

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

25 *San Sebastian*

(August 1813)

With Thoughts of Sergeant M\_\_\_\_ (Pensioner), who died 185–

“Why, Sergeant, stray on the Ivel Way,  
As though at home there were spectres rife?  
From first to last ’twas a proud career!  
And your sunny years with a gracious wife  
Have brought you a daughter dear. 5

“I watched her to-day; a more comely maid,  
As she danced in her muslin bowed with blue,  
Round a Hintock maypole never gayed.”  
“Aye, aye; I watched her this day, too,  
As it happens,” the Sergeant said. 10

“My daughter is now,” he again began,  
“Of just such an age as one I knew  
When we of the Line, the Forlorn-hope van,  
On an August morning a chosen few  
Stormed San Sebastian. 15

“She’s a score less three; so about was *she*  
The maiden I wronged in Peninsular days. . . .  
You may prate of your prowess in lusty times,  
But as years gnaw inward you blink your bays,  
And see too well your crimes! 20

“We’d stormed it at night, by the flapping light  
Of burning towers, and the mortar’s boom:  
We’d topped the breach; but had failed to stay,  
For our files were misled by the baffling gloom;  
And we said we’d storm by day. 25

“So, out of the trenches, with features set,  
On that hot, still morning, in measured pace,  
Our column climbed; climbed higher yet,  
Past the fauss’bray, scarp, up the curtain-face,  
And along the parapet. 30

“From the battered hornwork the cannoneers  
Hove crashing balls of iron fire;  
On the shaking gap mount the volunteers  
In files, and as they mount expire  
Amid curses, groans, and cheers. 35

“Five hours did we storm, five hours re-form,  
As Death cooled those hot blood pricked on;  
Till our cause was helped by a woe within:  
They were blown from the summit we’d leapt upon,  
And madly we entered in. 40

“On end for plunder, ’mid rain and thunder  
That burst with the lull of our cannonade,  
We vamped the streets in the stifling air  
Our hunger unsoothed, our thirst unstayed  
And ransacked the buildings there. 45

“From the shady vaults of their walls of white  
We rolled rich puncheons of Spanish grape,  
Till at length, with the fire of the wine alight,  
I saw at a doorway a fair fresh shape  
A woman, a sylph, or sprite. 50

“Afeard she fled, and with heated head  
I pursued to the chamber she called her own;  
When might is right no qualms deter,  
And having her helpless and alone  
I wreaked my will on her. 55

“She raised her beseeching eyes to me,

And I heard the words of prayer she sent  
In her own soft language. . . . Fatefully  
I copied those eyes for my punishment  
    In begetting the girl you see! 60

“So, to-day I stand with a God-set brand  
Like Cain’s, when he wandered from kindred’s ken. . . .  
I served through the war that made Europe free;  
I wived me in peace-year. But, hid from men,  
    I bear that mark on me. 65

“Maybe we shape our offspring’s guise  
From fancy, or we know not what,  
And that no deep impression dies,  
For the mother of my child is not  
    The mother of her eyes. 70

“And I nightly stray on the Ivel Way  
As though at home there were spectres rife;  
I delight me not in my proud career;  
And ’tis coals of fire that a gracious wife  
    Should have brought me a daughter dear!” 75

1898

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