visitants, and the bright pigment so largely used by shepherds in preparing sheep for the fair is obtained by other routes. Even those who yet survive are losing the poetry of existence which characterized them when the pursuit of the trade meant periodical journeys to the pit whence the material was dug, a regular camping out from month to month, except in the depth of winter, a peregrination among farms which could be counted by the hundred, and in spite of this Arab existence the preservation of that respectability which is insured by the never-failing production of a well-lined purse.

Reddle spreads its lively hues over everything it lights on, and stamps unmistakably, as with the mark of Cain, any person who has handled it half an hour.

A child's first sight of a reddleman was an epoch in his life. That blood-coloured figure was a sublimation of all the horrid dreams which had afflicted the juvenile spirit since imagination began. "The reddleman is coming for you!" had been the formulated threat of Wessex mothers for many generations. He was successfully supplanted for a while, at the beginning of the present century, by Buonaparte; but as process of time rendered the latter personage stale and ineffective the older phrase resumed its early prominence. And now the reddleman has in his turn followed Buonaparte to the land of worn-out bogeys, and his place is filled by modern inventions.

The reddleman lived like a gipsy; but gipsies he scorned. He was about as thriving as travelling basket and mat makers; but he had nothing to do with them. He was more decently born and brought up than the cattledrovers who passed and repassed him in his wanderings; but they merely nodded to him. His stock was more valuable than that of pedlars; but they did not think so, and passed his cart with eyes straight ahead. He was such an unnatural colour to look at that the men of roundabouts and waxwork shows seemed gentlemen beside him; but he considered them low company, and remained aloof. Among all these squatters and folks of the road the reddleman continually found himself; yet he was not of them. His occupation tended to isolate him, and isolated he was mostly seen to be.

It was sometimes suggested that reddlemen were criminals for whose misdeeds other men wrongfully suffered – that in escaping the law they had not escaped their own consciences, and had taken to the trade as a lifelong penance. Else why should they have chosen it? In the present case such a question would have been particularly apposite. The reddleman who had entered Egdon that afternoon was an instance of the pleasing being wasted to form the ground-work of the singular, when an ugly foundation would have done just as well for that purpose. The one point that was forbidding about this reddleman was his colour. Freed from that he would have been as agreeable a specimen of rustic manhood as one would often see. A keen observer might have been inclined to think – which was, indeed, partly the truth – that he had relinquished his proper station in life for want of interest in it. Moreover, after looking at him one would have hazarded the guess that good nature, and an acuteness as extreme as it could be without verging on craft, formed the framework of his character.

While he darned the stocking his face became rigid with thought. Softer expressions followed this, and then again recurred the tender sadness which had sat upon him during his drive along the highway that afternoon. Presently his needle stopped. He laid down the stocking, arose from his seat, and took a leathern pouch from a hook in the corner of the van. This contained among other articles a brown-paper packet, which, to judge from the hinge-like character of its worn folds, seemed to have been carefully opened and closed a good many times. He sat down on a three-legged milking stool that formed the only seat in the van, and, examining his packet by the light of a candle, took thence an old letter and spread it open. The writing had originally been traced on white paper, but the letter had now assumed a pale red tinge from the accident of its situation; and the black strokes of writing

thereon looked like the twigs of a winter hedge against a vermilion sunset. The letter bore a date some two years previous to that time, and was signed "Thomasin Yeobright." It ran as follows: —

