

MY CHAT WITH THOMAS HARDY

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AN October day in the year 1925, just such a one as the great novelist described in his books, it was my privilege to call upon Thomas Hardy at his charming home, Max Gate, situated on the outskirts of Dorchester, the ancient municipal borough of Dorsetshire. Then a grand old fellow of eighty-five, Hardy had the agility of a man at least twenty years his junior, and although he was severely bald, the hair that rimmed his head was not altogether grey. With brown eyes unusually keen and piercing, he spoke in a highly cultivated voice that immediately attracted one. It may be added that he was small and slight in stature, and had a somewhat scraggly moustache. There was very definitely an air of distinction about him, that would have made him noticeable in any crowd.

"You know I had a very interesting encounter many years ago", commenced Hardy as we both took seats in an exceedingly comfortable, book-lined living-room. "I was on a walking-tour with a friend, and we stopped for supper in a little inn where Isaak Walton is supposed to have spent the night and which he described in the *Compleat Angler*. While we were sitting before the blazing hearth awaiting the summons to supper, there entered a striking-looking man with a great mass of snow-white hair and a peculiar drawlish manner of speaking. We began chatting, and when it turned out that he was an American, I asked him some questions about the Mississippi river, as only the week before I had finished rereading *Huckleberry Finn*. I told the book's creator—for it turned out to be Mark—that, after reading his extraordinarily vivid pages, I knew the Mississippi almost as well as the Thames. Mark recalled having read *Under the Greenwood Tree* aloud to his wife. He characterized as "altogether unfounded and untrue" the report of his disliking my work and professing never to have read it.

"We found we had a number of friends in common, such as Browning, Dr. John Brown of Edinburgh, Andrew Lang, Thomas Huxley and Anthony Trollope. Mark spoke in such a fascinating, even drawl that I felt I could have listened to him forever. I feel that Mark Twain did more than any other man to make plain people in England understand plain people in Amer-

ica. That alone was a big work, and he did it by the way: without setting out to do it.

“Speaking of *Huck Finn* reminds me of my own boyhood. In Dorchester, where I was brought up, I was the only youth able to write. So the other village lads and maidens fell into the habit of waylaying me, and begging me to set down their correspondence. Delighted to be able to help out, I soon became the village amanuensis. The letters I wrote out for the most part were love letters, and it proved a rare opportunity to study human nature under the stress of emotion and circumstance. The knowledge of the human heart that I thus acquired was of inestimable value when I commenced my fiction writing.

“I will never forget,” continued Hardy, after handing me a fragrant cup of tea, “when we had a new clergyman at the Dorchester church. A very nervous man, he was proceeding in a humdrum way fiddling his manuscript when all of a sudden half the congregation jumped up and rushed out. Never in my whole life have I seen such a surprised and startled man. He evidently concluded that he had all unwittingly propounded some doctrine at which his congregation had taken mortal offence. He drew his sermon to a conclusion in a cold sweat. Only afterwards did he learn that the men were volunteer firemen, and that they had rushed out to attend a fire!

“I also read Fenimore Cooper as a boy. *The Last of the Mohicans* was my favorite, and next to that *The Deerslayer*. Writers before Cooper had either maligned or sentimentalized the Red Indian. Cooper’s dark aborigines, crafty, noble, eloquent, superseded all others, actual or imagined as the classic members of their race—at least for the English reader. Cooper was possessed of remarkable narrative and descriptive powers, and could occasionally delineate character, but most important of all, he had the merit of opening up an entirely new field and giving expression to the spirit of the New World.”

When I asked Hardy if he read any of Washington Irving, he said,

“Only the *Sketch Book*, which served as an excellent foil to Cooper’s robustness. To my mind, the ‘Legend of Sleepy Hollow’ is the best thing of its kind ever done. Irving here does with words what the old Dutch masters did with oils. I have lately been rereading the poetry of William Barnes, whose outlook upon life reminds me somewhat of Irving’s. As you are perhaps aware, Barnes lived at Dorchester from 1801 to 1886, and his *Poems of Rural Life* were written entirely in the Dorsetshire

dialect. In 1908 I had the pleasure of bringing out his *Selected Poems* with a preface and glossarial notes. Just this year *Twenty Poems in Common English* appeared with an excellent introduction written by my friend John Drinkwater. I have always been grateful to Drinkwater for introducing me to American history through his *Abraham Lincoln*. I imagine there are few Englishmen who can see, or even merely read, that engrossing drama without becoming genuinely interested in the Civil War period. It led me on to Bierce's powerful 'Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' and other pieces."

"A recent magazine article stated," I commented, "that George Meredith knew and admired Barnes."

"I am aware of that," returned my host, "but speaking of Meredith makes me think of that delightful quatrain of his which might well be used as the text for many a writer of fiction:

I've studied men from topsy-turvy,
Close, and I reckon, rather true.
Some are fine: some, right scurvy;
Most, a dash between the two.

