THOMAS HARDY'S COUNTRY

Scenes from the Wessex Novels

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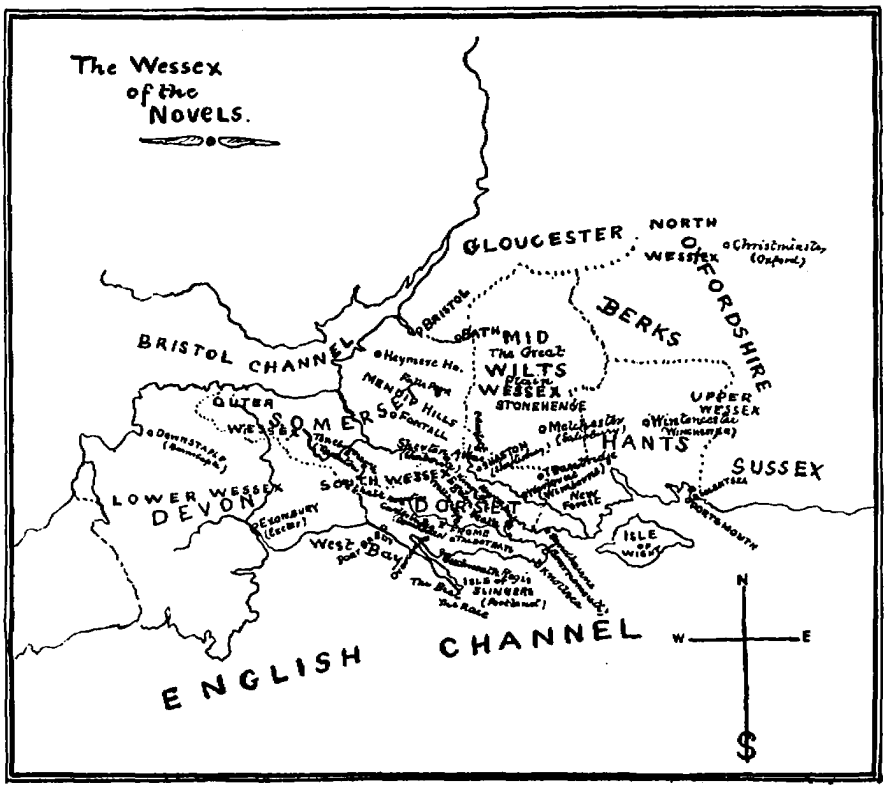
I.

THE genius of Thomas Hardy, who lives at "Max Gate," Dorchester, England, situated in almost the heart of the country he has made his own in his novels, has done for the county of Dorset, and in a lesser degree, for Hants, Wilts, Somerset and parts of Oxford and Devon what his contemporary, Mr. R. D. Blackmore, has done not less admirably for the last-named county in his famous *Lorna Doone* and other West Country tales.

The district in which the scenes of the Wessex novels are laid is subdivided by the novelist himself into North Wessex, South Wessex, Mid-Wessex, Outer Wessex, Lower Wessex and Upper Wessex, and comprises what may be roughly called the greater part of the South and West of England. A very large number of the towns, and even villages of importance in Hants, Wilts, Dorset and Somerset are mentioned by name or are thinly disguised in the novels and volumes of short stories which, numbering nearly a score, bear his name. But it is to Dorset, after



JUDGE JEFFREYS'S LODGING.

all, with its sharp contrasts in scenery and character, that the novelist has devoted loving and unremitting care and study. Indeed, it may almost be said that Dorset is Wessex, so comparatively seldom does he wander even for a brief period of time outside its confines.

It is with the identification of some of the more famous scenes depicted in the various stories, and the description and illustration of the actual places, that these articles will seek to deal.

Dorchester, from which centre the scenes of the various novels may almost be said to radiate, is a typical West Country town of some eight thousand inhabitants. Its importance, however, in the past has at various times been great, and now in the present day it is still greater than its size would imply. A Roman military base, it was anciently known as Duronvaria. The vicissitudes which overtook it during the period of the Danish occupation were numerous and disastrous. Just after the dawn of the eleventh century the town, then flourishing, and one of the chief places in the West of England, was totally destroyed by fire, and for some two hundred years its history is rather of a recuperative than of an advancing character. The disquieting times following the Norman Conquest had much to do with the slow advance the town made toward regaining the position the calamities that had at various times overtaken it caused it to lose. But eventually a rich priory was established, a castle erected and the town walls enlarged, repaired and strengthened.

