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THE NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY.


It has become quite the fashion of late years to make elaborate studies of the writings of living authors. Formerly it was considered proper to let a man become a classic, or, at least, to let him die, before giving him the honor of a commentary. Patrick Hume waited until Milton had been dead twenty-one years before he published his three hundred folio pages of notes on Paradise Lost; but Mr. Ruskin, Mr. Browning, and Mr. George Meredith have more than once seen their names on the backs of thick volumes of which they were not the authors. Two of them have even seen societies founded for the express purpose of studying their works and perpetuating their fame before death had cut short the works or time had had a chance to claim as notoriety what eternity might not be very anxious to battle for as fame.

Reasons for the change herein involved are not far to seek. In the first place, literature, as a profession, fills a larger space in the world's regard than it ever did before; for as civilization becomes less romantic and picturesque, as the stage for the brilliant soldier, sailor, diplomat, and traveller narrows, as society becomes morbid and introspective, the author, and along with him, the plastic artist and the actor, become more and more objects of popular interest, perhaps,
of popular affection. In the second place, the rise of the 
magazine and the newspaper has given criticism of contem-
poraries a position and power which the pamphleteers of the 
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could never have won 
with their spasmodic though able productions. The "re-
viewer" has, from the nature of things, been compelled to 
deal with contemporaries as well as with classics, and in spite 
of the hysterics of Shelley and the young lady novelists he 
has, on the whole, wielded his power fairly. But from an 
elaborate review of a single volume to an exhaustive essay 
or treatise on the entire works of a living author, nay even 
to a society founded in his honor, is but a short and natural 
step in evolution.

There are some persons, however, who are shocked at ev-
olution whether it occur in nature, or in theology, or in pol-
itics, or in literature. It may be well to explain, therefore, 
that the evolution under discussion can have done little 
harm to authors great enough for calm self-criticism, and 
that, if it has harmed inferior authors, posterity, for very ob-
vious reasons, is not likely to suffer. It is furthermore true 
that fair criticism by contemporaries must do good by en-
couraging writers of talents and by causing them to concen-
trate their energies on special fields where their work will 
tell, as well as by introducing them to appreciative readers 
who would not otherwise be attracted to them. Perhaps this 
last fact is the chief reason why a sympathetic study of the 
 writings of a living author has an unmistakable value. When such a study is the result of love and enthusiasm, 
when it belongs to what we may well call missionary criti-
cism, that is the criticism which seeks to lay before others 
that which has charmed, inspired, transformed the critic 
himself, then such a study is valuable not only because it 
may serve to bring author and reader together, but also be-
cause it is likely to have the positive value which belongs to 
creative literature. If the following study be found to pos-
sess any such value we shall be more than satisfied.

As there is always a more or less intimate connection be-
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tween an author's works and his life and environment, it will be proper to give here a short sketch of Mr. Hardy's life, uneventful as it seems to have been. Thomas Hardy was born in Dorset on June 2, 1840.¹ He was educated in his native county until he was seventeen, when he was articled as pupil to an ecclesiastical architect residing in the county town. He spent the four years of his apprenticeship as much in studying the classics and theology as in mastering his profession. He was assisted in these studies by the sympathy of two friends of kindred tastes, and he has probably celebrated this intellectual communion in one of his novels, "A Pair of Blue Eyes." On the expiration of his minority he went to London and allied himself with the modern school of Gothic artists, studying under Sir Arthur Bloomfield and also becoming a student of modern languages at Kings College. In 1863 he received the prize and medal of the Institute of British Architects for his essay on "Colored Brick and Terra Cotta Architecture," as well as Sir W. Tite's prize for architectural design. He resided in London until 1867, when he probably went abroad. How he spent his time, except in writing poetry which is still in manuscript, remains uncertain. It may be remarked that definite information on the point is not at all necessary to convince a careful reader of Mr. Hardy's novels that their author must at some time or other have written poetry. No man with Mr. Hardy's imagination and his wonderful command of striking figures and pregnant phrases could have refrained from endeavoring

"Himself to sing and build the lofty rhyme."

During his second residence in London (1870–72) Mr. Hardy undertook to write his first novel. Upon its completion it was published anonymously, in 1871, under the title of "Desperate Remedies." It seems to have been equally praised and blamed, but its author was encouraged to follow it up the next year with a prose idyl of rural life entitled

¹ One authority says Devonshire.
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"Under the Greenwood Tree." This was well received, and deservedly so; another twelvemonth, therefore, saw a third novel, on different lines from its predecessor, but also successful, "A Pair of Blue Eyes." But a sure instinct led Mr. Hardy away from the conventional society novel back to his peasants of Dorset, or as he prefers to call it, "Wessex," and in "Far from the Madding Crowd" (1874) he achieved a gratifying success. The story appeared first as a serial in The Cornhill Magazine, and until the appearance of "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," only a year ago, was regarded as its author's masterpiece, judicious critics declaring that in its pages the English peasant had been made to speak out as he had never done since the days of Shakspere. Since this success Mr. Hardy's pen has rarely rested, and his fame has been steadily growing. Besides dramatising "Far from the Madding Crowd" (1879), he has written eight novels, one novelette, and two volumes of short stories, many of which have appeared simultaneously in England, America, Australia, and India, while some have been translated into foreign languages. His latest novel, "Tess of the D'Urbervilles," has been more widely read and noticed than any work of fiction in recent years, except, perhaps, Mrs. Ward's "David Grieve" and the stories of Mr. Kipling. He is now said to be engaged upon a novel entitled "The Pursuit of the Well Beloved."

