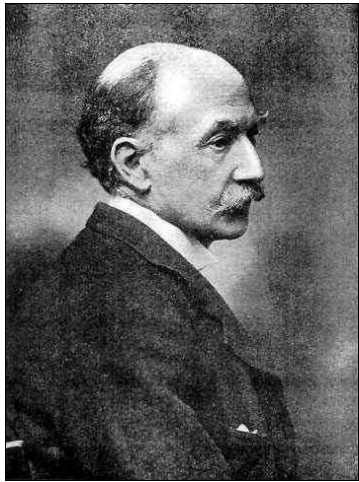


The Thieves Who Couldn't Help Sneezing

by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)



Thomas Hardy, the son of a stonemason, was born in Dorsetshire, England, in 1840. He trained as an architect and worked in London and Dorset for ten years. Hardy began his writing career as a novelist, publishing *Desperate Remedies* in 1871, and was soon successful enough to leave the field of architecture for writing. His novels *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which are considered literary classics today, received negative reviews upon publication and Hardy was criticized for being too pessimistic and preoccupied with sex.

Hardy's stories often take place in the "partly-real, partly-dream" county of Wessex (named after an Anglo-Saxon kingdom which existed in the area), modeled on the real counties of

Berkshire, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Somerset and Wiltshire. In his stories the fictional placenames are based on real locations. For example the town of Casterbridge is based on the real town of Dorchester. His distinctive achievement is to have captured the cultural atmosphere of rural Wessex in the golden epoch that existed just before the impact of the railways and the industrial revolution was to change the English countryside for ever.

From 1898, Hardy concentrated on poetry, and published eight collections, including *Wessex Poems* (1898) and *Satires of Circumstance* (1912). Hardy's poetry explores a fatalist outlook against the dark, rugged landscape of his native Dorset. He rejected the Victorian belief in a benevolent God, and much of his poetry reads as a sardonic lament on the bleakness of the human condition. A traditionalist in technique, he nevertheless forged a highly original style, combining rough-hewn rhythms and colloquial diction with an extraordinary variety of meters and stanzaic forms. Thomas Hardy died in 1928.

Many years ago, when oak trees now past their prime were about as large as elderly gentlemen's walking sticks, there lived in Wessex a yeoman's son, whose name was Hubert. He was about fourteen years of age, and was as remarkable for his candor and lightness of heart as for his physical courage, of which, indeed, he was a little vain.

One cold Christmas Eve his father, having no other help at hand, sent him on an important errand to a small town several miles from home. He travelled on horseback, and was detained by the business till a late hour in the evening. At last, however, it was completed; he returned to the inn, the horse was saddled, and he started on his way. His journey homeward lay through the Vale of Blackmore, a fertile but somewhat lonely district, with heavy clay roads and crooked lanes. In those days, too, a great part of it was thickly wooded.

It must have been about nine o'clock when, riding along amid the over-hanging trees upon his stout-legged cob, Jerry, and singing a Christmas carol, to be in harmony with the season, Hubert fancied that he heard a noise among the boughs. This recalled to his mind that the spot he was traversing bore an evil name. Men had been waylaid there. He looked at Jerry, and wished he had been of any other color than light gray; for on this account the docile animal's form was visible even here in the dense shade. "What do I care?" he said aloud, after a few minutes of reflection. „Jerry's legs are too nimble to allow any highwayman to come near me.“

"Ha! ha! indeed," was said in a deep voice; and the next moment a man darted from the thicket on his right hand, another man from the thicket on his left hand, and another from a tree-trunk a few yards ahead. Hubert's bridle was seized, he was pulled from his horse, and, although he struck out with all his might, as a brave boy would naturally do, he was overpowered. His arms were tied behind him, his legs bound tightly together, and he was thrown into the ditch. The robbers, whose faces he could now dimly perceive to be artificially blackened, at once departed, leading off the horse.

As soon as Hubert had a little recovered himself, he found that by great exertion he was able to extricate his legs from the cord; but, in spite of every endeavor, his arms remained bound as fast as before. All, therefore, that he could do was to rise to his feet and proceed on his way with his arms behind him, and trust to chance for getting them unfastened. He knew that it would be impossible to reach home on foot that night, and in such a condition; but he walked on. Owing to the confusion which this attack caused in his brain, he lost his way, and would have been inclined to lie down and rest till morning among the dead leaves had he not known the danger of sleeping without wrappers in a frost so severe.