Dorchester, however, had not yet done with misfortune. For half way through the last decade of the year 1500 it was stricken with the plague, and the population of the town was, according to the chroniclers, reduced by one half. Eighteen years later it was once more the scene of a conflagration, which laid two thirds of the town in ruins. During the great Civil War the town was loyal to the Parliament; it was captured, however, by the King's forces under the Earl of Carnarvon, and during the rest of the war played an important part in the struggle for supremacy in the West, being alternately occupied by the Cavaliers and Roundhead forces.

Not quite half a century later, in 1685,

MR. CASE'S SHOP, CORNHILL, DORCHESTER, AT WHICH MR. HARDY WHEN A BOY USED TO BORROW BOOKS.

the ancient town with its dismantled defences became the scene of one of the bloodiest farces of justice which stain the pages of history. It was here that the infamous Jeffreys, judge in nothing save name, held his "Bloody Assizes." He lodged in the High West Street; the window, which in those days commanded a view of the jail, and out of which he gazed at the executions of his victims, is still shown. There were over three hundred prisoners to be tried, and the infamous wretch in whose hands their fate lay let it be understood that the only hope of mercy was a plea of guilty. Scores of the unfortunate people, who had been directly or indirectly concerned in the Duke of Monmouth's Rebellion, on pleading guilty were without trial ordered to be executed forthwith—two hundred and ninety-two receiving sentence of death out of about three hundred and twenty prisoners. Jeffreys's chair is still shown at the Town Hall. Dorchester, by reason of the magnitude of its misfortunes, almost from time immemorial up to the commencement of the eighteenth century, deserved well of fate, and from the termination of the period embraced by the Monmouth Rebellion its history has down to the present day been uneventful.

"Max Gate," as Thomas Hardy's house is called, lies about three quarters of a mile outside the town, and is approached by a short carriage drive from the Wareham road. The views from the upper windows on one side look over into the valley of the Frome, and on the entrance side, which faces almost south, across at the rising ground toward the coast, which in a straight line is distant about six or seven miles. The house has an unpretentious exterior, but inside all is interesting and well arranged. Originals of many of the illustrations to those of the novelist's stories which have appeared serially, as well as sketches donated by famous artists, adorn the walls and lend an individuality to the house.

As is, perhaps, natural, Dorchester—the Casterbridge of the novels—plays an important part in a considerable number of the novelist's stories. The immediately surrounding country, indeed, lends itself admirably to the descriptive gifts which Thomas Hardy possesses in so marked a degree.

It is not the purpose of the writer to deal with the whole series of seventeen volumes, into which the Wessex novels and short tales have been recently gathered, in a uniform edition. We are compelled from considerations of space to make a selection as representative as possible, not laying claim, however, to either the selection or inclusion of necessarily

THE WELLAND HOUSE OF "TWO ON A TOWER."

the most excellent of the novelist's works in every case.

For the purposes of this choice the novels (excluding the three collections of short stories—*A Group of Noble Dames, Life's Little Ironies* and *Wessex Tales*) may be classified in three divisions with some attempt at exactness—namely, the Idyllic, the Tragic, and the Miscellaneous in which are included the tales having a romantic, comic, ironic or extravagant note.

Under the first head may be placed *The Trumpet Major* and Mr. Hardy's second novel, as regards sequence of publication, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Of these two we have selected the first named as being the more powerful book, and as providing a better example of "action." The second classification includes—in the order of their publication—*Desperate Remedies, A Pair of Blue Eyes, Far from the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Woodlanders, Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Of these *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* have been selected for illustration. In the remaining class may be placed *The Hand of Ethelberta, A Laodicean, Two on a Tower,* and *The Well-Beloved*, from which *Two on a Tower* and *The Well-Beloved* have been selected—the latter more especially because of its elusiveness, a quality more highly developed in this novel than in any of the others.

