CHAPTER XXIV

Collecting Old Poems and Making New

1897–1898: Aet. 57–58

The misrepresentations of the last two or three years affected but little, if at all, the informed appreciation of Hardy’s writings, being heeded almost entirely by those who had not read him; and turned out ultimately to be the best thing that could have happened; for they well-nigh compelled him, in his own judgment at any rate, if he wished to retain any shadow of self-respect, to abandon at once a form of literary art he had long intended to abandon at some indefinite time, and resume openly that form of it which had always been more instinctive with him, and which he had just been able to keep alive from his early years, half in secrecy, under the pressure of magazine-writing. He abandoned it with all the less reluctance in that the novel was, in his own words, “gradually losing artistic form, with a beginning, middle, and end, and becoming a spasmodic inventory of items, which has nothing to do with art”.

The change, after all, was not so great as it seemed. It was not as if he had been a writer of novels proper, and as more specifically understood, that is, stories of modern artificial life and manners showing a certain smartness of treatment. He had mostly aimed, and mostly succeeded, to keep his narratives close to natural life, and as near to poetry in their subject as the conditions would allow, and
had often regretted that those conditions would not let him keep them nearer still.

Nevertheless he had not known, whilst a writer of prose, whether he might not be driven to society novels, and hence, as has been seen, he had kept, at casual times, a record of his experiences in upper social life, though doing it had always been a drudgery to him. It was now with a sense of great comfort that he felt he might leave off further chronicles of that sort; and it will be found that from this point the writer of these pages has very little material of the kind available. But his thoughts on literature and life were often written down still, from which much of which follows has been abridged.

He had already for some time been getting together the poems which made up the first volume of verse that he was about to publish. In date they ranged from 1865 intermittently onwards, the middle period of his novel writing producing very few or none, but of late years they had been added to with great rapidity, though at first with some consternation he had found an awkwardness in getting back to an easy expression in numbers after abandoning it for so many years; but that soon wore off.

He and his wife went to London as usual this year (1897) but did not take a house there. After two or three weeks' stay, during which, according to Mrs Hardy's diary, they went to a large dance at Londonderry House, given for Lady Helen Stewart, they adopted the plan of living some way out, and going up and down every few days, the place they made their temporary centre being Basingstoke. In this way they saw London friends, went to concerts at the Imperial Institute (the orchestra this season being the famous Vienna band under Edouard Strauss), saw one or two Ibsen plays, and the year's pictures. Being near they also went over the mournful relics of that city of the past, Silchester; till in the middle of June they started for Switzerland, thus entirely escaping the racket of the coming Diamond Jubilee, and the discomfort it would bring upon people like them who had no residence of their own in London and no invitation to any Jubilee function.

All the world, including the people of fashion habitually abroad, was in London or arriving there, and the charm of a lonely Continent impressed the twain much. The almost empty Channel steamer, the ease with which they crossed France from Havre by Paris, Dijon, and Pontarlier to Neuchâtel, the excellent rooms accorded them by obsequious hosts at the hotels in Switzerland usually frequented by English and American tourists, made them