So he wandered further onwards, his arms wrung and numbed by the cord which pinioned him, and his heart aching for the loss of poor Jerry, who never had been known to kick, or bite, or show a single vicious habit. He was not a little glad when he discerned through the trees a distant light. Towards this he made his way, and presently found himself in front of a large mansion with flanking wings, gables, and towers, the battlements and chimneys showing their shapes against the stars.

All was silent; but the door stood wide open, it being from this door that the light shone which had attracted him. On entering he found himself in a vast apartment arranged as a dining-hall, and brilliantly illuminated. The walls were covered with a great deal of dark wainscoting, formed into moulded panels, carvings, closet-doors, and the usual fittings of a house of that kind. But what drew his attention most was the large table in the midst of the hall, upon which was spread a sumptuous supper, as yet untouched. Chairs were placed around, and it appeared as if something had occurred to interrupt the meal just at the time when all were ready to begin.

Even had Hubert been so inclined, he could not have eaten in his helpless state, unless by dipping his mouth into the dishes, like a pig or cow. He wished first to obtain assistance; and was about to

penetrate further into the house for that purpose when he heard hasty footsteps in the porch and the words, „Be quick!“ uttered in the deep voice which had reached him when he was dragged from the horse. There was only just time for him to dart under the table before three men entered the dining-hall. Peeping from beneath the hanging edges of the tablecloth, he perceived that their faces, too, were blackened, which at once removed any remaining doubts he may have felt that these were the same thieves.

“Now, then,” said the first--the man with the deep voice--“let us hide ourselves. They will all be back again in a minute. That was a good trick to get them out of the house--eh?”

“Yes. You well imitated the cries of a man in distress,” said the second.

“Excellently,” said the third.

“But they will soon find out that it was a false alarm. Come, where shall we hide? It must be some place we can stay in for two or three hours, till all are in bed and asleep. Ah! I have it. Come this way! I have learnt that the further closet is not opened once in a twelve-month; it will serve our purpose exactly.”

The speaker advanced into a corridor which led from the hall. Creeping a little farther forward, Hubert could discern that the closet stood at the end, facing the dining-hall. The thieves entered it, and closed the door. Hardly breathing, Hubert glided forward, to learn a little more of their intention, if possible; and, coming close, he could hear the robbers whispering about the different rooms where the jewels, plate, and other valuables of the house were kept, which they plainly meant to steal.

They had not been long in hiding when a gay chattering of ladies and gentlemen was audible on the terrace without. Hubert felt that it would not do to be caught prowling about the house, unless he wished to be taken for a robber himself; and he slipped softly back to the hall, out the door, and stood in a dark corner of the porch, where

he could see everything without being himself seen. In a moment or two a whole troop of personages came gliding past him into the house. There were an elderly gentleman and lady, eight or nine young ladies, as many young men, besides half-a-dozen menservants and maids. The mansion had apparently been quite emptied of its occupants.

“Now, children and young people, we will resume our meal,” said the old gentleman. “What the noise could have been I cannot understand. I never felt so certain in my life that there was a person being murdered outside my door.”

Then the ladies began saying how frightened they had been, and how they had expected an adventure, and how it had ended in nothing at all.

“Wait a while,” said Hubert to himself. “You’ll have adventure enough by-and-by, ladies.”

It appeared that the young men and women were married sons and daughters of the old couple, who had come that day to spend Christmas with their parents.

The door was then closed, Hubert being left outside in the porch. He thought this a proper moment for asking their assistance; and, since he was unable to knock with his hands, began boldly to kick the door. “Hullo! What disturbance are you making here?” said a footman who opened it; and, seizing Hubert by the shoulder, he pulled him into the dining-hall. „Here’s a strange boy I have found making a noise in the porch, Sir Simon.“

Everybody turned.

“Bring him forward,” said Sir Simon, the old gentleman before mentioned. „What were you doing there, my boy?“

“Why, his arms are tied! „, said one of the ladies.

“Poor fellow! „, said another.

