Chapter-3

A Pair of Blue Eyes: ‘De-crowning’ Nobility, Church and Death

‘tis out of question that a human being can be so mournful as black edges half-an-inch wide’.

A Pair of Blue Eyes, earlier planned to be titled ‘A Winning Tongue Had He’, is the first of Hardy’s novels to be published with the author’s name on the title page. The title was adapted from the song in R. B. Sheridan’s The School for Scandal (III, iii). For its setting, Hardy chose North Cornwall or what the author termed ‘Outer Wessex’. “The cosy village scenes, the engaging but diminutive characters, all the panoply of the ‘portfolio of pictures’, with its amusing anecdotes and illustrative scenes, are put aside in favour of something much grander and more rugged” (Bullen 53).

Hardy had a special fondness for the novel as it reminded him of his first meeting with his first wife Emma in Cornwall in 1870 (Life 65-74) and the subsequent romantic phase. ‘Elfride Swancourt has much in common with young Emma Gifford with whom Hardy fell in love; and the young architect Stephen Smith who visits her, can be seen as a remote reflection of the young Hardy. Smith is the son of relatively humble parents, a fact he is
at some pains to conceal: and this uncomfortable position between two worlds was certainly Hardy's own' (Butler 142-43). Stephen's father too was a 'master-mason' like Hardy's father.

The novel was written during the initial phase of Hardy's career when he was gliding through his romantic years just before his wedding and expectedly, it abounds in elements of merriment and laughter. The humour in this novel is not adulterated by the suffering and alienation of the immigrant industrial labourers as in his later novels. Laughter here is pure, simple and hearty, though the novel terminates in the premature death of the heroine Elfride and the sad frustration of her suitors Stephen and Henry Knight. 'The dialogue of the rustics is a relief from discussions on serious themes, especially those which turn on prying jealousy, Victorian properties, and feminine caprice' (Pinion 26). The description of rustic merriment here bears out the validity of F.E. Hardy's claim that the stream of Hardy's sympathy flowed with 'the intense interests, passions, and strategy that throb through the commonest lives' (Life 153).

Duffin observes that 'the quality of the rustic humour grew richer, if not finer, as the novels went on' (145). He emphasizes the element of fun in the scene of Stephen's homecoming. 'John Smith's account of his gradual and cautious recognition of his son; the steady vivisection of Stephen's
changed appearance; the tales of idiosyncratic pigs — deaf, and melancholy and insane, and rheumatic; the family joke that had been made at every pig-killing for three generations, and had not yet lost its incomparable flavour; and the puzzle snuff-box whose secret was that it wouldn’t open at all; the whole proceedings carried on with epic seriousness by the hempen homespuns who are the actors:’ (145)

The first instance of carnivalesque laughter however is provided by Robert Lickpan, the driver of the dog-cart in which Stephen is coming to Endelstow for restoring the church. When they come across Lord Luxellian’s house, Lickpan informs Stephen that Luxellians were hedgers and ditchers by profession. Once upon a time, one of them, when at work, had changed clothes with King Charles II and thus saved the King’s life. Then the King said to Luxellian the hedger:

Now mind ye; if ever I come to the crown, you come to court, knock at the door, and say out bold, ‘Is King Charles the second at home?’ Tell your name, and they shall let you in, and you shall be made lord (PBE 9).

Lickpan narrates that in due course Charles the Second came to the throne. A few years later Hedger Luxellian went to the palace, knocked at
the door and enquired whether the king was there. Being answered in the negative, he asked if Charles the third was in.

"Yes," said a young feller standing by like a common man, only he had a crown on, "my name is Charles the Third (PBE 9).

Though the driver's description seems a bit fabricated, but the 'de-crowning' effect of laughter is unmistakably present there. The next illustrations not only prove it to be exaggerated but also ludicrous.

Stephen, however, cannot bear such a distortion of history and protests that it must be a mistake, as he could not remember anything in the history of England about Charles the Third.

'Oh that's right history enough, only't wasn't prented; he was rather a queer tempered man, if you remember.'

