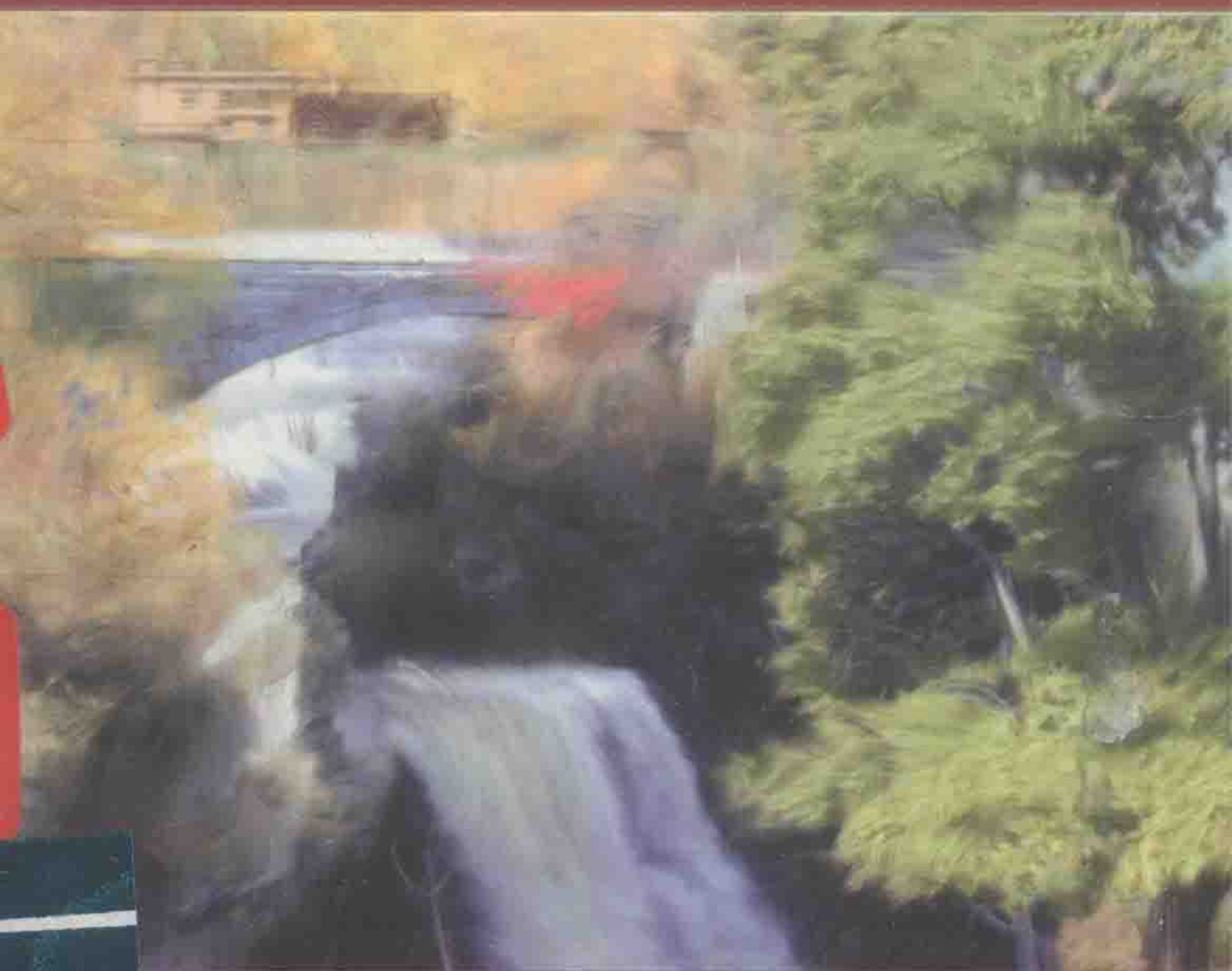


B A N T A M C L A S S I C

THOMAS HARDY
The Return
of the Native



THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

THOMAS HARDY

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THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE
A Bantam Book

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THOMAS HARDY, whose writings immortalized the Wessex countryside and dramatized his sense of the inevitable tragedy of life, was born near Egdon Heath in Dorset in 1840, the eldest child of a prosperous stonemason. As a youth he trained as an architect and in 1862 obtained a post in London. During this time he began seriously to write poetry, which remained his first literary love and his last. In 1867–68, his first novel was refused publication, but *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), his first Wessex novel, did well enough to convince him to continue writing. In 1874, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, published serially and anonymously in the *Cornhill Magazine*, became a great success. Hardy married Emma Gifford in 1874, and in 1875 they settled at Max Gate in Dorchester, where he lived the rest of his life. There he wrote *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). With *Tess*, Hardy clashed with the expectations of his audience; a storm of abuse broke over the “infidelity” and “obscenity” of this great novel he had subtitled “A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented.” *Jude the Obscure* aroused even greater indignation and was denounced as pornography. Hardy’s disgust at the reaction to *Jude* led him to announce in 1896 that he would never write fiction again. He published *Wessex Poems* in 1898, *Poems of the Past and Present* in 1901, and from 1903 to 1908, *The Dynasts*, a huge drama in which Hardy’s conception of the Immanent Will, implicit in the tragic novels, is most clearly stated. In 1912, Hardy’s wife, Emma, died. The marriage was childless and had long been a troubled one, but in the years after her death, Hardy memorialized her in several poems. At seventy-four, he married his longtime secretary, Florence Dugdale, herself a writer of children’s books and articles, with whom he lived happily until his death in 1928. His heart was buried in the Wessex countryside; his ashes were placed next to Charles Dickens’s in the Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey.

‘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.’

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 southwestern 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.

The first edition of this novel was published in three volumes in 1878.

T.H.

April 1912

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BOOK FIRST

THE THREE WOMEN

CHAPTER I

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 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 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 ac-

cepted 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 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