Although Thomas Hardy has studied his characters and their background so closely that identification of the latter becomes a matter of no great difficulty to one well acquainted with the counties in which the scenes are laid, he has on occasion availed himself of the novelist's privilege to idealise, and even sometimes to combine two or more places under one description. For example, the Welland House—Lady Constantine's home—of *Two on a Tower* is partly Charborough House, near Winterborne, and partly an old mansion (now a farm-house), near Milborne St. Andrew. In like manner, the column (the tower of the story), which plays so important a part in the novel, is, as regards situation and surroundings, that standing within half a mile of the house, in the midst of a tree-clad hill, called Weatherbury Castle; while, as regards architectural formation and accessibility, the column is rather that placed on the rising ground amid the trees near Charborough. The same

may be said of Talbothays, the dairy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Referring to the identification of this, Mr. Hardy says in a recent letter to the writer that Talbothays represents "two or three dairies in the Frome Valley . . . any existing house of that name has been so called since the novel was written, and has no claim to be the scene." This note will also serve to explain why so important a place as Talbothays occupies in the story is not here illustrated by means of a photograph.

Dorset, it may truly enough be said, is like no other county of England. It gives a general impression of age, and yet not merely age as a modern would understand it, but rather that of the true Dorset phrase, "an old, ancient county." Time—one is almost tempted to write civilisation—has affected it probably far less than any other district in the South and Southwest of England. Each great period of history seems to have affected it deeply, and instead of being obliterated by succeeding periods blends with them while still retaining much of its individuality.

Dorset has a trace of the Roman occupation still left in its idioms and in the faces of its peasantry; of the ecclesiastic of Saxon times in its buildings and traditions; of the Norman period in many of its customs, and of the Middle Ages in much of its placidity and "behind the times" air. Many of the old towns are still Roman in character as regards their plan, while examples of Elizabethan and early Georgian architecture still abound throughout the county in manor houses (many singularly well preserved) and in the townlets and villages. Dorchester (Casterbridge) is rich in all these echoes of the past. And whenever the foundations of a new house are being dug, or a field is turned up more deeply than usual with the plough, it is always with the chance that some Roman spear head, coin, fibula, urn or pin will be unearthed. From time to time in the chalk pits skeletons of the Roman soldiery are discovered, lying on their sides in a roughly hollowed-out coffin, carved in the chalk itself. Outside the town, along the road, trending southward, is the huge amphitheatre, round which several legends have been woven, the most circumstantial of which is that in summer-time persons sitting in the arena even in broad daylight have at times on lifting their eyes from

THE WEYMOUTH (BUDMOUTH REGIS) OF TO-DAY.

THE DOWN ABOVE OVERCOMBE MILL, ALSO THE SITE OF THE GRAND REVIEW, DESCRIBED IN "THE TRUMPET MAJOR."

"THE ISLE . . . LYING ON THE SEA TO THE LEFT OF THESE, LIKE A GREAT, CROUCHING ANIMAL, TETHERED TO THE MAINLAND."

the book they were reading, or on first opening them after a doze, been startled to see the green slopes lined with the Roman legion of Hadrian apparently intent upon some equally spectral gladiatorial show going on in the arena below them. Even the hoarse murmur of the voices of these long dead Romans has been heard ere the whole vision of phantasms disappeared as swiftly as it was conjured up!

It is not, however, in these legends alone that the England of the past seems to be almost still the England of the present to the traveller and wayfarer who journeys through Dorset and other parts of Wessex with open eyes and in a romantic spirit. On all sides—in the names of the villages and hamlets scattered in the fertile vales or perched on some hill which, from its configuration, suggests the "earthworks" of the period of Roman occupation rather than hillocks of nature's formation; in the ruins of monastic institutions scattered thickly throughout the countryside; in the churches, Saxon and otherwise, such as that of Saint Cuthberga at Wimborne (the Warborne of the novels), in which, at least, one Saxon king has found sepulture, and the old Saxon church at Shaftesbury (Shaston), where St. Edward lies, and in the slow, old-time speech of the peasantry—the same almost mediæval spirit seems to still exist.

"Dorset has stood still for several hundred years" is not the exaggerated statement of the antiquarian who made it, but a perhaps singular but scarcely deniable truth.

"THE BUSY SCENE OF LOADING AND UNLOADING CRAFT . . . AT THE BOATS AND BARGES RUBBING AGAINST THE QUAY WALL."

