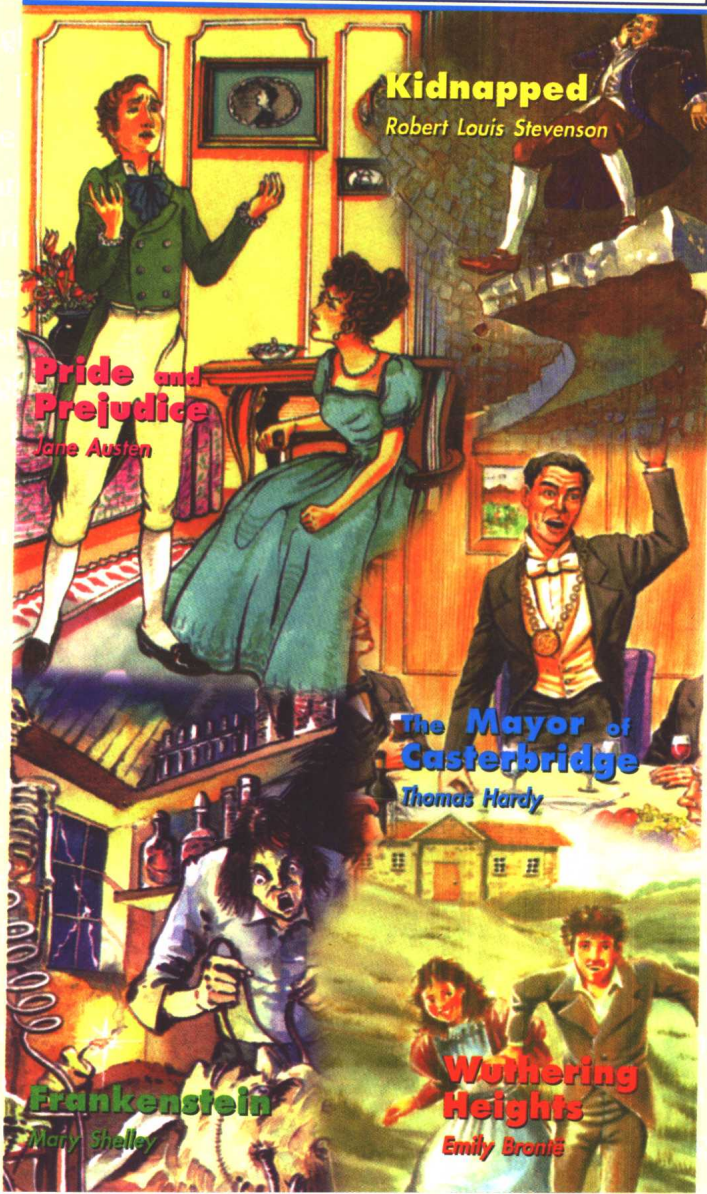


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The Mayor of Casterbridge
卡斯特桥市长

