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Reading The signs

In the same way that cuckoos harbinger spring, and robins, Christmas, the actions of sheep, slugs and toads indicate a thunderstorm is coming. I know this because Thomas Hardy told me. Since coming to live with Gabriel Oak in the emerald vale, I have stopped talking to live people and taken to communing with the dead. They have far more interesting things to say, and don't annoy you with reminders to tidy up the cloakroom.

Spotting toads and slugs, and then seeing sheep all huddled together is a sure sign, says Tom H in *Far From The Madding Crowd* that a storm is brewing – both metaphorically and physically. So when a toad popped out of the hosepipe yesterday, and I found three slugs in a jug I had left outside, I took it as an omen that bad news was on the horizon. I quickly went and checked the sheep - luckily they were strung out like clothes on a line. All day I was checking those sheep and at yea, at 7pm they all clustered together. The sky looked grey and intimidating, tinged with fire. The toad had disappeared but legions of slugs were hovering up our winter greens.

The time was clearly nigh. Batten down the hatches. Switch off the lights. Get away from those trees. I cocked an ear to see if I could hear a rumble – nothing. I put my palm out to see if anything landed on it. Not a tinkle.

I was starting to lose my faith in new Tom. Perhaps he's a lying bastard. Perhaps he says things for effect. Perhaps he doesn't know what he's talking about.

But then, out of nowhere came a searing crack. In fact it was the tumble dryer blowing a fuse and Tom L, who was reading the paper at the time, blamed it on me for stuffing too many things down the back of it. There were no lights. We had a row. They knew a thing or two the Old Masters.