'Very well; go on'.

'And by hook or by crook, Hedger Luxellian was made a lord, and everything went on well till some time after, when he got into a terrible row with King Charles the Fourth' —

'I can't stand Charles the Fourth. Upon my word, that's too much'.

'Why? There was a George the Fourth, wasn't there?'

'Certainly'.
The rustics make their own version of history, may be, out of their ignorance, but they enjoy it in their own way. Even history, with all its sanctity, is a source of mirth for them. In this context we may cite the three major features of carnival defined by Bakhtin and pointed out by Hawthorn:

First, that ‘their starting point for understanding, evaluating, and shaping reality, is the living present’; second, that they do not rely on legend but, consciously, on experience and free invention; and third, that they are deliberately ‘multi-styled and hetero-voiced’ (1984, 108). (37)

The concluding part of the driver’s words and the apparently self-imposed wisdom in it makes it delightful. The apparent gravity and simplicity of the driver amuse us. Admitting Stephen’s fair knowledge of the political history of England, we also admire the driver’s rooted belief in traditional hearsay of Wessex. He seems to represent the potentially disruptive mistrust embedded in folk wisdom vis-à-vis the claims of authenticity and superiority as per the traditional hierarchical order of the society.

Neither is there any hint of awed reverence regarding the church and its representatives. As the dog-cart approaches towards the Endelstow
Vicarage Lickpan provides information about Parson Swancourt. When Stephen asks him how long has the present parson been there, the driver replied,

May be about a year, or a year and half: 't isn't two years; for they don't scandalise him yet, and, as a rule, a parish begins to scandalise the pa'son at the end of two years among 'em familiar. (PBE 10)

These meticulous details about scandalizing a parson manifest the carnivalesque spirit of mocking the church and mirthfully dragging down the venerable into the dust.

The driver, arriving at the destination, wishes to have a bit of supper in Parson Swancourt's kitchen; 'Sich a lovely mate-pize and figged keakes, and cider, and drops o' cordial that they do keep here!' (PBE 10). Thus we are given hints of the rustics' love for eating and drinking which we shall come across in almost every subsequent novel of Hardy.

We have already been introduced to William Worm, a 'dazed factotum' or stupid servant of Mr Swancourt, who lets Stephen and the driver in the residence of the parson [in the second chapter]. He is supposed to suffer from a strange type of headache. During a conversation between Stephen and Mr Swancourt, Worm intervenes to inform them that people
have begun frying again in his head. To explain the matter, he tells the
former groaningly that he has got such a headache that there is ‘no living
night nor day. ’Tis just for all the world like people frying fish: fry, fry, fry,
all day long in my poor head, till I don’t know whe’r I’m here or yonder.
There, God A’mighty will find it out sooner or later, I hope, and relieve me’
(PBE 21-22). He also adds that he can hear the frying pan a-fizzing as
natural as life. Though the chronic disease is quite painful for William, the
funny detailing of the headache is rather amusing. That one can compare
headache with people frying fish in one’s head is beyond imagination. The
comparison also brings out the rustics’ flair for eating as they show a
tendency to associate even their diseases with food elements. One is
obviously reminded of Peter Breughel’s painting “The Battle of Carnival
and Lent”. Bristol identifies,

In Breughel’s painting The Battle of Carnival and Lent, the
personification of Carnival rides on a wine barrel instead of a
horse, and the combatants brandish cooking utensils instead of
weapons. Various figures in Carnival train wear articles of
food or kitchenware on their heads—a kettle, a hat made of
waffles—and Carnival himself is crowned with a meat pie that
someone has bitten into. The comprehensive rethinking of the
social world in terms of common, everyday material and physical experience is central to ‘uncrowning’ — the fundamental transformation downward of popular imagery. In this system, the kettle or meat pie take the place of the crown or helmet as the ‘topmost’ principle. Carnival brings all knowledge of social reality down to earth and places the body, its needs and its capabilities, at the center of the social process.

