Besides the short stories contained in the volumes which I have discussed in earlier chapters Hardy had left behind six uncollected short stories - "Old Mrs Chundle", "Destiny and a Blue Cloak", "The Doctor's Legend", "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress", "The Thieves who Couldn't Help Sneezing" and "Our Exploits at West Poley". One can only guess as to why Hardy had not collected these stories into a volume or include them in the already existing volumes. Perhaps Hardy had lost all track of some of the stories after their first publication, or perhaps, like in the case of "The Doctor's Legend", a story so obviously written for inclusion in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES he feared that he might offend a local family, or again he might have thought that by publishing stories like "Old Mrs. Chundle" he would be offending the Victorian reading public. The stories may have remained uncollected but they are all good and far from negligible as examples of the short story. F.B. Pinion recognised the merits of the stories and collected them together posthumously in 1977, along with Hardy's epic drama THE FAMOUS TRAGEDY OF THE QUEEN
OF CORNWALL and the outlines for five short stories
which he never completed, Pinion has followed a
certain pattern in arranging the stories. He has
arranged the short stories in three parts. The first
part consisting of "Old Mrs. Chundle", "Destiny and a
Blue Clock" and "The Doctor's Legend" is for adult
readers. The second part contains the story or
novelette "An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress"
adopted from his first unpublished novel THE POOR MAN
AND THE LADY. The third part is meant for children
and has the two stories "The Thieves Who Couldn't
Help Sneezing" and "Our Exploits at West Poley."

"Old Mrs. Chundle" the first story in Pinion's
volume is perhaps the only story to have remained
unpublished during Hardy's lifetime. It was published
posthumously by his wife Florence Emily Hardy in the
Ladies Home Journal (Philadelphia) in January, 1929
and in the Crosby Gaige Edition (New York). Though
not published till after his death this story was
written as early as 1888 - 1890 and Hardy had probably
made no attempt to publish it because "too many readers
would have deemed him guilty of irreverent designs."¹
This meaningless concern for the sensibilities of his
Victorian reading public delayed the publication of
one of Hardy's best and touchingly amusing stories by many years. Behind, what the Victorian readers might have considered to be the disrespectful attitude of Hardy towards the clergy there is a deep reverence for humanity.

One autumn morning, the new curate of Kingscreech was engaged in painting a distant view of Corvagate Castle ruins. When the lunch hour drew on he discovered that he was feeling hungry and spotting a respectable and substantial looking old stone built cottage he called there and asked for a meal. An old woman prepared one for him. During lunch, in the way of conversation, the old woman told the curate that she seldom ventured out of the house but when she did she visited only two places - Anglebury, once a fortnight for marketing and the Kingscreech parish once a week.

When discussing Mrs. Chundle (for that was the old woman's name) with the rector later on in the week, the curate discovered that Mrs. Chundle had exaggerated her travels for in reality she had not visited the church for thirteen years. The new curate revisited Mrs. Chundle to reproach her for her falsehood and to see if he could persuade her to come to Church. By way of explanation old Mrs. Chundle said that she had been in
the habit of attending services ages ago but now saw no use in continuing with this practice since she was too deaf to hear anything. The zealous curate not to be defeated so easily and wanting to do everything possible to bring this stray sheep back into the fold brought her an ear trumpet. But all his efforts were in vain for Mrs. Chundle attended the service but was unable to hear a single word. Disappointed she told the curate:

"Twasn't a mossel o' good, and so I could have told 'ee before. A wasting your money in jimcracks upon a' old 'ooman like me.......you might as well have been mouthing at me from the top of Greech Barrow."

Not wishing to accept defeat at the very first attempt the curate promised her that he would have a speaking tube installed to the pulpit at his own expense and the lower mouth of the tube would be placed opposite her.

At the next Sunday service everything was set according to plans and Mrs. Chundle attended placing herself immediately under the pulpit. The curate began his service but soon after beginning his sermon
he noticed vapour arising from the bell mouth of the speaking tube and detected in it the smell of onion stew. This was obviously caused by Mrs. Chundle's breathing. When he could no longer endure the odour he dropped his handkerchief into the bell of the tube and had the satisfaction of breathing in comparatively fresh air. But this sense of satisfaction he could not enjoy for long. He soon heard a fidgeting followed by a hoarse whisper "The Pipe's Chokt!" This was repeated more loudly and hoarsely as the handkerchief continued blocking the flow of words into Mrs. Chundle's deaf ears. Suddenly there was a violent puff of warm air and the handkerchief rose from the tube and floated to the pulpit floor. Mrs Chundle had successfully cleared the blockade by blowing with all her might. Seeing this little boys laughed thinking that a miracle had happened. The curate once again began to feel uncomfortable as the odour of peppermint, cider and pickled cabbage oozed out of the tube but he did not dare to block the tube again for the fear of causing a greater disturbance. He continued with his sermon till being unable to bear it any longer blocked the bell-mouth with his thumb and brought the sermon to a premature end.
He avoided meeting Mrs. Chundle during the next week but accidentally encountered her at a friend's cottage that he was visiting. She told him that she could hear beautifully except when he had absentmindedly dropped his handkerchief into the speaking tube. She told him that she would attend church every Sunday now onwards. The next Sunday the ordeal was repeated. The curate found himself entirely at a loss and as a means towards solving his problem he had the tube removed.