Thomas Hardy
Syllabus designer: David Foulds
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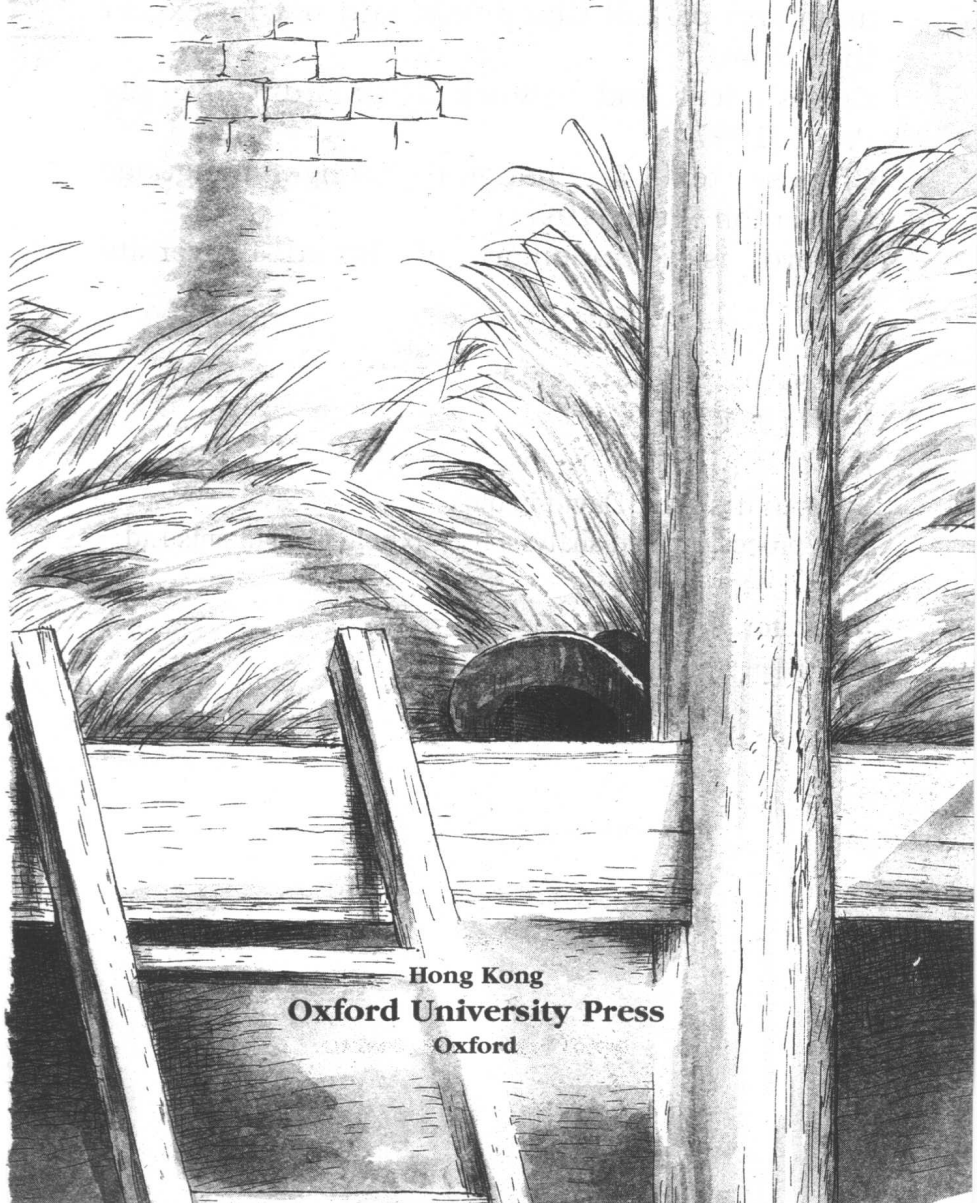
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The Mayor of Casterbridge

Thomas Hardy



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Text processing and analysis by Luxfield Consultants Ltd

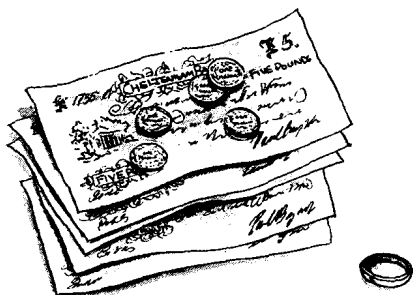
注 释: 吴其尧

Illustrator: 胡绍球

责任编辑: 王金鹤

CONTENTS

1 THE AUCTION	1
2 IN SEARCH OF MR HENCHARD	12
3 A SECOND MARRIAGE	23
4 HENCHARD AND FARFRAE	34
5 LUCETTA COMES TO CASTERBRIDGE	46
6 LUCETTA AND DONALD	59
7 LUCETTA IS MARRIED	70
8 HENCHARD'S FALL	81
9 AN UNEXPECTED DEATH	92
10 NEWSON RETURNS	104
QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES	117



THE AUCTION

The silent couple

It was a late summer evening at the beginning of the nineteenth century. A young man and a woman were approaching the large village of Weydon-Priors in Upper Wessex. They were on foot and the woman was carrying a child. 5

The man had a fine, strong figure and his face was stern and dark. His clothes were made of cotton cord material, the sort that farm workers wear, and his head was covered with a straw hat. He carried a basket on his back. Out of the top of the basket could be seen some hay-cutting tools. His steady, measured walk showed that he was a skilled countryman. 10

