Chapter III

Selected Stories from
A Group of Noble Dames and A
 Changed Man and Other Tales
Selected stories from **A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES** and **A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES**

**A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES** and **A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES** are chronologically the second and the fourth volume of short stories that Hardy published. Although both these volumes contain short stories which Hardy could boast of, it is the two volumes **WESSEX TALES** and **LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES** that are better known as they contain the better lot of Hardy's short stories. However, as Hardy the writer of short stories is the sum of all his short fiction - the successful ones as well as the failures - so in this chapter I shall discuss a few selected stories from each of these volumes so as to show a fair cross section of both of them.

**A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES** appeared for the first time in the Christmas issue of **THE Graphic in 1880**. It then contained only six of the present collection of ten short stories. The stories included were "Barbara of the House of Grebe", "The Marchioness of Stonehenge", "Lady Mottisfont", "Squire Petrick's Lady", "Lady Icenway" and "Anna, Lady Baxby". The rest of the stories in this volume appeared separately in different magazines. "The Duchess of Hamptonshire" appeared as "The Impulsive Lady of Croome Castle" in **The Light**, April 1978; "The
Honourable Laura" as "Benighted Travellers" in 
Bolton Weekly Journal, December 1881; "The First 
Countess of Wessex" in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 
1889 and "The Lady Penelope" in Longman's Magazine, 
January 1890. It was in 1891 that A GROUP OF NOBLE 
DAMES was published in the form that we have today.

Like in his earlier volume WESSEX TALES Hardy 
in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES continues telling stories from 
the Wessex past. Here he deals with the same themes 
of marriage, nature of women and the pre-occupation of 
his characters with class. Although the themes of his 
stories are the same and Hardy is dealing with the 
history and the tradition of the Wessex people the two 
volumes are very different from each other. History 
and tradition of a very different kind from WESSEX TALES 
enter most of the stories in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES. 
In the 1912 Wessex editions of his works Hardy had 
categorised WESSEX TALES under the title "Novels of 
Character and Environment" but included A GROUP OF NOBLE 
DAMES under the title "Romances and Fantasies".

Another conspicuous difference between the two volumes 
is that Hardy has here moved from the world of the 
Wessex farmers, labourers, shopkeepers, craftsmen and 
land owners to the county aristocracy, living in the 
great houses of Wessex standing aloof from the villages. 
His reason for writing about the aristocrats, Hardy
explains in the 1896 Preface to A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES:

"The pedigrees of our county families, arranged in diagrams on the pages of county histories, mostly appear to be at first sight as barren of any touch of nature as a table of logarithms. But given a clue the faintest tradition of what went on behind the scenes and this dryness as of dust may be transformed into a palpitating drama".1

Hardy in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES writes about the deep dark secrets in the lives of the aristocrats - secrets of illegitimacy, murder, insanity, incest and every possible scandal that he can think of that transforms the otherwise dry as dust life of the aristocrats into palpitating dramas. The stories that Hardy tells are very gripping and the reader's interest is so aroused that he wants to read through the stories to find out what finally happens to the group of noble dames. But inspite of the gripping nature of the subject matter A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES happens to be one of the least popular of Hardy's works. Susan Hill commenting on the stories says:

"They seem to be failures, written with little commitment, the plots groaning and over-laden with far fetched events, with wooden two dimensional characters and little entertainment value."2
Hardy undoubtedly is not at his best in *A Group of Noble Dames* but then it would be wrong to pass off the stories as "almost entirely failures" Susan Hill's comment about Hardy writing these stories with little commitment is not true for Hardy revised some of these stories and rewrote them several times and if he did bowdlerise some of these stories it was done at the request of the editors. Susan Hill says that the plots are groaning and over laden with far fetched events but isn't it true that in real life the true is often as inexplicable as the fictional? And as for the entertainment value of the stories they were good enough to hold the attention of the storm bound club members and not only good enough to hold their attention but to leave them craving for more.

Another allegation made against *A Group of Noble Dames* is that it is the least heterogeneous of his collections of short stories. As we read through the volume we discover that this is not entirely true, for *A Group of Noble Dames* forms a strange assortment from the grim and startling "Barbara of the House of Grebe" to the amusing "Anna, Lady Baxby". It is true that Hardy lingers for an unnecessarily long time over the scandals in the life of the aristocrats but we must keep
in mind the occasion on which the stories are being narrated.

