Chapter-7

The Mayor of Casterbridge: ‘A Few Crusted Characters’ on Life, Death and Four Pennies

'... a good laugh warms my heart more than a cordial....'

While commenting on Lope de Vega’s plays in the article ‘Comedy in Spain and the Spanish comedia’, J.C.J. Metford says, ‘He knew from experience that audiences liked to be moved to tears and then to find relief in laughter. This is the formula he applied successfully to most of his plays which have stood the test of time. A tragic event, like the rape of the bride from the village of Fuenteovejuna, is made bearable by the mock-heroic behaviour of some of the rustics’ (Howarth 88). Almost the same formula is applicable to the tragic fiction of Hardy and it is clearly manifest in The Mayor of Casterbridge. This comic relief provides a release from everyday monotony as well as hectic activities by allowing a transitory freedom from it. Like the rustics of Aristophanes’ plays this release or liberation of the rural characters from everyday restraints expresses a freedom from earthly logic. Like Aristophanes’ comedy, Hardy’s tragedy also strikes ‘the contrast between rustic simplicity and urban sophistication’ (Howarth 24). Hardy himself was rooted in the countryside and could feel the pulse of this life.
Following the publication of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* an anonymous reviewer in *Athenaeum* (29 May 1886, 711) observed,

...he has a wonderful knowledge of the minds of men and women, particularly those belonging to a class which better educated people are often disposed to imagine has no mind, chiefly because it cannot express itself with much fluency or 'lucidity'. Also he knows the ways and humours of Country-folk, and can depict them vividly and in few strokes. (Cox 133)

Published on the same day, another unsigned review in the *Saturday Review* (1xi 757) claimed, ‘[...] The rustic dialogue, indeed, forms the most, if not the only, amusing portion of the book’ (Cox 135).

It has been common knowledge that Casterbridge is the fictional name attributed to the mid-nineteenth century Dorchester. It was essentially rural in spirit, a marketplace with some surrounding villages: ‘Casterbridge was the complement of the rural life around; not its urban opposite’ (*MC* 60). In June 1883, after almost ten years of wandering with Emma, Hardy arrived from Wimborne at Dorchester, the very centre of his partly real partly imaginary Wessex. Hardy had then completed almost half of his life-span and Dorchester remained his home for the rest of his life. Gibson observes,
The action of *A Laodicean* took place around Dunster, some hundred miles from Dorchester; that of *Two on a Tower* brought him back to within twenty miles, and as he himself returned to live in Dorchester it became — almost inevitable—the location for one of his greatest novels. [...] The main action of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* takes place in the late 1940s, the time of Hardy’s own childhood, and the memories came flooding back as in this description of Casterbridge. (95)

Hardy traces the beginning of the story in 1850 (*Life* 351, 378).

1883 was a significant year in the career of Hardy. Apart from writing two stories titled ‘The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid’ and ‘The Three Strangers’ (rich in carnivalesque laughter), he wrote a remarkable essay ‘The Dorsetshire Labourer’ where he said,

The pleasures enjoyed by the Dorset labourer may be far from pleasures of the highest kind desirable for him. They may be pleasures of the wrong shade. And the inevitable glooms of a straitened hard-working life occasionally enwrap him from such pleasures as he has; and in times of special storm and stress the “Complaint of Piers the Ploughman” is still echoed in his heart. But even Piers had his flights of merriment and humour; and ploughman as a rule does not give
sufficient thought to the morrow to be miserable when not in physical pain. (Orel 171)

Paul Turner informs that Hardy began to collect materials for the novel in March 1884 in the back numbers of the Dorset County Chronicle at the Dorset County Museum. Among other significant news items, he read about 'a labring man' who sold his wife for £5 and a 'public nuisance' who transformed into 'a respectable tradesman' by swearing off alcohol for seven years. After the completion of that term and just one bender to celebrate, he renewed his oath for twelve years more.... (92). Apparently Hardy used the information as he subsequently began the novel around April or May 1884. On 17 April 1885 (Friday) he wrote in his personal notebook: "Wrote the last page of 'The Mayor of Casterbridge' begun at least a year ago, and frequently interrupted in the writing of each part" (Millgate 177). The main interruption was caused by the construction of his new house, Max Gate, which Hardy himself designed and closely supervised its building by his father and his brother Henry. R.H.Taylor informs that it was actually Mack's Gate, named after the former keeper of a nearby toll-gate; but Hardy liked to think of it as 'Porta Maxima', the chief gate into the Roman town (Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy 25). The novel was serially published on both the sides of the Atlantic (in the Graphic in England and in Harper's Weekly
in America) from 2 January to 15 May 1886 and it was published in book from on 10 May of the same year. Though the author does not deal with Wessex countryside as such in The Mayor of Casterbridge, the town of Casterbridge is avowedly a village-oriented one, and its ways are governed by rural ethos and norms. The aspiration of the poor commoners of Casterbridge, unlike the protagonist, is very meagre, and rarely brings about any affliction. They can rejoice in an uninhibited manner. Instead of attempting to evade suffering they manifest a patient approach to bear with it. A good deal of Wessex way of life spills over into the market-town of Casterbridge and moulds its character. Casterbridge holds a pivotal position and functions as the nerve-centre of Wessex. As Lance Butler comments, ‘First, Casterbridge is not really a town in the modern sense or even in the Victorian-industrialized sense. It is almost as far removed from Dickens’ London, say, as the smallest villages of Wessex’ (56).

