



FORTUNA RULES OUR LIVES

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I have spent many days trying to find the right book. I tried to avoid work-related texts (philosophy, politics, etc.) and came up with a work that may not be well known but has left a deep impression on me (actually I re-read it a short while ago). It is Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure. Why this book? It is one of the saddest tragedies in English literature. The hero is a simple peasant who aspires to be a scholar. He studies the classics with devotion, hoping to enter a prestigious institution of learning in order to become a teacher himself. However, social as well as personal obstacles (romantic involvements) stand in his way. He spends his time as a mason, repairing churches and studying, until he loses confidence in his ability to achieve his goal. In the end, life defeats him, and he dies a broken man.

One of my questions reading Plato's Republic was: "What if a lower-class individual shows the willingness and ability to join the ranks of philosophers?" This question was important for me because I felt that I was such a lucky individual. I am grateful for my good luck, but I wonder how many young people who found themselves in the same situation as me were left behind. How many rose above their social status, and how many survived the wounds of passionate engagements? I cannot get away from the idea that it is luck – *Fortuna*, as Machiavelli calls it – that rules our lives. This is why Hardy's novel has left such an important mark on me.

JUDE THE OBSCURE

Thomas Hardy

FIRST PART – III.

Not a soul was visible on the hedgeless highway, or on either side of it, and the white road seemed to ascend and diminish till it joined the sky. At the very top it was crossed at right angles by a green 'ridgeway'—the Ickniel Street and original Roman road through the district. This ancient track ran east

and west for many miles, and down almost to within living memory had been used for driving flocks and herds to fairs and markets. But it was now neglected and overgrown.

The boy had never before strayed so far north as this from the nestling hamlet in which he had been deposited by the carrier from a railway station southward, one dark evening some few months earlier, and till now he had had no suspicion that such a wide, flat, low-lying country lay so near at hand, under the very verge of his upland world. The whole northern semicircle between east and west, to a distance of forty or fifty miles, spread itself before him; a bluer, moister atmosphere evidently than that he breathed up here.

Not far from the road stood a weather-beaten old barn of reddish-gray brick and tile. It was known as the Brown House by the people of the locality. He was about to pass it when he perceived a ladder against the eaves; and the reflection that the higher he got, the further he could see led Jude to stand and regard it. On the slope of the roof two men were repairing the tiling. He turned into the ridgeway, and drew towards the barn.

When he had wistfully watched the workmen for some time he took courage, and ascended the ladder till he stood beside them.

'Well, my lad; and what may you want up here?'

'I wanted to know where the city of Christminster is, if you please.'

'Christminster is out across there, by that clump. You can see it—at least, you can on a clear day. Ah, no, you can't now.'

The other tiler, glad of any kind of diversion from the monotony of his labour, had also turned to look towards the quarter designated. 'You can't often see it in weather like this,' he said. 'The time I've noticed it is when the sun is going down in a blaze of flame, and it looks like—I don't know what.'

'The Heavenly Jerusalem,' suggested the serious urchin.

'Ay—though I should never ha' thought of it myself... But I can't see no Christminster to-day.'

The boy strained his eyes also; yet neither could he see the far-off city. He descended from the barn, and abandoning Christminster with the versatility of his age he walked along the ridge-track, looking for any natural objects of interest that might lie in the banks thereabout. When he repassed the barn to go back to Marygreen he observed that the ladder was still in its place, but that the men had finished their day's work and gone away.

It was waning towards evening; there was still a faint mist, but it had cleared a little except in the damper tracts of subjacent country, and along the river-courses. He thought again of Christminster, and wished, since he had come two or three miles from his aunt's house on purpose, that he could have seen for once this attractive city of which he had been told. But even if he waited here it was hardly likely that the air would clear before night. Yet he was loth to leave the spot, for the northern expanse became lost to view on retreating towards the village only a few hundred yards.

He ascended the ladder to have one more look at the point the men had designated, and perched himself on the highest rung, overlying the tiles. He might not be able to come so far as this for many days. Perhaps if he prayed the wish to see Christminster might be forwarded. People said that, if you prayed things sometimes came to you, even though they sometimes did not. He had read in a tract that a man who had begun to build a church, and had no money to finish it, knelt down and prayed, and

the money came in by the next post. Another man tried the same experiment, and the money did not come; but he found afterwards that the breeches he knelt in were made by a wicked Jew. This was not discouraging, and turning on the ladder Jude knelt on the third rung, where, resting against those above it, he prayed that the mist might rise.

