

## PROLOGUE

# THE RAVEN

**J**ude waited.

He had been waiting a long time; in fact, he had waited much longer for this event than he had waited for anything in memory. It had not been passive waiting, but the patience needed for an arachnid's weavings, the strands of which were, after many months of delicate spinning, about to coalesce into a web of remarkable complexity. It was possible that very early in his life he had been forced or coerced into a state of being resembling such a patience, but Jude took neither blame nor responsibility for events he could not remember, and he could remember almost *everything*.

A few times over his span of years which did not yet number twenty, Jude had looked into the eyes of another human being and seen in the reflection not a man, but an animal; more, he knew that the vision was not merely their estimation of him, but his own of himself as well. What is significant is that to an opponent, it was the cold precision of his actions and the deep indifference in his eyes which marked him a beast; to himself, it was the realization that only the offspring of animals are able to fend for themselves and gain an awareness of their environment soon after birth. It was in awareness of self that humans differed from beasts, but as most people Jude encountered either ignored that awareness or allowed it to atrophy, he

reckoned it wasn't so bad to be grouped with the animals.

Clearly etched in his memory was the slum in the east end of London, where he was born to a woman composed of equal parts sloth and vodka, and a succession of fathers. It was the one who stuck the longest, a stout fish-gutter named Vaughn, who first noticed the three-year-old boy paying more attention to sodden newspapers than to the haddock they were wrapped around.

"Boy," he said gruffly, for no one had yet taken the trouble to give a name to the child, "bring me that paper." He did as he was told, having learned from experience how quickly inaction earned a cuffing about the ears, and Vaughn pointed to a word then looked at him expectantly. The child immediately read aloud the word "Royal", as well as "procession", and "house" and "Fawkes" and every other word his greasy stepfather pointed to, for he had not yet learned that his ability to read was an unexpected talent, or that reading at a level greater than that of his parents would earn not praise, but a beating.

He remembered being asked to read the word "eccentricities", which he promptly did, then feeling a sharp pain behind his left ear, then nothing. His stepfather's tolerance for multisyllabic reading apparently stopped at five.

Thus, for the next three years of his life, the boy became, for all that his parents knew, a mute illiterate—at least during the night, when he was shut into his nook behind the stairs to sleep. During the day, however, the garbage scattered around the streets of the city became his library; newspapers, magazines—even the few scraps of books which made their way to the east end inevitably found their way into the gutter, then to the boy's secret stash under a loose floorboard. These scraps of minds on paper were his only joy, and his sister, born not quite a year after Vaughn's arrival, was his only passion. She didn't have the abilities of her brother, but she had mercifully avoided inheriting the inhuman lethargy of their mother.

Each midday, as Vaughn went to work and their mother collapsed amongst a scattering of half-full bottles, the two children sat and read stories of a world that to them would have been impossible to reach had it been merely blocks away—which it was, in terms of geography; in terms they understood, it was more distant than the sun. He loved to read, for he adored his sister; she loved to listen, because he was her hero. Both were careful never to let either Vaughn or their mother

see them with the reading material; their parents fed and clothed them sparsely enough as it was, forcing rotted bread and rags upon them when it was convenient to do so. The boy didn't mind, as he secretly supplanted their meager means with vegetables traded for sweeping out the stoops of the shop down the street; and he rationalized that it was simply easier for their parents to keep them alive than to let them starve.

Because he was rational, he assumed this was a basic human condition; he also assumed his parents were human; and he assumed that therefore, as humans, they would be rational. He would later discover that two of those three assumptions were wrong. Which two, he did not know; it didn't matter anyway.

He had discovered a book; it was the first complete book the boy had ever found: *Jude The Obscure*, by Thomas Hardy. The writing was exceptional, the characterizations enthralling, the story, passionately told. Most affecting to the six-year-old boy was the emotional climax, wherein a very similar young boy, named Jude after his father, is told that he, his parents, and two young sisters will be turned out of their apartment into the street "... Because there are too many." The following morning, the elder Jude and his wife, having secured a job that will pay enough to move into lodgings big enough for a family, arrive back at the apartment to find a cold silence, and a note pinned to the bedroom door: "*because we are to many*". Inside, swinging slightly and casting a shadow over the still bodies of his sisters, the boy Jude hung lifeless from the ceiling, a thin cord biting deeply into his small pale throat.

