Chapter-10

Hardy’s Short Stories: ‘a draught of vintage’ and ‘sunburnt mirth’

Desmond Hawkins, in the introduction to Hardy’s Collected Short Stories observes, “Within the narrow compass of the short story he deployed themes and techniques that extend and enrich our appreciation of his novels, and indeed of his poetry also” (xiii). In the same vein Kristin Brady comments, “Hardy’s status as a writer of short fiction can be measured by the quality of his entire corpus, by its variety, and by his artistry in its individual form” (x).

The marked difference between Hardy’s novels and short stories is that while most of the formers are replete with tragic vision of life, most of the latter are vibrant with optimistic vigour. Irving Howe rightly underscores: “You could hardly know from these stories that Hardy had ever been captivated by the theories of Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill and Thomas Huxley; you could never suppose he would keep struggling with the pessimistic vision of von Hertmann and Schopenhauer. In the stories Hardy allows himself to feel more pleasure for the ordinary course of life than he does in the major novels, and perhaps more pleasure than, strictly speaking, his philosophy allows. He relaxes into nostalgia and anecdote; the pastoral
impulse flows with a purity he could seldom preserve in his more ambitious novels” (77).

The raw materials of Hardy’s short stories are drawn from various sources familiar to him. Primarily he derives his material from the first-hand experience of his early life about the social environment around him. Another significant source was ‘the legends and chronicles of local history in which Hardy was steeped almost from his birth, but which he augmented by his own studies’ (Hawkins xvi). He also draws upon the ancestral folk culture with which he was acquainted through his parents, grandmother, other relatives and neighbours who passed on anecdotes and country lores. Hawkins observes, ‘This was a darker world of superstition and violence, in which death might come by hanging or drowning, by a firing squad or some secret malevolent act of witchcraft, but where there was also a contrary ebullience of broad humour and conviviality’ (xvii).

Several of Hardy’s stories reverberate with hilarious laughter of the simple folk. Irving Howe comments:

The writing in these stories is happiest when Hardy is most at ease in his country world. Then the prose is pure and unrestrained; there is no grasping after unearned intensities; the very rhythms suggest psychic comfort. Rarely approaching the
sublimity that Hardy can now and again reach in his novels, the best of his stories are also free of the turgidity to which the novels frequently succumb (81).

What seems significant about Hardy's short stories in the context of the present study is that, many of them are comic in nature; and this comedy is replete with simple rustic joviality. They often remind one of the ancient customs relating to 'Saturnalia' or the 'Lord of Misrule' when the established social institutes were symbolically subverted, the sacrosanct was profaned and the proletariats convivially enjoyed themselves for a few hours or days to forget their everyday struggle. By their carnival joviality through dancing, singing, drinking and rustic merriment the commoners bring the atmosphere down to a bodily level. Hardy includes these cheerful plebeians to strike a harmony between the Victorian literary tradition and the Bakhtinian 'grotesque' of the market place. Here Hardy stands in sharp contrast to other contemporary short story writers on both sides of the Atlantic. What Valerie Shaw observes about Maupassant is applicable to Hardy as well: 'Many of his stories are framed so as to evoke some twentieth century version of the primitive camp fire' (83).

Many of Hardy's stories vibrate with peals of rustic laughter and echoes of rural joviality and these features impart a special flavour of
‘sunburnt mirth’ to the stories. “The Three Strangers” can be cited as a fine example. Hawkins maintains:

In such a story as ‘The Three Strangers’, where the plot itself is the dominant feature, the characterization might excusably go no further than the circumstances require. For good measure, however, Hardy throws in a delightful cadenza on mead. It is typical of the gusty humour and expansive conviviality that so often transform the grimmer face of his prose. In the cottage on the heath that his great-grandfather had built at what in 1800 was New Bockhampton there were traditions of dancing and merry-making and the sweet scent of cider-pressing in the autumn days of Hardy’s youth; and it is this pervasive good-fellowship and delight in lighter side of rustic life that can warm Hardy’s fiction with a genial humanity that is sometimes disregarded or undervalued. (xviii)

