BOOK SECOND

THE ARRIVAL

I

Tidings of the Comer

On fine days at this time of the year, and earlier, certain ephemeral operations were apt to disturb, in their trifling way, the majestic calm of Egdon Heath. They were activities which, beside those of a town, a village, or even a farm, would have appeared as the ferment of stagnation merely, a creeping of the flesh of somnolence. But here, away from comparisons, shut in by the stable hills, among which mere walking had the novelty of pageantry, and where any man could imagine himself to be Adam without the least difficulty, they attracted the attention of every bird within eyeshot, every reptile not yet asleep, and set the surrounding rabbits curiously watching from hillocks at a safe distance.

The performance was that of bringing together and building into a stack the furze-faggots which Humphrey had been cutting for the captain's use during the foregoing fine days. The stack was at the end of the dwelling, and the men engaged in building it were Humphrey and Sam, the old man looking on.

It was a fine and quiet afternoon, about three o'clock; but the winter solstice having stealthily come on, the lowness of the sun caused the hour to seem later than it actually was, there being little here to remind an inhabitant that he must unlearn his summer experience of the sky as a dial. In the course of many days and weeks sunrise had advanced its quarters from north-east to south-east, sunset had receded from north-west to south-west; but Egdon had hardly heeded the change.

Eustacia was indoors in the dining-room, which was really more like a kitchen, having a stone floor and a gaping chimney-corner. The air was still, and while she lingered a moment here alone sounds of voices in conversation came to her ears directly down the chimney. She entered the recess, and, listening, looked up the old irregular shaft, with its cavernous hollows, where the smoke blundered about on its way to the square bit of sky at the top, from which the daylight struck down with a pallid glare upon the tatters of soot draping the flue as seaweed drapes a rocky fissure.

She remembered: the furze-stack was not far from the chimney, and the voices were those of the workers.

Her grandfather joined in the conversation. "That lad ought never to have left home. His father's occupation would have suited him best, and the boy should have followed on. I don't believe in these new

moves in families. My father was a sailor, so was I, and so should my son have been if I had had one."

"The place he's been living at is Paris," said Humphrey, "and they tell me 'tis where the king's head was cut off years ago. My poor mother used to tell me about that business. 'Hummy,' she used to say, 'I was a young maid then, and as I was at home ironing mother's caps one afternoon the parson came in and said, "They've cut the king's head off, Jane; and what 'twill be next God knows."'"

"A good many of us knew as well as He before long," said the captain, chuckling. "I lived seven years under water on account of it in my boyhood--in that damned surgery of the _Triumph_, seeing men brought down to the cockpit with their legs and arms blown to Jericho... And so the young man has settled in Paris. Manager to a diamond merchant, or some such thing, is he not?"

"Yes, sir, that's it. 'Tis a blazing great business that he belongs to, so I've heard his mother say--like a king's palace, as far as diments go."

"I can well mind when he left home," said Sam.

"'Tis a good thing for the feller," said Humphrey. "A sight of times better to be selling diments than nobbling about here."

"It must cost a good few shillings to deal at such a place."

"A good few indeed, my man," replied the captain. "Yes, you may make away with a deal of money and be neither drunkard nor glutton."

"They say, too, that Clym Yeobright is become a real perusing man, with the strangest notions about things. There, that's because he went to school early, such as the school was."

"Strange notions, has he?" said the old man. "Ah, there's too much of that sending to school in these days! It only does harm. Every gatepost and barn's door you come to is sure to have some bad word or other chalked upon it by the young rascals: a woman can hardly pass for shame some times. If they'd never been taught how to write they wouldn't have been able to scribble such villainy. Their fathers couldn't do it, and the country was all the better for it."

"Now, I should think, cap'n, that Miss Eustacia had about as much in her head that comes from books as anybody about here?"

"Perhaps if Miss Eustacia, too, had less romantic nonsense in her head it would be better for her," said the captain shortly; after which he walked away.

"I say, Sam," observed Humphrey when the old man was gone, "she and Clym Yeobright would make a very pretty pigeon-pair--hey? If they

wouldn't I'll be dazed! Both of one mind about niceties for certain, and learned in print, and always thinking about high doctrine--there couldn't be a better couple if they were made o' purpose. Clym's family is as good as hers. His father was a farmer, that's true; but his mother was a sort of lady, as we know. Nothing would please me better than to see them two man and wife."

"They'd look very natty, arm-in-crook together, and their best clothes on, whether or no, if he's at all the well-favoured fellow he used to be."

"They would, Humphrey. Well, I should like to see the chap terrible much after so many years. If I knew for certain when he was coming I'd stroll out three or four miles to meet him and help carry anything for'n; though I suppose he's altered from the boy he was. They say he can talk French as fast as a maid can eat blackberries; and if so, depend upon it we who have stayed at home shall seem no more than scroff in his eyes."

"Coming across the water to Budmouth by steamer, isn't he?"

"Yes; but how he's coming from Budmouth I don't know."

"That's a bad trouble about his cousin Thomasin. I wonder such a nice-notioned fellow as Clym likes to come home into it. What a nunnywatch we were in, to be sure, when we heard they weren't married

at all, after singing to 'em as man and wife that night! Be dazed if I should like a relation of mine to have been made such a fool of by a man. It makes the family look small."

"Yes. Poor maid, her heart has ached enough about it. Her health is suffering from it, I hear, for she will bide entirely indoors. We never see her out now, scampering over the furze with a face as red as a rose, as she used to do."

"I've heard she wouldn't have Wildeve now if he asked her."

"You have? 'Tis news to me."

While the furze-gatherers had desultorily conversed thus Eustacia's face gradually bent to the hearth in a profound reverie, her toe unconsciously tapping the dry turf which lay burning at her feet.

The subject of their discourse had been keenly interesting to her. A young and clever man was coming into that lonely heath from, of all contrasting places in the world, Paris. It was like a man coming from heaven. More singular still, the heathmen had instinctively coupled her and this man together in their minds as a pair born for each other.

That five minutes of overhearing furnished Eustacia with visions enough to fill the whole blank afternoon. Such sudden alternations

from mental vacuity do sometimes occur thus quietly. She could never have believed in the morning that her colourless inner world would before night become as animated as water under a microscope, and that without the arrival of a single visitor. The words of Sam and Humphrey on the harmony between the unknown and herself had on her mind the effect of the invading Bard's prelude in the "Castle of Indolence," at which myriads of imprisoned shapes arose where had previously appeared the stillness of a void.

Involved in these imaginings she knew nothing of time. When she became conscious of externals it was dusk. The furze-rick was finished; the men had gone home. Eustacia went upstairs, thinking that she would take a walk at this her usual time; and she determined that her walk should be in the direction of Blooms-End, the birthplace of young Yeobright and the present home of his mother. She had no reason for walking elsewhere, and why should she not go that way? The scene of a day-dream is sufficient for a pilgrimage at nineteen. To look at the palings before the Yeobrights' house had the dignity of a necessary performance. Strange that such a piece of idling should have seemed an important errand.

She put on her bonnet, and, leaving the house, descended the hill on the side towards Blooms-End, where she walked slowly along the valley for a distance of a mile and a half. This brought her to a spot in which the green bottom of the dale began to widen, the furze bushes to recede yet further from the path on each side, till they were

diminished to an isolated one here and there by the increasing fertility of the soil. Beyond the irregular carpet of grass was a row of white palings, which marked the verge of the heath in this latitude. They showed upon the dusky scene that they bordered as distinctly as white lace on velvet. Behind the white palings was a little garden; behind the garden an old, irregular, thatched house, facing the heath, and commanding a full view of the valley. This was the obscure, removed spot to which was about to return a man whose latter life had been passed in the French capital--the centre and vortex of the fashionable world.

II

The People at Blooms-End Make Ready

All that afternoon the expected arrival of the subject of Eustacia's ruminations created a bustle of preparation at Blooms-End. Thomasin had been persuaded by her aunt, and by an instinctive impulse of loyalty towards her cousin Clym, to bestir herself on his account with an alacrity unusual in her during these most sorrowful days of her life. At the time that Eustacia was listening to the rickmakers' conversation on Clym's return, Thomasin was climbing into a loft over

her aunt's fuel-house, where the store-apples were kept, to search out the best and largest of them for the coming holiday-time.

The loft was lighted by a semicircular hole, through which the pigeons crept to their lodgings in the same high quarters of the premises; and from this hole the sun shone in a bright yellow patch upon the figure of the maiden as she knelt and plunged her naked arms into the soft brown fern, which, from its abundance, was used on Egdon in packing away stores of all kinds. The pigeons were flying about her head with the greatest unconcern, and the face of her aunt was just visible above the floor of the loft, lit by a few stray motes of light, as she stood half-way up the ladder, looking at a spot into which she was not climber enough to venture.

"Now a few russets, Tamsin. He used to like them almost as well as ribstones."

Thomasin turned and rolled aside the fern from another nook, where more mellow fruit greeted her with its ripe smell. Before picking them out she stopped a moment.

"Dear Clym, I wonder how your face looks now?" she said, gazing abstractedly at the pigeon-hole, which admitted the sunlight so directly upon her brown hair and transparent tissues that it almost seemed to shine through her.

"If he could have been dear to you in another way," said Mrs. Yeobright from the ladder, "this might have been a happy meeting."

"Is there any use in saying what can do no good, aunt?"

"Yes," said her aunt, with some warmth. "To thoroughly fill the air with the past misfortune, so that other girls may take warning and keep clear of it."

Thomasin lowered her face to the apples again. "I am a warning to others, just as thieves and drunkards and gamblers are," she said in a low voice. "What a class to belong to! Do I really belong to them? 'Tis absurd! Yet why, aunt, does everybody keep on making me think that I do, by the way they behave towards me? Why don't people judge me by my acts? Now, look at me as I kneel here, picking up these apples--do I look like a lost woman?... I wish all good women were as good as I!" she added vehemently.

"Strangers don't see you as I do," said Mrs. Yeobright; "they judge from false report. Well, it is a silly job, and I am partly to blame."

"How quickly a rash thing can be done!" replied the girl. Her lips were quivering, and tears so crowded themselves into her eyes that she could hardly distinguish apples from fern as she continued industriously searching to hide her weakness.

"As soon as you have finished getting the apples," her aunt said, descending the ladder, "come down, and we'll go for the holly. There is nobody on the heath this afternoon, and you need not fear being stared at. We must get some berries, or Clym will never believe in our preparations."

Thomasin came down when the apples were collected, and together they went through the white palings to the heath beyond. The open hills were airy and clear, and the remote atmosphere appeared, as it often appears on a fine winter day, in distinct planes of illumination independently toned, the rays which lit the nearer tracts of landscape streaming visibly across those further off; a stratum of ensaffroned light was imposed on a stratum of deep blue, and behind these lay still remoter scenes wrapped in frigid grey.

They reached the place where the hollies grew, which was in a conical pit, so that the tops of the trees were not much above the general level of the ground. Thomasin stepped up into a fork of one of the bushes, as she had done under happier circumstances on many similar occasions, and with a small chopper that they had brought she began to lop off the heavily-berried boughs.

"Don't scratch your face," said her aunt, who stood at the edge of the pit, regarding the girl as she held on amid the glistening green and scarlet masses of the tree. "Will you walk with me to meet him this

evening?"

"I should like to. Else it would seem as if I had forgotten him," said Thomasin, tossing out a bough. "Not that that would matter much; I belong to one man; nothing can alter that. And that man I must marry, for my pride's sake."

"I am afraid--" began Mrs. Yeobright.

"Ah, you think, 'That weak girl--how is she going to get a man to marry her when she chooses?' But let me tell you one thing, aunt: Mr. Wildeve is not a profligate man, any more than I am an improper woman. He has an unfortunate manner, and doesn't try to make people like him if they don't wish to do it of their own accord."

"Thomasin," said Mrs. Yeobright quietly, fixing her eye upon her niece, "do you think you deceive me in your defence of Mr. Wildeve?"

"How do you mean?"

