A STUDY FOR A PORTRAIT

THE MARN'LL BOOK

OF THE BLACKMORE VALE

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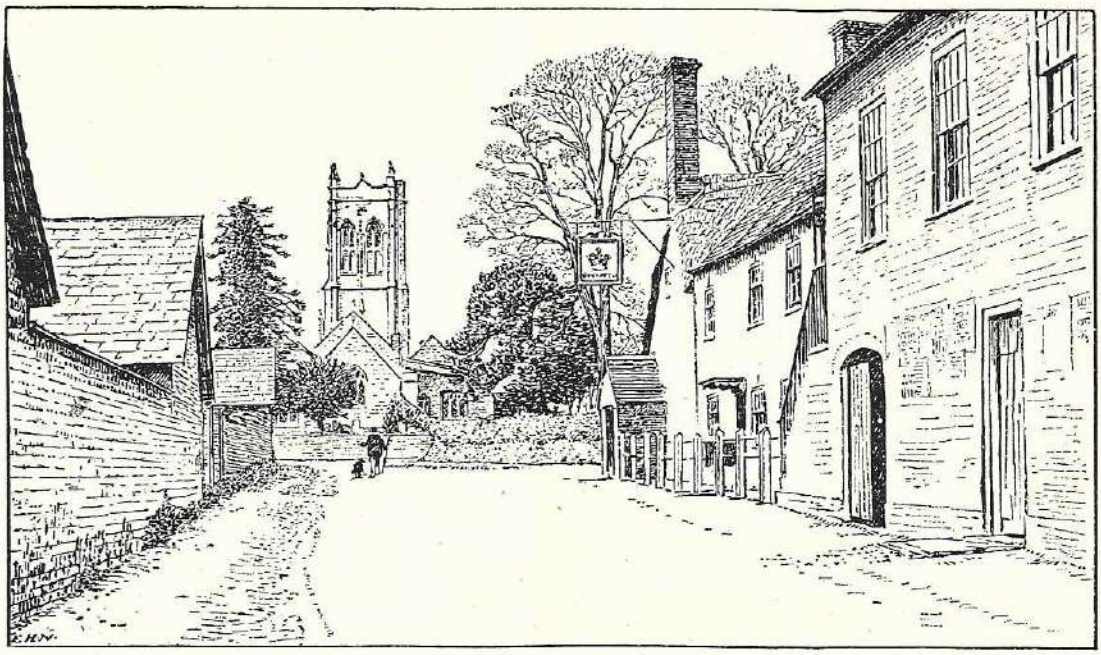

214: MARLOTT: "THE PURE DROP" *by E. H. New, from* The Wessex of Thomas Hardy *by B. C. A. Windle,* 1906

THOMAS HARDY

& THE MARNHULL DISTRICT

MARNHULL is not famous in history, art or literature, with one notable exception. We remember the fable of a lioness who, when asked how many children she had, replied, "One, but that one is a lion." Marnhull's lion is Thomas Hardy. Not only did he choose this village as the birthplace and home of one of his heroines, but she was his greatest heroine: Tess, of the D'Urbervilles.

The district has a double association with Hardy. He lived at Sturminster Newton from July 3, 1876 to March 18, 1878. He was married in the late autumn of 1874, but the first two years of married life were spent in London and in various other lodgings. They longed for a home, and did some house-hunting in this district - Childe Okeford, Shaftesbury, Blandford, Wimborne - before settling in "Riverside Villa": the first house of their own ("a pretty cottage overlooking the Dorset Stour", Mrs F. E. Hardy called it). Many years later friends called at Max Gate to take Hardy for a drive. They asked where he would like to go and he replied "To Sturminster, where I spent the happiest years of my life".

It was a time rich in creative energy. One of the greatest novels, *The Return of the Native,* was written then; and his poetic genius was already at work on plans for *The Dynasts.* Poems such as "On Sturminster Bridge" and "Overlooking the River Stour", while written later, show how vivid were his memories of swallows and moor-hens, of kingcups and lily pads, and of the current "clucking" into the hollows in the bridge piers.

