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A Pair of Blue Eyes

THOMAS HARDY

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

Thomas Hardy

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A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy's third novel, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, was much overshadowed by the popularity of *Far from the Madding Crowd* which immediately succeeded it, but it is none the less a work of distinction in a highly distinguished *oeuvre*. Initially serialized in *Tinsley's Magazine* between September 1872 and July 1873, the novel attracted attention and wide admiration. Hardy classified his own works and placed *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in the group which he called 'Romances and Fantasies'.

The novel has a simple but effective plot that is reliant on fairly improbable coincidence, although this is used for the first time in a way that shows the full emergence of the schematic ironies which characterise Hardy's later great works and many of his short stories, and gives a suggestion of the tragic philosophy that came to dominate all he wrote. Writing under the pressure of serialisation, Hardy drew on autobiographical material, and returned to an already favourite theme of 'the poor man and the lady'. The action concerns Stephen Smith, a young architect who goes to the village of Endelstowe in Cornwall to restore the church and falls in love with the vicar's beautiful blue-eyed daughter, Elfride Swancourt. Despite Elfride's initial reciprocation, Stephen's suit is blighted because of his lowly social origins. His much older friend and mentor Henry Knight becomes engaged to Elfride once Stephen is off the scene, but this affair too is doomed. Stephen's circumstances and his reasons for going to Cornwall are directly based on Hardy's own experience, and his courtship of Elfride finds a parallel in Hardy's courtship of Emma Gifford.

Hardy's portrayal of Elfride is the most outstanding feature in the novel and surpasses all his previous efforts at characterisation. With genuine psychological insight he traces the subtle changes wrought in Elfride by her differing emotional experiences. Elfride occasionally recalls Fancy Day, Hardy's heroine in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, but more significantly anticipates later heroines in her free-thinking disregard for convention and in her conscious use of her own sexual power in a society where women have few advantages. Like Emma Gifford, Elfride is writing a romance. Her straightforward, loving personality dominates the story, and this is perhaps the most

interesting of Hardy's attempts to capture the charm of his wife Emma when he first knew her.

Hardy's irony in *A Pair of Blue Eyes is* not directed at human weakness, but at the indifferent forces that govern our existence. Trivial incidents and momentary lapses in a world where destructive social prejudices prevail, are shown to have far reaching effects that determine human happiness. Stephen's fate is just so casually sealed, whilst Elfride's turns on the paradoxical inconsistency of Knight's perception of propriety. Hardy's study of Henry Knight (a character who is thought to have been based on Horace Moule, Hardy's own mentor) is another striking element of this novel. The nature of an intellectual who clearly commands adoration from others, yet is incapable of love himself, is depicted with fine discernment.

As always in Hardy's work, place is of supreme importance. The claustrophobic nature of village life in a remote part of Cornwall which is slower to change than many other places is presented with conviction and detachment. Trains feature as a sign of encroaching modernity, representing both escape and access, yet they are notably connected with disillusionment. The novel abounds with funeral episodes and other incidents of rich relevance. Precise natural observation gives a solidity to Hardy's perennial preoccupation with the ironies of time.

A Pair of Blue Eyes has much to offer any student of Hardy's work, not only for its rich biographical echoes, but for the way that it points forward in aspects of theme, characterisation and symbolism to his greatest novels. It is perhaps best known for its celebrated central scene that both shocked and stimulated Victorian readers, where Elfride strips off her underclothes to make a rope with which to save Knight as he hangs from the cliff, leaving herself clad only in her 'diaphanous exterior robe'. Despite the acknowledged genius of Hardy's writing in this scene, which puts the insignificance of a man's life into stark perspective, he was ever-after embroiled in arguments concerning sexual morality in the novels where he strove to show the stifling effects of social conventions on the human spirit. This early novel has an unpolished charm that is widely appealing.