DEAR DIGGORY VENN, — The question you put when you overtook me coming home from Pond-close gave me such a surprise that I am afraid I did not make you exactly understand what I meant. Of course, if my aunt had not met me I could have explained all then at once, but as it was there was no chance. I have been quite uneasy since, as you know I do not wish to pain you, yet I fear I shall be doing so now in contradicting what I seemed to say then. I cannot, Diggory, marry you, or think of letting you call me your sweetheart. I could not, indeed, Diggory. I hope you will not much mind my saying this, and feel in a great pain. It makes me very sad when I think it may, for I like you very much, and I always put you next to my cousin Clym in my mind. There are so many reasons why we cannot be married that I can hardly name them all in a letter. I did not in the least expect that you were going to speak on such a thing when you followed me, because I had never thought of you in the sense of a lover at all. You must not becall me for laughing when you spoke; you mistook when you thought I laughed at you as a foolish man. I laughed because the idea was so odd, and not at you at all. The great reason with my own personal self for not letting you court me is, that I do not feel the things a woman ought to feel who consents to walk with you with the meaning of being your wife. It is not as you think, that I have another in my mind, for I do not encourage anybody, and never have in my life. Another reason is my aunt. She would not, I know, agree to it, even if I wished to have you. She likes you very well, but she will want me to look a little higher than a small dairy-farmer, and marry a professional man. I hope you will not set your heart against me for writing plainly, but I felt you might try to see me again, and it is better that we should not meet. I shall always think of you as a good man, and be anxious for your well-doing. I send this by Jane Orchard's little maid, — And remain Diggory, your faithful friend,

THOMASIN YEOBRIGHT.

To MR. VENN, Dairy-farmer.

Since the arrival of that letter, on a certain autumn morning long ago, the reddleman and Thomasin had not met till today. During the interval he had shifted his position even further from hers than it had originally been, by adopting the reddle trade; though he was really in very good circumstances still. Indeed, seeing that his expenditure was only one-fourth of his income, he might have been called a prosperous man.

Rejected suitors take to roaming as naturally as unhived bees; and the business to which he had cynically devoted himself was in many ways congenial to Venn. But his wanderings, by mere stress of old emotions, had frequently taken an Egdon direction, though he never intruded upon her who attracted him thither. To be in Thomasin's heath, and near her, yet unseen, was the one ewe-lamb of pleasure left to him.

Then came the incident of that day, and the reddleman, still loving her well, was excited by this accidental service to her at a critical juncture to vow an active devotion to her cause, instead of, as hitherto, sighing and holding aloof. After what had happened it was impossible that he should not doubt the honesty of Wildeve's intentions. But her hope was apparently centred upon him; and dismissing his regrets Venn determined to aid her to be happy in her own chosen way. That this way was, of all others, the most distressing to himself, was awkward enough; but the reddleman's love was generous.

His first active step in watching over Thomasin's interests was taken about seven o'clock the next evening and was dictated by the news which he had learnt from the sad boy. That Eustacia was somehow the cause of Wildeve's carelessness in relation to the marriage had at once been Venn's conclusion on hearing of the secret meeting between them. It did not occur to his mind that Eustacia's love signal to Wildeve was the tender effect upon the deserted beauty of the intelligence which her grandfather had brought home. His instinct was to regard her as a conspirator against rather than as an antecedent obstacle to Thomasin's happiness.

During the day he had been exceedingly anxious to learn the condition of Thomasin, but he did not venture to intrude upon a threshold to which he was a stranger, particularly at such an unpleasant moment as this. He had occupied his time in moving with his ponies and load to a new point in the heath, eastward to his previous station; and here he selected a nook with a careful eye to shelter from wind and rain, which seemed to mean that his stay there was to be a comparatively extended one. After this he returned on foot some part of the way that he had come; and, it being now dark, he diverged to the left till he stood behind a holly bush on the edge of a pit not twenty yards from Rainbarrow.

He watched for a meeting there, but he watched in vain. Nobody except himself came near the spot that night.

But the loss of his labour produced little effect upon the reddleman. He had stood in the shoes of Tantalus, and seemed to look upon a certain mass of disappointment as the natural preface to all realizations, without which preface they would give cause for alarm.

The same hour the next evening found him again at the same place; but Eustacia and Wildeve, the expected trysters, did not appear.

He pursued precisely the same course yet four nights longer, and without success. But on the next, being the day-week of their previous meeting, he saw a female shape floating along the ridge and the outline of a young man ascending from the valley. They met in the little ditch encircling the tumulus – the original excavation from which it had been thrown up by the ancient British people.

The reddleman, stung with suspicion of wrong to Thomasin, was aroused to strategy in a moment. He instantly left the bush and crept forward on his hands and knees. When he had got as close as he might safely venture without discovery he found that, owing to a cross-wind, the conversation of the trysting pair could not be overheard.