"I have long had a suspicion that your love for him has changed its colour since you have found him not to be the saint you thought him, and that you act a part to me."

"He wished to marry me, and I wish to marry him."

"Now, I put it to you: would you at this present moment agree to be his wife if that had not happened to entangle you with him?"

Thomasin looked into the tree and appeared much disturbed. "Aunt," she said presently, "I have, I think, a right to refuse to answer that question."

"Yes, you have."

"You may think what you choose. I have never implied to you by word or deed that I have grown to think otherwise of him, and I never will. And I shall marry him."

"Well, wait till he repeats his offer. I think he may do it, now that he knows--something I told him. I don't for a moment dispute that it is the most proper thing for you to marry him. Much as I have objected to him in bygone days, I agree with you now, you may be sure. It is the only way out of a false position, and a very galling one."

"What did you tell him?"

"That he was standing in the way of another lover of yours."

"Aunt," said Thomasin, with round eyes, "what DO you mean?"

"Don't be alarmed; it was my duty. I can say no more about it now,

but when it is over I will tell you exactly what I said, and why I said it."

Thomasin was perforce content.

"And you will keep the secret of my would-be marriage from Clym for the present?" she next asked.

"I have given my word to. But what is the use of it? He must soon know what has happened. A mere look at your face will show him that something is wrong."

Thomasin turned and regarded her aunt from the tree. "Now, hearken to me," she said, her delicate voice expanding into firmness by a force which was other than physical. "Tell him nothing. If he finds out that I am not worthy to be his cousin, let him. But, since he loved me once, we will not pain him by telling him my trouble too soon. The air is full of the story, I know; but gossips will not dare to speak of it to him for the first few days. His closeness to me is the very thing that will hinder the tale from reaching him early. If I am not made safe from sneers in a week or two I will tell him myself."

The earnestness with which Thomasin spoke prevented further objections. Her aunt simply said, "Very well. He should by rights have been told at the time that the wedding was going to be. He will never forgive you for your secrecy."

"Yes, he will, when he knows it was because I wished to spare him, and that I did not expect him home so soon. And you must not let me stand in the way of your Christmas party. Putting it off would only make matters worse."

"Of course I shall not. I do not wish to show myself beaten before all Egdon, and the sport of a man like Wildeve. We have enough berries now, I think, and we had better take them home. By the time we have decked the house with this and hung up the mistletoe, we must think of starting to meet him."

Thomasin came out of the tree, shook from her hair and dress the loose berries which had fallen thereon, and went down the hill with her aunt, each woman bearing half the gathered boughs. It was now nearly four o'clock, and the sunlight was leaving the vales. When the west grew red the two relatives came again from the house and plunged into the heath in a different direction from the first, towards a point in the distant highway along which the expected man was to return.

III

How a Little Sound Produced a Great Dream

Eustacia stood just within the heath, straining her eyes in the direction of Mrs. Yeobright's house and premises. No light, sound, or movement was perceptible there. The evening was chilly; the spot was dark and lonely. She inferred that the guest had not yet come; and after lingering ten or fifteen minutes she turned again towards home.

She had not far retraced her steps when sounds in front of her betokened the approach of persons in conversation along the same path. Soon their heads became visible against the sky. They were walking slowly; and though it was too dark for much discovery of character from aspect, the gait of them showed that they were not workers on the heath. Eustacia stepped a little out of the foot-track to let them pass. They were two women and a man; and the voices of the women were those of Mrs. Yeobright and Thomasin.

They went by her, and at the moment of passing appeared to discern her dusky form. There came to her ears in a masculine voice, "Good night!"

She murmured a reply, glided by them, and turned round. She could not, for a moment, believe that chance, unrequested, had brought into her presence the soul of the house she had gone to inspect, the man without whom her inspection would not have been thought of.

She strained her eyes to see them, but was unable. Such was her intentness, however, that it seemed as if her ears were performing the functions of seeing as well as hearing. This extension of power can almost be believed in at such moments. The deaf Dr. Kitto was probably under the influence of a parallel fancy when he described his body as having become, by long endeavour, so sensitive to vibrations that he had gained the power of perceiving by it as by ears.

She could follow every word that the ramblers uttered. They were talking no secrets. They were merely indulging in the ordinary vivacious chat of relatives who have long been parted in person though not in soul. But it was not to the words that Eustacia listened; she could not even have recalled, a few minutes later, what the words were. It was to the alternating voice that gave out about one-tenth of them--the voice that had wished her good night. Sometimes this throat uttered Yes, sometimes it uttered No; sometimes it made inquiries about a timeworn denizen of the place. Once it surprised her notions by remarking upon the friendliness and geniality written in the faces of the hills around.

The three voices passed on, and decayed and died out upon her ear. Thus much had been granted her; and all besides withheld. No event could have been more exciting. During the greater part of the afternoon she had been entrancing herself by imagining the fascination which must attend a man come direct from beautiful Paris--laden with its atmosphere, familiar with its charms. And this man had greeted

her.

With the departure of the figures the profuse articulations of the women wasted away from her memory; but the accents of the other stayed on. Was there anything in the voice of Mrs. Yeobright's son--for Clym it was--startling as a sound? No; it was simply comprehensive. All emotional things were possible to the speaker of that "good night." Eustacia's imagination supplied the rest--except the solution to one riddle. What COULD the tastes of that man be who saw friendliness and geniality in these shaggy hills?

On such occasions as this a thousand ideas pass through a highly charged woman's head; and they indicate themselves on her face; but the changes, though actual, are minute. Eustacia's features went through a rhythmical succession of them. She glowed; remembering the mendacity of the imagination, she flagged; then she freshened; then she fired; then she cooled again. It was a cycle of aspects, produced by a cycle of visions.

Eustacia entered her own house; she was excited. Her grandfather was enjoying himself over the fire, raking about the ashes and exposing the red-hot surface of the turves, so that their lurid glare irradiated the chimney-corner with the hues of a furnace.

"Why is it that we are never friendly with the Yeobrights?" she said, coming forward and stretching her soft hands over the warmth. "I wish

we were. They seem to be very nice people."

"Be hanged if I know why," said the captain. "I liked the old man well enough, though he was as rough as a hedge. But you would never have cared to go there, even if you might have, I am well sure."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Your town tastes would find them far too countrified. They sit in the kitchen, drink mead and elderwine, and sand the floor to keep it clean. A sensible way of life; but would you like it?"

"I thought Mrs. Yeobright was a ladylike woman? A curate's daughter, was she not?"

"Yes; but she was obliged to live as her husband did; and I suppose she has taken kindly to it by this time. Ah, I recollect that I once accidentally offended her, and I have never seen her since."

That night was an eventful one to Eustacia's brain, and one which she hardly ever forgot. She dreamt a dream; and few human beings, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Swaffham tinker, ever dreamt a more remarkable one. Such an elaborately developed, perplexing, exciting dream was certainly never dreamed by a girl in Eustacia's situation before.
It had as many ramifications as the Cretan labyrinth, as many fluctuations as the Northern Lights, as much colour as a parterre

in June, and was as crowded with figures as a coronation. To Queen Scheherazade the dream might have seemed not far removed from commonplace; and to a girl just returned from all the courts of Europe it might have seemed not more than interesting. But amid the circumstances of Eustacia's life it was as wonderful as a dream could be.

There was, however, gradually evolved from its transformation scenes a less extravagant episode, in which the heath dimly appeared behind the general brilliancy of the action. She was dancing to wondrous music, and her partner was the man in silver armour who had accompanied her through the previous fantastic changes, the visor of his helmet being closed. The mazes of the dance were ecstatic. Soft whispering came into her ear from under the radiant helmet, and she felt like a woman in Paradise. Suddenly these two wheeled out from the mass of dancers, dived into one of the pools of the heath, and came out somewhere beneath into an iridescent hollow, arched with rainbows. "It must be here," said the voice by her side, and blushingly looking up she saw him removing his casque to kiss her. At that moment there was a cracking noise, and his figure fell into fragments like a pack of cards.

She cried aloud. "O that I had seen his face!"

Eustacia awoke. The cracking had been that of the window shutter downstairs, which the maid-servant was opening to let in the day, now

slowly increasing to Nature's meagre allowance at this sickly time of the year. "O that I had seen his face!" she said again. "'Twas meant for Mr. Yeobright!"

When she became cooler she perceived that many of the phases of the dream had naturally arisen out of the images and fancies of the day before. But this detracted little from its interest, which lay in the excellent fuel it provided for newly kindled fervour. She was at the modulating point between indifference and love, at the stage called "having a fancy for." It occurs once in the history of the most gigantic passions, and it is a period when they are in the hands of the weakest will.

The perfervid woman was by this time half in love with a vision. The fantastic nature of her passion, which lowered her as an intellect, raised her as a soul. If she had had a little more self-control she would have attenuated the emotion to nothing by sheer reasoning, and so have killed it off. If she had had a little less pride she might have gone and circumambulated the Yeobrights' premises at Blooms-End at any maidenly sacrifice until she had seen him. But Eustacia did neither of these things. She acted as the most exemplary might have acted, being so influenced; she took an airing twice or thrice a day upon the Egdon hills, and kept her eyes employed.

The first occasion passed, and he did not come that way.

She promenaded a second time, and was again the sole wanderer there.

The third time there was a dense fog; she looked around, but without much hope. Even if he had been walking within twenty yards of her she could not have seen him.

At the fourth attempt to encounter him it began to rain in torrents, and she turned back.

The fifth sally was in the afternoon: it was fine, and she remained out long, walking to the very top of the valley in which Blooms-End lay. She saw the white paling about half a mile off; but he did not appear. It was almost with heart-sickness that she came home and with a sense of shame at her weakness. She resolved to look for the man from Paris no more.

But Providence is nothing if not coquettish; and no sooner had Eustacia formed this resolve than the opportunity came which, while sought, had been entirely withholden.

IV

Eustacia Is Led On to an Adventure

In the evening of this last day of expectation, which was the twenty-third of December, Eustacia was at home alone. She had passed the recent hour in lamenting over a rumour newly come to her ears--that Yeobright's visit to his mother was to be of short duration, and would end some time the next week. "Naturally," she said to herself. A man in the full swing of his activities in a gay city could not afford to linger long on Egdon Heath. That she would behold face to face the owner of the awakening voice within the limits of such a holiday was most unlikely, unless she were to haunt the environs of his mother's house like a robin, to do which was difficult and unseemly.

The customary expedient of provincial girls and men in such circumstances is churchgoing. In an ordinary village or country town one can safely calculate that, either on Christmas-day or the Sunday contiguous, any native home for the holidays, who has not through age or _ennui_ lost the appetite for seeing and being seen, will turn up in some pew or other, shining with hope, self-consciousness, and new clothes. Thus the congregation on Christmas morning is mostly a Tussaud collection of celebrities who have been born in the neighbourhood. Hither the mistress, left neglected at home all the year, can steal and observe the development of the returned lover who has forgotten her, and think as she watches him over her prayer-book that he may throb with a renewed fidelity when novelties have lost

their charm. And hither a comparatively recent settler like Eustacia may betake herself to scrutinize the person of a native son who left home before her advent upon the scene, and consider if the friendship of his parents be worth cultivating during his next absence in order to secure a knowledge of him on his next return.

But these tender schemes were not feasible among the scattered inhabitants of Egdon Heath. In name they were parishioners, but virtually they belonged to no parish at all. People who came to these few isolated houses to keep Christmas with their friends remained in their friends' chimney-corners drinking mead and other comforting liquors till they left again for good and all. Rain, snow, ice, mud everywhere around, they did not care to trudge two or three miles to sit wet-footed and splashed to the nape of their necks among those who, though in some measure neighbours, lived close to the church, and entered it clean and dry. Eustacia knew it was ten to one that Clym Yeobright would go to no church at all during his few days of leave, and that it would be a waste of labour for her to go driving the pony and gig over a bad road in hope to see him there.