A day or two later the curate received a message from Mrs. Chundle asking him to see her. Expecting to be attacked by the irrate old woman, he delayed going to her and when he finally trudged to her cottage in a vexed mood he found the curtains of her cottage drawn. Mrs. Chundle had died. The previous Sunday finding herself late for Church, she had run up the hill. As a result she had overstrained her heart and been ill. She sent for him thinking that he was anxious about her spiritual welfare she had refused to send him a second message thinking that he was busy with people who were in greater need than herself. She died with the idea that she had at last
found somebody who was genuinely interested in her 
welfare and left him all her possessions - "her 
bureau, case-clock, four-post bedstead, and framed 
sampler - in fact all the furniture of any account 
that she possessed."(18).

The curate went out with tears in his eyes.
He was a meek, young man after Mrs. Chundle's death.
He walked on thinking of Mrs. Chundle's death till 
he reached a lonely place where

".....kneeling down on the dust of the 
road he rested his elbow in one hand 
and covered his face with the other.

Thus he remained some minutes or 
so a black shape on the hot-white of 
the sunned trackway; till he rose, 
brushed the knees of his trousers and 
walked on."(18).

The story is very touching in its conclusion and one 
feels a lot of sympathy for Old Mrs. Chundle's 
situation. The pent up irony with which the story ends 
is powerful. The rejection which is Mrs. Chundle's lot 
due to no fault of hers makes the reader angry with 
the curate. The story ends on a reverential note with 
the curate repenting for the harsh treatment he had 
handed out to Old Mrs. Chundle. But it is too late for 
him to make repairs. Mrs. Chundle has already died
leaving behind all her property to a man who had initially shown a little concern towards her but deserted her the moment he found something in her which he disliked. It is, therefore, with her death that the curate awakens to the realities of life.

"Old Mrs. Chundle" is one of Hardy's best short stories. Even though the story has an elegiac note in it, it is on the whole amusing. There is a very clever mixing of humor with tragedy. This story also shows that Hardy had a thorough understanding of human nature and its conclusion exhibits the deep reverence that Hardy felt for humanity.

The next story in the collection "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" is of particular interest to us for it is Hardy's first short story. As is usual with the first of most writers, this story is a disappointment to the readers especially since Hardy had written it during a time when he had already become famous in England and in America as the author of the serialised *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*. Hardy was himself aware of the limitations of this story and was least hesitant in admitting it. He called "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" "an impromptu of a trivial kind."
His wife, Florence Emily Hardy considered it to be unsatisfactory. The reason for this story not coming through successfully may lie in the fact that Hardy had hurriedly written the narrative and dispatched it a week before his marriage. He had written it in response to a request made by the editor of The New York Times. It was published for the first time on Sunday 4 October, 1874. From reading this story one might get the impression that Hardy had not taken the short story form seriously in 1874 and had not then thought of experimenting with this form. However "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" is like all other works of Hardy interesting reading and there are brilliant Hardyan touches to be found scattered throughout the story. The conclusion makes a strong impact and reveals an intuitive understanding of women and female rivalry arising from jealousy.

Frances Lovill and Agatha Pollin lived at Coton. Of the two girls Frances was more beautiful and somehow with her beauty she managed to eclipse all the other girls. When the story begins, we are told that one day Frances and Agatha had travelled together to Maiden – Newton, Agatha going from there by train to
Meymouth. She wore a blue Autumn wrap like Frances' which "she had bought in a spirit of emulation rather than originality" and because of this was mistaken for Frances by Oswald Winwood, the hero of this story. As she had already lost her heart to Oswald, Agatha did not correct the young man for fear that he might leave her and go off if he were to discover his mistake. They spent the day together and in the evening he accompanied her home. The final part of the journey they did by the carrier van which they caught just in time. By the time they reached their journey's end Agatha perceived that Oswald loved her and cared for her and for what she was and confessed her deception. He kissed her, said he liked her now that he knew her but admitted that it was Miss Lovill he had been looking for in the morning. At Beaminster, a person whom they had not noticed in the darkness of the van stepped out. They later learnt from the driver that their co-passanger all this while had been none other than Miss Frances Lovill and she had heard all.