Apart from the central figures in The Mayor of Casterbridge the rustic characters, who adequately represent the pulse of Wessex, include Christopher Coney, Solomon Longways, Buzzford, Nance Mockridge, Mrs Cuxom and Mrs Stannidge. The group has been compared to the Greek chorus. Michael Anderson in his article The Comedy of Greece and Rome observes, ‘[...] it is in the chorus that Old Comedy remains closest to the
primal ἱώμος or revel in which lie its origins' (Howarth 25). Same may be said of Hardy’s rustic chorus. As D.S. Maimi in the introduction to the text of the novel (OUP 1989) remarks, ‘Their witty and ribald comments do constitute a kind of commentary on the events, though their primary purpose is to exemplify rural mirth, levity and earthliness’ (xxiv).

However, there is a marked difference between the rustics of The Mayor of Casterbridge and those of Hardy’s other novels. In his earlier novels this chorus serves mainly the purpose of comic relief occasionally commenting on the deracination or defeat of the major figures. “But in The Mayor they form a significant part of the story. It is they who participate in the skimmity ride which throws Lucetta into a fever and then subsequent death. The social transformation has been dramatized by Hardy through the clash between Henchard and Farfrae is sharply reflected in the life of the ‘rustics’, now ill at ease in the town, beginning to express a measure of social ressentiment, and clearly losing their cohesion as a group” (Howe 100-101). Howe’s observation may be considered in the light of Glymne Wickham’s comment on Medieval comic traditions: “All these expressions of what at an unselfconscious or natural level we may call ‘release’, and of what at a more selfconscious level we should term ‘rebellion’ or ‘assault’, occasional mirth, merriment and laughter” (Howarth 45). Another striking
contrast between the plebeian chorus of the earlier novels and that of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is that in the former novels the traditional country celebrations like the bonfire or shearing supper or Maypole festival provide the occasion for joviality; but in this novel, as Douglas Brown perceptively points out, "[...] our sense is of men going about their daily affairs, the furry, the chatter, the sights and sounds. The workmen and the communities of Mixen Lane and ‘The Three Mariners’ are Hardy’s best achievement in this vein, and they count for more than the rustics of the other novels” (67).

Another remarkable feature of these inhabitants of this semi-urban market-town is that, though they do not live in ‘harmonious bliss’ but certainly they experience ‘a sense of relationship with both one another and their common past’ (Howe 93). Timothy Hands observes that like the residents of Little Hintock in *The Woodlanders* who co-operate with each other ‘well-nigh like one family’ the Casterbridge populace ‘still retained the primitive habit of helping one another in time of need’ (83). Though Hardy himself in his essay ‘The Dorsetshire Labourer’ (1883) regrets the gradual disappearance of ‘the humorous simplicity’ from the life of the rustics due to ‘annual migration from farm to farm’ (Orel 179-80), Pinion holds that ‘they still supply comic relief, but they are more sympathetically treated’ (THD 177). The sympathy felt by the author is manifest when he observes in the same
essay that ‘The happiness of a class can rarely be estimated aright by philosophers who look down upon that class from the Olympian heights of society’ (172). Though the Dionysian attributes like noise, disorder, drunkenness, lasciviousness, nudity, generosity, corruption, fertility and ease which characterize the ‘vital theatre’ like John Arden’s *The Workhouse Donkey* (1963) [Howarth 185] are not vigorously present in the novel, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* projects the residents of Casterbridge as a community relishing their lives to the extreme whenever merry occasions appear. The rejoicing is much subdued in comparison to that of the original Roman or Greek popular festivals; still the Casterbridge plebeians of Hardy retain and exhibit a convivial spirit. Though the joviality of Hardy’s rustics is much mellowed here than in his earlier novels, still they respond to the Candlemas fair or the Skimmity ride or Farfrae’s celebration of a national event [Chapter 16] with the same cheerful spirit as their ancestors would have done in similar situations. From their very first appearance in the market-town inn where Susan and her daughter and Farfrae take lodging for the night, to the clamorous proceedings in the Mixen Lane, they exemplify the instinctive, changeless convivial life which is rooted in the life of Wessex. Their amusing comments and wisecracks at times display their practical outlook which comes from a close study of life and its privation. Christopher
Coney comments after Henchard's (second-time) marriage with Susan that 'It is five-and-forty years since I had my settlement in this here town, but daze me if ever I see a man wait so long before to take so little. There is a chance even for thee after this, Nance Mockridge' (MC 88). One cannot miss the touch of humour in the remark. When Coney digs up the ounce pennies following the burial of Susan, Mrs Cuxom relates the action thus: “But if ye’ll believe words, that man, Christopher Coney went and dug 'em up, and spent 'em at the Three Mariners... ‘Faith’, he said, ‘why should death rob life o’ fourpence? Death is not of such good report that we should respect 'en to that extent’, says he” (MC 126). It reminds one of the grave-diggers in Hamlet. The information not only expresses Coney's inclination for enjoying a sip in the said inn but also brings to one's mind the triumph of life over death and 'acceptance of the vagaries, the follies, the foibles, the inequities, the eccentricities, the absurdities of humanity, as a result of which we emerge more reconciled to the strains and stresses of life, more ready to come to terms with its inevitable end' (Howarth 123). Bristol identifies that the symbols of carnival include the representation of the essentially funny truth about death and its relation to worldly privilege. He comments, 'In this tradition, the death of the old is a constantly recurrent event, linked always
to images of the fecundating processes of eating and sexuality that ring forth new life.’ (184)