What was strange about this couple was the silence between them. The man was reading, or pretending to read, a song printed on a sheet of paper. The woman, clearly his wife, behaved as if she were alone except for the child she carried. The only sound was an occasional whisper of the woman to the child, and the tiny girl's reply. 15

The young woman's face was not beautiful, although the way she looked down sideways to the little girl made her quite pretty. But as she walked slowly on, silently thinking, she had only the hard, dull expression of hopelessness on her face. She stared straight ahead most of the time, and showed little interest in what she saw. 20

For a long time there was no sound at all, except the voice of a bird singing an old evening song. Then, as they came closer to the village, a lot of different shouts and noises began to reach their ears. When the first houses of Weydon-Priors could finally be seen, the family group met a farm labourer coming towards them. The husband looked up from his song-sheet. 25 30

'Any work here?' he asked, pointing to the village with a wave of his piece of paper. 'Anything for a hay-maker?'

The labourer had already begun shaking his head. 'There's nothing like that near Weydon-Priors at this time of the year.'

5 'Then is there a house for rent — a small, new cottage just built, or something like that?' asked the first.

The labourer said, 'Pulling down is what happens here, not building. Five houses were cleared away last year, and three this year. That's how things are in Weydon-Priors.'

10 The hay-maker nodded. Looking towards the village, he continued, 'There is something going on here, isn't there?'

'Yes. It's Fair Day, though what you hear now is only the noise of the fairground taking the money of children and fools. The real business was done much earlier.'

15

The furmity tent

The hay-maker and his family went on their way, and soon entered the fairground. At present, as they had been told by the labourer, there was little real business left, only the auctioning of a few poor quality horses that could not be
20 sold in any other way. Yet the crowd was thicker than in the morning. There were visitors and workers out for a holiday, a soldier or two, and village shopkeepers, all coming at the end of their day's work. They all enjoyed the usual fairground amusements: the shows, the medicines on sale said to be
25 able to cure almost anything, and the fortune-tellers.

Neither the man nor his wife were much interested in these things, and they looked around for a refreshment tent. Two, which were nearest to them, seemed almost equally inviting. One was new and had red flags flying from it. Beer
30 and other strong drinks were sold there. The other was not so new, a little iron chimney came out of it at the back, and at the front a sign announced, 'Good Furmity Sold Here'. The man looked at both tents and then moved towards the first.

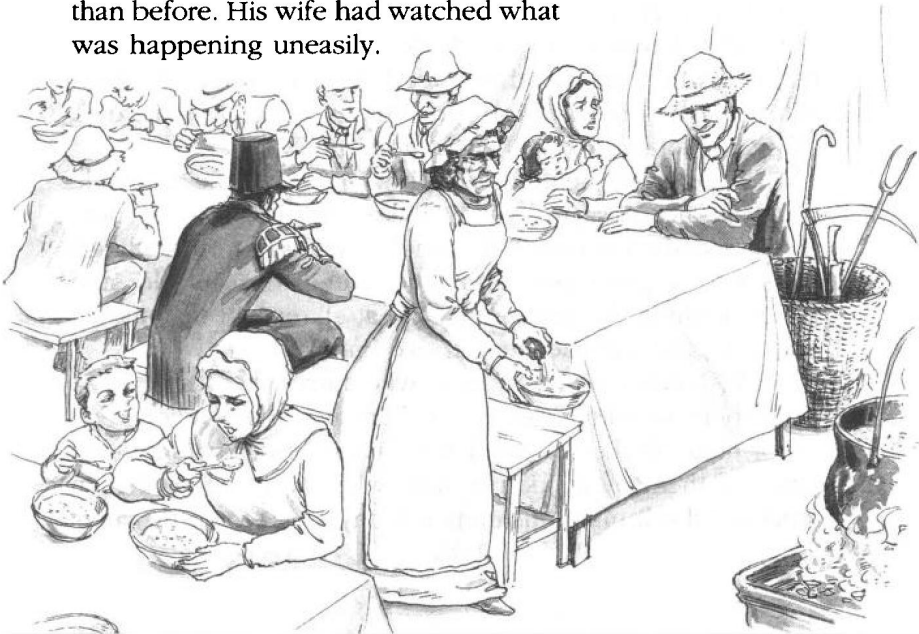
35 'No — no — the other one,' said the woman. 'I always like furmity, and so does Elizabeth-Jane, and so will you. It is nourishing after a long, hard day.'