Near him, as in divers places about the heath, were areas strewn with large turves, which lay edgeways and upside down awaiting removal by Timothy Fairway, previous to the winter weather. He took two of these as he lay, and dragged them over him till one covered his head and shoulders, the other his back and legs. The reddleman would now have been quite invisible, even by daylight; the turves, standing upon him with the heather upwards, looked precisely as if they were growing. He crept along again, and the turves upon his back crept with him. Had he approached without any covering the chances are that he would not have been perceived in the dusk; approaching thus, it was as though he burrowed underground. In this manner he came quite close to where the two were standing.

“Wish to consult me on the matter?” reached his ears in the rich, impetuous accents of Eustacia Vye. “Consult me? It is an indignity to me to talk so – I won’t bear it any longer!” She began weeping. “I have loved you, and have shown you that I loved you, much to my regret; and yet you can come and say in that frigid way that you wish to consult with me whether it would not be better to marry Thomasin. Better – of course it would be. Marry her – she is nearer to your own position in life than I am!”

“Yes, yes; that’s very well,” said Wildeve peremptorily. “But we must look at things as they are. Whatever blame may attach to me for having brought it about, Thomasin’s position is at present much worse than yours. I simply tell you that I am in a strait.”

“But you shall not tell me! You must see that it is only harassing me. Damon, you have not acted well; you have sunk in my opinion. You have not valued my courtesy – the courtesy of a lady in loving you – who used to think of far more ambitious things. But it was Thomasin’s fault.

“She won you away from me, and she deserves to suffer for it. Where is she staying now? Not that I care, nor where I am myself. Ah, if I were dead and gone how glad she would be! Where is she, I ask?”

“Thomasin is now staying at her aunt’s shut up in a bedroom, and keeping out of everybody’s sight,” he said indifferently.

“I don’t think you care much about her even now,” said Eustacia with sudden joyousness, “for if you did you wouldn’t talk so coolly about her. Do you talk so coolly to her about me? Ah, I expect you do! Why did you originally go away from me? I don’t think I can ever forgive you, except on one condition, that whenever you desert me, you come back again, sorry that you served me so.”

“I never wish to desert you.”

“I do not thank you for that. I should hate it to be all smooth. Indeed, I think I like you to desert me a little once now and then. Love is the dimmest thing where the lover is quite honest. O, it is a shame to say so; but it is true!” She indulged in a little laugh. “My low spirits begin at the very idea. Don’t you offer me tame love, or away you go!”

“I wish Tamsie were not such a confoundedly good little woman,” said Wildeve, “so that I could be faithful to you without injuring a worthy person. It is I who am the sinner after all; I am not worth the little finger of either of you.”

“But you must not sacrifice yourself to her from any sense of justice,” replied Eustacia quickly. “If you do not love her it is the most merciful thing in the long run to leave her as she is. That’s always the best way. There, now I have been unwomanly, I suppose. When you have left me I am always angry with myself for things that I have said to you.”

Wildeve walked a pace or two among the heather without replying. The pause was filled up by the intonation of a pollard thorn a little way to windward, the breezes filtering through its unyielding twigs as through a strainer. It was as if the night sang dirges with clenched teeth.

She continued, half sorrowfully, “Since meeting you last, it has occurred to me once or twice that perhaps it was not for love of me you did not marry her. Tell me, Damon – I’ll try to bear it. Had I nothing whatever to do with the matter?”

“Do you press me to tell?”

“Yes, I must know. I see I have been too ready to believe in my own power.”

“Well, the immediate reason was that the license would not do for the place, and before I could get another she ran away. Up to that point you had nothing to do with it. Since then her aunt has spoken to me in a tone which I don’t at all like.”

“Yes, yes! I am nothing in it – I am nothing in it. You only trifle with me. Heaven, what can I, Eustacia Vye, be made of to think so much of you!”

“Nonsense; do not be so passionate... Eustacia, how we roved among these bushes last year, when the hot days had got cool, and the shades of the hills kept us almost invisible in the hollows!”

She remained in moody silence till she said, “Yes; and how I used to laugh at you for daring to look up to me! But you have well made me suffer for that since.”

“Yes, you served me cruelly enough until I thought I had found someone fairer than you. A blessed find for me, Eustacia.”

