

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

6 *The Dance at the Phoenix*

To Jenny came a gentle youth  
From inland leazes lone,  
His love was fresh as apple-blooth  
By Parrett, Yeo, or Tone.  
And duly he entreated her 5  
To be his tender minister,  
And take him for her own.

Now Jenny's life had hardly been  
A life of modesty;  
And few in Casterbridge had seen 10  
More loves of sorts than she  
From scarcely sixteen years above;  
Among them sundry troopers of  
The King's-Own Cavalry.

But each with charger, sword, and gun, 15  
Had bluffed the Biscay wave;  
And Jenny prized her rural one  
For all the love he gave.  
She vowed to be, if they were wed,  
His honest wife in heart and head 20  
From bride-ale hour to grave.

Wedded they were. Her husband's trust  
In Jenny knew no bound,  
And Jenny kept her pure and just,  
Till even malice found 25  
No sin or sign of ill to be  
In one who walked so decently  
The duteous helpmate's round.

Two sons were born, and bloomed to men,  
    And roamed, and were as not: 30  
Alone was Jenny left again  
    As ere her mind had sought  
A solace in domestic joys,  
And ere the vanished pair of boys  
    Were sent to sun her cot. 35

She numbered near on sixty years,  
    And passed as elderly,  
When, on a day, with flushing fears,  
    She learnt from shouts of glee,  
And shine of swords, and thump of drum, 40  
Her early loves from war had come,  
    The King's-Own Cavalry.

She turned aside, and bowed her head  
    Anigh Saint Peter's door;  
"Alas for chastened thoughts!" she said; 45  
    "I'm faded now, and hoar,  
And yet those notes—they thrill me through,  
And those gay forms move me anew  
    As they moved me of yore!" . . .

'Twas Christmas, and the Phoenix Inn 50  
    Was lit with tapers tall,  
For thirty of the trooper men  
    Had vowed to give a ball  
As "Theirs" had done ('twas handed down)  
When lying in the selfsame town 55  
    Ere Buonaparté's fall.

That night the throbbing "Soldier's Joy,"  
    The measured tread and sway  
Of "Fancy-Lad" and "Maiden Coy,"  
    Reached Jenny as she lay 60  
Beside her spouse; till springtide blood



Seemed scouring through her like a flood  
That whisked the years away.

She rose, arrayed, and decked her head  
Where the bleached hairs grew thin; 65

Upon her cap two bows of red  
She fixed with hasty pin;  
Unheard descending to the street  
She trod the flags with tune-led feet,  
And stood before the Inn. 70

Save for the dancers', not a sound  
Disturbed the icy air;  
No watchman on his midnight round  
Or traveller was there;  
But over All-Saints', high and bright, 75  
Pulsed to the music Sirius white,  
The Wain by Bullstake Square.

She knocked, but found her further stride  
Checked by a sergeant tall:  
"Gay Granny, whence come you?" he cried, 80  
"This is a private ball."  
—"No one has more right here than me!  
Ere you were born, man," answered she,  
"I knew the regiment all!"

"Take not the lady's visit ill!" 85  
The steward said; "for see,  
We lack sufficient partners still,  
So, prithee, let her be!"  
They seized and whirled her mid the maze,  
And Jenny felt as in the days 90  
Of her immodesty.

Hour chased each hour, and night advanced;  
She sped as shod with wings;

Each time and every time she danced—  
    Reels, jigs, poussettes, and flings:                     95  
They cheered her as she soared and swooped,  
(She had learnt ere art in dancing drooped  
    From hops to slothful swings).

The favourite Quick-step “Speed the Plough”—  
    (Cross hands, cast off, and wheel)—                     100  
“The Triumph,” “Sylph,” “The Row-dow-dow,”  
    Famed “Major Malley’s Reel,”  
“The Duke of York’s,” “The Fairy Dance,”  
“The Bridge of Lodi” (brought from France),  
    She beat out, toe and heel.                             105

The “Fall of Paris” clanged its close,  
    And Peter’s chimed went four,  
When Jenny, bosom-beating, rose  
    To seek her silent door.  
They tiptoed in escorting her,                             110  
Lest stroke of heel or clink of spur  
    Should break her goodman’s snore.

The fire that lately burnt fell slack  
    When lone at last was she;  
Her nine-and-fifty years came back;                     115  
    She sank upon her knee  
Beside the durn, and like a dart  
A something arrowed through her heart  
    In shoots of agony.

Their footsteps died as she leant there,                     120  
    Lit by the morning star  
Hanging above the moorland, where  
    The aged elm-rows are;  
As overnight, from Pummery Ridge  
To Maembury Ring and Standfast Bridge                     125  
    No life stirred, near or far.



Though inner mischief worked amain,  
    She reached her husband's side;  
Where, toil-weary, as he had lain  
    Beneath the patchwork pied                     130  
When forthward yestereve she crept,  
And as unwitting, still he slept  
    Who did in her confide.

A tear sprang as she turned and viewed  
    His features free from guile;                     135  
She kissed him long, as when, just wooed,  
    She chose his domicile.  
She felt she would give more than life  
To be the single-hearted wife  
    That she had been erstwhile. . . .                     140

Time wore to six. Her husband rose  
    And struck the steel and stone;  
He glanced at Jenny, whose repose  
    Seemed deeper than his own.  
With dumb dismay, on closer sight,                     145  
He gathered sense that in the night,  
Or morn, her soul had flown.

When told that some too mighty strain  
    For one so many-yearred  
Had burst her bosom's master-vein,                     150  
    His doubts remained unstirred.  
His Jenny had not left his side  
Betwixt the eve and morning-tide:  
    —The King's said not a word.

Well! times are not as times were then,                     155  
    Nor fair ones half so free;  
And truly they were martial men,  
    The King's-Own Cavalry.

And when they went from Casterbridge  
And vanished over Mellstock Ridge,                   160  
    'Twas saddest morn to see.

*1898*

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