The Trumpet Major, the first book we have selected for illustration, deals with an older period of Dorset life than any other of Thomas Hardy's novels—if we exclude the shorter stories—and yet the speech of the characters in the comparatively modern *Tess*, which cannot be post-dated more than a quarter of a century, probably considerably less, is that of those in the other story dealing with events in the early days of the century, when the South of England was under arms awaiting for the threatened Napoleonic invasion, and children, if not their

"THE VACANT AND SOLEMN HORIZON UPON WHICH ANNE GARLAND GAZED WITH WET EYES, AND MURMURED, 'THEY THAT GO DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS, THAT DO BUSINESS IN GREAT WATERS—.'"

"ANNE GARLAND MIGHT STILL TAKE HER WAY TO PORTLAND . . . ALONG THE COAST ROAD."

CASTERBRIDGE STREET.

elders, lay a-bed of nights trembling at the thoughts of the redoubtable "Boney." And, doubtless, had there been a Hardy in the century before, the talk of his types would have been but little different from that of the Wessex novelist of to-day.

In each of the Wessex novels the reader is kept within a definite sphere of interest. In *The Trumpet Major* that sphere is practically comprised within a radius of ten or fifteen miles around Budmouth Regis (the Weymouth of to-day). In his preface the novelist states that this particular "tale is founded more largely on testimony—oral and written—than any other in this series." And the relics in the way of trenches dug on the summits of the downs, old pike heads found in lofts, and volunteer uniforms preserved in clothes-presses of old-fashioned folk, are by no means a thing entirely of the past in Dorset. Quite recently, during the repairs of a warehouse on the Quay Poole (Havenpool), the upper shutters of the loft were discovered to be drilled for musketry, and in a chest were found the sabretaches, uniforms and hats of the Poole volunteers of the time when Napoleon Bonaparte was hourly expected by the inhabitants of the coast of Sussex, Hants, Dorset and Devon more especially. The fisher lads who put these moth-eaten trappings on little realised the romance that attached to each brass button and each inch of cloth.

The Budmouth Regis of the present day differs, no doubt, materially from the watering-place at which George III. disported himself to the wonder, astonishment and admiration of the countryside round about, but the outlying villages of Overcombe (Upwey and Sutton), King's-bere (Bere-Regis), Oxwell (Poxwell) are now very much what they were then, and have altered quite unappreciably since fair Anne Garland threw down her work on that fine summer morning to watch the soldiers assembling on top of the down above Overcombe Mill.

Indeed, after reading the story on the spot one can realise to the full the consternation of the villagers lest these unlooked-for soldiers should indicate that Bonaparte had outwitted the fleet cruising in the Channel, and had attacked timorous Budmouth on the flank. The stolid villagers, who regard one's efforts with a camera as a not unamiable idiosyncrasy, make one feel instinctively that they would act in just the same wonder-struck, wide-open-mouthed way were such an event possible at the present time—just, in fact, as they did in the pages of this novel. Overcombe Mill still grinds (like those of the gods) slowly if exceeding small; and the miller, if not a Loveday by descent, might well pass for one. The "Lookout," to which several of the characters in the story made anxious pil-

grimage, in search of signs of the French invaders, is still known as such locally, and the troublous times which gave rise to such things are permanently recorded by the name of Kimmeridge Lookout, a few miles farther down the coast.

A succession of the least humorous and successful scenes in the story are those in Chapter XII., in which is recorded, "How everybody, great and small, climbed to the top of the Downs." We are told that it was on "a clear day, with little wind stirring, and the view from the downs, one of the most extensive in the county, was unclouded. The eye of any observer who cared for such things swept over the wave-washed town, and the bay beyond, and the isle, with its pebble bank, lying on the sea to the left of these, like a great, crouching animal tethered to the mainland." It is a scene like this which, happily, in many instances, yet remains immutable in Wessex. The isle "crouches" to-day (see page 333) as it did then; "the wave-washed town" still preserves much of its early-in-the-century air, and when once away on the sloping uplands to the north-east, out of earshot of fashionable talk and the sight of present-day toilettes and the ubiquitous bicycle, one can well imagine that the soldiers of the German legion and York Hussars in "white buckskin pantaloons, three-quarter boots, scarlet shakos set off with lace, mustachios waxed to a needle point, and, above all, those richly ornamented blue jackets mantled with the historic pelisse" are still patrolling the street of the distant town, or guarding the matutinal bathing of his Majesty King George the Third.