A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES is organised round the core provided by a meeting of the South Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club at which the storm bound members take turns in telling tales drawn from local

"Legends and traditions of gentle and noble dames, renowned in times past in that part of England, whose actions and passions were now, but for men's memories buried under the brief inscription on a tomb or an entry of dates in a dry pedigree."[3]

And as the members themselves observed that "a storm bound club could not presume to be selective"(49) so they are content with the stories told to them. The exchange of scandals creates a cosy atmosphere amongst the members which is only possible in a small place like Wessex where everybody knows everybody and all are acquainted with the history of the place. Under such circumstances it is only natural that in this get together of "inclusive and intersocial" people with a range of types including a maltster, a gentleman, a spark, a churchwarden, a colonel, a surgeon, a dean and a historian, they turn to discuss their social betters.
"The first Countess of Wessex" is the first story in this collection. This story is partly narrated and partly read from a manuscript by the Local Historian. This story introduces us to the character types and situations we are going to encounter in the rest of the stories in this volume. "The First Countess of Wessex" is as the Local Historian summarises it, an instance of the "small count taken of the happiness of an innocent child in the social strategy of those days, which might have led, but providentially did not lead, to great unhappiness." (48).

Eversince she was a mere girl Squire Dornell and his wife Susan quarreled over the marriage of their young and innocent daughter Betty. The fact was that her manipulative parents had in mind a suitor each for their daughter and as later events prove, their choice in no way was based on her future happiness but was directed by their own interests, aims and their desires for her future above her welfare. While Susan Dornell had in mind a certain Stephen Reynard, a poor but titled man with good connections and older than Betty by many years, the squire favoured Charles Phelipson, a youthful and attractive lad a couple of years his daughter's senior. After one such quarrel
the squire left his wife and child and went to live in a house which he owned some distance away. During her father's absence, Betty was taken to London by her mother and quietly married to Stephen Reynard. When she returns home her father knows that she is married but not willing to admit defeat at the hands of his wife he creates a few situations by which Betty can meet his favoured suitor. This results in Betty falling in love with Charles and she is reluctant to join Stephen when he comes six years after the marriage to claim her. She deliberately contacts smallpox to escape him and in so doing she puts her husband and lover to the supreme test. It is, however, not the expected Charles Phelipson, young, physically attractive and an ideal romantic hero who proves equal to the situation but the pale, tall, sedate and self possessed Stephen Reynard.

On hearing of Stephen's return to claim his wife, the squire had risen from his sick bed, for he had fallen sick ever since he had first got the news of Betty's secret marriage. He rode to Bristol to waive Stephen's rights but the mission fails and the Squire's exertions hastens his death.

In deference to her late husband's wishes, Susan now urges Betty to postpone the union with Stephen only
to discover that they have been meeting frequently and at several places and now it had become necessary for them to join hands publicly as soon as possible. They were united and lived very happily. Stephen became an Earl and Betty the First Countess of Wessex.

Betty's situation illustrates the central theme of most of the stories in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES—the necessity of a woman to make a good match may prevent her from ever making an independent decision. In this theme lies the tragic irony. The story of Betty has been repeated often in Wessex history.

Perhaps Betty's parents had to go through a similar crises before getting married to each other. In spite of their incompatability of temperament and background Susan had married Squire Dornell. As a result the feelings and motives of the Dornell's always flew in contrary directions even when it came to such an important issue as their only daughter's marriage. Susan forces Betty into marriage with Reynard simply because the places wealth and prestige over affection and sexual passion. Initially it may appear that Squire Dornell is more concerned for their daughter's welfare but he is a violent man and his instincts
sometimes lead him to actions destructive of his own happiness and the happiness of those whom he loves. His "uncalculating passionateness" towards Betty is more harmful than her mother's ambition because her mother's self-interest takes a practical form. Susan wants to find for Betty not a romantic mate but a man who has prestige at Court and thus the potential for a title. She is seeking, in short, the qualities which her husband lacks - perhaps in order to enjoy vicariously her daughter's social triumph.

