

THE SEARCHLIGHTS



WILFRID GIBSON

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By the Same Writer

Challenge

The Alert

Coming and Going

(Oxford University Press)

Collected Poems, 1905-1925

The Golden Room

Hazards

Islands

Fuel

(Macmillan & Co.)

A Leaping Flame, A Sail!

(Privately Printed)

WILFRID GIBSON

THE SEARCHLIGHTS

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The Omen

Crouched by the rear-gun, his reluctant mind
Fails to relinquish all he leaves behind,
As through the cloudbank towards Italy
The aircraft flies; and clearly he can see,
Suffusing the blank vapour's prisoning gloom,
The firelight of the old familiar room
Flicker with lively amber flames that light
The faces round the hearthstone he last night
Dared scarcely glance at, lest those loving eyes,
Meeting his own, should happen to surprise
The fear within his breast, the fear that still
Clutched at his midriff with foreboding, till,
Leaving the tarmac with impatient roar,
The craft took off, and, in the air once more,
Despair fell from him as life raced again
With its old urgency through every vein
And the cold hollow that had been his heart
When he from all he loved had come to part
Once more was charged with courage impetuously
Beating out its old eager rhythm.

And now he

Could look into the firelit room to-night
With confidence and even meet the bright
Eyes of his wife and children. For it seemed
The vision that on the cloudbank glowed and gleamed
With golden fervor was assuredly
An earnest of his safe return, that he
Should make the happy landing once again.

And now from out the muffling mist the plane
Emerges into naked cold moonlight;
And, looking down, he sees the mapped-out white
Ice-lustred Alpine ranges sheer below,
Relieved that into some crevasse's snow
It will not be his lot to crash, and lie
A frozen corpse through all eternity.

The Gulls

Day after day the sentries keeping guard
Along the ramparts of the embattled strand
See her still pacing the harsh fallow sand,
Stopping at times to stare again with hard
Glazed tearless eyes across the bleak North Sea—
Day after day. And now they try no more
To hold her back from the restricted shore
To which each dawn her heart remorselessly
Draws her at the first glint of Wintry light
To keep her watch by the indifferent tide,
Impelled by hope that will not be denied,
And only fails her at the fall of night,
To be renewed at daybreak by the cry
Of gulls that reaches her on her sleepless bed—
Gulls that all day will wrangle overhead
With white wings glancing sharply against a sky
Of slatey cloud unrestingly, as she
Paces the desolation of the beach—
Fierce gulls whose every beaked and taloned screech
Tears at her vitals, and yet seems to be
The voice of her anger against the sea that keeps
Her love from her so long—her love who went
From her that raw December daybreak, bent
On the risky dredging of the mine-sown deeps,
Three years ago—the sea that keeps him still,
Keeps him in secret and yields her heart no news
Save that which in the skirling of the mews
Stabs her with anguish, and yet cannot kill
The hope within her.

So, day after day
The sentries see her pacing, till one dawn
They note the yelling gulls have all been drawn
Into a yammering flock that in the grey
Light hangs above a bundle on the sand,
Where, at length lapt in peace, with ears and eyes
Mercifully deaf and blind to the birds, she lies,
Harrassed by hope no longer, on the strand.

The Barrow

The soldiers in encampment on the down,
After the nightlong route-march, sprawling lie
With closed lids or eyes staring drowsily
From weary youthful faces, weathered brown,
Into the intense blue of the noonday sky,
From which the lark-notes tinkle pleasantly
Trilling through dazed exhausted minds that still
Keep marching, marching through a thunderous night
Of breathless darkness, marching on, until
The music sprinkled through the quivering light
Lulls them asleep.

And, weary as the rest,
Young Richard on the barrow's grassy breast
Lies curled, with burning eyes and aching brow,
Longing to fall asleep, too. But, somehow,
No slumber comes to him, as still his mind
Stumbles through sultry darkness, thick and blind—
A darkness that is nigh as dense and deep
As that which closed on the death-dimming eyes
Of the British warrior, who, to him unknown,
With prized utensils and flint weapons lies
Beneath him in his burial kist of stone
Within the bosom of the barrow asleep—
Lies in a slumber of oblivious night,
His death-throes long since over, and knowing not,
Although his ancient wars are long forgot,
That ever in new quarrels men still fight.

The Seals

The still soused body huddled on the strand
Suddenly shivers in the Summer dawn;
And the curious timid seals, who have withdrawn
To a safe distance, watch it from the sand
Lift up its head and slowly look around
With vaguely wondering eyes. And, even when
They see this stranger from the world of men
Sit upright, still they gaze without a sound,
As the lad stares across the creaming tide
And marvels how he ever came to be
Escaped from midnight's all-devouring sea
Into whose depths he stumbled overside
When the mine struck. He wonders now if all
His mates beneath the curdling waters lie:
And, as the sunrise reddens in the sky,
He listens to the maddening rise and fall
Of mocking waves on that unfriendly shore
With boding heart and spirit desolate,
And almost wishes he had shared the fate
Of those drowned lads whom he will see no more—
Those lads whose names he mumbles in his mind—
Those lads who always jockeyed him and made
Such sport of all his blunders, and who played
Such tricks with all his gear, and yet were kind
Enough when things went badly . . .

