CHAPTER II

STUDENT AND ARCHITECT

1856–1862: Aet. 16–21

At sixteen, though he had just begun to be interested in French and the Latin classics, the question arose of a profession or business. His father as a builder had carried out the designs of, and so become associated with, Mr. John Hicks, an architect and church-restorer originally in practice in Bristol and now in Dorchester. Having seen Thomas Hardy junior when his father conjointly with another builder was executing Mr. Hicks’s restoration of, it is believed, Woodsford Castle, and tested him by inviting him to assist at a survey, Hicks wished to have him as a pupil, offering to take him for somewhat less than the usual premium, payable in the middle of a term of three years. As the father was a ready-money man, Mrs. Hardy suggested to the architect a substantial abatement for paying down the whole premium at the beginning of the term, and to this Mr. Hicks, who was not a ready-money man, agreed. Hardy was a born bookworm, that and that alone was unchanging in him; he had sometimes, too, wished to enter the Church; but he cheerfully agreed to go to Mr. Hicks’s.

JULY 1856

The architect’s office was at 39 South Street, Dorchester, now part of a Temperance Hotel, though the room in which Hardy used to draw is unchanged. On arriving he found there a pupil of twenty-one, who was at the end of his term and was just leaving; also a pupil in the first year of his articles, a year or more older than himself, who had been well educated at a good school in or near London, and who, having a liking for the classical tongues, regretted his recent necessity of breaking off his studies to take up architecture. They began later to read together, and during the ensuing two or three years often gave more time to books than to drawing. Hicks, too, was exceptionally well educated for an ordinary country architect. The son of a Gloucestershire rector, who had been a good classical scholar, he had
read some Greek, and had a smattering of Hebrew (probably taught him by his father); though, rather oddly, he was less at home with Latin. He was a kindly-natured man, almost jovial, and allowed the two youths some leisure for other than architectural study, though much of Hardy's reading in the ensuing years was done between five and eight in the morning before he left home for the office. In the long summer days he would even rise at four and begin. In these circumstances he got through a moderately good number of the usual classical pages — several books of the *Aeneid*, some Horace and Ovid, etc.; and in fact grew so familiar with his authors that in his walks to and from the town he often caught himself soliloquizing in Latin on his various projects. He also took up Greek, which he had not learnt at school, getting on with some books of the *Iliad*. He once said that nearly all his readings in the last-named work had been done in the morning before breakfast.

Hicks was ahead of them in Greek, though they could beat him in Latin, and he used to ridicule their construings, often when these were more correct than his own. When cornered and proved wrong he would take shelter behind the excuse that his school-days were longer ago than theirs.

At this time the Rev. William Barnes, the Dorset poet and philologist, was keeping school next door. Knowing him to be an authority upon grammar Hardy would often run in to ask Barnes to decide some knotty point in dispute between him and his fellow-pupil. Hardy used to assert in later years that upon almost every occasion the verdict was given in his favour.

An unusual incident occurred during his pupillage at Hicks's which, though it had nothing to do with his own life, was dramatic enough to have mention. One summer morning at Bockhampton, just before he sat down to breakfast, he remembered that a man was to be hanged at eight o'clock at Dorchester. He took up the big brass telescope that had been handed on in the family, and hastened to a hill on the heath a quarter of a mile from the house, whence he looked towards the town. The sun behind his back shone straight on the white stone façade of the gaol, the gallows upon it, and the form of the murderer in white fustian, the executioner and officials in dark clothing and the crowd below being invisible at this distance of nearly three miles. At the moment of his placing the glass to his eye the white figure dropped downwards, and the faint note of the town clock struck eight.

The whole thing had been so sudden that the glass nearly fell