'I've never tasted it,' said the man. However, he didn't really mind, and they went into the furmity tent.

There were a lot of people inside, seated at long narrow tables that ran down the tent at each side. At the upper end stood a hot stove, over which hung a large pot. A rough-looking woman aged about fifty was in charge. She was wearing a clean, white apron which made her look quite respectable. The contents of the pot: corn, flour, milk, raisins, currants and spices, made a meal of a type that had been sold and eaten in that part of the country for centuries.

The young man and woman each ordered a bowl of the steaming hot mixture, and sat down to eat it. So far, all was well, for furmity, as the woman had said, was nourishing. It was as good a meal as could be found anywhere in the world, even though it might not look very pleasant.

But there was more happening in the tent than was obvious at first. The man watched the woman out of the corner of his eye, and saw what she was doing. He smiled at her and passed her his bowl. She took a bottle out from under the table and poured some rum from it into the man's furmity. The man slyly paid for the addition to his meal. He found the mixture much more satisfactory than before. His wife had watched what was happening uneasily.



The ruin of good men

The man finished his bowl and called for another, the rum being added again, but even more this time. The effect soon became obvious in his manner, and his wife realized too late,
5 that though she had prevented him going into the beer tent, he was still becoming drunk.

The child was restless, and the wife said to her husband, 'Michael, we must find somewhere to stay. If we don't go soon, we will have trouble finding anything.'

10 But he did not listen to his wife, and began talking loudly to everyone around him. The child went to sleep.

At the end of his fourth basin, the man was loud and began to argue. The conversation turned to the ruin of good men by bad wives, and the end of many a young man's
15 hopes by an unfortunate early marriage.

'That has happened to me,' said the hay-maker, with bitterness. 'I married at eighteen, like the fool that I was; and this is the result of it.' He pointed at himself and his family with a wave of his hand.

20 His wife, who seemed used to such remarks, acted as if she did not hear them. The man continued, 'I haven't more than fifteen shillings in the world, and yet I am a good, experienced man in my work. If I were a free man again, I'd be worth a thousand pounds before I'd finished. But a
25 fellow never knows these little things until all chance of doing something about them is gone.'

The auctioneer selling the old horses in the field outside could be heard saying, 'Now this is the last one — now who'll take the last one? Will someone give me forty shillings?
30 She's a very good animal, a little over five years old, and there's nothing the matter with her at all, except that she's a little thin and has had her left eye knocked out.'

'Well, I don't see why men who have wives and don't want them shouldn't get rid of them like these fellows get
35 rid of their old horses,' said the hay-maker. 'Why shouldn't they sell them by auction to men who are in need of such articles? I'd sell mine this minute if anybody would buy her!'

'There are some who would be willing,' one of the guests replied, looking at the woman, who was certainly not ugly.

'True,' said another gentleman, who looked as if he had once been a servant in a wealthy family. 'I've lived among the wealthy and I can see if someone is a lady — and this one is, though it might not be obvious at first.'

The drunk young husband stopped for a few seconds at this unexpected praise of his wife. He shook his head as if to clear his mind, but then said harshly, 'Well, then, now is your chance. I will accept an offer for my wife.'

The sailor

The wife turned to her husband and murmured, 'Michael, you have talked this nonsense in public places before. A joke is a joke, but you will make it once too often if you're not careful!'

'I know I've said it before and I meant it. All I want is a buyer. Now, who will be the auctioneer?' cried the hay-maker.

'I will,' answered a man with a red nose and eyes like buttonholes. 'Who'll make an offer for this lady?'

The woman looked at the ground, as if she kept her position by a great effort of will.

'Five shillings,' said someone, at which there was a laugh.

'No insults,' said the husband. 'Who'll say a guinea?'

