

Jude the Obscure - by Thomas Hardy

Chapter 44

Part Sixth. Chapter II

Sue sat looking at the bare floor of the room, the house being little more than an old intramural cottage, and then she regarded the scene outside the uncontained window. At some distance opposite, the outer walls of Sarcophagus College-- silent, black, and windowless threw their four centuries of gloom, bigotry, and decay into the little room she occupied, shutting out the moonlight by night and the sun by day. The outlines of Rubric College also were discernible beyond the other, and the tower of a third farther off still. She thought of the strange operation of a simple-minded man's ruling passion, that it should have led Jude, who loved her and the children so tenderly, to place them here in this depressing purlieu, because he was still haunted by his dream. Even now he did not distinctly hear the freezing negative that those scholared walls had echoed to his desire.

The failure to find another lodging, and the lack of room in this house for his father, had made a deep impression on the boy-- a brooding undemonstrative horror seemed to have seized him. The silence was broken by his saying: "Mother, *what* shall we do to-morrow!"

"I don't know!" said Sue despondently. "I am afraid this will trouble your father."

"I wish Father was quite well, and there had been room for him! Then it wouldn't matter so much! Poor Father!"

"It wouldn't!"

"Can I do anything?"

"No! All is trouble, adversity, and suffering!"

"Father went away to give us children room, didn't he?"

"Partly."

"It would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?"

"It would almost, dear."

""Tis because of us children, too, isn't it, that you can't get a good lodging?"

"Well--people do object to children sometimes."

"Then if children make so much trouble, why do people have 'em?"

"Oh--because it is a law of nature."

"But we don't ask to be born?"

"No indeed."

"And what makes it worse with me is that you are not my real mother, and you needn't have had me unless you liked. I oughtn't to have come to 'ee--that's the real truth! I troubled 'em in Australia, and I trouble folk here. I wish I hadn't been born!"

"You couldn't help it, my dear."

"I think that whenever children be born that are not wanted they should be killed directly, before their souls come to 'em, and not allowed to grow big and walk about!"

Sue did not reply. She was doubtfully pondering how to treat this too reflective child.

She at last concluded that, so far as circumstances permitted, she would be honest and candid with one who entered into her difficulties like an aged friend.

"There is going to be another in our family soon," she hesitatingly remarked.

"How?"

"There is going to be another baby."

"What!" The boy jumped up wildly. "Oh God, Mother, you've never a-sent for another; and such trouble with what you've got!"

"Yes, I have, I am sorry to say!" murmured Sue, her eyes glistening with suspended tears.

The boy burst out weeping. "Oh you don't care, you don't care!" he cried in bitter reproach. "How ever could you, Mother, be so wicked and cruel as this, when you needn't have done it till we was better off, and Father well! To bring us all into *more* trouble! No room for us, and Father a-forced to go away, and we turned out to-morrow; and yet you be going to have another of us soon! ... 'Tis done o' purpose!--'tis--'tis!" He walked up and down sobbing.

"Y-you must forgive me, little Jude!" she pleaded, her bosom heaving now as much as the boy's. "I can't explain--I will when you are older. It does seem-- as if I had done it on purpose, now we are in these difficulties! I can't explain, dear! But it--is not quite on purpose--I can't help it!"

"Yes it is--it must be! For nobody would interfere with us, like that, unless you agreed! I won't forgive you, ever, ever! I'll never believe you care for me, or Father, or any of us any more!"

He got up, and went away into the closet adjoining her room, in which a bed had been spread on the floor. There she heard him say: "If we children was gone there'd be no trouble at all!"

"Don't think that, dear," she cried, rather peremptorily. "But go to sleep!"

The following morning she awoke at a little past six, and decided to get up and run across before breakfast to the inn which Jude had informed her to be his quarters, to tell him what

had happened before he went out. She arose softly, to avoid disturbing the children, who, as she knew, must be fatigued by their exertions of yesterday.

