Chapter 8

The Woodlanders: In the Merry Woodland for 'a good roaring supper'

Heart-halt and spirit-lane,

City-opprest,

Unto this wood I came

As to a nest;

['In a Wood', WTH 1995, 56]

From the semi-urban setting of The Mayor of Casterbridge Hardy opted for a congenial atmosphere of greenery as the setting of his next novel The Woodlanders. Duffin observes:

From the streets of a considerable market-town we pass to a scene as remote from civilization as was the life on Egdon, isolated not by space but by trees: a few houses and cottages, gardens and orchards, snipped out of the woodland, a sequestered spot outside the gates of the world. (41)

The rustics of Little Hintock (Stockwood in reality) as portrayed by Hardy seem to be a part of this woodland. J. Hillis Miller remarks, 'Man here is
not opposed to nature as the human to the inhuman, but the two together form a continuum without division or seam’ (84).

Published simultaneously on both the sides of the Atlantic from May 1886 to April 1887 (in Macmillan’s Magazine and Harper’s Bazzar), The Woodlanders manifests, as Lance Butler observes, ‘the other side of Hardy, the side of him that weaves together so brilliantly a story of love with the parallel movements of the rustic setting in which that story takes place’ (75). Paralleling Butler’s view, Douglas Brown identifies ‘the other Hardy’ when he comments, ‘The Woodlanders is the novel that most comprehensively expresses Hardy’s feelings towards agricultural life and the sense of its resistance to despair. It is his most fluid book; the talk and the activities of the lesser country folk are joined into the rhythm of the whole, and not contrived as an episodic chorus or commentary.’ (70; emphasis added). Though the novel carries signs of the tremors of the transition to industrialization and annual migration of the rustics to the industrial towns thus resulting in a vacuum in the traditional old ways of life, jovial enjoyment still appears to dominate the texture of Wessex life. Collective mirth, which has been the sole prerogative of the rustics, still prevails in their festive celebrations. Obviously the frequency of such happy occasions is already somewhat regulated by the practical restraints of
an increasingly faster life. In this regard one may recall Millgate’s judicious comment, ‘[...] Hardy had learned that his popularity depended largely upon his comic rustics, and he had managed to squeeze a few of them into almost every book’ (249; emphasis added).

The eleventh of his fourteen novels, The Woodlanders was Hardy’s own favourite and ‘in one sense it marks the centre of his achievement’ (Gregor 36). Going through the novel in 1912, Hardy wrote, ‘I think I like it, as a story, the best of all. Perhaps that is owing to the locality and scenery of the action, a part I am very fond of’ (Collected Letters iv, 212). Pinion considers it ‘a tragic counterpart to Under the Greenwood Tree’ (A Hardy Companion 43). Hardy’s acquaintance with the ancient myths and the rituals performed by the woodlanders must have inspired him to adopt the setting of the novel. These myths were later collected in J.H. Philpot’s The Sacred Tree, or The Tree in Religion and Myth (1897). Bullen holds that, ‘[...] many incidents in the novel seem to have been inspired by contemporary anthropological literature’ (174).

From the research of Ruth Skilling it appears that Little Hintock was actually Stockwood; Marty, in her quiet nature and self sacrifice, resembles Hardy’s sister Mary and the author must have again remembered his
accompanying his father in cidermaking while depicting Giles Winterborne (Gibson 102).

The Woodlanders received wide acclaim. Returning to England from a 'long contemplated visit to Italy' with Emma (Millgate 280) Hardy was delighted to find that this novel had been appreciated by almost all the leading literary journals. The Athenaeum wrote, 'The novel is distinctly not one for the "young person" of whom we have lately heard, but should be read by all who can tell masterly work in fiction...'. The Saturday Review talked of 'the richness and humanity of the book', and The Academy described it as 'the best and most powerful work Hardy has produced since Far from the Madding Crowd', while The Spectator found it 'a very powerful book', [...] (Gibson 106). The Times compared Hardy to Millet and praised his capacity to harmonize the poetry and penury of rural life. (Millgate 283)