And he alone,

The youngest and the dumbest, seemingly,
Had been cast up by the rejecting sea
Upon a desert island of sand and stone
To die of slow starvation, likely as not,
Or, anyway, of loneliness, before
He could be rescued—stranded on a shore
Where there was naught to do but sit and rot
Among the rotting weed, cut off from life

Among the totting weed, cut off from me.

Then all at once he hears behind a stir
As the seals suddenly feeling friendlier
Shuffle towards him; and he draws his knife
In quick alarm. But, when he sees their eyes
Twinkling as though in mischief, he seems to see
His old mates jostling round him mockingly
And, grinning, turns to greet them with surprise.

The Yews

In the dark room from which the unclipt yews
About the window half shut out the light
The old man listens to the evening news
That tells once more how men still fight and fight—
The old man listens, staring at the blaze
Of beechlogs on the hearth, yet hardly hears,
As his mind drops back into earlier days
And he recalls those other evil years—
Those four long years of nightmare when he fought,
Himself, in the war that was to end all war
In a world, already in new conflict caught
And threatened with destruction as never before.
Then, as the news ends, in his chair he turns
And switches off the wireless; when he sees
A picture that again in memory burns
On the windowglass, backed by the dark yewtrees,
Rekindled . . .

And, once more, across the mire
Of Flanders floundering to the assault,
He urges on his men through bristling wire;
When he is instantly brought to a halt
And his heart almost stops beating, as his eyes
Light on a body in the deadly strands
Entangled; and his friend before him lies
With his machine-gun still clutched in his hands—
Dead hands, that, living, in old days had wrought
Such beauty, chiselling from stone a rare
Spiritual entity beyond all thought—
Hands that had only dropt their tools, to dare
All hazards in the fight for lasting peace,
Peace that eludes men yet . . .

Though from his sight
The picture fades, still on the dark yewtrees
He gazes till they merge into the night.

In the Cinema

Her sad eyes on the screen, she tries to keep
Her mind on the story, all about those strange
Americans whose lives would seem to be
So unlike anything she had known. A change
For her, could she enjoy such luxury—
Sure that, in spite of each calamity,
She would come to the happy ending, after all!

The happy ending. . . . Again the shadows creep
Into her mind and even seem to crawl,
Blurring the picture, over the bright screen,
Blacking it out for a moment . . .

When a scene,
Invisible to those neighbouring staring eyes,
Is flashed before her mind. And now she sees
A soldier stroll towards her down the street,
Whistling, with hands in pockets, at his ease:
And, as they come together, their eyes meet
As if in recognition, although they
Were strangers to each other till to-day.
Startled, they stop; and then he speaks to her;
And in a twinkling they are chattering
Gaily about every blessed thing
That comes into their heads. Soon happily
They turn and side by side they saunter on,
He, doing most of the talking; while dreamily
She knows, and queerly knows without surprise,
That for the first time she has come to life,
And there's nothing left to wish for . . .

Now a stir
About her in the audience: and she hears
A bored man grumble sourly to his wife
Who sits there dribbling sentimental tears—
And in a flash the happy scene is gone:

And in a flash the happy scene is gone,
And now she gazes with eyes dimmed with pain
At those strange antics on the screen again—
But only for a moment, as once more
Her private vision holds her . . .

And she sees

Herself alone now sheltering under trees,
While through the night the heavens seem to pour
In one vast sheet of rain, awaiting him
After her long day in the factory,
A day in which the shells had seemed to swim
Before her eyes like fishes in a sea
Of bright anticipations. In the wet
She awaits—for, surely, he could not forget!
And still awaits till long beyond the time
He had mentioned to her, promising to be
There without fail. And hour after hour
She awaits, until from the unseen church tower
Suddenly the four quarters tinkling chime
And the great bells booms out midnight . . .

Laughter now

Ripples through all the cinema; and she
Rouses, to see fantastic creatures prance
Across the screen and a crazy Disney cow
Leading an ancient milkmaid a mad dance.
She watches them, unsmiling . . .

Then again

She sees herself there, waiting in the rain,
Waiting for ever in a steady pour,
Waiting for someone who will come no more,
Waiting till Doomsday strikes . . .

If only she

Could know why he had failed her! whether he
Were faithless to her, or, if hastily
And secretly his regiment had been
Without a warning rushed off to the war—
If only she could know . . .