It was dusk, and she was sitting by the fire in the dining-room or hall, which they occupied at this time of the year in preference to the parlour, because of its large hearth, constructed for turf-fires, a fuel the captain was partial to in the winter season. The only visible articles in the room were those on the window-sill, which showed their shapes against the low sky: the middle article being the

old hourglass, and the other two a pair of ancient British urns which had been dug from a barrow near, and were used as flower-pots for two razor-leaved cactuses. Somebody knocked at the door. The servant was out; so was her grandfather. The person, after waiting a minute, came in and tapped at the door of the room.

"Who's there?" said Eustacia.

"Please, Cap'n Vye, will you let us--"

Eustacia arose and went to the door. "I cannot allow you to come in so boldly. You should have waited."

"The cap'n said I might come in without any fuss," was answered in a lad's pleasant voice.

"Oh, did he?" said Eustacia more gently. "What do you want, Charley?"

"Please will your grandfather lend us his fuel-house to try over our parts in, tonight at seven o'clock?"

"What, are you one of the Egdon mummers for this year?"

"Yes, miss. The cap'n used to let the old mummers practise here."

"I know it. Yes, you may use the fuel-house if you like," said

Eustacia languidly.

The choice of Captain Vye's fuel-house as the scene of rehearsal was dictated by the fact that his dwelling was nearly in the centre of the heath. The fuel-house was as roomy as a barn, and was a most desirable place for such a purpose. The lads who formed the company of players lived at different scattered points around, and by meeting in this spot the distances to be traversed by all the comers would be about equally proportioned.

For mummers and mumming Eustacia had the greatest contempt. The mummers themselves were not afflicted with any such feeling for their art, though at the same time they were not enthusiastic. A traditional pastime is to be distinguished from a mere revival in no more striking feature than in this, that while in the revival all is excitement and fervour, the survival is carried on with a stolidity and absence of stir which sets one wondering why a thing that is done so perfunctorily should be kept up at all. Like Balaam and other unwilling prophets, the agents seem moved by an inner compulsion to say and do their allotted parts whether they will or no. This unweeting manner of performance is the true ring by which, in this refurbishing age, a fossilized survival may be known from a spurious reproduction.

The piece was the well-known play of "Saint George," and all who were behind the scenes assisted in the preparations, including the women

of each household. Without the cooperation of sisters and sweethearts the dresses were likely to be a failure; but on the other hand, this class of assistance was not without its drawbacks. The girls could never be brought to respect tradition in designing and decorating the armour; they insisted on attaching loops and bows of silk and velvet in any situation pleasing to their taste. Gorget, gusset, basinet, cuirass, gauntlet, sleeve, all alike in the view of these feminine eyes were practicable spaces whereon to sew scraps of fluttering colour.

It might be that Joe, who fought on the side of Christendom, had a sweetheart, and that Jim, who fought on the side of the Moslem, had one likewise. During the making of the costumes it would come to the knowledge of Joe's sweetheart that Jim's was putting brilliant silk scallops at the bottom of her lover's surcoat, in addition to the ribbons of the visor, the bars of which, being invariably formed of coloured strips about half an inch wide hanging before the face, were mostly of that material. Joe's sweetheart straightway placed brilliant silk on the scallops of the hem in question, and, going a little further, added ribbon tufts to the shoulder pieces. Jim's, not to be outdone, would affix bows and rosettes everywhere.

The result was that in the end the Valiant Soldier, of the Christian army, was distinguished by no peculiarity of accoutrement from the Turkish Knight; and what was worse, on a casual view Saint George himself might be mistaken for his deadly enemy, the Saracen. The

guisers themselves, though inwardly regretting this confusion of persons, could not afford to offend those by whose assistance they so largely profited, and the innovations were allowed to stand.

There was, it is true, a limit to this tendency to uniformity. The Leech or Doctor preserved his character intact: his darker habiliments, peculiar hat, and the bottle of physic slung under his arm, could never be mistaken. And the same might be said of the conventional figure of Father Christmas, with his gigantic club, an older man, who accompanied the band as general protector in long night journeys from parish to parish, and was bearer of the purse.

Seven o'clock, the hour of the rehearsal, came round, and in a short time Eustacia could hear voices in the fuel-house. To dissipate in some trifling measure her abiding sense of the murkiness of human life she went to the "linhay" or lean-to-shed, which formed the root-store of their dwelling and abutted on the fuel-house. Here was a small rough hole in the mud wall, originally made for pigeons, through which the interior of the next shed could be viewed. A light came from it now; and Eustacia stepped upon a stool to look in upon the scene.

On a ledge in the fuel-house stood three tall rush-lights and by the light of them seven or eight lads were marching about, haranguing, and confusing each other, in endeavours to perfect themselves in the play. Humphrey and Sam, the furze and turf cutters, were there looking on, so also was Timothy Fairway, who leant against the wall and prompted

the boys from memory, interspersing among the set words remarks and anecdotes of the superior days when he and others were the Egdon mummers-elect that these lads were now.

"Well, ye be as well up to it as ever ye will be," he said. "Not that such mumming would have passed in our time. Harry as the Saracen should strut a bit more, and John needn't holler his inside out. Beyond that perhaps you'll do. Have you got all your clothes ready?"

"We shall by Monday."

"Your first outing will be Monday night, I suppose?"

"Yes. At Mrs. Yeobright's."

"Oh, Mrs. Yeobright's. What makes her want to see ye? I should think a middle-aged woman was tired of mumming."

"She's got up a bit of a party, because 'tis the first Christmas that her son Clym has been home for a long time."

"To be sure, to be sure--her party! I am going myself. I almost forgot it, upon my life."

Eustacia's face flagged. There was to be a party at the Yeobrights'; she, naturally, had nothing to do with it. She was a stranger to

all such local gatherings, and had always held them as scarcely appertaining to her sphere. But had she been going, what an opportunity would have been afforded her of seeing the man whose influence was penetrating her like summer sun! To increase that influence was coveted excitement; to cast it off might be to regain serenity; to leave it as it stood was tantalizing.

The lads and men prepared to leave the premises, and Eustacia returned to her fireside. She was immersed in thought, but not for long. In a few minutes the lad Charley, who had come to ask permission to use the place, returned with the key to the kitchen. Eustacia heard him, and opening the door into the passage said, "Charley, come here."

The lad was surprised. He entered the front room not without blushing; for he, like many, had felt the power of this girl's face and form.

She pointed to a seat by the fire, and entered the other side of the chimney-corner herself. It could be seen in her face that whatever motive she might have had in asking the youth indoors would soon appear.

"Which part do you play, Charley--the Turkish Knight, do you not?" inquired the beauty, looking across the smoke of the fire to him on the other side.

"Yes, miss, the Turkish Knight," he replied diffidently.

"Is yours a long part?"

"Nine speeches, about."

"Can you repeat them to me? If so I should like to hear them."

The lad smiled into the glowing turf and began--

"Here come I, a Turkish Knight,
Who learnt in Turkish land to fight,"

continuing the discourse throughout the scenes to the concluding catastrophe of his fall by the hand of Saint George.

Eustacia had occasionally heard the part recited before. When the lad ended she began, precisely in the same words, and ranted on without hitch or divergence till she too reached the end. It was the same thing, yet how different. Like in form, it had the added softness and finish of a Raffaelle after Perugino, which, while faithfully reproducing the original subject, entirely distances the original art.

Charley's eyes rounded with surprise. "Well, you be a clever lady!"

he said, in admiration. "I've been three weeks learning mine."

"I have heard it before," she quietly observed. "Now, would you do anything to please me, Charley?"

"I'd do a good deal, miss."

"Would you let me play your part for one night?"

"Oh, miss! But your woman's gown--you couldn't."

"I can get boy's clothes--at least all that would be wanted besides the mumming dress. What should I have to give you to lend me your things, to let me take your place for an hour or two on Monday night, and on no account to say a word about who or what I am? You would, of course, have to excuse yourself from playing that night, and to say that somebody--a cousin of Miss Vye's--would act for you. The other mummers have never spoken to me in their lives, so that it would be safe enough; and if it were not, I should not mind. Now, what must I give you to agree to this? Half a crown?"

The youth shook his head

"Five shillings?"

He shook his head again. "Money won't do it," he said, brushing the

iron head of the fire-dog with the hollow of his hand.

"What will, then, Charley?" said Eustacia in a disappointed tone.

"You know what you forbade me at the Maypoling, miss," murmured the lad, without looking at her, and still stroking the firedog's head.

"Yes," said Eustacia, with a little more hauteur. "You wanted to join hands with me in the ring, if I recollect?"

"Half an hour of that, and I'll agree, miss."

Eustacia regarded the youth steadfastly. He was three years younger than herself, but apparently not backward for his age. "Half an hour of what?" she said, though she guessed what.

"Holding your hand in mine."

She was silent. "Make it a quarter of an hour," she said.

"Yes, Miss Eustacia--I will, if I may kiss it too. A quarter of an hour. And I'll swear to do the best I can to let you take my place without anybody knowing. Don't you think somebody might know your tongue, miss?"

"It is possible. But I will put a pebble in my mouth to make is less

likely. Very well; you shall be allowed to have my hand as soon as you bring the dress and your sword and staff. I don't want you any longer now."

Charley departed, and Eustacia felt more and more interest in life. Here was something to do: here was some one to see, and a charmingly adventurous way to see him. "Ah," she said to herself, "want of an object to live for--that's all is the matter with me!"

Eustacia's manner was as a rule of a slumberous sort, her passions being of the massive rather than the vivacious kind. But when aroused she would make a dash which, just for the time, was not unlike the move of a naturally lively person.

On the question of recognition she was somewhat indifferent. By the acting lads themselves she was not likely to be known. With the guests who might be assembled she was hardly so secure. Yet detection, after all, would be no such dreadful thing. The fact only could be detected, her true motive never. It would be instantly set down as the passing freak of a girl whose ways were already considered singular. That she was doing for an earnest reason what would most naturally be done in jest was at any rate a safe secret.

The next evening Eustacia stood punctually at the fuel-house door,

waiting for the dusk which was to bring Charley with the trappings. Her grandfather was at home tonight, and she would be unable to ask her confederate indoors.

He appeared on the dark ridge of heathland, like a fly on a negro, bearing the articles with him, and came up breathless with his walk.

"Here are the things," he whispered, placing them upon the threshold. "And now, Miss Eustacia--"

"The payment. It is quite ready. I am as good as my word."

She leant against the door-post, and gave him her hand. Charley took it in both his own with a tenderness beyond description, unless it was like that of a child holding a captured sparrow.

"Why, there's a glove on it!" he said in a deprecating way.

"I have been walking," she observed.

"But, miss!"

"Well--it is hardly fair." She pulled off the glove, and gave him her bare hand.

They stood together minute after minute, without further speech, each

looking at the blackening scene, and each thinking his and her own thoughts.

"I think I won't use it all up tonight," said Charley devotedly, when six or eight minutes had been passed by him caressing her hand. "May I have the other few minutes another time?"

"As you like," said she without the least emotion. "But it must be over in a week. Now, there is only one thing I want you to do: to wait while I put on the dress, and then to see if I do my part properly. But let me look first indoors."

She vanished for a minute or two, and went in. Her grandfather was safely asleep in his chair. "Now, then," she said, on returning, "walk down the garden a little way, and when I am ready I'll call you."

Charley walked and waited, and presently heard a soft whistle. He returned to the fuel-house door.

"Did you whistle, Miss Vye?"

"Yes; come in," reached him in Eustacia's voice from a back quarter. "I must not strike a light till the door is shut, or it may be seen shining. Push your hat into the hole through to the wash-house, if you can feel your way across."

Charley did as commanded, and she struck the light, revealing herself to be changed in sex, brilliant in colours, and armed from top to toe. Perhaps she quailed a little under Charley's vigorous gaze, but whether any shyness at her male attire appeared upon her countenance could not be seen by reason of the strips of ribbon which used to cover the face in mumming costumes, representing the barred visor of the mediaeval helmet.

"It fits pretty well," she said, looking down at the white overalls, "except that the tunic, or whatever you call it, is long in the sleeve. The bottom of the overalls I can turn up inside. Now pay attention."