The novel opens on a late summer evening in a fair-ground where Henchard and his wife appear for the first time with their infant daughter Elizabeth-Jane. The fair, along with provisions for entertainment, is specifically meant for selling horses and sheep; the transaction was mostly over by forenoon. Some inferior animals, however, remain for sale by auction. Still the gathering becomes denser as evening draws on, ‘the frivolous contingent of visitors, including journeymen out for a holiday, a stray soldier or two home on furlong, village shopkeepers, and the like, having latterly flocked in; persons whose activities found a congenial field among the peep-shows, toy-stands, wax-works, inspired monsters, disinterested medical men who traveled for the public good, thimble-riggers, nick-nack vendors, and readers of Fate’ (MC 4). Thus the fair is attended and enjoyed mainly by the common folk of Wessex. The couple looks for a suitable refreshment tent among the many that are constructed. The nearest two tents seem inviting enough to them; the former announces ‘Good Home-brewed Beer, Ale and Cyder’, the latter displays on a placard ‘Good Furmity Sold Hear’. Henchard, being excited by the spirit of the fair inclines for the former tent but Susan pursues him to enter the second one. The hag, who
prepares and serves the furmity, concocts rum slyly in her preparation if ordered. 'He found the concoction, thus strongly laced, much more to his satisfaction than it had been in its natural state. His wife had observed the proceeding with much uneasiness; but he persuaded her to have hers laced also, and she agreed to a milder allowance after some misgiving' (MC 5).

Thus carried off by Bacchanalian instinct Henchard momentarily loses his sanity and then we come across the episode of the selling of a wife by a drunkard for a silly amount. Before the ultimate moment it cannot be asserted that Henchard is really in earnest in his absurd decision:

The spectators had indeed taken the proceedings throughout as a piece of mirthful irony carried to extremes; and had assumed that, being out of work, he was, as a consequence, out of temper with the world, and society, and his nearest kin. But with the demand and response of real cash the jovial frivolity of the scene departed. (MC 10)

Significantly this tragic novel of Hardy opens up with a fair — an occasion of public rejoicing. Only with the exception of Henchard's 'tantalizing declaration' (MC 10), the fair remains exuberant with the Dionysian vigour of the common people. The author here, like in his other novels, emphasizes that though the protagonists may become a victim of
Providence, the rustic bystanders, despite their regular hardship, continue their ways of rejoicing whenever there is a suitable occasion or chance. The contrast between the psyche of the protagonist and that of the uncomplicated villagers of Wessex is apparent here. Hardy, in delineating this incident of wife-selling, was influenced, as mentioned earlier, by a report he had gone through a particular issue of the Dorset County Chronicle. However, being a keen observer of Wessex life and sympathetic to the semi-urban life pattern, Hardy displays a meticulous and lively accuracy in his portrayal of the collective mirth. J.B. Bullen observes:

There is no doubt that one of the strengths of The Mayor of Casterbridge is the conviction with which Hardy portrays Wessex provincial life. The richness of the texture of that life comes principally from Hardy’s sharp eye for detail, and from his feel for the social structure of small-town existence. (140)

Thus the tragic narrative is punctuated now and then by delightful touches of ‘sunburnt mirth’.

The fifth chapter begins with the town band “shaking the window-panes with the strains of ‘The Roast Beef of Old England’” (MC 32), when after the supposed death of Newson, Susan and Elizabeth-Jane reach
Casterbridge in search of Henchard, the venue being King’s Arms, the chief hotel of the town.

