

An Evening with Thomas Hardy

By an English Journalist



MR. HARDY had just left the pink-lighted dining-room of the novelist's house on the outskirts of Dorchester, and we drew up our chairs to the fire preparatory to a chat.

"So you are publishing another volume of short stories, Mr. Hardy?" I began, in allusion to his new book.

"Yes, a collection of those that have appeared in the magazines since the publication of 'A Group of Noble Dames,' more than three years ago—about twenty in all. I like doing a short story occasionally, if only as a relief to the tension of writing three-volume novels. In the midst of a book one is chained to one's task, so to speak; even if you are not under contract to finish it by a certain time, the 'fever of composition' is upon you, and nothing can be enjoyed till the last chapter is written."

"But it is sometimes said that a short story requires as great an effort—"

"Yes, I know; and since some promising young men write only short stories, there has been a theory that they require greater art. But to my mind that is absurd. With a short story you have simply one episode to deal with, and it cannot possibly call for as much effort or for more art than a number of incidents standing as cause and effect in their relation to each other."

"In reading 'A Group of Noble Dames,' Mr. Hardy, I was greatly struck by the waste of good material. In one story you put the material, as far as plot goes, of a long novel."

"Yes, I suppose I was wasteful. But there, it doesn't matter, for I have far more material now than I shall ever be able to make use of."

"In note-books?"

"Yes, and in my head. I don't believe in that idea of a man's imaginative powers becoming naturally exhausted; I believe that, if he liked, a man could go on writing till his physical strength gave out. Most men exhaust themselves prematurely by something artificial—their manner of living—Scott and Dickens, for example. Victor Hugo, on the other hand, who was so long in exile, and who necessarily lived a very simple life during much of his time, was writing as well as ever till he died at a good old age. So, too, was Carlyle, if we except his philosophy, the least interesting part of him. The great secret is, perhaps, for a writer to be content with the life he was leading when he made his first success; not to enter into a constantly increasing round of social pleasures and gayety. Do I? Well, I spend here at least six months of the year, seldom paying a visit anywhere, though I get a good many visitors. I find that in these six months I can do more work than I could in London all the year. Thus I am free to spend the remaining six months as I please—three or four months in London, a month or two at country-houses, in Scotland, or on the Continent."

"I suppose you are still fond of rambling about the country?"

"Well, I am not such a good walker as I was. At one time I thought nothing of twenty or twenty-five miles in a day. Now I am out of training, and could not do half."

We spoke next of Mr. Hardy's essay into dramatic authorship last year. His little play was one of a programme of five—a bad arrangement. Consequently, its run was a short one.

"I was more unfortunate in that matter," said Mr. Hardy, "than you may suppose. I was foolish enough to part with the acting rights of 'The Three Wayfarers' for a period of five years, so that there is not much prospect of the thing seeing the light again for some time."

"But shall you not write another play?"

"I don't know that I shall. In my opinion, the drama is an inferior form of art, although there are, it is true, greater possibilities in it in one sense, appealing as it does so powerfully and directly to the feelings and emotions. But on the stage you can take such liberties with your characters, bringing about sudden changes in their temperaments and motives that would be ridiculous in a novel; while, on the other hand, you are seriously embarrassed by limitations of time and space. A play which the papers praise as really first-rate ranks in point of art, and, above all, character-drawing, no higher than a second or third rate novel."

"Then the author is so dependent on the actors and actresses."

"Yes, they may put into or take out of the play almost as much as the author—not altogether in words, but in characterization. I was much struck with this when conducting the rehearsals of an adaptation of one of my novels some years ago for the stage. And then when I went with Barrie to see his play, 'Walker, London,' it was most awkward. I would laugh at some line or other, and say, 'Ah, now, that's good.' 'Oh, that's not mine; that's Toole's,' Barrie would mournfully reply: 'there is a good deal that is fresh since I was here last!'

"Shall we go into the next room?" exclaimed the novelist. We crossed a square, softly lighted hall, and entered a large apartment, where Mr. Hardy threw himself upon a couch, and I took a seat by an occasional table, on which were piled some of the current numbers of the magazines and journals—the "English Illustrated," "Harper's," "The Sketch," "To-Day," "Longman's," "Scribner's," etc., etc.

"What a mass of periodicals come here by the post!" said Mr. Hardy, reflectively, as he swayed himself on the couch. "And every time I look at a railway book-stall I see many more than I have even heard of. Even at a station like Weymouth the other day I saw several that were quite fresh to me."

"Yes, indeed; more and more employment for literary people," I replied.