The entries he made in his journal (here quoted from *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy,* by F. E. Hardy, Macmillan, 1928) while at Sturminster are full of interest. It is amusing to read how the Hardys furnished their first home by going to Bristol and buying one hundred pounds worth of Victorian furniture in two hours. Up to that time their household goods had consisted of several packing cases of books, and a door-scraper and bookcase bought at an auction.

The journal entries show great delight in country life, where "vegetables pass from growing to boiling, fruit from the bushes to the pudding, without a moment's halt, and the gooseberries that were ripening on the twig at noon are in the tart an hour later".

Here is another note under 1877:

> May 30. Walking to Marnhull. The prime of bird-singing. The thrushes and blackbirds are the most prominent, pleading earnestly rather than singing, and with such modulation that you seem to see their little tongues curl inside their bills in their emphasis. A bullfinch sings from a tree with a metallic sweetness piercing as a fife. . . .

He watches games and dancing on the grass, and notes how: "The pretty girls, just before a dance, stand in inviting positions on the grass". We can see how he is building up material for *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* so that his descriptions of country life and scenes are based on first hand observation. In the poem "Afterwards", he writes: "He was a man who used to notice such things". (He began the writing of the book in 1889, and it was published in 1891).

Hardy's topography is not always strictly accurate. Houses have been known to take wing from one part of the county to another to meet the author's requirements. But the references and descriptions in *Tess* (and in *Jude*) are more than usually accurate. And the story ranges over an unusually wide stretch of country. From

Shaftesbury, Marnhull and Sturminster Newton the action moves to Pentridge and Cranborne Chase; then into Blackmore Vale and the valley of the Frome, to Wool and Bindon, on to the bare uplands, across Batcombe Down to Evershot, Beaminster and Bridport. Back to Marnhull, thence to Bere Regis and to Bournemouth. Then comes the flight through the New Forest and Salisbury to Stonehenge and the ultimate act of the tragedy at Winchester. Each place, as it comes into the story, is made real and vivid; sometimes by only a few phrases, but again by such full descriptions as those of the Frome Valley or that of the Blackmore Vale (page 21).

We are concerned here only with references to Marnhull and its immediate vicinity. Marlott was the only home Tess knew. She was born here, went to the village school and joined in the social life of the place. If one reads *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* with careful attention to background detail it is possible to build up a picture of what the village life was like a hundred years or so ago.

The book opens with Tess's father walking home from Shaftesbury to Marnhull. And that very first sentence marks one great difference between the Marnhull of today and the Marlott of then. Of what Marnhull girl of the present could we write as Hardy does of Tess:

> The Vale of Blackmoor was to her the world, and its inhabitants, the races thereof. From the gates and stiles of Marlott she had looked down its length in the wondering days of infancy, and what had been mystery to her then was not much less than mystery to her now. She had seen daily from her chamber-window towers, villages, faint white mansions; above all the town of Shaston standing majestically on its height; its windows shining like lamps in the evening sun. She had hardly ever visited the place, only a small tract, even of the Vale and its environs being known to her by close inspection. Much less had she been far outside the valley. Every contour of the surrounding hills was as personal to her as that of her relatives' faces; but for what lay beyond her judgment was dependent on the teaching of the village school, where she had held a leading place at the time of her leaving, a year or two before this date.

Other references to education tell how:

> Mrs Durbeyfield habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, spoke two languages; the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality.

And again:

> Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed.

Tess tells Clare that when she left school: "They said I had great aptness, and should make a good teacher, so it was settled that I should be one. But there was trouble in my family; father was not very industrious and he drank a little".

Another educational influence was the church, where her love for music was fed. "She liked to hear the chanting - such as it was - and to join in the morning hymn". One of her favourites was the old double chant Langdon. Her chosen seat was "Under the gallery, close to the lumber, where only old men and women came, and where the bier stood on end among the churchyard tools".

