FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

by Thomas Hardy, 1874

CHAPTER I

DESCRIPTION OF FARMER OAK - AN INCIDENT

When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth

spread till they were within an unimportant distance of

his ears, his eyes were reduced to chinks, and diverging

wrinkles appeared round them, extending upon his

countenance like the rays in a rudimentary sketch of

the rising sun.

His Christian name was Gabriel, and on working

days he was a young man of sound judgment, easy

motions, proper dress, and general good character. On

Sundays he was a man of misty views, rather given to

postponing, and hampered by his best clothes and

umbrella: upon the whole, one who felt himself to

occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean

neutrality which lay between the Communion people

of the parish and the drunken section, - that is, he went

to church, but yawned privately by the time the con-

gegation reached the Nicene creed,- and thought of

what there would be for dinner when he meant to be

listening to the sermon. Or, to state his character as

it stood in the scale of public opinion, when his friends

and critics were in tantrums, he was considered rather a

bad man; when they were pleased, he was rather a good

man; when they were neither, he was a man whose

moral colour was a kind of pepper-and-salt mixture.

Since he lived six times as many working-days as

Sundays, Oak's appearance in his old clothes was most

peculiarly his own - the mental picture formed by his

neighbours in imagining him being always dressed in

that way. He wore a low-crowned felt hat, spread out

at the base by tight jamming upon the head for security

in high winds, and a coat like Dr. Johnson's; his lower

extremities being encased in ordinary leather leggings

and boots emphatically large, affording to each foot a

roomy apartment so constructed that any wearer might

stand in a river all day long and know nothing of

damp - their maker being a conscientious man who

endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut

by unstinted dimension and solidity.

Mr. Oak carried about him, by way of watch,-

what may be called a small silver clock; in other

words, it was a watch as to shape and intention, and

a small clock as to size. This instrument being several

years older than Oak's grandfather, had the peculiarity

of going either too fast or not at all. The smaller

of its hands, too, occasionally slipped round on the

pivot, and thus, though the minutes were told with

precision, nobody could be quite certain of the hour

they belonged to. The stopping peculiarity of his

watch Oak remedied by thumps and shakes, and he

escaped any evil consequences from the other two

defects by constant comparisons with and observations

of the sun and stars, and by pressing his face close

to the glass of his neighbours' windows, till he could

discern the hour marked by the green-faced timekeepers

within. It may be mentioned that Oak's fob being

difficult of access, by reason of its somewhat high

situation in the waistband of his trousers which also

lay at a remote height under his waistcoat , the watch

was as a necessity pulled out by throwing the body to

one side, compressing the mouth and face to a mere

mass of ruddy flesh on account of the exertion, and

drawing up the watch by its chain, like a bucket from a

well.

But some thoughtfull persons, who had seen him

walking across one of his fields on a certain December

morning - sunny and exceedingly mild - might have

regarded Gabriel Oak in other aspects than these. In

his face one might notice that many of the hues and

curves of youth had tarried on to manhood: there even

remained in his remoter crannies some relics of the boy.

His height and breadth would have been sufficient to

make his presence imposing, had they been exhibited

with due consideration. But there is a way some men

have, rural and urban alike, for which the mind is more

responsible than flesh and sinew: it is a way of curtail-

ing their dimensions by their manner of showing them.

And from a quiet modesty that would have become a

vestal which seemed continually to impress upon him

that he had no great claim on the world's room, Oak

walked unassumingly and with a faintly perceptible

bend, yet distinct from a bowing of the shoulders.

This may be said to be a defect in an individual if he

depends for his valuation more upon his appearance

than upon his capacity to wear well, which Oak did not.

He had just reached the time of life at which "young"

is ceasing to be the prefix of "man" in speaking of one.

He was at the brightest period of masculine growth,

for his intellect and his emotions were clearly separated:

he had passed the time during which the influence of

youth indiscriminately mingles them in the character

of impulse, and he had not yet arrived at the stage

wherein they become united again, in the character of

prejudice, by the influence of a wife and family. In

short, he was twenty-eight, and a bachelor.

The field he was in this morning sloped to a

ridge called Norcombe Hill. Through a spur of this

hill ran the highway between Emminster and Chalk-

Newton. Casually glancing over the hedge, Oak saw

coming down the incline before him an ornamental

spring waggon, painted yellow and gaily marked,

drawn by two horses, a waggoner walking alongside

bearing a whip perpendicularly. The waggon was

laden with household goods and window plants, and

on the apex of the whole sat a woman, "young" and

attractive. Gabriel had not beheld the sight for more

than half a minute, when the vehicle was brought to a

standstill just beneath his eyes.

"The tailboard of the waggon is gone, Miss." said the

waggoner.

"Then I heard it fall." said the girl, in a soft, though

not particularly low voice. "I heard a noise I could

not account for when we were coming up the hill."

"I'll run back."

"Do." she answered.

The sensible horses stood - perfectly still, and the

waggoner's steps sank fainter and fainter in the distance.

