

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
To be his tender minister,
And call him aye her own.

Fair Jenny's life had hardly been
A life of modesty;
At Casterbridge experience keen
Of many loves had she
From scarcely sixteen years above;
Among them sundry troopers of
The King's-Own Cavalry.

But each with charger, sword, and gun,
Had bluffed the Biscay wave;
And Jenny prized her gentle one
For all the love he gave.
She vowed to be, if they were wed,
His honest wife in heart and head

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

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:

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.

She numbered near on sixty years,

And passed as elderly,

When, in the street, with flush of fears,

One day discovered she,

From shine of swords and thump of drum.

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;
"I'm faded now, and hoar,
And yet those notes--they thrill me through,
And those gay forms move me anew
As in the years of yore!" . . .

'Twas Christmas, and the Phoenix Inn
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
Ere Buonaparte'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
Beside her spouse; till springtide blood
Seemed scouring through her like a flood
That whisked the years away.

She rose, and rayed, and decked her head
Where the bleached hairs ran thin;

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.

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,
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;
 "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!"
 Upspoke the steward free;
"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
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:
They cheered her as she soared and swooped,
(She'd learnt ere art in dancing drooped
From hops to slothful swings).

The favourite Quick-step "Speed the Plough" -
(Cross hands, cast off, and wheel)--
"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.

The "Fall of Paris" clanged its close,
And Peter's chime told four,
When Jenny, bosom-beating, rose
To seek her silent door.

They tiptoed in escorting her,
Lest stroke of heel or clink of spur

Should break her goodman's snore.

The fire that late had burnt fell slack
When lone at last stood she;
Her nine-and-fifty years came back;
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,
Lit by the morning star
Hanging above the moorland, where
The aged elm-rows are;
And, as o'ernight, from Pummery Ridge
To Maembury Ring and Standfast Bridge
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
When yestereve she'd forthward 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;
She kissed him long, as when, just wooed,
She chose his domicile.
She felt she could have given her life
To be the single-hearted wife
That she had been erstwhile.

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,
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,
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,
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,
'Twas saddest morn to see.

THE CASTERBRIDGE CAPTAINS

(KHYBER PASS, 1842)

A TRADITION OF J. B. L-, T. G. B-, AND J. L-.

Three captains went to Indian wars,
And only one returned:
Their mate of yore, he singly wore
The laurels all had earned.

At home he sought the ancient aisle
Wherein, untrumped of fame,
The three had sat in pupilage,
And each had carved his name.

The names, rough-hewn, of equal size,
Stood on the panel still;

Unequal since.--"Twas theirs to aim,
Mine was it to fulfil!"

- "Who saves his life shall lose it, friends!"
Outspoke the preacher then,
Unweeting he his listener, who
Looked at the names again.

That he had come and they'd been stayed,
'Twas but the chance of war:
Another chance, and they'd sat here,
And he had lain afar.

Yet saw he something in the lives
Of those who'd ceased to live
That sphered them with a majesty
Which living failed to give.

Transcendent triumph in return
No longer lit his brain;
Transcendence rayed the distant urn
Where slept the fallen twain.