Again the screen

Catches her eye: and now she sees men fight
And fall in heaps, smashed by a swooping flight
Of devilish dive-bombers. Suddenly,
Reeling in death, one turns towards the light
A white drawn face, like Jim's, if Jim should be . . .

Blindly she leaves her seat, and blunderingly
Rushes out into the black drenching night.

The Refugee

Beside the friendly and yet alien
Hearthstone he watches the memory-kindling blaze
Of logs from English woodlands, in a daze
Through which he sees his fellowcountrymen
Still struggle in the horror of the night
That closed about them when in a black hour
Their rulers, crazy with the lust of power
And dominance, turned traitor to the light.
He sees his friends and those of his own kind
Caught in the toils, friends who had failed to flee
And in another land seek sanctuary
From the implacable murderers of the mind
And torturers of the body, failed, or scorned,
Scorned to forsake their country in its duress.

And now his heart is searched with bitterness
To think that he, in his despair suborned
By the seductive lure of freedom, fled
And left them to sustain the agony
And carry on the fight stoutheartedly
Without his aid.

Freedom! None but the dead
Who died for honour's sake and those who yet
In prison or concentration-camp endured,
Still resolute under torture, could be assured
Of freedom in a reeling world, beset
By all the powers of darkness. His body, free,
Had in his own land left his spirit bound
And helpless.

And now in the crackling sound
And blaze of the logs he can only hear and see
Far off the city of his heart's desire,
His native town, beneath the midnight sky
Flaring to heaven, as over it there fly
Avenging furies scattering cleansing fire.

The Watch on the Wall

From his high station on the Great Whin Sill
In a milecastle of the Roman Wall
Watching the dim fells dreaming in the still
Tender Spring moonshine, now he hears the call
Of courting curlew from a nearby syke
Answered by crake of wild-duck and the scream
Of seagull nesting on far Hallypike.
And, as he listens, still alert to hear
The approach of enemy aircraft, in a half-dream
He gazes at the rippling shimmer and gleam
Of light on Broomlee Lough; and thinks of all
The fighting and the fury and the fear
These Northern wastes have known since time began—
Forgotten tribes of prehistoric man
Warring with wolves and their own wolf-like kind:
The ancient Picts, stemming the Northward sweep
Of Roman cohorts on this very steep,
Storming and harrying year after year,
Until at length the legions were withdrawn
Southward in panic, summoned in headlong haste
Back to the succour of their mother Rome,
Or, battleworn deserters, they strayed to find
And settle in some peaceful British home:
The coming of the Saxons; and the hordes
Of Vikings sallying inland from the coast
Time and again in many a bloody dawn
From their beached longboats, host on murderous host
With wide-winged helms and bitter-biting swords.
The Normans in baulked anger laying waste
The hills and dales of all Northumberland:
The longdrawn civil conflicts breaking out
Through the ensuing centuries till the last
Forlorn adventure of the Jacobites:
And, always, startling the dark Northern nights

And, always, starting the dark northern nights
With fiery forays, the Border reiving clans.
And, recollecting how these fells have been
Bloodsoaked so often and how these hills have seen
Defeat and victory and foes put to rout
Or vanquished in a last heroic stand
Times out of mind; and wondering at man's
Insatiable lust for killing, his heart is filled,
As in the haunted night he watches alone,
With dire despair, to think that now the whole
World seethes in insensate slaughter fiercer far
Than even these Border battlefields have known
Through their long history of futile strife;
And every instant under sun and star
Cities are stormed and men in thousands killed,
And all the hardwon ideals of man's soul
In shattering disaster overthrown;
While, caught in the blind frenzy, such men as he
Who only asked to lead a peaceful life
And be allowed to cultivate and build
For future generations now should be
Compelled, by total annihilation faced,
To join in the destruction, and lay waste
Their best years, waging war with their own kind.

And, even as he stares into the blind
And ominous future, he marks the hostile drone
Of Westward-flying planes from oversea.

The Dairy Farm

Now singlehanded she must run the farm
And keep it going for Tom, if blessedly
Tom should come through the war without much harm
Tom, fighting somewhere far across the sea,
And knowing naught about his father, dead
And buried in a week.

How thoughtless she
Had gone that morning to the milking-shed,
To find Jake lying senseless there, his head
Face-downward in a puddle of spilt milk!
And, as she stood an instant, that had seemed
Time without end, still in their stalls the cows
Kept up their munching, munching placidly;
Their big eyes glinting under quiet brows,
While on their new-brushed hides, as sleek as silk,
Light from the stable-lantern softly gleamed.

She still could hear that munching, as she lay
Wakeful in bed, and see the yellow light
Kindling dark eyes, while slowly the hot night
Dragged onward to another crowded day,
Another Friday . . . And, last Friday, she
So unsuspectingly had risen from bed,
Thinking of nothing much; just busily
Concerned to do her usual jobs, with not
A thought of what she would find within the shed.
Her usual jobs! And she had had, instead,
To carry all alone across the yard
Her husband in her arms and up the stair,
And then to lay him out on his last bed,
This very bed that seemed so big and strange
Without him now. God knows how she had got
The heart to do it by herself! But then
She had always been as hefty as most men

She had always been as hardy as most men.

