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Far From the Madding Crowd

Written by Thomas Hardy

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Far From the Madding Crowd

THOMAS HARDY

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
ROSEMARIE MORGAN
with SHANNON RUSSELL



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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 mere 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,[1] 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 a postponing treatment of things, whose best clothes and seven-and-six-penny umbrella were always hampering him: upon the whole one who felt himself to occupy morally that vast middle space of Laodicean[2] neutrality which lay between the Sacrament[3] people of the parish and the drunken division of its inhabitants – that is, he went to church, but yawned privately by the time the congregation reached the Nicene[4] creed, and thought of what there was 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.

As he lived six times as many working days as Sundays, his appearance in his old clothes was most peculiarly his own – the neighbours' mental picture of him always presenting him as dressed in that way when their imaginations answered to the thought "Gabriel Oak". 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 Doctor Johnson's,[5] 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 about it – their maker being a conscientious man who always endeavoured to compensate for any weakness in his cut by unstinted dimension and solidity.

Mr Oak carried about with 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 the greatest precision, nobody could be quite certain of the hour they belonged to. The stopping peculiarity of his watch Oak remedied by thumps and shakes, when it always went on again immediately, 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 when passing by their houses, till he could discern the hour marked by the green-faced timekeepers within. It may be mentioned that Oak's fob, being painfully 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 extremely to one side, compressing the mouth and face to a mere mass of wrinkles on account of the exertion required, and drawing up the watch by its chain, like a bucket from a well.

But some thoughtful persons, who had seen him walking across one of his fields on a certain December morning – sunny, and exceptionally 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 or sinew – a way of curtailing their dimensions by their manner of showing them; and from a quiet modesty that would have become a vestal,[6] 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, quite distinct from a bowing of the shoulders. This may be said to be a defect in an individual if he depends for his valuation as a total 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 life, for his intellect

and emotions were clearly separate: 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 state 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 sloped steeply to a ridge called Norcombe Hill, through an adjunct of which ran the highway from Norcombe to Casterbridge, sunk in a deep cutting.[7] Casually glancing over the hedge, Oak saw coming down the hill towards 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 the animal gazed with half-closed eyes, and smilingly 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 then 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. Then 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 black 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 the peculiar charm of rarity. What possessed the girl 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 certainly did not intrinsically possess. The picture was a delicate one. Woman's prescriptive infirmity had stalked into the sunlight, which had invested it with 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 a feminine direction – her expression 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 were 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 in 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 at 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. It was a difference concerning

two pence 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 grate 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 two pence remarkably insignificant: three pence had a definite value as money – it was an appreciable infringement on a day's wages,[8] and, as such, a haggling matter; but two pence – "Here," he said stepping forward and handing two pence 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 Saint John and the ugliness of Judas Iscariot[9] 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 red jacketed and dark haired maiden probably thought 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 gate-keeper 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 two pence: ay, 'tis true."

"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:[1] 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 – forming part of Norcombe Ewelease – 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 protuberances 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 ferretting out a few, and sending them spinning across the grass. A group or two of the latest in date among this dead multitude had remained on the twigs which bore them till this very mid-winter time,[2] and in falling rattled against the trunks with smart taps.

Between this half-wooded, half-naked hill and the vague still horizon its summit indistinctly commanded was a mysterious sheet of fathomless shade – the sounds only from which suggested that what it concealed bore some humble 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 differing natures – one rubbing the blades heavily, another raking them piercingly, another brushing them like a soft broom. The instinctive act of human-kind here was to stand, and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chanted to each

other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir; how hedges and other shapes to leeward then 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 revolved round it outwardly to the east, till it 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 kingly brilliancy of Sirius pierced the eye with a steely glitter, the star called Capella was yellow, Aldebaran and Betelgueux shone with a fiery red.[3]

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 stillness; or by a fancy that the better outlook upon space afforded by a hill emphasizes terrestial revolution; 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, first enlarging the consciousness with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are horizontal and disregardful of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. After such a nocturnal reconnoitre among these astral clusters, aloft from the customary haunts of thought and vision, some men may feel raised to a capability for eternity at once.

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, but 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[4] 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 the firmest because the earliest impressions, to pass as an approximate pattern. The hut stood on small wheels which raised its floor about a foot from the ground. Such shepherd's 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 preceding 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[5] for a short time, and earlier still a shepherd only, tending the flocks of large proprietors from his childhood with his father, 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 appearing 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 all 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[6] 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 in any case, as a rule.

A close examination of the ground hereabout, even by the wan starlight only, revealed how a portion of what would have been casually called a

wild slope had been appropriated by Farmer Oak for his great purpose this winter. Detached hurdles thatched with straw were stuck into the ground at various scattered points, amid and under which the whitish forms of his meek ewes moved and rustled. The ring of the sheep-bell, which had been silent during his absence, recommenced, in tones which had more mellowness than clearness, owing to an increasing growth of surrounding wool, and continued till Oak withdrew again from the flock. He returned to the hut, bringing in his arms a new-born lamb, consisting of four legs large enough for a full-grown sheep united by an unimportant membrane about half the substance of the legs collectively, which constituted the animal's entire body just at present.

The little speck of life he placed on a wisp of hay before the small stove, over which simmered a can of milk. Oak extinguished the lantern by blowing into it with pouted lips and then pinching out the snuff, the cot being lighted by a candle suspended from a nail by a twisted wire. A rather hard couch, formed of a few corn-sacks thrown carelessly down covered half the floor of this little habitation, and here the young man stretched himself along, loosened his woollen cravat, and closed his eyes. In about the time a person unaccustomed to bodily labour would have decided upon which side to lie, Farmer Oak was asleep.

The inside of this hut as it now presented itself, was cosy and even alluring, and the scarlet handful of fire, in addition to the candle, reflecting its own genial colour upon whatever it could reach, flung associations of enjoyment even over utensils and tools. In the corner stood the sheep-crook, and along a shelf at one side were ranged bottles and cannisters of the simple preparations pertaining to ovine surgery and physic – Spirits of wine, turpentine, tar, magnesia, ginger, and castor oil being the chief. On a triangular shelf across the corner stood bread, bacon, cheese, and a cup for ale or cider, the source of which was a flagon beneath. Beside the provisions lay the flute, the notes of which had lately been called forth by the lonely watcher to beguile a tedious hour. The house was ventilated by two round holes, like the lights of a cabin, with wood slides.

The lamb, revived by the warmth, began to bleat, and the sound entered Gabriel's ears and brain with an instant meaning, as expected sounds will. Passing from the profoundest sleep to the most alert wakefulness with the same ease that had accompanied the reverse operation, he looked at his watch, found that the hour hand had shifted again, put on

his hat, took the lamb in his arms, and carried it into the darkness. After placing the little creature with its mother he stood and carefully examined the sky to ascertain the time of night from the altitudes of the stars.

The Dog-star[7] and Aldebaran, pointing to the restless Pleiades were half way up the southern sky, and beneath them hung Orion[8] which gorgeous constellation never burnt more vividly than now as it swung itself high above the rim of the landscape. Castor and Pollux with their quiet shine almost rested on the ground: the barren and gloomy Square of Pegasus was creeping round to the north-west; far away through the plantation Vega sparkled like a lamp suspended amid the leafless trees; and Cassiopeia's Chair[9] stood daintily poised on the uppermost boughs.

"One o'clock," said Gabriel.

Being a man not without a frequent consciousness that there was some beauty in this life he led, he stood still after looking at the sky as a useful instrument, and regarded it in an appreciative spirit, as a work of art superlatively beautiful. For a moment he seemed impressed with the speaking loneliness of the scene, or rather with the complete abstraction from all its compass of the sights and sounds of man. Human shapes, interferences, troubles, and joys were all as if they were not, and there seemed to be on the shaded hemisphere of the globe no sentient being save himself: he could fancy them all gone round to the sunny side.

Occupied thus, with eyes stretched afar, Oak gradually perceived that what he had previously taken to be a star low down behind the outskirts of the plantation was in reality no such thing. It was an artificial light not fifty yards off.

