

THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

The door was ajar; Farfrae knocked; and he who stood before them was Whittle, as they had conjectured.

His face showed marks of deep sadness, his eyes lighting on them with an unfocused gaze; and he still held in his hand the few sticks he had been out to gather. As soon as he recognized them he started.

‘What, Abel Whittle; is it that ye are here?’ said Farfrae.

‘Ay, yes, sir! You see he was kind-like to mother when she wer here below, though ’a was rough to me.’

‘Who are you talking of?’

‘Oh, sir—Mr. Henchet! Didn’t ye know it? He’s just gone—about half-an-hour ago, by the sun; for I’ve got no watch to my name.’

‘Not—dead?’ faltered Elizabeth-Jane.

‘Yes, ma’am, he’s gone! He was kind-like to mother when she wer here below, sending her the best ship-coal, and hardly any ashes from it at all; and taties, and such-like that were very needful to her. I seed en go down street on the night of your worshipful’s wedding to the lady at yer side, and I thought he looked low and faltering. And I followed en over the road, and he turned and zeed me, and said “You go back!” But I followed, and he turned again, and said, “Do you hear, sir? Go back!” But I zeed that he was low, and I followed on still. Then ’a said, “Whittle, what do ye follow me for when I’ve told ye to go back all these times?” And I said, “Because, sir, I see things be bad with ’ee, and ye wer kind-like to mother if ye were rough to me, and I would fain be kind-like to you.” Then he walked on, and I followed; and he never complained at me no more. We walked on like that all night; and in the blue o’ the morning, when ’twas hardly day, I looked ahead o’ me, and I zeed that he wambled, and could hardly drag along. By that time we had got past here, but I had seen that this house was empty as I went by, and I got him to come