(67)

Later in this chapter in a conversation between Elfride and Stephen regarding writing of sermons, the observation of the former provides ample humour for the simplicity of their delivery as well as their casual attitude towards the church. She informs Stephen that she often composes sermons for her father; the parson preached them better than he does his own; and afterwards he talks to people and to her about what he has said in his sermon that day being oblivious of who has composed it. This is in tune with the carnival spirit of subversion vis-à-vis the church proceedings. Elfride also claims that writing sermons is as easy as the playing of a game of forfeit called “When is it? Where is it? What is it?” (PBE 24). She continues that, to write a sermon a person should take the text first. Then he should think
“Why is it? What is it?” etc. He has to put it down under “Generally”. Elfride adds,

‘Then you proceed to the First, Secondly and Thirdly. Papa won’t have fourthlys — says they are all my eye. Then you have a final Collectively, several pages of this being put in great black brackets, writing opposite, “Leave this out if the farmers are falling asleep.” Then comes your In Conclusion, then A Few Words And I Have Done. Well, all this time you have put on the back of each page, “Keep your voice down” — I mean,’ she added correcting herself, ‘that’s how I do in papa’s sermon-book, because otherwise he gets louder and louder, till at last he shouts like a farmer up a-field. Oh, papa is so funny in some things!’ (PBE 24).

The entire description reflects an indifferent attitude towards the gravity of church proceedings. It becomes all the more amusing when we go through the direction for leaving some pages if the farmers are asleep. It obviously reveals that they are used to attend the church only as a mark of religious duty, while having no interest in the sermons. In other novels of Hardy the boisterous rustics even dare to cut jokes at the church. The caution at the back of every page to keep his voice down also reflects Elfride’s casual
approach towards the spiritual value of the sermons, which is in tune with
the response of the drowsy congregation.

An even more humorous situation arises when Mr. Swancourt, in
absence of Elfride, tells Stephen confidentially that he is going to tell him a
top secret which he should not reveal to anybody or Elfride:

‘Now, Smith, I’ll tell you something; but she mustn’t know it
for the world — not for the world, mind, for she insists upon
keeping it a dead secret. Why, she writes my sermons for me
often, and a very good job she makes of them!’ said the parson.
‘She can do anything.’
‘She can do that. The little rascal has the very trick of the trade.
But, mind you, Smith, not a word about it to her, not a single
word!’
‘Not a word,’ said Smith. (PBE 24)

The twenty-third chapter deals with Stephen Smith’s return from
India and the celebration arranged to observe this joyous occasion. While
approaching his native place on his return, Stephen comes across his father
accompanied by Martin Cannister. They reach home and find that William
Worm and his wife have dropped in to take shelter from rain. Worm is once
again suffering from his chronic headache. This time he can feel in his head
along with fish-frying, 'rashers o' bacon and inions' (182). The fun of the situation is that Worm can imagine the presence of nothing but food elements in his head. Worm's imagination appears to respond only to gustatory images. This once again brings out the rustics' uninhibited appreciation of food, particularly when, as on this occasion, on the eve of a supper. John Smith has already welcomed Worm and his wife and requested them to join in a supper where the special item is pork.

Robert Lickpan, the pig-killer and carrier, arrives there in due course. He cleaves the pig, hanging in the back-kitchen, down the middle of its backbone. Mrs Smith has, in the meantime, started preparing the supper. Between the cutting and chopping of the animal, wine is served as Worm and Lickpan listen to Mr Smith's description of his encounter with Stephen. He tells them that he could identify his son first by the resemblance of his walk with his grandfather's. Stephen was recognized by his father also by the black case he was carrying, his stick and the family step. It is quite funny that a father had to take help of so many objects to recognize his son, while he could have identified him easily by his countenance.