And she'd need all her strength now: 'twould be hard
To keep things going, she was well aware.

Only last Friday morn—and such a change!
But, in these times, when you could only live
From day to day, not knowing what the next
Might bring, changes came quick, and nothing seemed
Too terrible to happen. Yesternight
In brief uneasy slumber she had dreamed
That she awaked to find her world on fire—
The frightened cows within the blazing byre
Mooring like mad—and she had been only vexed
At being disturbed from sleep, when she awoke!
But that was just a dream; and, in dreams, folk
Seemed unaccountable. And yet, she knew,
Ay, all too certainly, she knew she might
Waken one night to find her dream come true:
For Harefield Farm just over the hillside
Already a heap of rubble and cinder lay,
Bombed one black hour. And what would she not give
To have Tom with her here to carry on,
Now Jake was dead! But Tom was far away,
Far out of reach. Three years he had been gone
To some outlandish place across the tide;
And singlehanded she must see things through
Till he came home. 'Twas fortunate for her
That it was nothing but a dairy-farm
She had to manage: and, even so, she knew
That she should have more than enough to do:
'Twould take her all her time. Still, it was well
To be kept busy in these days with not
An idle hour for thinking. Ay, she had got
Her work set. . . . And, for all that she could tell,
Tom might come through the war without much harm.
Tom might come through . . .

But it was nearly three!

Already from his roost the cock was crowing

Already from his roost the cock was crowing,
And from the byre there came a noise of lowing.
The cows awaited her impatiently,
Heavy with milk. Yet, they, she knew, when she
Should come to ease them, would stand quietly
About her, munching, each within her stall,
As they had stood last Friday, as though all
The world were still at peace, and Jake, alive—
Munching and munching on, without a care,
Munching and munching. . . . It was hard to bear.
She had best try not to listen. . . .

But she must dress

At once and set about her business
And get the milking done, however hard,
And have the full churns ready in the yard
Before the station-lorry should arrive.

The Shelter

In the air-raid shelter of the Underground
Stretched on the narrow wire racks ranged around
The walls, like corpses in a catacomb
With brows and cheeks cadaverous in the light,
By enemy raiders driven from hearth and home
War-weary workers slumber in the thick
Close atmosphere throughout the Summer night.
But, wakeful in the glitter of glazed white brick,
Dan sees a figure stumble down the stair,
A girl with wide eyes dazzled by the glare
Who pauses near the bottom; then with a moan
Sways helplessly, and, dropping like a stone,
Crumples up at the stairfoot. Hastily
The lad leaps down; then carefully makes his way
Among the sleepers huddled on the ground
To where she lies unconscious with still grey
Eyes staring. Stooping down, Dan hears a sound
Of heavy breathing; and, assured that she
Still lives, he seeks assistance speedily;
And skilfully the nurses bring her round;
When she sits up, bewildered, stroking back
The strands of chestnut hair from her white face.
Then, at a question where room can be found
To make a bed for her in that packed place,
The lad insists that she must have his rack.
So now he helps them as they carry her
And lay her on his berth; where presently,
After a puzzled glance at the unknown lad
Whose kind eyes look on her so anxiously,
Wrapt in Dan's overcoat she falls asleep,
Wornout by terror and shock, and does not stir;
In a fatigue-drugged slumber, dreamless and deep,
Recovering her vitality; while he
Against the rack leans resting, eager and glad

Against the rack leans resting, eager and glad
To think that he should have her in his care—
That he, among the sleepers who toss and groan
And mutter in their dreams, should watch alone
In sole charge of this slumbering unknown
Young creature come to him out of the night.

And, as Dan gazes drowsily at the light
That burnishes the tangles of her hair,
Somehow he does not seem so desolate.
Even for a while he nigh forgets the fate
That crashed upon his home two nights ago
And left him orphaned; of his family
The only one to be dragged senselessly
Out of the blazing ruin of all that life
Held for him: and, though even now the pain
Of loss, returning, stabs again and again
Through his young quivering vitals like a knife,
Something has seemed to lighten his despair.
For the first time he ceases to regret
He had not perished also when the blow
Fell, blasting, and wiped out with sweeping flame
All that he loved; and left none of his name
To care for him; and without warning he
Was forced alone to face his destiny.