“Do you still think you found somebody fairer?”

“Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. The scales are balanced so nicely that a feather would turn them.”

“But don’t you really care whether I meet you or whether I don’t?” she said slowly.

“I care a little, but not enough to break my rest,” replied the young man languidly. “No, all that’s past. I find there are two flowers where I thought there was only one. Perhaps there are three, or four, or any number as good as the first... Mine is a curious fate. Who would have thought that all this could happen to me?”

She interrupted with a suppressed fire of which either love or anger seemed an equally possible issue, “Do you love me now?”

“Who can say?”

“Tell me; I will know it!”

“I do, and I do not,” said he mischievously. “That is, I have my times and my seasons. One moment you are too tall, another moment you are too do-nothing, another too melancholy, another

too dark, another I don't know what, except – that you are not the whole world to me that you used to be, my dear. But you are a pleasant lady to know and nice to meet, and I dare say as sweet as ever – almost.”

Eustacia was silent, and she turned from him, till she said, in a voice of suspended mightiness, “I am for a walk, and this is my way.”

“Well, I can do worse than follow you.”

“You know you can't do otherwise, for all your moods and changes!” she answered defiantly. “Say what you will; try as you may; keep away from me all that you can – you will never forget me. You will love me all your life long. You would jump to marry me!”

“So I would!” said Wildeve. “Such strange thoughts as I've had from time to time, Eustacia; and they come to me this moment. You hate the heath as much as ever; that I know.”

“I do,” she murmured deeply. “'Tis my cross, my shame, and will be my death!”

“I abhor it too,” said he. “How mournfully the wind blows round us now!”

She did not answer. Its tone was indeed solemn and pervasive. Compound utterances addressed themselves to their senses, and it was possible to view by ear the features of the neighbourhood. Acoustic pictures were returned from the darkened scenery; they could hear where the tracts of heather began and ended; where the furze was growing stalky and tall; where it had been recently cut; in what direction the fir-clump lay, and how near was the pit in which the hollies grew; for these differing features had their voices no less than their shapes and colours.

“God, how lonely it is!” resumed Wildeve. “What are picturesque ravines and mists to us who see nothing else? Why should we stay here? Will you go with me to America? I have kindred in Wisconsin.”

“That wants consideration.”

“It seems impossible to do well here, unless one were a wild bird or a landscape-painter. Well?”

“Give me time,” she softly said, taking his hand. “America is so far away. Are you going to walk with me a little way?”

As Eustacia uttered the latter words she retired from the base of the barrow, and Wildeve followed her, so that the reddleman could hear no more.

He lifted the turves and arose. Their black figures sank and disappeared from against the sky. They were as two horns which the sluggish heath had put forth from its crown, like a mollusc, and had now again drawn in.

The reddleman's walk across the vale, and over into the next where his cart lay, was not sprightly for a slim young fellow of twenty-four. His spirit was perturbed to aching. The breezes that blew around his mouth in that walk carried off upon them the accents of a commination.

He entered the van, where there was a fire in a stove. Without lighting his candle he sat down at once on the three-legged stool, and pondered on what he had seen and heard touching that still-loved one of his. He uttered a sound which was neither sigh nor sob, but was even more indicative than either of a troubled mind.

“My Tamsie,” he whispered heavily. “What can be done? Yes, I will see that Eustacia Vye.”

10 – A Desperate Attempt at Persuasion

The next morning, at the time when the height of the sun appeared very insignificant from any part of the heath as compared with the altitude of Rainbarrow, and when all the little hills in the lower levels were like an archipelago in a fog-formed Aegean, the reddleman came from the brambled nook which he had adopted as his quarters and ascended the slopes of Mistover Knap.

Though these shaggy hills were apparently so solitary, several keen round eyes were always ready on such a wintry morning as this to converge upon a passer-by. Feathered species sojourned here in hiding which would have created wonder if found elsewhere. A bustard haunted the spot, and not many years before this five and twenty might have been seen in Egdon at one time. Marsh-harriers looked up from the valley by Wildeve's. A cream-coloured courser had used to visit this hill, a bird so rare that not more than a dozen have ever been seen in England; but a barbarian rested neither night nor day till he had shot the African truant, and after that event cream-coloured coursers thought fit to enter Egdon no more.

