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The Return of the Native

by Thomas Hardy

PREFACE

The date at which the following events are assumed to have occurred may be set down as between 1840 and 1850, when the old watering place herein called "Budmouth" still retained sufficient afterglow from its Georgian gaiety and prestige to lend it an absorbing attractiveness to the romantic and imaginative soul of a lonely dweller inland.

Under the general name of "Egdon Heath," which has been given to the sombre scene of the story, are united or typified heaths of various real names, to the number of at least a dozen; these being virtually one in character and aspect, though their original unity, or partial unity, is now somewhat disguised by intrusive strips and slices brought under the plough with varying degrees of success, or planted to woodland.

It is pleasant to dream that some spot in the extensive
tract whose southwestern quarter is here described,
may be the heath of that traditionary King of Wessex--Lear.

July, 1895.

"To sorrow

I bade good morrow,

And thought to leave her far away behind;

But cheerly, cheerly,

She loves me dearly;

She is so constant to me, and so kind.

I would deceive her,

And so leave her,

But ah! she is so constant and so kind."

book one

THE THREE WOMEN

1 - A Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression

A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor.

The heaven being spread with this pallid screen and the earth with the darkest vegetation, their meeting-line at the horizon was clearly marked. In such contrast the heath wore the appearance of an instalment of night which had taken up its place before its astronomical hour was come: darkness had to a great extent arrived hereon, while day stood distinct in the sky. Looking upwards, a furze-cutter would have been inclined to continue work; looking down, he would have decided to finish his

faggot and go home. The distant rims of the world
and of the firmament seemed to be a division in time no
less than a division in matter. The face of the heath
by its mere complexion added half an hour to evening;
it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon,
anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated,
and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause
of shaking and dread.

In fact, precisely at this transitional point of its
nightly roll into darkness the great and particular glory
of the Egdon waste began, and nobody could be said to
understand the heath who had not been there at such a time.
It could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen,
its complete effect and explanation lying in this and the
succeeding hours before the next dawn; then, and only then,
did it tell its true tale. The spot was, indeed, a near
relation of night, and when night showed itself an apparent
tendency to gravitate together could be perceived in its
shades and the scene. The sombre stretch of rounds
and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom
in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly
as the heavens precipitated it. And so the obscurity

in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together
in a black fraternization towards which each advanced halfway.

The place became full of a watchful intentness now;
for when other things sank bleeding to sleep the heath
appeared slowly to awake and listen. Every night
its Titanic form seemed to await something; but it
had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries,
through the crises of so many things, that it could only
be imagined to await one last crisis--the final overthrow.

It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who
loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity.

Smiling champaigns of flowers and fruit hardly do this,
for they are permanently harmonious only with an existence
of better reputation as to its issues than the present.

Twilight combined with the scenery of Egdon Heath
to evolve a thing majestic without severity, impressive
without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in
its simplicity. The qualifications which frequently
invest the facade of a prison with far more dignity
than is found in the facade of a palace double its size
lent to this heath a sublimity in which spots renowned

for beauty of the accepted kind are utterly wanting.

Fair prospects wed happily with fair times; but alas,

if times be not fair! Men have oftener suffered from,

the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than

from the oppression of surroundings oversadly tinged.

Haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct,

to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds

to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.

Indeed, it is a question if the exclusive reign of this

orthodox beauty is not approaching its last quarter.

The new Vale of Tempe may be a gaunt waste in Thule;

human souls may find themselves in closer and closer harmony

with external things wearing a sombreness distasteful

to our race when it was young. The time seems near,

if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened

sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all

of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods

of the more thinking among mankind. And ultimately,

to the commonest tourist, spots like Iceland may become

what the vineyards and myrtle gardens of South Europe

are to him now; and Heidelberg and Baden be passed

unheeded as he hastens from the Alps to the sand dunes

of Scheveningen.

The most thoroughgoing ascetic could feel that he had a natural right to wander on Egdon--he was keeping within the line of legitimate indulgence when he laid himself open to influences such as these. Colours and beauties so far subdued were, at least, the birthright of all.

Only in summer days of highest feather did its mood touch the level of gaiety. Intensity was more usually reached by way of the solemn than by way of the brilliant, and such a sort of intensity was often arrived at during winter darkness, tempests, and mists. Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover, and the wind its friend. Then it became the home of strange phantoms; and it was found to be the hitherto unrecognized original of those wild regions of obscurity which are vaguely felt to be compassing us about in midnight dreams of flight and disaster, and are never thought of after the dream till revived by scenes like this.

It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature--neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man,

slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal
and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some
persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed
to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face,
suggesting tragical possibilities.

This obscure, obsolete, superseded country figures in Domesday.
Its condition is recorded therein as that of heathy, furzy,
briary wilderness--"Bruaria." Then follows the length
and breadth in leagues; and, though some uncertainty exists
as to the exact extent of this ancient lineal measure,
it appears from the figures that the area of Egdon
down to the present day has but little diminished.
"Turbaria Bruaria"--the right of cutting heath-turf--occurs
in charters relating to the district. "Overgrown with
heth and mosse," says Leland of the same dark sweep of country.

Here at least were intelligible facts regarding
landscape--far-reaching proofs productive of genuine
satisfaction. The untameable, Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon
now was it always had been. Civilization was its enemy;
and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil
had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural

and invariable garment of the particular formation.