Agatha and Oswald continued to love each other. The uncle with whom Agatha lived did not object to this relationship and so they continued to meet till Oswald
had to leave for he was soon to take a competitive examination for a post in India and he had as good a chance as the best of them. Then there follows an interesting bit of conversation between Oswald and Agatha

"Thanks to Macaulay, of honoured memory, I have as good a chance as the best of them, he said with gravity, "What a great thing competitive examination is; it will put good men in good places, and make inferior men move lower down; all bureaucratic jobbery will be swept away."

"What's bureaucratic, Oswald?"

"Oh I. that's what they call it, you know. It is well, I don't exactly know what it is. I know this, that it is the name of what I hate, and that it isn't competitive examination."

"At any rate it is a very bad thing," she said conclusively.

"Very bad, indeed; you may take my word for that." (23)

Hardy through this bit of conversation has brilliantly exposed to his readers the basically innocent and naive nature of the Wessex folks who were gradually being introduced to new concepts of competitive examinations and bureaucracy and who were beginning to accept these concepts without understanding what they in reality were.

Oswald Winwood appeared for the examination, topped the list of successful candidates and left for
India. From there he corresponded with Agatha and told her that he was doing well professionally and would return home to marry her. Meanwhile Agatha's uncle, Humphrey announced that he would marry Frances Lovill.

A merry old bachelor named Lovill, a distant relative of Frances fell in love with Agatha. To Agatha this "aged old youth was positively distasteful" (26) and she had reasons to be repelled by him for

"He was an old man - really and fairly old - sixty five years of age at least. He was not exactly feeble but he found a stick useful when walking in a high wind... His face was not shrivelled, but there was unmistakable puckers in some places. And hence the old gentleman, unmarried, substantial, and cheery as he was, was not doted on by the young girls of Cloton as he had been by their mothers in former time........ They might have liked him as a friend had he not shown the abnormal wish to be regarded as a lover." (25)

Inspite of her dislike for Lovill, her uncle asked her to marry him for the miller owed Lovill a large sum of money and wished to emigrate with his family to Australia. She refused and explained her position. Eventually with a lot of persuasion from
her uncle and advice from the parson Mr. Davids she signed a contract to accept Lovill if Oswald did not return to marry her by November. She wrote to Oswald at once, was assured that he would return, and was happy.

By the evening of her wedding day when Oswald had not returned she decided to run away from home in order to avoid marrying Lovill. She had a young friend named John who worked at her uncle's mill. She planned a means of escape with him. On the day of her wedding she concealed herself in a cart loaded with sacks of flour for local delivery. When it began to move she concluded that all was well and went to sleep. Suddenly she woke up and realised that the cart was returning. She then discovered that the driver was not John but old Lovill disguised in a miller's smock-frock. He was highly amused at the joke. Agatha knew that she was defeated and married Lovill.

In the evening her uncle's wife, the former Frances Lovill came to her room wearing the blue cloak which had meant so much in Agatha's destiny.
She revealed that Mr. Davids was an old admirer of hers, and that she had persuaded him to advise Agatha as he had done. She had heard Agatha making plans with John the previous evening, told Mr. Lovill to avenge her deprivation of a lover and subsequent marriage to a man she did not love. She informed Agatha that Winwood had arrived, his delay having been caused by illness. She had told him that Agatha had gone out with the man she was to marry. Agatha did not flinch 'in face of her adversary' but said that the information was 'interesting' and that she was her husband's darling and would not make him jealous for the world.

"The bride though nearly slain by the news, would not flinch in the presence of her adversary. Stilling her quivering flesh, she said smiling: "That information is deeply interesting, but does not concern me at all, for I am my husband's darling now, you know, and I wouldn't make the dear man jealous for the world. And she glided downstairs to the chaise". (40)

This then in brief is the interesting story of "Destiny and a Blue Gown". Although the story is gripping and typically Hardyan it did not find its way into any of the volumes of short stories. This is because Hardy's
judgement on this story was a negative one. He considered it to be of "no literary value. Kristin Brady commenting on the story writes:

"Hardy fails to see beyond plot and technique to the human emotions they are meant to dramatise."

No one can deny that Hardy is not at his best in "A Destiny and a Blue Cloak". But then this story is an important part of Hardy's literary career and merits study for it is here that Hardy experimented with and made a crude sketch of the themes that he explored over and over again in his later major and minor prose fiction. Here he writes about sexual jealousy leading to rivalry, the important role played by destiny in human lives and the inability of the heroine to make her own choice of partner because of pressure put on her by family and society. In its conclusion the story is melodramatic and it is this which makes a strong impact on the reader's mind.