The girl on the summit of the load sat motionless,

surrounded by tables and chairs with their legs upwards,

backed by an oak settle, and ornamented in front by

pots of geraniums, myrtles, and cactuses, together with

a caged canary - all probably from the windows of the

house just vacated. There was also a cat in a willow

basket, from the partly-opened lid of which she gazed

with half-closed eyes, and affectionately-surveyed the

small birds around.

The handsome girl waited for some time idly in her

place, and the only sound heard in the stillness was the

hopping of the canary up-and down the perches of its

prison. Then she looked attentively downwards. It

was not at the bird, nor at the cat; it was at an oblong

package tied in paper, and lying between them. She

turned her head to learn if the waggoner were coming.

He was not yet in sight; and her-eyes crept back to

the package, her thoughts seeming to run upon what

was inside it. At length she drew the article into her

lap, and untied the paper covering; a small swing

looking-glass was disclosed, in which she proceeded to

survey herself attentively. She parted her lips and

smiled.

It was a fine morning, and the sun lighted up to a

scarlet glow the crimson jacket she wore, and painted

a soft lustre upon her bright face and dark hair. The

myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses packed around her

were fresh and green, and at such a leafless season they

invested the whole concern of horses, waggon, furniture,

and girl with a peculiar vernal charm. What possessed

her to indulge in such a performance in the sight of the

sparrows, blackbirds, and unperceived farmer who were

alone its spectators, - whether the smile began as a

factitious one, to test her capacity in that art, - nobody

knows; it ended certainly in a real smile. She blushed

at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the

more.

The change from the customary spot and necessary

occasion of such an act - from the dressing hour in a

bedroom to a time of travelling out of doors - lent to

the idle deed a novelty it did not intrinsically possess.

The picture was a delicate one. Woman's prescriptive

infirmity had stalked into the sunlight, which had

clothed it in the freshness of an originality. A

cynical inference was irresistible by Gabriel Oak as he

regarded the scene, generous though he fain would have

been. There was no necessity whatever for her looking

in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her

hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to

signify that any such intention had been her motive in

taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a

fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts

seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in

which men would play a part - vistas of probable

triumphs - the smiles being of a phase suggesting that

hearts were imagined as lost and won. Still, this was

but conjecture, and the whole series of actions was so

idly put forth as to make it rash to assert that intention

had any part in them at all.

The waggoner's steps were heard returning. She

put the glass in the paper, and the whole again into its

place.

When the waggon had passed on, Gabriel withdrew

from his point of espial, and descending into the road,

followed the vehicle to the turnpike-gate some way

beyond the bottom of the hill, where the object of his

contemplation now halted for the payment of toll. About

twenty steps still remained between him and the gate,

when he heard a dispute. lt was a difference con-

cerning twopence between the persons with the waggon

and the man at the toll-bar.

"Mis'ess's niece is upon the top of the things, and

she says that's enough that I've offered ye, you great

miser, and she won't pay any more." These were the

waggoner's words.

"Very well; then mis'ess's niece can't pass." said the

turnpike-keeper, closing the gate.

Oak looked from one to the other of the disputants,

and fell into a reverie. There was something in the

tone of twopence remarkably insignificant. Threepence

had a definite value as money - it was an appreciable

infringement on a day's wages, and, as such, a higgling

matter; but twopence - " Here." he said, stepping

forward and handing twopence to the gatekeeper; "let

the young woman pass." He looked up at her then;

she heard his words, and looked down.

Gabriel's features adhered throughout their form so

exactly to the middle line between the beauty of St.

John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot, as represented

in a window of the church he attended, that not a single

lineament could be selected and called worthy either of

distinction or notoriety. The redjacketed and dark-

haired maiden seemed to think so too, for she carelessly

glanced over him, and told her man to drive on. She

might have looked her thanks to Gabriel on a minute

scale, but she did not speak them; more probably she

felt none, for in gaining her a passage he had lost her

her point, and we know how women take a favour of

that kind.

The gatekeeper surveyed the retreating vehicle.

"That's a handsome maid" he said to Oak

"But she has her faults." said Gabriel.

"True, farmer."

"And the greatest of them is - well, what it is

always."

"Beating people down? ay, 'tis so."

"O no."

"What, then?"

Gabriel, perhaps a little piqued by the comely

traveller's indifference, glanced back to where he had

witnessed her performance over the hedge, and said,

"Vanity."

CHAPTER II

NIGHT - THE FLOCK - AN INTERIOR - ANOTHER INTERIOR

IT was nearly midnight on the eve of St. Thomas's, the

shortest day in the year. A desolating wind wandered

from the north over the hill whereon Oak had watched

the yellow waggon and its occupant in the sunshine of

a few days earlier.

Norcombe Hill - not far from lonely Toller-Down

- was one of the spots which suggest to a passer-by

that he is in the presence of a shape approaching the

indestructible as nearly as any to be found on earth.

It was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil - an

ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuber-

ances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on

some great day of confusion, when far grander heights

and dizzy granite precipices topple down.

