

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

29 *A Sunday Morning Tragedy*

(circa 186- )

I bore a daughter flower-fair,  
In Pydel Vale, alas for me;  
I joyed to mother one so rare,  
But dead and gone I now would be.

Men looked and loved her as she grew, 5  
And she was won, alas for me;  
She told me nothing, but I knew,  
And saw that sorrow was to be.

I knew that one had made her thrall,  
A thrall to him, alas for me; 10  
And then, at last, she told me all,  
And wondered what her end would be.

She owned that she had loved too well,  
Had loved too well, unhappy she,  
And bore a secret time would tell, 15  
Though in her shroud she'd sooner be.

I plodded to her sweetheart's door  
In Pydel Vale, alas for me:  
I pleaded with him, pleaded sore,  
To save her from her misery. 20

He frowned, and swore he could not wed.  
Seven times he swore it could not be;  
"Poverty's worse than shame," he said,  
Till all my hope went out of me.

"I've packed my traps to sail the main"— 25

Roughly he spake, alas did he—  
“Wessex beholds me not again,  
’Tis worse than any jail would be!”

—There was a shepherd whom I knew,  
A subtle man, alas for me: 30  
I sought him all the pastures through,  
Though better I had ceased to be.

I traced him by his lantern light,  
And gave him hint, alas for me,  
Of how she found her in the plight 35  
That is so scorned in Christendie.

“Is there an herb. . . .?” I asked. “Or none?”  
Yes, thus I asked him desperately.  
“—There is,” he said; “a certain one. . . .”  
Would he had sworn that none knew he! 40

“To-morrow I will walk your way,”  
He hinted low, alas for me.—  
Fieldwards I gazed throughout next day;  
Now fields I never more would see!

The sunset-shine, as curfew strook, 45  
As curfew strook beyond the lea,  
Lit his white smock and gleaming crook,  
While slowly he drew near to me.

He pulled from underneath his smock  
The herb I sought, my curse to be— 50  
“At times I use it in my flock,”  
He said, and hope waxed strong in me.

“’Tis meant to balk ill-motherings”—  
(Ill-motherings! Why should they be?)—  
“If not, would God have sent such things?” 55

So spoke the shepherd unto me.

That night I watched the poppling brew,  
With bended back and hand on knee:  
I stirred it till the dawnlight grew,  
And the wind whiffled wailfully. 60

“This scandal shall be slain,” said I,  
“That lours upon her innocency:  
I’ll give all whispering tongues the lie;”—  
But worse than whispers was to be.

“Here’s physic for untimely fruit,” 65  
I said to her, alas for me,  
Early that morn in fond salute;  
And in my grave I now would be.

—Next Sunday came, with sweet church chimes  
In Pydel Vale, alas for me: 70  
I went into her room betimes;  
No more may such a Sunday be!

“Mother, instead of rescue nigh,”  
She faintly breathed, alas for me,  
“I feel as I were like to die, 75  
And underground soon, soon should be.”

From church that noon the people walked  
In twos and threes, alas for me,  
Showed their new raiment—smiled and talked,  
Though sackcloth-clad I longed to be. 80

Came to my door her lover’s friends,  
And cheerly cried, alas for me,  
“Right glad are we he makes amends,  
For never a sweeter bride can be.”

My mouth dried, as 'twere scorched within, 85  
Dried at their words, alas for me:  
More and more neighbours crowded in,  
(O why should mothers ever be!)

“Ha-ha! Such well-kept news!” laughed they,  
Yes—so they laughed, alas for me. 90  
“Whose banns were called in church to-day?”—  
Christ, how I wished my soul could flee!

“Where is she? O the stealthy miss,”  
Still bantered they, alas for me,  
“To keep a wedding close as this . . . .” 95  
Ay, Fortune worked thus wantonly!

“But you are pale—you did not know?”  
They archly asked, alas for me,  
I stammered, “Yes—some days—ago,”  
While confined clay I wished to be. 100

“’Twas done to please her, we surmise?”  
(They spoke quite lightly in their glee)  
“Done by him as a fond surprise?”  
I thought their words would madden me.

Her lover entered. “Where’s my bird?— 105  
My bird—my flower—my picotee?  
First time of asking, soon the third!”  
Ah, in my grave I well may be.

To me he whispered: “Since your call—”  
So spoke he then, alas for me— 110  
“I’ve felt for her, and righted all.”  
—I think of it to agony.

“She’s faint to-day—tired—nothing more—”  
Thus did I lie, alas for me. . . .

I called her at her chamber door 115  
As one who scarce had strength to be.

No voice replied. I went within—  
O women! scourged the worst are we. . . .  
I shrieked. The others hastened in  
And saw the stroke there dealt on me. 120

There she lay—silent, breathless, dead,  
Stone dead she lay—wronged, sinless she!—  
Ghost-white the cheeks once rosy-red:  
Death had took her. Death took not me.

I kissed her colding face and hair, 125  
I kissed her corpse—the bride to be!—  
My punishment I cannot bear,  
But pray God *not* to pity me.

*1904*

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