A spacious bow-window projected into the street over the main portico, and from the open sashes came the babble of voices, the jingle of glasses, and the drawing of cords. The blinds, moreover, being left unclosed, the whole interior of this room could be surveyed from the flight of stone steps to the road-waggon office opposite, for which reason a knot of idlers had gathered there. (MC 32)

Enquiring an old man, Elizabeth comes to know that a grand public dinner of gentlemen chaired by the Mayor of the town [Henchard] is in progress. The plebeians outside show their interest in the social superiors and their zest to enjoy even as mere witnesses to the carnival inside.

In the dinner party the youngsters converse and consume jubilantly, the elders are also engrossed in tidbits and consuming liquor: ‘Three drinks seemed to be sacred to the company — port, sherry, and rum; outside which old-established trinity few or no palates ranged’ (MC 35). The Mayor, however, remaining true to his vow not to touch wine for twenty-one years, abstains from indulging in boozing, but he joins the party by drinking huge quantity of water from a tumbler instead. Meanwhile the band is striking one
melody after another. The dinner being over, ‘toasts and speeches had given place to songs, the wheat subject being quite forgotten’ (MC 40) [The low quality wheat circulated by Henchard has already given rise to a hot encounter].

Men were putting their heads together in twos and threes, telling good stories, with pantomimic laughter which reached convulsive grimace. Some were beginning to look as if they did not know how they had come there, what they had come for, or how they were going to get home again; and provisionally sat on with a dazed smile. Square-built men showed a tendency to become hunchbacks; men with a dignified presence lost it in a curious obliquity of figure, in which their features grew disarranged and one-sided; whilst the heads of a few who had dined with extreme thoroughness were somehow sinking into their shoulders, the corners of their mouths and eyes being bent upwards by the subsidence. (MC 40)

Thus typical carnival conviviality takes over the atmosphere of the King’s Arms, while the rustic bystanders outside the window continue to enjoy the proceedings of the party, their delight receiving further impetus from new entries.
Henchard leaves the room for a while and when he returns, the Mayor finds that the songs, toasts and conversations proceed as usual even in his absence. The guests 'had, in fact, gone in for comforting beverages to such an extent that they had quite forgotten, not only the Mayor, but all those vast political, religious, and social differences which they felt necessary to maintain in the daytime, and which separated them like iron grills' (MC 42). Such is the boon of carnivalesque merriment. According to Bakhtin, the masks and identities of carnivalesque pageant life in the squares and market places embody 'the right to be "other" in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available'. (1983, 159)

In the eighth chapter we again come across buoyant vivacity at the Three Mariners. A band of socially inferior inhabitants of the town is also present 'who drank from cups instead of glasses' and among them there are 'some of those personages who had stood outside the windows of the King's Arms' (MC 52). Farfrae enters the room and makes himself at home within moments. The Scotsman, at the entreaty of some of the tradesmen, obliges the gathering with a song. Elizabeth-Jane, who is listening from the upper-storey, is also enthralled by his melodious tune.
She had never heard any singing like this; and it was evident that the majority of the audience had not heard such frequently, for they were attentive to a much greater degree than usual. They neither whispered, nor drank, nor dipped their pipe-stems in their ale to moisten them, nor pushed the mug to their neighbours. (MC 53)

The song expresses a longing for Farfrae’s own native land and its charm. The song is applauded with a burst of appreciation followed by a profound silence which is perhaps more eloquent.

‘’Twas not amiss — not at all amiss! Muttered Christopher Coney (MC 53) and he requests Farfrae to continue, singing the next verse. A ‘bucket-headed man’ significantly remarks, ‘Folks don’t lift up their hearts like that in this part of the world’ (MC 54). When the Scotchman informs that he has finished the song, the general dealer eagerly says, ‘Soul of my body, then we’ll have another!’ (MC 55)

Longways declares that they are prepared to stay there all over the night if Farfrae continues singing. At their ardent request the young Scotchman “at once rendered ‘O Nannie’ with faultless modulations, and another or two of like sentiment, winding up at their earnest request with ‘Auld Long Syne’ ”(MC 55).
The event brings out the capacity of the residents of Casterbridge to take delight in genuine melody and appreciate such proceedings. It seems, as if they share the various sentiments of the singer. Their ability to appreciate and accommodate even a stranger is also displayed. Rejoicing in rapturous song is a part of carnival spirit. Enjoying a pleasant proceeding collectively also echoes a similar disposition. Though Longway’s request for drawing on the next verse reveals his ignorance about such songs, their eagerness exposes their passionate fascination for veritably excellent music which is cherished by all and sundry. They do not need the knowledge of Scottish in which Farfrae sings—such is the appeal of genuine music.