A sad picture of the church is the funeral of little 'Sorrow', whose christening by Tess is not held sufficient to secure for him a Christian burial:

> So the baby was carried in a small deal box, under an ancient woman's shawl, to the churchyard that night, and buried by lantern-light, at the cost of a shilling and a pint of beer to the sexton, in that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptized infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the conjecturally damned are laid. In spite of the untoward surroundings, however, Tess bravely made a little cross of two laths and a piece of string, and having bound it with flowers, she stuck it up at the head of the grave one evening when she could enter the churchyard without being seen, putting at the foot also a bunch of the same flowers in a little jar of water to keep them alive.

Village life had its own pleasures, one of the greatest perhaps being the 'club walking' (see p. 148) of the women and girls, each dressed in white and carrying in one hand a peeled willow wand and in the other a bunch of flowers. After a processional march of two and two round the village they turned into a field near the "Pure Drop Inn" (The Crown) for dancing on the grass. Here Tess first saw Angel Clare. One of the few indications of where Hardy imagined Tess's cottage to be is the statement that when she left the dancing green she "bent her steps toward the end of the village at which the parental cottage lay".

She goes into a stone flagged room, lit by a single candle, where her mother stands over the washing tub, with one foot on the rocker of the baby's cradle and singing 'The Spotted Cow':

> The cradle-rockers had done hard duty for so many years, under the weight of so many children, on that flagstone floor, that they were worn nearly flat, in consequence of which a huge jerk accompanied each swing of the cot, flinging the baby from side to side like a weaver's shuttle, as Mrs Durbeyfield, excited by her song, trod the rocker with all the spring that was left in her after a long day's seething in the suds.
>
> Nick-knock, nick-knock, went the cradle; the candle-flame stretched itself tall, and began jigging up and down; the water dribbled from the matron's elbows, and the song galloped on to the end of the verse.

Tess comes from the pleasures of the dancing green; her parents seek their pleasure at Rolliver's, the alehouse at one end of 'the long and straggling village'. Rolliver's had only an off-license but there was a large bedroom upstairs, whose window was thickly curtained by a heavy woolen shawl. Here a few special customers foregathered:

> A gaunt four-post bedstead which stood in the room afforded sitting-space for several persons gathered round three of its sides; a couple more men had elevated themselves on a chest of drawers; another rested on the oak-carved 'cwoffer'; two on the wash-stand; another on the stool; and thus all were, somehow, seated at their ease.

The hours spent at Rolliver's proved fatal to 'Sir John' Durbeyfield. He declined from a haggler with horse and cart, carrying his trade as far afield as Dorchester, to a foot haggler, travelling with his basket on his arm. Often, to show that he was at work, he carried about an unfortunate live hen in a basket. This often lay for more than

an hour under the table at the inn, while the haggler sought rest and refreshment.

When Tess was called home by her mother's illness she found her father declined into an armchair invalid with a wonderful scheme in his head:

'I'm thinking of sending round to all the old antiqueerians in this part of England', he said, 'asking them to subscribe to a fund to maintain me. I'm sure they'd see it as a romantical, artistical, and proper thing to do. They spend lots o' money in keeping up old ruins, and finding the bones o' things, and such like; and living remains must be more interesting to 'em still, if they only knowed of me. Would that somebody would go round and tell 'em what there is living among 'em, and they thinking nothing of him! If Parson Tringham, who discovered me, had lived, he'd ha' done it, I'm sure.'

While this wonderful plan was being thought out the practical work of the garden had been quite neglected. Tess set to work upon their allotment:

The plot of ground was in a high, dry, open enclosure, where there were forty or fifty such pieces, and where labour was at its briskest when the hired labour of the day had ended. Digging began usually at six o'clock, and extended indefinitely into the dusk or moonlight. Just now heaps of dead weeds and refuse were burning on many of the plots, the dry weather favouring their combustion.

. . . .