She found Jude at breakfast in the obscure tavern he had chosen as a counterpoise to the expense of her lodging: and she explained to him her homelessness. He had been so anxious about her all night, he said. Somehow, now it was morning, the request to leave the lodgings did not seem such a depressing incident as it had seemed the night before, nor did even her failure to find another place affect her so deeply as at first. Jude agreed with her that it would not be worth while to insist upon her right to stay a week, but to take immediate steps for removal.

"You must all come to this inn for a day or two," he said. "It is a rough place, and it will not be so nice for the children, but we shall have more time to look round. There are plenty of lodgings in the suburbs--in my old quarter of Beersheba. Have breakfast with me now you are here, my bird. You are sure you are well? There will be plenty of time to get back and prepare the children's meal before they wake. In fact, I'll go with you."

She joined Jude in a hasty meal, and in a quarter of an hour they started together, resolving to clear out from Sue's too respectable lodging immediately. On reaching the place and going upstairs she found that all was quiet in the children's room, and called to the landlady in timorous tones to please bring up the tea-kettle and something for their breakfast. This was perfunctorily done, and producing a couple of eggs which she had brought with her she put them into the boiling kettle, and summoned Jude to watch them for the youngsters, while she went to call them, it being now about half-past eight o'clock.

Jude stood bending over the kettle, with his watch in his hand, timing the eggs, so that his back was turned to the little inner chamber where the children lay. A shriek from Sue suddenly caused him to start round. He saw that the door of the room, or rather closet-- which had seemed to go heavily upon its hinges as she pushed it back-- was open, and that Sue had sunk to the floor just within it. Hastening forward to pick her up he turned his eyes to the little bed spread on the boards; no children were there. He looked in bewilderment round the room. At the back of the door were fixed two hooks for hanging garments, and from these the forms of the two youngest children were suspended, by a piece of box-cord round each of their necks, while from a nail a few yards off the body of little Jude was hanging in a similar manner. An overturned chair was near the elder boy, and his glazed eyes were slanted into the room; but those of the girl and the baby boy were closed.

Half-paralyzed by the strange and consummate horror of the scene he let Sue lie, cut the cords with his pocket-knife and threw the three children on the bed; but the feel of their bodies in the momentary handling seemed to say that they were dead. He caught up Sue, who was in fainting fits, and put her on the bed in the other room, after which he breathlessly summoned the landlady and ran out for a doctor.

When he got back Sue had come to herself, and the two helpless women, bending over the children in wild efforts to restore them, and the triplet of little corpses, formed a sight which overthrew his self-command. The nearest surgeon came in, but, as Jude had inferred, his presence was superfluous. The children were past saving, for though their bodies were still barely cold it was conjectured that they had been hanging more than an hour. The probability

held by the parents later on, when they were able to reason on the case, was that the elder boy, on waking, looked into the outer room for Sue, and, finding her absent, was thrown into a fit of aggravated despondency that the events and information of the evening before had induced in his morbid temperament. Moreover a piece of paper was found upon the floor, on which was written, in the boy's hand, with the bit of lead pencil that he carried:

Done because we are too menny.

At sight of this Sue's nerves utterly gave way, an awful conviction that her discourse with the boy had been the main cause of the tragedy, throwing her into a convulsive agony which knew no abatement. They carried her away against her wish to a room on the lower floor; and there she lay, her slight figure shaken with her gasps, and her eyes staring at the ceiling, the woman of the house vainly trying to soothe her.

They could hear from this chamber the people moving about above, and she implored to be allowed to go back, and was only kept from doing so by the assurance that, if there were any hope, her presence might do harm, and the reminder that it was necessary to take care of herself lest she should endanger a coming life. Her inquiries were incessant, and at last Jude came down and told her there was no hope. As soon as she could speak she informed him what she had said to the boy, and how she thought herself the cause of this.

"No," said Jude. "It was in his nature to do it. The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us-- boys of a sort unknown in the last generation--the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live. He's an advanced man, the doctor: but he can give no consolation to----"

Jude had kept back his own grief on account of her; but he now broke down; and this stimulated Sue to efforts of sympathy which in some degree distracted her from her poignant self-reproach. When everybody was gone, she was allowed to see the children.