To find themselves utterly alone at night where company is desirable and expected makes some people fearful; but a case more trying by far to the nerves is to discover some mysterious companionship when intuition, sensation, memory, analogy, testimony, probability, induction – every kind of evidence in the logician's list – have united to persuade consciousness that it is quite alone.

Farmer Oak went towards the plantation and pushed through its lower boughs to the windy side. A dim mass under the slope reminded him that a shed occupied a place here – the site being a cutting into the slope of the hill, so that at its back-part the roof was almost level with the ground. In front it was formed of boards nailed to posts and covered with tar as a preservative. Through crevices in the roof and side spread streaks and

dots of light, a combination of which made up the radiance that had attracted him. Oak stepped up behind, where, leaning down upon the roof and putting his eye close to a crack he could see into the interior clearly.

The place contained two women and two cows. By the side of the latter a steaming bran mash stood in a bucket. One of the women was past middle age. Her companion was apparently young and graceful: he could form no decided opinion upon her looks, her position being almost beneath his eye, so that he saw her in a bird's eye aerial view, as Satan first saw Paradise.[10] She wore no bonnet or hat, but had enveloped herself in a large cloak, which was carelessly flung over her head as a covering.

"There, now we'll go home," said the elder of the two, resting her knuckles upon her hips and looking at their goings-on as a whole."I do hope Daisy will fetch round again now. I have never been more frightened in my life, but I don't mind breaking my rest if she recovers."

The young woman, whose eyelids were apparently inclined to fall together on the smallest provocation of silence, yawned without parting her lips to any inconvenient extent, whereupon Gabriel caught the infection and slightly yawned in sympathy. "I wish we were rich enough to pay a man to do these things," she said.

"As we are not we must do them ourselves," said the other. "For you must help me if you stay."

"Well – my hat is gone, however," continued the younger. "It went over the hedge, I think. The idea of such a slight wind catching it."

The cow standing erect was of the Devon breed, and was encased in a tight warm hide of rich Indian red, as absolutely uniform from eyes to tail as if the animal had been dipped in a dye of that colour, her long back being mathematically level. The other was spotted – grey and white. Beside her Oak now noticed a little calf about a day old, looking idiotically at the two women, which showed it had not long been accustomed to the phenomenon of eyesight, and often turning to the lantern, which it apparently mistook for the moon, inherited instinct having as yet had little time for correction by experience. Between the sheep and the cows, Lucina[11] had been busy on Norcombe Hill lately.

"I think we had better send for some oatmeal," said the elder woman. "There's no more bran."

"Yes, aunt. And I'll ride over for it as soon as it is light."

"But there's no side saddle."[12]

"I can ride on the other: trust me."

Oak, upon hearing these remarks became more curious to observe her features, but this prospect being denied him by the hooding effect of the cloak, and by her forehead coming in the way of what the cloak did not cover, he felt himself drawing upon his fancy for their details. – In making even horizontal and clear inspections we colour and mould according to the wants within us whatever our eyes bring in: had Gabriel been able from the first to get a distinct view of her countenance his estimate of it as very handsome or slightly so would have been as his soul required a divinity at the moment or was ready supplied with one. Having then for some time known the want of a satisfactory form to fill an increasing void within him, his position moreover affording the widest scope for his fancy, he straightway painted her a beauty.

By one of those whimsical coincidences in which Nature, like a busy mother, seems to spare a moment from her unremitting labours to turn and make her children smile, the girl now dropped the cloak, and forth tumbled ropes of black hair over a red jacket. Oak knew her instantly as the heroine of the yellow waggon, myrtles and looking-glass: prosily, as the woman who owed him twopence.

They placed the calf beside its mother again, took up the lantern, and went out, the light sinking down the hill till it was no more than a nebula. Gabriel Oak returned to his flock.

CHAPTER III

A girl on horseback: conversation.

The sluggish day began to break. Even its position terrestially is one of the elements of a new interest, and for no particular reason save that the incident of the night had occurred there Oak went again into the plantation. Lingering and musing here he heard the steps of a horse at the foot of the hill, and soon there appeared in view an auburn pony with a girl on its back, ascending by the path leading past the cattle shed: she was the young woman of the night before. Gabriel instantly thought of

the hat she had mentioned as having lost in the wind: possibly she had come to look for it. He hastily scanned the ditch, and after walking about ten yards along it, found the hat among the leaves. Gabriel took it in his hand and returned to his hut. Here he ensconced himself, and looked through the loophole in the direction of the rider's approach.