But it is Betty who finally transcends the selfish machinations of both her parents by choosing her true suitor. Until the elopement, Betty and the readers perceive Phelipson as the ideal romantic hero. He is young and attractive hence he is seemingly a more appropriate mate for Betty than the not so young and attractive Reynard. But the smallpox incident reveals things as they really are. Phelipson hitherto judged as so appealingly frank and impulsive is in reality a coward. Reynard appears in a new and more flattering light. The very qualities which had seemed villainous - his cunning, self-possession and apparent distance from events become the attributes of a hero. Betty is safe in his hands. Reynard combines the
calculating qualities of Mrs. Dornell, without her self-absorbed coldness and the loving attributes of the Squire, without his selfishness and impulsiveness. Embodying the virtues of Betty's parents he can act in her best interest and become her ideal mate.

"Barbara of the House of Grebe" repeats the dramatic configuration of character types in "The First Countess of Wessex" - an heiress, too young to know her own mind, her ambitious parents, an attractive admirer of modest descent, and a titled suitor who seeks by a series of calculated moves to conquer her affections. But this is where the similarity ends. In the earlier story the young attractive suitor is exposed as a coward as the events progress but here it is the other way round. The earlier story ends happily for our noble dame but life is not very promising for Barbara at the point where Hardy leaves us.

An young Earl, Lord Uplandtowers was bent on marrying Barbara Grebe, but she eloped with Edmund Willower. Such was her father's love for Barbara, and so pleased was her mother with Edmond's attractiveness that they were soon reconciled to the marriage and decided to send Edmond abroad with a tutor to complete his education. He was shockingly disfigured at a fire at a
Venetian theatre, while rescuing people from the flames. When he returned home Barbara was so horrified at his appearance that he could not think of staying with her, but decided to go abroad for a further year before testing her feelings again. He died six months later and Lord Uplandtowers married Barbara. However Barbara's second marriage was not a very happy one. Uplandtowers was irritated at Barbara's lack of warmth and discovered that Barbara's love for Edmond had revived with the arrival of a beautiful statue of him which Edmond had commissioned for her while he was at Pisa. Lord Uplandtowers' jealousy was aroused. After making enquiries he discovered from Edmond's tutor exactly what form his disfigurement had taken and had the statue hacked so as to take on the form of the human remnant which had confronted Barbara when Edmond had removed his mask before her. With heartless and relentless insistence, he made Barbara face this image night after night until she broke down in terror and promised the Earl that she would love him forever. She became utterly dependent on him and submissive to his will, and bore him eleven children in nine years. At length she was taken by her husband to try the effect of a more genial climate on her wasted health. She died at Florence, a few months after her arrival in Italy.
This then in short is the story of "Barbara of the House of Grebe". Ever since the story came to be written it has received much adverse criticism. T.S. Eliot⁴ in AFTER STRANGE GODS has commented that Hardy in this story has portrayed a world of pure evil". Eliot's remarks on the story are not lengthy, but they are sufficiently weighty and damning. He said that Hardy had written this story "solely to provide a satisfaction for some morbid emotion." F.B. Pinion commenting on this story and Eliot's attitude to it writes:

"How far the story was based on historical research or imagination is not known, but Hardy's motive in presenting it was his horror at man's inhumanity to woman, one of his avowed themes. Eliot's attitude is that of a Grand Inquisitor, he deplores heterodoxy, and translates the horror which the story rouses into the diabolical operating through Hardy."⁵

T.S. Eliot is not the only critic who is disgusted with the ghoulish atmosphere surrounding this story. A reviewer of the Spectator had written that it is "as unnatural as it is disgusting."⁶ But inspite of the morbid background "Barbara of the House of Grebe" is a fine story and whether we like the story or not we must yet admit that Hardy has in the writing of this story exhibited admirable skill. Susan Hill writing on this story writes:
"It is like some lurid, brightly lit tableau, set within a hard-edged black frame, gothic in its trappings, melodramatic, gruesome, cruel - and, in those terms, utterly successful. What makes it seem horrible and not at all as such tales often become - risible, is a certain restraint Hardy exercises; there are enough unpleasant images but not too many. It is quite different, in its heartlessness and coldness as well as its gothic style, from anything else he wrote, but in spite of ourselves, we are affected by it and forced to admire the skill with which it is done."

