Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

30 The Supplanter

A Talk

I
He bends his travel-tarnished feet
To where she wastes in clay:
From day-dawn until eve he fares
Along the wintry way:
From day-dawn until eve he bears
A wreath of blooms and bay.

II
“Are these the gravestone shapes that meet
My forward-straining view?
Or forms that cross a window-blind
In circle, knot, and queue:
Gay forms, that cross and whirl and wind
To music throbbing through?” —

III
“The Keeper of the Field of Tombs
Dwells by its gateway-pier:
He celebrates with feast and dance
His daughter’s twentieth year:
He celebrates with wine of France
The birthday of his dear.” —

IV
“The gates are shut when evening glooms:
Lay down your wreath, sad wight:
To-morrow is a time more fit
For placing flowers aright:
The morning is the time for it:
Come, wake with us to-night!” —

V
He drops his wreath, and enters in,
And sits, and shares their cheer. —
“I fain would foot with you, young man, 
Before all others here; 
I fain would foot it for a span 
With such a cavalier!”

VI
She coaxes, clasps, nor fails to win 
His first-unwilling hand: 
The merry music strikes its staves, 
The dancers quickly band; 
And with the Damsel of the Graves 
He duly takes his stand.

VII
“You dance divinely, stranger swain, 
Such grace I’ve never known. 
O longer stay! Breathe not adieu 
And leave me here alone! 
O longer stay: to her be true 
Whose heart is all your own!” —

VIII
“I mark a phantom through the pane, 
That beckons in despair, 
Its mouth all drawn with heavy moan — 
Her to whom once I sware!” — 
“Nay: ’tis the lately carven stone 
Of some strange girl laid there!” —

IX
“I see white flowers upon the floor 
Betrodden to a clot: 
My wreath were they?” — “Nay; love me much, 
Swear you’ll forget me not! 
’Twas but a wreath! Full many such 
Are brought here and forgot.”

X
The watches of the night grow hoar, 
He wakens with the sun; 
“Now could I kill thee here!” he says,
“For winning me from one
Who ever in her living days
Was pure as cloistered nun!”

XI
She cowers: and, rising, roves he then
Afar for many a mile,
For evermore to be apart
From her who could beguile
His senses by her burning heart,
And win his love awhile.

XII
A year beholds him wend again
To her who wastes in clay:
From day-dawn until eve he fares
Along the wintry way,
From day-dawn until eve repairs
Towards her mound to pray.

XIII
And there he sets him to fulfil
His frustrate first intent:
And lay upon her bed, at last,
The offering earlier meant:
When, on his stooping figure, ghast
And haggard eyes are bent.

XIV
“O surely for a little while
You can be kind to me.
For do you love her, do you hate,
She knows not — cares not she:
Only the living feel the weight
Of loveless misery!

XV
“I own my sin; I’ve paid its cost,
Being outcast, shamed, and bare:
I give you daily my whole heart,
Your child my tender care,
I pour you prayers; this life apart
   Is more than I can bear!"

XVI
He turns — unpitying, passion-tossed;
   "I know you not!" he cries,
   "Nor know your child. I knew this maid,
   But she's in Paradise!"
And he has vanished in the shade
   From her beseeching eyes.

1902

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