The venue is the small cottage of Shepherd Fennel, ‘the cheerful rustic’, who is ‘entertaining a large party in glorification of the christening of his second girl’ (8). Nineteen persons assemble, five of whom are women ‘wearing gowns of various bright hues’ (8). The main living-room where the guests gather is lighted by half-a-dozen candles in candlesticks which are used only
at high days, holy days and family feasts. Two of the candles are placed on the chimney piece. 'This position of candles was in itself significant. Candles on the chimney-piece always meant a party (8). Male participants include members from various professions of different strata of Wessex society, including the hedge-carpenter, the parish clerk, the dairyman, etc. The congregation also includes a young man and maid and the shepherd's grandfather. The community feeling of the environment is highlighted:

Enjoyment was pretty general, and so much the more prevailed in being unhampered by conventional restrictions. Absolute confidence in each other's good opinion begot perfect ease, while the finishing stroke of manner, amounting to a truly princely serenity, was lent to the majority by the absence of any expression or trait denoting that they wished to get on in the world, enlarge their minds, or do any eclipsing thing whatever[...] (9).

The shepherd's frugal wife is worried about the possibility of unrestrained expenditure following huge consumption of drinks and victuals in the party whereas the shepherd is in the mood to exhibit the 'most reckless phases of hospitality' (9). To avoid unnecessary expense the shepherdess plans to
make an intermediate arrangement balancing between a sit-still party and a dancing-party.

A sit-still party had its advantages; but an undisturbed position of ease in chairs and settles was apt to lead on the men to such an unconscionable deal of toping that they would sometimes fairly drink the house dry. A dancing-party was the alternative; but this, while avoiding the foregoing objection on the score of good drink, had a counterbalancing disadvantage in the matter of good victuals, the ravenous appetites engendered by the exercise causing immense havoc in the buttery. Shepherdess Fennel fell back upon the intermediate plan of mingling short dances with short periods of talk and singing, so as to hinder any ungovernable rage in either. (9)

However, she becomes unable to monitor the “rage”. Music begins and soon it is accompanied by dancing. The spirit of revelry becomes all pervasive; nobody cares about the quality of the music. It seems as if the author himself relishes the buoyancy of the occasion as it appears from the meticulous delineation of the conviviality:

The fiddler was a boy of those parts, about twelve years of age [...]. At seven the shrill tweedle-dee of this youngster had
begun, accompanied by a booming ground-bass from Elizah New, the parish-clerk, who had thoughtfully brought with him his favourite musical instrument, the serpent. Dancing was instantaneous, Mrs Fennel privately enjoining the players on no account to let the dance exceed the length of a quarter of an hour.

But Elizah and the boy in the excitement of their position quite forgot the injunction. Moreover, Oliver Giles, a man of seventeen, one of the dancers, who was enamoured of his partner, a fair girl of thirty-three rolling years, had recklessly handed a new crown-piece to the musicians, as a bribe to keep going on as long as they had muscle and wind. Mrs Fennel, seeing the steam begin to generate on the countenances of her guests, crossed over and touched the fiddler’s elbow and put her hand on the serpent’s mouth. But they took no notice [...] And so the dance whizzed on with cumulative fury, the performers moving in their planet-like courses, direct and retrograde, from apogee to perigree [...]. (10-11)

The revelry continues for an hour and then taking a pause the rustics get ready for another bout. They almost ignore the entrance of the first stranger
as they are engaged in ‘an absorbing discussion [...] with the band about a
tune for the next dance. The matter being settled, they were about to stand
up’ (13) when the resuming of the dance is interrupted in by the entrance of
the second stranger. The host, however, welcomes every stranger with a
warm reception.