Robert, who is apparently an expert in the area, begins his account of the various pigs he has come across. According to him, like human beings, pigs too have individualizing behavioral traits. 'Many's the rum-tempered
pig I’ve knowed’. (PBE 185) He knew a pig, which was deaf and dumb, and it behaved very modestly when it was killed. It was ‘very tender eating, very; as pretty a bit of mate as ever you see; you could suck the mate through a quill’. (PBE 185)

Consuming a draught of ale the pig-killer resumes that he had known another pig, which went out of its mind. In early life it was very melancholy and never seemed a hopeful pig by any means. But it went ‘As clean out of his mind as the cleverest Christian could go’ (PBE 186). It was Andrew Stainer’s pig, which has also been proved to be a pretty little porker in due course. A pig killer’s sympathy for particular pigs simply because they were delicious when killed and cooked, seems only appropriate. Robert’s way of attributing human qualities to the pigs contributes to the effect of the grotesque and absurd. Here Bristol’s observation may be recalled: “Carnival is ‘a monster for feeding’ that celebrates quantity and the whole cycle of alimentation. The symbolism of popular pageantry discloses the hidden interconnectedness between living and dead matter. Instead of articulating distinctions, it manifests the continuity between food (slaughtered meat) and living flesh (producers and consumers). Carnival represents a dialectical exchange between life and death, achieved through positive and negative transformation of matter.” (68)
Lickpan next narrates the ‘old familiar joke’ (PBE 186), which has been in their family for generations and used by his father regularly at pig-killings for more than forty-five years. His father got the story from his grandfather who had also been used to tell the story in every pig-killing more or less; ‘and pig-killings were pig-killings in those days’ proudly added Lickpan (PBE 186). Robert narrates the joke thus:

“Bob will tell the weight of your pig, ’a b’lieve”, says I. The congregation of neighbours think I mane my son Bob, naturally; but the secret is that I mane the bob o’ the steelyard. Ha, ha, ha!’

‘Haw, haw, haw!’ laughed Martin Cannister who had heard the explanation of this striking story for the hundredth time.

‘Huh, huh, huh!’ laughed John Smith, who had heard it for the thousandth.

‘Hee, hee, hee!’ laughed William Worm, who had never heard it at all, but was afraid to say so.

‘Thy grandfather, Robert, must have been a wide-awake chap to make that story’, said Martin Cannister, subsiding to a placid aspect of delighted criticism.
‘He had a head, by all account. And you see, as the first-born of the Lickpans have all been Roberts, they’ve all been Bobs, so the story was handed down to the present day’. (PBE 186)

This is shared mirth while enjoying a supper along with drinks and needs little or no real point in order to bubble up and burst into loud uninhibited laughter. They possess the tremendous capacity to have delight whenever merry occasions arise.

Being enthused by the collective response, Lickpan proceeds with another anecdote. This time he narrates the tale of the snuff-box of his uncle Levi, whom he considers cleverer than his grandfather. Levi made a snuff-box that should be a puzzle to his friends to open. He used to hand it round at marriage parties, christenings, funerals, ‘and in other jolly company’, and let them make an effort to open it. This extraordinary box was constructed with a spring behind which would push in and out — a hinge where the cover seemed to exist; at the end there was a slide, a screw in front, and knobs and strange notches all round. Every single person tried his best to open the box but in vain. Narrating the meticulous description Lickpan asks the congregation, — ‘Now what might you think was the secret of that box?’ (PBE 187). As everybody in the gathering fails to come out with a solution, Lickpan declares:
'Why the box wouldn't open at all. 'A were made not to open, and ye might have tried till the end of Revelations, 'twould have been as naught, for the box were glued all round'.

'A very deep man to have made such a box'. (PBE 187)

Simple jokes, apparently made familiar through many repetitions continue to have their never failing appeal to the rustics who are ready to respond even to dull or smutty jokes. Their unadulterated mental set up does not require any complexity of plot or perplexity of thought. The simple stories, jokes and puzzles provide them with sufficient elements of laughter and psychological satisfaction. Moreover, when the stories are narrated on a merry occasion accompanied by supper and drinks, they can squeeze as much enjoyment from it as anything.