That was as far as the boy read when the paperback was suddenly snatched violently out of his hands. He had been so absorbed in the story that he had not noticed when the shadows grew long, or when Vaughn came home covered in fish and stink. The stout man looked through the pages of the tattered book, then down at the still unconcealed stash underneath the floorboard, then fixed the child with a mixed look of disdain and contempt. The boy looked back and, still chagrined from the loss of his book, allowed the fog he protectively forced to drift across his eyes to clear, and the utter awareness which was his own shone through like a flare. Vaughn looked into the child's eyes and saw there an intelligence greater than his own; what's more, he saw that the boy knew it too. He struck his

stepson hard across the face, but the boy only shook his head and continued to stare, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth. The second blow brought no greater reaction; nor the fourth, nor the eighth. The now enraged man was casting about for a weapon, for some means to force a cry of fear or pain or terror out of the boy, when both of them heard a stirring in the next room.

The boy's sister, asleep under the table in the kitchen, was not awakening quickly enough to see the look of malevolence in her father's eyes, or the sudden look of alarm in her brother's. It was not until Vaughn had seized her roughly by the arm and begun dragging her out the door that she began to cry in a high, keening wail. The boy cast all his pride to the wind, begging, pleading with his stepfather not to do whatever it was he meant to do.

In later years, he would remember wondering whether the fixed nature of his stepfather's intent was the trait of a man or an animal—although the question never came up again, at least, not in any way which made him take the trouble to answer.

Dragging the children through the grimy streets down to the docks, Vaughn tossed them into a smallish, battered dinghy with an air that was at once careless and careful. Unleashing the rope from the mooring, he took to the oars and rowed them out into the darkening mists. How long a time passed, the boy could not tell; the fog swept away all marking of time. His stepfather looked back on occasion with a malevolent sneer, while his sister wore the expression of a hunted animal that knows the killing shot has been fired, but has simply not yet found its mark. The boy's expression was blank; he merely waited, as if saving his emotional responses for a thunderclap of reaction to an event which had not yet occurred, but was looming on the horizon.

An hour later, when the boat returned to the dock, the man was its sole passenger.

When he returned home, his wife neither asked nor cared what had been done with the children; he had brought with him a full bottle of vodka. They finished it in short order, and thus were still in a drunk stupor when the small, shivering form padded haltingly through the door and stood there, looking.

For hours, unmoving, his clothes sodden and covered in seaweed, the figure looked on those who should have been conveyors of all that was needed for a child to learn how to make its way in the world, and

slowly realized that no such support was forthcoming, nor ever had been or would be.

It took a great effort to manage, the second-greatest exertion of the child's life, but when he was finally finished, the two creatures he had called his parents were hanging from cords attached to the light fixtures in the ceiling, cutting off blood and air and life and removing everything from them except the souls which had been absent to begin with. Swaying a foot above the carpet, they looked no different than when they'd been slumped on the couch; it seemed less an act of murder than of housekeeping; nevertheless, it was the only way the night could have concluded. No note was left; none was necessary.

When again it was morning, the boy left the apartment without a backwards glance. It was at this point that he knew he was Jude, and he was fully himself.



Jude sat cross-legged on the bench close to the center of the park in front of the Festspielhaus. The autumn rain of the night before had left a pleasant tang in the air, and a moistness that seemed to soften his vision; the people moving about in front of the massive wood and brick structure seemed hazy at the edges, as if not entirely in focus. Of the dozens of people in the park, the hundreds inside the structure, the thousands around him in the city, the millions walking the continent and the billions drawing breath on the planet, only Jude knew that the haze was not an illusion caused by the rain. No matter—the world would come back into focus soon enough.

He didn't need to glance at his watch to know that only a few minutes remained before the chaos began. He did wonder how many moments it would take for the audience to realize what was actually taking place on stage—he amended the thought: to realize what *appeared* to be taking place on stage; which was different from what was supposed to be taking place on stage, and far removed from what was actually occurring. As if on cue, a few scattered shouts escaped the doors of the Festspielhaus—that would be the devotees, possibly the directors of the festival. They would be first to notice the opera was not proceeding according to Hoyle. It would only be moments, now.