Eustacia then proceeded in her delivery, striking the sword against the staff or lance at the minatory phrases, in the orthodox mumming manner, and strutting up and down. Charley seasoned his admiration with criticism of the gentlest kind, for the touch of Eustacia's hand yet remained with him.

"And now for your excuse to the others," she said. "Where do you meet before you go to Mrs. Yeobright's?"

"We thought of meeting here, miss, if you have nothing to say against it. At eight o'clock, so as to get there by nine."

"Yes. Well, you of course must not appear. I will march in about five minutes late, ready-dressed, and tell them that you can't come. I have decided that the best plan will be for you to be sent somewhere by me, to make a real thing of the excuse. Our two heath-croppers are in the habit of straying into the meads, and tomorrow evening you can go and see if they are gone there. I'll manage the rest. Now you may leave me."

"Yes, miss. But I think I'll have one minute more of what I am owed, if you don't mind."

Eustacia gave him her hand as before.

"One minute," she said, and counted on till she reached seven or eight minutes. Hand and person she then withdrew to a distance of several feet, and recovered some of her old dignity. The contract completed, she raised between them a barrier impenetrable as a wall.

"There, 'tis all gone; and I didn't mean quite all," he said, with a sigh.

"You had good measure," said she, turning away.

"Yes, miss. Well, 'tis over, and now I'll get home-along."

V

Through the Moonlight

The next evening the mummers were assembled in the same spot, awaiting the entrance of the Turkish Knight.

"Twenty minutes after eight by the Quiet Woman, and Charley not come."

"Ten minutes past by Blooms-End."

"It wants ten minutes to, by Grandfer Cantle's watch."

"And 'tis five minutes past by the captain's clock."

On Egdon there was no absolute hour of the day. The time at any moment was a number of varying doctrines professed by the different hamlets, some of them having originally grown up from a common root, and then become divided by secession, some having been alien from the beginning. West Egdon believed in Blooms-End time, East Egdon in the time of the Quiet Woman Inn. Grandfer Cantle's watch had numbered many followers in years gone by, but since he had grown older faiths were shaken. Thus, the mummers having gathered hither from scattered

points each came with his own tenets on early and late; and they waited a little longer as a compromise.

Eustacia had watched the assemblage through the hole; and seeing that now was the proper moment to enter, she went from the "linhay" and boldly pulled the bobbin of the fuel-house door. Her grandfather was safe at the Quiet Woman.

"Here's Charley at last! How late you be, Charley."

"'Tis not Charley," said the Turkish Knight from within his visor. "'Tis a cousin of Miss Vye's, come to take Charley's place from curiosity. He was obliged to go and look for the heath-croppers that have got into the meads, and I agreed to take his place, as he knew he couldn't come back here again tonight. I know the part as well as he."

Her graceful gait, elegant figure, and dignified manner in general won the mummers to the opinion that they had gained by the exchange, if the newcomer were perfect in his part.

"It don't matter--if you be not too young," said Saint George. Eustacia's voice had sounded somewhat more juvenile and fluty than Charley's.

"I know every word of it, I tell you," said Eustacia decisively. Dash being all that was required to carry her triumphantly through, she

adopted as much as was necessary. "Go ahead, lads, with the try-over. I'll challenge any of you to find a mistake in me."

The play was hastily rehearsed, whereupon the other mummers were delighted with the new knight. They extinguished the candles at half-past eight, and set out upon the heath in the direction of Mrs. Yeobright's house at Bloom's-End.

There was a slight hoar-frost that night, and the moon, though not more than half full, threw a spirited and enticing brightness upon the fantastic figures of the mumming band, whose plumes and ribbons rustled in their walk like autumn leaves. Their path was not over Rainbarrow now, but down a valley which left that ancient elevation a little to the east. The bottom of the vale was green to a width of ten yards or thereabouts, and the shining facets of frost upon the blades of grass seemed to move on with the shadows of those they surrounded. The masses of furze and heath to the right and left were dark as ever; a mere half-moon was powerless to silver such sable features as theirs.

Half-an-hour of walking and talking brought them to the spot in the valley where the grass riband widened and led down to the front of the house. At sight of the place Eustacia, who had felt a few passing doubts during her walk with the youths, again was glad that the adventure had been undertaken. She had come out to see a man who might possibly have the power to deliver her soul from a most deadly

oppression. What was Wildeve? Interesting, but inadequate. Perhaps she would see a sufficient hero tonight.

As they drew nearer to the front of the house the mummers became aware that music and dancing were briskly flourishing within. Every now and then a long low note from the serpent, which was the chief wind instrument played at these times, advanced further into the heath than the thin treble part, and reached their ears alone; and next a more than usually loud tread from a dancer would come the same way. With nearer approach these fragmentary sounds became pieced together, and were found to be the salient points of the tune called "Nancy's Fancy."

He was there, of course. Who was she that he danced with? Perhaps some unknown woman, far beneath herself in culture, was by that most subtle of lures sealing his fate this very instant. To dance with a man is to concentrate a twelve-month's regulation fire upon him in the fragment of an hour. To pass to courtship without acquaintance, to pass to marriage without courtship, is a skipping of terms reserved for those alone who tread this royal road. She would see how his heart lay by keen observation of them all.

The enterprising lady followed the mumming company through the gate in the white paling, and stood before the open porch. The house was encrusted with heavy thatchings, which dropped between the upper windows; the front, upon which the moonbeams directly played, had

originally been white; but a huge pyracanth now darkened the greater portion.

It became at once evident that the dance was proceeding immediately within the surface of the door, no apartment intervening. The brushing of skirts and elbows, sometimes the bumping of shoulders, could be heard against the very panels. Eustacia, though living within two miles of the place, had never seen the interior of this quaint old habitation. Between Captain Vye and the Yeobrights there had never existed much acquaintance, the former having come as a stranger and purchased the long-empty house at Mistover Knap not long before the death of Mrs. Yeobright's husband; and with that event and the departure of her son such friendship as had grown up became quite broken off.

"Is there no passage inside the door, then?" asked Eustacia as they stood within the porch.

"No," said the lad who played the Saracen. "The door opens right upon the front sitting-room, where the spree's going on."

"So that we cannot open the door without stopping the dance."

"That's it. Here we must bide till they have done, for they always bolt the back door after dark."

"They won't be much longer," said Father Christmas.

This assertion, however, was hardly borne out by the event. Again the instruments ended the tune; again they recommenced with as much fire and pathos as if it were the first strain. The air was now that one without any particular beginning, middle, or end, which perhaps, among all the dances which throng an inspired fiddler's fancy, best conveys the idea of the interminable--the celebrated "Devil's Dream." The fury of personal movement that was kindled by the fury of the notes could be approximately imagined by these outsiders under the moon, from the occasional kicks of toes and heels against the door, whenever the whirl round had been of more than customary velocity.

The first five minutes of listening was interesting enough to the mummers. The five minutes extended to ten minutes, and these to a quarter of an hour; but no signs of ceasing were audible in the lively Dream. The bumping against the door, the laughter, the stamping, were all as vigorous as ever, and the pleasure in being outside lessened considerably.

"Why does Mrs. Yeobright give parties of this sort?" Eustacia asked, a little surprised to hear merriment so pronounced.

"It is not one of her bettermost parlour-parties. She's asked the plain neighbours and workpeople without drawing any lines, just to give 'em a good supper and such like. Her son and she wait upon the

folks."

"I see," said Eustacia.

"'Tis the last strain, I think," said Saint George, with his ear to the panel. "A young man and woman have just swung into this corner, and he's saying to her, 'Ah, the pity; 'tis over for us this time, my own.'"

"Thank God!" said the Turkish Knight, stamping, and taking from the wall the conventional lance that each of the mummers carried. Her boots being thinner than those of the young men, the hoar had damped her feet and made them cold.

"Upon my song 'tis another ten minutes for us," said the Valiant Soldier, looking through the keyhole as the tune modulated into another without stopping. "Grandfer Cantle is standing in this corner, waiting his turn."

"'Twon't be long; 'tis a six-handed reel," said the Doctor.

"Why not go in, dancing or no? They sent for us," said the Saracen.

"Certainly not," said Eustacia authoritatively, as she paced smartly up and down from door to gate to warm herself. "We should burst into the middle of them and stop the dance, and that would be unmannerly."

"He thinks himself somebody because he has had a bit more schooling than we," said the Doctor.

"You may go to the deuce!" said Eustacia.

There was a whispered conversation between three or four of them, and one turned to her.

"Will you tell us one thing?" he said, not without gentleness. "Be you Miss Vye? We think you must be."

"You may think what you like," said Eustacia slowly. "But honourable lads will not tell tales upon a lady."

"We'll say nothing, miss. That's upon our honour."

"Thank you," she replied.

At this moment the fiddles finished off with a screech, and the serpent emitted a last note that nearly lifted the roof. When, from the comparative quiet within, the mummers judged that the dancers had taken their seats, Father Christmas advanced, lifted the latch, and put his head inside the door.

"Ah, the mummers, the mummers!" cried several guests at once. "Clear

a space for the mummers."

Hump-backed Father Christmas then made a complete entry, swinging his huge club, and in a general way clearing the stage for the actors proper, while he informed the company in smart verse that he was come, welcome or welcome not; concluding his speech with

"Make room, make room, my gallant boys,
And give us space to rhyme;
We've come to show Saint George's play,
Upon this Christmas time."

The guests were now arranging themselves at one end of the room, the fiddler was mending a string, the serpent-player was emptying his mouthpiece, and the play began. First of those outside the Valiant Soldier entered, in the interest of Saint George--

"Here come I, the Valiant Soldier;
Slasher is my name;"

and so on. This speech concluded with a challenge to the infidel, at the end of which it was Eustacia's duty to enter as the Turkish

Knight. She, with the rest who were not yet on, had hitherto remained in the moonlight which streamed under the porch. With no apparent effort or backwardness she came in, beginning--

"Here come I, a Turkish Knight,
Who learnt in Turkish land to fight;
I'll fight this man with courage bold:
If his blood's hot I'll make it cold!"

During her declamation Eustacia held her head erect, and spoke as roughly as she could, feeling pretty secure from observation. But the concentration upon her part necessary to prevent discovery, the newness of the scene, the shine of the candles, and the confusing effect upon her vision of the ribboned visor which hid her features, left her absolutely unable to perceive who were present as spectators. On the further side of a table bearing candles she could faintly discern faces, and that was all.

Meanwhile Jim Starks as the Valiant Soldier had come forward, and, with a glare upon the Turk, replied--

"If, then, thou art that Turkish Knight,
Draw out thy sword, and let us fight!"

And fight they did; the issue of the combat being that the Valiant Soldier was slain by a preternaturally inadequate thrust from Eustacia, Jim, in his ardour for genuine histrionic art, coming down like a log upon the stone floor with force enough to dislocate his shoulder. Then, after more words from the Turkish Knight, rather too faintly delivered, and statements that he'd fight Saint George and all his crew, Saint George himself magnificently entered with the well-known flourish--

"Here come I, Saint George, the valiant man,
With naked sword and spear in hand,
Who fought the dragon and brought him to the slaughter,
And by this won fair Sabra, the King of Egypt's daughter;
What mortal man would dare to stand
Before me with my sword in hand?"

This was the lad who had first recognized Eustacia; and when she now, as the Turk, replied with suitable defiance, and at once began the combat, the young fellow took especial care to use his sword as gently as possible. Being wounded, the Knight fell upon one knee, according to the direction. The Doctor now entered, restored the Knight by giving him a draught from the bottle which he carried, and the

fight was again resumed, the Turk sinking by degrees until quite overcome--dying as hard in this venerable drama as he is said to do at the present day.

This gradual sinking to the earth was, in fact, one reason why Eustacia had thought that the part of the Turkish Knight, though not the shortest, would suit her best. A direct fall from upright to horizontal, which was the end of the other fighting characters, was not an elegant or decorous part for a girl. But it was easy to die like a Turk, by a dogged decline.

