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soon followed, and a few teas; and last summer I saw a great deal of her, both at Pau and at Paris.

One day she produced her "treasure book," and in showing me the volume, she told me that, of all the letters, the one from Hardy was the one she prized the most. She seemed proud to show the proof that she had acquired the approval as well as the friendship of the great novelist. When I asked permission to copy the letter, she replied: "Why, of course! I am only so regretful not to give you the letter, but that would spoil the book. I am now thinking of leaving the Collection to the Edinburgh Museum. I am so very Scottish!" Well, I copied the letter, and here it is, for the benefit of those who share my interest in Thomas Hardy.*

"TWO LADIES CALLED"

By Philo Calhoun

Bridgeport, Connecticut

It is more than fifty years since the death of Queen Victoria closed the book on the great age of literature which bears her name. Perhaps the interval is still insufficient to provide an adequate perspective for critical judgment which can fairly claim to be more than tentative and provisional, but there is a temptation now and again to measure by modern standards the stature of those who once were giants. It is the opinion of the present writer that, among the great Victorian novelists, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy alone remain without noticeable shrinkage. Of these three it is Hardy of whom we know the least. The two-volume biography written by the second Mrs. Hardy, the only one which professes to be

* This interest has been recorded on two previous occasions in the pages of this quarterly. See the two articles by Dr. Peirce: "Hardy's Lady Susan," February 1948, pages 77-80, and "A Visit to Max Gate," November 1949, pages 190-195.—Editor.
comprehensive, is really a cold and lifeless recital, factually inadequate and incomplete. Sometime, somehow, someone will undertake the task of telling the whole story of this strange, silent recluse, and when that time comes it is a safe assumption that that future biographer of Hardy will owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Carl J. Weber of Colby, whose seven books and scores of shorter studies have already served to throw much light on the life and bibliography of the novelist; who has carried to a dozen universities and learned societies a torch fueled by vast knowledge and fired with unlimited enthusiasm.

Not the least important by-product of Dr. Weber's energies has been the accumulation in the library of Colby College of what is undoubtedly the most complete and useful collection of Hardy and Hardiana in the world. The history of how an important segment of this collection came to Colby is a fascinating saga in its own right. In a new book, *Hardy and the Lady from Madison Square*, Weber for the first time not only records in detail the story of how the Owen books and papers came to Colby, but also tells the far more engrossing tale of the lady whose whole mature life these books and papers represented.

Rarely in this reviewer's experience have the results of painstaking and scholarly research been more palatably presented than in this latest contribution to Hardy lore. It is far more than just another book about Thomas Hardy. It is in essence the story of Rebekah Owen, a moving narrative even if it deals with a frustrated and singularly inept spinster. And if, when you have finished the book you are conscious, as I was, of having absorbed along the way an extraordinarily large amount of new light on Hardy, his habits, his household, his wives, his likes and dislikes, to say nothing of his books—both the novels and the poems—and of the Wessex which he made a vital part of England, you will have no sense of having been victimized by an unscrupulous educator. You will rather be left with the
THOMAS HARDY IN 1923
(at Queen’s College, Oxford, where he had been given an honorary fellowship, from a photograph taken on June 26, 1923)
THOMAS HARDY IN 1927
(seated in the armchair which is now in the Treasure Room of the Colby College Library, the gift of Mr. E. N. Sanders, of Parkstone, Dorset)
feeling that you have been treated to a first-rate book which has commanded your unflagging interest, and which you have closed with reluctance and appreciation.