Thomas Hardy was born at Higher Bockhampton near Dorchester in Dorset on 2 June 1840. He was the son and grandson of master-stonemasons whose family had known better times. His father encouraged his early interest in books and he was educated locally and in Dorchester, becoming articled to a Dorchester architect, John Hoicks, in 1856. Later, when practising in London as a young

architect, Hardy greatly added to his store of reading. His fourth novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) was sufficiently successful for him to abandon architecture for full-time writing. It also enabled him to marry Emma Gifford, and although this marriage was frequently under great strain, it inspired some of Hardy's most moving poetry. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was published in 1891 and was received with mixed reviews. Some critics considered the book immoral, but their comments were mild compared with the scandal which greeted the publication of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) as a result of which Hardy abandoned writing fiction for poetry. Emma died in 1912 and Hardy married Florence Dugdale in 1914. Hardy died, laden with honours including the Order of Merit, on 11 January 1928. His ashes lie buried in Westminster Abbey and his heart is interred in his first wife's grave at Stinsford churchyard in Dorset.

FURTHER READING

R. Gittings: *Young Thomas Hardy* 1975
R. Gittings: *The Older Hardy* 1980
M. Millgate: *Thomas Hardy, His Career as a Novelist* 1982
F. B. Pinion: *A Hardy Companion*, Macmillan 1968
Norman Page: *Thomas Hardy*, London 1977

MAJOR WORKS WITH DATE OF FIRST PUBLICATION

1871 *Desperate Remedies*
1872 *Under the Greenwood Tree*
1873 *A Pair of Blue Eyes*
1874 *Far from the Madding Crowd*
1878 *The Return of the Native*
1880 *The Trumpet-Major*
1881 *A Laodicaean*
1886 *The Mayor of Casterbridge*
1887 *The Woodlanders*
1888 *Wessex Tales*
1891 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*
1894 *Life's Little Ironies*
1895 *Jude the Obscure*
1897 *The Well-Beloved*
1898 *Wessex Poems*
1902 *Poems of the Past and the Present*
1903 *The Dynasts Part 1*
1905 *The Dynasts Part 2*
1908 *The Dynasts Part 3*
1909 *Time's Laughingstocks*
1919 *A Changed Man & Other Tales*
1914 *Satires of Circumstance*
1917 *Moments of Vision*
1922 *Late Lyrics and Earlier*
1923 *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*
1925 *Human Shows*
1928 *Winter Words*
1952 *Our Exploits at West Poley*

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The following chapters were written when the craze for indiscriminate church-restoration had just reached the remotest nooks of western England, where the wild and tragic features of the coast had long combined in perfect harmony with the crude Gothic art of the ecclesiastical buildings scattered along it, throwing into extraordinary discord all architectural attempts at newness there. To restore the grey carcases of a mediævilism whose spirit had fled, seemed a not less incongruous act than to set about renovating the adjoining crags themselves.

Hence it happened that an imaginary history of three human hearts, whose emotions were not without correspondence with these material circumstances, found in the ordinary incidents of such church-renovations a fitting frame for its presentation.

The shore and country about 'Castle Boterel' is now getting well known, and will be readily recognised. The spot is, I may add, the furthest westward of all those convenient corners wherein I have ventured to erect my theatre for these imperfect little dramas of country life and passions; and it lies near to, or no great way beyond, the vague border of the Wessex kingdom on that side, which, like the westering verge of modern American settlements, was progressive and uncertain.

This, however, is of little importance. The place is pre-eminently (for one person at least) the region of dream and mystery. The ghostly birds, the pall-like sea, the frothy wind, the eternal soliloquy of the waters, the bloom of dark purple cast, that seems to exhale from the shoreward precipices, in themselves lend to the scene an atmosphere like the twilight of a night vision.

One enormous seaboard cliff in particular figures in the narrative; and for some forgotten reason or other this cliff was described in the story as being without a name. Accuracy would require the statement to be that a remarkable cliff which resembles in many points the cliff of the description bears a name that no event has made famous.