Little is known about Mr. Hardy's personality. His portrait shows us a strongly individual face, which is attractive if not handsome. The lines of deep thought are plainly visible, and there is a far-away look in the eyes that recalls the novelist's early poetry, and his affiliation to some extent with the romantic school. Naturally preferring to live in his favorite "Wessex," Mr. Hardy resides near Dorchester in a fine house of his own design. He loves the quiet of family life (he married a Miss Gifford in 1875), so he rarely visits London except on business, and is not often pestered by the lion hunter and the reporter. Still we feel that he is no hermit, that he must have known personally the characters that move across
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his pages. We feel also that he is not a mere bookworm, but that he knows every foot of ground in Devon, Dorset, Summerset, Hampshire, and Wilts, in that Wessex whose literature begins with England's noblest king and ends with—Mr. Hardy. It is time, however, as our author uses "I" with the greatest infrequency in his writings, to pass to a consideration of his novels in detail, and of his general characteristics as a writer of fiction.

A man of letters is himself often a good critic of his own youthful work, and so Mr. Hardy fairly sums up the defects of "Desperate Remedies," when he says of it in the "Prefatory Note" appended to its re-issue in 1889: "The principles observed in its composition are, no doubt, too exclusively those in which mystery, entanglement, surprise, and moral obliquity are depended on for exciting interest." In other words, Mr. Hardy means to say that he had fallen under the spell of that wonderful weaver of plots, Wilkie Collins. But Collins in his best work avoided the mistake into which his follower fell, of failing to observe a due proportion between the mystery and entanglement of his plot and the value, that is the interest, of his characters and their actions. We do not like to be perplexed or mystified about people unless we are greatly interested in them, and with the possible exception of the steward Manston, there are no very interesting characters in "Desperate Remedies."

The plot is too intricate to be given here in detail. There are marriages that are no marriages, there is a murder, there is an illegitimate son of an aristocratic mother, there is a beautiful love-sick heroine who gets into every sort of trouble, and a love-sick hero who plays detective and gets her out. In short, we have all the materials for a story eminently suitable for the New York Ledger, materials put together in a very artificial way, but in a way that excites and interests the reader to his heart's content. But the question immediately occurs, if a man of thirty-one could seriously occupy himself in developing such a plot, how was it that he ever succeeded in writing a great novel? An an-
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swer is easily found. An ultra-sensational novel with a mixed-up plot and an artificial method of presentation does not necessarily mean an unpromising volume. When such a novel is written in a style which is at once recognized as individual in its simplicity, its strength, its grace; when it is found to be distinguished by passages and scenes of rare descriptive power; when its author, time and again dazzles us with a flashing simile or an exquisitely poetic epithet; when he not infrequently lets drop a pearl of wisdom which no swine save skimming readers can possibly be found to spurn; when to crown all he takes an impassive peasant and makes him talk as though nobody were near to overhear him; then we may well feel sure that our novice in authorship gropes only because he is seeking for a method and that he is not unlikely to find one.

That all the above promising traits were to be found in "Desperate Remedies" by a careful reader of 1871 will not, we think, be disputed by the careful reader of 1892. Of course such a proposition cannot be definitely established in an article like the present, but the book is easily accessible, and the accuracy of our statement can be tested. We feel inclined, however, to support ourselves by at least one quotation:

"His clothes are something exterior to every man; but to a woman her dress is part of her body. Its motions are all present to her intelligence if not to her eyes; no man knows how his coat-tails swing. By the slightest hyperbole it may be said that her dress has sensation. Crease but the very Ultima Thule of fringe or frounce, and it hurts her as much as pinching her. Delicate antennæ, or feelers bristle on every outlying frill. Go to the uppermost: she is there; tread on the lowest: the fair creature is there almost before you."

"Under the Greenwood Tree" is a year-long rural idyl, as simple in its plot as "Desperate Remedies" is complex. The nine chapters of the first part entitled "Winter," are taken up with a wonderfully humorous description of the old-fashioned wind-instrument choir of the parish of Mellstock trudging around on Christmas night to serenade every dweller in the parish, and with an equally humorous description of
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the party given by honest Reuben Dewey, the tranter, or wagoner. The other parts, named after the other seasons, commemorate the love of Dick Dewey, the tranter's son for Fancy Day, the village schoolmistress—a love which ends in the most typical of rural weddings, in spite of the fact that the young rector himself is somewhat smitten with the fair schoolmistress who plays the first organ set up in the parish church. The despair of the old choir at the advent of this organ and their visit to the rector in expostulation are described with a humor that puts Mr. Hardy alongside of Dickens if not, as some think, above him. Obviously no quotation can do justice to the exquisite truth to nature, to the simplicity, the humor, the genial charm of this idyl which is as much above most genre sketches of the modern school as a representative poem of Wordsworth's is above the best effusion of Bryant. The fresh smell of woods and fields blows through the all but poetic pages; like Antæus the reader rises up refreshed from a touch of mother earth. Mr. Hardy has at last learned his method. He reproduces nature, whether in flower, or tree, or cloud, or field, or man—not the man of streets and parlors—but the man of the fields, who is as much a natural object as a tree or a boulder—yet his method of reproduction is not that of the photographer, but of the painter. He is realistic, but at the same time idealistic; in other words, he is an artist, and the sub-title of his book, "A Rural Painting of the Dutch School," does not belie its qualities.