A traveller who should walk and observe any of these visitants as Venn observed them now could feel himself to be in direct communication with regions unknown to man. Here in front of him was a wild mallard – just arrived from the home of the north wind. The creature brought within him an amplitude of Northern knowledge. Glacial catastrophes, snowstorm episodes, glittering auroral effects, Polaris in the zenith, Franklin underfoot – the category of his commonplaces was wonderful. But the bird, like many other philosophers, seemed as he looked at the reddleman to think that a present moment of comfortable reality was worth a decade of memories.

Venn passed on through these towards the house of the isolated beauty who lived up among them and despised them. The day was Sunday; but as going to church, except to be married or buried, was exceptional at Egdon, this made little difference. He had determined upon the bold stroke of asking for an interview with Miss Vye – to attack her position as Thomasin's rival either by art or by storm, showing therein, somewhat too conspicuously, the want of gallantry characteristic of a certain astute sort of men, from clowns to kings. The great Frederick making war on the beautiful Archduchess, Napoleon refusing terms to the beautiful Queen of Prussia, were not more dead to difference of sex than the reddleman was, in his peculiar way, in planning the displacement of Eustacia.

To call at the captain's cottage was always more or less an undertaking for the inferior inhabitants. Though occasionally chatty, his moods were erratic, and nobody could be certain how he would behave at any particular moment. Eustacia was reserved, and lived very much to herself. Except the daughter of one of the cotters, who was their servant, and a lad who worked in the garden and stable, scarcely anyone but themselves ever entered the house. They were the only genteel people of the district except the Yeobrights, and though far from rich, they did not feel that necessity for preserving a friendly face towards every man, bird, and beast which influenced their poorer neighbours.

When the reddleman entered the garden the old man was looking through his glass at the stain of blue sea in the distant landscape, the little anchors on his buttons twinkling in the sun. He recognized Venn as his companion on the highway, but made no remark on that circumstance, merely saying, "Ah, reddleman – you here? Have a glass of grog?"

Venn declined, on the plea of it being too early, and stated that his business was with Miss Vye. The captain surveyed him from cap to waistcoat and from waistcoat to leggings for a few moments, and finally asked him to go indoors.

Miss Vye was not to be seen by anybody just then; and the reddleman waited in the window-bench of the kitchen, his hands hanging across his divergent knees, and his cap hanging from his hands.

“I suppose the young lady is not up yet?” he presently said to the servant.

“Not quite yet. Folks never call upon ladies at this time of day.”

“Then I’ll step outside,” said Venn. “If she is willing to see me, will she please send out word, and I’ll come in.”

The reddleman left the house and loitered on the hill adjoining. A considerable time elapsed, and no request for his presence was brought. He was beginning to think that his scheme had failed, when he beheld the form of Eustacia herself coming leisurely towards him. A sense of novelty in giving audience to that singular figure had been sufficient to draw her forth.

She seemed to feel, after a bare look at Diggory Venn, that the man had come on a strange errand, and that he was not so mean as she had thought him; for her close approach did not cause him to writhe uneasily, or shift his feet, or show any of those little signs which escape an ingenuous rustic at the advent of the uncommon in womankind. On his inquiring if he might have a conversation with her she replied, “Yes, walk beside me,” and continued to move on.

Before they had gone far it occurred to the perspicacious reddleman that he would have acted more wisely by appearing less unimpressible, and he resolved to correct the error as soon as he could find opportunity.

“I have made so bold, miss, as to step across and tell you some strange news which has come to my ears about that man.”

“Ah! what man?”

He jerked his elbow to the southeast – the direction of the Quiet Woman.

Eustacia turned quickly to him. “Do you mean Mr. Wildeve?”

“Yes, there is trouble in a household on account of him, and I have come to let you know of it, because I believe you might have power to drive it away.”

“I? What is the trouble?”

“It is quite a secret. It is that he may refuse to marry Thomasin Yeobright after all.”

Eustacia, though set inwardly pulsing by his words, was equal to her part in such a drama as this. She replied coldly, “I do not wish to listen to this, and you must not expect me to interfere.”

