CHAPTER VII

‘FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD’, MARRIAGE, AND ANOTHER NOVEL

1873–1876: Aet. 33–36

Some half-year before this, in December 1872, Hardy had received at Bockhampton a letter from Leslie Stephen, the editor of the Cornhill — by that time well known as a man of letters, Saturday reviewer, and Alpine climber — asking for a serial story for his magazine. He had lately read Under the Greenwood Tree, and thought ‘the descriptions admirable’. It was ‘long since he had received more pleasure from a new writer’, and it had occurred to him that such writing would probably please the readers of the Cornhill Magazine as much as it had pleased him.

Hardy had replied that he feared the date at which he could write a story for the Cornhill would be too late for Mr. Stephen’s purpose, since he already had on hand a succeeding novel (i.e. A Pair of Blue Eyes), which was arranged for; but that the next after should be at Mr. Stephen’s disposal. He had thought of making it a pastoral tale with the title of Far from the Madding Crowd — and that the chief characters would probably be a young woman-farmer, a shepherd, and a sergeant of cavalry. That was all he had done. Mr. Stephen had rejoined that he was sorry he could not expect a story from Hardy at an earlier date; that he did not, however, mean to fix any particular time; that the idea of the story attracted him; also the proposed title; and that he would like Hardy to call and talk it over when he came to Town. There the matter had been left. Now Hardy set about the pastoral tale, the success of A Pair of Blue Eyes meanwhile surpassing his expectations, the influential Saturday Review pronouncing it to be the most artistically constructed of the novels of its time — a quality which, by the bye, would carry little recommendation in these days of loose construction and indifference to organic homogeneity.

But Hardy did not call on Stephen just then.
It was, indeed, by the merest chance that he had ever got the *Cornhill* letter at all. The postal arrangements in Dorset were still so primitive at this date that the only delivery of letters at Hardy’s father’s house was by the hand of some friendly neighbour who had come from the next village, and Stephen’s request for a story had been picked up in the mud of the lane by a labouring man, the school children to whom it had been entrusted having dropped it on the way.

While thus in the seclusion of Bockhampton, writing *Far from the Madding Crowd*, we find him on September 21, walking to Woodbury-Hill Fair, approximately described in the novel as ‘Greenhill Fair’. On the 24th he was shocked at hearing of the tragic death of his friend Horace Moule, from whom he had parted cheerfully at Cambridge in June. The body was brought to be buried at Fordington, Dorchester, and Hardy attended the funeral. It was a matter of keen regret to him now, and for a long time after, that Moule and the woman to whom Hardy was warmly attached had never set eyes on each other; and that she could never make Moule’s acquaintance, or be his friend.

On the 30th of September he sent to Leslie Stephen at his request as much of the MS. of *Far from the Madding Crowd* as was written — apparently between two and three monthly parts, though some of it only in rough outline — and a few days after a letter came from Stephen stating that the story suited him admirably as far as it had gone, and that though as a rule it was desirable to see the whole of a novel before definitely accepting it, under the circumstances he decided to accept it at once.

So Hardy went on writing *Far from the Madding Crowd* — sometimes indoors, sometimes out — when he would occasionally find himself without a scrap of paper at the very moment that he felt volumes. In such circumstances he would use large dead leaves, white chips left by the wood-cutters, or pieces of stone or slate that came to hand. He used to say that when he carried a pocket-book his mind was barren as the Sahara.

This autumn Hardy assisted at his father’s cider-making — a proceeding he had always enjoyed from childhood — the apples being from huge old trees that have now long perished. It was the last time he ever took part in a work whose sweet smells and oozings in the crisp autumn air can never be forgotten by those who have had a hand in it.

Memorandum by T. H.: