LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES

LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES is the next volume of short stories which Hardy published. Hardy divided this volume into two parts. The first part consists of a "set of Tales" which he called LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES. The second part contains "some colloquial sketches" which he entitled A FEW CRUSTED CHARACTERS. In this volume Hardy moves from the rural stories of WESSEX TALES set in the Dorset of his childhood and the historical stories of A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES set in a period two centuries before his birth to incidents occurring in an unspecified present. This volume was first published in 1894. It then contained nine stories - "The Son's Veto", "For Conscience' Sake", "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions", "On the Western Circuit", "To please his Wife", "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion", "The Fiddler of the Reels", "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" and "A Few Crusted Characters". "An Imaginative Woman" (which was added to the 1896 edition of WESSEX TALES) replaced "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" and "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four" in the 1912 edition of LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES. This repeated shuffling and reshuffling of stories from one volume to another shows that Hardy did as in his earlier two volumes, once again make a conscious attempt to arrange the stories so as to present them
as an united whole. The stories in *Life's Little Ironies* depend a lot on coincidence and ironic compulsion and the unifying principle of the stories in this volume lies, to quote Hardy's own words, in the stories turning "upon a trick of Nature, so to speak".¹

In 1894 when this volume was published Hardy had almost reached the end of his writing career. Although Hardy in this volume once again shows his characteristic stance towards life, i.e. - that life is intrinsically unsatisfactory, that sexual attraction and romantic illusions are potentially destructive forces, that women who are forced into marriage by social and economic pressures often have to face a difficult situation, that the intrusion of education and sophistication into a peasant culture often upset old patterns, that in human life there is nothing to dislike but much to pity - he does it with much greater subtlety and poignancy than in his earlier tales.

It is not known when "An Imaginative Woman", the first story in this collection, was written but a note of December 1893 refers to this story as follows - "Found and touched up a short story called "An Imaginative Woman"."² This story, based on a contemporary psychological fantasy was first published in the *Pall Mall Magazine* in April 1894 and originally published in the first edition of *Wessex*
TALES. It was, however, transferred to LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES in 1912.

"as being more nearly its place, turning as it does upon a trick of Nature, so to speak, a physical possibility that may attach to a wife of vivid imaginings, as is well known to medical practitioners and other observers of such manifestations". 3

Ella Marchmill, the heroine, is a fanciful and ambitious woman. She is self-indulgent, spoilt and discontent with her lot. She is married to a commonplace and prosaic philistine who is indifferent to the emotional needs of his wife. Temperamental incompatibility leads to failure of their marriage. Ella's evasive tactic of "shrinking humanely from detailed knowledge of her husband's trade" (4) is part of her instinctive hesitancy in confronting problems. She is secretive about the events of her inner life as Marchmill is about his social activities. The two follow their individual ways of lives. Ella's attitude towards her three children is no better. She is generally indifferent towards them. She spends her time "letting off her delicate and ethereal emotions in imaginative occupations, day-dreams and night-sighs" (4).

Hardy cleverly manipulates this story in a modern way. Instead of a narrator gradually creating the atmosphere, in which the events occur, for his listeners in keeping with the ancient tradition of tales and ballads he puts us amidst this couple at a point when events are already under way.
"When William Marchmill had finished his inquiries for lodgings at the well-known watering-place of Solentsea in Upper Wessex, he returned to the hotel to find his wife ..." (3)

After they shift to their new lodgings Ella discovers from the landlady that one of the rooms they are using is under the tenancy of a young poet, Robert Trewe who has gone away temporarily. Mrs. Marchmill, an aspiring poet herself falls in love with the image of this young poet and longs to meet him, all the while building for herself a dream world in which they meet and are happy together. But as luck is against her she never gets an opportunity to meet him even though on one occasion he had actually stood in front of her gate talking to a painter friend who later drops in to meet her. Then suddenly she reads in a newspaper that he has committed suicide and this distracts her with grief and she makes a surreptitious visit to his grave. Her husband finds her here crouching beside the grave and suspects a liaison which she properly denies since she has never seen the poet. But she has in her possession a photograph of the poet and a lock of his hair which she puts away along with a lock of her own hair. Time passes and she is to have a child. She dies during childbirth and just before her death she confesses to Marchmill - "Will, I want to confess another lover". Ella had begun to believe what she had merely imagined and desired but the real irony lies in the incidents that follow. Marchmill begins out of his
own jealous imagination to believe Ella's imagination and becomes as imaginative as Ella. After Ella's death Marchmill one day discovers the photograph and the lock of Robert Trewe's hair and compares them to the features and hair of his child. By "a known and inexplicable trick of Nature" Marchmill detects a resemblance between the poet and his boy. His suspicions are confirmed and he spurns the child, saying "Get away, you poor little brat! You are nothing to me!" (31) Not only has Ella's attachment to an illusion brought her unwarranted grief and guaranteed her child a bleak future, but her husband who is a tolerant and long suffering man is denied the love for her child. And yet she has done nothing culpable. Even her imaginary love affair was perfectly platonic. All one can say is that this is one of life's little ironies. And as Dr. Noorul Hasan puts it

"... it expresses Hardy's oft repeated belief that the unexpected or the fantastic is co-present with the normal. A "sensational novel", Hardy wrote "is possible in which the sensationalism is not casualy, but evolution, not physical but psychial." "An Imaginative Woman" is an experiment in psychial sensationalism." 4

The story on the whole may be sensational but Hardy once again explores here one of his favourite subjects - the failure of a nineteenth century middle class marriage, a marriage which was made with no consideration of "tastes and fancies, those smallest greatest particulars"
but rather out of the thoughtless desperation felt especially by women, "of getting life leased at all cost". (4)

Hardy also explains here the futility of imagination because life seldom conforms to private dreams and "imaginativeness - seemingly a harmless and even 'creative' escape from harsh realities - can itself become destructive.

With this introductory story Hardy sets the keynote of the volume as a whole. Ella, like most of Hardy's characters is the victim of circumstances. Hardy has portrayed the character of this whimsical woman in a clever, knowing and entirely credible way. Her inner life is made of conflicting forces - the romantic existing with the practical, the emotional with the physical, and the maternal and the platonic with the conjugal love. Ella is representative of many young women with poetic inclinations and flighty temperaments who attached themselves to famous artistic personality and blew up their scanty impressions by imaginative occupations, day dreams and night sighs into all consuming passions.

The other characters that we encounter in this story are Robert Trewe and William Marchmill. Robert Trewe does not make an actual appearance in the story. Hardy deliberately keeps him just out of sight on the edge of the story, never allowing him to make a real entry into it, in
Person, as he always fails to enter Ella's life. But the lonely life that he has led, the frustration he has felt and his innermost feelings have been very well depicted and even though like Ella we do not meet him personally we know him well enough.

Unlike the stories in his two previous volumes "An Imaginative Woman" has an urbane air. It does not have any reference to rural life or society or to the past. Although its setting is Victorian the event might well have occurred during a much later period thus bringing Hardy forward in time. Even in his narrative technique Hardy has adopted a direct, abrupt and more modern technique abandoning the old fashioned balladic style of the earlier volumes.

"The Son's Veto" the next story in the collection once again is about an unhappy marriage but this time the miserable consequences are a result of the discrepancies of social class. This highly charged and touching story was published in The Illustrated London News in December 1891. Hardy confessed to Rebekah Owen, one of his American admirers, that he thought this to be his best story.

Sophy is a parlourmaid to Mr. Twycott, the vicar. After his wife's death the vicar discovers that he has grown more and more dependent on Sophy and not only
that, he has begun to care for her. One day when the vicar is ill, while attending to him Sophy trips, falls, hurts herself and becomes a cripple for life. Guilty that he is in some way responsible for the accident the vicar proposes to Sophy. Sophy has a lover already but overawed with the vicar's proposal she accepts it and assents to be his wife. But this hasty decision is not a wise one for the vicar. Marriage with a servant girl means social suicide. The vicar is obliged to take Sophy out of her native village to avoid causing a scandal there. They move to the anonymity of London where neither the vicar nor Sophy are happy. The vicar dies after fourteen years leaving behind a son who is now attending a Public School. Sophy thus lives on alone in London pining for her lost past and happiness.

Even when the boy comes home for his vacation Sophy is not happy because her son finds her lack of refinement exasperating and reproaches her for her uncouthness of speech, and her country ways. Her only happiness lies in thoughts of her past Wessex life where she at least had a place of her own. Her nostalgia is excited by the scene in which she sits at the window gazing at the vegetable carts, swaying with fresh country produce, lumber through the silent streets of the city at dawn. One day, on one of these carts she notices her old lover, Sam Hobson. She looks out for him daily that day onwards and as time passes they meet
and once again become friends. They even go for a ride and enjoy it finding comfort in each other's company. At first Sophy tries to maintain a distance in keeping with her status but she cannot keep this up for long. Sam proposes to Sophy but the latter cannot accept as Randolph, her son, is incensed at the idea of having "A miserable boor! a churl! a clown" (50) for a stepfather. She hopes that once Randolph becomes independent he would withdraw his objection. But he does not. "His education had by this time sufficiently ousted his humanity to keep him quite firm, though his mother might have led an idyllic life with her fruitier and green-grocer and nobody would have been anything the worse in the world". (51-2). He finally makes her promise in front of a cross and altar never to marry Sam Hobson without his consent. Sophy never gets to understand why Randolph objects to this marriage and she keeps murmuring to herself till her very end "Why mayn't I say to Sam that I'll marry him? Why mayn't I?" (52). She finally dies, an unhappy woman till her very end. In the last scene Hardy describes Sam Hobson standing in front of his half shuttered shop as a funeral procession crosses. He stands with tears in his eyes, hat in his hands as the vehicles move past him. And from the mourning coach a young smooth-shaven priest looks "bleak as a cloud at the shop-keeper standing there". (52)
"Fate, chance, co-incidence - the notorious imponderables of Hardy's fiction - have nothing to do here. It is a story of man's callousness to man. More specifically, it is a story of the cruelty of social ambition."

So one might wonder why Hardy had included this story in a collection called LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES. There is no dramatic irony and little verbal irony in this tale of a son educated above his mother, denying her the right to marry below his station and she dying of grief. This time the focus of the irony Hardy fixes in the fact that a natural woman is kept from marrying a devoted, rural lover by the selfishness and snobishness of her son. Now, a person who believes that sons have the right to keep the mothers from remarrying if it injures their reputation in any way will see no irony in the story. But to Hardy who detests the selfishness and snobishness of the son and who esteems the virtues of the mother, the irony lies in the fact that the son's choice should win out and the mother be destroyed by grief.

The tragic events which occur in Sophy's life are not unique. The tragedy of Sophy is the tragedy of many Wessex people. There is a new thrust which upsets the old pattern of life. Education and sophistication are disruptive forces. It turns Sophy's son against her and makes him ashamed of her. It ousts his humanity. Hardy says that Wessex people can do without that vicious
education which makes a boy forget his affinities with nature and changes him into a horrid snob. Randolph looks at everything from the point of view of social decorum. His values are a vindication of the values of Sophy - the values of the rural Wessex people. Through the story of the alienation of mother from son, Hardy tells us about the distance and separation between city and country, between the conventional values of the Twycott men and the pure instincts of Sophy. Sophy is a country girl brought up amidst the picturesqueness and dense complexity of Wessex and when she moves to London she misses "their pretty country home, with trees and shrubs and glebe" and the fine peel of bells. Neither her husband nor her son understands her misery and she suffers all alone. When we first meet Sophy we are in the midst of a crowd admiring from behind her nut-brown hair which she has woven into an intricate design. The story is offered as a response to the reader's curiosity about this interesting woman who looked young and sat on a wheel chair and braided, twisted and coiled her long locks of hair like the rushes of a basket.

This innocent Sophy is thrown between the urban world represented by her immediate family members and the happy Wessex world of Sam Hobson, her lover. Hardy has portrayed both the worlds very successfully. The Twycotts in spite of all their formal education are in reality very deplorable characters deprived of any culture whereas Sam
Hobson is a plain, good, loveable man and we feel genuinely touched by his unselfish love for Sophy. Sam Hobson, though not educated in the formal way that the Twycotts have been educated is more respectable. He has been educated by Nature and is close to it. He has a masculine assertiveness which is seriously lacking in the vicar, Sophy's husband. Sam is one person who understands Sophy's position and thus he tries to bridge the gap for Sophy between the seclusion of the rural life of Wessex and "the rhythm and racket of the movements called progress in the world without" (50). He brings into the city the life giving resources of the countryside. But in spite of all his efforts he could not make life happy for Sophy. Sophy in a way is to be blamed for this for she never tries to assert herself on Randolph and it is the helplessness she feels which makes this story so touching. It is the depiction of the distance and separation - between city and country, Sophy and her husband, Sophy and her lover and her son and finally between her lover and herself firstly because of circumstances and finally by death - in a very sympathetic manner which makes "The Son's Veto" one of Hardy's best pieces of short fiction.

"For Conscience' Sake" was first published in THE FORTNIGHTLY REVIEW in March 1891. In this story Hardy "undermines one of the most sacrosanct of Victorian tenets" - a man who has wronged a woman should make amendments by
marring her. Hardy, in a most unorthodox manner, is going against those conventions of which the literature of his time was so supportive. Hardy drew inspiration for this story from a real life account he heard in 1882 of a girl who had been "betrayed and deserted" by a lover and who refused to be "made respectable" by her lover when the latter for conscience's sake wanted to make amendments by marrying her. Hardy was impressed by this woman's spirit. He admired her for not becoming a slave of her seducer and saw in her the "first glimmer of woman's enfranchisement".8

In "For Conscience' Sake" Hardy tells us the story of Mrs. Frankland through a narrator. The narrator uses a rhetorical way of recounting the story and he tells it with rational and compassionate objectivity. The narrator begins his story:

"Whether the utilitarian or the intuitive theory of the moral sense be upheld it is beyond question that there are a few subtle-souled persons with whom the absolute gratuitousness of an act of reparation is an inducement to perform it; while exhortation as to its necessity would breed excuses for leaving it undone. The case of Mr. Millborne and Mrs. Frankland particularly illustrated this and perhaps something more". (55).

The story is about Mr. Millborne, a Victorian gentleman who had abandoned his pregnant sweetheart twenty years earlier after trifling with her feelings, in spite of the fact that he had promised to marry her because as he puts it "it was represented to me that it would be beneath my
position to marry her". (58) Now with the passage of time he begins to feel guilty and his conscience keeps pricking him till he reaches a sense of dissatisfaction at the recollection of his unfulfilled promise. He, moreover, learns that his sweetheart now lives on at Exonbury under the name of Mrs. Leonora Frankland, a widow along with their daughter. They run a Music and Dancing School and are respected by the neighbourhood for what they are.

Mr. Millborne out of a sincere though belated desire to salve his conscience desires to marry Mrs. Frankland and with this intention he proceeds to Exonbury to court the very sweetheart whom he had seduced twenty years earlier and whom he had abandoned subsequently. When he encounters Leonora he discovers that she is not too keen to marry him.

"I appreciate your motives Mr. Millborne; but you must consider my position; and you will see that, short of the personal wish to marry, which I don't feel, there is no reason why I should change my state, even though by so doing I should ease your conscience. My position in this town is a respected one; I have built it up by my own hard labours, and in short, I don't wish to alter it". (64).

Millborne, however, ignores all oppositions because he begins to believe that the only way to peace of mind lies in his marriage to this girl whom he had wronged and he continues courting her with the hope that she will someday change her mind. And luckily for him, he one day discovers that a young curate desired to marry his daughter but was
hesitating because his friends were objecting to the match
because of the Frankland's vocation. So like many of
Hardy's characters Rev. Percival Cope was also choking his
natural instincts to further his ambition. Millborne
persuades Leonara to leave her school and start a new
life with him, as his wife. Not willing to stand in the
path of her daughter's happiness Leonara marries him. But
Leonara is not destined to be happy. Soon after the
marriage the curate accidentally discovers resemblance
between Miss Frankland and Mr. Millborne and he guesses
that Frances had been born out of wedlock. On this dis-
covery Mr. Cope's attitude towards Miss Frankland cools.
Mr. Millborne soon realises that his return to the life
of these two women has ruined the life and prospects of
his daughter. He leaves them finally having made them
financially secure - and having ruptured the nice routine
of his bachelor's life.

"For Conscience' Sake" is one of Hardy's short
stories for here Hardy tackles a situation in a manner
which was unconventional by Victorian standards and hence
not to be found in Victorian literature. Leonara Frankland's
sexual behaviour, as portrayed in this story, may have
appeared unconventional to the Victorian readers but to
us it is this very unconventional attitude of the protago-
nist which makes her all the more admirable. Leonara refu-
ses to be made respectable by the lower who had earlier
betrayed her and she capably performs male roles. Because of the courage she shows in the face of all her troubles she is well liked and respected by her neighbours. She is well dressed, moderately attractive, dignified and cheerful. She is, in fact, most unlike the traditional seduced and wronged woman. On the other hand, Mr. Millborne is in a state of self-imposed exile and leads a solitary life, unknown in the anonymity of London.

The courtship of Frances Frankland and Percival Cope in a way parallel to that between Millborne and Leonara twenty years earlier. Both of them put their ambition above everything else. While Millborne says "it was represented to me that it would be beneath my position to marry her", Percival Cope hesitates to marry Frances because his friends object to her vocation and when he decides not to marry her (the decision is reversed later) it is because of her questionable relationship to Millborne.

The general atmosphere of unhappiness which engages this story like most other Hardy stories, is this time, not caused by the forces of circumstance but by human meddling. Millborne, urged on by moral impulse and with all good intentions enters the world of the Franklands and disrupts their stable equilibrium which they have achieved by hard labour. Millborne's conventional attempt to right a wrong leads not to happiness but to unhappiness, not to respect but to the loss of it. Hardy here formulates
a new and complex moral for his Victorian readers. "Past wrongs cannot be rectified by acts of formal morality in the present," ⁹

The basic irony of "For Conscience Sake" lies in the title of the story itself. Kristin Brady says that the word 'conscience' was an important word in the enforcement of Victorian social conventions and that the theme of "For Conscience Sake" perhaps is

".... the moral 'bewildenment' that accompanies conventional life, in which 'intuitive' and 'utilitarian' judgements about matters of conscience are often confounded. Both Millborne's belated marriage to Leonara and the attempt to convert 'happy savages' to Christianity are symptomatic of moral short-sightedness. By depicting a situation in which an act of conscience leads to 'the reward of dishonourable laxity' Hardy formulates a more complex moral for his Victorian audience: that past wrongs cannot be rectified by acts of formal morality in the present." ¹⁰

So far we have discussed stories where ambition has caused much unhappiness but in "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" we see ambition as the cause of irreparable damage. We see that the ambition to rise above one's class can leave little time for love. It can even be so strong as to lead to crime. "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" was sent to H. Quiller, on request in August 1888 for publication in his magazine. It appeared in THE UNIVERSAL REVIEW in December 1888. On New Year (1889) Hardy received a letter from Mr. Gosse which said that he thought "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" to be
"...one of the most thrilling and complete stories Hardy had ever written .... I walked under the moral burden of it for the remainder of the day.... I am truly happy - being an old faded leaf and disembowelled bloater and wet rag myself - to find your genius ever so fresh and springing."11

"A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" once again throws the clergy into a not too favourable light. Joshua and Cornelius Halborahough are two brothers who have struggled and scrimpéd in order to realize their ambitions to enter the church and to see their sister properly educated and married. But the path of their ambition is not very smooth. Their handicap lies in the form of a boorish, drunken and disreputable father who does everything possible to ruin their happiness. As a result of the circumstances in which they find themselves in they become harsh and self-centred. The only time they show any concern is when they are making plans for their much loved sister Rosa. They love her and have a genuine desire to see her educated and well established in the world by contracting a good marriage. But before looking for a suitable match for her they send her to a school at Brussels.

By dint of sheer hard work Joshua and Cornelius make some progress in the world. Joshua becomes a successful curate and Cornelius a school master. They also manage to get rid of their troublesome father and his gypsy wife by borrowing some money and sending them off to Canada. But the father is not too happy in Canada and so returns on the
eve of Rosa's marriage to a wealthy Squire who is a widower. The father in the meantime, having spent all his money on drinks does the last part of his journey on foot. He is determined to take revenge on his sons for having him shipped to Canada. He threatens his sons by telling them that he will stop Rosa's marriage and will ruin their souls for preaching. However, fortunately for Joshua and Cornelius their father, completely out of his senses, looses his footing and falls into a weir where after a fruitless struggle he drowns calling out for help and all the while calling out Rosa's name. Joshua and Cornelius look on. The sons allow their father to drown because they think that if their father is saved from this situation he will definitely ruin their sister's life and happiness and their reputation. By the time good sense prevails on them and they begin to think that they should try to save their father it is already too late. Their father's body has already gone under the culvert. The only trace left of him is his walking stick which they thrust into the river bank. When his body is finally found too much time has already passed. He cannot be identified and so his corpse is buried as that of a person unknown. Joshua conducts the service all the while feeling a deep sense of remorse and guilt.

Rosa is married and lives on happily with the Squire. On the day of her father's death she hears someone
call her name in a voice resembling her father's but she dismisses the incident because she thinks it could only be a fancy or it could be the voice of someone who had a wife or a child with a name like hers. Rosa is very different from her brothers who have lost their humanity in the pursuit of their ambitions. Joshua and Cornelius ultimately do achieve their ambition but this they do under rather tragic circumstances. They have lost their peace of mind and they see the vision of their drowning father every night. The father has got his revenge. The souls of Joshua and Cornelius are spoiled for preaching or for anything else. Their personal ambitions become considerably weakened and the world, once so promising now becomes flat and unprofitable even though now it is rid of the person whose presence had threatened their success. Of course, knowing the situation we cannot blame Joshua and Cornelius for not helping their father. Their hesitation is inevitable as they know that if their father lives on then all their years of struggle and sacrifice would go a waste. Moreover, the Victorian society being what it was the two brothers had little or no choice. Hardy gives a beautiful explanation of the difficult position that the two brothers were in through the lips of Joshua.

"The case as it stands is maddening. For a successful painter, sculptor, musician, author, who takes society by storm, it is no drawback, it is sometimes even a romantic recommendation, to hail from
outcastes and proficients. But for a clergyman of the church of England! Cornelius, it is fatal. To succeed in the church, people must believe in you, first of all, as a gentleman, secondly as a man of means, thirdly as a scholar, fourthly as a preacher, fifthly, perhaps as a Christian, - but always first as a gentleman, with all their heart and soul and strength. I would have faced the fact of being a small machinist's son, and have taken my chance, if he'd been in any sense respectable and decent. The essence of Christianity is humility, and by the help of God I would have brazened it out. But this terrible vagabondage and disreputable connection." (87)

The two brothers are but victims of circumstances and they take the only way open before them for progress - the path of hypocrisy. Because they are victims of circumstance we sympathise more with their problems then we did with Randolph in "The Son's Veto" although all three characters face the same sort of a problem - the problem of the ambitious son embarrassed by an unrespectable parent. The father, an insensitive, boorish man has ruined his sons' chances of education by spending the money his wife had saved for their education. But in spite of all these despicable qualities Hardy enlists our admiration for him in his

"Splendidly, incongruous, rumbustious appearance in the Cathedral Close with a gypsy woman on his arm, and we relish his over-familiar accosting of the Dean, and Joshua's horror". 12

Here Hardy shows his great skill at portraying characters. Mr. Halborough is a man with a great zest for life. In contrast Joshua and Cornelius are mean spirited. Even as boys they are single minded and cold and refuse to diverge
for even half an hour from their studies which they treat as a means to material profit. The brothers have little interest in or true commitment to the Christian religion. They see the Church only in terms of their future material and worldly advancements.

Joshua and Cornelius are both sons of the same parents, nursing the same ambitions and struggling to achieve their ambitions under the same circumstances. But Hardy shows subtle differences in their characters which goes to make "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" one of Hardy's better if not best stories. "The anger of the elder was reflected as simple sadness in the face of the other" (79) writes Hardy. Throughout the story we see that it is Joshua who is always calculating and wanting to rise in the world pulling his brother and sister along with him lest they prove to be disgraces like their father. Cornelius is just the half willing follower who would have been satisfied to be a school master without his brother's influence. Cornelius is more humane, more warm, more innocent than his elder brother.

Like so many of Hardy's characters Cornelius and Joshua cause a major event like their father's death to occur not by what they do but by what they fail to do. They have been extremely provoked by their father. But it is their suppression of feeling, their ability to stand by and listen to their father as he drowns without extending
a helping hand which is very inhumane and which makes them akin to cold blooded murderers.

"A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" "is a dark intensely moral parable with innumerable biblical overtones and everything in it works towards the central point, including the fact that, for once, the female characters, though interestingly and roundly conveyed, remain in the background." 13

In the next short story "On the Western Circuit" Hardy once again returns to his favourite love-courtship-marriage theme and his pessimism about the married state is very apparent in this rather bleak short story. This story bears distinct resemblance to other stories in this collection, stories like "The Son's Veto", "An Imaginative Woman" and "For Conscience Sake". This story was published for the first time in HARPER'S WEEKLY and THE ENGLISH ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE at the end of 1891.

Edith Harnham is a frustrated woman and in this story Hardy illustrates a mild instance of sexual frustration. Edith is married to a rich wine merchant but she is not happy in her married life. She is bored and discontented with her husband. He in turn is irritated by her. Edith had agreed to marry him not out of any love that she felt for him but because she was getting on in age and no better match presented itself before her.

"Edith Harnham led a lonely life. Influenced by the belief of the British parent that a bad marriage with its aversions is better than free womanhood
with its interests, dignity, and leisure, she had consented to marry the elderly wine merchant as a poor illiterate, artless and ignorant of worldly ways. Soon after her arrival at Melchester she falls in love with Charles Raye, a barrister. Raye intrudes upon her rustic simplicity, seduces her and leaves her because he is afraid that his life will prove miserable in the future if he marries this girl who is his social inferior. She will definitely be a social embarrassment and an emotional burden to him. On the other hand Anna is anxious to marry Raye. Not knowing what to do she confides her state of affairs to her mistress who promises to help her by writing letters to Raye in Anna's name, Anna being illiterate. Edith writes to Raye and the latter is enamored with the image of Anna created through the letters. The deception is carried on while Raye occasionally meets Anna as he does the Western Circuit.
Anna soon discovers that she is pregnant. Edith's crowning touch is in the letter she writes to Raye convincing him that he must marry her. What the situation amounts to is that Edith, who has been married for years has come to love Raye through these letters and Raye also reciprocates this love. But when they realise this it is already too late. Raye has already married Anna and it is only after the marriage that he finds out that Anna is in reality a vulgar, country lass incapable of writing her name. She is not the vision he had thought her to be. Edith at last confesses her role in the deception to Raye and with one kiss they acknowledge their love and part each with a secret knowledge of his ruined life.

As we come to the end of the story, we feel sorry for Edith and Raye. We sympathise with them for these people have been made unhappy not because of any bad motives but because they have misapplied their good ones. Edith agrees to write letters for Anna, because she wants to help her and Charles Raye agrees to marry Anna only because he wanted to do that which was right because Anna was carrying his child. The story has about it the sense of inevitability that one usually associates with tragedies. We the readers feel right from the beginning that things will not end happily for any of the characters. Hardy's pessimism about the married state is nowhere more apparent than in this story. But this does not mean that "On the
Western Circuit" is all painful reading. It has funny moments in it. Hardy shows his great skill in blending the funny moments in the story with the most painful. Hardy is here narrating situations which are funny but the consequences of these situations on the lives of the characters are painful. He mixes laughter with compassion.

Hardy's portrayal of characters is also very noteworthy in this story. Raye is an "end-of-the-age young man" (118); "Anna is a pretty rural, maiden" (119) innocent and illiterate and Ella is a "lonely, impressionable creature" (118) and an unhappy wife. None of the characters in the story see the others in proper light. Each character's image of the loved one is a distortion of fact.

Instead of recognising in the frivolous conversation of Anna her real nature Raye believes what he wants to believe that it is her letters which show her real character.

Edith's emotional interest in Raye is aroused after he has idly touched her hand. She chooses to forget that Raye had seduced Anna without nursing any intentions of marrying her. Both Edith and Anna have an inflated opinion of Raye's professional status. Anna adores him as if he were a god.

This difference between the characters' appraisal of each other and the more objective and comprehensive view that the reader has of each of them makes the story complex and interesting reading.

First published in BLACK AND WHITE in June 1891 "To Please His Wife" has once again got female jealousy and ambition,
and their capacity for the destruction of self and family, for a theme. Joanna and Emily are two friends of very different looks and temperaments. Emily Manning is a "slight and gentle creature" and Joanna Phippard is "a tall, large-framed, deliberative girl". (143) When we see them for the first time we find them conversing with deep interest about Shadrach Jolliffe, a young sailor who has freshly returned to Havenpool after a narrow escape from a ship wreck. With the passing of time both girls develop an interest in the sailor and the latter in turn shows a liking for both the girls with a distinct preference for Emily. Joanna's jealousy is aroused and being a proud and ambitious woman she contrives as to marry the sailor, whom she does not love, in order to keep him from marrying Emily. Sexual jealousy makes her abandon her plans of "mating considerably above her" (144). She also prevails upon Shadrach to leave the sea and start a grocer's shop. The successful achievement of her plans instead of bringing her triumph over Emily, dishes out more misery. Emily is discovered by a rich wine merchant who marries her. Joanna becomes intensely envious of Emily's prosperity and to make matters worse we find that the Jolliffe fortune is steadily declining because of Shadrach's ineptitude at shopkeeping. As a result she persuades him to return to sea, in search of riches. He returns after a partly successful voyage but the fortune he brings back is not sufficient to enable her
to compete socially with Emily. So she asks him to venture out a second time this time taking along with him their two sons in order to increase their profits. They never return and Joanna is finally forced to become the object of Emily's charity. Thus by her own act she becomes miserably indebted to one whom she intended to outdo.

The conclusion of the tale is terrible in its pathos, Joanna waits on hoping in vain that they would come back. Eventually she has to live with Emily because of her poverty. In the final scene she dreams that she hears the footsteps of her husband and sons and she runs out into the street in her nightgown. Nothing is there but the mist swirling up the street, she wanders up and down barefoot, distracted, until eventually she knocks on the door which had once been hers - they might have been admitted for the night, unwilling to disturb her till the morning. "Nobody has come", she is told by the young man who keeps the shop. We leave her standing in the misty street with nothing but emptiness and despair before her.

The narrative mode of the story changes along with Joanna's stand towards life. From an intensely confident woman sure of all that she does Joanna suddenly becomes a typical sailor's widow of the ballad. She goes about lamenting the treachery of the sea and haunts the scenes of happier days. But then she has no one but herself to blame. As a personification of ambition and the means she adopts to
achieve this ambition she comes to her deserved end. Yet she does not recognise her own contribution to the working out of her destiny. She puts the blame on everything else but herself - on Emily, Providence and the sea - and her final state is heart rending.

Richard Carpenter writing about Joanna says:

"Joanna's pitiful rationalizations, her persistence in a fruitless hope, are pathetically human. It might be argued that she does not deserve to be crushed in this manner for the simple fault of vanity and a desire to best her rival in love, but that is the essence of tragedy as Hardy sees it. A radical disproportion exists between our flaws and the punishments meted out for them, it just happens that things turn out the way they do. Joanna loses her family, her position and is losing her mind, not simply because she wanted too much and took satisfaction at another's discomfiture but because, when she did so act, she made possible a conjunction of circumstances which would not have otherwise occurred. Thus character and fate become ironically intertwined."14

In contrast to the over ambitious Joanna we have the two other characters, Emily and Shadrach. They are happy because of their lack of ambition for social advancements. Emily is more resourceful than Joanna and is able to face the situation she finds herself in successfully. When living with her father she kept a stationery shop to fill in the "gaps of his somewhat uncertain business" (143) and unlike Joanna's grocery shop hers was a success. Even when she had to lose Shadrach she manages to get used to her disappointment and is able to make a good and prosperous marriage.
Shadrach, married to Joanna is more like Emily in character. He is direct and naive. He has great trust and faith in God and submits to the workings of Providence. Jolliffe’s integrity and rigid adherence to principle make him but malleable stuff in the hands of the world and of worldly women like Joanna. Being most of the time away at sea he is unaware of the ways of men on land. His purity and simplicity are inappropriate for life in the small nineteenth century town of Havenpool, with its wealthy merchants and genteel society. He is an unsophisticated hero and unfit for this highly complex and competitive world.

"The Fiddler of the Reels" is alone among Hardy’s short stories which has been singled out time and again for critical attention and universal praise, often being held up as the only example of a story of real merit. The story was written for the Exhibition number of the SCRIBNER’S MAGAZINE published in May 1893 to mark the Chicago World Fair.

Wat Ollamoor, musician, dandy, "company man in practice", "veterinary surgeon in theory" had come to Mellstock village from nobody know where. He was much favoured by the unsophisticated maidenhood and he had a "weird and wizardly" power over them. His fiddling perhaps had the most to do with the fascination he exercised.

"While playing he invariably closed his eyes; using no notes, and, as it were, allowing the violin to wander on at will into the most plaintive passages ever heard by rustic man. There was a certain lingual
character in the supplicatory expressions he produced, which would well-nigh have drawn an ache from the heart of a gate-post. He could make any child in the parish, who was at all sensitive to music, burst into tears in a few minutes by simply fiddling one of the old dance tunes he almost entirely affected - country jigs, reels, and 'Favourite quick steps' of the last century. Occasionally Mop could produce the aforesaid moving effect upon the souls of grown-up persons, especially young women of fragile and responsive organization". (167-68).

Wat Ollamoor goes around fiddling and casting spells over the villagers like the Pipe Piper. Amongst those who are charmed by the demonic, "heart-stealing melodies of "Mop" (as Ollamoor is popularly known) is Carolina Aspent. She is mesmerised by the music and the personality of Mop and abandons her faithful village lover, Ned Hipcroft, in favour of Mop. Disappointed, Ned leaves Wessex and goes to London. But things do not move smoothly for Carolina. Mop after seducing her disappears without a trace. Many years later Carolina realising the mistake she had made in not marrying Ned, goes to join him in London. She takes along with her, her child by the Fiddler. Ned who still nursed a certain tenderness for Carolina excuses her for her past mistakes and they get married. Ned grows to love his step daughter and life would have been perfectly happy for them had they not begun to miss the home simplicities of Wessex life. They decide to return to Wessex. On the way back home they seek rest at an inn where Mop reappears and with his music once again mesmerizes Carolina. She jigs and dances
to his music till she falls unconscious in a fit of exhaus-
tion. While she lay unconscious Mop vanishes with the child,
the symbol of their union. They are not heard of again.

Perhaps, Hardy concludes

"Mop, no doubt, finding the girl a highly desirable
companion when he had trained her to keep him by
her earnings as a dancer. There, for that matter,
they may be performing in some capacity now, though
he must be an old scamp verging on three-score-and-
ten and she a woman of four-and-fourty" (185).

"The Fiddler of the Reels" appears highly impos-
vable and Hardy does not bother to offer a rational expan-
tion to the tale except to say that

"..... music in such masterly hands as Mop's has an
Orphic influence; to counter balance this implica-
tion he says that Mop's power over "unsophisticated
maiden-hood ..... seemed sometimes to have a touch of
the weird and wizardly about it". On the whole Hardy
breaks with the realistic tradition quite definitely
here and gives us a story that belongs with folk
tales of witches and warlocks".15

The story may be improbable but the story is
gripping and Hardy is at his best in the portrayal of his
characters. Its central character, Wat Ollamoor has great
power and memorability even though he is not at all like-
able. He is repellent, swarthy, greasy, "weird and wizardly,
a mad, diabolic and siren figure. He is disliked by man and
highly attractive to women. Hardy goes out of his way to
describe him physically to show how perverse and magically
induced the women's passion for him was
"Personally he was not ill-favoured, though rather un-
English, his complexion being a rich olive, his rank
hair dark and rather clammy - made still clammy by
secret ointments, which, when he came fresh to a
party, caused him to smell like "boys'-love"
(Southern-wood) steeped in lamp-oil. On occasion he
wore curls - a double row running almost horizon-
tally around his head. But as these were sometimes
noticeably absent, it was concluded that they were
not altogether by Nature's making. By girls whose
love for him had turned to hatred he had been
nicknamed 'Mop' from this abundance of hair, which
was long enough to rest upon his shoulders...." (166)

Ollamoor is the embodiment of evil. He has power and he
revels in it. Its effect amuses him. A total contrast to
Ollamoor is Ned Hipcroft, a honest Wessex artisan. He is
reliable, lovable but a far from romantic figure. Car-line
turns to him when her real needs become very strong. She
knows that he will never refuse her help. She however, has
no hesitation in dancing to the fiddler's tune the moment
he reappears. We have by now become familiar with this
situation which we have repeatedly encountered in story
after story - the rivalry of the good and honest Wessex
man and the attractive but villainous intruder.

In this story, Hardy besides telling us the
story of the beguilement of Car-line by Mop also tells us
about the intrusion of science, technology and modern
concepts into the Wessex world. Hardy tells us of the reac-
tion of the Wessex people to the introduction of the rail-
roads and the setting up of the Great Exhibition and in
keeping with this theme of progress Hardy makes the narrator
use a scientific imagery in his narration. The narrator describes Carline's "Compelled Capers" in these words - she jumps "as if she had received a galvanic shock" and in describing the invocation of contemporary medical authority to describe her condition he writes "The next evidences of his influence over her were singular enough and it would require a neurologist to fully explain them" (169).

But inspite of the introduction of scientific inventions into the world of Wessex Hardy says that human nature has something mysterious and uncontrollable in it which cannot be overcome by scientific advancement of any sorts. As Kristin Brady says

"... Images of progress are defeated by the forces of nature; the women arriving in London on the "excursion train" - an absolutely new departure in the history of travel", are "blue-faced, stiff-necked, sheezing, rain-beaten, chilled to the marrow" by nature's "wind and rain" (174); after the Exhibition, the park trees "that had been enclosed for six months (are) again exposed to the winds and storms, and the sod (grows) green anew" (177); and neither the civilizing influences of "London life" nor the veil which Carline has worn "to keep off the wind" (179) can shield her from the glance or the music of Mop Ollamoor."16

But even as one appreciates and recognises the merits of "The Fiddler of the Reels" one wonders if there is not some element of truth in Susan Hill's comment on the story.

"Yet I believe the story has been over praised, and for the very obviousness of its virtues. It is rather too well made, rather over-neat, and it somehow lacks the subtleties and depths of others which are much better and quite unjustly neglected. Like Wat
Ollamoor, its slickness is seductive but somehow ultimately shallow."\(^{17}\)

"The Fiddler of the Reels" is the story with which Hardy concludes his first part of "LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES, a set of Tales". The second part of this volume as has already been mentioned consists of "some colloquial sketches" entitled "A Few Crusted Characters". The most conspicuous difference between the 'tales' and the 'sketches' is that the latter narratives are of limited scope and length and the narrators of these incidents use a more casual tone in narrating their stories. The stories are less sombre than those included in the first section, almost humorous but mixed in with the laughable is as Douglas Brown has said "an elegiac framework".\(^{18}\) As in his 'tales' in the sketches too we find Hardy dealing with the same themes and superstitions, country customs, ceremonies, gaieties and village band.

"A Few Crusted Characters" appeared for the first time as "Wessex Folk" in both the American and European editions of HARPER'S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE from March to June 1891. Douglas Brown describes them as

".... buoyant and humorous anecdotes for the most part .... (relating) to the figure of the returned native, dismayed by his experience of the outer world, longing for the agricultural certainties and simplicities and much possessed by death and the passing of things."\(^{19}\)

The mode of narration that Hardy uses for "A Few Crusted Characters" is an interesting variant of that
employed by Chaucer for *The Canterbury Tales*. John Lackland returns after thirty five years as an emigrant to Wessex (Longpuddle) with the intention of settling there. He makes the final part of his journey to his native village in a carrier van. The other occupants of the carriage not recognizing him took a natural interest in him as a stranger. He introduces himself and is soon asking about people he had known as a child. Most of the people he enquires about are no more but the fellow passengers know their histories and are only too willing to tell him all that they know. One reminiscential story leads to another by association and curiosity until Longpuddle is reached. Here, however, John Lackland discovers that things have so greatly changed that he does not belong here anymore. Instead of feeling at home he feels like a stranger so after a few days stay he leaves to start life elsewhere.

Tony Kytes, the Arch-Deceiver is the first Wessex folk whose history John Lackland hears of. Although all present in the carriage are well acquainted with the history of Tony it is, Burthen, the carrier who tells the story. Burthen's knowledge of Tony's exact route gives him the right to tell the story. The incident narrated is farcical, comical and charming. Hardy once again explores his favourite theme of love, courtship and marriage but the treatment this time has a comic turn and a happy ending. In the brief span of an afternoon Tony Kytes, a country lad accepts and rejects three women as marriage partners and
finally when the decision is made he does not have the opportunity to exercise his choice.