"At twelve o'clock," we are told in the story, "the review was over, and the King and his family left the hill. The troops then cleared off the field, the spectators followed, and by one o'clock the downs were again bare," as they appear in our picture. Only different in that the white horse and rider, one of the several cut in the chalk downs and uplands of England, and now an object of curiosity to tourists and visitors to Budmouth, and a landmark for those who go down to the sea in ships, were not there.

The harbour, too, has scarcely altered since sailor Bob Loveday on the morning of September the third, long ago, after his renunciation of the girl he loved in favour of soldier John, returned from the barracks to Budmouth, "passed on to the harbour, where he remained awhile, looking at the busy scene of loading and unloading craft and swabbing the decks of yachts: at the boats and barges rubbing against the quay wall, and at the houses of the merchants, some ancient structures of solid

"THE RIVER SLID ALONG NOISELESSLY AS A SHADE, THE SWELLING REEDS AND SEDGE FORMING A FLEXIBLE PALISADE ALONG ITS MOIST BANK."

GREENHILL FAIR.

stone, some green-shuttered with heavy wooden bow-windows, which appeared as if about to drop into the harbour by their own weight." The only difference is the presence of steam, which has, doubtless, driven some of the barges away. But the houses, the quay, the stores and the old stone bridge are still there, as in Loveday's time.

The Isle of Portland—no true island now or then, but a peninsula—has altered even less. Anne Garland might still set out, as it is related of her on page 313 of *The Trumpet Major*, from Overcombe by carrier, and after finishing her shopping in Budmouth itself, cross the ancient bridge, and take her way to Portland through the old town along the coast road. To-day she would be, as then, confronted, before reaching the base of Portland Hill, by the steep incline, dotted with houses, raised tier upon tier, so that the doorstep of one man is sometimes almost on a level with the chimney of his neighbour immediately below.

From the bare promontory of the "Bill" she would look upon the same prospect as when she watched Nelson and Hardy's *Victory*, with Bob Loveday aboard her, and the *Euryalus* frigate, in her wake, sail clean out of sight down the Channel. This desolate isle, with the wonderful pebble beach linking it to the mainland and stretching for ten miles in an unbroken curve toward Bridport to the west, and encircling the famous West Bay, is much the same as when Anne Garland, watching the last topmast of the *Victory* sink below the distant horizon, murmured, without removing her wet eyes from the vacant and solemn horizon, "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters ——," and turned, at the sound of another voice completing the verse, to find the vanished Bob Loveday's brother John at her elbow.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* Thomas Hardy has written a story almost exclusively of the farm. And it is no small tribute to his genius that he can enlist his readers' sympathies so completely in this every-day life, which is bounded, one might with tolerable accuracy say, by the lambing season in the spring and the getting in of root crops in the autumn.. The contrasts of character in the book are sharper than in several of the Wessex novels. A more clean-cut divergence than that afforded

by the vicious adventurer, Serjeant Troy, and the unselfish, plodding, dog-faithful Gabriel Oak, the shepherd, it would not be easy to imagine—the one with his cheap gallantry and echo of town ways, his power over women with whom he came in contact by both physical and mental means (as an example of the former there is the wonderful sword-play bewitchment of Bathsheba in the ferny hollow, when he severs a lock of hair from her head, and of the latter his veneer of education and flattering talk); the other with his stolid ways and countryside sympathies. And the same applies to the women characters also. Fanny Robin, the dazzled and deceived, serving as a foil to the trustful, ignorant Bathsheba equally dazzled, but at first cautious. Though tragedy and comedy jostle each other in the pages of the novel, the tragic consequences of Serjeant Troy's amours being in a measure set off by the excellent rustics and their delicious, humorous talk, it is the tragic note which predominates. For the fate of Fanny is not less insistent than the pen of the artist would have it, and the marriage of the long-suffering Gabriel Oak with Bathsheba in the last few pages does not succeed in effacing from the memory the tragic doing to death of Troy by Boldwood in the hall of his own house.

"THE GATEWAY OF THE JAIL IS MUCH THE SAME AS EVER."

The scene of the story is circumscribed, as in so many of Thomas Hardy's books. It centres in Weatherbury (a village just outside Casterbridge), and within a radius of a few miles of this Wessex hamlet the whole action of the tale takes place.