She came up and looked around – then on the other side of the hedge. Gabriel was about to advance and restore the missing article, when an unexpected performance induced him to suspend the action for the present. The path after passing the cow-shed bisected the plantation. It was not a bridle-path – merely a pedestrian's track, and the boughs spread horizontally at a height not greater than seven feet above the ground, which made it impossible to ride erect beneath them. The girl, who wore no riding-habit, looked around for a moment as if to assure herself that all humanity was out of view, then dexterously dropped backwards flat upon the pony's back, her head over its tail, her feet against its shoulder and her eyes to the sky. The rapidity of her glide into this position was that of a kingfisher – its noiselessness that of a hawk: Gabriel's eyes had scarcely been able to follow her. The tall lank pony seemed used to such phenomena, and ambled along unconcerned. Thus she passed under the level boughs.

The performer seemed quite at home anywhere between a horse's head and its tail, and the necessity for this abnormal attitude having ceased with the passage of the plantation, she began to adopt another, even more obviously convenient than the first. She had no side-saddle, and it was very apparent that a firm seat upon the smooth leather beneath her was unattainable sideways. Springing to her accustomed perpendicular like a bowed sapling, and satisfying herself that nobody was in sight, she seated herself in the manner demanded by the saddle, though hardly expected of the woman, and trotted off in the direction of Tewnell Mill.

Oak was amused – perhaps a little astonished, and hanging up the hat in his hut, went again among his ewes. An hour passed, the girl returned, properly seated now, with a bag of bran in front of her. On nearing the cattle shed she was met by a boy bringing a milking pail, who held the reins of the pony whilst she slid off. The boy led away the animal, leaving the pail with the young woman.

Soon a soft spirt alternating with a loud spirt came in regular succession from within the shed. They were the sounds of a person milking a cow.[1]

Gabriel took the lost hat in his hand, and waited beside the path she would follow in leaving the hill.

She came, the pail in one hand, hanging against her knee. The left arm was extended as a balance, enough of it being shown bare to make Oak wish that the event had happened in summer when the whole would have been revealed. There was a bright air and manner about her now, by which she seemed to imply that the desirability of her existence could not be questioned; and this rather saucy assumption failed in being offensive because a beholder felt it to be, upon the whole, true. Like exceptional emphasis in the tone of a genius, that which would have made mediocrity ridiculous was an addition to recognised power. It was with some surprise that she saw Gabriel's face rising like the moon, behind the hedge.

The adjustment of the farmer's hazy conceptions of her charms to the portrait of herself she now presented him with was less a diminution than a difference. The starting-point selected by the judgment was her height. She seemed tall, but the pail was a small one, and the hedge diminutive; hence making allowance for error by comparison with these, she could have been not above the height to be chosen by women as best. All features of consequence were severe and regular. It may have been observed by persons who go about the shires with eyes for beauty that in English women a classically formed face is seldom found united with a figure of the same pattern, the highly finished features being generally too large for the remainder of the frame; that a graceful and proportionate figure of eight heads[2] usually goes off into random facial curves. Without throwing a Nymphean[3] tissue over a milkmaid it may be said that criticism checked itself in examining details to return to where it began, and looked at her proportions with a long consciousness of pleasure. From the contours of her figure in its upper part, she must have had a beautiful neck and shoulders, but it may be stated that since her infancy nobody had ever seen them. Had she been put into a low dress, she would have run and thrust her head into a bush. Yet she was not a shy girl by any means; it was merely her instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do it in towns.

That the girl's thoughts hovered about her face and form as soon as she caught Oak's eyes conning the same page was natural, and almost certain. The self-consciousness shown would have been vanity if a little

more pronounced, and dignity if a little less. Rays of male vision seem to have a tickling effect upon virgin faces in rural districts: she hastily brushed hers with her hand, as if Gabriel had been irritating its pink surface with a long straw, and the free air of her previous movements was reduced at the same time to a chastened phase of itself. Yet it was the man who blushed, the maid not at all.