We said above that Mr. Hardy is as humorous as Dickens, and we appealed to the description of the choir's visit to the rectory in proof of the assertion. As this scene takes up a whole chapter, it must remain unquoted, but who could fail to quote a few paragraphs from the chapter describing Dick Dewey's first visit to the house of his sweetheart's father, Geoffrey Day, in the depths of Yalbury wood? Geoffrey and Dick and Fancy, the sweet link between them, are seated at the noon-day meal. Mrs. Day the second is bustling about overhead preparing to make a disagreeable descent
upon the party below. The conversation meanwhile has turned on matrimony.

"'If we are doomed to marry, we marry; if we are doomed to remain single, we do,' replied Dick.

"Geoffrey had by this time sat down again, and he now made his lips thin by severely straining them across his gums, and looked out of the fire-place window to the end of the paddock with solemn scrutiny. 'That's not the case with some folk,' he said at length, as if he read the words on a board at the farther end of the paddock.

"Fancy looked interested, and Dick said 'No?'

"There's that wife o' mine. It was her doom not to be nobody's wife at all in the wide universe. But she made up her mind that she would, and did it twice over. Doom? Doom is nothing beside an elderly woman—quite a chiel in her hands.'"

"A Pair of Blue Eyes," Mr. Hardy's third novel, gives the heart history of a rather susceptible but very charming young lady, Miss Elfride Swancourt, who, by the way, is said to be unpopular with her own sex. It has at least one strong character, Henry Knight, the reviewer, Elfride's second lover. It contains also one very powerful scene, the rescue of Knight from the cliff through the heroism and presence of mind of Elfride. It is not only an interesting story, but a very subtle study of feminine instincts, yet although a successful novel as a whole, it can hardly be placed among our author's masterpieces. The last scene of all in which Elfride's two disappointed lovers encounter her husband at her tomb, is pathetic in the extreme.

"Far from the Madding Crowd" has already been described as inferior only to "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." It combines all the charm of "Under the Greenwood Tree" with more than the power and interest of "Desperate Remedies." It is the first work to prove that Mr. Hardy possesses the power of creating characters that live. Farmer Oak, the faithful, modest, sensible hero, is a character that no one can forget, a nobler, a longer lived character, perhaps, than even Adam Bede. Joseph Poorgrass, Mr. Hardy's masterpiece in the way of peasant characters, is a personage whom Fielding would not have disdained to create—Fielding who in the creation of characters is the Zeus of English
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novelists. Bathsheba Everdene, the heroine—Mr. Hardy disdains to give his heroines common names thereby linking himself to the romancers—Farmer Boldwood, Sergeant Troy, the maltster, are all excellent in their way, although inferior to the two first mentioned. But with his advance in characterization, Mr. Hardy does not fall behind, nay rather, he advances in his other qualities. Never has the life of the farm and the sheepfold been more truthfully or more charmingly described; never has the homely picturesqueness of the English peasant received so attractive a setting. The humor that welled up in "Under the Greenwood Tree," flows here in a full stream, witness Joseph Poorgrass drunk in the public house testifying to the evils of the affliction known as "a multiplying eye"—an affliction which had a way of always coming on when he had been in a public house a little while, as he meekly confessed to Shepherd Oak. In style, too, Mr. Hardy has improved. He has become more practised in his use of that noble instrument, the prose of his native tongue. There is less straining for effect, there is less dependence upon the aid of a flashing figure or epithet; in other words, there is more Sophoclean roundedness, and less Æschylean pointedness than in his earlier works.

But—and without this "Far from the Madding Crowd" would not be a great novel—there is a human interest about this story which lifts it above its predecessors. Human interest is a term used by some writers' with reference to passion rather than to action, but we here use it inclusively. It is to be remarked, however, that for a novel or a romance to be truly inspiring, the human interest that emerges from passion or suffering should not predominate. Men and women must act their parts, in the true sense of the phrase, in a novel as well as on the stage; and unless one character acts a great part, or some of the characters combine to act a great part, the novel must often fail of truly inspiring its readers. Now Farmer Oak, though in a modest way, does

1See Mr. R. G. Moulton's admirable book, "Shakspere as a Dramatic Artist" (Second Edition, pp. 272, 273).
live a great life and act a great part, and Bathsheba Everdene and Farmer Boldwood, if they do not live great lives, nevertheless go through fires of affliction that try their souls and lend them an inevitable interest. Hence it is that we place this novel among the few great novels of our generation—because even “far from the madding crowd” Mr. Hardy has seen that there is something more than the life of plant, and stone, and stream, something more than the animal life of Joseph Poorgrass and his kind—the life of men who love greatly, and endure greatly, and dare greatly like Shepherd Oak, the life of women who pass through Sloughs of Despond to reach at last the Delectable Mountains like Bathsheba Everdene.