In its venerable one coat lay a certain vein of satire
on human vanity in clothes. A person on a heath in
raiment of modern cut and colours has more or less an
anomalous look. We seem to want the oldest and simplest
human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive.

To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley
of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the
eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits
and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole
circumference of its glance, and to know that everything
around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as
unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind
adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.

The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which
the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea
that it is old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon,
it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour.

The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers,
the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained.

Those surfaces were neither so steep as to be destructible
by weather, nor so flat as to be the victims of floods

and deposits. With the exception of an aged highway,
and a still more aged barrow presently to be referred
to--themselves almost crystallized to natural products
by long continuance--even the trifling irregularities
were not caused by pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained
as the very finger-touches of the last geological change.

The above-mentioned highway traversed the lower levels
of the heath, from one horizon to another. In many
portions of its course it overlaid an old vicinal way,
which branched from the great Western road of the Romans,
the Via Iceniana, or Ikenild Street, hard by.

On the evening under consideration it would have been
noticed that, though the gloom had increased sufficiently
to confuse the minor features of the heath, the white
surface of the road remained almost as clear as ever.

2 - Humanity Appears upon the Scene, Hand in Hand with Trouble

Along the road walked an old man. He was white-headed

as a mountain, bowed in the shoulders, and faded in general aspect. He wore a glazed hat, an ancient boat-cloak, and shoes; his brass buttons bearing an anchor upon their face. In his hand was a silver-headed walking stick, which he used as a veritable third leg, perseveringly dotting the ground with its point at every few inches' interval. One would have said that he had been, in his day, a naval officer of some sort or other.

Before him stretched the long, laborious road, dry, empty, and white. It was quite open to the heath on each side, and bisected that vast dark surface like the parting-line on a head of black hair, diminishing and bending away on the furthest horizon.

The old man frequently stretched his eyes ahead to gaze over the tract that he had yet to traverse. At length he discerned, a long distance in front of him, a moving spot, which appeared to be a vehicle, and it proved to be going the same way as that in which he himself was journeying. It was the single atom of life that the scene contained, and it only served to render the general loneliness more evident. Its rate of advance was slow, and the old

man gained upon it sensibly.

When he drew nearer he perceived it to be a spring van, ordinary in shape, but singular in colour, this being a lurid red. The driver walked beside it; and, like his van, he was completely red. One dye of that tincture covered his clothes, the cap upon his head, his boots, his face, and his hands. He was not temporarily overlaid with the colour; it permeated him.

The old man knew the meaning of this. The traveller with the cart was a reddleman--a person whose vocation it was to supply farmers with redding for their sheep. He was one of a class rapidly becoming extinct in Wessex, filling at present in the rural world the place which, during the last century, the dodo occupied in the world of animals. He is a curious, interesting, and nearly perished link between obsolete forms of life and those which generally prevail.

The decayed officer, by degrees, came up alongside his fellow-wayfarer, and wished him good evening. The reddleman turned his head, and replied in sad and occupied tones.

He was young, and his face, if not exactly handsome, approached so near to handsome that nobody would have contradicted an assertion that it really was so in its natural colour. His eye, which glared so strangely through his stain, was in itself attractive--keen as that of a bird of prey, and blue as autumn mist.

He had neither whisker nor moustache, which allowed the soft curves of the lower part of his face to be apparent.

His lips were thin, and though, as it seemed, compressed by thought, there was a pleasant twitch at their corners now and then. He was clothed throughout in a tight-fitting suit of corduroy, excellent in quality, not much worn, and well-chosen for its purpose, but deprived of its original colour by his trade. It showed to advantage the good shape of his figure. A certain well-to-do air about the man suggested that he was not poor for his degree.

The natural query of an observer would have been, Why should such a promising being as this have hidden his prepossessing exterior by adopting that singular occupation?

After replying to the old man's greeting he showed no inclination to continue in talk, although they still walked side by side, for the elder traveller seemed

to desire company. There were no sounds but that of the booming wind upon the stretch of tawny herbage around them, the crackling wheels, the tread of the men, and the footsteps of the two shaggy ponies which drew the van.

They were small, hardy animals, of a breed between Galloway and Exmoor, and were known as "heath-croppers" here.

Now, as they thus pursued their way, the reddleman occasionally left his companion's side, and, stepping behind the van, looked into its interior through a small window. The look was always anxious. He would then return to the old man, who made another remark about the state of the country and so on, to which the reddleman again abstractedly replied, and then again they would lapse into silence.

The silence conveyed to neither any sense of awkwardness; in these lonely places wayfarers, after a first greeting, frequently plod on for miles without speech; contiguity amounts to a tacit conversation where, otherwise than in cities, such contiguity can be put an end to on the merest inclination, and where not to put an end to it is intercourse in itself.

Possibly these two might not have spoken again till their parting, had it not been for the reddleman's visits to his van.

When he returned from his fifth time of looking in the old man said, "You have something inside there besides your load?"

"Yes."

"Somebody who wants looking after?"

"Yes."

Not long after this a faint cry sounded from the interior.

The reddleman hastened to the back, looked in, and came away again.

"You have a child there, my man?"

"No, sir, I have a woman."

"The deuce you have! Why did she cry out?"

"Oh, she has fallen asleep, and not being used to traveling, she's uneasy, and keeps dreaming."

"A young woman?"