As evening thickened some of the gardening men and women gave over for the night, but the greater number remained to get their planting done, Tess being among them, though she sent her sister home. It was on one of the couch-burning plots that she laboured with her fork, its four shining prongs resounding against the stones and dry clods in little clicks. Sometimes she was completely involved in the smoke of her fire; then it would leave her figure free, irradiated by the brassy glare from the heap. She was oddly dressed tonight, and presented a somewhat staring aspect, her attire being a gown bleached by many washings, with a short black jacket over it, the effect of the whole being that of a wedding and funeral guest in one. The women further back wore white aprons, which, with their pale faces, were all that could be seen of them in the gloom, except when at moments they caught a flash from the flames.

Westward, the wiry boughs of the bare thorn hedge which formed the boundary of the field rose against the pale opalescence of the lower sky. Above, Jupiter hung like a full-blown jonquil, so bright as almost to throw a shade. A few small nondescript stars were appearing elsewhere. In the distance a dog barked, and wheels occasionally rattled along the dry road.

Still the prongs continued to click assiduously, for it was not late; and though the air was fresh and keen there was a whisper of spring in it that cheered the workers on. Something in the place, the hour, the crackling fires, the fantastic mysteries of light and shade, made others as well as Tess enjoy being there. Nightfall, which in the frost of winter comes as a fiend and in the warmth of summer as a lover, came as a tranquillizer on this March day.

Tess went home from the allotment to learn of her father's sudden death and to be faced with further tragedy:

Her father's life had a value apart from his personal achievements, or perhaps it would not have had much. It was the last of the three lives for whose duration the house and premises were held under a lease; and it had long been coveted by the tenant-farmer for his regular labourers, who were stinted in cottage accommodation. Moreover, 'liviers' were disapproved of in villages almost as much as little freeholders, because of their independence of manner, and when a lease determined it was never renewed.

And so the family were driven to leave Marlott.

The description of work on the allotment might have been written today, but that of harvest carries us back to days before our modern machinery. It is so vivid that it is worth quoting almost in full (see under FARMING, p. 50). This and the pictures of life on the dairy farm in the Froom valley show how keen was Hardy's eye for country things, and it is only from this angle that we have considered *Tess*. The greatness of the book calls for other treatment and belongs elsewhere. We end as we began with pride and satisfaction that so much of this magnificent novel belongs to Marlott.

A.M.L.

WILLIAM BARNES

WE CANNOT pass without mention of the Dorset poet, William Barnes. He was born in the neighbouring hamlet of Bagber in 1801 (and lived until 1886) and his boyhood wanderings must often have led through this village, especially as his kinsfolk lived not far away. There are today two Marnhull residents, Howard and Harold Plowman, whose grandfather was Barnes's brother.

His poems of rural life, whenever written, show how rich were his memories of this countryside whether he speaks of "the night a-brooden dark - At Stalbridge wi' its grey-wall'd park" or of "Lydlinch bells be good vor sound, And liked by all the neighbours round" or again of "the spring 'ithin the leane, a-leaden down to Lyddan Brook". We can follow him through the Bagber leanes:

> Where woody Stock do nessle low
> Or where the risen moon did light
> The walls o'Thornhill on the height.

We wonder exactly where:

> Swans did zwim
> In highneck'd trim,
> And zwallows skim the water, bright
> Wi' whirlen froth, in western light;
> An' clack, clack, clack, that happy hour,
> Wi' whirlen stone and streamen flour,
> Did goo the mill by cloty Stour.

These rural poems of Barnes have much more to give us than these references to places we ourselves know and love. No author has done more to preserve the fine old words of the Dorset dialect. Hardy, in his preface to a selection from Barnes' poems which he published in 1908, speaks of "their delicate ability to express the doings, joys and jests, troubles, sorrows, needs and sicknesses of life in the rural world as elsewhere". He also says that it seems to him that Barnes, despite his faithfulness to the true dialect, really belonged to the literary school of such poets as Tennyson, Gray and Collins.

His poems are much more than nature or descriptive verse. The more one reads them the more one seems to