Like other stories by Hardy the action of "A Destiny and a Blue Cloak" appears contrived but here they are more implausible because factors like characterisation, painting of Wessex scenes and the skills which Hardy otherwise exhibits play a subordinate role. All said and
done inspite of its negative points. "Destiny and a Blue Cloak" is an important landmark in Hardy's literary career.

Although "The Doctor's Legend", the next story in the collection appeared on print in THE INDEPENDENT (New York) on 26 March 1891 from its narrative technique, subject matter and date of composition one can easily detect that it was written for inclusion in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES. Its exclusion from this volume and its publication in America may have been in order to avoid offending the living descendents of Joseph Damer, Lord Milton, the eighteenth century original of the story's cruel and ambitious squire. He might have also excluded it because he did not consider Lady Cecilia's role important and major enough for inclusion in A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES. This is one of Hardy's not so well written story and its "wormy circumstance and general gloom" generally keeps the readers off. But inspite of its dark points like the other bad stories by Hardy it narrates an interesting incident and stands out as a typically Hardeyan work.
Hardy begins his legend in the manner in which
he begins most of his stories from *A Group of Noble Dames*

"Not more than half a dozen miles from the
Wessex coast" (said the doctor) "is a
mansion which appeared newer in the last
century than it appears at the present
day after years of neglect and occupation
by inferior tenants. It was owned by a man
of five and twenty, than whom a more
ambitious personage never surveyed his
face in a glass. His name I will not
mention out of respect to those of his
blood and connections who remain on earth,
if any such there be. In the words of a
writer of that time who knew him well, he
was "one whom anything would petrify but
nothing would soften."(41)

After quickly building up a rapport with his audience
the narrator continues with his story.

The young squire kept a jealous eye on his
property and was annoyed because a little girl, the
daughter of a widow living in the neighbour hood, tres-
passed on his lawn in search of flowers. One day he
pursued her with a cane and so terrified her that she
fell down in a apoplectic fit. She was carried home by
the gardener, who had silently been observing this scene.
It seemed that fright had deprived her of her reason.
Her hair came off, her teeth came out, and everyone
around her started calling her "Death's Head".
In the course of time, the young squire married Lady Cicely, the daughter of an ancient and noble family. One evening Lady Cicely was returning home by the light of the harvest moon when the widow and her child were in the churchyard. As the lady was passing the churchyard, the mother hurried her child to the wall, pulled off her hood and told her to grin. Lady Cicely, who was then expecting a child, shrieked with terror but no evil consequence seemed to result.

On the death of his uncle, the squire inherited a large fortune and with this he bought an abbey and its estates. A year later he was made a peer. His son who was exceedingly timid and impressionable grew up and married a beautiful woman who was a sculptress of great skill. In the meantime the widowed mother seemed to have been "blasted out of existence" by the success of her long time enemy. She died, her death having happily been preceded by that of her child.

The Abbey was too small for the wealthy lord and the village was close to his very doors. He had it removed to make way for extensions and built a new village with convenient cottages a mile or more away so as to get maximum privacy. But the villagers still intruded. They loved to ring the bells. He sold them.
Soon afterwards Lady Cicely died. The renovation work continued and the abbey was pulled down wing by wing. The cloisters and the tombs of the abbots were removed, and it seemed there never would be an end to the removal and reburial of bones. The lord told the workmen to throw the 'wormy rubbish' into any ditch they could find. His son's wife asked if she could have a skull to copy in designing a marble tomb for a church in London. The son was much depressed by what he saw.

One evening he returned to his home in London much the worse for liquor. He entered the studio to look for his wife, and, by the light of a candle which he held unsteadily above his head, caught sight of a sheeted figure with a death's head above it - the draped dummy which his wife had set up to copy. Next morning it was discovered that he had shot himself at a tavern. People said that his death was a retribution for his father's wickedness. Few could know how his mother had been terrified almost to death by the sight of "Death's Head" at the time when she was expecting him. A fearless dissenter preached a sermon on the Sunday after the funeral, taking as his text Isaiah xiv. 10-23.
Whether as a Christian moralist he was justified in doing so, the doctor left others to judge. His listeners continued gazing thoughtfully at the fire at the conclusion of the story.

"The Doctor's Legend" is a weak example of a characteristic mode of telling stories which we have already encountered in Hardy's second volume of short stories, *A Group of Noble Dames*. This story can be studied as an example of his style of telling stories and it shows Hardy's usual love for the unusual and the gruesome.