Although the story had not been very well received by Hardy's contemporaries it has begun to be looked upon in a more favourable light in recent times. Stewart has tried to explain and justify the story's grotesqueness by seeing it as written* in a consciously Gothic mode* and it has been interpreted as a fable having affinities with myths and fairy tales. Kristin Brady says that:

"Barbara's predicament recalls "Beauty and the Beast", a tale about appearance and reality and the maturing of a young woman as she comes to accept the bestial aspects of sexuality. Barbara, however, fails to learn what Beauty learns, that in sexual love ugliness can become beauty".*

Although the atmosphere of the story is morbid the events occur in a natural environment and Hardy in this
story once again repeats all that he has been saying—
that Barbara's moral weakness is not embedded in her
nature but is a natural outgrowth of her position in
society. She is, as is other heroines of Hardy, a
victim of circumstance.

In "The Marchioness of Stonehenge" Hardy once
again writes about class-consciousness and how it can
stifle and corrupt normal human emotions. Lady
Caroline, courted and flattered by many young noblemen
and gentlemen fell in love with the son of the parish-
clerk and married him secretly. Soon after her
marriage she discovered that she had little in common
with her husband and anxious about her position she
grew critical. Her husband was a sensitive youth with
a weak heart and her sharp words to him provoked a
spasm from which he died. It was past midnight when
this incident occurred in her room. To prevent her
secret marriage being discovered Caroline conveyed the
dead body from her room and her house all the way to
his house. Here she finally laid his corpse at the
doorstep, placing the doorkey in his hand to make it
seem as though the young man had died just as he was
about to open the door. Soon afterwards Lady Caroline
met Milly, the girl he had admired, told her what had
happened and persuaded her to pretend that she and the young man had been secretly married, and that she had carried him home to prevent discovery by her parents. Milly agreed, appeared in widow's weeds and took delight in tending his grave. The posthumous romance became a reality to her and Lady Caroline grew jealous. Finding herself pregnant she felt that the truth must be told. Milly would not give up her 'husband'. Finding herself in a helpless situation Lady Caroline confided in her mother and they left for London, Milly leaving soon afterwards apparently for the North of England but in reality to London. When she came back she had with her an infant.

Two or three years later, Lady Caroline married the Marquis of Stonehenge. Milly was devoted to her son who grew up to become a soldier. He attained the rank of quartermaster when he was still young. Lady Caroline left a childless, solitary widow now wished to claim her son. Milly objected but was fair enough and said that it would be her son who would decide. When the story was told to him the young man was not altogether surprised at the Marchioness' disclosures. However, he rejected her overtures.
She had neglected him while Milly had always been a good mother to him. Bitter disappointment at what appeared to be unrequited love was the beginning of death to the unfortunate Marchioness of Stonehenge. She died of a broken heart.

This story like all the other stories in "A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES" is highly melodramatic and improbable but inspite of this the story is very gripping and skillfully written. Hardy throughout the story portrays the radical shifts between jealousy and pride in Caroline's emotions. When she realises that her husband is dead her feelings change with unnatural speed from passionate grief to concern at her own position as the daughter of an earl. Caroline overlooks nothing when she drags her husband's corpse to his father's cottage. She leaves the sash of the window open in order to return undetected, lifts the body across the gravel to avoid leaving traces on the road and even remembers to find the key to the cottage and place it in the dead man's hand. Caroline's self-possessed and level headed manner is a cold reversal of Barbara's intense and tempestuous embrace of Willows' statue. Caroline can without flinching lay the arms
of her dead husband "round her shoulders" in order to "gain immunity from the social consequence of her rash act"; (99) while Barbara looses all control in seeing even the image of her former husband.

In Milly, Hardy has portrayed the ideal wife. Although never married Milly's love for the youth makes her imagined marriage a living truth. Although from a poorer background Milly too has her social pride and when the occasion arises her pride outmatches that of the lady as can be seen on the occasion when Caroline finding herself pregnant tells Milly that she will reveal the truth. Milly replies "My character is worth as much to me as yours is to you!........
No such dishonour for me! I will outswear you, my lady, and I shall be believed: My story is so much the more likely that yours will be thought false." For the first time Lady Caroline's rank fails to gain her the triumph she desires. Lady Caroline's will is subverted by the equally vehement feelings of another.