The boy's face expressed the whole tale of their situation. On that little shape had converged all the inauspiciousness and shadow which had darkened the first union of Jude, and all the accidents, mistakes, fears, errors of the last. He was their nodal point, their focus, their expression in a single term. For the rashness of those parents he had groaned, for their ill assortment he had quaked, and for the misfortunes of these he had died.

When the house was silent, and they could do nothing but await the coroner's inquest, a subdued, large, low voice spread into the air of the room from behind the heavy walls at the back.

"What is it?" said Sue, her spasmodic breathing suspended.

"The organ of the college chapel. The organist practising I suppose. It's the anthem from the seventy-third Psalm; 'Truly God is loving unto Israel.'"

She sobbed again. "Oh, Oh my babies! They had done no harm! Why should they have been taken away, and not I!"

There was another stillness--broken at last by two persons in conversation somewhere without.

"They are talking about us, no doubt!" moaned Sue. "'We are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men!'"

Jude listened--"No--they are not talking of us," he said. "They are two clergymen of different views, arguing about the eastward position. Good God--the eastward position, and all creation groaning!"

Then another silence, till she was seized with another uncontrollable fit of grief. "There is something external to us which says, 'You shan't!' First it said, 'You shan't learn!' Then it said, 'You shan't labour!' Now it says, 'You shan't love!'"

He tried to soothe her by saying, "That's bitter of you, darling."

"But it's true!"

Thus they waited, and she went back again to her room. The baby's frock, shoes, and socks, which had been lying on a chair at the time of his death, she would not now have removed, though Jude would fain have got them out of her sight. But whenever he touched them she implored him to let them lie, and burst out almost savagely at the woman of the house when she also attempted to put them away.

Jude dreaded her dull apathetic silences almost more than her paroxysms. "Why don't you speak to me, Jude?" she cried out, after one of these. "Don't turn away from me! I can't *bear* the loneliness of being out of your looks!"

"There, dear; here I am," he said, putting his face close to hers.

"Yes.... Oh, my comrade, our perfect union--our two-in-oneness-- is now stained with blood!"

"Shadowed by death--that's all."

"Ah; but it was I who incited him really, though I didn't know I was doing it! I talked to the child as one should only talk to people of mature age. I said the world was against us, that it was better to be out of life than in it at this price; and he took it literally. And I told him I was going to have another child. It upset him. Oh how bitterly he upbraided me!"

"Why did you do it, Sue?"

"I can't tell. It was that I wanted to be truthful. I couldn't bear deceiving him as to the facts of life. And yet I wasn't truthful, for with a false delicacy I told him too obscurely.--Why was I half-wiser than my fellow-women? And not entirely wiser! Why didn't I tell him pleasant untruths, instead of half-realities? It was my want of self-control, so that I could neither conceal things nor reveal them!"

"Your plan might have been a good one for the majority of cases; only in our peculiar case it chanced to work badly perhaps. He must have known sooner or later."

"And I was just making my baby darling a new frock; and now I shall never see him in it, and never talk to him any more! ... My eyes are so swollen that I can scarcely see; and yet little more than a year ago I called myself happy! We went about loving each other too much--indulging ourselves to utter selfishness with each other! We said-- do you remember?--that we would make a virtue of joy. I said it was Nature's intention, Nature's law and *raison d'être* that we should be joyful in what instincts she afforded us-- instincts which civilization had taken upon itself to thwart. What dreadful things I said! And now Fate has given us this stab in the back for being such fools as to take Nature at her word!"

She sank into a quiet contemplation, till she said, "It is best, perhaps, that they should be gone.--Yes--I see it is! Better that they should be plucked fresh than stay to wither away miserably!"

"Yes," replied Jude. "Some say that the elders should rejoice when their children die in infancy."

"But they don't know! ... Oh my babies, my babies, could you be alive now! You may say the boy wished to be out of life, or he wouldn't have done it. It was not unreasonable for him to die: it was part of his incurably sad nature, poor little fellow! But then the others--my *own* children and yours!"