"An Indiscretion in the Life of an Heiress" is of particular interest to all scholars and students of Hardy for it contains the remnants of Hardy's first novel *The Poor Man and the Lady* which he wrote in 1867 but never published in its original form. However, he used long passages, sometimes whole chapters from it in other early novels of his, like *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *The Hand of Ethelberta*. Much the largest fragment to survive, perhaps a third of the whole original novel is his piece of short fiction, "An Indiscretion in the Life of An Heiress". This story was sold to an English and an American magazine. It was never published in book form in Hardy's lifetime. Terry Celeman writing
about the history of its publication writes:

"His second wife, Florence, did publish it privately in 1934 in an edition of one hundred copies, of which thirty five still remained at Max Gate at her death. They were bound in limp vellum, printed by the Curwen Press, and numbered and initialled F.E.H. by Mrs. Hardy in her own hand. Sydney Cockerell did not approve of this publication. In a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* of March 14, 1935, he said that as one of the literary executors of Hardy, the other being Mrs. Hardy, he had not been consulted about it. He had read "An Indiscretion" some years before in an American magazine' and come to the conclusion that Hardy had some reason for not reprinting it and that it would be a mistake to do so. He said Mrs. Hardy had been of the same opinion as recently as 1929, when she had refused permission for it to be reprinted (in Cleveland, Ohio). Cockerell did not say what Hardy's reasons might have been for not wishing it to be reprinted. Later in 1935 it was published in book form in America, by the late Carl Weber of Colby College, Maine, and this edition was reprinted in facsimile in 1965 by Russel and Russel, New York."8

In "An Indiscretion in the Life of An Heiress" Hardy returns to the social theme he had first explored in *The Poor Man and the Lady* and which he later repeatedly explored in stories after stories. It involves a marriage entirely based on the social and financial ambitions of the heroine's father. Hardy here dramatises the evils of class feeling as in many of his
other stories. Here he shows how honest human affection becomes shame faced and mean because of social prejudices and class divisions.

Egbert Mayne, a young schoolmaster at Tollamore, fell in love with Squire Allenville's daughter, after saving her life. She had gone to see a threshing machine, had inadvertently stepped backwards and had drawn so near to the band which ran from the engine to the drum of the thresher that in another moment her dress would certainly have been caught, and she would have been whirled round the wheel as a mangled corpse. She visited the school to thank him for saving her from imminent death. On this visit Egbert asked Geraldine to do him a favour. Mayne's grandfather, farmer Broadford, with whom he lived, was worried because his house and farm had lapsed to the squire who needed the land for extensions to his park. He asked Geraldine to talk to her father on this question. After this Geraldine and Egbert met frequently. The latter was relieved to hear that the scheme of enlargement had been postponed indefinitely. She visited the school often and on one of these visits after the children had been dismissed,
he kissed her. Geraldine left in a hurry. A week later it was announced that the Squire would go ahead with his plans of extending the park. Soon afterwards Farmer Broadford had an accident and died. Before his death, Egbert told his grandfather that he was in love with Geraldine. Geraldine anxious to make it clear to Egbert that she was in no way to blame for her uncle going back to his original plans of extension visited the house of the dead. They were reconciled.

Geraldine was on the verge of committing the most horrible social sin - that of loving beneath her and owning that she so loved. Eventually Egbert decided to go to London so that he could rise to her social level by years of sheer exertion.

Five years had passed. Egbert had become famous as an author. Geraldine had gone abroad with her father, but one day Egbert caught sight of her in a carriage in Piccadilly. Later he had reason to believe she would attend a performance of the "Messiah" and booked a seat as near as possible to the seats reserved for the Allenville's. At the concert, the opportunity came to hold hands and they arranged to meet at her front door at midnight. At the appointed hour, a letter was slipped under the door. It was from Geraldine. She wrote that since circumstances had
changed they must forget each other. Next morning he saw the papers announce her engagement to Lord Breton. A letter from Geraldine intimated that the announcement was premature. Egbert's ambition left him, as he saw no possibility of an union with Geraldine. He retired to a cottage at Fairland, a village near Tollamore.

He learnt that the wedding was to take place shortly. He decided to face the 'sacrifice' and visited the church to see the preparations for the ceremony. Here he met Geraldine and learned from her that she was not in love with Lord Bretton. In the early hours of the morning she ran away from her father's house and came to Egbert. They decided to marry at once. He borrowed a horse and rode off to procure a license. They were married the same day and set off for London via Melport where they stayed three days. It was agreed that her father should be seen before they left. They reached Tollamore House in the evening. Geraldine was ill with anxiety before she entered. It was arranged that Egbert should wait outside while Geraldine went in to break the news to her father. Half an hour later Egbert, saw a man gallop off from the stables. This was followed by the arrival of a carriage.
Ten minutes later Egbert was summoned into the house. Geraldine was very ill. On meeting her father she had fainted with anxiety. A blood vessel had been ruptured. Her life was in danger. Egbert remained for three days but neither did Egbert's relationship with Geraldine's father improve nor did his wife's health. On the third day Geraldine had another attack and she died.