Apparently, the appeal of the book owed to a large extent to its treatment of the 'woodland' and the 'woodlanders'. The inhabitants of the woodland are indeed vibrant with life and mirth. Like the forests in Shakespeare's As You Like It and A Midsummer Night's Dream the woodland setting imbues its residents with its freshness and generosity. Almost all of them including Giles, Mr and Mrs Melbury, Grammer Oliver,
John Upjohn, Timothy Tangs (old and young), Robert Creedle, farmer Cawtree, et al are living close to nature soaked in the tradition of their primitive ancestors, firmly embedded in the land which they typify. These rustic figures and their response to the fundamental emotions of life in their woodland setting lend a special charm to the novel.

In the opening chapter of the novel the village of Little Hintock is vividly depicted in its grand simplicity. Here the reader comes across a group of village-maidens who are returning home by a horse-carriage driven by Mrs Dollery. This week-end home-coming in a group is one of the most cheerful occasions for them.

This hour of coming home from market was the happy one, if not the happiest, of the week for them. Snugly ensconced under the tilt they could forget the sorrows of the world without, and survey life and discuss the incidents of the day with placid smiles. (W 7)

On the way they meet Barber Percomb who enquires Mrs Dollery about the route to Little Hintock. When the latter asks him to sit in the carriage, he mounts and sits beside her ‘with his feet outwards, where they were ever and anon brushed over by the horse’s tail’ (W 6). This little touch suggests the mood of the scene.
In the sixth chapter, while returning from Sherton Abbas with Grace Melbury who is coming to her native village Little Hintock from the boarding school in the town, Giles Winterborne converses with her in a pleasant reminiscing mood. But while he speaks about and observes John-apple trees and Brownley’s farm-buildings, Grace remains engrossed in a reverie where she visualizes a contrasting scene — ‘a broad lawn in the fashionable suburb of a fast city, the evergreen leaves shining in the evening sun, amid which bounding girls, gracefully clad in artistic arrangements of blue, brown, red, and white, were playing at games, with laughter and chat, in all the pride of life, the notes of piano and harp trembling in the air from the open windows adjoining’ (W 36). Giles can perceive to some extent the metamorphosis her mind has undergone in recent times. She remains no more an ardent admirer of village life as she used to be in her childhood, nor is she taking her early relation with Giles much seriously. To her, ‘It was a child’s tattle’ (W 36). So, Giles decides to arrange a Christmas party towards reviving their past attachment. As he tentatively broaches the idea with Marty:

‘s’uppose you know a person, and want to bring that person to a
good understanding with you, do you think a Christmas party of
some sort is a warming-up thing, and likely to be useful in hastening on the matter?'

‘Is there to be dancing?’

‘There might be, certainly.’

‘Will He dance with Her?’

‘Well, yes’.

‘Then it might bring things to a head, one way or the other, I won’t be the maid to say which.’ (W 58)

This dialogue simultaneously reveals the rustics’ fondness for dance and mirth and their trust in the positive impact of both on distracted souls.

Before starting any arrangement for the party, Giles, without much hope, goes to Mr Melbury’s residence to invite him and his family to the party. Mr Melbury, however, readily accepts the invitation and when he tells his wife and daughter about Gile’s proposal, they ‘assented without demur’ (W 59).

But Giles, as a token of modesty, does not mention any particular hour of commencement of the party. Mr Melbury and his family, thinking they are the only invitees, choose their own time which happens to be much early. At that moment it is all chaos at Winterborne’s place who ‘had planned an elaborate high tea for six o’ clock or thereabouts, and a good
roaring supper to come on about eleven’ (W 60) [emphasis added]. Giles himself, his trusted man Robert Creedle and their companions become puzzled at the early arrival of the guests.

‘My dear Giles, I see we have made a mistake in the time’, said the timber-merchant’s wife, her face lengthening with concern.

‘Oh, it is not much difference. I hope you’ll come in.’