During the pause the discussions of the rustic veer round the topic of
sex and birth without directly plunging into it. Thus the concept of ‘sexual
promisquity’ which is associated with carnival is very slightly hinted at in a
subdued tone. When the first stranger asks about the occasion of the party,
the shepherd informs: ‘[...] We are having a bit of a fling for a good cause—
though, to be sure a man could hardly wish that glad cause to happen more
than once.’ ‘Nor less,’ spoke up a woman. ‘For ’tis best to get your family
over and done with, as soon as you can, so as to be all the earlier out of the
fag o’ t.’ [...]. (12)
The stranger promptly replies intimating his hope that the shepherd may ‘not
be made unhappy either by too many or too few of such episodes’ (12).
Then the stranger is ‘invited by a gesture to a pull at the mug’ to which ‘he
readily acquiesced’ (12). Fennel ‘filled and handled him a new clay pipe’
(13) and also fills his “baccy-box”. When the second stranger enters and
settles ‘as if he had been specially invited,’ the first stranger ‘handed his
neighbour the family mug’ which is so described as to reflect the narrator’s delighted fondness for such articles:

The family mug — a huge vessel of brown ware, having its upper edge worn away like a threshold by the rub of whole generations of thirsty lips that had gone the way of all flesh, and bearing the following inscription burnt upon its rotund side in yellow letters:

THERE IS NO FUN
UNTIL I CUM (14)

The second stranger warmly responds to the offer of the mug:

The other man, nothing loth, raised the mug to his lips, and drank on, and on, and on, — till a curious blueness overspread the countenance of the shepherd’s wife, who had regarded with no little surprise the first stranger’s free offer to the second of what did not belong to him to dispense.(15)

The jovial rustics do not pay any heed to her surprise and go on enjoying the booze by appreciating the mead:

‘I knew it!’ said the toper to the shepherd with much satisfaction. ‘When I walked up your garden before coming in, and saw the hives all of a row, I said to myself, ‘Where there’s
bees there's honey, and where there's honey there's mead. But mead of such a truly comfortable sort as this I really didn't expect to meet in my older days.' He took yet another pull at the mug, till it assumed an ominous elevation.

'Glad you enjoy it!' said the shepherd warmly. (15)

When the frugal shepherdess coldly informs that they may not produce mead henceforth the toper exclaims, 'O, but you'll never have the heart,' and 'after taking up the mug a third time and setting it down empty' he says emphatically, 'I love mead, when 'tis old like this, as I love to go to church o' Sundays [...]’ (15). In the last comment there is a direct subversion and frank profaning of the so-called sacrosanct with the unrestrained mirth of drinking — a conspicuous feature of the carnival. The man at the chimney corner — who is actually a run-away convict — 'could not or would not refrain from this testimony to his comrade's humour' and hilariously laughs, 'Ha, ha, ha!' (15). Here at this juncture the author comments on the drink 'of those days' — its brewing and its effect on the consumers.

Now the old mead of those days, brewed of the purest first-year or maiden honey, four pounds to the gallon — with its due complement of white of eggs, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, mace, rosemary, yeast, and processes of working, bottling, and
cellaring — tasted remarkably strong; but it did not taste so strong as it actually was. Hence, presently, the stranger […] moved by its creeping influence, unbuttoned his waistcoat, threw himself back in his chair, spread his legs, and made his presence felt in various ways. (15)

The second stranger, who is actually the hangman himself, informs that he has to leave as his "trade" compels him to do so, but he cannot help taking another mug of drink saying, 'There's time for one more draught of friendship before I go; and I'd perform it at once if the mug were not dry' (16). When the shepherdess gives him a slight amount of liquor, he refuses it reproachfully and says, 'I won't spoil your first kindness by partaking o' your second' (16). The shepherd agrees immediately:

'Certainly not,' broke in Fennel. 'We don't increase and multiply everyday, and I'll fill the mug again' (16).