The story in "An Indiscretion in the Life of Heiress" is told chiefly from the perspective of the poor man but Hardy also shows a considerable amount of compassion for the heiress who complains that to be woven and tied in with the world by blood, acquaintance and tradition and external habit is a terrible thing for it compels a woman to be utterly at the beck of the world's customs. It is in this narrative perspective - where Hardy recognises the lady's as well as the poor man's plight - that the stories of A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES takes its shape.

"The Thieves who Couldn't Help Sneezing", the first of the two stories meant for children, is one of the earliest short stories to be written by Thomas Hardy.
He wrote this story simultaneously with *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*. It was published for the first time as the opening story for the December 1877 issue of *FATHER CHRISTMAS*, a children's annual brought out by the *ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS*. Like many tales of long ago, this event occurs "Many years ago, when oak trees past their prime were about as large as elderly gentlemen's sticks" (31). This story may appear incredible to modern adult readers but with its hilariously comic climax it is very appealing to young readers. It possesses all those elements which they look forward to encountering in stories meant exclusively for them. It has the romance like atmosphere, the right amount of adventure which children look forward to having and enjoy and does not have any sermons to preach. Hardy gives the child hero ample opportunity to exhibit his presence of mind, wit and bravery. Being a Christmas tale it evokes the Christmas spirit with its merry-making, good food, good drink, good company and Christmas carols and the story ends happily for our child hero.

While on the way home one cold Christmas Eve, after executing an important errand for his father,
Hubert is robbed of his horse by some robbers (who had artificially blackened their faces); his arms tied behind him, his legs tightly bound and he is thrown into a ditch. The robbers leave Hubert to his fate. Not to be defeated so easily Hubert struggles, bravely, to free himself and after a great deal of exertion manages to free his legs. With his hands still tightly bound behind him he walks on till he comes to "a large mansion with flanking wings, gables, and towers." (132) Finding the door standing wide open he enters to find himself in a dining room in which a large table was spread with a sumptuous supper as yet untouched. All was silent in the house and Hubert could see no one. To Hubert it seemed as though something had occurred to interrupt the meal.

Even as Hubert was wondering what he should do the silence was broken by hasty footsteps and the words "Be quick" uttered in a deep voice, a voice which he immediately recognised as the voice of the man who had robbed him of his horse. Hubert darted under the table for protection and well hidden by the table cloth he was in a position to overhear the conversation of the three robbers. From their conversation he learnt that the
three thieves had tricked the owner of the house, accompanied by his guests to leave the house and search for a man whose distressed shouts for help they had heard just as they were about to sit down for supper. Needless to say they found no one in distress. One of the thieves had imitated the cries of a man to draw out the inmates so that they could hide within the house and wait for an opportunity to steal all the valuables from the house while all its inmates were sleeping. The thieves hid inside a closet when they heard the host and his guests returning and Hubert took this opportunity to escape from the house least he was mistakenly taken by the inmates for a thief. However, once the family had settled down to dinner Hubert returned to the house this time being led in by the butler.

The people found it hard to believe his tale of misfortune but being in a happy, generous mood they invited him to share their meal. After dinner the men took out snuff and offered some to Hubert asking him to say something about himself. Hubert introduced himself as a travelling magician and he said that his
speciality lay in being able to "conjure up a tempest in a cupboard" (135). With these words he led every one present up to the cupboard where the thieves were hidden, locked it and poured in snuff - a little at a time. This caused the thieves to sneeze a little at first but as Hubert poured in more and more snuff a tempest of sneezes was created within the cupboard. By then, the host realised that Hubert could not possibly be creating the tempest within the cupboard through magic. There must be people hidden inside the closet. By now the thieves within the cupboard were begging for mercy. The thieves were captured and Hubert thanked. After this little adventure Hubert returned home to the normal routine of everyday life.

This tale is a great favourite with children. They simply love the idea that a seemingly invincible foe is defeated by the skill and guile of a young boy. Young readers like to identify themselves with Hubert. The child hero has no moral choice to make except to oppose an externalised evil.
"The Thieves who Couldn't Help Sneezing" shows that Hardy would have made an excellent children's story writer if he chose to be one. This fact is further proved by the story which follows. "Our Exploits at West Poley" is a more sophisticated story and it is written for children a little older. Even though this story remained uncollected it is one of Hardy's best stories.