And, now regarding her with grave eyes set
Fixedly on her slender form as she
Lies sleeping there, Dan wonders how she came
To be out wandering in that wild night
Of blitz-krieg all alone, so frail and slight
And helpless in the horror; and if she, too,
Had lost her way in life, like him bereft
Of friends and family, with nothing left
Of the old comfortable world she knew
And never doubted till it fell in wreck
And devastation. Gradually the gleam
Of curls that cluster round her slender neck

STORIES THAT SISTER FOUND HER BROTHER READ
Dazzles and mesmerises him; and he,
Drooping beside the rack, nods drowsily,
Till he is suddenly startled from a dream
Of home and the old happiness, to see
Her sitting up and glancing down at him
With timid troubled eyes. Dan speaks to her
With quiet reassuring words; but still
She sits, unanswering, her grey eyes dim
With unshed tears of frigid grief; until
One after one the neighbouring sleepers stir,
Rousing from slumber round them; and, awake
To the new day's new menace, prepare to take
Their traps up and return to homes that may
Have vanished in the night, for all they know.
She watches them as towards the stair they go—
Care-burdened parents, and young children, gay
With youth's unquenchable curiosity
And lively wonder as to what may be
Awaiting them even now up in the queer
Exciting world in which their life's now spent,
Where every day brings something different,
Some hazardous delight or thrilling fear
That makes for them seem deadly dull and slow
The old ordinary world of school and play.
Then, roused at last, by a boy's laughing shout
Released from stupor, now the girl pours out
The tale of her distresses in Dan's ear—
A tale that is his own story over again;
Yet pierces him with even sharper pain,
Recounted by her quivering girlish lips,
And, as he listens to her, wincing, whips
His soul to a fresh anger at the insane
Outrage that has destroyed their homes and all
They had simply taken for granted. Now once more
Speechless she stops as quietly the tears fall,
Easing her tortured spirit's strain. Then she,
Startled to sudden awareness, wonderingly

Looks in the face of this strange lad who stands
By her with serious eyes and restless hands,
Sharing her confidences. Timidly
She questions, asking how they came to be
Sheltering together: and Dan answers her
With careful and considerate words; and tells
How out of the night she stumbled down the stair
Into his desolate life; and how they share
Like fate. And, at his story, quieter
She grows as quick assuaging pity wells
Within her bosom; and their young eyes meet
In kindred sympathy.

And now it is time

For them to leave: so, giving her his hand,
Dan helps her down; and for a second they stand
With fingers clasped. Then side by side they climb
Into the morning of the sunlit street.

The Moon

He gazes at the moon that with its light
Seems to have taken possession of the night,
Holding in its enchantment land and sea
In silver somnolence. Yet, even as he
Feels its unearthly influence through his veins
Stealing, he sees the snowy Russian plains
Where that same moon on burning village and town
In icy impotence is staring down,
Powerless with even its cold wizard light
To hold the hate-hot hearts of men from fight
Or stay the senseless slaughter.

And now it seems,

As on that sphere of brilliance he dreams,
That it were well for him if he could be
Rapt to those regions of placidity
Far from the rumour of war and from the ken
Of the outrageous passions of murderous men,
In undissolving icy peace to lie
Under an airless unfamiliar sky
With frozen eyes that, sealed to the lunar night,
Would be untroubled by even a distant sight
Of the passion-tortured and strife-riven earth
That to his sorrow he had known from birth;
And which with every year more frenziedly
Plunged itself into direr misery.

And then, against his old familiar sky,
Cresting a little wooded knoll nearby
He sees the gable in silvered silhouette
Of the house beneath whose roof lie sleeping yet
Those who depend on him and hold his heart
In bonds that only death can wrench apart;
And knows that he could never willingly
Leave them to face alone the tragedy

Leave them to face alone the tragedy
And sorrow of the times, at least till men,
War-wearied, drop their weapons and again
Take up the tools of peace and for a brief
Season in fruitful labour seek relief.

The Dinghy

A stormy sunset over Heligoland,
Black cloudy bastions flushed with amber flared
Behind him as towards the German strand
The dinghy drifted; and, for all he cared,
Might strike a mine, or, on a spit of sand,
Grounding, might spill him out into the sea
On whose unresting welter helplessly,
Wounded and almost senseless, he had tost
So many days and nights that he had lost
All count of time; and even but vaguely knew
By what bad luck he had ever come to be
Floating around in that damned rubber bath.

One moment, he had been steering a clear path
Above the Atlantic through the midnight blue
Of Summer on level wings; the next, it seemed,
He had wakened in the dinghy, coming to,
A burnt and broken carcass. Yet, how he came
To be there, he knew nothing. Though he had dreamed
Of a confused encounter . . . blasts of flame . . .
And falling, felling through infinity,
Falling and falling into a bottomless pit,
How he had found the dinghy and into it
Had managed to drag his half-dead body he
In his woolly-witted state could not recall.
Yet, here he was; and seemingly after all
Had only saved himself from death, to fall
Into the clutches of the enemy,
Unless he should capsize.