Eustacia was now among the number of the slain, though not on the floor, for she had managed to sink into a sloping position against the clock-case, so that her head was well elevated. The play proceeded between Saint George, the Saracen, the Doctor, and Father Christmas; and Eustacia, having no more to do, for the first time found leisure to observe the scene round, and to search for the form that had drawn her hither.

VI

The Two Stand Face to Face

The room had been arranged with a view to the dancing, the large oak table having been moved back till it stood as a breastwork to the fireplace. At each end, behind, and in the chimney-corner were grouped the guests, many of them being warm-faced and panting, among whom Eustacia cursorily recognized some well-to-do persons from beyond the heath. Thomasin, as she had expected, was not visible, and Eustacia recollected that a light had shone from an upper window when they were outside--the window, probably, of Thomasin's room. A nose, chin, hands, knees, and toes projected from the seat within the chimney opening, which members she found to unite in the person of Grandfer Cantle, Mrs. Yeobright's occasional assistant in the garden, and therefore one of the invited. The smoke went up from an Etna of peat in front of him, played round the notches of the chimney-crook, struck against the saltbox, and got lost among the flitches.

Another part of the room soon riveted her gaze. At the other side of the chimney stood the settle, which is the necessary supplement to a fire so open that nothing less than a strong breeze will carry up the smoke. It is, to the hearths of old-fashioned cavernous fireplaces, what the east belt of trees is to the exposed country estate, or the north wall to the garden. Outside the settle candles gutter, locks of hair wave, young women shiver, and old men sneeze. Inside is Paradise. Not a symptom of a draught disturbs the air; the sitters' backs are as warm as their faces, and songs and old tales are drawn from the occupants by the comfortable heat, like fruit from melon

plants in a frame.

It was, however, not with those who sat in the settle that Eustacia was concerned. A face showed itself with marked distinctness against the dark-tanned wood of the upper part. The owner, who was leaning against the settle's outer end, was Clement Yeobright, or Clym, as he was called here; she knew it could be nobody else. The spectacle constituted an area of two feet in Rembrandt's intensest manner. A strange power in the lounger's appearance lay in the fact that, though his whole figure was visible, the observer's eye was only aware of his face.

To one of middle age the countenance was that of a young man, though a youth might hardly have seen any necessity for the term of immaturity. But it was really one of those faces which convey less the idea of so many years as its age than of so much experience as its store. The number of their years may have adequately summed up Jared, Mahalaleel, and the rest of the antediluvians, but the age of a modern man is to be measured by the intensity of his history.

The face was well shaped, even excellently. But the mind within was beginning to use it as a mere waste tablet whereon to trace its idiosyncrasies as they developed themselves. The beauty here visible would in no long time be ruthlessly over-run by its parasite, thought, which might just as well have fed upon a plainer exterior where there was nothing it could harm. Had Heaven preserved Yeobright from a

wearing habit of meditation, people would have said, "A handsome man." Had his brain unfolded under sharper contours they would have said, "A thoughtful man." But an inner strenuousness was preying upon an outer symmetry, and they rated his look as singular.

Hence people who began by beholding him ended by perusing him. His countenance was overlaid with legible meanings. Without being thought-worn he yet had certain marks derived from a perception of his surroundings, such as are not unfrequently found on men at the end of the four or five years of endeavour which follow the close of placid pupilage. He already showed that thought is a disease of flesh, and indirectly bore evidence that ideal physical beauty is incompatible with emotional development and a full recognition of the coil of things. Mental luminousness must be fed with the oil of life, even though there is already a physical need for it; and the pitiful sight of two demands on one supply was just showing itself here.

When standing before certain men the philosopher regrets that thinkers are but perishable tissue, the artist that perishable tissue has to think. Thus to deplore, each from his point of view, the mutually destructive interdependence of spirit and flesh would have been instinctive with these in critically observing Yeobright.

As for his look, it was a natural cheerfulness striving against depression from without, and not quite succeeding. The look suggested isolation, but it revealed something more. As is usual with bright

natures, the deity that lies ignominiously chained within an ephemeral human carcase shone out of him like a ray.

The effect upon Eustacia was palpable. The extraordinary pitch of excitement that she had reached beforehand would, indeed, have caused her to be influenced by the most commonplace man. She was troubled at Yeobright's presence.

The remainder of the play ended: the Saracen's head was cut off, and Saint George stood as victor. Nobody commented, any more than they would have commented on the fact of mushrooms coming in autumn or snowdrops in spring. They took the piece as phlegmatically as did the actors themselves. It was a phase of cheerfulness which was, as a matter of course, to be passed through every Christmas; and there was no more to be said.

They sang the plaintive chant which follows the play, during which all the dead men rise to their feet in a silent and awful manner, like the ghosts of Napoleon's soldiers in the Midnight Review. Afterwards the door opened, and Fairway appeared on the threshold, accompanied by Christian and another. They had been waiting outside for the conclusion of the play, as the players had waited for the conclusion of the dance.

"Come in, come in," said Mrs. Yeobright; and Clym went forward to welcome them. "How is it you are so late? Grandfer Cantle has been

here ever so long, and we thought you'd have come with him, as you live so near one another."

"Well, I should have come earlier," Mr. Fairway said, and paused to look along the beam of the ceiling for a nail to hang his hat on; but, finding his accustomed one to be occupied by the mistletoe, and all the nails in the walls to be burdened with bunches of holly, he at last relieved himself of the hat by ticklishly balancing it between the candlebox and the head of the clock-case. "I should have come earlier, ma'am," he resumed, with a more composed air, "but I know what parties be, and how there's none too much room in folks' houses at such times, so I thought I wouldn't come till you'd got settled a bit."

"And I thought so too, Mrs. Yeobright," said Christian earnestly, "but father there was so eager that he had no manners at all, and left home almost afore 'twas dark. I told him 'twas barely decent in a' old man to come so oversoon; but words be wind."

"Klk! I wasn't going to bide waiting about, till half the game was over! I'm as light as a kite when anything's going on!" crowed Grandfer Cantle from the chimney-seat.

Fairway had meanwhile concluded a critical gaze at Yeobright. "Now, you may not believe it," he said to the rest of the room, "but I should never have knowed this gentleman if I had met him anywhere off

his own he'th--he's altered so much."

"You too have altered, and for the better, I think Timothy," said Yeobright, surveying the firm figure of Fairway.

"Master Yeobright, look me over too. I have altered for the better, haven't I, hey?" said Grandfer Cantle, rising and placing himself something above half a foot from Clym's eye, to induce the most searching criticism.

"To be sure we will," said Fairway, taking the candle and moving it over the surface of the Grandfer's countenance, the subject of his scrutiny irradiating himself with light and pleasant smiles, and giving himself jerks of juvenility.

"You haven't changed much," said Yeobright.

"If there's any difference, Grandfer is younger," appended Fairway decisively.

"And yet not my own doing, and I feel no pride in it," said the pleased ancient. "But I can't be cured of my vagaries; them I plead guilty to. Yes, Master Cantle always was that, as we know. But I am nothing by the side of you, Mister Clym."

"Nor any o' us," said Humphrey, in a low rich tone of admiration, not

intended to reach anybody's ears.

"Really, there would have been nobody here who could have stood as decent second to him, or even third, if I hadn't been a soldier in the Bang-up Locals (as we was called for our smartness)," said Grandfer Cantle. "And even as 'tis we all look a little scammish beside him. But in the year four 'twas said there wasn't a finer figure in the whole South Wessex than I, as I looked when dashing past the shop-winders with the rest of our company on the day we ran out o' Budmouth because it was thoughted that Boney had landed round the point. There was I, straight as a young poplar, wi' my firelock, and my bag-net, and my spatter-dashes, and my stock sawing my jaws off, and my accoutrements sheening like the seven stars! Yes, neighbours, I was a pretty sight in my soldiering days. You ought to have seen me in four!"

"'Tis his mother's side where Master Clym's figure comes from, bless ye," said Timothy. "I know'd her brothers well. Longer coffins were never made in the whole country of South Wessex, and 'tis said that poor George's knees were crumpled up a little e'en as 'twas."

"Coffins, where?" inquired Christian, drawing nearer. "Have the ghost of one appeared to anybody, Master Fairway?"

"No, no. Don't let your mind so mislead your ears, Christian; and be a man," said Timothy reproachfully.

"I will." said Christian. "But now I think o't my shadder last night seemed just the shape of a coffin. What is it a sign of when your shade's like a coffin, neighbours? It can't be nothing to be afeared of, I suppose?"

"Afeared, no!" said the Grandfer. "Faith, I was never afeard of nothing except Boney, or I shouldn't ha' been the soldier I was. Yes, 'tis a thousand pities you didn't see me in four!"

By this time the mummers were preparing to leave; but Mrs. Yeobright stopped them by asking them to sit down and have a little supper. To this invitation Father Christmas, in the name of them all, readily agreed.

Eustacia was happy in the opportunity of staying a little longer. The cold and frosty night without was doubly frigid to her. But the lingering was not without its difficulties. Mrs. Yeobright, for want of room in the larger apartment, placed a bench for the mummers half-way through the pantry door, which opened from the sitting-room. Here they seated themselves in a row, the door being left open: thus they were still virtually in the same apartment. Mrs. Yeobright now murmured a few words to her son, who crossed the room to the pantry-door, striking his head against the mistletoe as he passed, and brought the mummers beef and bread, cake pastry, mead, and elder-wine, the waiting being done by him and his mother, that the little

maid-servant might sit as guest. The mummers doffed their helmets, and began to eat and drink.

"But you will surely have some?" said Clym to the Turkish Knight, as he stood before that warrior, tray in hand. She had refused, and still sat covered, only the sparkle of her eyes being visible between the ribbons which covered her face.

"None, thank you," replied Eustacia.

"He's quite a youngster," said the Saracen apologetically, "and you must excuse him. He's not one of the old set, but have jined us because t'other couldn't come."

"But he will take something?" persisted Yeobright. "Try a glass of mead or elder-wine."

"Yes, you had better try that," said the Saracen. "It will keep the cold out going home-along."

Though Eustacia could not eat without uncovering her face she could drink easily enough beneath her disguise. The elder-wine was accordingly accepted, and the glass vanished inside the ribbons.

At moments during this performance Eustacia was half in doubt about the security of her position; yet it had a fearful joy. A series of

attentions paid to her, and yet not to her but to some imaginary person, by the first man she had ever been inclined to adore, complicated her emotions indescribably. She had loved him partly because he was exceptional in this scene, partly because she had determined to love him, chiefly because she was in desperate need of loving somebody after wearying of Wildeve. Believing that she must love him in spite of herself, she had been influenced after the fashion of the second Lord Lyttleton and other persons, who have dreamed that they were to die on a certain day, and by stress of a morbid imagination have actually brought about that event. Once let a maiden admit the possibility of her being stricken with love for some one at a certain hour and place, and the thing is as good as done.

Did anything at this moment suggest to Yeobright the sex of the creature whom that fantastic guise inclosed, how extended was her scope both in feeling and in making others feel, and how far her compass transcended that of her companions in the band? When the disguised Queen of Love appeared before Aeneas a preternatural perfume accompanied her presence and betrayed her quality. If such a mysterious emanation ever was projected by the emotions of an earthly woman upon their object, it must have signified Eustacia's presence to Yeobright now. He looked at her wistfully, then seemed to fall into a reverie, as if he were forgetting what he observed. The momentary situation ended, he passed on, and Eustacia sipped her wine without knowing what she drank. The man for whom she had predetermined to

nourish a passion went into the small room, and across it to the further extremity.

The mummers, as has been stated, were seated on a bench, one end of which extended into the small apartment, or pantry, for want of space in the outer room. Eustacia, partly from shyness, had chosen the midmost seat, which thus commanded a view of the interior of the pantry as well as the room containing the guests. When Clym passed down the pantry her eyes followed him in the gloom which prevailed there. At the remote end was a door which, just as he was about to open it for himself, was opened by somebody within; and light streamed forth.

