CHAPTER XXIX

Deaths of Swinburne and Meredith

1908–1909: Aet. 67–69

In March he finished preparing a book of selections from the poems of William Barnes, for the Clarendon Press, Oxford, with a critical preface and glossary.

In April Lady St. Helier and a party motored from beyond Newbury to Max Gate and back, arriving within five minutes of the time specified, although the distance each way was seventy-five miles. It was considered a good performance in those days. At the end of the month he dined at the Royal Academy, but was in Dorchester at a performance by the local Dramatic Society of some scenes from The Dynasts—the first attempt to put on the stage a dramatic epic that was not intended for staging at all. In May he sent his Presidential Address to the Society of Dorset Men in London, to be read by the Secretary, as he was always a victim to influenza and throat trouble if he read or spoke in London himself, and afterwards on request sent the original manuscript. (By the way, the address never was read, so he might have saved himself the trouble of writing it. What became of the manuscript is unknown.)

The following letter to Mr Robert Donald in May explains itself:
If I felt at all strongly, or indeed weakly, on the desirability of a memorial to Shakespeare in the shape of a theatre, I would join the Committee. But I do not think that Shakespeare appertains particularly to the theatrical world nowadays, if ever he did. His distinction as a minister to the theatre is infinitesimal beside his distinction as a poet, man of letters, and seer of life, and that his expression of himself was cast in the form of words for actors and not in the form of books to be read was an accident of his social circumstances that he himself despised. I would, besides, hazard the guess that he, of all poets of high rank whose works have taken a stage direction, will some day cease altogether to be acted, and be simply studied.

I therefore do not see the good of a memorial theatre, or for that matter any other material monument to him, and prefer not to join the Committee.

Nevertheless I sincerely thank you for letting me know how the movement is progressing, and for your appreciative thought that my joining the promoters would be an advantage.

Hardy afterwards modified the latter part of the above opinion in favour of a colossal statue in some public place.

It appears that the Hardys did not take any house or flat in London this year, contenting themselves with short visits and hotel quarters, so that there is not much to mention. From letters it can be gathered that at a dinner his historic sense was keenly appealed to by the Duchess of St. Albans taking a diamond pin from her neck and casually telling him it had been worn by Nell Gwynne; and that in May or June he paid a few days’ visit to Lord Curzon at Hackwood Park, where many of the house-party, which included Lady Elcho, Mr and Mrs Charteris, Sir J. and Lady Poynder, Lord Robert Cecil, Mr Haldane, Alfred and Mrs Alfred Lyttelton, Mr and Mrs Rochfort Maguire, Lord and Lady Cromer, Arthur Balfour, and Professor Walter Raleigh, went into the wood by moonlight to listen to the nightingale, but made such a babble of conversation that no nightingale ventured to open his bill.

In July Hardy was again in London with Mrs Hardy, and was present at the unveiling by Lord Curzon of the memorial to his friend “John Oliver Hobbes” (Mrs Craigie) at University College, where he had the pleasure of hearing his writings cried down by a speaker, nobody knowing him to be present. During some of these days he sat to Sir Hubert Herkomer for his portrait, kindly