T. H.
March 1895

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES


Thomas Hardy's
WESSEX
Fictitious names as
Exonbury
Real names as
Portsmouth
Cliff without name
Targan Bay
Dunder Fl.
St. Launce's
Plymouth
Miles
OFF
Trust
Penzeph
Lands End
Bristol
Channel
Mendip
Hills
Bath
Bristol
Exon Moor
Dunkery
Beacon
Quantock
Hills
Taunton
Glaston
Downstaph
Tauntorough
LOWER
Tinworthy
Exonbury
WESSEX
Deadmans Bay
Isle of Slingers
The Channel
Torquay
The Race
Christminster
Alfredstone
NORTH
Marygreen
Castle
Royal
Windlesham
MID
WESSEX
Marlbury Downs
Bolton Castle
Kennetbridge
Inkpen Beacon
Scale
Barrhills
Quarterbot
Weyden
Priory
Tremuddy House
WESSEX
The Great
Stonehenge
Plain
Melchester
Sherton
Wingreen
Deanleigh
UPPER
Wintoncester
WESSEX
Southampton
The Great
Forest
Portsmouth
Solentsea
The
Island
SOUTH
WESSEX
Casterbridge
Egdon Heath
Sandbourne
Bere Regis
Wareham
Knollsea
Budmouth
Lighthouse
Miles

THE PERSONS

Elfride Swancourt	*a young lady*
Christopher Swancourt	*a clergyman*
Stephen Smith	*an architect*
Henry Knight	*a reviewer and essayist*
Charlotte Troyton	*a rich widow*
Gertrude Jethway	*a poor widow*
Spenser Hugo Luxellian	*a peer*
Lady Luxellian	*his wife*
Mary and Kate	*two little girls*
William Worm	*a dazed factotum*
John Smith	*a master-mason*
Jane Smith	*his wife*
Martin Cannister	*a sexton*
Unity	*a maidservant*

Other servants, masons, labourers, grooms, nondescripts, etc., etc.

THE SCENE

Mostly on the outskirts of Lower Wessex

A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.

Chapter I

A fair vestal, throned in the west

ELFRIDE SWANCOURT was a girl whose emotions lay very near the surface. Their nature more precisely, and as modified by the creeping hours of time, was known only to those who watched the circumstances of her history.

Personally, she was the combination of very interesting particulars, whose rarity, however, lay in the combination itself rather than in the individual elements combined. As a matter of fact, you did not see the form and substance of her features when conversing with her; and this charming power of preventing a material study of her lineaments by an interlocutor, originated not in the cloaking effect of a well-formed manner (for her manner was childish and scarcely formed), but in the attractive crudeness of the remarks themselves. She had lived all her life in retirement – the *monstrari digito* of idle men had not flattered her, and at the age of nineteen or twenty she was no further on in social consciousness than an urban young lady of fifteen.

One point in her, however, you did notice: that was her eyes. In them was seen a sublimation of all of her; it was not necessary to look further: there she lived.

These eyes were blue; blue as autumn distance – blue as the blue we see between the retreating mouldings of hills and woody slopes on a sunny September morning. A misty and shady blue, that had no beginning or surface, and was looked *into* rather than *at*.

As to her presence, it was not powerful; it was weak. Some women can make their personality pervade the atmosphere of a whole banqueting hall; Elfride's was no more pervasive than that of a kitten.

Elfride had as her own the thoughtfulness which appears in the face of the Madonna della Sedia, with out its rapture: the warmth and spirit of the type of woman's feature most common to the beauties – mortal and immortal – of Rubens, without their insistent fleshiness. The characteristic expression of the female faces of Correggio – that of the yearning human thoughts that lie too deep for tears – was hers

sometimes, but seldom under ordinary conditions.

The point in Elfride Swancourt's life at which a deeper current may be said to have permanently set in, was one winter afternoon when she found herself standing, in the character of hostess, face to face with a man she had never seen before – moreover, looking at him with a Miranda-like curiosity and interest that she had never yet bestowed on a mortal.

On this particular day her father, the vicar of a parish on the sea-swept outskirts of Lower Wessex, and a widower, was suffering from an attack of gout. After finishing her household supervisions Elfride became restless, and several times left the room, ascended the staircase, and knocked at her father's chamber-door.

'Come in!' was always answered in a hearty out-of-door voice from the inside.

'Papa,' she said on one occasion to the fine, red-faced, handsome man of forty, who, puffing and fizzing like a bursting bottle, lay on the bed wrapped in a dressing-gown, and every now and then enunciating, in spite of himself, about one letter of some word or words that were almost oaths; 'papa, will you not come downstairs this evening?' She spoke distinctly: he was rather deaf.

'Afraid not – eh-h-h! – very much afraid I shall not, Elfride. Piph-ph-ph! I can't bear even a handkerchief upon this deuced toe of mine, much less a stocking or slipper – piph-ph-ph! There 'tis again! No, I shan't get up till tomorrow.'