Tony Kyles, is engaged to be married to Milly Richards, "a nice, light, small, tender little thing" but this does not prevent him from loving other women. One day while driving home from the market on his father's waggon he meets Unity Sallet, a woman to whom he had been very tender before he had got engaged to Milly. She asks him for a lift and he does not refuse. They drive on, Unity trying to make Tony realise that she would be better suited for him than Milly. Just at this point they catch sight of Milly walking ahead of them along the road. Fearing Milly's reaction Tony asks Unity to hide under the tarpaulin till they pass by Milly, promising to marry her if she agreed to do so. But Tony has completely forgotten that he had asked Milly to meet him so that they could discuss their future as they travelled towards their home in the carriage. So instead of passing her Tony is forced to offer Milly a lift. They travel on thus with Unity hidden under the tarpaulin till they see Hannah Jolliver, "the very first woman that Tony had fallen in love with - before Milly and before Unity, in fact - the one he had almost arranged to marry instead of Milly." On seeing Hannah, Tony asks Milly to hide under the sacks telling her

"I see a young woman a - looking out of window, who I think may accost me. The fact is, Milly, she had a notion that I was wishing to marry her, and since she's discovered I've promised another, and a prettier than she, I'm rather afeard of her temper if she
sees us together. Now Milly would you do me a favour my coming wife, as I may say?" (197)

But luck is against Tony. Instead of letting Tony pass by Hannah asks for a lift. Tony and Hannah travel and in the course of their conversation Tony almost promises to marry Hannah. Milly is ashamed of the position she has placed herself in and not wanting to be humiliated by exposing herself, often lets out squeaks from under the sacks where she is hiding whenever the conversation becomes too intimate between her fiance and Hannah.

As Tony is approaching Longpuddle he becomes anxious. He begins wondering how to get out of this ticklish situation. Even as he is wondering about his plight he spots his father and handing over the reins of the horses to Hannah, he walks over to his father with the idea of escaping. Pandemonium breaks out. Milly discovers Unity hiding under the tarpaulin and the two girls abuse each other in loud whispers. This surprises Hannah so much that she is unable to control the horses. The three girls are thrown out of the waggon. Tony is caught in a dilemma. He has to face the anger of three girls. But not for long and things work out smoothly for him in the end. Hannah's father comes and takes Hannah away; Unity walks out on Tony not wanting to marry someone whom Hannah had rejected. This leaves Milly and Tony is happy to marry her as she is the least imposing of the three and the best suited for him.
The incident narrated in this sketch is rather farcical and incredible and hardly logical. But things do follow such a pattern in real life. Human beings are often faced with the dilemma of choosing and often choose through a process of elimination.

Within a few pages Hardy has described three women who have distinctive traits. Unity Sallet is forward, Hannah is dashing and Milly demure and faithful. They are jealous of each other and each craves for Tony's attention just to be one up on the other. Tony is an arch-deceiver but there is nothing vicious or villainous about him.

"His story is a farcical summation of two conflicting attitudes towards sex: a male desire to have all women with no complications, and a female inclination to competition and exclusiveness".

A more sober look at marriage is presented in "The History of the Hardcomes". Steve and James Hardcomes, two cousins are engaged to be married to Olive Pawle and Emily Darth respectively. They are very well suited to each other but on the night of Tony's wedding they are infected by Tony's fickle nature and acting on impulse they not only decide to get married but they get married to each other's partners. Despite their higher social standing they are not unlike Tony in their fluctuating sexual preferences. As is to be expected the new partners are not very happy and they
get more and more drawn towards their original partners. Things continue in this manner till one day Steve and his cousin's wife go out on a boat, forget their commitments and responsibilities, even self preservation and they die due to drowning. As a result of a momentary whim Steve and Olive face a terrible end. If they had married as they had planned, things would have ended happily for them as James' second marriage to his original partner proves. The fickleness of their nature made these lovers do things which were against that planned by nature - result an unhappy end.

The very title of the next story makes the reader question the credibility of the occurrences that the seedsman describes for in "The Superstitious Man's Story" Hardy, the historian of rural superstition blends with Hardy the story teller to tell us about a few supernatural occurrences which preceded the death of William Privett.

One night while staying up late to finish some ironing Mrs. Privett hears her husband putting on his boots, crossing the room in which she is ironing and being a silent man by nature leaving the house without exchanging any words with her. After finishing her work she writes a message for her husband on the door asking him to "mind and do the door" (217) and goes to bed. To her great surprise, and alarm on the way to her bed Mrs. Privett finds her husband's boots in the very place where they always
stood and her husband sleeping soundly in bed. This is beyond her comprehension because the only way into the house lay in the room she was working in. Unable to unravel the mystery and feeling queer and uncomfortable she goes to bed. Next day with the intention of solving the mystery she asks her husband about his going out the night before. But his answer disturbs her all the more for William Privett tells her that he had not left the room after going to bed the previous night.

Later in the day she meets Nancy Weedle and Nancy tells her that on Midsummer Eve she had seen William Privett entering the church but had not seen him coming out of it again. The seedsman here explains to John Lackland a popular superstition of Wessex.

"(You may not remember, sir, having gone off to foreign parts so young, that on Midsummer Night it is believed here about that the faint shapes of all the folk in the parish who are going to be at death's door within the year can be seen entering the church. Those who get over their illness come out again after a while, those that are doomed to die do not return)". (218)

This incident is followed by another peculiar one. One day while Mr. Privett is mowing with John Chiles, they sit down to have their "bit o' nunch" and "empty their flagon" (218) and go to sleep, John Chiles gets up first and looking towards his fellow mower he sees "one of those great white miller's souls as we call 'em - that is to say, a miller moth - come from William's mouth while
he slept, and fly straight away" (218-19). On trying to
wake him John discovers that his friend had died in his
sleep.

On that day and at that very time Philip Hookhorn
is surprised to see William, "looking very pale and odd".
Coming down to Longpuddle Spring, Hookhorn is surprised
because William did not only avoid going to the Spring
but was in the habit of going "half-a-mile out of his way
to avoid the place" (219) because at this very Spring,
William's only child, while at play, had died from drowning.

"On inquiry, it was found that William in body could
not have stood by the Spring, being in the mead two
miles off, and it also came out that the time at
which he was seen at the Spring was the very time
when he died." (219)

On hearing this story by the seedsman, Lackland dismisses
it as being rather melancholy. But the Seedsmen's father,
who had heard the story from his father says that his
father had had an air of satisfaction while telling the
story for he was happy with the

"... perfect correspondence of the supernatural
occurrences with the copious circumstantial details
surrounding them. He is a spokesman for a particu-
lar rural attitude, eager to see a pattern in
the mystifying course of life and to replace an
instinctive fear of death by a fascination with
its inevitable but always startling suddenness." 21

Although "The Superstitious Man's Story" is anti
realistic the story has a traditional tone about it which
makes it popular and interesting not only to the audience
who hear the story directly but also to us twentieth-century readers for whom the story is not purely an inventive and imaginative piece of work but is a true record of the superstitions associated with death that were prevalent during Hardy's time amongst the country folk. Even though it is a record of five superstitions associated with death it is not in the least bit like a documentary for it has the stamp of the narrator's personality and his own mode of expression.

There is a shift in Hardy's treatment of the next three sketches - "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk", "Old Andrey's Experience as a Musician" and "Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir". From the rural attitudes towards marriage and death with which he is concerned in the first three sketches Hardy turns to a more specific theme

".... the simultaneous opposition and interdependence, especially strong in the feudal society of a rural village, existing between the common people and those authorities of church and property who formalize and organize their lives." 22

Andrey Satchel is engaged to be married to Jane. Jane being a little older than Andrey is "anxious to get the thing done with before he changed his mind" (220-21) and she manages to get Andrey to Church one morning so that she could get married. But Andrey who is fond of a drop of drink was not in a very sober state that morning and the
Parson Billy Toogood refuses to marry the couple. Jane who was afraid of losing Andrey altogether if they returned home without getting married asks the parson to lock them up in the tower of the church for a few hours till Andrey sobered down. The parson agrees. He locks them up within the church and is about to go home when he catches sight of a party of hunters and being fond of hunting he joins the group of hunters, completely forgetting the couple he had locked up in the church. Here Hardy gives a ridiculous account of hunting for Hardy was not at all fond of this sport. He remembers Andrey and Jane the next morning only and feeling guilty he goes and marries the couple without raising any further objection. Hardy, we know, did not hold a very high opinion of the clergy of his time. He ridiculed them time and again and never missed an opportunity to show their ineptitude and their lack of a good character. Although the parson refuses to wed Andrey and Jane on account of the former being drunk, drunkenness was not something foreign to Toogood. We learn that at Christenings the parson "never failed to christen the chief over again in a bottle of port wine" (224). Hardy shows us that though the parson was free of the sexual passions of young Andrey he was no better because the passionate obsession he nursed for fox hunting was equally bad. The humour of the story is accentuated by the skill with which he shows the contrast between the forthright passions of Andrey and
the sublimated ones of Toogood.