The rest of the stories in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES like the three stories that we have just discussed are fairy tales gone wrong, or as Kristin Brady puts it are "a perverseness of the convention in which princess and prince finally discover each other and live happily
everafter.10 Four of the stories in this collection are about desperate elopements and the remaining six depict the various ways in which the family as a group can be damaged by class pressures. Most of the stories can be seen as a ironic refutation of the moral of the preceding story. Because of this

A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES has never been a particular favourite with critics. But even as we are reading the stories we must remember that Hardy never published separately the stories in this volume but as a single piece of work. So when we are reading the stories we should read them as parts of a single, large work and take particular note of the pattern of repetition and subtle contrasts which structures the book. Hardy has exhibited great craftsmanship in bringing out these similarities and differences and because of this although none of the stories are superlatively good they are worth studying as a volume.

In A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES Hardy comments on chronicled families and emphasizes the destructiveness of class consciousness. Although from the title the reader expects to encounter in this volume women
having high moral qualities and ideals or women who are titled what he really encounters are common women finding themselves in uncommon situations. Like the Wessex rustics these so-called aristocrats of Wessex are vain and fickle. Like all women they too are incapable of making unsexed judgements and so usually choose the wrong men. They are rather unintelligent but neither selfish nor perverse. They too are vulnerable and fall easy victims to the rakes but they make the good and unaggressive men their victims.

A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES is the most sombre of Hardy's collection of short stories. Here it is difficult to find any sort of comic relief. This volume was particularly unpopular amongst Hardy's older generations of critics. They termed it "extremely nasty" or overlooked it completely. They had even less sympathy with his experiment in the macabre and the supernatural because this kind of stories clashed with the portrait of Hardy they had painted in their minds - of Hardy the realistic Chronicler of Wessex. What these critics had closed their mind to is the fact that the truth is often as inexplicable as the fictional and that though the
stories may appear rather absurd and unrealistic Hardy was not writing about non existent people living in a fictional land. His settings are Wessex settings and his people real flesh and blood Wessex people.

There may be a morbid and bizarre touch to these stories but Hardy's aim is not to evoke "a world of pure Evil". The stories supply examples of life's abundant strangeness. The people are not as astounding as the situations they find themselves in. We might find it hard to accept these unbelievable situations but we must recognise that it is these situations which arouses Hardy's powers as a dramatist and stylist which nothing else could.

With the passage of time A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES has begun to be regarded more favourably. As Richard Carpenter puts it:

"To contemporary taste, however, these often seem the most intriguing of his stories reaching down as they do into Kafkaesque depths of the unconscious and showing clearly Hardy's affinity with folk and mythic tradition."
A CHANGED MAN, THE WAITING SUPPER AND OTHER TALES, CONCLUDING WITH THE ROMANTIC ADVENTURES OF A MILKMAID is the complete title of Hardy's fourth and last volume of short stories. This volume was published in October 1913 by Macmillan. Unlike the earlier three volumes of short stories this volume does not have any thematic unifying principle as the title of the volume shows. In this volume Hardy collected those stories of his which remained uncollected so as to make them easily accessible to the readers. In a Prefatory Note to this volume Hardy wrote:

"I reprint in this volume, for what they may be worth, a dozen minor novels that have been published in the periodical press at various dates in the past, in order to render them accessible to readers who desire to have them in the complete series issued by my publishers." Another reason for his collecting the stories in a volume was that many of his stories were being frequently reprinted and these printed editions often misprinted his stories. Considered as a volume this collection is uninteresting but the stories being significant examples of his style are worth studying. Here I will discuss Hardy's three presumable favourites from this volume - A CHANGED MAN, THE WAITING SUPPER
and THE ROMANTIC ADVENTURES OF A MILKMAID.