The person was Thomasin, with a candle, looking anxious, pale, and interesting. Yeobright appeared glad to see her, and pressed her hand. "That's right, Tamsie," he said heartily, as though recalled to himself by the sight of her, "you have decided to come down. I am glad of it."

"Hush--no, no," she said quickly. "I only came to speak to you."

"But why not join us?"

"I cannot. At least I would rather not. I am not well enough, and we shall have plenty of time together now you are going to be home a good long holiday."

"It isn't nearly so pleasant without you. Are you really ill?"

"Just a little, my old cousin--here," she said, playfully sweeping her hand across her heart.

"Ah, mother should have asked somebody else to be present tonight, perhaps?"

"O no, indeed. I merely stepped down, Clym, to ask you--" Here he followed her through the doorway into the private room beyond, and, the door closing, Eustacia and the mummer who sat next to her, the only other witness of the performance, saw and heard no more.

The heat flew to Eustacia's head and cheeks. She instantly guessed that Clym, having been home only these two or three days, had not as yet been made acquainted with Thomasin's painful situation with regard to Wildeve; and seeing her living there just as she had been living before he left home, he naturally suspected nothing. Eustacia felt a wild jealousy of Thomasin on the instant. Though Thomasin might possibly have tender sentiments towards another man as yet, how long could they be expected to last when she was shut up here with this interesting and travelled cousin of hers? There was no knowing what affection might not soon break out between the two, so constantly in each other's society, and not a distracting object near. Clym's boyish love for her might have languished, but it might easily be

revived again.

Eustacia was nettled by her own contrivances. What a sheer waste of herself to be dressed thus while another was shining to advantage! Had she known the full effect of the encounter she would have moved heaven and earth to get here in a natural manner. The power of her face all lost, the charm of her emotions all disguised, the fascinations of her coquetry denied existence, nothing but a voice left to her; she had a sense of the doom of Echo. "Nobody here respects me," she said. She had overlooked the fact that, in coming as a boy among other boys, she would be treated as a boy. The slight, though of her own causing, and self-explanatory, she was unable to dismiss as unwittingly shown, so sensitive had the situation made her.

Women have done much for themselves in histrionic dress. To look far below those who, like a certain fair personator of Polly Peachum early in the last century, and another of Lydia Languish early in this, have won not only love but ducal coronets into the bargain, whole shoals of them have reached to the initial satisfaction of getting love almost whence they would. But the Turkish Knight was denied even the chance of achieving this by the fluttering ribbons which she dared not brush aside.

Yeobright returned to the room without his cousin. When within two or three feet of Eustacia he stopped, as if again arrested by a thought. He was gazing at her. She looked another way, disconcerted, and

wondered how long this purgatory was to last. After lingering a few seconds he passed on again.

To court their own discomfiture by love is a common instinct with certain perfervid women. Conflicting sensations of love, fear, and shame reduced Eustacia to a state of the utmost uneasiness. To escape was her great and immediate desire. The other mummers appeared to be in no hurry to leave; and murmuring to the lad who sat next to her that she preferred waiting for them outside the house, she moved to the door as imperceptibly as possible, opened it, and slipped out.

The calm, lone scene reassured her. She went forward to the palings and leant over them, looking at the moon. She had stood thus but a little time when the door again opened. Expecting to see the remainder of the band Eustacia turned; but no--Clym Yeobright came out as softly as she had done, and closed the door behind him.

He advanced and stood beside her. "I have an odd opinion," he said, "and should like to ask you a question. Are you a woman--or am I wrong?"

"I am a woman."

His eyes lingered on her with great interest. "Do girls often play as mummers now? They never used to."

"They don't now."

"Why did you?"

"To get excitement and shake off depression," she said in low tones.

"What depressed you?"

"Life."

"That's a cause of depression a good many have to put up with."

"Yes."

A long silence. "And do you find excitement?" asked Clym at last.

"At this moment, perhaps."

"Then you are vexed at being discovered?"

"Yes; though I thought I might be."

"I would gladly have asked you to our party had I known you wished to come. Have I ever been acquainted with you in my youth?"

"Never."

"Won't you come in again, and stay as long as you like?"

"No. I wish not to be further recognized."

"Well, you are safe with me." After remaining in thought a minute he added gently, "I will not intrude upon you longer. It is a strange way of meeting, and I will not ask why I find a cultivated woman playing such a part as this."

She did not volunteer the reason which he seemed to hope for, and he wished her good night, going thence round to the back of the house, where he walked up and down by himself for some time before re-entering.

Eustacia, warmed with an inner fire, could not wait for her companions after this. She flung back the ribbons from her face, opened the gate, and at once struck into the heath. She did not hasten along. Her grandfather was in bed at this hour, for she so frequently walked upon the hills on moonlight nights that he took no notice of her comings and goings, and, enjoying himself in his own way, left her to do likewise. A more important subject than that of getting indoors now engrossed her. Yeobright, if he had the least curiosity, would infallibly discover her name. What then? She first felt a sort of exultation at the way in which the adventure had terminated, even though at moments between her exultations she was abashed and

blushful. Then this consideration recurred to chill her: What was the use of her exploit? She was at present a total stranger to the Yeobright family. The unreasonable nimbus of romance with which she had encircled that man might be her misery. How could she allow herself to become so infatuated with a stranger? And to fill the cup of her sorrow there would be Thomasin, living day after day in inflammable proximity to him; for she had just learnt that, contrary to her first belief, he was going to stay at home some considerable time.

She reached the wicket at Mistover Knap, but before opening it she turned and faced the heath once more. The form of Rainbarrow stood above the hills, and the moon stood above Rainbarrow. The air was charged with silence and frost. The scene reminded Eustacia of a circumstance which till that moment she had totally forgotten. She had promised to meet Wildeve by the Barrow this very night at eight, to give a final answer to his pleading for an elopement.

She herself had fixed the evening and the hour. He had probably come to the spot, waited there in the cold, and been greatly disappointed.

"Well, so much the better: it did not hurt him," she said serenely. Wildeve had at present the rayless outline of the sun through smoked glass, and she could say such things as that with the greatest

facility.

She remained deeply pondering; and Thomasin's winning manner towards her cousin arose again upon Eustacia's mind.

"O that she had been married to Damon before this!" she said. "And she would if it hadn't been for me! If I had only known--if I had only known!"

Eustacia once more lifted her deep stormy eyes to the moonlight, and, sighing that tragic sigh of hers which was so much like a shudder, entered the shadow of the roof. She threw off her trappings in the out-house, rolled them up, and went indoors to her chamber.

VII

A Coalition between Beauty and Oddness

The old captain's prevailing indifference to his granddaughter's movements left her free as a bird to follow her own courses; but it so happened that he did take upon himself the next morning to ask her why she had walked out so late.

"Only in search of events, grandfather," she said, looking out of the window with that drowsy latency of manner which discovered so much force behind it whenever the trigger was pressed.

"Search of events--one would think you were one of the bucks I knew at one-and-twenty."

"It is so lonely here."

"So much the better. If I were living in a town my whole time would be taken up in looking after you. I fully expected you would have been home when I returned from the Woman."

"I won't conceal what I did. I wanted an adventure, and I went with the mummers. I played the part of the Turkish Knight."

"No, never? Ha, ha! Good gad! I didn't expect it of you, Eustacia."

"It was my first performance, and it certainly will be my last. Now I have told you--and remember it is a secret."

"Of course. But, Eustacia, you never did--ha! ha! Dammy, how 'twould have pleased me forty years ago! But remember, no more of it, my girl. You may walk on the heath night or day, as you choose, so that you don't bother me; but no figuring in breeches again."

"You need have no fear for me, grandpapa."

Here the conversation ceased, Eustacia's moral training never exceeding in severity a dialogue of this sort, which, if it ever became profitable to good works, would be a result not dear at the price. But her thoughts soon strayed far from her own personality; and, full of a passionate and indescribable solicitude for one to whom she was not even a name, she went forth into the amplitude of tanned wild around her, restless as Ahasuerus the Jew. She was about half a mile from her residence when she beheld a sinister redness arising from a ravine a little way in advance--dull and lurid like a flame in sunlight and she guessed it to signify Diggory Venn.

When the farmers who had wished to buy in a new stock of reddle during the last month had inquired where Venn was to be found, people replied, "On Egdon Heath." Day after day the answer was the same. Now, since Egdon was populated with heath-croppers and furze-cutters rather than with sheep and shepherds, and the downs where most of the latter were to be found lay some to the north, some to the west of Egdon, his reason for camping about there like Israel in Zin was not apparent. The position was central and occasionally desirable. But the sale of reddle was not Diggory's primary object in remaining on the heath, particularly at so late a period of the year, when most travellers of his class had gone into winter quarters.

Eustacia looked at the lonely man. Wildeve had told her at their last meeting that Venn had been thrust forward by Mrs. Yeobright as one ready and anxious to take his place as Thomasin's betrothed. His figure was perfect, his face young and well outlined, his eyes bright, his intelligence keen, and his position one which he could readily better if he chose. But in spite of possibilities it was not likely that Thomasin would accept this Ishmaelitish creature while she had a cousin like Yeobright at her elbow, and Wildeve at the same time not absolutely indifferent. Eustacia was not long in guessing that poor Mrs. Yeobright, in her anxiety for her niece's future, had mentioned this lover to stimulate the zeal of the other. Eustacia was on the side of the Yeobrights now, and entered into the spirit of the aunt's desire.

"Good morning, miss," said the reddleman, taking off his cap of hareskin, and apparently bearing her no ill-will from recollection of their last meeting.

"Good morning, reddleman," she said, hardly troubling to lift her heavily shaded eyes to his. "I did not know you were so near. Is your van here too?"

Venn moved his elbow towards a hollow in which a dense brake of purple-stemmed brambles had grown to such vast dimensions as almost to form a dell. Brambles, though churlish when handled, are kindly shelter in early winter, being the latest of the deciduous bushes

to lose their leaves. The roof and chimney of Venn's caravan showed behind the tracery and tangles of the brake.

"You remain near this part?" she asked with more interest.

"Yes, I have business here."

"Not altogether the selling of reddle?"

"It has nothing to do with that."

"It has to do with Miss Yeobright?"

Her face seemed to ask for an armed peace, and he therefore said frankly, "Yes, miss; it is on account of her."

"On account of your approaching marriage with her?"

Venn flushed through his stain. "Don't make sport of me, Miss Vye," he said.

"It isn't true?"

"Certainly not."

She was thus convinced that the reddleman was a mere _pis aller_ in

Mrs. Yeobright's mind; one, moreover, who had not even been informed of his promotion to that lowly standing. "It was a mere notion of mine," she said quietly; and was about to pass by without further speech, when, looking round to the right, she saw a painfully well-known figure serpentining upwards by one of the little paths which led to the top where she stood. Owing to the necessary windings of his course his back was at present towards them. She glanced quickly round; to escape that man there was only one way. Turning to Venn, she said, "Would you allow me to rest a few minutes in your van? The banks are damp for sitting on."

"Certainly, miss; I'll make a place for you."

She followed him behind the dell of brambles to his wheeled dwelling, into which Venn mounted, placing the three-legged stool just within the door.

"That is the best I can do for you," he said, stepping down and retiring to the path, where he resumed the smoking of his pipe as he walked up and down.

Eustacia bounded into the vehicle and sat on the stool, ensconced from view on the side towards the trackway. Soon she heard the brushing of other feet than the reddleman's, a not very friendly "Good day" uttered by two men in passing each other, and then the dwindling of the footfall of one of them in a direction onwards. Eustacia

stretched her neck forward till she caught a glimpse of a receding back and shoulders; and she felt a wretched twinge of misery, she knew not why. It was the sickening feeling which, if the changed heart has any generosity at all in its composition, accompanies the sudden sight of a once-loved one who is beloved no more.

When Eustacia descended to proceed on her way the reddleman came near. "That was Mr. Wildeve who passed, miss," he said slowly, and expressed by his face that he expected her to feel vexed at having been sitting unseen.