“The Hand of Ethelberta” (1876) was described by its author as “A Comedy in Chapters.” It bears out fairly well the claims of its sub-title. The heroine, Ethelberta, is a butler’s daughter, who, having been educated above her station, marries a young, wealthy, and well-born husband and is soon left a fashionable widow. She now essays the difficult rôle of moving in polite society while still preserving secret relations with her family. Her sister becomes her maid, her brother her footman, and once she is actually waited on at a dinner party by her father, the butler. Naturally such a plot furnishes Mr. Hardy with much opportunity for delicate satire on fashionable society as well as for indulging in his accustomed humor. Ethelberta publishes poems, recites her own stories, loves a poor gentleman, is wooed by several eligible suitors, and finally marries a worn-out peer. If it were not that she gets the upper hand of her old husband and is enabled to lift up and support her family the end of the story would be tragic, rather than comic; but, viewed as a whole, it is an amusing comedy which deserves more popularity than it seems to have had. Certainly Mr. Hardy has drawn few more interesting characters than his “squirrel haired” Ethelberta.

Two years later, 1878, appeared the book which some regard as our author’s masterpiece, but to which we are in-
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clined to give the third place among his works—"The Return of the Native." Here again we have a rural setting and a powerful and moving plot. The characters, too, are striking and well drawn, and one of them, Clym Yeobright, the hero, just misses greatness. Unlike Mr. Hardy's previous works, it is predominantly a tragedy; but it is not a thoroughly artistic success, because our pleasure at the artist's triumph is overbalanced by disagreeable sensations caused by the repulsiveness of many of his characters and of the environment in which they move. Mr. Hardy himself must have felt the effect of this repulsiveness, for his humor is almost entirely absent. A passion for excessive realism, too, has taken a greater hold upon this essentially poetic idealist, and it is only when he is in the presence of inanimate nature that his soul appears to be truly inspired. The descriptions of Egdon Heath in this novel, and of the effects of its sombre vastness upon its scattered inhabitants, are unequalled, so far as our reading goes, in modern fiction. But if nature has taken hold of Mr. Hardy as it has done of few men since Wordsworth, it has not disturbed him "with the joy of elevated thoughts," as Wordsworth sang; it has not proved itself to be the power "whose secret is not joy, but peace" of Matthew Arnold; but rather it has proved itself to be the mysterious, inscrutable counterpart in the world of the senses, of that "insoluble enigma" with which Herbert Spencer and so many modern minds have found themselves confronted in the world of thought. In other words, Mr. Hardy seems to have fallen a victim to the malheur du siècle, and so Clym Yeobright, and his mother, and Eustacia Vye, and Wildeve, and the other characters, love their loves and hate their hates on Egdon Heath without ever seeming to think that there is any thing beyond this present life, as pagan in heart as the old Celts that built the barrow crowning the hill that overlooked the immemorial plains. Every thing about the novel is pagan from the barrow to the peasants who light a fire upon it every Guy Fawkes day; and the only truly noble character, the Reddleman, is as much
pagan as Christian in his virtues. It is just here that we can lay our finger on the radical defect of this book, a defect which we shall expect to find characterizing much of Mr. Hardy's future work. The writer of a great novel must be enough of an optimist to impart a spring to his work. Pessimism imparts no spring to any thing, and pessimism is but another name for the deadly languor that accompanies the malheur du siécle is, in fact, the symptom by which one is usually enabled to diagnose the disease.

We do not mean to say that Mr. Hardy is a pessimist in the sense that he is an apostle of pessimism. He does not set out with the avowed intention of making his readers fall out of love with life. He sees as well as any one that there is much in human nature that is noble and true, that there is much in life that is capable of giving pure and genuine pleasure. But, as a recent critic, Mr. William Sharp, has pointed out,¹ there seems to be a large-eyed sadness about his face as he looks forth upon the world. He finds much that is inexplicable, much that is solemn, much that does not answer to his sense of justice in the life that surges about him, and he does not hesitate to reproduce in his novels all that he sees. As a realist he is warranted in doing this, but as a poet and idealist he ought sometimes at least to see further into the mystery we call life. If he relied more upon his poetical qualities he would avoid one of the pitfalls of realism—he has bravely escaped the others—the tendency to paint life as repulsive by stripping it of its hopefulness, its self-sufficing energy, its spring. Shakspeare, whom Mr. Hardy resembles in many ways, did not make this mistake. The Shakspeare of "As You Like It" and "The Merry Wives of Windsor" did, it is true, pass into the Shakspeare of "Hamlet" and "Othello"—the poet of a laughing, sunny world into the poet of the passions and the storms of life. But however much he was impelled to question life and fate, Shakspeare never failed to leave his hearers or

¹See "The Forum" for July, 1892.
readers that hopefulness which is the spring of human existence. And in his last years, the years of "The Tempest" and "A Winter's Tale," he reached a calm serenity of spirit and a clearness of vision which makes one feel that our troubled, thoughtful novelist may perhaps in time reach a similar "coign of vantage" from which to survey the world. If, as we shall see, Mr. Hardy has written in "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" a tragedy which instinctively suggests such tragedies as the "Lear" and the "Othello," who shall say that he may not in the years to come write a story of our modern life which shall suggest something of the wisdom, the genial charm of "The Tempest?"—even if he still finds it necessary to close with a note as solemn as