Nobody answered, and one of the women interrupted. 'Behave yourself properly, for Heaven's sake! Ah, the poor soul is married to a cruel man!'

'Set the price higher, auctioneer,' said the hay-maker.

'Two guineas!' said the auctioneer, and no one replied.

'If they don't take her for that in ten seconds, they'll have to give more,' said the husband. 'I tell you what — I won't sell her for less than five. I'll sell her for five guineas to any man who will pay me the money, and treat her well; and he shall have her for ever, and never hear anything again of me. But she shan't go for less. Now then — five guineas — and she's yours. Susan, you agree?'

She bowed her head, not caring.

'Five guineas,' said the auctioneer, 'or she'll be withdrawn. Will anyone give it? For the last time. Yes or no?'

'Yes,' said a loud voice from the doorway.

5 All eyes turned. Standing in the triangular opening which formed the door of the tent was a sailor. Unseen by the rest, he had arrived there within the last two or three minutes. A dead silence followed his answer.

'You say you will?' asked the husband, staring at him.

10 'I say so,' replied the sailor.

'Saying is one thing, and paying is another. Where's the money?'

The sailor hesitated a moment and looked once more at the woman. He came in, unfolded five pieces of paper, and
15 threw them down upon the table-cloth. They were Bank of England notes for five pounds. Upon them he placed five shillings.

Sold!

The sight of real money in answer to the husband's question
20 had a great effect upon the other guests. Up to this moment, no one could really say if the husband had been serious. The spectators had thought the whole thing to be a joke. But with the appearance of the money the joke ended. Everything was changed. The laughter left the listeners' faces,
25 and they waited with parted lips.

'Now,' said the woman, breaking the silence, so that her low, dry voice sounded quite loud. 'Before you go any further, Michael, listen to me. If you touch that money, I and this girl go with the man. Listen, it is no longer a joke!'

30 'A joke? Of course it is not a joke!' shouted her husband, his anger rising at her suggestion. 'I take the money. The sailor takes you. That's plain enough. It has been done elsewhere, and why not here?'

35 'It is on the understanding that the young woman is willing,' said the sailor gently. 'I wouldn't hurt her feelings for the world.'

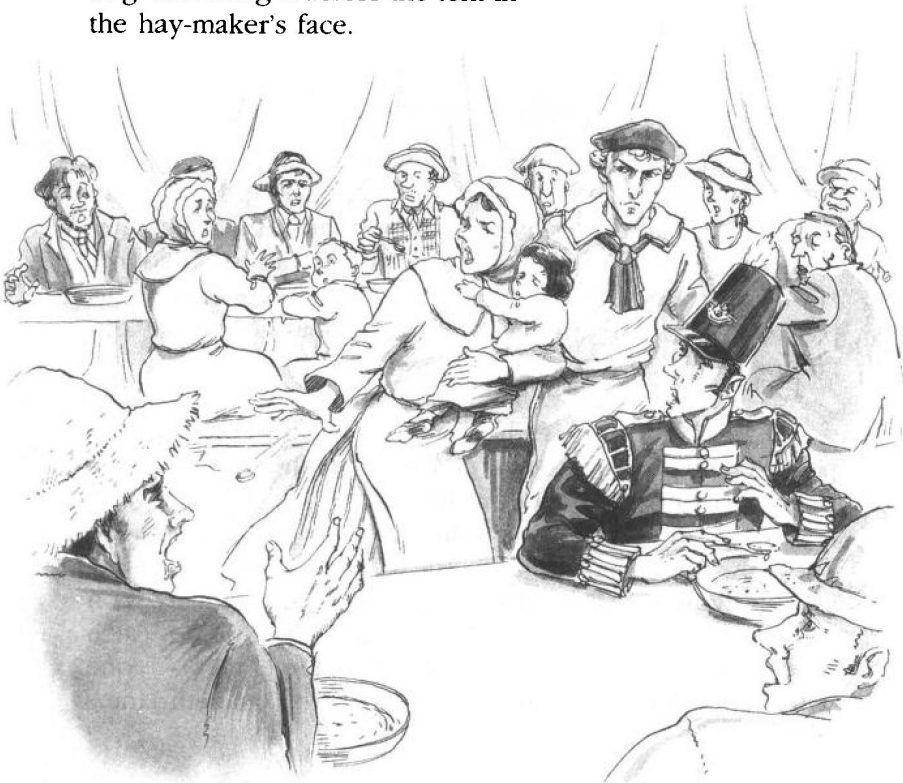
'Neither would I,' said her husband. 'But she is willing, provided she can have the child. She said so only the other day when I talked about it.'