"Yes, I saw him coming up the hill," replied Eustacia. "Why should you tell me that?" It was a bold question, considering the reddleman's knowledge of her past love; but her undemonstrative manner had power to repress the opinions of those she treated as remote from her.

"I am glad to hear that you can ask it," said the reddleman bluntly. "And, now I think of it, it agrees with what I saw last night."

"Ah--what was that?" Eustacia wished to leave him, but wished to know.

"Mr. Wildeve stayed at Rainbarrow a long time waiting for a lady who didn't come."

"You waited too, it seems?"

"Yes, I always do. I was glad to see him disappointed. He will be there again tonight."

"To be again disappointed. The truth is, reddleman, that that lady, so far from wishing to stand in the way of Thomasin's marriage with Mr. Wildeve, would be very glad to promote it."

Venn felt much astonishment at this avowal, though he did not show it clearly; that exhibition may greet remarks which are one remove from expectation, but it is usually withheld in complicated cases of two removes and upwards. "Indeed, miss," he replied.

"How do you know that Mr. Wildeve will come to Rainbarrow again tonight?" she asked.

"I heard him say to himself that he would. He's in a regular temper."

Eustacia looked for a moment what she felt, and she murmured, lifting her deep dark eyes anxiously to his, "I wish I knew what to do. I don't want to be uncivil to him; but I don't wish to see him again; and I have some few little things to return to him."

"If you choose to send 'em by me, miss, and a note to tell him that you wish to say no more to him, I'll take it for you quite privately. That would be the most straightforward way of letting him know your mind."

"Very well," said Eustacia. "Come towards my house, and I will bring it out to you."

She went on, and as the path was an infinitely small parting in the shaggy locks of the heath, the reddleman followed exactly in her trail. She saw from a distance that the captain was on the bank sweeping the horizon with his telescope; and bidding Venn to wait where he stood she entered the house alone.

In ten minutes she returned with a parcel and a note, and said, in placing them in his hand, "Why are you so ready to take these for me?"

"Can you ask that?"

"I suppose you think to serve Thomasin in some way by it. Are you as anxious as ever to help on her marriage?"

Venn was a little moved. "I would sooner have married her myself," he said in a low voice. "But what I feel is that if she cannot be happy without him I will do my duty in helping her to get him, as a man ought."

Eustacia looked curiously at the singular man who spoke thus. What a strange sort of love, to be entirely free from that quality of selfishness which is frequently the chief constituent of the passion,

and sometimes its only one! The reddleman's disinterestedness was so well deserving of respect that it overshot respect by being barely comprehended; and she almost thought it absurd.

"Then we are both of one mind at last," she said.

"Yes," replied Venn gloomily. "But if you would tell me, miss, why you take such an interest in her, I should be easier. It is so sudden and strange."

Eustacia appeared at a loss. "I cannot tell you that, reddleman," she said coldly.

Venn said no more. He pocketed the letter, and, bowing to Eustacia, went away.

Rainbarrow had again become blended with night when Wildeve ascended the long acclivity at its base. On his reaching the top a shape grew up from the earth immediately behind him. It was that of Eustacia's emissary. He slapped Wildeve on the shoulder. The feverish young innkeeper and ex-engineer started like Satan at the touch of Ithuriel's spear.

"The meeting is always at eight o'clock, at this place," said Venn, "and here we are--we three."

"We three?" said Wildeve, looking quickly round.

"Yes; you, and I, and she. This is she." He held up the letter and parcel.

Wildeve took them wonderingly. "I don't quite see what this means," he said. "How do you come here? There must be some mistake."

"It will be cleared from your mind when you have read the letter. Lanterns for one." The reddleman struck a light, kindled an inch of tallow-candle which he had brought, and sheltered it with his cap.

"Who are you?" said Wildeve, discerning by the candlelight an obscure rubicundity of person in his companion. "You are the reddleman I saw on the hill this morning--why, you are the man who--"

"Please read the letter."

"If you had come from the other one I shouldn't have been surprised," murmured Wildeve as he opened the letter and read. His face grew serious.

TO MR. WILDEVE.

After some thought I have decided once and for all that we must hold no further communication. The more I consider the matter the more I am convinced that there must be an end to our acquaintance. Had you been uniformly faithful to me throughout these two years you might now have some ground for accusing me of heartlessness; but if you calmly consider what I bore during the period of your desertion, and how I passively put up with your courtship of another without once interfering, you will, I think, own that I have a right to consult my own feelings when you come back to me again. That these are not what they were towards you may, perhaps, be a fault in me, but it is one which you can scarcely reproach me for when you remember how you left me for Thomasin.

The little articles you gave me in the early part of our friendship are returned by the bearer of this letter. They should rightly have been sent back when I first heard of your engagement to her.

EUSTACIA

By the time that Wildeve reached her name the blankness with which he had read the first half of the letter intensified to mortification.
"I am made a great fool of, one way and another," he said pettishly.
"Do you know what is in this letter?"

The reddleman hummed a tune.

"Can't you answer me?" asked Wildeve warmly.

"Ru-um-tum-tum," sang the reddleman.

Wildeve stood looking on the ground beside Venn's feet, till he allowed his eyes to travel upwards over Diggory's form, as illuminated by the candle, to his head and face. "Ha-ha! Well, I suppose I deserve it, considering how I have played with them both," he said at last, as much to himself as to Venn. "But of all the odd things that ever I knew, the oddest is that you should so run counter to your own interests as to bring this to me."

"My interests?"

"Certainly. 'Twas your interest not to do anything which would send me courting Thomasin again, now she has accepted you--or something like it. Mrs. Yeobright says you are to marry her. 'Tisn't true, then?"

"Good Lord! I heard of this before, but didn't believe it. When did she say so?"

Wildeve began humming as the reddleman had done.

"I don't believe it now," cried Venn.

"Ru-um-tum-tum," sang Wildeve.

"O Lord--how we can imitate!" said Venn contemptuously. "I'll have this out. I'll go straight to her."

Diggory withdrew with an emphatic step, Wildeve's eye passing over his form in withering derision, as if he were no more than a heath-cropper. When the reddleman's figure could no longer be seen, Wildeve himself descended and plunged into the rayless hollow of the vale.

To lose the two women--he who had been the well-beloved of both--was too ironical an issue to be endured. He could only decently save himself by Thomasin; and once he became her husband, Eustacia's repentance, he thought, would set in for a long and bitter term. It was no wonder that Wildeve, ignorant of the new man at the back of the scene, should have supposed Eustacia to be playing a part. To believe that the letter was not the result of some momentary pique, to infer that she really gave him up to Thomasin, would have required previous knowledge of her transfiguration by that man's influence. Who was to know that she had grown generous in the greediness of a new passion, that in coveting one cousin she was dealing liberally with another, that in her eagerness to appropriate she gave way?

Full of this resolve to marry in haste, and wring the heart of the proud girl, Wildeve went his way.

Meanwhile Diggory Venn had returned to his van, where he stood looking thoughtfully into the stove. A new vista was opened up to him. But, however promising Mrs. Yeobright's views of him might be as a candidate for her niece's hand, one condition was indispensable to the favour of Thomasin herself, and that was a renunciation of his present wild mode of life. In this he saw little difficulty.

He could not afford to wait till the next day before seeing Thomasin and detailing his plan. He speedily plunged himself into toilet operations, pulled a suit of cloth clothes from a box, and in about twenty minutes stood before the van-lantern as a reddleman in nothing but his face, the vermilion shades of which were not to be removed in a day. Closing the door and fastening it with a padlock, Venn set off towards Blooms-End.

He had reached the white palings and laid his hand upon the gate when the door of the house opened, and quickly closed again. A female form had glided in. At the same time a man, who had seemingly been standing with the woman in the porch, came forward from the house till he was face to face with Venn. It was Wildeve again.

"Man alive, you've been quick at it," said Diggory sarcastically.

"And you slow, as you will find," said Wildeve. "And," lowering his voice, "you may as well go back again now. I've claimed her, and got her. Good night, reddleman!" Thereupon Wildeve walked away.

Venn's heart sank within him, though it had not risen unduly high. He stood leaning over the palings in an indecisive mood for nearly a quarter of an hour. Then he went up the garden path, knocked, and asked for Mrs. Yeobright.

Instead of requesting him to enter she came to the porch. A discourse was carried on between them in low measured tones for the space of ten minutes or more. At the end of the time Mrs. Yeobright went in, and Venn sadly retraced his steps into the heath. When he had again regained his van he lit the lantern, and with an apathetic face at once began to pull off his best clothes, till in the course of a few minutes he reappeared as the confirmed and irretrievable reddleman that he had seemed before.

VIII

Firmness Is Discovered in a Gentle Heart

On that evening the interior of Blooms-End, though cosy and comfortable, had been rather silent. Clym Yeobright was not at home. Since the Christmas party he had gone on a few days' visit to a friend about ten miles off.

The shadowy form seen by Venn to part from Wildeve in the porch, and quickly withdraw into the house, was Thomasin's. On entering she threw down a cloak which had been carelessly wrapped round her, and came forward to the light, where Mrs. Yeobright sat at her work-table, drawn up within the settle, so that part of it projected into the chimney-corner.

"I don't like your going out after dark alone, Tamsin," said her aunt quietly, without looking up from her work.

"I have only been just outside the door."

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Yeobright, struck by a change in the tone of Thomasin's voice, and observing her. Thomasin's cheek was flushed to a pitch far beyond that which it had reached before her troubles, and her eyes glittered.

"It was HE who knocked," she said.

"I thought as much."

"He wishes the marriage to be at once."

"Indeed! What--is he anxious?" Mrs. Yeobright directed a searching look upon her niece. "Why did not Mr. Wildeve come in?"

"He did not wish to. You are not friends with him, he says. He would like the wedding to be the day after tomorrow, quite privately; at the church of his parish--not at ours."

"Oh! And what did you say?"

"I agreed to it," Thomasin answered firmly. "I am a practical woman now. I don't believe in hearts at all. I would marry him under any circumstances since--since Clym's letter."

A letter was lying on Mrs. Yeobright's work-basket, and at Thomasin's word her aunt reopened it, and silently read for the tenth time that day:--

> What is the meaning of this silly story that people are circulating about Thomasin and Mr. Wildeve? I should call such a scandal humiliating if there was the least chance of its being true. How could such a gross falsehood have arisen? It is said that one should go abroad to hear news of home, and I appear to have done it. Of course I

contradict the tale everywhere; but it is very vexing,
and I wonder how it could have originated. It is too
ridiculous that such a girl as Thomasin could so mortify
us as to get jilted on the wedding-day. What has she done?

"Yes," Mrs. Yeobright said sadly, putting down the letter. "If you think you can marry him, do so. And since Mr. Wildeve wishes it to be unceremonious, let it be that too. I can do nothing. It is all in your own hands now. My power over your welfare came to an end when you left this house to go with him to Anglebury." She continued, half in bitterness, "I may almost ask, why do you consult me in the matter at all? If you had gone and married him without saying a word to me, I could hardly have been angry--simply because, poor girl, you can't do a better thing."

"Don't say that and dishearten me."

"You are right: I will not."

"I do not plead for him, aunt. Human nature is weak, and I am not a blind woman to insist that he is perfect. I did think so, but I don't now. But I know my course, and you know that I know it. I hope for the best."

"And so do I, and we will both continue to," said Mrs. Yeobright,

rising and kissing her. "Then the wedding, if it comes off, will be on the morning of the very day Clym comes home?"

"Yes. I decided that it ought to be over before he came. After that you can look him in the face, and so can I. Our concealments will matter nothing."

Mrs. Yeobright moved her head in thoughtful assent, and presently said, "Do you wish me to give you away? I am willing to undertake that, you know, if you wish, as I was last time. After once forbidding the banns I think I can do no less."

"I don't think I will ask you to come," said Thomasin reluctantly, but with decision. "It would be unpleasant, I am almost sure. Better let there be only strangers present, and none of my relations at all. I would rather have it so. I do not wish to do anything which may touch your credit, and I feel that I should be uncomfortable if you were there, after what has passed. I am only your niece, and there is no necessity why you should concern yourself more about me."

