

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

30 *The Supplanter*

A Talk

I

He bends his travel-tarnished feet  
    To where she wastes in clay:  
From day-dawn until eve he fares  
    Along the wintry way;  
From day-dawn until eve he bears 5  
    A wreath of blooms and bay.

II

“Are these the gravestone shapes that meet  
    My forward-straining view?  
Or forms that cross a window-blind  
    In circle, knot, and queue: 10  
Gay forms, that cross and whirl and wind  
    To music throbbing through?” —

III

‘The Keeper of the Field of Tombs  
    Dwells by its gateway-pier;  
He celebrates with feast and dance 15  
    His daughter’s twentieth year:  
He celebrates with wine of France  
    The birthday of his dear.” —

IV

“The gates are shut when evening glooms:  
    Lay down your wreath, sad wight; 20  
To-morrow is a time more fit  
    For placing flowers aright:  
The morning is the time for it;  
    Come, wake with us to-night!” —

V

He drops his wreath, and enters in, 25  
    And sits, and shares their cheer. —

“I fain would foot with you, young man,  
    Before all others here;  
I fain would foot it for a span  
    With such a cavalier!” 30

VI

She coaxes, clasps, nor fails to win  
    His first-unwilling hand:  
The merry music strikes its staves,  
    The dancers quickly band;  
And with the Damsel of the Graves 35  
    He duly takes his stand.

VII

“You dance divinely, stranger swain,  
    Such grace I’ve never known.  
O longer stay! Breathe not adieu  
    And leave me here alone! 40  
O longer stay: to her be true  
    Whose heart is all your own!” —

VIII

“I mark a phantom through the pane,  
    That beckons in despair,  
Its mouth all drawn with heavy moan — 45  
    Her to whom once I swear!” —  
“Nay; ’tis the lately carven stone  
    Of some strange girl laid there!” —

IX

“I see white flowers upon the floor  
    Betrodden to a clot; 50  
My wreath were they?” — “Nay; love me much,  
    Swear you’ll forget me not!  
’Twas but a wreath! Full many such  
    Are brought here and forgot.”

. . . . .

X

The watches of the night grow hoar, 55  
    He wakens with the sun;  
“Now could I kill thee here!” he says,

“For winning me from one  
Who ever in her living days  
Was pure as cloistered nun!” 60

XI  
She cowers; and, rising, roves he then  
Afar for many a mile,  
For evermore to be apart  
From her who could beguile  
His senses by her burning heart, 65  
And win his love awhile.

XII  
A year beholds him wend again  
To her who wastes in clay;  
From day-dawn until eve he fares  
Along the wintry way, 70  
From day-dawn until eve repairs  
Towards her mound to pray.

XIII  
And there he sets him to fulfil  
His frustrate first intent:  
And lay upon her bed, at last, 75  
The offering earlier meant:  
When, on his stooping figure, ghast  
And haggard eyes are bent.

XIV  
“O surely for a little while  
You can be kind to me. 80  
For do you love her, do you hate,  
She knows not — cares not she:  
Only the living feel the weight  
Of loveless misery!

XV  
“I own my sin; I’ve paid its cost, 85  
Being outcast, shamed, and bare:  
I give you daily my whole heart,  
Your child my tender care,

I pour you prayers; this life apart  
Is more than I can bear!" 90

XVI

He turns — unpitying, passion-tossed;  
“I know you not!” he cries,  
“Nor know your child. I knew this maid,  
But she’s in Paradise!”  
And he has vanished in the shade 95  
From her beseeching eyes.

1902

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