The thirteenth chapter describes the reunion of Susan and Henchard in the bond of matrimony in the local church where Farfrae, the only man aware of the true history of the couple, acts as the groomsman. Outside the church a few people gather while the inside is well packed. As the hour of coming out of the couple draws near, persons like Christopher Coney, Longways, Buzzford, who are unaware of the actual secret gather on the adjoining pavement. The note of amusement in their discourse is apparent.

‘’Tis five-and-forty years since I had my settlement in this here town.’ said Coney; ‘but daze me if ever I see a man wait so
long before to take so little! There’s a chance even for thee after this, Nance Mockridge’. […]

‘Be cust if I’d marry any such as he, or thee either,’ replied that lady […] (MC 88)

Naturally, it is a matter of surprise to those who are unaware of Henchard’s history to approve of the match of a dignified Mayor with a shabby, flimsy middle-aged widow like Susan. But to turn the incident as an issue of joke provides an occasion of poking fun at the social superiors. This feature of uncrowning is a typical aspect of carnival merriment. Also notice the judicious verbal humour of Longways:

‘Well, Mother Cuxom,’ he said, ‘how’s this? Here’s Mrs Newson, a mere skellinton, has got another husband to keep her, while a woman of your tonnage have not.’

‘I have not. Nor another to beat me…. Ah, yes, Cuxom’s gone, and so shall leather breeches!’

‘Yes; with the blessing of God leather breeches shall go.’

‘Tisn’t worth my old while to think of another husband,’ continued Mrs Cuxom. ‘And yet I’ll lay my life I’m as respectable born as she.’
'True; your mother was a very good woman — I can mind her. She was rewarded by the Agricultural Society for having begot the greatest number of healthy children without parish assistance, and other virtuous marvels'. (MC 89)

Though the fun here turns a bit vulgar, lack of sophistication is a conspicuous carnival feature while sobriety may be the prerogative of the 'high'-cultured gentry. Besides, 'under the constant attrition of lives mildly approximating to those of workers in a manufacturing town' (Orel 180) vulgarity begins to stain the simple mellowed humour of the unpolluted countryside. However, the simplicity is once again focused when Mrs Cuxom, kindled by the retrospection, recalls how her mother used to sing melodiously and how they 'went with her to the party at Mellstock' (MC 89). While the populace is engrossed in such exchange, the remarriage is concluded; thus their collective mirth lends a perspective to the drama of individual lives. They crave to relate their private affairs and compare them with those of their social superiors and thus achieve a sort of ego satisfaction.

Chapter 16 deals mainly with 'a day of public rejoicing [...] in celebration of a national event that had recently taken place' (MC 107).
Farfrae plans to arrange for an entertainment for the Casterbridgians. As he seeks the help of Henchard by asking him to lend some rick-clothes for erecting an enclosure for the purpose, the latter readily agrees. Simultaneously the Mayor, who is gradually becoming jealous of the increasing popularity of his manager, also decides to make a more gorgeous arrangement for public entertainment separately. When he informs the councilmen about his contemplation seeking their agreement, they, ‘the majority being fine old crusted characters who had a decided taste for living without worry’ (MC 108), instantly approve his plan.

Thus encouraged by their agreement Henchard sets about to prepare a really fabulous arrangement.

He advertised about the town, in long posters of a pink colour, that games of all sorts would take place here; and set to work a little battalion of men under his own eye. They erected greasy-poles for climbing, with smoked hams and local cheese at the top. They placed hurdles in rows for jumping over; across the river they laid a slippery pole, with a live pig of the neighborhood tied at the other end, to become the property of the man who could walk over and get it. There were also provided wheelbarrows for racing, donkeys for the same, a
stage for boxing, wrestling, and drawing blood generally; sacks for jumping in. Moreover, not forgetting his principles, Henchard provided a mammoth tea, of which everybody who lived in the borough was invited to partake without payment.

(MC 108-9)

But from the very morning of the proposed fest the sky becomes overcast. Though several people enthusiastically gather in the field, torrential rain begins in the afternoon and within three hours brings down the entire erection, thereby ruining all the effort of the Mayor to entertain his people. At about six the storm and rain abate, but all the plebeians have already gone to Farfrae’s ‘pavilion’ which is hardly affected by the inclement weather as it has been ‘ingeniously constructed without poles or ropes’ (MC 110). As the Mayor walks towards it, he discerns the notes of stringed band coming from the enclosure. As he enters he witnesses:

A reel or fling of some sort was in progress; and the usually sedate Farfrae was in the midst of the other dancers in the costume of a wild Highlander, flinging himself about and spinning to the tune. (MC 111)

The entire Casterbridge including Susan and Elizabeth gather at the Walk, ‘such a delightful idea of a ballroom never having occurred to the
inhabitants before’ (MC 111). The dance advances in an unabated spirit. Henchard also finds Elizabeth footing a quaint little Scotch dance named ‘Miss M’ Leod of Ayr’ (MC 112) with Farfrae.