He then seated himself again, and waited. In the course of ten or fifteen minutes the thinning mist dissolved altogether from the northern horizon, as it had already done elsewhere, and about a quarter of an hour before the time of sunset the westward clouds parted, the sun's position being partially uncovered, and the beams streaming out in visible lines between two bars of slaty cloud. The boy immediately looked back in the old direction.

Some way within the limits of the stretch of landscape, points of light like the topaz gleamed. The air increased in transparency with the lapse of minutes, till the topaz points showed themselves to be the vanes, windows, wet roof slates, and other shining spots upon the spires, domes, freestone-work, and varied outlines that were faintly revealed. It was Christminster, unquestionably; either directly seen, or miraged in the peculiar atmosphere.

The spectator gazed on and on till the windows and vanes lost their shine, going out almost suddenly, like extinguished candles. The vague city became veiled in mist. Turning to the west, he saw that the sun had disappeared. The foreground of the scene had grown funereally dark, and near objects put on the hues and shapes of chimaeras.

He anxiously descended the ladder, and started homewards at a run, trying not to think of giants, Herne the Hunter, Apollyon lying in wait for Christian, or of the captain with the bleeding hole in his forehead and the corpses round him that remutined every night on board the bewitched ship. He knew that he had grown out of belief in these horrors, yet he was glad when he saw the church tower, and the lights in the cottage windows, even though this was not the home of his birth, and his great-aunt did not care much about him.

Inside and round about that old woman's 'shop' window, with its twenty-four little panes set in leadwork, the glass of some of them oxidized with age, so that you could hardly see the poor penny articles exhibited within, and forming part of a stock which a strong man could have carried, Jude had his outer being for some long tideless time. But his dreams were as gigantic as his surroundings were small.

Through the solid barrier of cold cretaceous upland to the northward he was always beholding a gorgeous city—the fancied place he had likened to the New Jerusalem, though there was perhaps more of the painter's imagination, and less of the diamond merchant's in his dreams thereof than in those of the Apocalyptic writer. And the city acquired a tangibility, a permanence, a hold on his life, mainly from the one nucleus of fact that the man for whose knowledge and purposes he had so much reverence was actually living there; not only so, but living among the more thoughtful and mentally shining ones therein.

In sad wet seasons, though he knew it must rain at Christminster too he could hardly believe that it rained so drearily there. Whenever he could get away from the confines of the hamlet for an hour or two, which was not often, he would steal off to the Brown House on the hill, and strain his eyes persistently; sometimes to be rewarded by the sight of a dome or spire, at other times by a little smoke, which in his estimate had some of the mysticism of incense.

Then the day came when it suddenly occurred to him that if he ascended to the point of view after dark, or possibly went a mile or two further, he would see the night lights of the city. It would be necessary to come back alone; but even that consideration did not deter him, for he could throw a little manliness into his mood, no doubt.

The project was duly executed. It was not late when he arrived at the place of outlook, only just after dusk; but a black north-east sky, accompanied by a wind from the same quarter, made the occasion dark enough. He was rewarded; but what he saw was not the lamps in rows as he had half expected. No individual light was visible, only a halo or glow-fog over-arching the place against the black heavens behind it, making the light and the city seem distant but a mile or so.

He set himself to wonder on the exact point in the glow where the schoolmaster might be; he who never communicated with anybody at Marygreen now, who was as if dead to them here. In the glow he seemed to see Phillotson promenading at ease, like one of the forms in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace.

He had heard that breezes travelled at the rate of ten miles an hour, and the fact now came into his mind. He parted his lips as he faced the north-east, and drew in the wind as if it were a sweet liquor.

'You,' he said, addressing the breeze caressingly, 'were in Christminster city between one and two hours ago: floating along the streets, pulling round the weather-cocks, touching Mr. Phillotson's face, being breathed by him; and now you are here, breathed by me; you, the very same.'

Suddenly there came along this wind something towards him; a message from the place—from some soul residing there, it seemed. Surely it was the sound of bells, the voice of the city; faint and musical, calling to him, 'We are happy here.'