When it was brought out that John Galsworthy was another author very fond of Barnes's poems, Hardy said,

"Galsworthy has long been a devoted friend. One of his books that I like the most was *Beyond* that appeared in 1917. It has always been my opinion that this work carries on the reader with more momentum than most of his works, excellent as they all are. Despite the fact of it being a story of artificial modern life which I do not care for as a rule, I found the work exceedingly stimulating. But as to the author's bringing on the catastrophe by cutting the knot and killing off the lover by an inconsequent accident, I am of two minds. Often my wife reads aloud Galsworthy's novels, which are about the only ones that I will listen to straight through. Before many pages of most of the others, I find myself exclaiming, "That's enough of that; now read something else, dear".

After draining his cup of tea and filling another, Hardy continued:

"I have always felt a bit proud of the fact that it was I who was the first to suggest to Galsworthy that he put a genealogical tree in front of some of his novels, so that the reader could the more readily understand the relationship of the various characters. It's odd the inconsequential things that one remembers! I recall verbatim what I wrote Galsworthy upon receipt of an inscribed copy of *The White Monkey*:

"I have heard of a Green Dragon [there is one a mile from here], I have heard of Red Lion [one five miles off], and of a Black Bear [eight miles away], but I have never before met with a White Monkey!"

"Away back in 1911, Galsworthy had a plan whereby he hoped to have the recently invented aeroplane banned from modern warfare. He wrote to me, Shaw, Chesterton, Arnold Bennett, and other men of letters, suggesting the signing of a Memorial. I answered that I entirely agreed that if those machines were really effectively constructed [which they gave rather slight indication of being at the time] they would make war worse than ever before. But I wondered if the appeal didn't tacitly admit that war in other ways would have to go on. At that time I was an extremist about this, and blissfully considered it an insanity that people of the twentieth century should suppose force to be a moral argument! I felt that some words about 'adding a new hideousness to the present hideousness of war' might remove my objection. But even at that early day I despaired of man making much progress towards further civilization. These words of Samuel Butler the Elder often occur to me:

The only difference is that then
They slaughtered only beasts, now men.
For then to sacrifice a bullock,
Or, now and then, a child to Moloch,
They count a vile abomination,
But not to slaughter a whole nation."

"All America vastly rejoiced when you received the Order of Merit, Mr Hardy. Many an American newspaper expressed keen regret that we did not have some similar honor with which to reward our distinguished men of letters."

"Well don't forget," returned Hardy, "that you have various prizes of your own which somewhat take the place of the Order. But I have never put much faith in the efficacy of literary prizes and official rewards. No literary prize can give an author anywhere near the same satisfaction and pleasure as seeing his first book in print. Never will I forget the thrill that ran through me from head to foot when I held my first copy of *Desperate Remedies* in my hand! I was in a veritable seventh heaven for weeks thereafter. As for the Order of Merit and the innumerable literary citations and honorary degrees that have come my way, I felt infinitely more honored when I was made Justice of the

Peace of my local district. That was a recognition that led somewhere and gave me a chance to do some good!:"

"I recently had dinner with an admirer of yours, Mr. Hardy." I remarked: "Prof. A. E. Housman of Trinity College, Cambridge. When I told him that his name is often bracketted with yours in American histories of English literature, he laughed and said,

"I fear your American professors often compare us for no better reason than that both our names begin with an H.' "

At this Hardy commented,

"Well, I would count it an honor to be compared to the author of those immortal lines,

Oh many a peer of England brews
Livelier liquor than the Muse,
And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.

"When *A Shropshire Lad* appeared away back in 1896, I sat up all night reading the book, and predicted without the slightest hesitation that it would be a permanent addition to English literature. One of my favorites of his pieces is the superb 'To an Athlete Dying Young'. You recall the lines:

To-day, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high, we bring you home,
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsmen of a stiller town.

"And you recall also that much quoted quatrain,

When I was one and twenty
I heard a wise man say:
Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away."

"Your admiration of Housman is not at all unilateral," I told Hardy. "Housman himself told me that one of his favorite novels was *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which suggested to him some sweet orderly interior by Jan Vermeer or De Hoeh. I recall that Housman referred to your poem that describes the pew in Casterbridge Church, on which are carved the initials of three captains who went to the wars, only one of whom returned. For a moment the survivor felt triumphant in the thought that only he survived.

Yet saw he something in the lives
Of those who ceased to live
That sphered them with a majesty
Which living failed to give.

"And Housman also quoted from memory the following lines from your exquisite piece, 'To Meet or Otherwise':

Whether to sally and see thee, girl of my dreams,
Or whether to stay
And see thee not! How vast the difference seems
Of Yea from Nay
Just now. Yet this same sun will slant its beams
At no far day
On both our mounds, and then what will the difference weigh?