Though the chapter terminates with a rift between the Mayor and his manager, here we once more perceive the commoner’s indomitable vigour and zest for life. Their applause and approval for genuine and jovial entertainment exposes their healthy and judicious mental set up despite the lack of formal education. Nature and experience educate them by virtue of which they can discriminate the hearty feeling of Farfrae from the ‘vanity fair’ of Henchard. Thus they prefer a man and place where they can indulge in uninhibited mirth than the grandeur and variety of arrangements made by an overconfident and obstinate person even if he be the Mayor. Natural calamities cannot daunt their natural inclination towards collective rejoicing. Emile Durkheim maintains that ‘harmonious collective life is beneficial to its members, who therefore participate willingly in activities that will promote and conserve such harmony’ (Bristol 33). He also observes, ‘Every festival reunites the individual with the collective. It reawakens and strengthens feelings of solidarity among persons who will actually benefit from it’ (Bristol 29). Bristol rightly points out that though Durkheim forms his idea on the basis of analyzing preindustrial and preliterate societies, his
observation is very much relevant for complex social organization of the post-industrialization era.

The eighteenth chapter brings out the plebeians' capacity to defy the superiority of death over life... The zest of life continues even after inevitable death which cannot snatch away the elemental urge for merriment. Susan Henchard saves four pennies, the heaviest she finds, and wishes that after her death, someone should keep two of the pennies on her left eye and two on her right. She also advises that when her eyes would open no more, one should bury the pennies along with her corpse. After her death, Martha meticulously abides by the direction of Susan. But Christopher's action following her burial is significant:

'Well, and Martha did it, and buried the ounce pennies in the garden. But if ye'll believe words, that man, Christopher Coney, went and dug 'em up, and spent 'em at the Three Mariners. "Faith," he said, "why should death rob life o' fourpence? Death's not of such good report that we should respect 'en to that extent," says he.' (MC 126)

Though some of the listeners deprecate Conney's act as a 'cannibal deed' (MC 126) the triumph of life over death is celebrated once again by Solomon Longway's remark:
‘[...] To respect the dead is a sound doxology; and I wouldn’t sell skellintons — to be varnished for ’natomies, except I were out o’ work. But money is scarce, and throats get dry. Why should death rob life o’ fourpence? I say there was no treason in it.’ (MC 126)

That Coney spends the ounce pennies at the Three Mariners reveals his zeal for drinking and merriment thus emphasizing their ability to ignore the seriousness of death and thereby to defeat its power to subdue the indomitable spirit of life. Coney’s action resembles the proceedings of the Porter scene in Macbeth which immediately follows the murder of Duncan, and the attitude of the gravediggers in Hamlet. Not to speak of Mrs Cuxom, even the Prince of Denmark himself is puzzled at the gravedigger’s bearing and comments:

Hath this fellow no feeling of his business? ’A sings in grave-making?’ (Hamlet, V, i. 66-7)

Bristol observes, “Against the perspective of death and burial all human effort is diminished, all the ‘serious’ claims of economic, political or moral systems become the object of laughter. The doomsday image of the grave is from this viewpoint not something grim and gloomy, but on the contrary, the occasion for ‘drink’ and merriment” (190). Coney’s attitude typically
represents the carnival fervour for uncrowning and debasing death and thus confirming the process of renewal. Bristol remarks, 'In this tradition, the death of the old is a constantly recurring event, linked always to images of the fecundating processes of eating and sexuality that bring forth new life' (184).

There is a reference to the Candlemas Fair in the twenty-second chapter in the conversation between Lucetta and Elizabeth-Jane. The same fair, which was a reality in the industrializing England, is mentioned in Hardy's other novels like *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and essays as 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' and in a poem titled 'Lament' in *Satires of Circumstances, Lyrics and Reveries*. Christina Hole describes the Candelmas Day:

The second day of February is the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady [Virgin Mary] and of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and it is also Candelmas Day because then the candles used in the churches are blessed and distributed and carried round in procession. This festival has taken the place of the pre-Christian Feast of Lights, which fell on February 1st, when blazing torches were carried about the streets, and also, to some extent, of the Roman Lupercalia on February 15th' (Hole 43).
But in the industrializing England the celebration loses its earlier connotation and in Dorchester it becomes a fair of hiring labourers who may begin their work on the Lady Day which is the feast of the Annunciation (the conception of Jesus, announced by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, Luke I, 26-33) celebrated on 25 March, nine months before Christmas. Pinion informs, ‘Farmers kept to the old calendar by making the operative day when recently engaged employees started work with them Lady Day, Old Style, i.e. 6 April’ (THD 158).