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

The reader of Mr. Hardy's next novel, "The Trumpet Major," published in 1880, will at once ask himself, "Is not this author making a brave struggle against the scepticism, the pessimism that have been assailing him? Will not the optimism of the poet and idealist finally conquer the pessimism of the realist?" If Mr. Hardy had died after writing "The Trumpet Major" the last question might well have been answered in the affirmative. Few more charming, spontaneous, wholesome stories than this have ever been written by an English novelist. Sweet Anne Garland may well be set by Sweet Anne Page, and her two devoted swains, fickle Bob Loveday, the sailor, and staunch John Loveday, the Trumpet Major, are worthy to live as long as the language in which their adventures are told. This is the only one of Mr. Hardy's stories that at all claims the title—the great title in spite of some modern critics—of an historical romance. The scene is laid on the southern coast of England during the exciting days of Napoleon's contemplated invasion. The historical setting is worthy of all praise—indeed, as we shall see later, Mr. Hardy shares with Thackeray the power to move as freely in the past as in the
present. We consider "The Trumpet Major" to be the most charming of Mr. Hardy's stories, and if all its characters had possessed the nobility of the unselfish hero and if its action had been more tense and pitched upon a higher plane it would easily have been his greatest work. As it is, it is one of the cleanest, most interesting, most wholesome stories that can be recommended to readers old or young.

In "A Laodicean" (1881) Mr. Hardy became less spontaneous and charming, although more subtle and, perhaps, more powerful. The heroine, Paula Power, the Laodicean, neither hot nor cold, is a most interesting study in feminine psychology. The three leading male characters—Somerset, the architect, Dare, the adventurer, and Captain de Stancy, the scion of a decayed family—are well drawn; the action is sufficiently complicated to be interesting; but the story as a whole, though in Mr. Hardy's manner is not representative of him at his best. Perhaps we miss our author's humor, his interpretation of nature, his power to move our souls; perhaps we are disappointed in having to exchange Wessex peasants for middle class gentlemen and ladies whom more than one living artist could have drawn as well. But if "A Laodicean" cannot be ranked among Mr. Hardy's masterpieces, it evidently served as an inclined plane to let the author of "The Trumpet Major" down to the level of the author of "Two on a Tower" (1882).

This romance, as the author entitled it in the English edition, is in some respects a successful, and in all respects, a powerful book. It is not devoid of humor, as the delightful description of the choir practice amply proves. It is certainly a romance if a strange and almost bizarre plot can give a story as claim to that title. It does not yield to any of our author's stories as a character study, nor does it yield to any story of modern times in its absolute truth to the fundamental principles of human nature under certain given circumstances. More than any of Mr. Hardy's novels it gives one the impression of being a study undertaken on definite lines and with a definite object. That object is the endeavor to show
the misery that must come to the woman who allows her passion for a man to blind her to the obstacles which difference of age, of rank, of education, of social aim, have set between them. The absorbing, the disastrous passion of Lady Constantine for her young astronomer, Swithin St. Cleve, the secret marriage, the terrible complications that arise upon her discovery that she was not a widow when she contracted this marriage, her anxiety to do no wrong to the budding genius of her boy husband, who still finds more to gaze at in the stars of heaven than in her own love-lit eyes, her open marriage to the Bishop of Melchester to save her reputation, the awakening of St. Cleve to the fact that there are other women in the world besides his quandam wife and patroness, and finally the death scene in the tower when the heart of her that loved not wisely, but too well, has snapped beneath its weight of grief—all these particulars make up a story of intense power and interest. But it is a painful story. The Genius of Pessimism is slowly rising from the magic jar in which our author has endeavored to imprison him. It is almost too much to ask us to sit quietly by while the beautiful and loving creature Mr. Hardy has given life to becomes involved in the meshes of a fate that knows no unloosing. It is too much to ask us to read a romance that contains not a single heroic character. Natural and true to life in many respects this story may be, but its truthfulness is not the truthfulness of great art, because repulsiveness forms no element of the truth of art.

Passing over the novelette entitled "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" (1884), which demands no serious consideration, we come to the least attractive of all Mr. Hardy's novels, "The Mayor of Casterbridge" (1886), a work, by the way, which the booksellers find to be unpopular. In the setting of this story we recognize much of our author's old power. The quiet rural town1 is set as distinctly

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1Casterbridge is Dorchester, the Durnovaria of the Romans. For an interesting description of our author's haunts see Mr. J. William White's letters to the New York Nation for September 8 and 15, 1892.
before us as Cranford is. But the people to whom Mr. Hardy introduces us upon its streets are not the people Mrs. Gaskell makes us know and love. There is to our mind not a really attractive character in the whole book. The good ones have a tendency to become commonplace, the bad ones can hardly be said to be interesting. It is true that Michael Henchard, the self-made hero, is a remarkable character study from the point of view of a psychologist or a sociologist, but that does not make him a proper hero for a novel, and we are forced to conclude that even the genius of Mr. Hardy cannot long sustain its eagle flight when, to borrow a metaphor from Shelley, its wings are cramped by the constraining folds of the serpent of pessimism.