'Then I hope this London man won't come; for I don't know what I should do, papa.'

Well, it would be awkward, certainly.'

'I should hardly think he would come today.'

'Why?'

'Because the wind blows so.'

'Wind! What ideas you have, Elfride! Who ever heard of wind stopping a man from doing his business? The idea of this toe of mine coming on so suddenly! . . . If he should come, you must send him up to me, I suppose, and then give him some food and put him to bed in some way. Dear me, what a nuisance all this is!'

'Must he have dinner?'

'Too heavy for a tired man at the end of a tedious journey.'

'Tea, then?'

'Not substantial enough.'

'High tea, then? There is cold fowl, rabbit-pie, some pasties, and things of that kind.'

'Yes, high tea.'

'Must I pour out his tea, papa?'

'Of course; you are the mistress of the house.'

'What! sit there all the time with a stranger, just as if I knew him, and not anybody to introduce us?'

'Nonsense, child, about introducing; you know better than that. A practical professional man, tired and hungry, who has been travelling ever since daylight this morning, will hardly be inclined to talk and air courtesies tonight. He wants food and shelter, and you must see that he has it, simply because I am suddenly laid up and cannot. There is nothing so dreadful in that, I hope? You get all kinds of stuff into your head from reading so many of those novels.'

'Oh no; there is nothing dreadful in it when it becomes plainly a case of necessity like this. But, you see, you are always there when people come to dinner, even if we know them; and this is some strange London man of the world, who will think it odd, perhaps.'

'Very well; let him.'

'Is he Mr Hewby's partner?'

'I should scarcely think so: he may be.'

'How old is he, I wonder?'

'That I cannot tell. You will find the copy of my letter to Mr Hewby, and his answer, upon the table in the study. You may read them, and then you'll know as much as I do about our visitor.'

'I have read them.'

'Well, what's the use of asking questions, then? They contain all I know. Ugh-h-h! . . . 'Od plague you, you young scamp! don't put anything there! I can't bear the weight of a fly.'

'Oh, I am sorry, papa. I forgot; I thought you might be cold,' she said, hastily removing the rug she had thrown upon the feet of the sufferer; and waiting till she saw that consciousness of her offence had passed from his face, she withdrew from the room, and retired again downstairs.

Chapter 2

'Twas on the evening of a winter's day

WHEN TWO OR THREE additional hours had merged the same afternoon in evening, some moving outlines might have been observed against the sky on the summit of a wild lone hill in that district. They circumscribed two men, having at present the aspect of silhouettes, sitting in a dog-cart and pushing along in the teeth of the wind. Scarcely a solitary house or man had been visible along the whole dreary distance of open country they were traversing; and now that night had begun to fall, the faint twilight, which still gave an idea of the landscape to their observation, was enlivened by the quiet appearance of the planet Jupiter, momentarily gleaming in intenser brilliancy in front of them, and by Sirius shedding his rays in rivalry from his position over their shoulders. The only lights apparent on earth were some spots of dull red, glowing here and there upon the distant hills, which, as the driver of the vehicle gratuitously remarked to the hirer, were smouldering fires for the consumption of peat and gorse-roots, where the common was being broken up for agricultural purposes. The wind prevailed with but little abatement from its daytime boisterousness, three or four small clouds, delicate and pale, creeping along under the sky southward to the Channel.

Fourteen of the sixteen miles intervening between the railway terminus and the end of their journey had been gone over, when they began to pass along the brink of a valley some miles in extent, wherein the wintry skeletons of a more luxuriant vegetation than had hitherto surrounded them proclaimed an increased richness of soil, which showed signs of far more careful enclosure and management than had any slopes they had yet passed. A little farther, and an opening in the elms stretching up from this fertile valley revealed a mansion.

'That's Endelstow House, Lord Luxellian's,' said the driver.

'Endelstow House, Lord Luxellian's,' repeated the other mechanically. He then turned himself sideways, and keenly scrutinised the almost invisible house with an interest which the indistinct picture itself seemed far from adequate to create. 'Yes, that's Lord Luxellian's,' he said yet again after a while, as he still looked in the same direction.