

English and American Classics Series

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

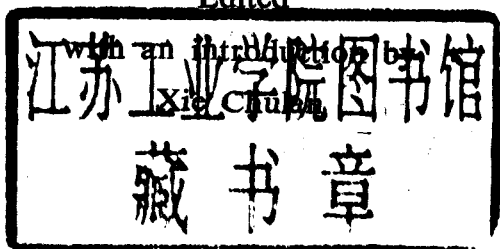
Thomas Hardy



The Return of the Native

Thomas Hardy

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Introduction

Son of a local builder, Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was born near Dorchester, Dorset, an agricultural district rich in tradition and folklore. At the age of 16, he started out to follow his father's profession and began his apprenticeship first in Dorchester and then in London. Yet his interest was in literature. In his early years, he wrote a good deal of verse. Afterwards he turned to prose fiction and produced as many as 15 novels, *The Return of the Native* (1878) being the first of his tragic novels. But towards the end of the 19th century, he gave up novel-writing and published five volumes of verse in addition to his great epic-drama 'The Dynasts' and two books of short stories.

The scene of *The Return of the Native* is Egdon Heath which, as if bypassed by the pace of industrialization, still preserves an ancient charm of its own with the wilderness, the Roman highways and village bonfires, and the traditional superstition of the local people. However, Egdon Heath is no paradise on earth. Its social structure is breaking apart. Visibly affected by this irresistible tide of change, the gentry grow increasingly worried while the majority of the rustic heathmen are still contented with their lot, living in peace and illusory happiness.

The story begins with two women, Thomasin Yeobright and Eustacia Vye, falling in love with Damon Wildeve who, for some reason, makes his choice in favour of the former. Eustacia eventually marries Thomasin's cousin Clym Yeobright, a native returned from Paris, but it is not long before she is thoroughly disillusioned with her husband. Wilful, proud, and self-indulgent, she finds herself confronted with the dreadful prospect of living on the bleak heath with a man who is destined to move among rustic folk. Clym, on the other hand, comes back to stay in the village because he is tired of city life. He has, on his return, the intention of running a school, but he becomes a furze-cutter on account of his failing eyesight. For Eustacia, this further deterioration in social status on Clym's part is the last straw. A terrible row arises when Clym finds his wife unfaithful. This discovery also precipitates her flight with Wildeve, and both get drowned on a stormy night. If Eustacia achieves something of a tragic heroine, Clym is not elevated to the dignity of a tragic hero. It is possible that the author deliberately tries to weaken the tragic effect by making Clym an itinerant preacher.

The Return of the Native is Hardy's first mature novel. Like a magnificent building, it attains integrity and balance in structure. It embodies the author's artistic principle of writing as well as his philosophical view of life and nature, while giving a realistic description of the English peasantry then in the process of decay. The few lines from John Keats' *Endymion* which we find at the beginning of the novel may serve as a warning to the reader that the story is not to be read simply for diversion. It might be Hardy's intention to record truthfully what happened to the English rural

community in the transitional period of the 19th-century industrialization.

Xie Chulan (解楚兰)

Author's 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 lovely 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 south-western quarter is here described, may be the heath of that traditionary King of Wessex — Lear.

July 1895

Postscript

To prevent disappointment to searchers for scenery it should be added that though the action of the narrative

is supposed to proceed in the central and most secluded part of the heaths united into one whole, as above described, certain topographical features resembling those delineated really lie on the margin of the waste, several miles to the westward of the centre. In some other respects also there has been a bringing together of scattered characteristics.

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'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.'

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Author's Preface</i>	1

Book First: The Three Women

i	A Face on Which Time Makes But Little Impression	3
ii	Humanity Appears upon the Scene, Hand in Hand with Trouble	9
iii	The Custom of the Country	17
iv	The Halt on the Turnpike Road	43
v	Perplexity among Honest People	50
vi	The Figure against the Sky	66
vii	Queen of Night	83
viii	Those Who Are Found Where There Is Said to Be Nobody	92
ix	Love Leads a Shrewd Man into Strategy	99
x	A Desperate Attempt at Persuasion	111
xi	The Dishonesty of an Honest Woman	122

Book Second: The Arrival

i	Tidings of the Comer	125
ii	The People at Blooms-End Make Ready	141

III	How a Little Sound Produced a Great Dream	147
IV	Eustacia Is Led On to an Adventure	153
V	Through the Moonlight	166
VI	The Two Stand Face to Face	175
VII	A Coalition between Beauty and Oddness	189
VIII	Firmness Is Discovered in a Gentle Heart	200

Book Third: The Fascination

I	'My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is'	215
II	The New Course Causes Disappointment	221
III	The First Act in a Timeworn Drama	232
IV	An Hour of Bliss and Many Hours of Sadness	250
V	Sharp Words Are Spoken, and a Crisis Ensues	260
VI	Yeobright Goes, and the Breach Is Complete	269
VII	The Morning and the Evening of a Day	278
VIII	A New Force Disturbs the Current	295

