

A VISIT TO MR. THOMAS HARDY

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IN Dorset, not far from the shire town of Dorchester, in a charming little house by the wayside, screened by its wall, garden and trees from the prying public, dwells the world's greatest living English author—Mr. Thomas Hardy. It was on a fine warm afternoon in the latter part of August, 1923—a day which will always stand out in my memory—that I was privileged to visit him at his home, Max Gate, and talk with the novelist who has peopled all Wessex with his characters.

Arrangements had been made that my wife and I should meet Mr. Hardy about five o'clock in the afternoon. The morning and afternoon of that day seemed never to pass, as I waited with considerable excitement and tense emotion the arrival of the appointed hour. Early in the morning, we set off for a long bus ride through Dorset lanes and quaint villages, with distant views of purpling stretches of heath and grey old manor-houses, past the great white horse carved in the chalk of Osmington Hill, to the seaside town of Weymouth. My first impression of Weymouth, I suppose, will always remain. It is an impression of a city of bathing suits, hanging from every window;—big bathing suits, little bathing suits, pretty ones and ugly ones; new and old; wet ones and half dry ones; some sadly hanging limp with the weight of water, and others fluttering gaily in the breeze; whole families of bathing suits of all colours, shapes and sizes. Weymouth, renowned as the favourite summer resort of George the Third, has continued as a popular seaside watering-place to draw its crowd of holiday-makers every year. The summer visitors, after the morning dip, hang the bathing suits from their lodging-room windows, and parade the promenade or sit idly in the sun on the beach—a delightful life, characteristic of the English, who of all nations on earth know best how to enjoy themselves.

After Weymouth's beach and bathing suits, the afternoon was spent in the quiet old inland town of Dorchester, the shire town of the county. But Dorchester was not Dorchester to me. I was, at last, in Casterbridge—the scene of Mr. Hardy's story, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Here was the market-place where Mayor Henchard traded in corn and became the giant of local

finance, the rich corn factor and first man of the town. Henchard's first experience in trading was in a country fair, where he sold his wife for a paltry sum to a sailor man. Then came riches, honour, power, and their ultimate end,—misery and degradation, because they were attained at the sacrifice of love. A powerful tale and a sad tale is the life story of Michael Henchard.

The day wore away amidst these pleasant surroundings; and as the time drew near, we turned our steps towards Max Gate. Walking about a mile from Dorchester, in scenes that seemed to be pictures out of Mr. Hardy's novels rather than the real from which the author had created them,—distant pastures with flocks of sheep, the clustering roofs of thatched cottages in tiny villages, fields far off with the grain stooked up, and standing against the sky line on Blagdon Hill the monument to Captain Hardy (a kinsman of the novelist) in whose arms Nelson had died—in such a setting, we came to the home.

The first greeting was the barking of a little dog, which came boldly at us over the lawn, to enquire what business we had within the gates. Its barking ceased at a word from Mrs. Hardy, who immediately appeared from the garden, welcomed us to Max Gate and conducted us to the drawing-room, the walls of which were rich with original etchings, water colours and paintings of Hardy characters and Wessex scenes presented to the author by admiring artists. This room was a veritable treasure house to a Hardy lover, tastefully and comfortably arranged, so that one felt at home immediately.

Very soon Mr. Hardy himself appeared. Simply, kindly and unaffectedly, he gave us welcome. He talked to us in a simple, pleasing way. Though he was already in his eighty-fourth year, his eyes were bright and keen, with a sparkle so different from that of youth,—the sparkle of genius, of a master intellect. Small in stature, so reserved, so quiet, so gentle, so unassuming, you might never notice him in a crowd; yet speak to him, meet him in a room, and at once you would realize that there is something exceptional in this man. Johnson once said of Burke that you could not talk to him for ten minutes under an archway in a rain-storm without feeling his greatness. My contact with Mr. Hardy helped me to understand that. His face is full of sympathy, interest and understanding, with just a touch of the tragic. His voice is low, soft and refined—almost musical. He speaks in a calm, attractive manner, using simple and beautiful English.

I read a story shortly afterwards in a magazine about some loud, gay Yankee tourists, who were "doing England" and had

come to Dorchester to see Mr. Hardy. They were having lunch in a Dorchester restaurant, and the leader of the party enquired of the waiter where this "great guy Hardy" lived, and what would be the best time to call and see him. The waiter informed the American that Mr. Hardy lived just a short distance from the town, but that it was doubtful if he would see him at home, as he was of a retiring disposition and saw very few strangers. It was next to impossible, he said, to get an interview with him. After a short time, the waiter came back and asked the American if he had noticed the gentleman and lady who had been sitting at a table near, and who had gone out but a few minutes before. The American said he had, but did not "take any particular stock in them." "Well," said the waiter, "you just saw Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Hardy." The American was filled with disappointment: "What a funny people you English are! Why didn't you tell me before that it was Hardy? Here I've brought a whole set of his books in my bag all already to be autographed, and you let him walk out right under my nose, and I may never see him again."