‘But this means a regular randyvoo!’ said Mr Melbury accusingly, as he glanced round and pointed towards the viands in the bakehouse with his stick.

‘Well yes,’ said Giles.

‘And — not Great Hintock band, and dancing, surely?’

‘I told three of ’em they might drop in if they’d nothing else to do,’ Giles mildly admitted.

‘Now why the name didn’t ye tell us afore that ’twas going to be a bouncing kind of thing? […]’ (W 60-61)

Melbury’s eager enquiries bring out his zest for participating in a ‘bouncing’ kind of occasion. He and his wife, however, manage the awkward situation by engaging themselves in the preparations of the party. Grace is also elated witnessing the preparations which remind her ‘so pleasantly that everything here in dear old Hintock is just as it used to be’ (W 62). The traditional
customs and their jovial observance continue to manifest the rustics' zest for pleasure. The protagonists may suffer from melancholy, but the simple Wessex folk exhibit the capacity to enjoy their life despite the everyday struggle.

The tenth chapter opens with the commencement of the supper when Creedle and his attendant boy serve 'the hot-baked meats from the oven, laid on a snowy cloth fresh from the press, and reticulated with folds as in Flemish Last-Suppers' (W 63). For the special invitees, Creedle approaches with a meticulously arranged dish, which he serves by hoisting the small three-legged crock which accommodates it and slopes the contents into a platter, exclaiming, 'Draw back, gentlemen and ladies, please!' (W 63). The action causes a sudden splash resulting some sprinkles falling on the face of Grace who nods and winks unintentionally and places her handkerchief to her face. Giles hurriedly goes to her and wishes none of it has entered into her eyes.

'Oh no', she said. 'Only a sprinkle on my face. It was nothing.'

'Kiss it and make it well,' gallantly observed Mr Cawtree.

Miss Melbury blushed. (W 64)

Here, beside Creedle's enthusiastic way of serving the food, Cawtree's final suggestion is remarkable for its uninhibited carnival spirit. The former's
attitude suggests the rustic's zest for making such jovial celebration perfect and memorable, while the latter's comment signifies that the villagers can tackle a grave situation by funny utterances. Here the simple ways of the villagers are constantly contrasted with the sophisticated refinement of the city-bred.

Supper being over, the rustics start playing cards. Cawtree and John Upjohn occupy the new packs for a seemingly ceaseless game, in which a lump of chalk is continuously used—a game they are used to play wherever they go. The rest of the company are content with playing their old games with the old cards 'that had been lying by in a drawer ever since the time that Giles's grandmother was alive' (W 64). Frequently the comments of the players at round game are rudely intruded by the 'langterloo jungle' of Cawtree and Upjohn 'accompanied by rapping strokes with the chalk on the table: then an exclamation, an argument, a dealing of the cards; then the commencement of the rhyme anew' (W 64).

The bandsmen from Great Hintock, whom Giles has invited, arrive, and after their supper, dancing starts. Some of the guests join the dancing though Grace cannot:
Grace had been away from home so long, and was so drilled in new dances, that she had forgotten the old figures, and hence did not join in the movement. (W 65)

Grace has significantly 'forgotten the old figures' as she, by her own choice, has got excluded, stepped outside the magic circle that is the first requisite for a carnival mood.

When the party comes to an end, the Melbury family is the first to take leave. The two card-players, Cawtree and Upjohn, continue their game till late hours and after their departure their voices can be heard 'vociferously singing a song to march-time' (W 66)

'... said she,

"A maid again I never shall be

Till apples grow on an orange tree!" (W 66)

In the empty house Giles and Creedle begin surveying the extent of success of the Christmas party. The former asks whether everything has gone off well. The latter remarks,

'The victuals did; that I know. And the drink did; that I steadfastly believe, from the holler sound of the barrels. Good honest drink 't were, the headiest drink I ever brewed; and the best wine that berries could rise to; and the briskest Horner-and-Cleeves cider ever
wring down, leaving out the spice and sperrits I put into it, while that egg-flip would ha’ passed through muslin, so little criddled ’t were. ’T was good enough to make any king’s heart merry — ay, to make his whole carcase smile! [...] (W 66-67)

