

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

15 *The Mock Wife*

It's a dark drama, this; and yet I know the house, and date;  
That is to say, the where and when John Channing met his fate.  
The house was one in High Street, seen of burghers still alive,  
The year was some two centuries bygone; seventeen-hundred and five.

And dying was Channing the grocer. All the clocks had struck eleven, 5  
And the watchers saw that ere the dawn his soul would be in Heaven;  
When he said on a sudden: "I should *like* to kiss her before I go, —  
For one last time!" They looked at each other and murmured, "Even so."

She'd just been haled to prison, his wife; yea, charged with shaping his death:  
By poison, 'twas told; and now he was nearing the moment of his last breath: 10  
He, witless that his young housemate was suspect of such a crime,  
Lay thinking that his pangs were but a malady of the time.

Outside the room they pondered gloomily, wondering what to do,  
As still he craved her kiss — the dying man who nothing knew:  
"Guilty she may not be," they said; "so why should we torture him 15  
In these his last few minutes of life? Yet how indulge his whim?"

And as he begged there piteously for what could not be done,  
And the murder-charge had flown about the town to every one,  
The friends around him in their trouble thought of a hasty plan,  
And straightway set about it. Let denounce them all who can. 20

"O will you do a kindly deed — it may be a soul to save;  
At least, great misery to a man with one foot in the grave?"  
Thus they to the buxom woman not unlike his prisoned wife;  
"The difference he's past seeing; it will soothe his sinking life."

Well, the friendly neighbour did it; and he kissed her; held her fast; 25  
Kissed her again and yet again. "I — knew she'd — come at last! —  
Where have you been? — Ah, kept away! — I'm sorry — overtried —  
God bless you!" And he loosed her, fell back tiredly, and died.

His wife stood six months after on the scaffold before the crowd,  
Ten thousand of them gathered there; fixed, silent, and hard-browed, 30  
To see her strangled and burnt to dust, as was the verdict then  
On women truly judged, or false, of doing to death their men.

Some of them said as they watched her burn: "I am glad he never knew,  
Since a few hold her as innocent — think such she could not do!  
Glad, too, that (as they tell) he thought she kissed him ere he died." 35  
And they seemed to make no question that the cheat was justified.

1925

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