"Our Exploits at West Poley" was written for the YOUTH'S COMPANION, an American magazine of wide appeal, in the summer of 1883. In a letter of 5th April, 1883 to the editors Hardy wrote that he had agreed to provide a story for serial publication "not later than the end of the present year". He then continued in his letter:

"I have roughly thought out a plan which at present seems promising. But I shall prefer not to commit myself to a title till later on in the year. The general scope, or sub-title, however, might be announced as "A rural tale of adventure in the West of England". You may depend upon my using my best efforts to please your numerous readers; and that the story shall have a healthy tone, suitable to intelligent readers of both sexes."
By November of that year Hardy had finished writing his story and he sent the manuscript on 5th November under the title "Our Exploits at West Poley". In a letter accompanying the manuscript Hardy wrote:

"In constructing the story I have been careful to avoid making it a mere precept in narrative - a fatal defect, to my thinking, in tales for the young, or for the old. That it carries with it a sufficiently apparent moral, will I think be admitted. The important features of plot and incident have received my best attention."\(^1^0\)

However, the story did not meet with the editor's approval and it was sent back to Hardy for correction. On 14 March, 1884 Hardy returned the copy with the following words:

"The story seems to be to go naturally enough now and I hope you will think the same - still more that your numerous young readers will think so. I shall be much obliged if you will send the numbers of the Companion in which the story appears, as I have no correct copy from which it could be printed in England afterwards, should I desire to do so."\(^1^1\)

The story remained unpublished for another couple of years as we can gather from another letter dated 13 December 1886 where Hardy wrote:
"With regard to the short story I wrote for the Companion please do not pay any attention to the fact that I cannot avail myself of it here as long as you keep it unpublished. The proprietors of the Companies treated me very courteously in the matter, and I should much prefer that you hold it back as long as there is any chance of your having room for it, to your publishing it elsewhere to oblige me. Possibly if you have no space for it at length you may someday think fit to produce it in a somewhat abridged form — it being a story of an imaginative kind suitable for a Christmas number, or such like. Our children here are younger for their age then yours; and possibly the story is too juvenile for your side of the sea. I fancy you may be mistaken in that; but of course I do not know as well as yourselves."

This story thus remained filed away with many others in the office of the YOUTH'S COMPANION. It was by sheer accident that the editor's son-in-law recovered this story and got it published. In a letter to Purdy he wrote:

"I did not join the staff of the Youth's Companion until 1890, and consequently have no first hand knowledge of the serial story by Thomas Hardy. All that I can tell you is what I heard about it later (from Rideing) for the action that Mr. Daniel S. Ford, then editor and
proprietor of the Companion, took in regard to it amazed his sub-editors and became an office legend. Mr. Ford's daughter "ried a Mr. Hartshorn, for whom Mr. Ford bought a small story paper entitled THE HOUSEHOLD. I think that it never prospered greatly, and, to help things along, Mr. Ford would now and then give his son-in-law MSS. from the ample stock of the YOUTH'S COMPANION in Boston, was an obscure and unsuccessful magazine which described itself as "Devoted to the Interests of the American Housewife". There in six monthly instalments between Nov., 1892 and April 1893, Our Exploits was first printed...........#13

Thus, it is by sheer accident that this delightful adventure story for children was rediscovered and published.

"Our Exploits at West Poley" being written for slightly older readers then the earlier. "The Thieves Who Couldn't help Sneezing" is more serious. In it Hardy tells the youthful adventure that two boys, Steve and Leonard, encounter while exploring Nick's Pocket, a cove in the Mandip Hills, through Leonard's eyes. While telling the story Hardy pays special attention to the plot and incident and takes care
to see that the story has the right amount of surprise, wonder, alarm and the thrills of escape and heroism to make the story appealing for the young readers. Yet the story is not all fun. It has a "sufficiently apparent moral to give its young readers food for thought.

While exploring Nick's Pocket, Steve one day finds a mysterious subterranean stream and when his cousin Leonard comes to visit him the two together decided to explore this stream. Their exploration provides them great amusement for they discover that they could divert the course of the river running through West Poley to their rival village East Poley. When they divert the river for the first time they do it unwittingly but as time passes the boys turn the river one way or the other at their own discretion. They do not know and cannot decide which of the two villages has a greater right to the river for they see the sudden disappearance of the stream from West Poley causes great distress to the West Poleyites but at the same time it relieves the villagers of East Poley from years of waterlessness. Seeing this Steve realises that
"it is next to impossible in this world to do good to one set of folks without doing harm to another." So what had started as an innocent sport soon proves a threat not only to the villagers but to the boys themselves for one day while turning the river course they direct the water into a cul-de-sac and they soon find themselves trapped within the cave with the water slowly rising and death just a few minutes away. However, they manage to escape only to find that they had caused more harm then good by tampering with the river source for no one could say which village had more right to the water source.