Many of the descriptions of rural life are charming, and conjure up as accurate an idea of the *locale* as would be afforded by an etching. One of the most important rural scenes in the book—the sheep-washing—affords an instance of this. It is a good example of the care and accuracy with which the novelist literally builds up his descriptions of even unimportant places. The true artistic economy of words is evident in every phrase. Boldwood, Shepherd Oak, Jan Coggan and the other farm-hands were there, and Bathsheba was looking on. "The river," we are told, "slid along noiselessly as a shade, the swelling reeds and sedge forming a flexible palisade along its moist bank. To the north of the mead were trees. . . ." Though this might serve as a general description of numberless Wessex meads, and the streams running silently through them, yet a distinct vision of this particular mead on Bathsheba's farm is brought before the reader's eyes.

Nowhere, probably, do fairs survive with more pertinacity in the South and

Southwest of England than in Dorset. And if one may believe the word of the country folk, who have attended them from days of childhood to those of hoary old age, the surviving fairs differ little or not at all from those of five decades or more ago. Ever on the alert to make use of existing circumstances in his novels indicative of the placidity of life, disturbed only occasionally by such things, it is little to be wondered at that Thomas Hardy should have fixed upon one of the most noted of these gatherings for description. Greenhill (Woodbury Hill) Fair, held in September, is known throughout the countryside. To it come shepherds with their flocks of South Downs, Leicesters, old West of England horned breeds, and even Exmoors, with parti-coloured faces and legs. The fair is held on the summit of a hill standing about half a mile outside Kingsbere (Bere Regis), in the church of which are laid the bones of Tess of the D'Urbervilles' ancestors. Antiquarians are of the opinion that the hill, up whose crumbling sides the two main roads leading to the top wind, is the site of an ancient British encampment; for at the summit there is a huge rampart and entrenchment, oval in form, and within the confines of this the Fair takes place. There are a few hovels and cottages of a permanent character on the crest of Greenhill; but most of those who foregather for the fairing are content to be under canvas or in the gypsy caravans which are still a leading feature. Down the centre of this temporary encampment, running almost north and south, the main street of the Fair is made, on either side of which stand the booths and stalls—the abodes of thin men, fat women, two-headed calves, ginger-bread and cheap, gaily coloured china ornaments, with which shooting-galleries, "cokernut shies" and nine-pins contest popularity.

The old drovers, commoner ten years ago than now throughout Wessex, are another survival of Greenhill. Early in the morning of the first day of the Fair we are told that "nebulous clouds of dust (are) to be seen floating between the pairs of hedges in all directions. These gradually converged upon the base of the hill, and the flocks became individually visible, climbing the serpentine way which led to the top. Thus, in slow procession, they entered the openings to which the roads wended."

This is as true of the Greenhill of today as of the Fair a quarter of a century ago, when Thomas Hardy wrote the novel. Even the circus, which plays so important a part in Troy's reappearance and in his wife Bathsheba's subsequent history, was there last autumn, and was almost exactly like its prototype of the story, and one could almost imagine that Troy was giving his sensational performance of Dick Turpin inside. Now, as then, everybody for miles round goes to Greenhill, the gentry and better-class farmers patronising the first day, and the second day being more or less given over to the labourers, their wives, sweethearts, sons and daughters.

From the time of Greenhill Fair and Troy's reappearance the story moves with rapidity to its close. The jail, in which Boldwood, the farmer, one of Bathsheba's most pertinacious visitors, was confined, waiting under sentence of death for execution, has since that time been pulled down and rebuilt after more modern ideas, but the gateway is much the same as ever. And it is easy enough to enter into Gabriel Oak's feelings as he turned to look back (after saying good-bye to the condemned man, who was also his rival) at the jail, and saw "the upper part of the entrance . . . and some moving figures"—these last lifting into position the post of the gibbet to be used on the morrow.

One cannot help feeling that the true end of the story comes with the scene at midnight on the Casterbridge road, when Laban brought to Oak, Coggan and the rest of the waiting villagers, who had walked toward Casterbridge from Weatherbury to meet him, the news of the murderer's reprieve. The conventional ending, with "the most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have" comes, indeed, almost as a dangerous anti-climax.

(To be continued.)