"Well, I question the advisability of journalism as a training for the literary man. It destroys the spontaneity, I am afraid, of his impressions, leads him to take too professional a view of life. If I had three or four novels before me—one by a journalist, another by an engineer, and another by a farmer—I would back either of the latter against the journalist's for real, genuine interest and freshness. Of course, there is journalistic work of various sorts; a man who was writing the money article or political leaders would probably be able to do imaginative work quite independently of that by which he was earning a livelihood."

"Ah, there is that question of a livelihood to be considered, Mr. Hardy."

"Yes, there is; the literary man must have the means of support while he is preparing for his work. But some standpoint in a totally independent profession is best, I fancy, for that. Of course, I do not ignore the trade value of journalism to a literary career. One is at a serious dis-



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advantage, from the log-rolling point of view, in starting as I did, quite unknown to the press and the press world. A new author whose friends are in journalism naturally finds the way smoothed for him."

"Do you attach much practical importance, then, to criticism?"

"To the new author, certainly; criticism may make or mar his book. I remember, for instance, how the sale of 'Desperate Remedies,' which had been fairly good, almost stopped after the appearance of a very severe notice. On the other hand, condemnations of 'Tess of the D'Urbervilles' had no effect whatever on the popularity of the book."

"'Tess' is wonderfully popular."

"Yes, but the frankness of the book has brought me some asperities, in the shape of letters and reviews mostly. In writing the story I expected such criticism, but the criticism has not come from the people I expected. There have been very few objectors really; in their secret hearts people know there is nothing honestly to object to. As a matter of fact, my tone has been the same in regard to moral questions for the twenty years or more I have been writing. From the very beginning I resolved to speak out. I remember that in the first edition of 'Desperate Remedies' there were many passages exhibiting a similar plainness to 'Tess.' Some of these were eliminated in the one-volume edition, in deference to my publishers; but I am sorry now that I did so, and if ever the book is included in the uniform edition of my works the old passages shall be restored. Some of the religious papers have not been unreasonable, but I am surprised that none of them used a point which was suggested to me the other day, that the tale illustrated the evil that may be done by suddenly destroying a man's faith, as Clare did Alec's through Tess's handing on his opinions. But I fear the author was Balaam in that. As a matter of fact, however, 'Tess' has been the text of many sermons. See, here is one."

And the novelist handed me the printed copy of a sermon preached by a South London vicar, which had the moral questions raised in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" for its theme. The sermon had been sent to him by its sympathetic author.

"Do you think people are beginning to take a different view regarding the introduction of such questions into fiction?"

"I think there is some reason to hope so."

Our talk about the clever books of the year led me to interrogate Mr. Hardy about the younger writers generally.

"I think Sarah Grand," says Mr. Hardy, "made the mistake of putting two distinct and independent stories into one book. She has explained to me that originally she had contemplated writing, not one, but two, novels with the materials she has used in 'The Heavenly Twins.'"

Of Barry Pain he said: "I prefer him in his serious moods; I don't care so much for his humor. Zangwill has made an excellent beginning with 'The Children of the Ghetto.'"

"But he told me the other day that he did not care to continue writing about Jewish life."

"Indeed, that's very curious, that a man should not care to continue doing what he can do so well. And I should think there's a fine field for such work. Up to the present there has not been a novelist of real Jewish life, for somehow or other I don't think George Eliot's Jews can be regarded as creatures of flesh and blood."

"As a rule," continued Mr. Hardy, after a pause in our conversation, "I think it is a mistake for a man to begin publishing when he's very young. A man's first efforts are almost sure to be imitative. What was my own beginning? Well, I scribbled from the age of sixteen, but my first book was not published till 1871. The first thing of mine which saw the light was a short paper in 'Chambers's Journal,' which I called 'How I Built Myself a House,' written when I was still designing churches with Sir Arthur Blomfield, whose portrait, by the way, hangs over there."

Mr. Hardy indicated the engraved picture of a fine,

intellectual-looking old man, which hangs by the side of the overmantel. "It was a fine school," adds Mr. Hardy, "the school of Street, R.A., and others, who were really artists just awakening and feeling their way; and though they were all wrong, their stage of thought was one that it was necessary to pass through. There are architects and architects, of course; some who are true artists, others who can be better described as builders."

Of Mrs. Hardy's artistic talent the walls of Max Gate give evidence in the shape of various water-color sketches of rural scenes. In the drawing-room, too, there is a most interesting series of pictures by Herkomer, Du Maurier, Strang, and Alfred Parsons—the originals of the illustrations in his novels.