On hearing the story of Andrey Satchel, Mr. Proffitt, the schoolmaster is reminded of Old Andrey—the father of Andrey Satchel of the previous story—of his first hand observations as a choir boy and Old Andrey's embarrassing experience at the Squire's.

Old Andrey was a jovial man, fond of eating and drinking. It was this love for eating and drinking which landed him in trouble one Christmas. The village band were to appear at the manor house to play and sing in the hall to the Squire's people and visitors. In return for entertaining his guests the squire treated the members of the village band to a good supper. Old Andrey was aware of this custom and wanted to join the band so that he could share the meal of beef, and turkey and plum pudding and ale. He knew that one more or less would make no difference to the Squire. But then he also knew that he was "too old to pass as a singing boy, and too bearded to pass as a singing girl". (230) So he decided to borrow a fiddle and join them as a bandsman. It being Christmas time no one wanted to be hard upon Old Andrew and although they knew that Andrew knew no music they did not have the heart to refuse him. So "armed with the instrument he walked up to the Squire's house with the others of us at the time appointed and went in boldly, his fiddle under his arm". (231) He tried to act as naturally as he could—
"opening the music-books and moving the candles to the best points for throwing light upon the notes" (231) - and he almost carried the show off till "the Squire's mother, a tall gruff old lady who was much interested in church music said quite unexpectedly to Andrew: "My man, I see you don't play your instrument with the rest. How is that?" (231)

Andrew tried to pull himself out of this situation by saying that on his way to the manor he fell down and broke his bow. But he was not to escape so easily. The old lady brought a replacement for Andrew's broken bow with the hope of hearing the full accompaniment. At this "Andrew's face looked as if it were made of rotten apple" (231). However, he tried to escape from this tight situation by keeping a little behind the next man and making "a pretence of beginning sawing away with his bow without letting it touch the strings, so that it looked as if he were driving into the tune with heart and soul" (231-32).

However, luck was against him that day. The archdeacon noticed that he held the fiddle upside down, the nut under his chin, and the tail piece in his hand, and they began to crowd round him, thinking 'twas some new way of performing" (232). This revealed everything. Andrew was thrown out of the house as a vile imposter. However, things did not end that badly for him in spite of the embarrassing situation he had to go through. He got what he had come for. The squire's wife took pity on him and had him let in through the
back door after being turned out at the front. But Andrew had learnt his lesson. He never repeated his performance in public as a musician.

Both this sketch and the next are pictures of the kind of band that Hardy's father and his grandfather and he himself used to play in as a child. Hardy was fascinated with this kind of band and it left a deep impression in his mind. He writes about this sort of a band in greater details in **UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE**. Hardy has sketched the band lightly, farcically and flippantly in "Old Andrey's Experience as a Musician" but the next sketch "Absent Mindedness in a Parish Choir" in spite of its being a farce possesses a special elegiac quality that lends it a seriousness and pathos. These local musicians appear foolish in the presence of high society and authority but they are well loved by the common people of Wessex and they have a dignity of their own and it is not surprising that we feel rather sorry to hear that this band is no more

"... they've been done away with these twenty years. A young teetotaler plays the organ in church now, and plays it very well, though 'tis not quite such good music as in old times, because the organ is one of them that go with a winch, and the young teetotaler says he can't always throw the proper feeling into the tune without wellnigh working his arms off."

So we find that change has been introduced into the world of Wessex music. The old choir, with their fiddles
and bass viols were no more and this was partly due to fashion and partly due to a "sort of scrape" that they had got into. The village band had "lost their character as officers of the church as complete as if they never had any character at all". (232-33)

The incident which resulted in the village band being thrown out of the church occurred on a Sunday afternoon after Christmas. The band was a good band and in great demand during Christmas and on that eventful Christmas they had performed throughout the night and had got next to no sleep. Then came that fateful Sunday after Christmas. It was very cold that year and the members of the band could hardly sit in the gallery because of the cold. So Nicholas smuggled into the church a gallon of hot brandy and beer, readymixed, in Timothy Thomas' bass viol bag. As they sat in the gallery they drank the brandy and beer and as the long sermon continued they all fell asleep "as sound as rocks". The sermon ended and the parson asked the quire to sound the tune to the Evening Hymn. As no music came the people turned round to see what the matter was. Levi Limpet, seeing the sleeping band nudged Timothy and Nicholas and asked them to begin.

On suddenly awaking and not knowing where he was Nicholas started playing "The Devil among the Tailors" a favourite jig thinking that he was still at the party that
he had played at the whole of the previous night. The others followed their leader as was to be expected. The parson's "hair fairly stood on end when he heard the evil tune raging through the church" (235) and he tried to stop them. But due to the sound of their own playing they did not hear and they continued playing louder. The congregation walked out wondering at the wickedness of the village band. It is needless to add this was the last performance that the village band put up at the church.

Out of all the sketches in "A Few Crusted Characters" the group containing the three Andrey Satchel stories and the village band are the best. They are, to quote Kristin Brady

".... the most inventive and 'colloquial' in "A Few Crusted Characters", not only for the hilarity of their content, but also for the richness of their hyperbolic language and metaphor. They contain a wealth of local dialect, in both their expository accounts and their quoted dialogues, and the liveliness of the thatcher's own mind is apparent in his descriptions of the parson slapping the Bible together "like a rat-trap" (222) and of the young couple bursting out of the tower "like starved mice from a cupboard."23

In "The Winters and the Palmleys" Hardy once again uses sexual jealousy between two women and the great attachment that can exist between a widow and her child as the theme.

There were two women in a parish who were rivals in good looks and as a result of this they were at "daggers
drawn" with each other. To make matters worse, both of them loved the same young man, Winter. One of them finally stole the young man's love for the other, married him and they had a son. The other lived singly till about the age of thirty, Then she married Palmley. She had a son born to her who was of rather weak intellect but none the less the apple of his mother's eye. Palmley died when his son was about eight years of age. Mrs. Palmley and her son were left in great poverty. Mrs. Winter seeing her former rivals' condition offered to help Mrs. Palmley by making young Palmley her errand boy. Although Mrs. Palmley did not approve of this arrangement she was forced to agree with it. One day in December while running an errand for Mrs. Palmley the boy received a shock which made him a drivelling idiot and as a result of this shock he died soon after. Mrs. Palmley vowed to take revenge. Her opportunity came with the arrival of her niece, Harriet, from the city of Exonbury, "a proud and handsome girl, very well brought up and more stylish and genteel" than the rest of the villagers. Mrs. Winter's son, Jack fell in love with Harriet. Harriet was flattered by the young man's presents and looks of admiration but did not like the way he wrote letters. "Jack Winter's performances in the shape of love letters quite jarred her city nerves". Her love for Jack Winter gradually diminished and disappeared and she developed a tenderness
for a road contractor who wrote a better hand. She wrote to Jack that being townbred he was not sufficiently well educated to please her. Jack who was a very sensitive boy in spite of his "want of pen-and-ink training" was ashamed and grieved that he could not write with the beautiful flourishes that was the pride of his days. He feared that Harriet and her new found lover would laugh at his letters. He asked Harriet to return his letters and she refused to return them. So he crept into Harriet's house one night and stole the box containing his letters. On reaching home he found buried under the letters several golden guineas. Next morning he was arrested on a charge of night burglary and was given death sentence. He refused to seek help from the only person who could have helped him. Mrs. Palmley had got her revenge. As for Harriet she got married to her road contractor and left Longpuddle for good because of its close associations with Jack. Mrs. Palmley soon left Longpuddle to join them.