“But, miss, you will hear one word?”

“I cannot. I am not interested in the marriage, and even if I were I could not compel Mr. Wildeve to do my bidding.”

“As the only lady on the heath I think you might,” said Venn with subtle indirectness. “This is how the case stands. Mr. Wildeve would marry Thomasin at once, and make all matters smooth, if so be there were not another woman in the case. This other woman is some person he has picked up with, and meets on the heath occasionally, I believe. He will never marry her, and yet through her he may never marry the woman who loves him dearly. Now, if you, miss, who have so much sway over us menfolk, were to insist that he should treat your young neighbour Tamsin with honourable kindness and give up the other woman, he would perhaps do it, and save her a good deal of misery.”

“Ah, my life!” said Eustacia, with a laugh which unclosed her lips so that the sun shone into her mouth as into a tulip, and lent it a similar scarlet fire. “You think too much of my influence over menfolk indeed, reddleman. If I had such a power as you imagine I would go straight and use it for the good of anybody who has been kind to me – which Thomasin Yeobright has not particularly, to my knowledge.”

“Can it be that you really don’t know of it – how much she had always thought of you?”

“I have never heard a word of it. Although we live only two miles apart I have never been inside her aunt’s house in my life.”

The superciliousness that lurked in her manner told Venn that thus far he had utterly failed. He inwardly sighed and felt it necessary to unmask his second argument.

“Well, leaving that out of the question, ‘tis in your power, I assure you, Miss Vye, to do a great deal of good to another woman.”

She shook her head.

“Your comeliness is law with Mr. Wildeve. It is law with all men who see ‘ee. They say, ‘This well-favoured lady coming – what’s her name? How handsome!’ Handsomer than Thomasin Yeobright,” the reddleman persisted, saying to himself, “God forgive a rascal for lying!” And she was handsomer, but the reddleman was far from thinking so. There was a certain obscurity in Eustacia’s beauty, and Venn’s eye was not trained. In her winter dress, as now, she was like the tiger-beetle, which, when observed in dull situations, seems to be of the quietest neutral colour, but under a full illumination blazes with dazzling splendour.

Eustacia could not help replying, though conscious that she endangered her dignity thereby. “Many women are lovelier than Thomasin,” she said, “so not much attaches to that.”

The reddleman suffered the wound and went on: “He is a man who notices the looks of women, and you could twist him to your will like withywind, if you only had the mind.”

“Surely what she cannot do who has been so much with him I cannot do living up here away from him.”

The reddleman wheeled and looked her in the face. “Miss Vye!” he said.

“Why do you say that – as if you doubted me?” She spoke faintly, and her breathing was quick. “The idea of your speaking in that tone to me!” she added, with a forced smile of hauteur. “What could have been in your mind to lead you to speak like that?”

“Miss Vye, why should you make believe that you don’t know this man? – I know why, certainly. He is beneath you, and you are ashamed.”

“You are mistaken. What do you mean?”

The reddleman had decided to play the card of truth. “I was at the meeting by Rainbarrow last night and heard every word,” he said. “The woman that stands between Wildeve and Thomasin is yourself.”

It was a disconcerting lift of the curtain, and the mortification of Candaules’ wife glowed in her. The moment had arrived when her lip would tremble in spite of herself, and when the gasp could no longer be kept down.

“I am unwell,” she said hurriedly. “No – it is not that – I am not in a humour to hear you further. Leave me, please.”

“I must speak, Miss Vye, in spite of paining you. What I would put before you is this. However it may come about – whether she is to blame, or you – her case is without doubt worse than yours. Your giving up Mr. Wildeve will be a real advantage to you, for how could you marry him? Now she cannot get off so easily – everybody will blame her if she loses him. Then I ask you – not because her right is best, but because her situation is worst – to give him up to her.”

“No – I won’t, I won’t!” she said impetuously, quite forgetful of her previous manner towards the reddleman as an underling. “Nobody has ever been served so! It was going on well – I will not be beaten down – by an inferior woman like her. It is very well for you to come and plead for her, but is she not herself the cause of all her own trouble? Am I not to show favour to any person I may choose without asking permission of a parcel of cottagers? She has come between me and my inclination, and now that she finds herself rightly punished she gets you to plead for her!”