A CHANGED MAN the first story in this volume is also the last story to have been written by Hardy. It was published in The Sphere and The Cosmopolitan in the spring of 1900. Hardy has in this story used as a basis the cholera outbreaks of 1849 and 1854. In its traditional mode of narration this story resembles the stories in WESSEX TALES. Like in "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion" Hardy has once again made a point of explaining the special picturesqueness that military men had in the eyes of the Wessex inhabitants of those days taking great care to point out local details. Hardy has the story partly told through the eyes of an invalid who silently watches the drama unfolding from his oriel window for, he was the "person, who, next to the actors themselves chanced to know most of their story"(3) 15. Like in the stories from WESSEX TALES the voice of the narrator in A CHANGED MAN is an embodiment of the communal point of view.

Laura, a gay young thing from Casterbridge and "a born player of the game of hearts"(7) is captivated by Captain Maumbry of one of the Hussar regiments. Captain Maumbry was a dashing and "handsome man of twentyeight or thirty, with an attractive hint of wickedness in his
manner that was sure to make him adorable with good young women" (4). The two marry and at first abandon themselves to the social whirl and in the winter following their marriage they are the most popular pair in South Wessex. They were present at all smart dinners in the country houses. They were the most prominent figures at the country balls and when an amateur dramatic entertainment was put by the garrison it was just the same. "The acting was for the benefit of such and such an excellent charity—nobody cared what, provided the play were played—and both Captain Maumbry and his wife were in the piece, having been in fact, by mutual consent, the originators of the performance" (8).

However, Captain Maumbry soon makes a friend in Mr. Sainway, a curate whose "persuasive and gentle eloquence .... operated like a charm" and he suddenly and unexpectedly becomes aware of the more sober realities of life and retires from the army and reads for the ministry for he has begun to believe that a curate is also a soldier—a soldier of the church militant. When Captain Maumbry gives up his worldly interests to become a curate and plunges into good works he expects Laura to get used to her new role of a parson's wife unquestioningly.
But Laura, who loved the social life associated with the army is bitterly disappointed. She seeks an outlet for her sexual energy and her desire for a gay life by having an affair with Lieutenant Vannicock while Reverend Maumbry is busy helping the victims of a cholera epidemic. Unaware of the danger that her husband was facing Laura plans to elope with Vannicock even as the plague becomes worse. It is only when she is in the process of eloping that she catches a glimpse of Maumbry toiling among the stricken and realising that he needed her she abandons her plan to elope. However, Maumbry does not live long to appreciate this voluntary act of his wife. He catches the infection and dies. Laura's desire of desertion which she had momentarily felt was never revived again. "The insistent shadow of the unconscious one"(23) kept coming back to her and she lived and died a widow.

In a letter to Sir Frederick Macmillan Thomas Hardy had written about "A Changed Man" that it is "the best .... of the tales" in this collection. The story raises a moral question which Hardy leaves unanswered. Is it right for Laura to have an adulterous relationship with Vannicock ? Of course, we know that Laura had married a man who she presumed would remain a social and
worldly being like herself. But she suddenly finds that the terms of her marriage have been drastically altered by an unexpected reversal in her husband's personality. She feels betrayed. Her adulterous relationship with Vannicock is an infidelity not to the man whom she married but to the incompatible person into which Maumbry suddenly transforms. This of course does not justify Laura's taking a lover but Hardy explains in compelling terms her emotional state when she does so. "Do you think ........that a woman's husband has a right to do such a thing, even if he does feel a certain call to it?" (15) However well Hardy portrays Laura's emotional state "A Changed Man" fails to achieve the sharp satirical quality that characterize the best of the LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES stories. It also lacks the density of social content or the dramatic force characteristic of the best of the WESSEX TALES.

Trumpery, parochial snobbery, class conflict were some of the things which angered Hardy and this he showed repeatedly in stories after stories. In the Wessex society where he lived and which he wrote about Hardy saw marriage's being hindered between lovers because of class consciousness and he spared no pains
to show how severely he disapproved of this practice. However, in "The Waiting Supper" Hardy tackles this class conflict with comparative restraint, even with light hearted mockery.

"The Waiting Supper" was first published in two parts in Harper's Weekly (31 Dec 1887 and 7 January 1888 and later it appeared in Murray's Magazine (January and February 1888). Hardy revised this story considerably for inclusion in A CHANGED MAN.