He had become entirely lost to his bodily situation during this mental leap, and only got back to it by a rough recalling. A few yards below the brow of the hill on which he paused a team of horses made its appearance, having reached the place by dint of half an hour's serpentine progress from the bottom of the immense declivity. They had a load of coals behind them, a fuel that could only be got into the upland by this particular route. They were accompanied by a carter, a second man, and a boy, who now kicked a large stone behind one of the wheels, and allowed the panting animals to have a long rest, while those in charge took a flagon off the load and indulged in a drink round.

They were elderly men, and had genial voices. Jude addressed them, inquiring if they had come from Christminster. 'Heaven forbid, with this load!' said they.

'The place I mean is that one yonder.' He was getting so romantically attached to Christminster that, like a young lover alluding to his mistress, he felt bashful at mentioning its name again. He pointed to the light in the sky—hardly perceptible to their older eyes.

'Yes. There do seem a spot a bit brighter in the nor'-east than elsewhere, though I shouldn't ha' noticed it myself; and no doubt it med be Christminster.'

Here a little book of tales, which Jude had tucked up under his arm, having brought them to read on his way hither before it grew dark, slipped and fell into the road. The carter eyed him while he picked it up and straightened the leaves.

'Ah, young man,' he observed, 'you'd have to get your head screwed on t'other way before you could read what they read there.'

'Why?' asked the boy.

'O—they never look at anything that folks like we can understand,' the carter continued, by way of passing the time. 'On'y foreign tongues used in the days of the Tower

of Babel, when no two families spoke alike. They read that sort of thing as fast as a night-hawk will whirl. 'Tis all learning there; nothing but learning, except religion. And that's learning too, for I never could understand it. Yes; 'tis a serious-minded place. Not but there's wenches in the streets o' nights... You know, I suppose, that they raise pa'sons there like radishes in a bed? And though it do take—how many years, Bob?—five years to turn a lirruring hobble-de-hoy chap into a solemn preaching man with no corrupt passions, they'll do it, if it can be done, and polish un off like the workmen they be, and turn un out wi' a long face and a long black coat and waistcoat, and a religious collar and hat, same as they used to wear in the Scriptures, so that his own mother wouldn't know un sometimes. There, 'tis their business, like anybody else's.'

'But how should you know—'

'Now don't you interrupt, my boy; never interrupt your senyers. Move the fore hoss aside, Bobby; here's som'at coming... You must mind that I be a-talking of the College life. 'Em lives on a lofty level; there's no gainsaying it, though I myself med not think much of 'em. As we be here in our bodies on this high ground, so be they in their minds—noble-minded men enough, no doubt—some on 'em—able to earn hundreds by thinking out loud. And some on 'em be strong young fellows that can earn a'most as much in silver cups. As for music, there's beautiful music everywhere in Christminster. You med be religious, or you med not, but you can't help striking in your homely note with the rest. And there's a street in the place—the main street—that ha'n't another like it in the world. I should think I did know a little about Christminster.'

By this time the horses had recovered breath, and bent to their collars again. Jude, throwing a last adoring look at the distant halo, turned and walked beside his remarkably well-informed friend, who had no objection to tell him as they moved on more yet of the city—its towers and halls and churches. The waggon turned into a cross-road, whereupon Jude thanked the carter warmly for his information, and said he only wished he could talk half as well about Christminster as he.

'Well, 'tis oonly what has come in my way,' said the carter unboastfully. 'I've never been there, no more than you; but I've picked up the knowledge here and there, and you be welcome to it. A-getting about the world as I do, and mixing with all classes of society, one can't help hearing of things. A friend o' mine, that used to clane the boots at the Crozier Hotel in Christminster when he was in his prime, why, I knowed un as well as my own brother in his later years.'

Jude continued his walk homeward alone, pondering so deeply that he forgot to feel timid. He suddenly grew older. It had been the yearning of his heart to find something to anchor on, to cling to; for some place which he could call admirable; should he find that place in this city if he could get there? Would it be a spot in which, without fear of farmers, or hindrance, or ridicule, he could watch and wait and set himself to some mighty undertaking like the men of old of whom he had heard? As the halo had been to his eyes when gazing at it a quarter of an hour earlier, so was the spot mentally to him as he pursued his dark way.

'It is a city of light,' he said to himself.

'The tree of knowledge grows there,' he added a few steps further on.

'It is a place that teachers of men spring from, and go to.'

'It is what you may call a castle, manned by scholarship and religion.'

After this figure he was silent a long while, till he added,

'It would just suit me.'