"I found a hat," said Oak.

"It is mine," said she, and, from a sense of proportion kept down to a small smile an inclination to laugh distinctly – "It flew away last night."

"One o'clock this morning."

"Well – it was." She was surprised. "How did you know?" she said.

"I was here."

"You are Farmer Oak, are you not?"

"That or thereabouts. I'm lately come to this place."

"A large farm?" she inquired, casting her eyes around, and swinging back her hair, which was black in the shaded hollows of its mass; but it being now an hour past sunrise the rays touched its prominent curves with a colour of their own.

"No: not large. About a hundred." (In speaking of farms the word "acres" is omitted by the natives by analogy with such old expressions as "a stag of ten").

"I wanted my hat this morning," she went on. "I had to ride to Tewnell Mill."

"Yes: you had."

"How do you know?"

"I saw you."

"Where?" she inquired, a misgiving bringing every muscle of her lineaments and frame to a standstill.

"Here – going through the plantation, and all down the hill," said Farmer Oak, with an aspect excessively knowing with regard to some matter in his mind, as he gazed at a remote point in the direction named, and then turned back to meet his colloquist's eyes.

A perception caused him to withdraw his own from hers as suddenly as if he had been caught in a theft. Recollection of the strange antics she had indulged in when passing through the trees, was succeeded in the girl by a nettled palpitation, and that by a hot face. It was a time to see a woman redden who was not given to reddening as a rule: not a point in

the milkmaid but was of the deepest rose colour. From the Maiden's Blush through all varieties of the Provence down to the Crimson Tuscany[4] the countenance of Oak's acquaintance quickly graduated; whereupon he, in considerateness, had turned away his head.

The sympathetic man still looked the other way, and wondered when she would recover whiteness sufficient to justify him in facing her again. He heard what seemed to be the flitting by of a dead leaf upon the breeze, and looked. She had gone away.

With an air between that of Tragedy and Comedy Gabriel returned to his work.

Five mornings and evenings passed. The young woman came regularly to milk the healthy cow or attend to the sick one, but never allowed her vision to stray in the direction of Oak's person. His want of tact had deeply offended her – not by seeing what he could not help, but by letting her know that he had seen it. For, as without law there is no sin, so without eyes there is no immodesty, and she appeared to feel that Gabriel's espial had made her an indecorous woman without her own connivance. It was food for great regret with him: it was also a contretemps which touched into life a latent heat he had experienced in that direction.

The acquaintanceship might however have ended in a slow forgetting, but for an incident which occurred at the end of the same week. One afternoon it began to freeze, and the frost increased with evening, which drew on like a stealthy tightening of bonds. It was a time when in cottages the breath of the sleepers freezes to the sheets, when round the drawing room fire of a thick-walled mansion the sitters' backs are cold even whilst their faces are all aglow. Many a small bird went to bed supperless that night among the bare boughs.

As the milking hour drew near Oak kept his usual watch upon the cow-shed. At last he felt cold, and shaking an extra quantity of bedding round the yeaning ewes, he entered the hut and heaped more fuel upon the stove. The wind came in at the bottom of the door, to prevent which Oak wheeled the cot round, a little more to the south. Then the wind spouted in at a ventilating hole – of which there was one on each side of the hut.

Gabriel had always known that when the fire was lighted and the door closed one of these must be kept open – that chosen being always on the side away from the wind. Closing the slide to windward he turned to open

the other: on second thoughts the farmer considered he would first sit down, leaving both closed for a minute or two till the temperature of the hut was a little raised. He sat down.

His head began to ache in an unwonted manner, and, fancying himself weary by reason of the broken rests of the preceding nights, Oak decided to get up, open the slide, and then allow himself to fall asleep. He fell asleep without having performed the necessary preliminary.

How long he remained unconscious Gabriel never knew. During the first stages of his return to perception peculiar deeds seemed to be in course of enactment. His dog was howling, his head was aching fearfully – somebody was pulling him about, hands were loosening his neckerchief.