Hardy concludes the story by describing a clash between the two villages. Steve sits through all this with the increasing belief that West Poley had more right to the river because he felt that had he not tampered with the river East Poley would never have had the river flowing through it. Thus convinced, Steve in a last outburst of heroism blasts the inner cave, where the river source lay, with gunpowder thus terminating the possibility of human interference
for good and restoring the river to West Poley. While executing this feat he nearly perished in the explosion. Because of this experience Steve becomes more aware of his responsibilities and he goes on to become "the largest gentleman farmer of those parts, remarkable for his avoidance of any thing like speculative exploits."

As Hardy had said the moral in this story is "sufficiently apparent". He discourages rashness because it often leads to consequence beyond one's control. Kristin Brady commenting on the moralistic point of view writes:

"The moral issue here ..........is the danger of tampering with the "most fragile" order of nature. The diversion of the river is potentially a form of the original sin - involving serious consequences not only in the present but also, by the transmission of this knowledge from one generation to the next, for the future."  

Hardy in "Our Exploits at West Poley" has definitely got a moral to preach but even as he is doing it he takes care to see that the story does not sound too didactic. In this story, as in all other stories by
Hardy, it is the artist who stands out more than the propounder of moral views. Hardy in this story once again gives a delightful picture of the rural life and characters of Wessex. He describes the basic problems of the rural people, problems like the frustration that is born out of a seeking to rise in the world and the tragedy of the countryman exiled from the agricultural world. These problems he portrays through the sombre, shadowy figure of "The Man who has Failed", a typically Hardyan character, who is oddly out of place in West Poley. When Leonard encounters him for the first time he is introduced by Steve as:

"Oh—he's nobody", Said Steve. "He's a man who has been all over the world, and tried all sorts of lives, but he has never got rich, and now he has retired to this place for quietness. He calls himself the man who has Failed."

There is nothing amusing about this 'nobody'.

He is a man

"....who has failed not from want of sense, but from want of energy, and people of that sort, when kindly, are
better worth attending to than those successful ones, who have never seen the seamy side of things."

In the words of Douglas Brown

"This saddened returned native presides at a distance, throughout a potential interpreter never called upon. He might have unfurled the image, we feel, and through him at its end, the tale points lightly but deliberately to the agricultural stoicism 'quiet perseverance in clearly defined courses'."

The other characters who appear briefly in the story are the miller, the baker, the diaryman, the blacksmith and the Shoemaker. Hardy presents them as "stock characters of rustic comedy" who "help to form a lively and rustic community but remain indistinct individuals". It is amongst these people that our two children protagonists live. Leonard and Steve have been drawn by Hardy as two distinctly different individuals going through the same experience. Leonard is an impressionable and morally sensitive boy in contrast to Steve who is less thoughtful but older and more masterful.

Even though F.B. Pinion has categorised "Our Exploits at West Poley" as a story for children "it does
not exclude an adult perception of things."\(^{17}\)

It is a story which has been enjoyed by children for quite some time now but it includes more than what children are expected to know. It has many scholarly references which suggests that Hardy expected his readers to be as well read as he was during his school days. There are scholarly references to history, literature and philosophy which most children will pass over without understanding.

In spite of this children respond well to the general atmosphere of rollicking comedy which expresses itself in incidents like the fateful encounter of the two rival villages and the scene where Steve and Leonard go dressed as wizards to East Poley, to impress the children there with white magic shows.

Children love the spirit of adventure in the story and love to identify themselves with Leonard and Steve. Adults find in it enough material to give it a second thought.

Like the stories in *A CHANGED MAN AND OTHER TALES* the remaining six short stories by Hardy which we have
discussed in this chapter do not have much interest when discussed as a volume for unlike WESSEX TALES, A GROUP OF NOBLE DAMES and LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES, there can be found no unifying principle running through these stories. But the volume of stories collected by Pinion contains stories which are most varied in subject matter and the usual allegation against Hardy that his stories are repetitions does not hold good here. The first four stories could have gone into his earlier volumes had he desired to include them and the two stories for children show that had he so desired and had he pursued his career as a children's story writer he would have become as immortal as Mark Twain did with his Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn for OUR EXPLOITS AT WEST POLEY and "THE Thieves who Couldn't Help Sneezing" are very good and popular examples of children's short story today.
But because of unfavourable and severe criticism Hardy abandoned his career as a prose fiction writer earlier than he would have otherwise done. Perhaps because of this, these stories of his remained uncollected. However, these are typically Hardyan stories and merit study because they are good and because they are examples of his style and concerns at particular points in his development as a prose fiction writer.