Mrs. Hardy then showed me a book in which she keeps a record of the names of the people and the places in her husband's books. From these interesting notes I learn that by "Budmouth" Mr. Hardy means Weymouth; by "Wintoncester," Winchester; by "Melchester," Salisbury; while the original of "Sandbourne" was Bournemouth.

Looking through this book, one is struck by the error of a common conception of Thomas Hardy's work—the error which supposes his books to be exclusively of rural life generally, and of the life of the Wessex peasantry in particular. In respect to "Two on a Tower," "A Laodicean," "Desperate Remedies," one comes across the names of different localities in London, and towns on the Continent, for example.

"It is curious," the novelist remarked, when I had finished with Mrs. Hardy's book, "how differently people regard the use I have made of their ancestors or of their ancestral residences. At a dinner-party, the lady I have taken into the room has asked me if I could not put her house into my next book, while other people have been angry because I have done so."

"I suppose most of your knowledge of these old romances in 'A Group of Noble Dames' is gained from hearsay, not from printed records?"

"Nearly all. In this story of 'The Countess of Wessex' the only fact that can be learned from the records—and it was this, of course, which first attracted my attention—is that the child was married at that age. That is given in the usual way: born in such a year, married at another date, twelve years later. The other facts in the story have been handed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. It is a singular fact that I am personally acquainted with eight ladies who are her direct descendants, and they are nearly all as piquant as she."

"Tess of the D'Urbervilles" is similarly founded on events which actually happened in a family which is now living, although some of the novelist's indignant correspondents are quite unaware of the fact. The old house of the D'Urbervilles, for example, in which Tess makes her confession on the day of her marriage with Angel Clare, is but ten miles from Max Gate. It is known, not as "Wellbridge House," but as "Woolbridge House." It has been much sketched and photographed since the story was published.

One cannot fail to observe, in the course of a talk with Thomas Hardy, how deep is his attachment to the scenes he has described so well, how keen his appreciation of the sentiment which clings to many of the old aspects and disappearing customs of rural life in Wessex. He laments, for one thing, the abolition of the old choirs in the village churches, in respect to which, as many will remember, there is so pathetic a story in "Under the Greenwood Tree." And he views with regret the desuetude into which the old village dances on Christmas Eve and May Day have fallen.

Mr. Hardy is not a little interested in the evidences of the Roman occupation which the district of Dorchester affords. From the garden around his own house he has taken a goodly collection of stones, coins, and other relics of the Roman period. Among the most curious things in a box which was brought into the room for my inspection was a Roman lady's fibula.

"It is the duplicate of one which they have in the

British Museum," explained Mr. Hardy, as I examined the time-worn jewel. "There it is described as a 'cloak-fastener.' But this, I think, must be an error, for I took this from off a female skull, where it had evidently fastened a band around the head."

Some of his prizes Mr. Hardy has sent to the Dorchester Museum, the committee of which institution has the honor of numbering him among its members.

"Few people in Dorchester, I am afraid, think much of the memorials of the town's past. Some time ago a shopkeeper, in making some alterations, pulled down an old Gothic doorway, and it would have been carted away with other 'rubbish' had it not been discovered in time. The stones were then taken to the Museum, but as it is only a small building, they were found to be in the way there, and the question arose, 'What is to be done with them?' The committee interviewed the house-owner, and asked him to allow the doorway to be put back again in its original position. He agreed to this after some demur, on our agreeing to pay all the expenses."

Max Gate is so named from an old toll-house which stood at the Fordington end of Dorchester, quite close to the spot where Mr. Hardy seven years ago built his house as a "writing-box." The house is not very large, nor of pretentious design, but, standing on high ground, it is swept by healthful breezes, and is it not in the midst of the country in which the novelist's ancestors held land and exercised feudal sway, and from which he has drawn so rich a harvest of romance and fancy? Walking from Max Gate to the railway station at the other end of the town, one easily recognizes the "Casterbridge" of which Mr. Henchard was Mayor; and in the train, beginning the journey back to London, one sees it as it is described in the novel, "an indistinct mass behind a dense stockade of limes and chestnuts, set in the midst of rotund down and concave field."



