CHAPTER X

LONDON, NORMANDY, AND CAMBRIDGE

1879–1880: Aet. 39–40

After their return to London they visited and dined out here and there, and as Mrs. Hardy had never seen the Lord Mayor’s Show Hardy took her to view it from the upper windows of Good Words in Ludgate Hill. She remarked that the surface of the crowd seemed like a boiling cauldron of porridge. He jots down that ‘as the crowd grows denser it loses its character of an aggregate of countless units, and becomes an organic whole, a molluscsous black creature having nothing in common with humanity, that takes the shape of the streets along which it has lain itself, and throws out horrid excrescences and limbs into neighbouring alleys; a creature whose voice exudes from its scaly coat, and who has an eye in every pore of its body. The balconies, stands, and railway-bridge are occupied by small detached shapes of the same tissue, but of gentler motion, as if they were the spawn of the monster in their midst.’

On a Sunday in the same November they met in Mr. Frith’s studio, to which they had been invited, Sir Percy Shelley (the son of Percy Bysshe) and Lady Shelley. Hardy said afterwards that the meeting was as shadowy and remote as were those previous occasions when he had impinged on the penumbra of the poet he loved — that time of his sleeping at the Cross-Keys, St. John Street, and that of the visits he paid to Old St. Pancras Churchyard. He was to enter that faint penumbra twice more, once when he stood beside Shelley’s dust in the English cemetery at Rome, and last when by Mary Shelley’s grave at Bournemouth.

They also met in the studio a deaf old lady, introduced as ‘Lady Bacon’ (though she must have been Lady Charlotte Bacon), who ‘talked vapidly of novels, saying she never read them — not thinking them positively wicked, but, well . . . .’. Mr. Frith afterwards explained that she was Byron’s Ianthe, to whom he dedicated the First and Second Cantos of Childe Harold when she was Lady Charlotte Harley. That ‘Peri of the West’, with an eye ‘wild as the Gazelle’s’, and a
voice that had entered Byron's ear, was now a feeble beldame muffled up in black and furs. (It may be mentioned that she died the following year.)

Hardy met there too — a distinctly modern juxtaposition — Miss Braddon, who 'had a broad, thought-creased, world-beaten face — a most amiable woman', whom he always liked.

In December Hardy attended the inaugural dinner of the Rabelais Club at the Tavistock Hotel, in a 'large, empty, dimly-lit, cheerless apartment, with a gloomy crimson screen hiding what remained of the only cheerful object there — the fire. There was a fog in the room as in the streets, and one man only came in evening dress, who, Walter Pollock said, looked like the skull at the banquet, but who really looked like a conjuror dying of the cold among a common set of thick-jacketed men who could stand it. When I came in Leland turned his high flat façade to me — like that of a clock-tower; his face being the clock-face, his coat swaying like a pendulum; features earnest and energetic, altogether those of a single-minded man. There were also Fred Pollock, girlish-looking; and genial Walter Besant, with his West-of-England sailor face and silent pantomimic laughter. Sir Patrick Colquhoun was as if he didn't know what he was there for, how he arrived there, or how he was going to get home again. Two others present, Palmer [afterwards murdered in the East] and Joe Knight [the dramatic critic] also seemed puzzled about it.

'When dinner was over and things had got warmer, Leland in his speech remarked with much emphasis that we were men who ought to be encouraged, which sentiment was applauded with no misgivings of self-conceit. D——, now as always, made himself the clown of our court, privileged to say anything by virtue of his office. Hence when we rose to drink the health of absent members, he stayed firmly sitting, saying he would not drink it because they ought to have been there, afterwards lapsing into Spanish on the strength of his being going some day to publish a translation of Don Quixote. Altogether we were as Rabelaisian as it was possible to be in the foggy circumstances, though I succeeded but poorly.'

It should be explained that this Rabelais Club, which had a successful existence for many years, had been instituted by Sir Walter Besant — a great lover of clubs and societies — as a declaration for virility in literature. Hardy was pressed to join as being the most virile writer of works of imagination then in London; while, it may be added, Henry James after a discussion was rejected for the lack of that quality, though he was afterwards invited as a guest.