On opening his eyes he found that evening had sunk to dusk in a strange phase of unexpectedness. The young girl with the remarkably pleasant lips and white teeth was beside him. More than this – astonishingly more – his head was upon her lap, his face and neck were disagreeably wet, and her fingers were unbuttoning his collar.

"Whatever is the matter?" said Oak, vacantly.

She seemed to experience a sensation of mirth, but of too insignificant a kind to start the capacity of enjoyment.

"Nothing now," she answered, "since you are not dead. It was a wonder you were not suffocated in this hut of yours."

"Ah – the hut!" murmured Gabriel. "I gave ten pounds for that hut. But I'll sell it and sit under thatched hurdles as they did in old times, and curl up to sleep in a lock of straw. It played me nearly the same trick the other day!" Gabriel by way of emphasis, brought down his fist upon the frozen ground.

"It was not exactly the fault of the hut," she observed, speaking in a tone which showed her to be that novelty among women – one who finished a thought before beginning the sentence which was to convey it. "You should I think have considered and not have been so foolish as to leave the slides closed."

"Yes – I suppose I should," said Oak, absently. He was endeavouring to catch and appreciate the sensation of being thus with her – his head upon her dress – before the event passed on into the heap of bygone things. He wished she knew his impressions; but he would as soon have thought of carrying an odour in a net as of attempting to convey the

intangibilities of his feeling in the coarse meshes of language. So he remained silent.

She made him sit up, and then Oak began wiping his face and shaking himself like a Samson.[5] "How can I thank ye," he said at last gratefully, some of the natural rusty red having returned to his face.

"O never mind that," said the girl smiling, and allowing her smile to hold good for Gabriel's next remark, whatever that might prove to be.

"How did you find me?"

"I heard your dog howling and scratching at the door of the hut, when I came to the milking – (it was so lucky – Daisy's milking is almost over for the season, and I shall not come here after this week or the next). The dog saw me, and jumped over to me, and laid hold of my dress. I came across and looked round the hut the very first thing to see if the slides were closed. My uncle has a hut like this one, and I have heard him tell his shepherd not to go to sleep without leaving a slide open. I opened the door and there you were like dead: I threw the milk over you as there was no water – forgetting it was warm, and no use."

"I wonder if I should have died," Gabriel said in a low voice which was rather meant to travel back to himself than on to her.

"O no," the girl replied. She seemed to prefer a less tragic probability: to have saved a man from death involved talk that should harmonize with the dignity of such a deed – and she shunned it.

"I believe you saved my life, Miss – I don't know your name. I know your aunt's, but not yours."

"I would just as soon not tell it – rather not. There is no reason either why I should, as you probably will never have much to do with me."

"Still, I should like – "

"You can inquire at my aunt's – she will tell you."

"My name is Gabriel Oak."

"And mine isn't. You seem fond of you in speaking it so decisively Gabriel Oak."

"You see, it is the only one I shall ever have, and I must make the most of it."

"I always think mine sounds odd and disagreeable."

"I should think you might soon get a new one."

"Mercy – how many opinions you keep about you concerning other people, Gabriel Oak."

"Well, Miss – excuse the words – I thought you would like them. But I can't match you, I know, in mapping out my mind upon my tongue as I may say. I never was very clever in my inside. But I thank you. Come, give me your hand!"

She hesitated, somewhat disconcerted at Oak's old-fashioned earnest conclusion to a dialogue lightly carried on. "Very well," she said and gave him her hand, compressing her lips to a demure impassivity. He held it but an instant, and in his fear of being too demonstrative swerved to the opposite extreme, touching her fingers with the lightness of a small-hearted person.

"I am sorry," he said the instant after, regretfully.

"What for?"

"Letting your hand go so quickly."

"You may have me again if you like: there it is." She gave him her hand again.

Oak held it longer this time – indeed, remarkably long. "How soft it is – being winter-time, too – not chapped or rough or anything!" he said.

"There – that's long enough," said she, though without pulling it away. "But I suppose you are thinking you would like to kiss it? You may if you want to."

"I wasn't thinking of any such thing," said Gabriel simply: "but I will – "

"That you won't!" she exclaimed, snatching her hand back.

Gabriel felt himself guilty of another want of tact.

"Now find out my name," she said teasingly; and withdrew.