“Indeed,” said Venn earnestly, “she knows nothing whatever about it. It is only I who ask you to give him up. It will be better for her and you both. People will say bad things if they find out that a lady secretly meets a man who has ill-used another woman.”

“I have NOT injured her – he was mine before he was hers! He came back – because – because he liked me best!” she said wildly. “But I lose all self-respect in talking to you. What am I giving way to!”

“I can keep secrets,” said Venn gently. “You need not fear. I am the only man who knows of your meetings with him. There is but one thing more to speak of, and then I will be gone. I heard you say to him that you hated living here – that Egdon Heath was a jail to you.”

“I did say so. There is a sort of beauty in the scenery, I know; but it is a jail to me. The man you mention does not save me from that feeling, though he lives here. I should have cared nothing for him had there been a better person near.”

The reddleman looked hopeful; after these words from her his third attempt seemed promising. “As we have now opened our minds a bit, miss,” he said, “I’ll tell you what I have got to propose. Since I have taken to the redde trade I travel a good deal, as you know.”

She inclined her head, and swept round so that her eyes rested in the misty vale beneath them.

“And in my travels I go near Budmouth. Now Budmouth is a wonderful place – wonderful – a great salt sheening sea bending into the land like a bow – thousands of gentlepeople walking up and down – bands of music playing – officers by sea and officers by land walking among the rest – out of every ten folks you meet nine of ‘em in love.”

“I know it,” she said disdainfully. “I know Budmouth better than you. I was born there. My father came to be a military musician there from abroad. Ah, my soul, Budmouth! I wish I was there now.”

The reddleman was surprised to see how a slow fire could blaze on occasion. “If you were, miss,” he replied, “in a week’s time you would think no more of Wildeve than of one of those he’th-croppers that we see yond. Now, I could get you there.”

“How?” said Eustacia, with intense curiosity in her heavy eyes.

“My uncle has been for five and twenty years the trusty man of a rich widow-lady who has a beautiful house facing the sea. This lady has become old and lame, and she wants a young company-keeper to read and sing to her, but can’t get one to her mind to save her life, though she’ve advertised in the papers, and tried half a dozen. She would jump to get you, and Uncle would make it all easy.”

“I should have to work, perhaps?”

“No, not real work – you’d have a little to do, such as reading and that. You would not be wanted till New Year’s Day.”

“I knew it meant work,” she said, drooping to languor again.

“I confess there would be a trifle to do in the way of amusing her; but though idle people might call it work, working people would call it play. Think of the company and the life you’d lead, miss; the gaiety you’d see, and the gentleman you’d marry. My uncle is to inquire for a trustworthy young lady from the country, as she don’t like town girls.”

“It is to wear myself out to please her! and I won’t go. O, if I could live in a gay town as a lady should, and go my own ways, and do my own doings, I’d give the wrinkled half of my life! Yes, reddleman, that would I.”

“Help me to get Thomasin happy, miss, and the chance shall be yours,” urged her companion.

“Chance – ‘tis no chance,” she said proudly. “What can a poor man like you offer me, indeed? – I am going indoors. I have nothing more to say. Don’t your horses want feeding, or your reddebags want mending, or don’t you want to find buyers for your goods, that you stay idling here like this?”

Venn spoke not another word. With his hands behind him he turned away, that she might not see the hopeless disappointment in his face. The mental clearness and power he had found in this lonely girl had indeed filled his manner with misgiving even from the first few minutes of close quarters with her. Her youth and situation had led him to expect a simplicity quite at the beck of his method. But a system of inducement which might have carried weaker country lasses along with it had merely repelled Eustacia. As a rule, the word Budmouth meant fascination on Egdon. That Royal port and watering place, if truly mirrored in the minds of the heathfolk, must have combined, in a charming and indescribable manner a Carthaginian bustle of building with Tarentine luxuriousness and Baian health and beauty. Eustacia felt little less extravagantly about the place; but she would not sink her independence to get there.

