

THE THING ABOUT THE *TITANIC*

The Convergence of the Twain Thomas Hardy

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity
And the pride of life that planned her, stilly couches she.

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrud, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls - grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles blear and black and blind.

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?"

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

Prepared a sinister mate
For her - so gaily great -
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being, anon, twin halves of one august event,

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

A Bit of Lit Crit The poem overleaf expresses with skill Hardy's fatalistic view of the world. His is a common outlook; his poem offers no identification of "The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything" or "the Spinner of the Years"; but we have a haunting, vague feeling of a Power that is far from blind. There is nothing *accidental* about the foundering of the *Titanic*; it is

decreed by a supernal force whose motive is above our knowledge or control. Hardy seems to find a strange consolation in this agnostic belief ("Well:"): it freed him from the terror of pure atheism, and the awful thought that good and bad alike are a matter of sheer chance, yet it also seems to absolve him from his failure to understand or fathom the workings of the Universe. His poem holds together the intricate grandeur of the *Titanic* with its doomed human freight, and the uncomplicated brute power of the Iceberg, the bluntest of instruments to contradict human sophistication. (If you examine all the third lines together, you will note how they carry within their greater length the contradiction of the ship and all that it means, and at last contradict the effort to predict, prevent, even understand the disaster that "jars two hemispheres" - that is, the whole world we know.)

Full of Questions When disaster strikes, we find ourselves questioning; but properly speaking the loss of the *Titanic* raises into towering public symbolism a question we know from nearer home. The collapse of my Victoria Sponge in the oven or the perishing of my potted palm would raise the same issues - so, to a thoughtful person, would winning the Lottery or recalling a vital fact in the exam room. Could these apparent chances and coincidences be signs from which we can extrapolate any kind of faith? What is the involvement of the God in whom we profess our faith in the details of our lives? Some preserve a sort of humanist hygiene, and say that we must treat God as absent from our equations, and then we shall be safe from superstition, and treat things with a firm, healthy realism. At the other extreme are those believers who see the hand of God in every detail of their experience, believing that the road has been dug up and the bus diverted by divine disposition precisely on this day *for His good purposes* which we may never divine here below. Creepy, I feel. Is there room for Sod's Law in a Christian's faith?

Christians have a respectable tradition of seeing the whole of history as ordered by God towards the end of all things, when Christ will be all in all. Into this simple-sounding scheme he has introduced the whole project of human freedom (which is easy for us to accept intellectually, though problematic on the hoof); but there is also a kind of dumb, senseless presence of evil which is not, so far as we can see, a matter of choices: the earth opens and swallows a house, a heart attack orphans a family, lightning kills a child. We struggle against this category to a degree (*don't build on a fault-line, eat less fat, stay indoors during electrical storms*) but we know really that there is a blank impassive thing at work which we won't understand, and which whispers to us that there is no God (or he is not almighty, or he is not good, which come to the same thing; a god who is careless or helpless would not deserve our worship). The *Titanic* certainly sank: 1,400+ drowned. What is the range of possibilities if we want to believe in the Providence of God? Here are a few to test on your pulses.

- 1 You can't find significance in everything. Some things are just accidental. God does not keep such close touch with what happens. He just allows free space in his creation. Not everything that happens involves him.
- 2 It was a sort of Babel, proclaimed unsinkable, so *God sank it* to puncture human vanity.
- 3 God knew it would happen, *but allowed it* because it was an act in the realm of human freedom, in which he would not interfere. (*Could not God have disposed the world differently?*)
- 4 God is responsible for the eternal salvation of the people; they were responsible for their own drowning. (*Does earthly happiness not weigh in God's scales as in ours? "Lord, do you not care? We are going down...." Mk 4:39*)