He knew that coast—
Had known it well in the old days; and like the ghost
Of his old self he drifted towards it now
With death-dews clammy on his burning brow,
Recalling those good sailing days and nights

recalling those good sailing days and nights.

And his heart was with *The Tern*—this many a day
Laid up in the Helford River near his home
Till war was over—for the flurry of foam
Over her bows and truck-high flying spray
Sousing her sails and spattering her deck
And the free windy world of flashing lights
Eating her heart out in that close dark shed.
For any ship would rather crash, a wreck,
On reef or skerry or foundered in deep sea,
Than in dryrotting dark be left half-dead,
Imprisoned, he would wager . . . Ay! and he,
He, too . . .

Well, he could settle that, at worst,
When the time came . . .

Then with a reviving burst
Like breakers washing over sunbaked sand
His salt-parched soul was flooded with memories
Of his last trip in her. Before the breeze,
Rounding the Foreland, again he steered a course
Up the North Sea; *The Tern*, like a young horse
Suddenly loosed from stable and made free
Of wide and windy meadows, crazily
Rearing and plunging in uproarious seas
Of rollicking waves hour after exultant hour
Beneath quick bursts of sun and squally shower;
And on and on through the star-convoys night,
Until that second noon when off the coast
Of Flanders she was tacking, and swathes of white
Fog upon cold airs pouring from the Pole
About her way came wafting, ghost on ghost,
Until she blindly moved like a lost soul,
With bleating foghorn, answered from the land
That lay beyond sandbank and lurking shoal
By lighthouse-horns and by hoarse horns at sea
And clanging bellbuoys tolling ceaselessly
And he recalled how, after an endless time
Of creeping through dense mist as slowly they

Creeping through dense mist, as, slowly they
Approached the mouth of the Elbe, an ominous grey
Shadow from out of the fogbank suddenly loomed;
And for a perilous instant they seemed doomed
To be run down by a German liner; when
The fog by the evening wind was swept away:
And out they sailed into releasing light
And heard the carillons in far steeples chime
And saw in lancing rays the homes of men;
While in the West, over dark Heligoland
A stormy sunset flared—clouds-bastions black
With rainy burden, flushed with amber . . .

Back

Suddenly to the present he dropt as night
Fell quickly and he neared the German strand:
And he thought again of *The Tern*, in her dark shed
Imprisoned . . . and of the certain fate, if he
Were taken now—year after year, maybe,
Of brutal soul-destroying drudgery—
Awaiting him, bound in captivity,
Him, who had known the freedom of the sea
And of the air that none may hold or bind.

Then, in an instant making up his mind,
He heaved his broken body painfully
Over the dinghy's edge; and, plunging deep,
Without a struggle went to his last sleep
Among the ranks of the undefeated dead.

The Stars

Quitting the foyer of the theatre,
With groping hands and numbly fumbling feet
Blundering on sandbags in the pitchy street
He stumbles blindly into the blackout,
His mind still living in the clarity
Of Shakespeare's visionary Italy
Tranced in Venetian moonlight, sleeping sweet
Upon a bank through love's illumined night
And with the singing of the stars astir;
That realm wherein his soul had found retreat
From the obsession of mortal dread and doubt
In quenchless poetry's immortal light.

But now the meaning of the lightless town
Over his troubled spirit closes down:
And in a darkness deeper than the gloom
That holds the city—a corpse within the tomb
Awaiting in cold stupor of numb dismay
The thunder and lightning of the Judgement Day—
He moves on, brooding, under the starless pall
Of clouded night, of night that burdens all
Creation, blacking-out the uncertain gleam
Mankind has followed through the centuries
Of foiled endeavor in a sanguine dream
To escape the chaos and confusion and find
Itself at last in an Hesperides
Of everlasting spiritual day.

But, still a blind man blundering through the blind
Throngs of his fellow-mortals, he makes his way
Haltingly till he reaches the dark square
Where still his home stands, scatheless and intact,
Among raid-shattered houses. And, coming there,
He pauses in amazement by his own door

He pauses in amazement by his own door
Rapt in a dreaming trance, relieved to see
The canopy of cloud has suddenly
Rolled back and that the Winter sky is fair
With stars. Now, breathing in the freshening air,
He gazes on the glittering welkin, packed
With the unswerving seraphim of light
In their old order through the ancient night
Moving, unshaken and unshadowed by
The darkness that in its obscurity
Has plunged the war-racked earth. And, as now he
Rejoices in the star-enraptured sky,
On wings of song again he seems to soar
Among the quiring spheres, while calm and bright
Beneath him Belmont dreams in still moonlight.

The Parents

Silent they sit together with eyes that gaze
Intently, yet see nothing of the blaze
And cheerful flicker of the friendly fire,
But only the charred ruin of all their days
And the cold ashes of their life's desire.