"Were you personally acquainted with Robert Louis Stevenson." I asked my host, who answered:

"If I recall correctly, it was in June, 1885, that Stevenson and his wife visited Dorchester, staying a few days at the King's Arms Hotel. They kindly called upon me, and then I returned the call. There was vague talk of further meetings which never took place, because shortly thereafter Stevenson had a severe hemorrhage attack. I understood, from mutual friends, however, that when *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* appeared in 1891, he did not care especially for it."

"That may be true, Mr. Hardy," I returned, "but I remember well that his wife once told me that when they made their last trip from Tilbury to New York on the steamship *Ludgate Hill* the only novel that Stevenson took in his baggage was *The Woodlanders* which engrossed him for many an hour during the sea-trip. He felt that you never excelled your nature descriptions presented in that book; and many of the descriptions he read aloud to Mrs. Stevenson out on deck."

When I asked Hardy if it were true that he had almost died as an infant, he said,

"When I was born, the doctor actually thought that I was dead, and dropped me into a basket as something fit only for burial. You can readily imagine how the infant's parents felt. But a good woman who was present—I have always been most grateful to her—slipped forward to make absolutely certain that I was dead, and much to everybody's surprise she found me still breathing! When I told the incident to Barrie, he remarked in his whimsical way:

"What interests me most is this. Were you shamming in the basket, Hardy? Knowing what we do of you now, we may

think that at first glimpse of life you liked it so little you lay still as a mcuse, but'—Barrie kindly concluded—'there never was any more faltering!'

"Do you intend writing an autobiography, Mr. Hardy, as so many of your colleagues are doing."

After replying in the negative, Hardy hesitated a few moments, looked at me rather hard, and then said:

"I will tell you something in confidence, if you promise not to repeat it until after my passing—an event which cannot be so very long delayed, as I am now eighty-five."

Upon my promising to respect his wishes scrupulously, the novelist continued,

"Well, I intend to write my autobiography through my good wife. Each day I slant my memoirs, as though my wife were writing them herself. After she has copied the day's stint on the typewriter, we hold a discussion, and she makes invaluable suggestions which are almost always immediately incorporated in the text. Then my original manuscript is given to the flames. Thus is insured absolute accuracy. My idea, of course, is to have the work appear after my death as a biography of myself written by my wife. I have always had a very decided distaste for the advertising usually attendant upon the appearance of posthumous autobiographies. Some of my friends tell me that I am essentially a very shy man. If a man can be said to be shy about what happens to his name after his death, perhaps this accounts for my attitude. Edgar Allan Poe in one of his essays also expressed disapproval of the posthumous autobiography."

"Do you like Poe, Mr. Hardy."

"Yes, I have always been fond of the American. I like especially *The House of Usher*, that cryptogram story *The Gold Beetle*, and *The Rue Morgue Murders*. Poe is often accused of having a penchant for horror just for its own sake, such as bringing in the Rue Morgue ape. It has always been my conviction that Walter Scott's *Count Robert of Paris* not only gave Poe his vicious ourang-outang, but indicates beyond reasonable doubt Poe was not drawn by any personal abnormality and love of mere horror. But I do not mean to deny that Poe often had first-hand knowledge of the passions and terrors he wrote about, and was at least sometimes near the thin edge of madness—the victim of some unfortunate obsessions?"

"Did Poe influence your work."

"Yes, without hesitation I say that Poe has influenced my work, as have also the powerful novels of Herman Melville whom

Edward Fitzgerald first called to my attention. I think his 'Benito Cereno' is one of the world's great short stories.

"It seems to me that Poe was actuated by one predominant ambition that made everything else subsidiary to it. He wanted to become the editor-owner of an influential journal of national reputation. This is shown in his effective work as critic on a succession of Richmond, New York, and Philadelphia papers; it is plainly evident in his passionate desire to win the wide reputation that the editor of such a magazine should bring to it; it is revealed in his deliberate selection of ways and kinds of writing, and in his remarks on their success or failure; and it is capped by the hope that ended only with his life, of securing a generous financial patron.

"Of course, I do not contend that this ambition—large as it did bulk—explains everything in Poe's life, but it does make clear many things that have been rather ridiculously accounted for by various critics. After all, is not the desire to own and edit your own magazine a very creditable ambition, and one that no author need feel ashamed of? Why is it that so many critics are never satisfied until they have discovered fantastic reasons for everything a writer does?"

So I left Max Gate feeling that, having met Hardy personally, I would thereafter be in a better position to appreciate his novels and poetry. Sir Walter Bagehot somewhere states that an author does not keep a tame steam-engine in his backyard to do his writing, but he does it HIMSELF. So knowing the man we are in a better position to appraise his work.

And Hardy was a man eminently worth knowing—for although I have always felt that his philosophy gravely erred in conveying the impression that such characters as Tess and Jude are in real life the rule rather than the exception, I have long entertained a profound regard for Hardy's tireless energy, superb craftsmanship, and rugged sincerity.