

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

36 *The Workbox*

“See, here’s the workbox, little wife,
That I made of polished oak.”
He was a joiner, of village life;
She came of borough folk.

He holds the present up to her 5
As with a smile she nears
And answers to the profferer,
“Twill last all my sewing years!”

“I warrant it will. And longer too. 10
’Tis a scantling that I got
Off poor John Wayward’s coffin, who
Died of they knew not what.

“The shingled pattern that seems to cease
Against your box’s rim
Continues right on in the piece 15
That’s underground with him.

“And while I worked it made me think
Of timber’s varied doom;
One inch where people eat and drink,
The next inch in a tomb. 20

“But why do you look so white, my dear,
And turn aside your face?
You knew not that good lad, I fear,
Though he came from your native place?”

“How could I know that good young man, 25
Though he came from my native town,
When he must have left far earlier than
I was a woman grown?”

“Ah, no. I should have understood!
It shocked you that I gave
To you one end of a piece of wood
Whose other is in a grave?” 30

“Don’t, dear, despise my intellect,
Mere accidental things
Of that sort never have effect
On my imaginings.” 35

Yet still her lips were limp and wan,
Her face still held aside,
As if she had known not only John,
But known of what he died. 40

1914

(From *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy*. London:
Macmillan, 1930)