Creedle’s assessment does not only reflect his elation over the success of the party; it also expresses their zest for the carnival, for Saturnalian exuberance, the joy of feasting on a grand scale. Such a lofty praise of liquor reveals their fondness for drinking and more importantly its allied merriment. On such occasions they can brush aside the thought of their life’s hardships and go ecstatic over liquor and victuals, dancing, gossiping, playing cards or musical instruments. Their unadulterated jubilation becomes all the more conspicuous in the presence of the so-called ‘well-informed’ persons like Mr Melbury or urbanized girls like Grace whose sophistication prevents them from being a part of such simple rural recreation. The class-consciousness of the socially superiors hinders them from participating in such mirthful occasion heartily while the uncomplicated rustics can immerse themselves in Bacchanalian exultation.

Chapter 19 depicts the most significant season of the entire year for the woodlanders — the embarking on the ‘barking’ season with the advent
of Spring — not only in the external atmosphere, but also in the lives of the residents of Little Hintock:

The rush of sap in the veins of the trees could almost be heard. The flowers of late April took up a position unseen, and looked as if they had been blooming a long while, though there had been no trace of them the day before yesterday; birds began not to mind getting mate. In-door people said they had heard the nightingale, to which out-door people replied contemptuously that they had heard him a fortnight before. (W 112)

Thus a sense of delight pervades the mood of the woodlanders who are perfectly in harmony with nature; the sense of harmony invigorates them and transforms their arduous task of bark-ripping into a joyous collective experience: ‘It was a pleasant time’ (W 115). Under Melbury’s supervision workmen like Upjohn, old and young Timothy Tangs and Creedle are engaged in ripping the bark while Marty South assists them. For refreshment a pail of cider is kept near, ‘a half-pint cup floating on it, with which they dipped and drank whenever they passed the pail’ (W 113). This once again hints at the secret of the instant source of their energy.

Meanwhile, Mr Fitzpiers, the young doctor, during one of his afternoon walks, comes to that part of the woods where barking is in progress. After a
few hours of work there is an interval. Melbury, examining the heaps of bark, approaches the workfolk and ‘accepted their shouted invitation to have a dish of tea’ (W 114). The rustic labourers remain hale and hearty in their work as well as in rest. Melbury relates ancient timber-tales addressing Fitzpiers in particular and the workmen in general, who have been used to hear the tales often before. The bark rippers also narrate sundry stories of their fathers and forefathers, their own adventurous experiences in these woods, ‘the mysterious sights they had seen — only to be accounted for by supernatural agency; of white witches and black witches: and the standard story of the Two Brothers [...]’ (W 115).

The tea-time tales revitalize the spirit of the woodland workers who can resume their job in a buoyant mood. Instead of considering their assignment a burden they turn it into a shared pleasant experience. The woodlanders derive their energy and pleasure not only from cider but also from the act of narrating and listening to tales.

Chapter 20 opens with the commencement of the Midsummer Eve. On this occasion, the village girls, according to the landlady of Mr Fitzpiers, ‘were about to attempt some spell or enchantment which would afford them a glimpse of their future partners for life’ (W.120). Pinion informs,
Many age-old superstitions grew up in connection with this time, especially on love and marriage. If certain rites were performed on the evening of 23 June (5 July, Old Style) one's future spouse, or the phantom of the beloved (alive or departed) would appear that night; [...] (THD 181)

Fitzpiers, looking over his garden gate, observes several simple village maids passing in a group, some walking steadily, 'some in a mood of wild gaiety' (W 120). Each of the girls approaches towards a particular portion of the woodland under the moonlight hoping to have a glimpse of the prospective life-partner.