The people of Dorchester know their man of genius. They respect his desire to be treated as a simple, plain-living citizen, as one of themselves. He moves in and out among them as simply Mr. Hardy. The townsmen do not acclaim him to curious strangers as one of the world's great men. No mob of hero-worshippers hang on his heels; no crowd of tourists are permitted to besiege him. He keeps what he loves—his privacy and seclusion, while the world passes by his door. There is a story of one ardent admirer who cycled half across England, simply to stand outside the portal of Max Gate and see the house where he lives; but he did not see Mr. Hardy.

Thus, as I sat and talked with him, I counted myself as very lucky in the privilege of not only seeing the master, but conversing with him in his own home, surrounded as we were by scene after scene from the stories of his creative mind. This privilege, I may add, was secured only through the medium of my wife and her relatives, who were very old friends of the Hardy family. I met the author, therefore, through the very best channel—that of his own personal friends.

He never even referred to that which had brought him greatness—he never mentioned his writings—until I asked him which was his favourite story of all his novels. His reply was, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and I think he counted this his favourite because it contains some of his own life-story. Mr. Hardy was more inclined to talk of Jane Austen's books than of his own. He said that Mrs.

Hardy and he had been lately reading together Jane Austen's stories, and found them more delightful and refreshing than ever. When I mentioned that some phrases in his writings were legal terms, and enquired whether he had ever studied law at any time, he replied, with a smile, "No, for if I had, I would have known more about the law of copyrights, which I had to learn by experience, to my cost."

As a Dickens enthusiast, before long I referred to Dickens, and then Mr. Hardy told me, with a pleasurable delight in the remembrance, that he had once seen him. Long ago, when a young student of architecture in London, he had gone one night to a crowded hall and heard Charles Dickens give one of his public readings. He pictured to me the dimly-lit hall, and the tense audience hanging on every word as the great master of humour and pathos read from his incomparable works. Little did those about the young Hardy that night realize that in their very midst was a successor to Dickens—that the shy young man at the back of the hall would stand next to Dickens in the list of England's masters of the novel.

In these two great writers I see some resemblance. What Dickens is to London, Mr. Hardy is to Wessex. The one is the author of the city; the other, that of the country. Dickens has preserved for all time, in imperishable print, old London with its inns, lanes and musty counting-houses; Mr. Hardy has done the same for the Dorset lane, the wayside inn, the farmyard, the old mills and manor-houses of southern England. Dickens loved crowds; he was never happy far from London. He sought the applause of the people, and was at his best when a crowded theatre of admirers sat at his very feet. Mr. Hardy was born in the country, lives in it and writes about it. He abhors crowds; there are no mob scenes in his novels, such as we find in *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Barnaby Rudge*. One sought the public gaze; the other shrinks from it; yet both have the same inexhaustible theme,—the theme of human hearts.

Shortly before our visit the Prince of Wales, who was then on a progress through western England, had called on Mr. Hardy and had taken luncheon with him at Max Gate. We were told of the Prince's call, and the honour which the novelist felt had been paid to literature. The Smiling Prince and the Thoughtful Poet had been photographed together on the lawn at Max Gate, and nearly every shop window in Dorchester displayed an enlargement of this happy picture. The townsmen were proud of the honour paid to a Dorset man.

Many books have been written endeavouring to identify the scenes of Mr. Hardy's novels and poems with the real places, for the Hardy country is more than just Dorsetshire where he lives. It comprises also the counties of Berkshire, Wilts, Somerset, Hampshire and Devon, either wholly or in part. In fact, nearly all the scenes in the novels, poems and dramas are located in what was originally the Wessex kingdom. Every village, church, lane, inn, bay, valley, heath or cross-roads, with but few exceptions, in this area, has some association with the Hardy stories. I was in doubt which one of these many guide books was the best to buy in order to make a study on the ground of the Wessex scenes. My doubts were set at rest when I had asked Mr. Hardy himself which of these books was the most reliable. He recommended to me, without hesitation, the book called *Thomas Hardy's Wessex* by Hermann Lea. As a hand-book to the reading of the novels, no better could be found than Mr. Lea's volume. It is rich in some two hundred and forty illustrations, and a chapter is devoted to each of the stories and poems. Mr. Lea in compiling the book consulted the novelist in many instances of doubt, and the result is a volume which most accurately correlates the fictitious with the real.

As the afternoon sun was sinking, we took leave of Mr. and Mrs. Hardy with the pleasantest and most treasured memory of one great hour in the presence of a genius. At the Dorchester station where we took the train, we could see opposite the railway lines the great Roman amphitheatre—the finest work of its kind in England. "It was to Casterbridge," says Mr. Hardy, "what the ruined Coliseum is to modern Rome, and was nearly of the same magnitude." Now, gentle sheep feed on its grass-grown slopes.

When we stepped off the train at our destination, the little station of Wool, I beheld with an added thrill the grim old manor of Wellbridge House and Bindon Abbey, with its empty tomb wherein Angel Clare, walking in his sleep, laid Tess on her bridal night. And I thought what a charm had been given to these places by the spirit of genius moving through the mighty pen of the shy, retiring man of Dorset whom I had just left at Max Gate.