Nicholas Long, an honest farmer but an "untamed, uncultivated man, who has never seen London and knows nothing about society at all"(30) woos squire Everard's daughter, Christine. Christine had promised to marry Nicholas since she was a little over sixteen and, when the story begins she had been Nicholas' promised one for three years. Because of prevalent class prejudices she is unable to claim her lover publicly but desiring to marry him she asks him to

"go away and travel, and see nations, and peoples and cities, and take a professor with you, and study books and art, simultaneously with your study of men and manners and then come back at the end of two years, when I should find that my father would by no means be indisposed to accept you as son-in-law."(31).
But Nicholas does not want to take this venture because he feels uneasy, (though he has Christine's promise) lest somebody should come and "snap" her up away from him. He prevails upon her to marry him secretly before he departs and he even gets a special marriage license with this purpose in mind. However, Christine was known to the rector of the Parish Church to which they go to get married and knowing that she was underage refuses to marry them specially since he did not in anyway want to contribute towards the "tragedy of marriage". Here Hardy expresses his view for considering marriage a tragedy. As the rector says, marriage "is full of crises and catastrophes and ends with the death of one of the actors." (39)

He believed in the proverb "Marry in haste and repent at leisure."

The marriage of Christine and Nicholas is stalled temporarily but this attempt of theirs to get married set the rumour going that Nicholas and Christine were secretly married and they were man and wife. When squire Evarard hears of this rumour he insists that Christine should marry Nicholas. This insistence acts as an incentive for Nicholas to go on the educational trip that Christine had so long been
insisting upon. He leaves on his journey and does not return for fifteen long years. When Christine saw no signs of Nicholas returning she marries a Captain James Bellston, a man who is socially more acceptable to her father. However, Mr. Bellston is not the best of husband. When her father dies he deserts her after having spent all that she possessed and leaving her in comparative poverty.

Fifteen years later Nicholas returns with a fortune. When he learns that Mr. Bellston had left Christine he asks her once again to marry him and she once again accepts. But Nicholas' plans to marry Christine breaks down on the eve of their marriage as a messenger arrives with her husband's portmanteau and announces his arrival. But Mr. Bellston never arrives. Seventeen years after this the skeleton of her husband is found in a waterfall. But now it is too late and they do not marry. The two of them have aged considerably and the relationship which has developed between the two is too comfortable for them to want to disturb it. The conclusion of the story is at once pathetic and abject. "But occasionally he ventured to urge her to reconsider the case, though he spoke not with the fervour of his earlier years."(83)
Hardy in "The Waiting Supper" once again is writing about the Wessex people's concern with class prejudice. Nic's lower social status and lack of sophistication are an embarrassment to Christine, but this artificial disparity between them "in little things" is insignificant because there is actually little real financial difference in their family assets. Squire Everard is the head of a "Countrified household of the smaller gentry, without much wealth or ambition" (27). Nic's family, on the other hand, has considerable ambition and entrepreneurial skill behind it and is described in solid mathematical terms: his uncle rents an impressive total of 1100 acres of land. The supposed difference in status between Christine and Nic therefore lies in the fact that Nic is a yeoman and the nephew of a tenant farmer. Therefore the difference between Christine and Nic lies more in their expectation of each other than in their actual circumstance and it is because of this apparent difference that they keep postponing their marriage till Nic leaves Christine to go and educate himself so as to measure up to his beloved's expectations.

In the second half of the story there is a reversal of the social position of the two lovers,
Christine now lives in relative poverty while Nicholas has amassed a fortune and is "a man of the world" (61). But as far as their relationship goes it is as of old. Nic crosses the meads to meet his sweet-heart in Froom-Everard House, and once again Christine promises her hand and has to recant because fate will not let them marry. Hardy does not round off the story by making the two elderly people marry. The conventional manner demanded that Hardy rounded off the histories of Christine and Nic but Hardy's refusal to round off shows him to be the great master that he is. "The Waiting Super" anticipates the irony of his best Life's Little Ironies stories which refuse to resolve conflicts in the best machine made conventional manner.