Other residents of Little Hintock, being aware of the nocturnal adventure about to be launched, are stealthily following the buoyant maidens. Grace, who has been already informed by Marty of the ensuing event, feels adequate curiosity to have a glimpse of the proceedings. The moonlight is so bright that she faces no problem to persuade her mother to accompany her. On the way, Marty and Grammer Oliver join them and they proceed towards their destination. The latter heartily wishes that Grace should find her life-partner in Winterborne and let Fitzpiers marry somebody more of the sort of Mrs Charmond.
When it is about midnight, the maids, some of whom are from Great Hintock, proceed tentatively towards the 'enchantment'. Grace, standing under a flood of moonlight, feels 'as if she had receded a couple of centuries in the world's history' (W 122). Perhaps she is mesmerized by the jollity of the ancient traditional occasion the intense charm of which overwhelms even her urbanized psyche. Suke Damson, 'a bouncing maiden, plighted to young Timothy Tangs' (W 122) enquires whether she will join them. Grace, with some excitement, agrees to her proposal.

The 'distant note of the Great Hintock clock striking the significant hour' (W 123) is heard. Grace, who has gone in the rear of the girls, is one of the first to come back, 'and the excitement, being contagious she ran laughing towards Marty' and then runs round a bush, when stepping forward in front of Giles, Fitzpiers stretches his arm and 'captured her in a moment, as if she had been a bird' (W 123) thus nullifying Grammer Oliver's wish.

Though the later part of the event is muddied by the ravishment of Suke Damson by Fitzpiers, the chapter brings out the indomitable enthusiasm of the village maids and lads as well as some of their guardians. Even the city-bred maids like Grace cannot resist the attraction of the custom — such is the power of their genuine mood of celebration. It is the
so-called highly educated persons like Fitzpiers, not the rustics, who spoil
the gaiety of such occasions by their secretive and dissocialized behaviour.

Midsummer Day is actually the Feast of the Nativity of St John the
Baptist. Christina Hole informs:

Anciently, it was a fire festival of great importance when
through countless centuries, the sun was ritually strengthened
by bonfires burning everywhere on Midsummer Eve, by
torchlight processions through the streets, by flaming tar­
barrels, and in some districts, by wheels bound with straw and
tow, set alight, and rolled down steep hillsides into the valley
below.

All this was said in the Middle Ages to be done in
honour of St John, but in fact, the fires were much older than
he. If, in pre-Christian times, they were lit to give magical aid
to the sun who now, in the full tide of summer began to wane,
they were also lit, then as later, to drive out evil, and to bring
fertility and prosperity to men, crops, and herds. (138)

It is significant to note that instead of adopting the Christian version of the
occasion, Hardy opts for displaying some pagan features of the festival in his
novel, the features which remind one of the Roman festival of Saturnalia.
The twenty-fifth chapter begins after the lapse of two months since Fitzpiers and Grace have been united in the bond of matrimony. As the former returns from the Earl of Wessex, the chief hotel in Sherton Abbas, to Melbury's residence, he finds a considerably large gathering of neighbours and other acquaintances, 'praising and congratulating Mrs Fitzpiers on her return, among them being the dairyman, Farmer Cawtree, and the relieving officer from Great Hintock; also the road-contractor, the master-tanner, the excisemen, and some others with their wives' (W 151). Grace is in the midst of them 'blushing and receiving their compliments with all the pleasures of all old comradeship' (W 152). She and her mother have invited them to supper. Perceiving her husband's irritation, Grace exclaims, 'Is it not good of them to welcome me so warmly?' with 'tears of friendship' (W 152) and explains that after such hearty feeling she cannot imagine keeping them away from her dining-room. Fitzpiers, urban and formal as he is, agrees with her. Mr Melbury, meanwhile arrives.

By this time Fitzpiers was making the best of his position among the wide-elbowed and genial company who sat eating and drinking, laughing and joking around him; and, getting warmed himself by the good cheer, he was obliged to admit
that, after all, the supper was not the least enjoyable he had ever known. (W 152)

As the hour grows late, the woodlanders and other guests gradually depart much to the relief of Fitzpiers.

The rustics’ zest for eating, drinking and merry making is once again manifested here.

