Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

5 The Catching Ballet of the Wedding Clothes (Temp. Guliel. IV.)

"A gentleman's coming	
To court me, they say;	
The ringers are told,	
And the band is to play.	
O why should he do it	5
Now poor Jack's away?	
I surely shall rue it:	
Come, white witch, and say!"	
"The gentleman's coming	
To marry you, dear;	10
They tell at the turnpikes	
That he has been here!	
He rode here in secret,	
To gain eye of you≔	
Throw over the sailor,	15
Is what I should do!"	
"I will not throw over	
Poor Jack: no, indeed,	
For a new unknown lover	
Who loves at such speed,	20
And writes to the ringers,	
And orders the band,	
As if I could only	
Obey his command!	
"La! now here is something	25
Close packed in a box,	
And strapped up and corded,	
And held with two locks!"	

"Dear, that's from him, surely,	
As we may suppose?	30
Ay, through the chink shining	
I spy wedding clothes!"	
"Yes—here's a drawn bonnet,	
And tortoiseshell combs,	
And a silk gown, silk stockings,	35
And scents of rare blooms;	
And shoes, too, of satin,	
Quite past all my pride:	
O, how will it end, witch;	
I can't be his bride!"	40
"Don't waste you in weeping:	
Not worth it is man!	
Beshrew me, my deary,	
I've shaped a new plan.	
Wear the clothes of the rich one,	45
Since he will not see,	
But marry the poor one	
You love faithfully."	
"Here's a last packet Never!	
It knocks me to bits—	50
The ring! 'Just to try on,	
To see if it fits.'	
O I cannot!" But Jack said,	
Quite cool, when he came,	
"Well, it will save money,	55
And be just the same."	
The marriage took place,	
Yes; as vowed, she was true	
To her dear sailor Jack	
Ere the gentleman knew;	60
But she wore the rich clothing,	

Much joyed at such guise, Yet fearing and trembling With tears in her eyes.	
And at midnight, between her And him she had wed,	65
The gentleman's figure	
Arose up and said:	
"My too-cruel darling,	
In spite of your oaths,	70
You have married the man	
Of the ring and the clothes!"	
Thence on, would confront her,	
When sleep had grown slack,	
His face on the pillow	75
Between her and Jack;	
And he nightly kept whispering:	
"You surely must see,	
Though your tongue-tip took him, Love,	
Your body took me."	80
Till she sighed: "Yes, my word, It must be confessed o' me, Jack has; but this man Can claim all the rest o' me!	
And off to go with him	85
Bewitched am I now:	00
I'd fain not be two men's,	
And won't, anyhow!"	
So she pleaded and pleaded From daybreak till dark, Converting the parish	90
(Save parson and clerk).	
She then wrote to Jack thus:	
"I'm torn with mind-strife:	

She who wears a man's bride-clothes	95
Must be the man's wife!"	
And still she kept plaining,	
Till Jack he wrote: "Aye!"	
And the villagers gathered,	
And on a fixed day,	100
They went out alertly	
And stood in a row,	
Quite blithe with excitement	
To see John's wife go.	
Some were facing her dwelling,	105
And some on the bridge,	
And some at the corner,	
And some by the ridge.	
With a nod and a word	
The coach stopped at her door,	110
And she upped like a bird,	
And they saw her no more.	
'Twas told that, years after,	
When autumn winds wave,	
A wealthy old lady	115
Stood long at Jack's grave,	
And while her coach waited:—	
She mused there; and then	
She stepped in, and never	
Came thither again.	120

1919

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