In response to his wife's concerned remonstrance the shepherd responds with a typical carnival attitude. When she says, 'He's emptied it once, though it held for ten people; and now he's not contended wi' the small, but must needs call for more o' the strong! And a stranger unbeknown to any of us' (16), the husband advises her to throw all such cares out at least for this festive night:
But he's in the house, my honey; and 'tis a wet night, and a christening. Daze it, what's a cup of mead more or less?

There'll be plenty more next bee-burning. (16)

At the behest of Mrs Fennel music is resumed once again though one of the singers has 'no voice' and another 'has forgotten the verse'. The hangman 'whose soul had now risen to a good working temperature' (17) offers to sing, and 'Thrusting one thumb into the arm-hole of his waistcoat, he waved the other hand in the air, and, with an extemporizing gaze at the shining sheep-crooks above the mantelpiece', began:

'O my trade it is [...]'. (17)

At the request of the hangman to join the 'chorus' the convict, who is destined to be killed at the scaffold, joins him 'in a deep bass voice of musical relish' (17), and requests for a subsequent song which reveals the actual identity of the singer. While others are startled at this disclosure, the convict seems to remain undaunted. Surprisingly, none but him reciprocates the merry bearing of the hangman, observing which 'he held out his cup towards that appreciative comrade, who also held out his own. They clinked together'(19). When the third stranger enters the shepherd welcomes him with usual warmth and the former sees the singer 'who had thrown his mind into his song with such a will that he scarcely heeded the interruption,
silenced all whispers and inquiries by bursting into his third verse’ (19) narrating about the person who has stolen, and who is going to be hanged by him the next day— ‘And on his soul may God ha’ mercy’. The convict himself, “waving cups with the singer so heartily that his mead splashed over on the hearth, repeated in his bass voice as before: ‘And on his soul may God ha’ mer-cy!’ ” (19).

The essence of the fun lies in the fact that the singer himself is the wanted “lad”. To add to this, he also joins the hunt for the escaped. Before long he returns, he cuts a piece of skimmer-cake and takes half cup mead from the remaining amount ‘ravenously eating and drinking’ when his destined executioner also returns ‘looking solicitously for the fascinating mug of old mead’ (22). The two privately share their dislike of such a chase in such an inclement weather and empty the mug, ‘after which, shaking hands heartily at the door, and wishing each other well, they went their several ways’ (23).

It is not surprising that this jolly lad receives the general sympathy of the community and he is never found out by the police authority. The convict’s attitude recalls the carnival feature of defying the apprehension of death in a festive mood. Apart from that the rustic community displays their latent plebeian disposition towards the official power. Even the hangman who
seems to relish his job, remarks, 'tis the business of the Government to take care of its criminals – not mine' (22).

Flouting of authority and flair for drinking are invariably associated with carnival revelry. The irreverence towards the King and the Church is manifested in the action of Nether-Moynton, the village of smugglers in "The Distracted Preacher". Though the preacher is primarily “distracted” by his attraction towards Lizzy, the young female protagonist of the tale, his diversion is also caused by his association with the band of smugglers of liquor. Of course, Mr Stockdale, the law-abiding preacher, has a natural disapproval for the trafficking of illicit liquor in which the entire village is involved in a daringly hilarious ardour. Basically it is a combined enterprise run in a sprightly spirit defying the strictures of the authorities baffling the King and the Church, the act manifesting Bacchanalian disposition. This mood is reflected in Lizzy’s reply to Stockdale’s request for renouncing her profession:

But why should you belong to that profession? [...] I have got this large house; why can’t you marry me, and live here with us, and not be a Methodist preacher any more? I assure you, Richard, it is no harm, and I wish you could only see it as I do! [...] (200)
While Lizzy solicits to include Stockdale in their venture, she also intimates that their enterprise is not individualized but altogether a collective job of adventurous delight:

We only carry it on winter: in summer it is never done at all. It stirs up one’s dull life at this time of the year, and gives excitement, which I have got so used to now that I should hardly know how to do ’ithout it. At nights, when the wind blows, instead of being dull and stupid, and not noticing whether it do blow or not, your mind is afield, even if you are not afield yourself; and you are wondering how the chaps are getting on; [...] and then you go out yourself, and [...] have hair-breadth escapes from old Latimer and his fellows [the police], who are too stupid ever to really frighten us, and only make us a bit nimble. (200)

In another instance when Stockdale expresses his concern that the smugglers may kill the “Preventives” or “the King’s Officers” who have been tied down to trees by them, Lizzy instantly articulates her reproach: ‘Murder! [...] We don’t do murder here’ (197). Undoubtedly the illicit trade is invariably linked with the smugglers’ daily bread, but at the same time it is obvious that they have taken up such a profession as it is adventurous,
exciting, challenging and thus highly entertaining. When the customs men chase them, they simply vanish. When Stockdale, accompanied by his sweetheart, arrives at the church tower through a secret trap-door and reaches the roof by a ladder, he discovers all the disappeared parishioners who gladly invite him as ‘one of us’. They are ‘lying on their stomachs on the tower roof, except a few who, elevated on their hands and knees, were peeping through the embrasures of the parapet’ (190). About thirty tubs of liquor have been ‘secreted in the lumber of the tower’ (191). The “Preventives”, after seizing the secret tubs, are surprised to find that there is no available means of transport to carry the seized liquor to the town. All the carts and wagons have become bereft of linch-pins and screws overnight, no horse is there with more than three shoes, even some of them have only two, all the harnesses are found out of order, and the blacksmith is found missing. Martha, a little girl, represents the response of the entire hamlet when she describes it as hugely funny. When the blacksmith is discovered, he takes up the whole day to repair the vehicles and when the customs men set out for the town, the sun has already completed the day’s work. After a while the minister found that the carts and horses are returning and these are not being conducted by the customs men but these vehicles ‘were now accompanied by a body of from twenty to thirty, all of whom […] had blackened faces.
Among them walked six or eight huge female figures, whom from their wide strides, Stockdale guessed to be men in disguise' (197). One is reminded of the bizarre costumes used in the carnival processions of the ancient days. When Lizzy compares herself with the Methodist preacher, the comparison smacks of carnival spirit:

"You dissent from Church, and I dissent from State," she said,

"And I don't see why we are not well matched". (200)

The vein of dissent can also be traced even in the voice of the chief customs officer. When the prisoners are released by Stockdale, Latimer admits with "complete dispassionateness":

For my part, I'd sooner be them than we [...]. My opinion is, now I've had time to think o't that you may serve your Gover'ment at too high a price. (198)

Thus in the story "The Distracted Preacher" light traces of carnival ingredients can be perceived which include contagious elements of fun, irreverence or uncrowing of the authority by the commoners. Though Hardy had to make a compromise with the demands of the traditional Victorian outlook and professional compulsion in terminating the story showing the victory of morality and law administered by the Church and the King, he was, as researches reveal, not happy about the ending of the story.
When Latimer articulates his annoyance that government servants have to give high price during their service, he obviously voices the subversion of lofty ideals laughingly and prefers to defend his temporal life. An analogous attitude is manifested by Solomon Selby in "A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four". Solomon nostalgically evokes the most unforgettable night of his life when he witnessed Napoleon while during his boyhood he was tending his sheep near the Cove. Uncle Job is introduced by his nephew as an extraordinary man who was 'the sergeant in the Sixty-first foot, then in camp on the downs above King George's watering-place' (30). That very night Uncle Job is in the house and offers to accompany the boy in sheep-tending. The uncle entertains the boy with stories related to battle and his own courageous combat with the French and also assures that he 'hoped to fight 'em again' (31). Ultimately two persons land close to their shelter. When one of the faces is exposed by the lantern-light the uncle almost faints. Being asked by the boy about the reason of his condition Uncle Job informs that one of the persons who have just landed is Napoleon himself.