One of the guests present there observes that Uncle Levi has been the tallest man he has ever seen. Being inspired by this attribute offered to his uncle, Lickpan readily informs them that since Levi grew up as a boy, he was not able to sleep in bed-stead as there was none long enough to accommodate him. When he lived in the little house by the pond he used to leave the chamber door open every night before going to bed, so that his feet could poke out upon the landing. Though the exaggeration is well-understood by everybody, they appreciate his uncle's height by not objecting
to Lickpan's narration. Grotesque exaggeration is but a part of the game in this plebeian laughter.

The weighing and cutting up of the pig flesh are carried on amid a jubilant discussion of Stephen's travels; and 'the first-fruits of the day's slaughter, fried in onions, were then turned from the pan into a dish on the table, each piece steaming and hissing till it reached their very mouths' (PBE 187). It is vivid evocation of the eager eaters who enjoy the food no less than the tales that preceded the feast.

Thus the home-coming of Stephen is celebrated by his well-wishers amid eating, drinking, gossiping, and hearty laughter. The vitality of the rustics is once again brought forth; and this seems to offer a counterpoint to the main plot in which the major characters in the novel face a tremendous emotional tumult. The rustics' aspirations are meagre, complexities are hardly any, and therefore they can immerse themselves in the joy of the moment, and bask in the glow of the *carpe diem* spirit.

In the twenty-sixth chapter we come across Stephen joining his father John Smith who is accompanied by William Worm, Martin Cannister and others in the graveyard at the hour when they are having some refreshment. They have gathered there to find an adequate burying space for Lady Luxellian who has expired that very morning. Sitting on the displaced
coffins, they are consuming bread and cheese and sharing ale from the same mug. Stephen approaches them with greeting whereas Martin and William respond ‘merely by compressing their eyes to friendly lines and wrinkles’ (PBE 198) as their mouths are already filled up. Apparently a recent death, together with the signs of countless past deaths lying scattered round, fail to awe these grave-diggers.

As the conversation proceeds, Stephen enquires about Lady Luxellian’s age. The under-mason replies that by candlelight she looked just a young lady of twenty-seven or eight but promptly adds, ‘Lord! by day ’a was forty if ’a were an hour’ (PBE 199). Cannister supports the statement by his observation that for rich ladies daylight and night can make a difference of twenty years in their appearance. Their comment brings out the carnival attitude of ‘de-throning’ their social superiors and their capacity to poke fun even within the premises of the graveyard. They seem to be right successors to Shakespeare’s grave-diggers (Hamlet) both in spirit and speech.

During the conversation someone wonders if Lord Luxellian has sent the news of the demise to other lords. One of the rustics answers that letters have already been dispatched after an hour of the death. He then marvels at the ‘wonderful black rims as the letters had — half an inch wide, at the very least’ (PBE 199). Martin Cannister is rather serious to furnish his judgement
in this regard. For him half an inch wide ribbons to tie the mourning letters are ‘too much’ (PBE 199). His idea is, ‘tis out of question that a human being can be so mournful as black edges half-an-inch wide’. Rather he is sure enough about the fact that ‘people don’t feel more than a very narrow border when they feels most of all’. The rustics’ power of mocking even death and mourning is manifested in a brilliant way. It is the carnival approach to measure grief by the width of a ribbon and dismissing any extraordinary width as unrealistic. According to Bakhtin, ‘Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts’ (RHW 9).

The rustics’ immense ability to defy the grief and threat of death proves their inherent vitality. They are well aware of the inevitability of death and yet display a courageous indifference towards it. They possess the astonishing capacity to gossip, eat and drink while sitting on the coffins and this obviously signifies their triumph over the fear of death. They are capable of making fun on the eve of a person’s burial. It seems that they have the vital knowledge that there is no use of mourning for one who has ceased to exist. That is why they are able to discuss about measuring grief by means of the length and width of a ribbon. Gusto for life becomes all the
more pronounced in their casual, even lively, approach to death. As Pinion aptly observes: "The world might be bleak, but he [Hardy] saw 'the determination to enjoy… in all nature, from the leaf on the tree to titled lady at the ball' (Life 213); and the current of his sympathies ran with 'the intense interests, passions, and strategy that throb through the commonest lives' (Life 153), however" (144).