Hubert at once began to explain that he had been waylaid on his journey home, robbed of his horse, and mercilessly left in this condition by the thieves.

“Only to think of it!“ exclaimed Sir Simon.

“That’s a likely story,“ said one of the gentlemen-guests, incredulously.

“Doubtful, hey?“ asked Sir Simon.

“Perhaps he’s a robber himself,“ suggested a lady.

“There is a curiously wild, wicked look about him, certainly, now that I examine him closely,“ said the old mother.

Hubert blushed with shame; and, instead of continuing his story, and relating that robbers were concealed in the house, he doggedly held his tongue, and half resolved to let them find out their danger for themselves.

“Well, untie him,“ said Sir Simon. „Come, since it is Christmas Eve, we’ll treat him well. Here, my lad; sit down in that empty seat at the bottom of the table, and make as good a meal as you can. When you have had your fill we will listen to more particulars of your story. „ The feast then proceeded; and Hubert, now at liberty, was not at all sorry to join in. The more they ate and drank the merrier did the company become; the wine flowed freely, the logs flared up the chimney, the ladies laughed at the gentlemen’s stories; in short, all went as noisily and as happily as a Christmas gathering in old times possibly could do.

Hubert, in spite of his hurt feelings at their doubts of his honesty, could not help being warmed both in mind and in body by the good cheer, the scene, and the example of hilarity set by his neighbors. At last he laughed as heartily at their stories and repartees as the old Baronet, Sir Simon, himself. When the meal was almost over one of the sons, who had drunk a little too much wine, after the manner of men in that century, said to Hubert, “Well, my boy, how are you? Can you take a pinch of snuff?“ He held out one of the snuff-boxes which were then becoming common among young and old throughout the country.

“Thank you,“ said Hubert, accepting a pinch.

“Tell the ladies who you are, what you are made of, and what you can do,” the young man continued, slapping Hubert upon the shoulder.

“Certainly,” said our hero, drawing himself up, and thinking it best to put a bold face on the matter. “I am a traveling magician. „

“Indeed! „

“What shall we hear next?“

“Can you call up spirits from the vasty deep, young wizard?“

“I can conjure up a tempest in a cupboard,” Hubert replied.

“Ha-ha!“ said the old Baronet, pleasantly rubbing his hands. “We must see this performance. Girls, don’t go away: here’s something to be seen.“

“Not dangerous, I hope?“ said the old lady.

Hubert rose from the table. „Hand me your snuff-box, please,” he said to the young man who had made free with him. “And now,” he continued, „without the least noise, follow me. If any of you speak it will break the spell.“

They promised obedience. He entered the corridor, and, taking off his shoes, went on tiptoe to the closet door, the guests advancing in a silent group at a little distance behind him. Hubert next placed a stool in front of the door, and, by standing upon it, was tall enough to reach to the top. He then, just as noiselessly, poured all the snuff from the box along the upper edge of the door, and, with a few short puffs of breath, blew the snuff through the chink into the interior of the closet. He held up his finger to the assembly, that they might be silent.

“Dear me, what’s that?“ said the old lady, after a minute or two had elapsed.

A suppressed sneeze had come from inside the closet.

Hubert held up his finger again.

“How very singular,” whispered Sir Simon. “This is most interesting.“

Hubert took advantage of the moment to gently slide the bolt of the closet door into its place. “More snuff,” he said, calmly.

“More snuff,” said Sir Simon. Two or three gentlemen passed their boxes, and the contents were blown in at the top of the closet.

Another sneeze, not quite so well suppressed as the first, was heard: then another, which seemed to say that it would not be suppressed under any circumstances whatever. At length there arose a perfect storm of sneezes.

“Excellent, excellent for one so young!“ said Sir Simon. „I am much interested in this trick of throwing the voice--called, I believe, ventriloquism.“

“More snuff,” said Hubert.

“More snuff,” said Sir Simon. Sir Simon’s man brought a large jar of the best scented Scotch.

Hubert once more charged the upper chink of the closet, and blew the snuff into the interior, as before. Again he charged, and again, emptying the whole contents of the jar. The tumult of sneezes became really extraordinary to listen to--there was no cessation. It was like wind, rain, and sea battling in a hurricane.

“I believe there are men inside, and that it is no trick at all!“ exclaimed Sir Simon, the truth flashing on him.

