

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

21 The Rash Bride

An Experience of the Mellstock Quire

I

We Christmas-carolled down the Vale, and up the Vale, and round the Vale,
We played and sang that night as we were yearly wont to do —
A carol in a minor key, a carol in the major D,
Then at each house: “Good wishes: many Christmas joys to you!”

II

Next, to the widow’s John and I and all the rest drew on. And I 5
Discerned that John could hardly hold the tongue of him for joy.
The widow was a sweet young thing whom John was bent on marrying,
And quiring at her casement seemed romantic to the boy.

III

“She’ll make reply, I trust,” said he, “to our salute? She must!” said he,
“And then I will accost her gently — much to her surprise! — 10
For knowing not I am with you here, when I speak up and call her dear
A tenderness will fill her voice, a bashfulness her eyes.”

IV

So, by her window-square we stood; ay, with our lanterns there we stood,
And he along with us, — not singing, waiting for a sign;
And when we’d quired her carols three a light was lit and out looked she, 15
A shawl about her bedgown, and her colour red as wine.

V

And sweetly then she bowed her thanks, and smiled, and spoke aloud
her thanks:
When lo, behind her back there, in the room, a man appeared.
I knew him — one from Woolcomb way — Giles Swetman — honest
as the day,
But eager, hasty; and I felt that some strange trouble neared. 20

VI

“How comes he there? . . . Suppose,” said we, “she’s wed of late!

Who knows?" said we.
— "She married yester-morning — only mother yet has known
The secret o't!" shrilled one small boy. "But now I've told, let's wish 'em joy!"
A heavy fall aroused us: John had gone down like a stone.

VII

We rushed to him and caught him round, and lifted him, and brought him
round, 25
When, hearing something wrong had happened, oped the window she:
"Has one of you fallen ill?" she asked, "by these night labours overtasked?"
None answered. That she'd done poor John a cruel turn felt we.

VIII

Till up spoke Michael: "Fie, young dame! You've broke your promise,
sly young dame, 30
By forming this new tie, young dame, and jilting John so true,
Who trudged to-night to sing to 'ee because he thought he'd bring to 'ee
Good wishes as your coming spouse. May ye such trifling rue!"

IX

Her man had said no word at all; but being behind had heard it all,
And now cried: "Neighbours, on my soul I knew not 'twas like this!"
And then to her: "If I had known you'd had in tow not me alone, 35
No wife should you have been of mine. It is a dear bought bliss!"

X

She changed death-white, and heaved a cry: we'd never heard so grieved
a cry
As came from her at this from him: heartbroken quite seemed she;
And suddenly, as we looked on, she turned, and rushed; and she was gone,
Whither, her husband, following after, knew not; nor knew we. 40

XI

We searched till dawn about the house; within the house, without the house,
We searched among the laurel boughs that grew beneath the wall,
And then among the crocks and things, and stores for winter junketings,
In linhay, loft, and dairy; but we found her not at all.

XII

Then John rushed in: "O friends," he said, "hear this, this, this!" and bends
his head: 45

“I’ve — searched round by the — well, and find the cover open wide!
I am fearful that — I can’t say what . . . Bring lanterns, and some cords
to knot.”

We did so, and we went and stood the deep dark hole beside.

XIII

And then they, ropes in hand, and I — ay, John, and all the band, and I
Let down a lantern to the depths — some hundred feet and more; 50
It glimmered like a fog-dimmed star; and there, besides its light, afar,
White drapery floated, and we knew the meaning that it bore.

XIV

The rest is naught. . . . We buried her o’ Sunday. Neighbours carried her;
And Swetman — he who’d married her — now miserablest of men,
Walked mourning first; and then walked John; just quivering, but composed
anon; 55
And we the quire formed round the grave, as was the custom then.

XV

Our old bass player, as I recall — his white hair blown — but why
recall! —
His viol upstrapped, bent figure — doomed to follow her full soon —
Stood bowing, pale and tremulous; and next to him the rest of us. . . .
We sang the Ninetieth Psalm to her — set to Saint Stephen’s tune. 60

1902

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