Again Sue looked at the hanging little frock and at the socks and shoes; and her figure quivered like a string. "I am a pitiable creature," she said, "good neither for earth nor heaven any more! I am driven out of my mind by things! What ought to be done?" She stared at Jude, and tightly held his hand.

"Nothing can be done," he replied. "Things are as they are, and will be brought to their destined issue."

She paused. "Yes! Who said that?" she asked heavily.

"It comes in the chorus of the *Agamemnon*. It has been in my mind continually since this happened."

"My poor Jude--how you've missed everything!--you more than I, for I did get you! To think you should know that by your unassisted reading, and yet be in poverty and despair!"

After such momentary diversions her grief would return in a wave.

The jury duly came and viewed the bodies, the inquest was held; and next arrived the melancholy morning of the funeral. Accounts in the newspapers had brought to the spot curious idlers, who stood apparently counting the window-panes and the stones of the walls. Doubt of the real relations of the couple added zest to their curiosity. Sue had declared that she would follow the two little ones to the grave, but at the last moment she gave way, and the coffins were quietly carried out of the house while she was lying down. Jude got into the

vehicle, and it drove away, much to the relief of the landlord, who now had only Sue and her luggage remaining on his hands, which he hoped to be also clear of later on in the day, and so to have freed his house from the exasperating notoriety it had acquired during the week through his wife's unlucky admission of these strangers. In the afternoon he privately consulted with the owner of the house, and they agreed that if any objection to it arose from the tragedy which had occurred there they would try to get its number changed.

When Jude had seen the two little boxes--one containing little Jude, and the other the two smallest--deposited in the earth he hastened back to Sue, who was still in her room, and he therefore did not disturb her just then. Feeling anxious, however, he went again about four o'clock. The woman thought she was still lying down, but returned to him to say that she was not in her bedroom after all. Her hat and jacket, too, were missing: she had gone out. Jude hurried off to the public house where he was sleeping. She had not been there. Then bethinking himself of possibilities he went along the road to the cemetery, which he entered, and crossed to where the interments had recently taken place. The idlers who had followed to the spot by reason of the tragedy were all gone now. A man with a shovel in his hands was attempting to earth in the common grave of the three children, but his arm was held back by an expostulating woman who stood in the half-filled hole. It was Sue, whose coloured clothing, which she had never thought of changing for the mourning he had bought, suggested to the eye a deeper grief than the conventional garb of bereavement could express.

"He's filling them in, and he shan't till I've seen my little ones again!" she cried wildly when she saw Jude. "I want to see them once more. Oh Jude-- please Jude--I want to see them! I didn't know you would let them be taken away while I was asleep! You said perhaps I should see them once more before they were screwed down; and then you didn't, but took them away! Oh Jude, you are cruel to me too!"

"She's been wanting me to dig out the grave again, and let her get to the coffins," said the man with the spade. "She ought to be took home, by the look o' her. She is hardly responsible, poor thing, seemingly. Can't dig 'em up again now, ma'am. Do ye go home with your husband, and take it quiet, and thank God that there'll be another soon to swage yer grief."

But Sue kept asking piteously: "Can't I see them once more--just once! Can't I? Only just one little minute, Jude? It would not take long! And I should be so glad, Jude! I will be so good, and not disobey you ever any more, Jude, if you will let me? I would go home quietly afterwards, and not want to see them any more! Can't I? Why can't I?"

Thus she went on. Jude was thrown into such acute sorrow that he almost felt he would try to get the man to accede. But it could do no good, and might make her still worse; and he saw that it was imperative to get her home at once. So he coaxed her, and whispered tenderly, and put his arm round her to support her; till she helplessly gave in, and was induced to leave the cemetery.

He wished to obtain a fly to take her back in, but economy being so imperative she deprecated his doing so, and they walked along slowly, Jude in black crape, she in brown and red clothing. They were to have gone to a new lodging that afternoon, but Jude saw that it was not practicable, and in course of time they entered the now hated house. Sue was at once got to bed, and the doctor sent for.

Jude waited all the evening downstairs. At a very late hour the intelligence was brought to him that a child had been prematurely born, and that it, like the others, was a corpse.