“There are,” said Hubert. „They are come to rob the house; and they are the same who stole my horse.“

The sneezes changed to spasmodic groans. One of the thieves, hearing Hubert’s voice, cried, “Oh! mercy! mercy! let us out of this!“

“Where’s my horse?“ said Hubert.

“Tied to the tree in the hollow behind Short’s Gibbet. Mercy! mercy! let us out, or we shall die of suffocation!“

All the Christmas guests now perceived that this was no longer sport, but serious earnest. Guns and cudgels were procured; all the men-servants were called in, and arranged in position outside the closet.

At a signal Hubert withdrew the bolt, and stood on the defensive. But the three robbers, far from attacking them, were found crouching in the corner, gasping for breath. They made no resistance; and, being pinioned, were placed in an outhouse till the morning.

Hubert now gave the remainder of his story to the assembled company, and was profusely thanked for the services he had rendered. Sir Simon pressed him to stay over the night, and accept the use of the best bedroom the house afforded, which had been occupied by Queen Elizabeth and King Charles successively when on their visits to this part of the country. But Hubert declined, being anxious to find his horse Jerry, and to test the truth of the robbers' statements concerning him.

Several of the guests accompanied Hubert to the spot behind the gibbet, alluded to by the thieves as where Jerry was hidden. When they reached the knoll and looked over, behold! there the horse stood, uninjured, and quite unconcerned. At sight of Hubert he neighed joyfully; and nothing could exceed Hubert's gladness at finding him. He mounted, wished his friends "Good-night!" and cantered off in the direction they pointed out, reaching home safely about four o'clock in the morning.

"The Oxen" – A Poem for Christmas 1915

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.

"Now they are all on their knees,"

An elder said as we sat in a flock°

By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where

They dwelt in their strawy pen.

Nor did it occur to one of us there

To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few believe

In these years! Yet, I feel,

If someone said on Christmas Eve

"Come; see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton° by yonder comb°

cow-shed; valley

Our childhood used to know,"

I should go with him in the gloom,

Hoping it might be so.

Transcribed directly from the London Times for 24 December 1915, page 7.

The Oxen

This short poem refers to a superstition about Christmas, which the author recalls from his childhood. As a child, Hardy lived in rural Dorset, and this poem has its origins in the simple beliefs of country people. In writing about it, you should try to consider both the content (what the poet has to say) and his method (how he says it).

Note: *barton* is a West Country dialect word for a cow-shed (byre or shippen); *coomb*, which often appears in place names, is, like Welsh *cwm*, a word for a valley.

The questions below can be used for talking about the poem, or can be used as prompts for a written response.

Introducing the poem

- Briefly introduce or outline the argument of the poem: what was the belief Hardy had, as a child, about what happens on Christmas Eve, and what is his attitude to it now?

Content - what is the poem about?

- Why is the poem called *The Oxen*? What do cattle have to do with Christmas traditionally?
- When the poet was a child, what superstition did he have about the oxen (cattle) on Christmas Eve? Which people encouraged him to believe this? How firmly did he and his friends hold this belief?
- Does the poet still have this belief? Explain why, in spite of his doubts, the poet is still willing to see if the superstition could be true?
- Is this poem, in your view, simply about one particular belief, or is it about a more general loss of religious faith?

The poet's method

- Comment on the picture given in the first stanza of the children listening to the elder. Why are they seen as a “flock” ?
- In what way did the children think of the cattle? Comment on the phrase “meek mild creatures”.
- What is suggested by Hardy's claim that it did not occur to any of them to doubt?
- Comment on the use of speech and colloquialism to suggest authenticity?
- Comment on the poet's use of short lines and simple ABAB rhyme scheme.
- How does the poet show the connection between the past and the present?
- Explain the relationship between the penultimate and the final stanzas or between doubt and hope in the poem.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) can write about nostalgia, but he does so without sentimentality. In his Christmas poem "The Oxen" he also writes directly, but with nuance. The legend that the beasts kneel at midnight on Christmas Eve is treated with dignity, as are the regional dialect terms "barton" (a farmyard) and "coomb" (a valley).

—Robert Pinsky

Notes on the argument of the poem

Use these to help you answer questions. They are only suggestions - make sure you can give your own ideas in your own words.