The forms of sublimation of suppressed instincts in energetic unmarried women are many and various, but not often, I imagine, have they assumed so singular a pattern as in the life of Rebekah Owen. Born in comfortable circumstances, living a placid youth in New York City amid the conventions and reticences of a Victorian household, surrounded with the indici of quiet culture and apparently destined only to long days of unexciting gentility, the Lady from Madison Square became enamoured at the age of thirty with the writings and later with the person of Thomas Hardy. Her fondness rapidly blossomed into an obsession which apparently consumed most of her thinking and her energies over a period of fifty years until her death in 1939. She crossed the ocean several times, stayed for long periods in Dorchester and finally took up her permanent abode in England. A chart of her relations and frequent contacts with Hardy and his two wives over a period of nearly forty years would show an upward curve of demanding insistence and ineptitude on her part and a corresponding trend of irritation on his. Flattered at the outset by her obviously encyclopedic knowledge of his books and her ingenuous admiration for the author, Hardy became gradually bored by her one-track mind, indifferent to her adulation and finally irritated by her intrusions and endless requests. Rebekah asked much, but gave little. One suspects she had little to give. She could only continue her single-minded devotion to a man to whom devotion meant little, and as the years went on the process became decreasingly productive. When she presumed to be gently critical of Hardy's later work, the resentment of a tired and sensitive author was in no way to be balanced by a friendship already worn thin. The story ends in a lonesome hotel in Rome and a little-known graveyard thousands of miles
from Madison Square, and almost as far from the heart then buried in Dorset.

Dr. Weber suggests, but does not try very hard to prove, the stirrings of potential romance in the early contacts of Hardy and Rebekah. Certainly Hardy’s notes in *The Later Years* lend no support for such a possibility, and there is not one word of comment, good or bad, on the Owen sisters in the whole biographical account of Florence Dugdale Hardy. Only by Rebekah’s own record may they be identified as the persons referred to in the paragraphs about the first Mrs. Hardy’s final illness: “On the 25th two ladies called. . . . she did go down. The strain obliged her to retire immediately they had left. She never went downstairs again.” On the one hand fifty years of study and adoration; on the other, “yours truly, Thomas Hardy.” On the one hand the distinguished collection of books, albums, notes, letters and photographs amassed by Rebekah Owen over the period of a long life-time; on the other, “two ladies called.” A pitiful record from the standpoint of Rebekah. A revealing one to the student of the lonely genius who could write convincingly about women but who could never get close to them, who at the age of seventy-two married a young woman on-the-make, and years later wore mourning on the anniversary of the death of his first wife from whom he had received little but jealousy, suspicion and abuse. Rebekah’s files offer some help in solving this enigma, and Dr. Weber’s analysis and interpretation of this rich material is presented with order and clarity.

Poor “Betty” Owen had no awareness of her contribution to posterity. I doubt not that she would have felt that the story of her life would be a study in futility. She might have quoted Hardy himself to make the point:

*If I had done without it
None would have cared about it,
Or said: “One has refused it
Who might have meekly used it.”*
But all in all, she will not have lived in vain, if only because Carl Weber has written this book* about her.

A NOTE ON ONE OF THOMAS HARDY'S POEMS

By GEORGE W. SHERMAN
Missoula, Montana

It seems to me there is a noteworthy resemblance between Thomas Hardy's description of the school children of migratory agricultural laborers in his "Dorsetshire Labourer" essay (1879) and objects in Nature compared to school children in his agnostic poem "Nature's Questioning" (Wessex Poems, 1898).

One of the perennial tragedies in rural England was the uprooting of these children every spring and their dazed removal and reorientation in another school as a result of their parents' will-o-the-wisp existence on the land. It is as if some scene in Nature had recalled the children of the essay to Hardy, and he had projected them in the poem metaphorically as field and flock and pool and tree of the scene that had evoked their recollection. The silence and listlessness of the children have more in common with inanimate than with animate Nature, and the contrast between the children's transience and the permanence of these natural objects emphasizes the irony. When one remembers that the agricultural laborers Hardy observed as a boy had been cowed into passivity by soldiers and by commissions of assize for their rebellion against their poverty and low wages encouraged by the Speenhamland system of outdoor relief (1795-1834), the similarity becomes even more apparent. The children in the poem are described as "chastened" by the schoolmaster, who has "cowed them till their early zest was overborne."