Silent they sit with hearts beyond all speech
That yet, in their dumb anguish, each to each
Yearn, seeking in mute sympathy to impart
Comfort that still eludes the utmost reach
Of either's sorrow-desolated heart—
Silent, still wife and husband side by side,
But now no longer parents full of pride
In the eager enterprise of young lives they
In mutual love had quickened, lives that died,
Blasted by war, each on its untimely day
Of doom with all its promise unfulfilled.
Three sons, and each in lonely agony killed
Far from the home they loved and fought to save
From the embattled evil that had willed
Their land's destruction—one upon the wave;
One, in the desert; and one, in the air.

And now the father and mother in despair,
Still parents, though parents only of the dead,
Gaze more intently at the fire; and there
In its now flameless core of glowing red
They see their eldest, David, in the night
Of mid-Atlantic over the threshing white
Wake of *The Petrel* keeping the lookout;
When suddenly overhead is heard a flight
Of bombers; and, as he turns and with a shout
Signals the bridge, lit with a hellish flare
They see his face

They see his face . . .

Then, in the desert-glare
At an outflanked outpost, now their second son,
Ronald, with imperturbable nonchalant air
Fires the last shell from the sole unshattered gun,
And turns towards them smiling . . .

Then in a blue sky
Above the North Sea they see Philip fly,
To tackle an enemy fighter; when a burst
Of gunfire smashes the cockpit, and helplessly
His craft dives, blazing . . .

But now neither durst
Meet the stark anguish of his eyes; and so
A moment they shut their own to the dying glow,
While the ultimate horror searches their very souls.

And then the father rises and with a slow
And shaking hand stirs up the blackening coals:
When in the dancing flames again they see
Their three sons, children playing happily
Among the breakers of the Atlantic shore;
And know such bliss, once theirs, could never be
Taken from them even by the terrors of war.

The Kites

Waking at last from interminable nightmare,
Supine upon the sand—the redhot dreams
Of endless furnace-feeding, in which he fed
Himself on a glowing shovel into the red
And roaring mouth that gaped in his own head—
He sees a hovering speck in the blue glare
Of desert sky, a hovering speck that seems
At first to him to be a lonely plane.
But, when with blinking eyes he looks again,
He knows it for a solitary kite
Hanging on tireless wing in the hot sky,
Awaiting patiently the end. And now
In slow succession stringing one by one
About it gathers an unending flight
Of birds, until dark plumes shut out the sun;
And, as he lies there, through his burning brow
The fierce eyes seem to pierce his very brain,
As, slowly wheeling lower, the flock swings
Over him and he hears the flap of wings
And a harsh jangle of sharp yelping cries . . .

And now he sees again with grateful eyes
His old dale-village in the sunset-glow
Beneath its sheltering scarp of heathered fell;
While in his ear there rings the pleasant bell
Calling to evening-service, as in slow
And gossiping groups the usual dalefolk go
Towards the little church on its green hill—
The little church among its ragged firs
That over the green-mounded graveyard throw
Their sleepy shadow as the light wind stirs
Their branches with soft rustling. Then, as the breeze
Fails, with boles gleaming red the ancient trees,
Dark-plumed, above the graveyard now stand still—

Dark-plum'd, above the graveyard now stand sur—

The graveyard where in peace his fathers lie,
And where for years he, too, unquestioningly
Had looked to share their quiet company.
Then, as the bell stops, gradually the light
Dies, and with heavy closing cloud the night
Shuts down on the narrow dale; and soon the snow
Falls quietly and covers all below
With white serenity; falls and falls until
In one vast cold oblivion valley and hill
Are merged; and in the laggard chill sunrise
Still slumber on . . .

And under that white pall

It seems, too, that his homing spirit lies
Beside his sleeping fathers, after all.

The Canteen

Smoothing with pocket-combs their towelled hair,
The girls flock chattering into the canteen,
Released awhile from the workshop's racket and glare
And their strict servitude to the machine
That with its arrogant precision binds,
As slick hands keep the inflexible routine
Of dull monotonous motions, their young minds
In an exacting bondage. And, as they take
Their places at the table, Nelly finds
Herself among a group of friends who break
Into shrill tittering gossip, although she
Can scarcely even manage to keep awake.
Wornout with unaccustomed drudgery,
She swallows unregardingly the meal
That now is set before her; and drowsily
Listens unheeding to the gabble and squeal,
That all at once comes to a welcome pause
As through the canteen's hubbub slowly steal
The strains of music: when with munching jaws
And eyes fixed on the platform the girls sit,
Breaking at times into boisterous applause
To greet or encore an old favourite
Performer. But soon Nelly falls asleep;
And in her ear the humour and cheap wit
And the sentiment that makes her neighbour weep
With facile tears and snufflings sound in vain . . .