As a child Hardy was told that the oxen (cattle) in the barton (cowshed) would kneel at midnight on Christmas Eve. Cattle are shown in traditional paintings of Christmas and in crib scenes like those in churches. They are supposed (or believed) to know that Jesus is special (the Son of God) and kneel to show respect.

The person who said this was an "Elder". This person was probably really older, but the word suggests that he (or perhaps she) was wise. As children Hardy and his friends looked up to this person.

He firmly believed what he was told. He did not even think of doubting: "Nor did it occur to one of us there/To doubt they were kneeling then ". He and his friends imagined the scene: "We pictured the meek mild creatures".

Hardy had lost this belief when he wrote the poem. Now, he thinks, few people would believe the superstition about the oxen. He is thinking both that people are more sophisticated or sceptical (doubting) generally and that he, particularly, knows too much now.

We know that, in spite of his doubts, the poet is still willing to see if the superstition could be true. We know this because he says if someone suggested going to "see the oxen kneel ", he would go with this person "hoping it might be so " - hoping that the oxen would really be kneeling.

Hardy is probably writing about more than just giving up a childish idea of oxen that kneel to Jesus at Christmas. This idea is linked to his more general loss of belief in God or the Christian faith, and of there being any

meaning in life.

Hardy was famous as an atheist but his own writing tells us of how he spent many years looking for God and trying to find purpose in life.

In the first stanza (verse) Hardy describes the children listening to the elder. They are seen as a "flock ". Hardy may compare them to sheep for several reasons:

they are led by the elder to belief as sheep are led to grass by the shepherd;
they are innocent and trusting;

there are lots of them together;

Jesus calls Himself "the Good Shepherd" and describes His followers as "sheep".

The children imagined the cattle in the cowsheds which they knew well, but thought of them as kneeling.

The phrase "meek mild creatures "may remind us of hymns in which Jesus is called "meek and mild ". It also echoes descriptions of sheep in the bible, and William Blake's poem The Lamb.

Hardy's claim that it did not occur to any of them to doubt suggests that the children trusted the Elder completely.

Hardy includes direct speech (in speech marks or inverted commas) in the poem. This makes us believe he remembers the Elder's exact words, after all these years.

Later he writes what someone might say: "Come; see the oxen kneel ". He uses dialect (non-standard) words here: barton, yonder and coomb. These suggest real speech of country people, especially uneducated people in the past.

Barton is another name for a cowshed or byre.

Yonder means "over there ". It can work as an adjective, as in the poem, or an adverb ("Let us go yonder ").

Coomb (also spelled coombe or combe) means a valley. It appears in lots of places names, such as Ilfracombe. It is of Celtic origin. In Welsh it is cwm (as in the television soap opera Pobol y Cwm - "people of the valley").

The short lines and simple ABAB rhyme scheme make the poem very easy to understand in a literal sense. It is very simple but it is very deep. It is about something which happens to most people, something we may think about deeply.

The simple structure of the poem depends upon Hardy's moving between the past (when he believed) and the present (when he is sceptical). But he hopes that he might one day have reason to regain his childhood belief.

The penultimate (last but one) and the final stanzas show the relationship, which runs through the whole poem, between doubt (that the oxen kneeled or that there is a God and life has meaning) and hope (that "it might be so " - that the oxen might really kneel and that there might be a God or meaning in life) .



Pope Julius II Della Rovere commissioned 25 year old Raphael Sanzio in 1508 to paint the frescos in his four room apartment on the top floor. Three of the rooms were of modest dimensions, while the fourth one was considerably larger; with the completion of the work, the rooms became known as "The Raphael Stanze" . They comprise the Stanza della Segnatura, the Stanza of Heliodorus, the Stanza of the Borgo Fire and the Sala of Constantine. The Raphael Loggia consist of 13 arches forming a gallery 65 meters long and 4 meters wide. The construction was started by Bramante in 1512, under Pope Julius II and was completed by Raphael Sanzio under the reign of Leo X. The pictorial work was initiated in 1517. The 52 scenes on the ceilings of the loggia are still popularly referred as "The Raphael Bible".

The WESSEX of Thomas Hardy's Novels & Poems

Scale of Miles

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