When Diggory Venn had gone quite away, Eustacia walked to the bank and looked down the wild and picturesque vale towards the sun, which was also in the direction of Wildeve’s. The mist had

now so far collapsed that the tips of the trees and bushes around his house could just be discerned, as if boring upwards through a vast white cobweb which cloaked them from the day. There was no doubt that her mind was inclined thitherward; indefinitely, fancifully – twining and untwining about him as the single object within her horizon on which dreams might crystallize. The man who had begun by being merely her amusement, and would never have been more than her hobby but for his skill in deserting her at the right moments, was now again her desire. Cessation in his love-making had revived her love. Such feeling as Eustacia had idly given to Wildeve was dammed into a flood by Thomasin. She had used to tease Wildeve, but that was before another had favoured him. Often a drop of irony into an indifferent situation renders the whole piquant.

“I will never give him up – never!” she said impetuously.

The reddleman’s hint that rumour might show her to disadvantage had no permanent terror for Eustacia. She was as unconcerned at that contingency as a goddess at a lack of linen. This did not originate in inherent shamelessness, but in her living too far from the world to feel the impact of public opinion. Zenobia in the desert could hardly have cared what was said about her at Rome. As far as social ethics were concerned Eustacia approached the savage state, though in emotion she was all the while an epicure. She had advanced to the secret recesses of sensuousness, yet had hardly crossed the threshold of conventionality.

11 – The Dishonesty of an Honest Woman

The reddleman had left Eustacia's presence with desponding views on Thomasin's future happiness; but he was awakened to the fact that one other channel remained untried by seeing, as he followed the way to his van, the form of Mrs. Yeobright slowly walking towards the Quiet Woman. He went across to her; and could almost perceive in her anxious face that this journey of hers to Wildeve was undertaken with the same object as his own to Eustacia.

She did not conceal the fact. "Then," said the reddleman, "you may as well leave it alone, Mrs. Yeobright."

"I half think so myself," she said. "But nothing else remains to be done besides pressing the question upon him."

"I should like to say a word first," said Venn firmly. "Mr. Wildeve is not the only man who has asked Thomasin to marry him; and why should not another have a chance? Mrs. Yeobright, I should be glad to marry your niece and would have done it any time these last two years. There, now it is out, and I have never told anybody before but herself."

Mrs. Yeobright was not demonstrative, but her eyes involuntarily glanced towards his singular though shapely figure.

"Looks are not everything," said the reddleman, noticing the glance. "There's many a calling that don't bring in so much as mine, if it comes to money; and perhaps I am not so much worse off than Wildeve. There is nobody so poor as these professional fellows who have failed; and if you shouldn't like my redness – well, I am not red by birth, you know; I only took to this business for a freak; and I might turn my hand to something else in good time."

"I am much obliged to you for your interest in my niece; but I fear there would be objections. More than that, she is devoted to this man."

"True; or I shouldn't have done what I have this morning."

"Otherwise there would be no pain in the case, and you would not see me going to his house now. What was Thomasin's answer when you told her of your feelings?"

"She wrote that you would object to me; and other things."

"She was in a measure right. You must not take this unkindly – I merely state it as a truth. You have been good to her, and we do not forget it. But as she was unwilling on her own account to be your wife, that settles the point without my wishes being concerned."

"Yes. But there is a difference between then and now, ma'am. She is distressed now, and I have thought that if you were to talk to her about me, and think favourably of me yourself, there might be a chance of winning her round, and getting her quite independent of this Wildeve's backward and forward play, and his not knowing whether he'll have her or no."

Mrs. Yeobright shook her head. "Thomasin thinks, and I think with her, that she ought to be Wildeve's wife, if she means to appear before the world without a slur upon her name. If they marry soon, everybody will believe that an accident did really prevent the wedding. If not, it may cast a shade upon her character – at any rate make her ridiculous. In short, if it is anyhow possible they must marry now."

"I thought that till half an hour ago. But, after all, why should her going off with him to Anglebury for a few hours do her any harm? Anybody who knows how pure she is will feel any such thought to be quite unjust. I have been trying this morning to help on this marriage with Wildeve – yes, I, ma'am – in the belief that I ought to do it, because she was so wrapped up in him. But I much question if I was right, after all. However, nothing came of it. And now I offer myself."

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