My Study Fire

Lightness of Touch

One of the happiest evidences that work has become play, and the strenuous temper of the artisan has given place to the artist's ease of mood, is that peculiar lightness of touch which is so elusive, so difficult, and yet so full of the ultimate charm of art. Does not Professor J. R. Seeley miss the point when he says: "Literature is perhaps at best a compromise between truth and fancy, between seriousness and trifling. It cannot do without something of popularity, and yet the writer who thinks much of popularity is unfaithful to his mission; on the other hand, he who leans too heavily upon literature breaks through it into science or into practical business"? He is speaking of Goethe, who sometimes leans so heavily on his art that he breaks through into philosophy, and whose verse, in didactic moods, comes perilously near prose; but is his general statement of the matter adequate or accurate? There is, it is true, literature so light in treatment and so unsubstantial in thought that it is distinctly trifling; "The Rape of the Lock," for instance, is in one sense a trifle, but as a trifle it is so perfect that it betrays a strong and steady hand behind it. Professor Seeley does not, however, limit the application of his statement; he evidently means to suggest that there is an element of trifling in literature as an art, for he puts it in antithesis with seriousness. Is there not an imperfect idea of art involved in this statement, and does not Professor Seeley confuse the ease and grace of literature with trifling?

There is, especially among English-speaking peoples, a lack of the artistic instinct, nowhere more discernible than in the inability to take art itself seriously, and to impute to it a lack which inheres not in art itself, but in the perception of the critic. Moral seriousness is a very noble quality, but it is by no means the only form of seriousness. It may even be suspected that there is something beyond it; a seriousness less strenuous, and therefore less obvious, but a seriousness more fundamental because more repose-

ful, and sustained by a wider range of relationships. Strain and stress have a dramatic as well as a moral interest, and often quite obscure those silent and unobtrusive victories which are won, not without sore struggle, but without dust and tumult. There are few things so deceptive as the lightness of touch which evidences the presence of the highest art; it means that the man is doing creatively what he once did mechanically. It is the very highest form of seriousness, because it has forgotten that it is serious; it has passed through self-consciousness into that unconscious mood in which a man does the noblest and most beautiful things of which he is capable, without taking thought that they are noble or beautiful. In the unfolding of character, where moral aims are most distinct and moral processes most constant, there must come a time when a man is genuine and sound as nature is fruitful, by the law of his own being. He passes beyond the stage when he needs to say to himself every hour and with intensest self-consciousness, "I must do right;" it becomes his habit to do right.

Lightness of touch is not based on lack of seriousness; it is, rather, the product of a seriousness which no longer obtrudes itself, because it has served its purpose. Shakespeare was not less serious when he wrote the exquisite calendar of flowers in "The Winter's Tale" than when he drew the portrait of Hector, but he was a greater artist; he had mastered his material more completely; he had touched the ultimate goal of his art. His touch is infinitely lighter in "The Tempest," where his imagination plays with the freedom and ease of a natural force, than in "Troilus and Cressida," where he more than once leans too heavily on poetry and breaks through into philosophy. The philosophy is extremely interesting, but it is not poetry; it rather illustrates the difference between the strenuous and the artistic mood, and throws a clear light on the process of evolution by which the heavy touch is transformed into that light, sure, self-effacing touch which gives us the thing to be expressed without any consciousness of the manner of the expression.

Milton's voice has great compass and his manner great nobleness in "Paradise Lost," but the purest and therefore the best poetry that came from his hand is to be found in "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," "Lycidas," the masque of "Comus," and the fragments of the "Arcades." These tender and beautiful lyrics, in which nobility of idea and ease of manner are so perfectly blended, were the products of the poet's most harmonious hours, when he was not less a Puritan because he was so much more the poet; when his mood was not less serious, but his relation to his time had less of self-consciousness in it; when he touched the deepest themes with consummate grace and lightness.

Goethe is at his best when his touch is lightest, and at his worst when it is heaviest. His lyrics are unsurpassed in that magical ease whose secret is known only to the masters of verse; he is as spontaneous, unforced, and fresh as a mountain rivulet. In his letters to Schiller he emphasizes the dependence of the poet on the unconscious, creative mood. When this mood possesses him, the didactic tendency disappears, and the glowing spirit of poetry shines in song, ballad, and lyrical romance; he is all fire, grace, and lightness. But when the spontaneous mood forsakes him, and he writes by force of his training and skill, how slow and heavy is his flight, how cold and obvious his touch! He is nowhere more in earnest than in these inimitable songs, and has nowhere else a touch so devoid of manner, so instinct with grace and freedom.

The lightness of touch which charms us in literature is not trifling; it is mastery. Whoever possesses it has gotten the better of his materials and of himself, and has brought both into subjection to that creative mood which pours itself out in finalities and perfections of speech and form as naturally as the vitality of a plant bursts into a flower which is both obviously and inexplicably beautiful. Whenever we come upon lightness of touch, we are in contact with a work of art; whenever we miss it, the work that lacks it may be noble, worthy, full of evidences of genius, but it is not a work of supreme artistic excellence.

H. W. M.