"The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" is the most supernatural tale that Hardy ever told. It is quite simply a fairy tale with the archetypal theme of the innocent maid in love with a mysterious visitor from another world. Margery Tucker, the milkmaid saves Baron Von Xantern from committing suicide — the motif of innocence triumphing over the evil. In gratitude the Baron grants her any one wish. Margery in a
proper Cinderella manner lets the Baron know that what she wants most in life is to go to a ball. The Baron grants her wish. On the day of the ball the Baron asks Margery to meet him at a particular place. To this place he brings a beautiful ball gown for her, which she wears in the hollow of an ancient tree. This event is only the beginning of the fairy-tale elements. Margery has a lovely time at the ball. She dances divinely with the Baron under his mysterious influence. After the ball she is whisked back to change into her ordinary clothes.

Margery has a lover called Jim. After the night at the ball Margery wanted that Jim should be able to provide her with silver candlesticks and furniture to enable him to win his suit. The Baron provides Jim and Margery with all these wanting the two of them to be happy together. On the day of the wedding the Baron unwittingly disrupts the ceremony by calling for Margery to come to him. Because Margery had promised the Baron that she would always go to him if he needed her she has to go leaving Jim behind waiting for his lover to come and marry him. The Baron arranges that Jim and Margery are to be secretly married and then disappears.
A good deal of everyday Wessex life supervenes in these events but eventually the Baron returns in his black carriage with the black horses to take Margery away with him on his yacht. Margery does not, despite the temptation, leave on the Baron's yacht. She suddenly realises what may happen to her if she goes with him. Perhaps she is remembering that the Baron had told her before he went away that she was to answer no more appeals from him because her "salvation may depend on it". The Baron releases her and she is reunited with Jim. The mysterious nobleman disappears from Wessex forever.

In "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" Hardy has used conventions from melodrama and romance to serve the larger purpose of presenting an accurate picture of life in rural Wessex. Although this story has been described by Guerard as the most unrealistic prose narrative that Hardy ever wrote, here Hardy is doing nothing but describing a distinct and living culture of Dorset - a culture which is often misinterpreted because of the inability of the people to see below the surface of things. Here Hardy helps
his readers to see below the superficial by basing the romance elements firmly in the real. Wessex life is presented in detail and where it is necessary Hardy has even interpreted things for the readers. Hardy has through the contrast in the attitude towards life of both the Bay'on and the Milkmaid brought out the contrast between the urban and the rural way of life. The Bay'on appears mysterious to Margery because she has never encountered his kind of people before. To the Bay'on Margery seems to be "Nature's own image" (305) because he has no knowledge of milkmaids.

The dark-mustachioed Bay'on is a mixture of the villain from melodramas, the demon lover of the ballad who can lure a woman away from her simple and devoted husband and the repentant Byronic hero who regrets past sins. Margery is also a mixture of Cinderella of the fairy tales who is transformed for a single night into a princess and the maiden of ballad and romance who is drawn from the safety of simple domesticity by a demon lover.

"The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" was written in the early part of Hardy's fiction writing career. This story anticipates the emphasis that Hardy laid on
the theme that sexual attraction and romantic illusion are potentially destructive forces. Margery's enchantment by the Baron is similar to Carline Aspent's enchantment by Mop Ollamoor in "The Fiddler of the Reels. The attraction between the innocent Margery and the urban sophisticated Baron is the same sort of magnetism as in "On the Western Circuit", "The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid" would have fitted in perfectly in Hardy's collection LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES. Perhaps Hardy did not include it because the story's unusual length made it difficult for him to classify the piece. It did not fit into either of the conventional Victorian categories of short story or novel. However, Hardy's inclusion of this short story in A CHANGED MAN and his mentioning the story on the title page, shows that he did consider it to be, at least in comparison with most of the other narratives in this collection of some interest in importance.

Writing about A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES to Mrs. Henniker Hardy wrote that he did not "take kindly to publishing (his) stray short stories" because they did not seem" to be worth reprinting" and would
gladly have left uncollected these stories had not
Macmillan prompted the suggestion that he assemble
in one final volume all of his still uncollected
works. The result was a collection that is miscellaneous
in every sense in length, kind, quality and in
content. Unlike the three previous volumes of short
stories this book is not concerned with any single
historical period or theme and employs no consistent
narrative technique - it is as Hardy roughly
categorised it in the Wessex edition, a collection of
"Mixed Novels" and its general heading describes
accurately the miscellaneous quality of its contents.