

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

34 *The Well-Beloved*

I went by star and planet shine
Towards the dear one's home
At Kingsbere, there to make her mine
When the next sun upclomb.

I edged the ancient hill and wood 5
Beside the Ikling Way,
Nigh where the Pagan temple stood
In the world's earlier day.

And as I quick and quicker walked 10
On gravel and on green,
I sang to sky, and tree, or talked
Of her I called my queen.

— "O faultless is her dainty form,
And luminous her mind;
She is the God-created norm 15
Of perfect womankind!"

A shape whereon one star-blink gleamed
Slid softly by my side,
A woman's; and her motion seemed 20
The motion of my bride.

And yet methought she'd drawn erstwhile
Out from the ancient leaze,
Where once were pile and peristyle
For men's idolatries.

— "O maiden lithe and lone, what may 25
Thy name and lineage be
Who so resemblest by this ray
My darling? — Art thou she?"

The Shape: "Thy bride remains within
Her father's grange and grove." 30
— "Thou speakest rightly," I broke in,
"Thou art not she I love."

— "Nay: though thy bride remains inside
Her father's walls," said she,
"The one most dear is with thee here, 35
For thou dost love but me."

Then I: "But she, my only choice,
Is now at Kingsbere Grove?"
Again her soft mysterious voice:
"I am thy only Love." 40

Thus still she vouched, and still I said,
"O sprite, that cannot be!" . . .
It was as if my bosom bled,
So much she troubled me.

The sprite resumed: "Thou hast transferred 45
To her dull form awhile
My beauty, fame, and deed, and word,
My gestures and my smile.

"O fatuous man, this truth infer,
Brides are not what they seem; 50
Thou lovest what thou dreamest her;
I am thy very dream!"

— "O then," I answered miserably,
Speaking as scarce I knew,
"My loved one, I must wed with thee 55
If what thou sayest be true!"

She, proudly, thinning in the gloom:
"Though, since troth-plight began,
I have ever stood as bride to groom,
I wed no mortal man!" 60

Thereat she vanished by the lane

Adjoining Kingsbere town,
Near where, men say, once stood the Fane
To Venus, on the Down.

— When I arrived and met my bride 65
Her look was pinched and thin,
As if her soul had shrunk and died,
And left a waste within.

c. 1897

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