The hill was covered on its northern side by an

ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose

upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing its

arched curve against the sky, like a mane. To-night

these trees sheltered the southern slope from the keenest

blasts, which smote the wood and floundered through

it with a sound as of grumbling, or gushed over its

crowning boughs in a weakened moan. The dry leaves

in the ditch simmered and boiled in the same breezes,

a tongue of air occasionally ferreting out a few, and

sending them spinning across the grass. A group or

two of the latest in date amongst the dead multitude

had remained till this very mid-winter time on the twigs

which bore them and in falling rattled against the trunks

with smart taps:

Between this half-wooded, half naked hill, and the

vague still horizon that its summit indistinctly com-

manded, was a mysterious sheet of fathomless shade

- the sounds from which suggested that what it con-

cealed bore some reduced resemblance to features here.

The thin grasses, more or less coating the hill, were

touched by the wind in breezes of differing powers, and

almost of differing natures - one rubbing the blades

heavily, another raking them piercingly, another brushing

them like a soft broom. The instinctive act of human-

kind was to stand and listen, and learn how the trees

to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral

choir; how hedges and other shapes to leeward them

caught the note, lowering it to the tenderest sob; and

how the hurrying gust then plunged into the south, to

be heard no more.

The sky was clear - remarkably clear - and the

twinkling of all the stars seemed to be but throbs of

one body, timed by a common pulse. The North Star

was directly in the wind's eye, and since evening the

Bear had swung round it outwardly to the east, till he

was now at a right angle with the meridian. A

difference of colour in the stars - oftener read of than

seen in England-was really perceptible here. The

sovereign brilliancy of Sirius pierced the eye with a steely

glitter, the star called Capella was yellow, Aldebaran and

Betelgueux shone with a fiery red.

To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear

midnight such as this, the roll of the world eastward is

almost a palpable movement. The sensation may be

caused by the panoramic glide of the stars past earthly

objects, which is perceptible in a few minutes of still-

ness, or by the better outlook upon space that a hill

affords, or by the wind, or by the solitude; but whatever

be its origin, the impression of riding along is vivid and

abiding. The poetry of motion is a phrase much in

use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it

is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the

night, and, having first expanded with a sense of differ-

ence from the mass of civilised mankind, who are

dreamwrapt and disregardful of all such proceedings at

this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress

through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre

it is hard to get back to earth, and to believe that the

consciousness of such majestic speeding is derived from

a tiny human frame.

Suddenly an unexpected series of sounds began to

be heard in this place up against the sky. They had a

clearness which was to be found nowhere in the wind,

and a sequence which was to be found nowhere in

nature. They were the notes of Farmer Oak's flute.

The tune was not floating unhindered into the open

air: it seemed muffled in some way, and was altogether

too curtailed in power to spread high or wide. It came

from the direction of a small dark object under the

plantation hedge - a shepherd's hut - now presenting

an outline to which an uninitiated person might have

been puzzled to attach either meaning or use.

The image as a whole was that of a small Noah's

Ark on a small Ararat, allowing the traditionary outlines

and general form of the Ark which are followed by toy-

makers - and by these means are established in men's

imaginations among their firmest, because earliest im-

pressions - to pass as an approximate pattern. The

hut stood on little wheels, which raised its floor about a

foot from the ground. Such shepherds' huts are dragged

into the fields when the lambing season comes on, to

shelter the shepherd in his- enforced nightly attendance.

It was only latterly that people had begun to call

Gabriel "Farmer" Oak. During the twelvemonth pre-

ceding this time he had been enabled by sustained

efforts of industry and chronic good spirits to lease the

small sheep farm of which Norcombe Hill was a portion,

and stock it with two hundred sheep. Previously he

had been a bailiff for a short time, and earlier still a

shepherd only, having from his childhood assisted his

father in tending the flocks of large proprietors, till old

Gabriel sank to rest.

This venture, unaided and alone, into the paths of

farming as master and not as man, with an advance of

sheep not yet paid for, was a critical juncture with

Gabriel Oak, and he recognised his position clearly.

The first movement in his new progress was the lambing

of his ewes, and sheep having been his speciality from

his "youth, he wisely refrained from deputing - the task

of tending them at this season to a hireling or a novice.

The wind continued to beat-about the corners of the

hut, but the flute-playing ceased. A rectangular space

of light appeared in the side of the hut, and in the

opening the outline of Farmer Oak's figure. He carried

a lantern in his hand, and closing the door behind him,

came forward and busied himself about this nook of the

field for nearly twenty minutes, the lantern light appear-

ing and disappearing here and there, and brightening

him or darkening him as he stood before or behind it.

Oak's motions, though they had a quiet-energy, were

slow, and their deliberateness accorded well with his

occupation. Fitness being the basis of beauty, nobody

could-have denied that his steady swings and turns"

in and- about the flock had elements of grace, Yet,

although if occasion demanded he could do or think a

thing with as mercurial a dash as can the men of towns

who are more to the manner born, his special power,

morally, physically, and mentally, was static, owing

little or nothing to momentum as a rule.