"Bonaparty" he said. The Corsican ogre. O that I had got but my new-flinted fireclock, that there man should die! But I haven't got my new-flinted fireclock, and that there man must live. So lie low, as you value your life. (32-33)
The reader is already informed that before going for sheep-watching the uncle ‘had fastened up his stock and waist-belt’ (31). But even then he is scared to take any risk. This is the typical carnival approach, the down-to-earth commitment to life and body. Lofty values like patriotism or heroism seem meaningless in this situation. Hardy’s laughing rustics are well aware of this and make no pretence to hide the celebration of life which constitutes the very essence of carnival. The author also informs that in the very evening before going to sheep-watching Uncle Job came home to enjoy ‘a drop to drink’ (30) and that also was taken ‘from the tub of sperrits that the smugglers kept us in for housing their liquor when they’d make a rum, and for burning ’em off when there was danger’ (30).

In the story “Interlopers at the Knap” there is an elaborate discussion on various liquors and delight of drinking which is an invariable part of carnival merriment. Here Mrs Hall, the hostess invites Japeth John to have a drink supposedly on the eve of her daughter’s wedding. They discuss in detail and compare the merits and charms of various liquors and it shows the rustics’ joy in boozing. Hawkins observes, “It is not only in his deliberately comic stories that Hardy’s indigenous bravura adds its distinctive quality. Just as the celebration of mead breaks into ‘The Three Strangers,’ so in
Interlopers at the Knap’ there comes this tribute to cider from the dairyman Mr Johns” (xix):

‘Drink hearty, Mr Johns — drink hearty,’ said the matron magnanimously. ‘Such as it is there’s plenty of it. But perhaps cider-wine is not to your taste?— though there’s body in it.’

‘Quite the contrary, ma’am — quite the contrary,’ said the dairyman. ‘For though I inherit the malt-liquor principle from my father, I am a cider-drinker on my mother’s side. She came from these parts, you know. And there is this to be said for’t—’tis a more peaceful liquor, and don’t lie about a man like your hotter drinks. With care, one may live on it a twelve-month without knocking down a neighbour, or getting a black eye from an old acquaintance.’ (137)

In all collective community occasions drinking is one of the most fascinating attractions. Thus Andrey Satchel arrives to marry his maid who is in advanced stage of pregnancy, he is totally drunk and the parson is reluctant to unite them in the bond of matrimony. The author says,

Well, some folks noticed that Andrey walked with rather wambling steps to church that morning; the truth o’t was that his nearest neighbour’s child had been christened the day
before, and Andrey, having stood godfather, had stayed all night keeping up the christening, for he said to himself, "Not if I live to be a thousand shall I again be made a godfather one day, and a husband the next, and perhaps a father the next, and therefore I'll make the most of the blessing." So that when he started from home in the morning he had not been in bed at all (536).

When the parson criticizes him for being 'in liquor' adding 'and so early too', Andrey unabashedly retorts:

'Well, that is true, sir [...]. But I can walk straight enough for practical purposes. I can walk a chalk line', he says (meaning no offence), 'as well as some other folk: and' (getting hotter)—‘I reckon that if you, Pa'son Billy Toogood, had kept up a christening all night so thoroughly as I have done, you wouldn't be able to stand at all; d — me if you would!' (536)

Naturally no priest would agree to perform the wedding rituals after this. He advises Andrey to depart from the church, and come back when he regains his sobriety. At the earnest entreaty of the bride the priest permits them to wait inside the church for two hours (so that the bridegroom may become sober) and bolts from outside. From her experience, the bride comments
about Andrey, 'if he don’t come drunk he won’t come at all'. At the same time she is confident about her would-be life partner that if provided with a breather of two hours, 'he shall be as sober as a judge' (537).