"Well, he has beaten us," her aunt said. "It really seems as if he had been playing with you in this way in revenge for my humbling him as I did by standing up against him at first."

"O no, aunt," murmured Thomasin.

They said no more on the subject then. Diggory Venn's knock came soon after; and Mrs. Yeobright, on returning from her interview with him in the porch, carelessly observed, "Another lover has come to ask for you."

"No?"

"Yes, that queer young man Venn."

"Asks to pay his addresses to me?"

"Yes; and I told him he was too late."

Thomasin looked silently into the candle-flame. "Poor Diggory!" she said, and then aroused herself to other things.

The next day was passed in mere mechanical deeds of preparation, both the women being anxious to immerse themselves in these to escape the emotional aspect of the situation. Some wearing apparel and other articles were collected anew for Thomasin, and remarks on domestic details were frequently made, so as to obscure any inner misgivings about her future as Wildeve's wife.

The appointed morning came. The arrangement with Wildeve was that he should meet her at the church to guard against any unpleasant curiosity which might have affected them had they been seen walking

off together in the usual country way.

Aunt and niece stood together in the bedroom where the bride was dressing. The sun, where it could catch it, made a mirror of Thomasin's hair, which she always wore braided. It was braided according to a calendric system: the more important the day the more numerous the strands in the braid. On ordinary working-days she braided it in threes; on ordinary Sundays in fours; at May-polings, gipsyings, and the like, she braided it in fives. Years ago she had said that when she married she would braid it in sevens. She had braided it in sevens today.

"I have been thinking that I will wear my blue silk after all," she said. "It IS my wedding day, even though there may be something sad about the time. I mean," she added, anxious to correct any wrong impression, "not sad in itself, but in its having had great disappointment and trouble before it."

Mrs. Yeobright breathed in a way which might have been called a sigh. "I almost wish Clym had been at home," she said. "Of course you chose the time because of his absence."

"Partly. I have felt that I acted unfairly to him in not telling him all; but, as it was done not to grieve him, I thought I would carry out the plan to its end, and tell the whole story when the sky was clear."

"You are a practical little woman," said Mrs. Yeobright, smiling. "I wish you and he--no, I don't wish anything. There, it is nine o'clock," she interrupted, hearing a whizz and a dinging downstairs.

"I told Damon I would leave at nine," said Thomasin, hastening out of the room.

Her aunt followed. When Thomasin was going up the little walk from the door to the wicket-gate, Mrs. Yeobright looked reluctantly at her, and said, "It is a shame to let you go alone."

"It is necessary," said Thomasin.

"At any rate," added her aunt with forced cheerfulness, "I shall call upon you this afternoon, and bring the cake with me. If Clym has returned by that time he will perhaps come too. I wish to show Mr. Wildeve that I bear him no ill-will. Let the past be forgotten. Well, God bless you! There, I don't believe in old superstitions, but I'll do it." She threw a slipper at the retreating figure of the girl, who turned, smiled, and went on again.

A few steps further, and she looked back. "Did you call me, aunt?" she tremulously inquired. "Good-bye!"

Moved by an uncontrollable feeling as she looked upon Mrs. Yeobright's

worn, wet face, she ran back, when her aunt came forward, and they met again. "O--Tamsie," said the elder, weeping, "I don't like to let you go."

"I--I--am--" Thomasin began, giving way likewise. But, quelling her grief, she said "Good-bye!" again and went on.

Then Mrs. Yeobright saw a little figure wending its way between the scratching furze-bushes, and diminishing far up the valley--a pale-blue spot in a vast field of neutral brown, solitary and undefended except by the power of her own hope.

But the worst feature in the case was one which did not appear in the landscape; it was the man.

The hour chosen for the ceremony by Thomasin and Wildeve had been so timed as to enable her to escape the awkwardness of meeting her cousin Clym, who was returning the same morning. To own to the partial truth of what he had heard would be distressing as long as the humiliating position resulting from the event was unimproved. It was only after a second and successful journey to the altar that she could lift up her head and prove the failure of the first attempt a pure accident.

She had not been gone from Blooms-End more than half an hour when Yeobright came by the meads from the other direction and entered the house.

"I had an early breakfast," he said to his mother after greeting her. "Now I could eat a little more."

They sat down to the repeated meal, and he went on in a low, anxious voice, apparently imagining that Thomasin had not yet come downstairs, "What's this I have heard about Thomasin and Mr. Wildeve?"

"It is true in many points," said Mrs. Yeobright quietly; "but it is all right now, I hope." She looked at the clock.

"True?"

"Thomasin is gone to him today."

Clym pushed away his breakfast. "Then there is a scandal of some sort, and that's what's the matter with Thomasin. Was it this that made her ill?"

"Yes. Not a scandal: a misfortune. I will tell you all about it, Clym. You must not be angry, but you must listen, and you'll find that what we have done has been done for the best."

She then told him the circumstances. All that he had known of the affair before he returned from Paris was that there had existed an attachment between Thomasin and Wildeve, which his mother had at first

discountenanced, but had since, owing to the arguments of Thomasin, looked upon in a little more favourable light. When she, therefore, proceeded to explain all he was greatly surprised and troubled.

"And she determined that the wedding should be over before you came back," said Mrs. Yeobright, "that there might be no chance of her meeting you, and having a very painful time of it. That's why she has gone to him; they have arranged to be married this morning."

"But I can't understand it," said Yeobright, rising. "'Tis so unlike her. I can see why you did not write to me after her unfortunate return home. But why didn't you let me know when the wedding was going to be--the first time?"

"Well, I felt vexed with her just then. She seemed to me to be obstinate; and when I found that you were nothing in her mind I vowed that she should be nothing in yours. I felt that she was only my niece after all; I told her she might marry, but that I should take no interest in it, and should not bother you about it either."

"It wouldn't have been bothering me. Mother, you did wrong."

"I thought it might disturb you in your business, and that you might throw up your situation, or injure your prospects in some way because of it, so I said nothing. Of course, if they had married at that time in a proper manner, I should have told you at once."

"Tamsin actually being married while we are sitting here!"

"Yes. Unless some accident happens again, as it did the first time. It may, considering he's the same man."

"Yes, and I believe it will. Was it right to let her go? Suppose Wildeve is really a bad fellow?"

"Then he won't come, and she'll come home again."

"You should have looked more into it."

"It is useless to say that," his mother answered with an impatient look of sorrow. "You don't know how bad it has been here with us all these weeks, Clym. You don't know what a mortification anything of that sort is to a woman. You don't know the sleepless nights we've had in this house, and the almost bitter words that have passed between us since that Fifth of November. I hope never to pass seven such weeks again. Tamsin has not gone outside the door, and I have been ashamed to look anybody in the face; and now you blame me for letting her do the only thing that can be done to set that trouble straight."

"No," he said slowly. "Upon the whole I don't blame you. But just consider how sudden it seems to me. Here was I, knowing nothing; and

then I am told all at once that Tamsie is gone to be married. Well, I suppose there was nothing better to do. Do you know, mother," he continued after a moment or two, looking suddenly interested in his own past history, "I once thought of Tamsin as a sweetheart? Yes, I did. How odd boys are! And when I came home and saw her this time she seemed so much more affectionate than usual, that I was quite reminded of those days, particularly on the night of the party, when she was unwell. We had the party just the same--was not that rather cruel to her?"

"It made no difference. I had arranged to give one, and it was not worth while to make more gloom than necessary. To begin by shutting ourselves up and telling you of Tamsin's misfortunes would have been a poor sort of welcome."

Clym remained thinking. "I almost wish you had not had that party," he said; "and for other reasons. But I will tell you in a day or two. We must think of Tamsin now."

They lapsed into silence. "I'll tell you what," said Yeobright again, in a tone which showed some slumbering feeling still. "I don't think it kind to Tamsin to let her be married like this, and neither of us there to keep up her spirits or care a bit about her. She hasn't disgraced herself, or done anything to deserve that. It is bad enough that the wedding should be so hurried and unceremonious, without our keeping away from it in addition. Upon my soul, 'tis almost a shame.

I'll go."

"It is over by this time," said his mother with a sigh; "unless they were late, or he--"

"Then I shall be soon enough to see them come out. I don't quite like your keeping me in ignorance, mother, after all. Really, I half hope he has failed to meet her!"

"And ruined her character?"

"Nonsense: that wouldn't ruin Thomasin."

He took up his hat and hastily left the house. Mrs. Yeobright looked rather unhappy, and sat still, deep in thought. But she was not long left alone. A few minutes later Clym came back again, and in his company came Diggory Venn.

"I find there isn't time for me to get there," said Clym.

"Is she married?" Mrs. Yeobright inquired, turning to the reddleman a face in which a strange strife of wishes, for and against, was apparent.

Venn bowed. "She is, ma'am."

"How strange it sounds," murmured Clym.

"And he didn't disappoint her this time?" said Mrs. Yeobright.

"He did not. And there is now no slight on her name. I was hastening ath'art to tell you at once, as I saw you were not there."

"How came you to be there? How did you know it?" she asked.

"I have been in that neighbourhood for some time, and I saw them go in," said the reddleman. "Wildeve came up to the door, punctual as the clock. I didn't expect it of him." He did not add, as he might have added, that how he came to be in that neighbourhood was not by accident; that, since Wildeve's resumption of his right to Thomasin, Venn, with the thoroughness which was part of his character, had determined to see the end of the episode.

"Who was there?" said Mrs. Yeobright.

"Nobody hardly. I stood right out of the way, and she did not see me." The reddleman spoke huskily, and looked into the garden.

"Who gave her away?"

"Miss Vye."

"How very remarkable! Miss Vye! It is to be considered an honour, I suppose?"

"Who's Miss Vye?" said Clym.

"Captain Vye's granddaughter, of Mistover Knap."

"A proud girl from Budmouth," said Mrs. Yeobright. "One not much to my liking. People say she's a witch, but of course that's absurd."

The reddleman kept to himself his acquaintance with that fair personage, and also that Eustacia was there because he went to fetch her, in accordance with a promise he had given as soon as he learnt that the marriage was to take place. He merely said, in continuation of the story--

"I was sitting on the churchyard wall when they came up, one from one way, the other from the other; and Miss Vye was walking thereabouts, looking at the head-stones. As soon as they had gone in I went to the door, feeling I should like to see it, as I knew her so well. I pulled off my boots because they were so noisy, and went up into the gallery. I saw then that the parson and clerk were already there."

"How came Miss Vye to have anything to do with it, if she was only on a walk that way?"

"Because there was nobody else. She had gone into the church just before me, not into the gallery. The parson looked round before beginning, and as she was the only one near he beckoned to her, and she went up to the rails. After that, when it came to signing the book, she pushed up her veil and signed; and Tamsin seemed to thank her for her kindness." The reddleman told the tale thoughtfully, for there lingered upon his vision the changing colour of Wildeve, when Eustacia lifted the thick veil which had concealed her from recognition and looked calmly into his face. "And then," said Diggory sadly, "I came away, for her history as Tamsin Yeobright was over."

"I offered to go," said Mrs. Yeobright regretfully. "But she said it was not necessary."

"Well, it is no matter," said the reddleman. "The thing is done at last as it was meant to be at first, and God send her happiness. Now I'll wish you good morning."

He placed his cap on his head and went out.

From that instant of leaving Mrs. Yeobright's door, the reddleman was seen no more in or about Egdon Heath for a space of many months. He vanished entirely. The nook among the brambles where his van had been standing was as vacant as ever the next morning, and scarcely a sign remained to show that he had been there, excepting a few straws, and a little redness on the turf, which was washed away by the next storm of

rain.

The report that Diggory had brought of the wedding, correct as far as it went, was deficient in one significant particular, which had escaped him through his being at some distance back in the church. When Thomasin was tremblingly engaged in signing her name Wildeve had flung towards Eustacia a glance that said plainly, "I have punished you now." She had replied in a low tone--and he little thought how truly--"You mistake; it gives me sincerest pleasure to see her your wife today."