'Do you swear that is true?' the sailor asked her.

'I do,' she said, after glancing at her husband's face and seeing no wish for change there. 5

'Very well, she shall have the child, and the bargain's complete,' said the hay-maker. He took the sailor's money, folded the notes and put them with the shillings in one of his pockets. 10

The sailor looked at the woman and smiled. 'Come along!' he said kindly. 'The little one too — the more the merrier!' She paused for a moment, with a glance at him. Then, lowering her eyes again, and saying nothing, she picked up the child and followed him as he went towards the door. On reaching it, she turned, and pulled off her wedding ring. She flung it across the tent in 15 the hay-maker's face.



'Mike,' she said, 'I've lived with you for two years, and had nothing from you but your ill-temper! Now I'll try my luck with someone else. It'll be better for me and Elizabeth-Jane. So good-bye!'

5 Seizing the sailor's arm with her right hand, and carrying the little girl with her left, she went out of the tent crying bitterly.

Perhaps because they knew they had witnessed something wrong, or perhaps because it was late, the customers left the tent shortly after this. The man stretched his elbows forward
10 on the table, leant his face on his arms, and soon began to snore. The furnity seller decided to close for the night, leaving the tidying up for the morning. Then she went over to the man and shook him, but he would not wake up. As
15 the tent was not being moved that night, she decided to let the sleeper stay where he was, and his basket with him. Putting out the last candle, and lowering the flap of the tent, she left.

Difficult problems

20 The morning sun was pouring through a gap between the canvas sheets of the tent when the man awoke. It was very warm, and a single big blue fly buzzed musically round and round. Besides the buzz of the fly there was not a sound. He looked about at the benches, at the tables and at his
25 basket of tools. Among them he saw a small shining object, and picked it up. It was his wife's ring.

A confused picture of the events of the previous evening seemed to come back to him, and he put his hand into his pocket. The rustling sound of paper reminded him of the
30 sailor's banknotes he had put there.

This second proof of his dim memories was enough. He knew they were not dreams. He remained seated, looking at the ground for some time. 'I must put things right as soon as I can,' he said deliberately, as though he could not catch
35 his thoughts unless he spoke them. 'She's gone — gone with that sailor who bought her, and little Elizabeth-Jane.

I remember now. We walked here, and I had the furmity, with rum in it, and I sold her. Now, what am I to do?' Lifting the tent flap he went out into the open air.

Here, the man looked around with gloomy curiosity. The freshness of the September morning made him feel better. 5
He and his family had been tired when they had arrived, and they had only seen a little of the place; so he now looked at it as if for the first time. The fairground was on the top of an open hill. A winding road approached the hill, and there were some woods on one side of it. At the bottom stood the 10
village. The whole scene lay in the bright, clear light of the early morning sun.

The people who worked at the fair still lay in their carts and tents, and were silent and still as death, except when an occasional snore revealed their presence. One of their many 15
dogs started barking from under a cart, but quickly lay down to sleep again. The dog was the only one to see the hay-maker leave the Weydon-Priors fairground.

The hay-maker went on in silent thought, not noticing the birds singing in the hedges, nor the sound of the sheep-bells. 20
When he reached a lane, a mile from the scene of the previous evening, he put down his basket and leant upon a gate. A difficult problem or two occupied his mind.

