



CHAPTER 1

Egdon Heath, a vast tract of uncultivated land in the county of Dorset, England, was untamable. Covered with ferns and low shrubs, it was majestic, but not severe, in its monotony. The storm was its lover and the wind its friend. Ever since the beginning of vegetation, its soil had worn the same brown dress. The place had an ancient permanence. The sea changed; the fields changed; the rivers, villages, and people changed. But Egdon Heath remained the same.

At twilight on Guy Fawkes Day*, 1850, Egdon Heath was darkening. The cloudy sky was a vast white tent. As other things sank to sleep, the heath slowly awakened and listened.

Captain Vye, a retired naval officer, walked along the road that crossed the heath. White-haired and slightly stooped, he wore a faded hat

*Guy Fawkes Day, on November 5, is an annual British holiday. On this day, Britons celebrate the failure of a 1605 plot by Guy Fawkes and others to blow up the British parliament. In the mid-19th century, the day commonly was celebrated with evening bonfires.

and cloak. The image of an anchor decorated each of his brass buttons. He used a silver-headed walking stick as a third leg. Every few inches, he poked the ground with its point. The long road stretched before him: dry, empty, and white. It divided the vast, dark heath like the part on a head of black hair. Vye frequently looked ahead to see how much farther he had to go. After a time, he saw a wagon some distance in front of him. It moved slowly, so he gained on it.

Diggory Venn walked beside the wagon, which was red. His cap, boots, face, hands—all were red. He was a ruddleman, whose job was to supply ruddle, a bright red iron ore, dug from pits, with which farmers marked their sheep.

Vye came up alongside Diggory. “Good evening.”

Diggory turned his head. “Good evening.” He was twenty-four years old, tall and slim, with an attractive, clean-shaven face. His blue eyes were as keen as a bird of prey’s. He wore a fitted, high-quality corduroy suit and had a dignified manner.

Apart from his greeting, Diggory showed no desire to talk, although he continued to walk alongside Vye. There were no sounds except the wind on the vegetation, the wagon’s wheels, and the footsteps of Diggory, Vye, and the two shaggy ponies—small and hardy—who drew the wagon.

Periodically Diggory would leave Vye’s side and, stepping behind the wagon, anxiously look inside through a small window. Then he’d return to

Vye. Neither man found the silence awkward. In lonely places, travelers frequently greet each other and then plod on for miles without talking. The two men might not have spoken again until their parting had it not been for Diggory's visits to his wagon. After he looked in a fifth time, Vye asked, "Is something inside there besides your load?"

"Yes."

"Someone who needs looking after?"

"Yes."

A faint cry came from inside the wagon. Diggory hastened to the back, looked in, and came away again.

"Do you have a child there?"

"No, sir, a woman."

"Why did she cry out?"

"She's fallen asleep and, not being used to traveling, she's uneasy and keeps dreaming."

"A young woman?"

"Yes."

"Is she your wife?"

"No," Diggory said bitterly. "She's above mating with the likes of me. But there's no reason why I should tell you about that."

"That's true. And there's no reason why you shouldn't."

Diggory looked into Vye's face. "Well, sir," he said, "I knew her before today, although perhaps it would have been better if I hadn't. I'm nothing to her. She wouldn't be in my wagon if a better vehicle had been there to take her."

“Been where?”

“Anglebury.”

“I know the town well. What was she doing there?”

“Not much. She’s tired now and unwell. That’s what makes her so restless. She dropped off into a nap about an hour ago. It’ll do her good.”

“Is she a good-looking woman?”

“Yes.”

Vye turned his eyes toward the wagon window. “May I look at her?”

“No,” Diggory said sharply. “I have no right to allow you that. I hope she won’t wake up until she’s home.”

“Who is she? Someone from this neighborhood? Is she that Blooms End woman who’s been talked about lately? If so, I know her, and I can guess what’s happened.”

“It’s of no matter. You and I soon will have to part company. My ponies are tired, and I have farther to go. I’m going to rest them under this bank for an hour.”

Vye nodded indifferently, and Diggory turned his horses and wagon in on the turf. “Good night.”

“Good night,” Vye returned, and he went on his way.