After the lapse of months following the death of Winterborne, death of Mrs Charmond abroad and estrangement between Grace and Fitzpiers, Fitzpiers, presently in a mood of reconciliation, writes a letter to Grace appealing for a chance to explain his condition so that she may favourably consider the possibility of their reunion.

While proceeding towards the hill with a mind preoccupied with these thoughts Fitzpiers witnesses a gay procession coming down the way and soon recognizes that it is a wedding party. The women are in light garments and the men are in pretty flowered waistcoats. ‘Each of the gentler ones clung to the arm of her partner so tightly as to have with him one step, rise, swing, gait, almost one centre of gravity’ (W 279). Fitzpiers recognizes that the bride is none other than Suke Damson, ‘who in her light gown looked a giantess; the small husband beside her he saw to be Tim Tangs’
(W 279). When he congratulates the couple, Timothy informs him that they will walk round the parishes to ‘show ourselves a bit’ (W 280). Their proposed route appropriately includes the Revellers Inn. He also eagerly relates that they are going to New Zealand within a couple of months for their honeymoon.

The final chapter, dealing with the ultimate reunion of Mr and Mrs Fitzpiers (i.e. Grace), shows the woodlanders enjoying themselves with boozing and gossiping. Their sense of humour is also revealed on this occasion. Grace tells her father that she will go to the garden to get some parsley, but actually departs for the Earl of Wessex to secretly meet Fitzpiers. Being not in the know about her destination Mr Melbury apprehends that she may have landed in some danger. Accompanied by his men, Melbury sets out on a search for her. Taking cue from various information, they cover seven miles on foot and reach the hotel where Melbury discovers the couple already reconciled. Being informed about the reunion, the reaction of Upjohn is significant:

‘Well,’ said the hollow-turner, ‘here be we seven mile from home, and night-time, and not a hoss or four-footed creeping thing to our name. I say we’ll have a mossel and a drop o’ summat to strengthen our nerves afore we vamp all the way
back again! My throat’s as dry as a kex. What d’ye say so’s?’ (W 301)

The others readily agree to the proposal and proceed to the quaint dark back street where the only bright object is the red curtain of The Three Tuns. As soon as they enter the inn, Melbury orders them to be served. The woodlanders place themselves relaxedly by the long table and stretch out their legs upon the ‘herring-boned sand of the floor’ (W 302). Their conversations naturally allude to the reunited pair. When Creedle expresses his annoyance at Grace’s whimsical conduct, farmer Cawtree informs that such ‘deceiving of folks is nothing unusual in matrimony’ (W 302). He himself knows a couple during whose quarrel one would hear the poker, tongs, bellows and warming-pans flying across the house ‘with the movement of their vengeance’, and the next hour one would hear them ‘singing “The Spotted Cow” together, as peaceable as two holy twins’; (W 302).

The subsequent scene reflects woodlanders’ ability to accommodate and absorb. The vivid delineation of the couple manifests their sense of humour. They do not always indulge in boisterous laughter; sometimes their ways of expression are witty as well. Besides, they are hardly annoyed at having to search for Grace apprehending her danger; rather the discovery of
the couple's reconciliation elates them and they are at once spurred to celebrate it in the best possible jovial fashion.

The bark-ripper narrates the story of a woman whose husband was away for twenty-four years; and the story is finely in tune with the mood of the situation. One night the husband came back and sitting by the chimney-corner asked her if she had got any news. "No", says she, "except that my daughter by the husband that succeeded 'ee was married last month, which was a year after I was made a widow by him". "Oh! Anything else" he says. "No", says she. This narration brings out the roguish wit that lies hidden underneath the apparently prosaic attitude of the people. The woodlanders are keen observers of life and they give free rein to their uninhibited carnivalesque mood which lends to the mirth of the jolly occasions.

After a good deal of gossipping, boozing and merry-making the men declare themselves refreshed at last and start their homeward walk which is pretty cheerful in the moonlight.

The rustic woodlanders thus are not superfluous in the novel. On the contrary, they are essential part of the woodland atmosphere of Little Hintock.