

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

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