But the darkest hour is that which immediately precedes the dawn. In "The Mayor of Casterbridge" the sun of Mr. Hardy's genius seems almost sunk from sight; in "The Woodlanders" (1886–7) it is seen rising slowly from the waves. Again we have the intimate sense of the mystery and the passion of nature; again we have the wonderful power of describing rural characters; again we have the closely knit and powerful action; we even have glimpses of the old humor. Still there is an indefinable something that separates the author of "The Woodlanders" from the author of "Far from the Madding Crowd." Twelve years have made Mr. Hardy a more practised writer, they have given him a wider experience, but they have not made him any more in love with life. On the contrary, as has been indicated, they have frequently made him see little in life except a purposeless struggle in the coils of an implacable fate. And so Giles Winterbourne in "The Woodlanders" fails in the pursuit of his love, which is his life, when Farmer Oak, in "Far from the Madding Crowd" succeeds. Honesty, loyalty, and love meet death for their reward; while a barely decent repentance on the part of a rather repulsive personage is rewarded by the love of a heroine who though scarcely noble is worthy of a better fate. It, therefore, matters little when we view "The Woodlanders" as a whole, whether the descriptions of
the forests to be found in its pages are unexcelled in truth and beauty even by Mr. Hardy himself, or whether the scene which describes Marty South dressing the grave of Winterbourne is the finest in the whole range of our author's novels; for the total impression produced by the book is painful because the fate that rules its characters is to Mr. Hardy, as well as to his readers, the relentless fate of alien times and peoples. And yet how powerful and original the book is, and who else among modern Englishmen could have written it!

It must not be imagined that during this long period of incessant novel writing Mr. Hardy refrained entirely from trying his hand on that popular form of literature, the short story. His novelette, "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid," has been already mentioned, but it may be recalled again to praise the character of the lime-burner Jim, and to condemn the generally improbable features of the plot. Besides this story, Mr. Hardy wrote before the year 1888 at least six stories of notable merit, five of which were in this year collected in a volume entitled "Wessex Tales, Strange, Lively, and Commonplace." The tales thus brought together were entitled "The Three Strangers," "The Withered Arm," "Fellow Townsmen," "Interlopers at the Knap," and "The Distracted Preacher." An interesting story not included in this collection is "What the Shepherd Saw."

Mr. Hardy has done nothing more realistic in the more technical sense of that word than in these stories. By this we mean that he has kept a stricter guard over his poetic and romantic tendencies than elsewhere in his works. He allows himself to be humorous, but rarely to flash his imagination over the scene he is observing with his wide-awake eyes. In "Under the Greenwood Tree" he had proved himself to be as close an observer of animate and inanimate nature as one could well wish to have for a guide, but the closeness of his observation had not prevented him from sometimes looking at things with the eyes of a poet. It is Hardy the pure prose-man who confronts us in "Wessex Tales," and certainly we
could not well afford to lose this aspect of his genius. There are few stories in all literature more perfectly worked out in every detail than the "Three Strangers;" there are few that show more keen observation and humor than "The Interlopers at the Knap" and "The Distracted Preacher." But it is a dry, white light which plays over these stories, not the delicate, subtly-tinted light that plays over the exquisite idyl that describes the wooing of Richard Dewey and Fancy Day.

It is, however, a subtly-tinted light that plays over Mr. Hardy's second volume of short stories published three years later, and entitled "A Group of Noble Dames." This Wessex Decameron consists of ten tales, each of which concerns itself with the fortunes of a noble dame, and each of which is a work of perfect art. Not only is Mr. Hardy able to show his wonted power of characterization within the narrow limits he has set himself—which cannot always be said of him in "Wessex Tales"—but he is also able by a few sure touches to surround his characters with environments such as he has not hitherto attempted to depict. The ability to transport himself and his readers into the past which he had shown eleven years before in "The Trumpet Major," is shown here to a greater degree. The eighteenth century lives for us again in nearly every story as truly as it does in the poems of Austin Dobson. This is high praise, but it is deserved. A more charming book has not been given to the world for many years, and its charm and grace are ample proof that Mr. Hardy does not always live under the shadow of pessimism.

But it is a book not a year old which has made Mr. Hardy the most prominent living English novelist. "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" is possibly too fresh in our minds and the verdicts of its various critics and readers are still too jarring and confused to enable us to feel certain that we are criticizing it fairly, and not merely taking up the cudgels for or

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1One is forced to wonder whether Mr. Barrie had not read this story before he began "The Little Minister."
against certain very pronounced opinions of its author. For in this novel, as in "Two on a Tower," Mr. Hardy seems to have succumbed to a popular tendency, and to have written a novel with a purpose. We say seems, for after all the purpose may have developed itself after the inception of the story—the opening incident of which at least was founded on fact—or it may have ceased to affect the writer the moment he became deeply interested in his characters. We confess that the power and the movement of the story are so great that it is only when we read a review of it that we are conscious that its author had any purpose save that which is common to every true writer of fiction—viz.: to tell a story which shall please. But this unconsciousness of a novelist's purpose is the highest tribute that can be paid to his work.

