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Thomas Hardy

Far from the Madding Crowd

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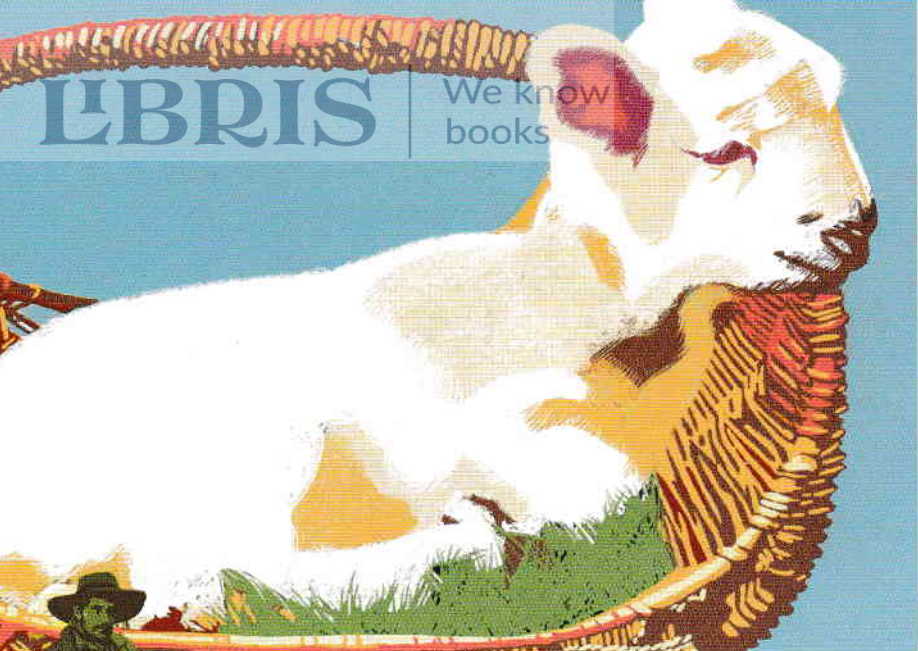
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THE STORY IS FULLY RECORDED.

A track number indicates that the audio can be found on the CD.

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CHAPTER 1

Farmer Oak



track 02

When Farmer Oak smiled, the corners of his mouth spread till they were nearly at his ears, and the lines around his eyes looked like a picture of the rising sun. Gabriel Oak was twenty-eight, tall and broad-shouldered, but he had a humble way of walking and standing, as if he didn't want to frighten anyone.

One morning, Gabriel was watching over his sheep on a hill when he saw a bright yellow wagon on the road below. It was pulled by two horses and loaded with household goods¹ and furniture. There was a young, attractive girl sitting at the top of this pile, next to a pot full of red flowers, and a yellow bird in a cage. The wagon stopped and the driver walked back along the road, looking for something that had fallen. The girl was alone.

1. **household goods** : common objects which are usually found or used in a home.

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Gabriel watched her. The girl sat quietly for a moment, then she picked up a mirror from the pile of objects beside her. She looked at herself and smiled. The sunlight touched her red jacket, her bright face and dark hair. The driver came back and the wagon started to move again. Gabriel followed it.

There was a gate in the road with a toll charge — anyone who used this road had to pay two pence. The wagon stopped and the driver started arguing with the gatekeeper; the girl was refusing to pay. Gabriel stepped forward and paid the two pence for her.

‘Here,’ he said to the gatekeeper. ‘Let the young lady pass.’

The girl glanced down at Gabriel. She told the driver to move on.

‘A pretty girl,’ said the gatekeeper, watching the wagon as it rolled away.

‘But she has her faults,’ Gabriel answered. ‘Vanity, for one.’

He saw the girl again several times — she was staying with her aunt on a nearby farm, and so they were practically neighbours. He thought about her more and more.

It was late December, and freezing cold. Out in the countryside you could see the different colours of the stars, some yellow, some white, some almost red. Gabriel spent his nights in a shepherd’s hut in the fields. There were wheels under the hut’s floor and he could move it to different parts of his farm. He had to be close to his sheep now that the lambs were being born. This hut was very small, but it had a good stove for warmth — though he had to keep the vents in the walls open or smoke could fill the place. (Many shepherds had died falling asleep with the vents closed in huts like this.) At night everything was quiet, except for the sounds of the bells around the sheep’s necks, so sometimes Gabriel would sit by the stove and play his flute.



One night he was in his chair, almost asleep. 'I have to open the vents,' he said to himself. 'But I'll just wait until the hut gets a bit warmer...'

He woke up. His dog was barking and someone was pulling him outside. His face and neck were wet. He looked up and found that he was lying with his head in the lap² of the dark-haired girl.

'What's the matter?' Gabriel said in a sleepy voice.

'Nothing, now. Since you are not dead,' said the girl. She made him stand up. Gabriel began wiping³ his face and shaking himself.

'I came out to milk the cows,' the girl said, 'and I heard your dog outside the hut. I threw a bucket of milk over you.'

'I believe you saved my life, Miss — I don't know your name.'

'I won't tell you. There is no reason why I should, as we probably won't see each other again.'

'My name is Gabriel Oak.'

'And mine isn't,' she said.

'I thank you.' Gabriel touched her fingers lightly.

'I suppose you would like to kiss my hand?' the girl said.

'I wasn't thinking of anything like that,' said Gabriel. 'But I will —'

'You won't.' The girl quickly took her hand away. She smiled. 'Now find out my name.' She walked away over the fields.

He started asking questions and discovered that her name was Bathsheba Everdene. He liked to say the name to himself when he was alone. Gabriel realised that he was in love. 'I'll make her my wife,' he vowed to himself. 'Or I'll be good for nothing.'

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2. **lap** : the upper part of your legs when you sit down.
 3. **wipe** : dry or clean something using a cloth or your hand.