

MACMILLAN READERS

PRE-INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

THOMAS HARDY

Far From the Madding Crowd

Retold by John Escott



MACMILLAN

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Gabriel Oak

Farmer Gabriel Oak was a quiet, sensible man. He was twenty-eight years old and unmarried. And he was a man of good character¹³. On Sundays, he went to church and prayed. During the week, he worked in the fields of his farm.

On a sunny morning in December, Gabriel Oak walked across his field on Norcombe Hill, in the county of Wessex. He looked towards the road which went between Emminster and Chalk-Newton and saw a bright yellow wagon¹⁴. Two horses were pulling the heavy wagon slowly along the road. The driver was walking beside the wagon, which was loaded¹⁵ with furniture. A woman was sitting on top of the furniture. She was young and very attractive.

Suddenly, the driver called to her. 'Something has fallen off the wagon, miss! I'll go back and get it.'

The young woman waited quietly. She did not get down from the wagon to help the driver. After several minutes, she looked back to see if the wagon driver was returning. He was not, so she opened a small package that was beside her. She took a mirror from the package and held it up to her face. As she looked in the mirror, she smiled.

The sun shone down on to the woman's red jacket, her pretty face and her dark hair. Gabriel Oak watched her and smiled. The girl did not touch her hat, or her hair. She simply looked at herself and smiled. Then she heard the wagon driver returning to the wagon. She put the mirror into the package and waited for him to drive the horses forward.

When the wagon moved on, Gabriel Oak followed it to the tollgate¹⁶. As he came nearer to the wagon, Oak heard the driver arguing with the man at the gate.

‘The toll is two pence,’ said the gatekeeper. ‘But this wagon is large. You must pay two pence extra.’

But the young woman would not pay the extra money.

Oak thought that two pence was too small an amount to argue about. He held out two pennies to the gatekeeper.

‘Take this and let the young woman go through,’ he said.

The young woman looked down at Oak. She did not thank him, but she told her driver to go on. Oak and the gatekeeper watched her as the wagon passed.

‘She’s a handsome woman,’ said the gatekeeper.

‘That’s true,’ said Oak. ‘But unfortunately, she knows it.’

It was nearly midnight on 21st December, the shortest day of the year. There were no clouds in the dark sky and the stars were shining brightly. A cold wind was blowing, but it was not the sound of the wind that travellers could hear on Norcombe Hill. It was the sound of music. The music came from a little wooden shepherd’s hut that belonged to Gabriel Oak. Inside the hut, Gabriel was playing a happy tune on his flute¹⁷. The hut was on wheels and it gave shelter for the shepherd in the winter and early spring. He stayed in the hut while he cared for his sheep. At this time of the year, the sheep were giving birth¹⁸ to their lambs. It was warm and comfortable inside the hut. Oak had a small stove¹⁹ to keep him warm. And he had some bread, cheese and beer²⁰.

Oak’s father had been a shepherd and he had taught Gabriel all that he knew about sheep. Now the young man had two hundred sheep, two sheepdogs²¹, and a farm of his own. He had not yet paid for the sheep, and it was important to guard the sheep and their young lambs during the night.

After a few minutes, Oak stopped playing his flute, picked up a lamp, and went outside. As he moved around the field, he held the light high and looked at each sheep. Twenty minutes later, he returned to the hut with a new-born lamb.

It was weak and cold. After an hour in the warm hut, the lamb became stronger. Oak took the little lamb back outside and left it with its mother.

Suddenly, he saw a light shining in a field next to his own farm. Lamplight was coming from a cowshed²² that was built into the side of the hill. Oak walked down the hill until he stood above the roof of the wooden building. He looked through a hole in the roof.

Inside the cowshed, two women were sitting beside a cow and its young calf. A lamp was standing on the floor of the cowshed. The soft yellow light shone on the women and the animals. One woman was about fifty years old. The other was younger, but she was wearing a cloak²³ which hid her face.

‘We can go home now,’ said the older woman. ‘I hope that the cows will be all right.’

‘If we were rich, we could pay a man to do these things,’ said the younger woman.

‘Well we aren’t rich, so we must do the work ourselves,’ said the older woman. ‘And you must help me, if you stay on the farm.’

‘Aunt, I’ve lost my hat,’ said the younger woman. ‘The wind blew it into the next field.’

Suddenly the cloak fell back from the young woman’s head and Oak saw her long black hair and her red jacket. Oak recognized²⁴ her at once. It was the young woman who had been in the yellow wagon. The young woman who liked to look at herself in the mirror. The young woman who owed him two pence.

The two women put the calf next to its mother. Then they picked up their lamp and went out of the hut and down the hill. Oak went back to his sheep.

When it began to get light, Oak remembered the girl’s lost hat. He went to look for it in his field. He found the hat under a hedge and took it back to his hut.

Later in the morning, Oak saw the young woman on the road. He was surprised. She was riding her horse like a man. She did not ride sidesaddle²⁵, like a lady. She had pulled up her long skirt and each of her legs were down the sides of the horse. He smiled and watched her ride away down the hill.

An hour later, the young woman returned. She was riding sidesaddle now. Oak got the hat from his hut and stepped onto the road in front of her.

‘I found a hat, miss,’ he said. And he held it up towards her.

‘It’s mine,’ she said. She smiled and took the hat. ‘It flew off my head in the wind last night.’

‘At one o’clock this morning?’

‘Yes, how did you know that?’ she asked.

‘I was here, with my sheep.’

‘You’re Farmer Oak,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And I saw you again, about an hour ago.’

Her face became red. She was remembering her ride down the hill. He had seen her riding astride, like a man! Oak turned away. He had not wanted to embarrass²⁶ her.

When he turned back, she was gone.

Five mornings and evenings went by. The young woman came to the cowshed to take care of the cows which had new-born calves. But she did not speak to Oak. He watched her each day, and his heart ached²⁷.

Then one evening he was very tired. He came back to his shepherd’s hut and shut the door. It was a cold night and he was pleased to be near the warm stove. But he forgot to open one of the little windows. It was important to do this when a fire was burning in the stove and the door was shut. In a few minutes, Oak fell asleep.

When Oak opened his eyes again, his head was aching. He looked up and saw the face of the young woman. His

head was in her arms and she was opening the top of his shirt.



‘What’s the matter?’ asked Oak.

‘Nothing now,’ she replied. ‘But you could have died. You forgot to open a window.’

‘Oh,’ said Oak. He wanted to stay with his head in her arms forever, but she made him sit up.

‘I heard your dog barking²⁸,’ she told him. ‘It was trying to open the door of the hut. I came to see what was wrong.’

‘You saved my life, miss,’ said Oak. ‘But – but I don’t know your name. I know your aunt’s name. It’s Mrs Hurst. But I don’t know yours.’

‘You don’t have to know my name,’ she replied. ‘And I don’t like it.’