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that Falconer not only uses "serene" as a noun, as does Keats, but he also *breathes* the serene, again as does Keats. And there is an additional reason for offering the suggestion that one poet knew the work of the other. In Canto III, i, of *The Shipwreck*, we read:

Darkling I wander with prophetic dread.

Who can escape thinking at once of Keats's line, "Darkling I listen. . . ." in the *Ode to a Nightingale*? None of the references cited in Notes 1 and 2 above offer any suggestions regarding Keats's "Darkling"; but it is clear that William Falconer not only preceded Keats in the choice of this unusual word but also used it with identical effect, i.e., as the initial word in an iambic verse, thus inverting, in the first foot, the rhythm of an otherwise normal iambic line.

In the years immediately preceding the publication of the *Ode to a Nightingale*, half a dozen London publishers vied one with another to render Falconer's lines familiar to every reader of poetry. It is therefore easier to believe that in Keats's "Darkling I listen" we have an echo (conscious or unconscious) of Falconer's "Darkling I wander" than it is to believe that the two poets stumbled into identical phraseology independently. Once the "Darkling" echo is heard, breathing the "pure serene" follows close behind.

Farewell, poor Falconer! When next I see  
John Keats's lines, I shall remember thee.



HARDY'S LADY SUSAN AND THE FIRST  
COUNTESS OF WESSEX

By WALTER PEIRCE  
*Santa Barbara, California*

**H**ARDY wrote a short story about the first Countess of Wessex and a poem about Lady Susan, but he does not mention the relationship between them or connect them in any way. As a matter of history, Lady Susan was

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the daughter of this first countess, and of each he relates such a dramatic story that I was moved to investigate their careers and see how close he had kept to the facts. I found that he had kept very close indeed.

In his story *The First Countess of Wessex*, published in *Harper's Magazine* for December 1889 and later included in *A Group of Noble Dames*, one Thomas Dornell of Fells-Park has married the great heiress of King's Hintock. Her family name is not mentioned, but her husband calls her Sue. They have one child, a daughter named Betty, and against the will and indeed without the knowledge of the Squire Mrs. Dornell marries this daughter to one Stephen Reynard. Betty is thirteen at the time and her husband very much older. The bride returns to her home at King's Hintock and her husband goes abroad. The Squire had chosen as son-in-law a young man of his own neighborhood, and though it would seem too late to carry out this plan he continues to favor it. The young people meet and fall in love, they have clandestine meetings, and the end is of the ironical sort so favored by Hardy: a trap is set for the husband, the lover is caught instead and killed, and in time Betty accepts Reynard for her husband, who later becomes Lord Ivell. "Such," concludes the author, "is woman, or rather (not to give offense by so sweeping an assertion), such was Betty Dornell."

Now let us see what Burke's *Peerage* has to tell us. Early in the eighteenth century Thomas Horner married Susannah Strangways, a great heiress of Dorsetshire. Her sister was Duchess of Hamilton, so there must have been family as well as fortune. With the death of this sister Susannah remained sole heiress of the Strangways, and her fortune, together with her more exalted lineage, enabled her to carry her maiden name into her married state and even to engraft it on to that of her husband, who became Thomas Strangways-Horner. Neither Burke nor Hardy explain why such a distinguished heiress married an ordinary squire of small estate and no lineage whatever. They had

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one daughter, Elizabeth, born in 1722, who in 1735 was married to Stephen Fox, brother of the first Lord Holland and uncle of Charles James Fox. He was born in 1704 and was therefore eighteen years older than his wife. He was later created Baron Ilchester and finally became the first Earl of Ilchester. Elizabeth, like her mother, carried her name to her husband along with her fortune, and the family name of the Ilchesters became and is today Fox-Strangways.

Thus far Hardy has adhered strictly to history, with only the most transparent alteration of names. Stephen Fox becomes Stephen Reynard, Thomas Horner appears as Thomas Dornell, Susannah Strangways is still Sue, her daughter Elizabeth is Betty, and Ilchester, itself a contraction of Ivelchester, becomes Ivell. Falls-Park is Mells-Park near Glastonbury Abbey in Somersetshire, and King's Hintock is Melbury House, a mile or so outside of Dorchester, and still the country seat of the Earls of Ilchester. The long period between the marriage of the child-bride and its consummation would seem also to be historical, since the marriage took place in 1735 and the first child was born in 1743, to be followed in rapid succession by six others.

So much is authentic, but how about the lover and his tragic death? If this is history the Peerage is discreetly silent on the matter. Is this circumstance a legend about Dorchester, or is it sheer invention, grafted on to the real story? Hardy has recorded his conviction that history and fiction should not be mixed, that if part is true all must be authentic. Did he respect this principle in *The First Countess of Wessex*, or did he make an exception to his theory in order to give a sardonic twist to a story that would otherwise have limped to a lame and impotent conclusion? Only a trip to Dorchester and a tapping of local gossip can settle this point.