It would be useless to enter here upon any elaborate account of the plot of a book every one is reading or has read. As we all know Tess, the milkmaid heroine, has fallen from virtue through no fault of her own. Subsequently her great passion for a second and nobler lover sweeps her into a marriage with him after she has failed to tell him of her condition, although she has attempted to do so. Her confession of her secret to her husband is one of the most powerful and painful scenes in all literature. After the weak man has deserted her, she undergoes in patience a life of unspeakable torture, but at last falls again to her former betrayer in order to keep her mother and her family from starvation. Her husband returns to her, and in her remorse she stabs her betrayer to death. After a brief period of ecstatic bliss with the now repentant man, whose desertion has brought her to such a pass, she is seized by the officers of the law and led to the scaffold. Her story ends with the husband and her young sister moving away with averted eyes from the black flag that floats above the gloomy modern jail. In the words of her Creator, "'Justice' was done, and Time, the arch-satirist, had had his joke out with Tess."

"How horrible, how pessimistic," exclaims one reader.
"How absurd," says another, "to attempt to prove that such a woman was pure," this last personage being swift to remember Mr. Hardy's sub-title, "A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented." "What is the good of such stories when they only make one weep?" says a third. "It is the greatest tragedy of modern times," says a fourth. "It is a dangerous book to put into the hands of the young," says a fifth. And so on through a chorus of praise and blame which seems to us to be as a rule beside the point.

In the first place, we see little use in arguing whether or not Tess was really pure. We may see some excuse for her second fall, another may not. But what no one can fail to see is that in Tess Mr. Hardy has drawn a great character, nay, his greatest character, and we venture to say the greatest character in recent fiction. She seizes one at once and never looses her hold. What does it matter to us, from the point of view of art, whether she is pure or not, provided she does not repel us? There is here no allurement to sin, no attempt to make wrong right, no disposition to paint vice in the colors that belong to virtue. We see in her only a beautiful earth-born creature struggling against a fate too strong for her, a fate that brings her to a dishonored grave, and yet not a fate that will cut her off from the peace and joy of another world than this. She is elemental, this peasant's daughter with the blood of a Norman noble in her veins. She has the elemental freshness, the odor of earth, that Mr. Hardy's other peasants have, but she has also an elemental strength and nobility that they have not. This elemental freshness, this elemental strength and nobility, make her a woman fit to set in the gallery of Shakspere's women—which is but to say that she is a creation of genius that time cannot devour. Her story is pure tragedy—the greatest tragedy, it seems to us, that has been written since the days of the Elizabethans—it lacks "the accomplishment of verse," but at least it is told in the strongest and purest prose. If this be true, how vain to call it a horrible book? As well call the "Othello" horrible. Granted
that it leaves a sensation of pain that lingers with a reader for hours, still it is the bitter-sweet pain that tragedy always leaves, and the pain is overbalanced by the pleasure we gain from our appreciation of the artist's triumph. Mr. Hardy may take his leave of us with a pessimistic fling, but he has succeeded malgré pessimism in producing a great work of art. He must have kept his eye fixed upon the nobleness, the pathos of his heroine's life, he must have seen a rift in the black sky above her, he must have sunk his realism in idealism, his pessimism in optimism, oftener than he was perhaps aware of.

Viewed in its details, this book impresses one as strongly as it does when viewed as a whole. Its subordinate characters are admirably drawn and all help on the action. The husband, Angel Clare, is scarcely worthy of Tess's love, but Mr. Hardy has the authority of the Greeks for setting the man's selfishness and subservience to conventionalism as a foil to the natural purity and charm of the woman. Euripides makes Admetus serve as a foil to Alkestis. Mrs. Durbeyfield, the silly mother, who is responsible for Tess's fall, is a creature seen time and again among her class. Angel Clare's evangelical father and mother are also touched off in a few strokes which have the inevitableness that a master's hand alone can give. It is perhaps needless to praise Dairyman Crick and the love-lorn milkmaids, for with such characters Mr. Hardy is always at home, and with them he never fails to be humorous, even if he does not rise to the humor that belongs of right to the creator of Joseph Poorgrass.

But this is also a novel of powerful and memorable scenes. That in which Tess christens her child of shame, giving him the name of Sorrow, while her little brothers and sisters act as clerk and congregation, is piercing in its pathos, to borrow an expression of Matthew Arnold's. This scene was omitted from the first American edition of "Tess," and the book was thereby greatly mutilated. No one who has read it can ever forget it or forget the lesson of charity it teaches. Very powerful also are the scenes describing Tess's confession
to her husband and the consequences of that confession, although it is impossible to deny that the sleep-walking experiences of the pair are somewhat exaggerated. With the departure of Angel Clare the clouds of doom begin to mass above Tess's head and the tragedy gathers such swift intensity that it is almost vain to speak of scenes. But who will forget Tess's first day at the bleak upland farm, or her frustrated visit to her father-in-law's house, or her second meeting with her betrayer, or her sudden deed of frenzy, or her capture on Salisbury plain under the Shadow of Stonehenge? To forget these scenes would imply the power to forget the sight of Lear upon the wintry heath or of Othello in the death chamber of his "gentle lady."