Diggory watched his form as it shrank to a speck on the road and disappeared into the night. He took some hay from a metal frame under the wagon and, throwing some of it in front of the

horses, used the rest to make a pad that he laid on the ground beside the wagon. He sat on the pad, leaning his back against the wheel. He heard a low, soft breathing from inside the wagon.

Diggory looked around. He spotted a barrow, a large mound of earth built up over an ancient burial site. Known as Rainbarrow, the mound was the heath's highest part.

A woman stood on the mound. She shifted a step or two and turned around. Apparently alarmed, she descended on the mound's right side, like a water drop gliding down a bud, and vanished.

The reason for her sudden departure now appeared. As she dropped out of sight on the mound's right side, other people climbed the mound's left side. Soon the mound was covered with people, silhouettes against the sky. Each deposited a load of gorse branches, bound together, on top of the mound.

A pyramid of gorse thirty feet around now occupied the mound's crown. The landscape began to change. One by one, bonfires appeared, flecking the countryside. Some were distant. Others were large and near. About thirty could be counted within the district.

The first tall flame from Rainbarrow sprang into the sky. The cheerful blaze lit the men and women who stood on the mound.

"Tamsin Yeobright and Damon Wildeve went to Anglebury this morning to get married,"

Timothy Fairway said. "They must have returned to the Quiet Woman Inn by now."

"Last fall Mrs. Yeobright forbade the marriage, but then she changed her mind," Humphrey Miller the gorse-cutter said. He was a somewhat solemn young fellow. "I guess they married in Anglebury because marrying here would have embarrassed Mrs. Yeobright."

"A lady like Tamsin must have disliked being married without a proper wedding," Susan Nunsuch said. "I don't know what she sees in Damon Wildeve, although some may say that he's good-looking."

"Wildeve's a clever, educated fellow, almost as clever as Clym Yeobright," Timothy said.

"Yes, Clym's wonderfully smart," Humphrey said. "I saw Mrs. Yeobright last night. She said that he'll be coming home at Christmas."

"He should have come before and married Tamsin himself," Susan said.

"Maybe he's just coming to spend some time with Mrs. Yeobright. She'll be feeling lonely now that Tamsin has left Blooms End," Humphrey said.

The bonfire was beginning to dwindle, as were most of the other fires within the wide horizon. One fire, about a mile off, continued to burn bright. "I think that bonfire's at Captain Vye's," Timothy said.

"Vye's granddaughter is a strange one," Susan said. "She keeps to herself."

"She's attractive," Humphrey said, "especially when she's wearing one of her best dresses."

"We'd better be getting home," Timothy said. The fire now was nothing more than a circle of ashes flecked with red embers and sparks.

"Hoi!" Diggory called from the darkness.

"Halloo!" Timothy called back.

"Is there a wagon road up across here to Mrs. Yeobright's?" Diggory asked as he climbed the barrow, having left his wagon below.

"Yes," Timothy said. "Keep along the path down there."

"I mean a road that two horses and a wagon can travel over?"

"Yes. It will take you to the valley below. The road's a bit rough, but if you've got a light, your horses will find their way."

"Thank you. Good night." Diggory headed back down the barrow.

"I think I've seen him before," Humphrey said.

Elizabeth Yeobright now approached. She was a well-respected, genteel widow. She was middle-aged, thin, with strong features that suggested intelligence, character, and aloofness. Her husband had been a farmer and her father a clergyman.

"Mrs. Yeobright, a few minutes ago a young ruddleman was here asking the way to your house," Sam Brown the turf-cutter said.

"What did he want?" she asked.

“He didn’t say. I’m glad to hear that Mr. Clym is coming home at Christmas, ma’am,” Sam said.

“Yes,” she said.

“He must be a fine fellow now,” Timothy said.

“He’s a man now,” Elizabeth said quietly. “I must go now. I’m headed to the inn. Tamsin is returning there tonight with her husband. Will you walk with me, Olivia?”

“Surely, ma’am,” Olivia Dowden the broom-maker answered.

“You’ll probably encounter the ruddleman that I mentioned,” Timothy said. “He just went back to his wagon. We heard that your niece and her husband were coming home as soon as they were married. We’re going to the inn soon to congratulate them.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said. “Are you ready, Olivia?”

“Yes, ma’am. There’s a light shining from the inn. It will guide us.” Olivia indicated a faint light at the bottom of the valley, and the two women descended the barrow.