In the twenty-third chapter there is a brief depiction of the Candlemas Fair which is the chief hiring fair of the year and it is remarkably different from everyday market. In the fair mentioned here, people congregate in huge number gradually making a clamorous atmosphere. ‘In substance it was a whitey-brown crowd flecked with white—this being the body of labourers waiting for places. The long bonnets of the women, like wagon-tilts, their cotton gowns and checked shawls, mixed with the carter’s smock-frocks; for they, too, entered into the hiring’. (MC 167)

In the thirty-second chapter we are informed that Henchard is on the verge of completing the tenure of twenty-one years of not touching any hard drinks when he exclaims, ‘In twelve days it will be twenty-one years
since I swore it; and then I mean to enjoy myself, please God!’ (MC 241)
The following chapter delineates the much-awaited date.

At this date ‘a convivial custom’ (MC 242) the origin of which can be hardly identifiable but which is nevertheless an established one, prevails in Casterbridge. During this custom on every Sunday afternoon a good number of Casterbridgeans, — hired workmen, regular church goers and men of composed nature — after attending church service, directly go to the Three Mariners where ‘The rear was usually brought up by the choir, with their bass-viols, fiddles and flutes under their arms’ (MC 242). But in the inn each man restricts himself to consume only half-a-pint of liquor as a token of respect to the solemnity of the occasion.

The verbal exchange invariably includes the discussion about ‘the sermon, dissecting it, weighing it, as above or below the average — the general tendency being to regard it as a scientific feat or performance which had no relation to their own lives’ (MC 242). This tendency of ‘uncrowning’ the church and theology is an inevitable part of carnival spirit:

The mockery of ‘holy theology’ and every other serious interpretation of the world is the normal state of affairs in every carnivalesque procession because the basis of popular festive form is precisely the wearing of borrowed and
misappropriated costumes to generate rude, foolish, abusive mimicry of everyday social distinctions. (Bristol 65)

To the workmen drinking is obviously secondary to the fervour for collective mirth and thus despite being aware of the stringency about the former they gather in the inn for sheer merriment.

Popular festive form celebrates and briefly actualizes a collective desire for a freer and more abundant way of life. This desire is at once a forward looking hopefulness and a memory of better times. (Bristol 88).

Henchard opts for the Three Mariners as the site for terminating his 'dramless years' (MC 243). He enters into the large room when the forty church-goers begin to consume liquor from their cups: 'The flush upon his face proclaimed at once that the vow of twenty-one years had lapsed, and the era of recklessness begun anew' (MC 243). Recklessness and flouting of social rules are the inherent features of the carnivalesque. He suggests to a singer, 'chuck across one of your psalters — old Wiltshire is the only tune worth singing — the psalm-tune that would make my blood ebb and flow like the sea when I was a stedy chap' (MC 243).

Even a man of discipline and austerity like Henchard is overwhelmed by the jovialty of the situation. Later in this chapter the reader
also witnesses that he endeavours to reduce his mental agony caused by
Lucetta's avoidance and his social humiliation 'fortifying his heart by
drinking more freely at the Three Mariners every evening' (MC 249).

The thirty-seventh chapter depicts the convivial gathering of the
Casterbridgeans and the inhabitants of the adjoining areas on the occasion of
the passing through the market-town of a royal personage on his way to a
place further west. The local mob becomes excited on the eve of the regal
visit which has not been witnessed by Casterbridge since the tenure of King
George III.

The eventful morning was bright, a full-faced sun confronting
early window-gazers eastward, and all perceived (for they were
practiced in weather-lore) that there was permanence in the
glow. Visitors soon began to flock in from county houses,
villages, remote copses, and lonely uplands, the latter in oiled
boots and tilt bonnets, to see the reception, or if not to see it, at
any rate to be near it. There was hardly a workman in the town
who did not put a clear shirt on. Solomon Longways,
Christopher Coney, Buzzford, and the rest of that fraternity,
showed their sense of the occasion by advancing their
customary eleven o'clock pint to half-past ten; from which they
found a difficulty in getting back to the proper hour for several
days. (MC 276)

The mob waits in eager attention — some in their carriages and some on
foot — and keeps vigil on the long-stretched London highway to the
chiming of bells and clamour of voices. Elizabeth-Jane watches the occasion
from the background. Some seats are arranged for the ladies the foremost of
which is occupied by Lucetta, the Mayor’s wife.

At length the much-awaited hour comes and ‘the Corporation in
their robes proceeded from the front of the Town-Hall to the archway
erected at the entrance to the town. The carriages containing the Royal
visitor and his suite arrived at the spot in a cloud of dust, a procession was
formed, and the whole came on to the Town Hall at a walking pace’. (MC
278)

Suddenly an unexpected event occurs. Henchard acting on an abrupt impulse
in front of the Royal carriage starts to wave the Union Jack in his left hand
and gently holds out his right to the illustrious personage. However, Farfrae
with Mayoral authority seizes him by the shoulder, draws him back and
throws him out.