But "Tess" has merits that lie apart from the power of characterization and of dramatic presentation which its author so constantly displays. Never has Mr. Hardy's knowledge of nature stood him in better stead than in the descriptive passages which here and there break the tense thread of the action. They have the effect that all description should have in a novel, of heightening the impression which the author is endeavoring to convey by means of his characters and their actions. We read them only to plunge once more into the narrative of Tess's adventures with a sense of the impotence of nature to avert the doom of her choicest creation. At times it seems as if this modern Englishman were really a Greek endowed with the power of personifying the trees and streams past which his heroine glides, just as he seems to be a Greek in his never-ceasing sense of the presence of an inexorable fate. In fine, the Hardy of this novel is the Hardy who has charmed and impressed us before, but also a Hardy of heightened and matured powers—a master of fiction.

But it is high time to bring this article to a close, and in doing so we shall attempt to sum up the qualities that appear to us to make Mr. Hardy a great novelist. It would be pleasant to compare him with his contemporaries and to endeavor to show why we believe him to stand both in breadth
and depth of genius supreme among his living rivals. But this would require another article, and it is a kind of criticism which certain recent writers pronounce to be unscientific. We might be able to defend its usefulness in spite of the stigma which seems nowadays to attach to everything deductive, but we forbear.

Our first reason for considering Mr. Hardy great is that he possesses a great and individual style. He has the rare power of saying exactly what he wants to say in clear, strong, and charming English, even though his diction is at all times Latin rather than Teutonic, as Mr. Sharp has pointed out. He does not write rhetorical prose or, as a rule, poetic prose, but a prose that has a rhythm which does not suggest poetry, and that always fits its subject-matter as closely as a well-cut garment.

The second quality of Mr. Hardy's greatness is his wonderful power of describing and interpreting inanimate nature. We have so often referred to this power that we shall now content ourselves with observing that if meditative Wordsworth be substituted for blythe-hearted Chaucer in Landor's famous lines to Browning, they will be found not inapplicable to Mr. Hardy:—

"Since Chaucer was alive and hale
No man has walked along our roads with step
So active, so enquiring eye, or tongue
So varied in discourse."

A third quality of our novelist's greatness is his power as a narrator. His characters move, the action never halts. He has the threads of his plot well in hand, and although he does not attempt to manage many threads, he leaves his readers confident of his power to do so should he wish. One feels in reading Hardy that this man has found his true vocation, that he is not a social reformer like Mrs. Ward or a philosopher like George Eliot, using the novel as the best means to reach the masses, but a story-teller, a lineal descendant of the cyclic bards of Greece, of the troubadours
of France, of the ballad singers and dramatic poets of merry England.

Fourth and last of Mr. Hardy’s qualities that may be mentioned here is his power of characterization. His gallery of women is unique, even if he has seldom drawn one whom his average male reader would care to marry. Bathsheba Everdene, Elfride Swancoat, Ethelberta Petherwin, Eustacia Vye, Mrs. Yeobright, Anne Garland, Paula Power, Lady Constantine, Grace Melbury, Marty South, the “ever-memorable” group, and finally, to crown all, Tess, the milkmaid—who of our modern novelists can make such a showing! There they stand, flesh and blood women, whose every action, whose most delicate sensation is thoroughly understood by their creator. We can only regret that he has not chosen to portray a larger number of them as distinctly noble, but he has given us Marty South and Tess, and the others are all admirable in their kind and degree. For his own sex Mr. Hardy has done as well, if not better. The peasants of “Under the Greenwood Tree,” Henry Knight, Farmer Oak, Joseph Poorgrass, Wildeve, Clym Yeobright, the Reddleman, Bob Loveday and his brother, the Trumpet Major, Dare, Swithin St. Cleve, Michael Henchard, Giles Winterbourne, and Angel Clare, are all striking characters, five of whom are noble men, and one of whom, Joseph Poorgrass, is destined to immortality.

It is unnecessary to repeat how great a debt we owe to this novelist for making his favorite Wessex, that strange country of pagan survivals, as well known to us almost as our own birthplace. His success as a provincial novelist has made many critics and readers overlook the fact that he has claims to a higher place among writers of fiction—a place not far below the exalted station where we have put Fielding and Scott and Thackeray, and for which Bulwer and Dickens and George Eliot are yet struggling. As he is still in the prime of life, and as his last work shows such an immense stride forward in his powers of characterization and of dramatic presentation, we hesitate to affirm that he will
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not eventually lift himself to this high and secure position. He gives one always the impression that he has not put forth his full powers, and that there is yet more to come. If, as the years go by, he attains more and more to the philosophic mind, if he sees further into the secrets of life and nature and learns that pessimism and realism do not comprise the last words that art has in store for man; if he gives fuller scope to these poetic powers which are his by nature and which his wide observation and his deep study of the poets have strengthened, it may be that he will put a still greater distance between himself and his contemporaries—some of whom, like Mr. George Meredith, are pressing him close—and that he will yet write his name among the supreme masters of fiction—that is, among the benefactors of the human race.¹

¹As we go to press we find that Harper's Bazar for October 1 contains the opening chapters of Mr. Hardy's new novel, "The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved. A Sketch of a Temperament."