Book Fourth: The Closed Door

I	The Rencounter by the Pool	307
II	He Is Set Upon by Adversities; but He Sings a Song	316
III	She Goes Out to Battle against Depression	329
IV	Rough Coercion Is Employed	344
V	The Journey across the Heath	353
VI	A Conjuncture, and Its Result upon the Pedestrian	359
VII	The Tragic Meeting of Two Old Friends	372
VIII	Eustacia Hears of Good Fortune, and Beholds Evil	382

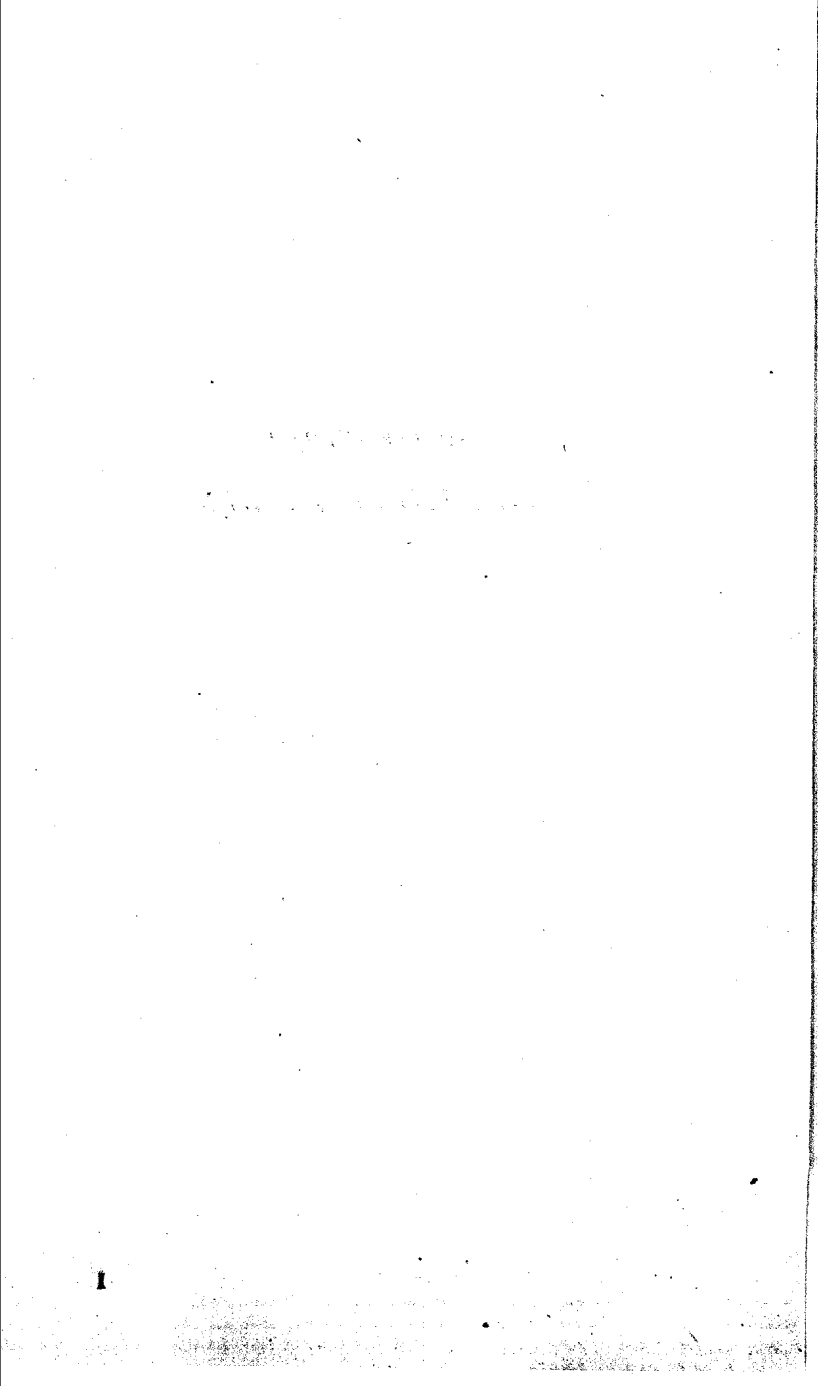
Book Fifth: The Discovery

I	'Wherefore Is Light Given to Him That Is in Misery'	395
II	A Lurid Light Breaks In upon a Darkened Understanding	405
III	Eustacia Dresses Herself on a Black Morning	417
IV	The Ministrations of a Half-Forgotten One	427
V	An Old Move Inadvertently Repeated	434
VI	Thomasin Argues with Her Cousin, and He Writes a Letter	442
VII	The Night of the Sixth of November	450
VIII	Rain, Darkness, and Anxious Wanderers	460
IX	Sights and Sounds Draw the Wanderers Together	473

Book Sixth: Aftercourses

I	The Inevitable Movement Onward	489
II	Thomasin Walks in a Green Place by the Roman Road	500
III	The Serious Discourse of Clym with His Cousin	504
IV	Cheerfulness Again Asserts Itself at Blooms-End, and Clym Finds His Vocation	510

BOOK FIRST
THE THREE WOMEN



*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 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 half-way.

The place became full of a watchful intentness now; for when other things sank brooding 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 champagnes 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 façade of a prison with far more dignity than is found in the façade 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 thorough-going 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 ar-