The parson himself also manifests *carpe diem*. Locking the would-be couple, he, along with his clerk goes to enjoy a hunt, their common fascination, with gay abandon. The story-teller naughtily elaborates (in harmony with the spirit of the fun) the innocuous carelessness of the clergy and his partner and their rejoicing in daylong hunt during which they altogether forget the couple locked in the church. They remember this not until the breakfast next morning and the person repents— 'Why the hell didn’t I marry ’em, drunk or sober!' (541) Here the wily narrator inserts an authorial comment: ‘Pa’sons used to cuss in them days like plain honest men’ (541).

The Parson and his clerk manifest the carnivalesque recklessness. A hilarious situation arises from their relishing the fact that at least for a day they have been able to shun the constraints of responsibility. The keen delight can be perceived from their verbal exchange:

‘Hee, hee!’ says the clerk, glancing sly into the Pa’son’s eye.
'Ha, ha!', says the pa'ason, a-glancing back into the clerk's.

'Halloo!' he shouts, as he sees the fox break cover at that moment.

'Halloo!' cries the clerk. There he goes! Why, dammy, there's two foxes—'

'Hush, clerk, hush! Don't let me hear that word again! Remember our calling.'

'True, sir, true. But really, good sport do carry away a man so, that he's apt to forget his high persuasion!' And the next minute the corner of the clerk's eye shot again into the corner of the pa'son's, and the pa'son's back again to the clerk's. 'Hee, hee!' said the clerk.

'Ha, ha!' said Pa'son Toogood.

'Ah, sir,' says the clerk again, 'this is better than crying Amen to your Ever-and-ever on a winter's morning!'

'Yes, indeed, clerk! To everything there's a season,' says Pa'son Toogood, quite pat, for he was a learned Christian man when he liked, and had chapter and verse at his tongue's end, as a pa'son should. (539-40)
Drinking, song and dance are regular features of carnival mirth. In “The Waiting Supper”; ‘only the parish people had been at the feast, but outlying neighbours had [...] strolled in for a dance’ (600) at the party celebrated in Squire Everade’s apartment. The Sergeant Major in “Enter a Dragoon” intrudes into another’s engagement feast mistaking it to be a celebration of his own delayed return to the maid whom he had not wedded timely. In the party he contributes his own stock of liquor and victuals to “make an evening of it” declaring, ‘There’s nine-gallon cask o’ “Phoenix” bear outside in the trap, and a ham, and half a rawmill’ cheese’ [...] (682).

Supper being over Sergeant Clark wishes to enjoy dancing and the subject of a dance having been broached, to put the thought in practice was the feeling of all. Soon after the tables and chairs are borne from the opposite room to this by zealous hands, and two of the villagers sent home for a fiddle and a tambourine, when the majority began to tread a measure well-known in that secluded vale (683).

While dancing Clark suffers from cardiac arrest and expires before long exemplifying the author’s philosophy that ‘happiness is only an occasional episode’.
It does not necessarily imply that people would deprive themselves from rejoicing in merry occasions. On the contrary, they would make the best of the chances for carnival merriment whenever such opportunity comes. Such occasions are made spicy through the gestures of irreverence to and flouting of authority. In this connection the series of stories titled “A Few Crusted Characters” is significant. Irving Howe observes:

The reader who has suffered vicariously the blows and disasters of Hardy’s major novels find a special chance in turning to “A Few Crusted Characters”, an utterly winning survey of Wessex conduct and idiosyncrasy, free from the darkness of spirit that hovers over Hardy’s novels and buoyant with the delight of coming back to a familiar world of youth. (77)