This story is the most grim of all the sketches in "A Few Crusted Characters". Jack, is an innocent and helpless victim of his mother's jealousy and anger, and the intrusion of sophistication and pretension into the not very large world of Longpuddle and the uncomprehending power of an authority that can hang a man for petty burglary.
The story of the hanging of Jack Winter brought to the minds of the passengers in the carrier coach the story of Georgy Crookhill. Of course Georgy never got so far as hanging but he had a very narrow escape.

Georgy Crookhill was a shady person. One day as he was "ambling out of Melchester on a miserable screw" (247) he saw a fine looking young farmer riding out of the town in the same direction. He was mounted on a good strong horse. Not wanting to ride on alone Georgy overtook him and jogged alongside this stranger. They soon became friends and they even decided to share a room at an Inn when night drew on. Early next morning while the tall young farmer was still asleep Georgy stealthily crept out of bed, dressed himself in the farmer's clothes and helping himself to a little bit of the farmer's money to pay the rent, he left the inn on the farmer's horse. When the farmer awoke he was happy to find that although cheated of his clothes and horse he still had left with him the money. He took the whole incident in a surprisingly good spirit dressed himself up in Georgy's clothes and quietly left the Inn.

Georgy proceeded with his journey on the farmer's horse. On the way he was arrested by some constables who were on the look out for a deserter who was dressed the way that Georgy was. Georgy tried to explain to them how he had come about his attire. They refused to believe him. Even as
he was giving his explanation the young farmer with whom he had shared the room at night and whose clothes he was wearing came by. Georgy told the constables that this was the man they were looking for. But they refused to believe him. They discovered that Georgy was telling the truth when the corporal to whom they took Georgy told them that Georgy was not the absconder. He was released. When the constables realised the mistake they had made and started looking around for the real deserter it was already too late. He had made good his escape and was never traced.

"Incident in the life of Georgy Crookhill" is like "The Three Strangers" of WESSEX TALES a story illustrating the virtues and vice of cunning resourcefulness. In keeping with the farcical tone adopted for the sketches in "A Few Crusted Characters" Hardy steers away from violence of any kind and the irony lies in the humorous turn of the plot whereby Georgy is almost convicted not only for theft but also for desertion. The story has a happy ending but then it is not happy throughout. The threat of hanging for another man's offense - something which was common in the Wessex of those days - runs through out the story increasing its suspense.

In "Netty Sargeants Copyhold" Hardy once again tells us a story of deception but this time the deception is of a harmless sort. Netty lived with her uncle in a house built by her great, great grandfather. But the house was
copyhold, that is to say, "granted upon lives in the old way, and had been so granted for generations" (252). Her uncle's was the last life upon the property unless a small fine of a few pounds was paid so as to entitle Netty to live on there. Netty had developed a tenderness for Jasper Cliff, a selfish man who had an eye on Netty's house more then on Netty herself. Netty knew that Jasper would marry her only if she could make her uncle pay the required fine and make the house her own. But unfortunately her uncle dies before she can get the deed done. But being a determined girl and not wanting to accept defeat so easily she makes her uncle's corpse sit on a chair near the window and deceives the people who come to get his signature into believing that her uncle has signed the documents when it is actually she who guides her uncle's dead hand in signing the papers. The deed done she undresses her uncle, puts him to bed and the next morning she declares before all that her uncle had died in his sleep. It is only after she is married and her husband begins ill-treating her that she discloses the deception she had exercised for the sake of one whom she loved and who now did not hesitate in beating her.

In this story Hardy once again portrays the Wessex aristocracy and once again it is not done in a very favourable light. The squire hated those who possessed copyholds, leaseholds and freeholds and missed no opportunity
to acquire land from these people. Even though Netty gets the better of the squire by exercising deception we do not frown down on her action because the villainous squire gets what he deserves and Netty in the process proves her great pragmatism and nerve. But then it is rather ironic that she fails to get a perfect husband. The only thing which is in her favour is that she is secure of her cottage.

"Netty Sargent's Copyhold" is the last sketch in "A Few Crusted Characters" for by the time that this story is told the coach on which the stories are being told has reached its destination. The stories exchanged in the course of the journey are miscellaneous in subject matter and highly entertaining and readable and comic in tone. The comedy turns on the genial farcical humours of village life. Hardy shows in the sketches a sharp perception of the ludicrous and odd in human situation and behaviour but this he does in a convincing manner and with validity. The Wessex presented here, unlike the Wessex of his other stories and novels is free of the frustration which is a consequence of social ambition, free of despair and the fear of invasion and intrusion of alien objects from the outside world. But there is a sense of nostalgia one feels when reading the stories. There is a strong feeling for decay. There is an anxious feeling for local ties and traditions. There is a sense of grief that a thing so traditional as the Wessex band is no more.
The stories told in "A Few Crusted Characters" have miscellaneous themes and do not follow any chronological pattern as can be seen by the story of Andrey Satchel's father preceding the story of Old Andrew the father. They are randomly arranged but in spite of this there is a thematic coherence. The unity lies in the fact that all the stories are told in the Canterbury tales fashion - on a journey by the carrier coach to Longpuddle. Even though the stories are miscellaneous there is a common trait in them. They are all shared memories of the local people, of the various experiences of particular Wessex people spread over a long time. "A Few Crusted Characters" presents a small composite picture of Wessex life in the past. It may thus seem inappropriate for "A Few Crusted Characters" to be included along with the set of sombre and contemporary stories of LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES. Commenting on this Kristin Brady says that both sections of the volume treat the same fundamental human problems

"... Shadrach Jolliffe's confusion about which woman to marry anticipates that of Tony Kytes; deception in love is a theme both of "On the Western Circuit" and of "Tony Kytes"; clerical hypocrisy is a subject of "The Son's Veto", "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions", and "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk", female jealousy produces tragedy in both "To Please his Wife" and "The Winters and the Palmleys", and the irrational side of the sexual instinct allures Caroline Aspent and the Hardcomes alike away from domestic happiness. These links make the sketches in "A Few Crusted Characters" a fitting conclusion to the whole volume. Just as the longer "Tales" of LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES expose the
tragedies that can underlie a comically absurd sequence of events, so these small narratives portray the same phenomenon, by embodying the peculiar combination found in oral village culture of the burlesque and the pathetic, the humane and the cruel. These "Colloquial Sketches" are life's little ironies writ smaller."

**LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES** the third collection of Hardy's short stories contains some of Hardy's best short fiction. It gives us an extended picture of the Wessex society that Hardy wrote about. In this volume Hardy moves from the rural society of the past presented in WESSEX TALES, and the aristocracy of the eighteenth century Wessex to the respectable middle classes of an unspecified present living in urban areas. Although the class of people Hardy deals with in **LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES** is different the problems which face them are the same as those faced by the people in WESSEX TALES and by the group of noble dames. The stories again deal with the failure of the institution of marriage to stabilize sexual relationships which leads the readers to question the desirability of marriage for women. Where Hardy is not dealing with marriage, as in "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" he is writing about the evil consequences of social ambition. Sometimes as in "On the Western Circuit" Hardy combines both these themes.

The fact that most of Thomas Hardy's stories end tragically led critics and Victorian readers to say that Hardy was a pessimist. But this is not at all true. Hardy
did not let his stories end happily ever after simply because the ghastly unreality of such endings raised in him a greater horror than the honest sadness that came of logical and inevitable tragedy. The fact that he went against the conventions followed by the Victorian writers and had the courage to question the Victorian conventions and morality goes to prove how great a writer he was. Although Hardy points out the evils of the Victorian society through his stories he does not want to take the role of correcting the moral convictions of the people. In his stories he is neither didactic nor satirical. He just gives a frank and realistic portrayal of the Wessex that he knew.

In keeping with this goal of merely narrating his events Hardy's narrators merely play the role of observers of Nature, adopting a posture of worldly wisdom and philosophical distance. There are times when the narrator in keeping with the tradition of the ancient bards deviates from the main stream of these stories to make a general comment. This gives the story an air of rational and compassionate objectivity. In keeping with the title of the volume the narrator assumes a rhetorical and ironic stance.

The colloquial sketches which follow the 'set of tales' called LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES are a happier set of stories although tragedy strikes these characters also. It
is this realistic portrayal of life which makes this volume not only one of the best of Hardy's collection of short stories but of short stories by any writers. The volume is best described in the words of Kristin Brady as

"... an impassioned depiction of man's inevitable failure to impose upon the chaos of his being. Only the ironic perspective with its simultaneous muted acceptance and compassionate regret, can accommodate what is both farcical and tragic about this perennial contradiction in the nature of life." 25.