Though the ex-Mayor’s action mars the jocundity of the occasion the
total proceeding brings out the commoners’ inherent urge to grasp any
possible opportunity for collective joviality. They put on their best garments and trot miles to witness the occasion. Identifying oneself as an inevitable part of society by feeling a bond of solidarity is more significant than seeing a royal personage. And this obviously manifests a significant feature of carnival jollity.

Though the skimmington ride poking fun at the illicit relation between Henchard and Lucetta is displayed in the thirty-ninth chapter, anticipatory hints are already there in Chapter 36. In Mrs Cuxom's view, ' 'Tis the funniest thing under the sun! And it costs money' (MC 272). Nance would enjoy the proceeding of the skimmity ride as 'A good laugh warms my heart more than a cordial, and that's the truth on't' (MC 273). They enjoy the occasion of the 'decrowning' of the higher-ups — the ex-Mayor and the wife of the existing Mayor. What Bergson, while commenting on the social rather than the moral aim of the neoclassical comedy, observes in Laughter (1900), is also applicable in this context: "[...] its intention was 'to humiliate and consequently to correct' any behaviour that departed from accepted social norms" (Howarth 146).

The name 'Skimmington ride', according to Pinion, 'probably arose from the skimming-ladle used to beat the effigy of the offender during the organized processional demonstration' (THD 249). Pinion describes it,
quoting J.S. Udal, as ‘a kind of matrimonial lynch law or pillory intended for
those in a lower class of life, who, in certain glaring particulars, may have
transgressed their marital duties’ (249).

In Chapter 39 the commoners bring out the procession of the ride
where two figures placed back to back, are set on a donkey, their elbows are
tied to one another, the woman (an image of Lucetta) facing the head and the
man (an image of Henchard) facing the tail. The jocundity of the procession
and the clamour of the music cease only when Lucetta, recognizing herself
in the female effigy, falls heavily and faints.

The proceeding may seem a bit sarcastic, but the inherent desire of
the people to uncrown the social superiors is once again brought out which is
an obvious analogue of carnival laughter. Bergsons observes, ‘Laughter […]
indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. […] it […] is a froth
with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself’. (200)

In the penultimate chapter, Henchard, now reduced to a wretch, is
informed about the ensuing wedding of his step-daughter with Farfrae. Some
passengers inform that the town band has been hired for the evening party,
and ‘lest the convivial instincts of that body should get the better of their
skill, the further step had been taken of engaging the string band from
Budmouth, so that there would be a reserve of harmony to fall back upon in case of need' (MC 335).

Just after twelve [noon] the soft chiming of the Casterbridge bells is heard signifying that the nuptials have been accomplished, 'that there had been no slip 'twixt cup and lip in this case; that Elizabeth-Jane and Donald Farfrae were man and wife' (MC 335-6). Henchard asks a market-man if the newly-wedded couple have departed and is informed that they have not. At that very auspicious hour they are entertaining a considerable congregation of guests at their residence in Corn Street. Protagonists like Henchard, the ex-Mayor, may suffer from solitariness, Lucetta may have succumbed to humiliating situation, but the jovial commoners do not hesitate to rejoice at the matrimonial fest of the former's daughter with the latter's husband.

An exquisite festive atmosphere prevails in Farfrae's apartment where the host himself heartily shares it by singing a song of his native land. Idlers are listening to the note standing on the pavement in front. The door is wide open; 'the hall was lighted extravagantly, and people were going up and down the stairs' (MC 337). A dance is struck up in the best parlour and the newly married pair chip in the figure. Henchard from an adjoining room can see 'fractional part of the dancers whenever their gyrations brought them near the doorway, chiefly in the shape of the skirts of dresses and streaming
curls of hair; together with about three-fifths of the band in profile, including the restless shadow of a fiddler's elbow, in the tip of the bass-viol bow’ (MC 337). Witnessing the gaiety of the occasion, he feels assured that ‘custom was omnipotent’ (MC 338).

The entire occasion reflects the luminous glow of the carnival attitude displayed by the commoners, and their strong propensity for collective jollity. The rustic bystanders and their zest for enjoying life should not be considered redundant in the texture of the novel. They serve as inevitable ingredients of the semi-urban atmosphere of Casterbridge which functions as the pivot of the whole story. Through them we become acquainted with the customs, beliefs and superstitions of the Wessex folk. They exemplify Hardy’s philosophy of life — his view that happiness is achievable only by those who are not ambitious and who receive their servile lot without being disgruntled. The total ambience eventually displays a greater vivacity than the sophisticated individual’s life, and the novel asserts the regenerative power of the old order, the vigour of the commoners and their ultimate triumph over everyday tribulations.