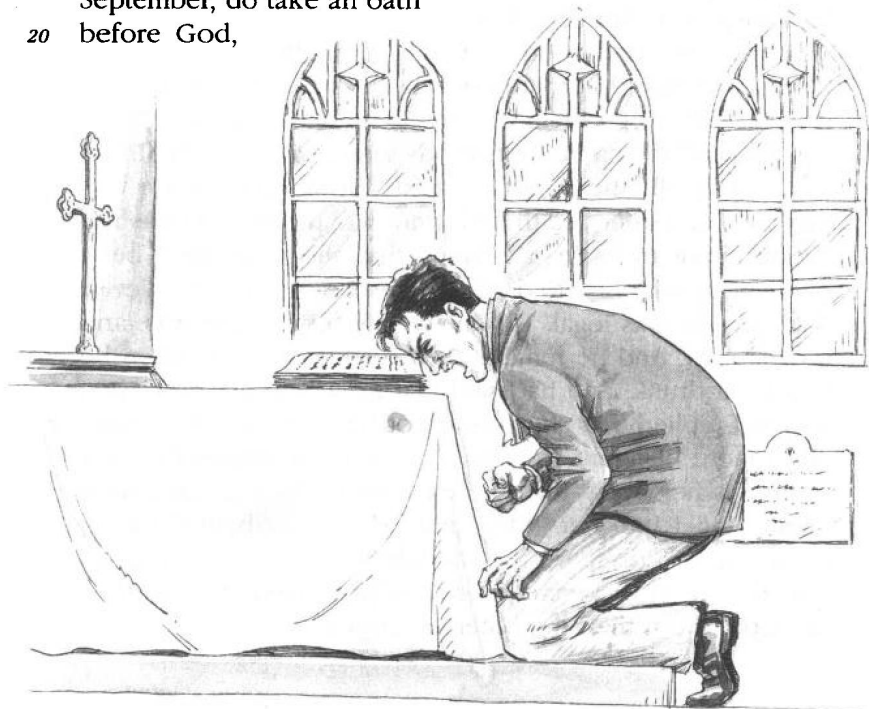
'Did I tell my name to anybody last night, or didn't I?' he said to himself, and at last decided that he had not. He was 25
surprised and annoyed that his wife had thought he was not joking about the sale. He knew that she must have been quite angry with him to do this. She must also have believed that the sale was legal. He knew how serious she was, and how simple. And he remembered now, that once, when he 30
had been drunk, and had said that he would get rid of her, she had replied that she would not hear him say that many times more before it happened ... 'Yet she knows I do not mean it when I say that!' he exclaimed. 'Well, I must walk about until I find her. Why didn't she know better than to 35
cause me this disgrace!' he thought. 'She wasn't drunk. It's just like Susan to behave like this. Her quietness has done me more harm than the bitterest temper!'

The oath

When he was calmer, he realized that he really must find her and his little Elizabeth-Jane, and put up with the shame as best he could. It was of his own making, and he ought to
5 bear it. But first he decided to make an oath, a greater oath than he had ever sworn before; and to do it properly, he required a suitable place.

He picked up his basket and moved on, looking round the land for what he needed. In the distance he saw a village
10 and the tower of a church. He immediately made towards the church.

The village was quite silent, for it was still early, and he reached the church unnoticed. He put down his basket near the door and went up to the altar. Then the hay-maker knelt
15 down upon the step just below the altar and, dropping his head upon the Bible that was always kept in front of the altar, he said aloud, 'I, Michael Henchard, on this morning of the sixteenth of September, do take an oath
20 before God,



here in this holy place, that I will avoid all strong drink for the space of twenty-one years to come, being a year for every year I have lived. And this I swear upon the book before me; and may I be struck dumb, blind and helpless, if I break my oath!" 5

After he had said these words, the hay-maker kissed the Bible, got up, and seemed relieved at having made a start in a new direction. When he left the church, he began his search for his wife and child.

The difficulty of his task soon became clear. He asked everywhere, but they had not been seen since the evening of the fair. To add to his difficulty, he could not even discover the sailor's name. As he had very little money of his own, he decided, after hesitating, to spend the sailor's money to help with his search; but it was no use. The truth was that Michael Henchard was too ashamed to make his search easier by telling the whole truth about what he had done. 10 15

The weeks became months, and still he searched, keeping himself by small jobs of work in between. By this time he had arrived at a seaport, and there he learned that Susan, the sailor and the child had left a little time before for America. He then decided that he would not search any longer. Next day he started, going south-west, and did not pause, except at night, until he reached the town of Casterbridge, in a far distant part of Wessex. 20 25