In his poem *The Noble Lady Speaks* Hardy tells the story of Lady Susan and her actor husband, how after years of

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marriage the latter wished to return for one night to the London stage, how he did so and met with failure, and how he saw, or thought he saw, his wife watching him from the wings, though she was supposed to be at home in Mellstock. The noble lady protests that she had not left home, but the author characteristically leaves us in doubt as to whether the figure in the wings was reality or hallucination.

As in the case of the Countess of Wessex, we are led to ask ourselves how much of this story is really true? Lady Susan Fox-Strangways did marry an actor and they did live out their lives at Stinsford, but did William O'Brien ever return to the stage, even for a single night? Did his wife follow him there, or did she stay quietly in Dorsetshire? This we shall never know, but what we can be sure of is that the first Lord and Lady Ilchester had a daughter named Susannah Sarah Louisa, known to her contemporaries as Lady Susan, Lady Sue or even Suke. She inherited from her grandmother Susannah Strangways her name and apparently much of her energetic disposition. Her uncle, Charles Fox, later the first Lord Holland, had eloped with Lady Caroline Lennox, daughter of the Duke of Richmond and great-granddaughter of Charles II with a bar sinister. Lady Caroline's sister, Lady Sarah Lennox, was two years younger than Lady Susan, and the two girls spent much time together at Holland House and became fast friends. Each had a romantic history. Lady Sarah caught the roving eye of the young king, George III, and for a time all London, including Holland House, thought that his intentions were honorable. His mother, however, the formidable Princess Dowager of Wales, had other plans, and King George found himself married to his plain but high-born cousin, the Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg. Lady Sarah was allowed to be bridesmaid at the wedding. Lady Susan's affair involved a much less exalted personage, but in the event proved far more satisfactory. Private theatricals were much indulged in at Holland House, under the stimulus of Charles James Fox, down from Ox-

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ford for the holiday, and Lady Susan found herself playing opposite a handsome young Irishman from Drury Lane Theatre, named William O'Brien. He was far from being a nobody. He was related to the O'Briens Lords of Clare, and as for his professional standing, Garrick had brought him from Dublin to Drury Lane, where he played with brilliant success Mercutio and other Shakespearean rôles, and all the young men about town in the Restoration and eighteenth-century repertory. He must have been some years older than his wife, since he made his début in London in 1758, when she was but fifteen. Between him and Lady Susan it was the *coup de foudre*, and so obvious that the Foxes took alarm and prepared to pack her off to Redlynch in Somerset, another seat of the Ilchesters. Lady Susan played for time and stayed in London. The motto in the Ilchester arms is *Faire sans dire*, and the first daughter of the house acted on it with decision. She said nothing until her twenty-first birthday, which was near at hand, and at midnight on that birthday she walked out of Holland House and married her actor. The Ilchesters raged, but there was nothing they could do about it save to demand that Mr. O'Brien renounce his profession, and to send the indiscreet couple as far as possible out of England. A grant of land on the Hudson was secured for him, and for some years Lady Susan O'Brien languished in New York while her husband attempted to raise flax in the Hudson Valley. Whether this venture was successful or not, they returned in time to England and settled at Stinsford, and Lord Ilchester, making the best of a bad business, had his son-in-law appointed receiver-general of Dorset. Here they lived happily ever after, so far as we know, unless there is some truth in the noble lady's tale, and they lived long to enjoy their romance. He died in 1815, and she survived him by twelve years, dying in 1827 at the age of eighty-four.

The story of this unpromising marriage which turned out so happily seems to have had a fascination for Hardy, and the grave of the couple, buried together in Stinsford

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churchyard, must have stimulated his imagination. Besides the poem *The Noble Lady Speaks*, another one, *Friends Beyond*, refers to her:

William Dewey, Tranter Reuben, Farmer Ledlow, late at plough,  
Robert's kin, and John's and Ned's, and the Squire and Lady Susan  
Lie in Mellstock churchyard now.

[The various friends beyond speak, one after the other, and when  
Lady Susan's turn comes:]

You may have my rich brocades, my laces, take each household key,  
Ransack each coffer, desk and bureau;  
Quiz the few poor treasures hid there, con the letters left by me.

Which is precisely what we should like to do, if only the Earl of Ilchester would see fit to add them to the Hardy Collection in the Colby College Library.



### MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

IN OUR issue of just a year ago, we printed a census of extant copies of Robinson's *The Torrent*. Number 47 in this census was the copy which Robinson sent to Swinburne; later returned to the poet, it was next given to L. M. Isaacs. A note in the *Publishers' Weekly* (November 22, 1947, p. 3354) informs us that this copy has now been given to the New York Public Library. In the list of persons to whom Robinson sent copies of *The Torrent* in 1896, No. 3 (as listed in this QUARTERLY, p. 3) was Professor George P. Baker; but his copy was not listed in the Colby census a year ago because it had not been traced. This copy was recently presented to the Yale University Library by Mrs. Baker, and it now enters our census as

No. 60. Inscribed to "G. P. Baker, with compliments of E. A. Robinson. 11 December, 1896." The missing line on page 7 has not been inserted.

Dr. Walter Peirce, author of the Hardy article in this issue, has been a frequent contributor to the Colby College Library. We recently reported the receipt of his musical setting for one of A. E. Housman's poems.