In this series of stories, the short delightful anecdote “Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir” is narrated by the master-thatcher. It is a marvelous invocation of the carnival spirit and environment reminding us of the older days. Before beginning his tale the speaker ‘attentively regarded past times as if they lay about a mile off, and went on’ (545) with his anecdote. The tale alludes to the Mellstock Choir which is also humorously delineated in Under the Greenwood Tree. The choir is efficient enough if judged by village standards and include ‘sound and powerful musicians, and strong-
winded men — they that blowed’ (545). They remain hectically engaged during Christmas days for small reels and dancing parties. Their extreme popularity is described thus:

For they could turn a gig or a hornpipe out of hand as well as ever they could turn out a psalm, and perhaps better, not to speak irreverent. In short one half-hour they could be playing a Christmas carol in the Squire’s hall to the ladies and gentleman, and drinking tay and coffee with ’em as modest as saints; and the next, at the Tinker’s Arms, blazing away like wild horses with the “dashing White Sergeant” to nine couples of dancers and more, and swallowing rum-and-cider hot as flame. (546)

On such a Christmas time they are performing ‘one rattling randy after another every night, and had got next to no sleep at all’ (546). Then comes the scheduled Sunday and it happens to be so biting cold that they can hardly sit in the gallery. So the band leader Nicholas, who is to play the first fiddle, exclaims at the morning service,

Please the Lord I won’t stand this numbing weather no longer: this afternoon we’ll have something in our insides to make us warm, if it cost a king’s ransom. (546)

The narrator nostalgically remembers
He brought a gallon of hot brandy and beer, ready mixed, to church with him in the afternoon, and by keeping the jar well wrapped up in Timothy Thomas's bass-viol bag it kept drinkably warm till they wanted it. (546)

They do not need much; 'just a thimbleful in the Absolution, and another after the Creed, and the remainder at the beginning o'the sermon' (546). Thus their drinking is particularly punctuated by the holy rituals of the church. 'When they'd had the last cool they felt quite comfortable and warm' and they become fast asleep in the dark afternoon during the elaborate sermon that follows. When the sermon ends, and the band's turn comes, they are found still asleep as sound as rock. A boy nudges Nicholas who suddenly wakes up:

'Hey? What?' says Nicholas, starting up; and the church being so dark and his head so muddled he thought he was at the party they had played at all the night before, and away he went, bow and fiddle, at "The Devil among the Tailors", the favourite jig of our neighbourhood at that time.

Other members of the band also follow Nicholas:
Being in the same state of mind and nothing doubting, [they] followed their leader with all their strength, according to custom. (546)

Their pure delight in performing their function is meticulously described by the narrator:

They poured out that there tune till the lower bass notes of “The Devil among the Tailors” made cobwebs in the roof shiver like ghosts; then Nicholas, seeing nobody moved, shouted out as he scraped (in his usual commanding way at dances when the folk didn’t know the figures), ‘Top couples cross hands! And when I make the fiddle squeak at the end, every man kiss his pardner under the mistletoe!’ (547)

What impression the song makes on the audience can be guessed, but the band members are simply carried away by their own enthusiasm, till it is too late to mend. Then

The boy Levi was so frightened that he bolted down the gallery and out homeward like lightning. The pa’son’s hair fairly stood on end when he heard the evil tune raging through the church, and thinking the quire had gone crazy he held up his hand and said: ‘Stop, stop, stop! Stop, stop! What’s this?’ But they did
not hear'n for the noise of their own playing, and the more he called the louder they played. (547)

No doubt they have to pay sufficient recompense for their inadvertence but the carnival feature of irreverence is covertly represented by the sleep and their obliviousness caused by liquor and tiredness. Of course, the recrowning of the 'official' follows when the band is dismissed for good for one evening of sacrilege.

The gala days of carnival seem to have been over with Malvolios and Kill-joys now taking over and the chariot of Bacchus getting grounded. Hardy only casts a nostalgic look at those bygone days of unrestrained and refreshing carnival joviality.

[All the quotations from Hardy’s stories refer to Thomas Hardy: Collected Short Stories. Ed. Desmond Hawkins. London: Macmillan, 1988.]