While on the green top of a craggy steep
Above the sea she sits with Dick again
Watching a snowy dazzling dithering flight
Of gulls that follow in the unseen train
Of a herring-shoal within the tide—the light
Glancing and glinting on their flashing wings.
And, as she gazes at those flickering white

And, as she gazes at those melting white
Pinions, her heart within her bosom sings
A song of love for which there are no words—
A song that pealing through the clear air rings
Over the ruffling waves that foam like curds.
And, as, in dream, her love-enraptured eyes
Follow the ever-shifting flight of birds
Who on light breezes fluttering fall and rise,
In panic she is suddenly aware
Of fear; and in her bosom the song dies
As, glancing down, she finds in sharp despair
That she is sitting on the turf alone;
And Dick, who but a moment since was there,
Has vanished: and, now mute and cold as stone
Her heart lies in her breast as, still in dream,
She knows that he is fighting . . .

With a moan

She wakes as, thronging towards the canteen door,
The girls about her in shrill chorus scream
The songs their fathers sang in the last war.

The Curlew

Deadbeat at length he sank among the ling
Under the felltop in the morning light,
He, who since midnight had been travelling,
Whither, he scarcely knew—just trudging on
Blindly, with baffled wits, through the black night
Of utter desolation, with no thought
Save only that for him his all was gone,
Gone up in smoke and flaring fury, caught
In the worldwide conflagration.

Quietly

The morning broke about him as the stars
Paled in the clear dawn over Kestrel Scars
Whose jagged crags reared stark against the red
Flush of the sunrise.

And, watching, in his head
Again those flames raged, roaring—those hellfires
That leapt last night above the city spires
And seemed to scorch the very sky until
It glowed as ruddy as the lid of hell.

And now across the greening miles of fell
There came far flute-notes, rippling rich and clear;
And, as their music quickened in his ear,
He dropt back into boyhood and again
Heard curlew calling through the April rain
As he so often over heath and hill
Had heard them with a swift responsive thrill
That fired his spirit to a wild delight
Of expectation of what life might still
Hold for his winning in the beckoning bright
Future . . . What life might hold! life, that last night
Collapsed for him in fiery ash . . .

Once more

Through hurtling fire-bombs and the havoc and roar

Through rattling me-bombs and the havoc and roar
He stumbles through the streets, hoping to reach
His home and be with his own family;
When, coming within sight of his own door,
He hears in that hell-night a wilder screech
And then a shattering burst . . . And now can see
Only a belching crater, deep and black,
Where once had stood his home; and frenziedly
He rushes towards it; but hands hold him back,
A raging madman . . .

And then dazedly

He finds himself just traipsing on and on
From street to burning street, scorched by the glare
And deafened by the uproar, and in his head
Only the thought that everything is gone—
Just traipsing on; not going anywhere,
It seems, until he finds he has left behind
The city, and has stumbled, stunned and blind,
Back to the hills of boyhood's memory.
"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills" the words
Drift healingly through his mind as once more he
Lies in the heather of his native fells,
Lies listening to the long-familiar birds
As they wing nearer down a rushy slack:
And, as still clearer the liquid piping wells
Rippling from long curved bills enchantingly,
Into his mind yet other words come back—
"The voices of the wind and of the sea
And of the curlew are the oldest voices
In all the world." And, though his heart rejoices
No more, in its despair, even to hear
Those flute-notes; yet into his bosom steals
A calmer mood, reflecting how time heals
The wounds of time; and, when the war shall cease
And the world wearily lapse into peace,
And when by land or sea or air no more
The fury of destruction and the roar
Of devastation rack men's souls with fear

Of the vastness that their souls will feel,
Though he in death alone may win release,
The ancient voices shall bring solace still
To wounded spirits; and over heath and hill
Through twilit dews of dawn and evenfall
Boys' hearts shall thrill to hear the curlew call.

The Fuse

Crouched by the uncoiled fuse, the last man left
Within the fallen town, in a dark cell
Beneath the ruins of the citadel
He awaits through what seems an eternity
The occupation of the enemy—
A naked soul, of hope and fear bereft,
A smokeless flame that burns with one desire,
To hurl to hell in one last blast of fire
The greatest number of his country's foes,
A sacrifice to all his friends who fell
Beside him in the last assault, and those,
Nearer and dearer, trapt by treacheries
And done to death by these same enemies
Before the war, when bands of raiders stole
Across the frontier. And, as he breathes the name
Dearest of all, still fiercer burns the flame
Of vengeance in his stark unflinching soul.

And now those conquering hordes as in a spell
Of aching tension he awaits, half-dazed
By the dense silence that has settled down
So strangely on the long-beleaguered town
Since midnight when the twelvemonth siege was raised
And, all the ammunition petered out,
The enemy destroyed the last redoubt
And brought the staunch resistance to a close—
Silence so strange after those battering days
And the inferno of those blasting nights
That, flaring, fired high heaven with hellish lights,
Silence so strange . . .

And in that silence he,
Without relaxing his taut vigilance
An instant, is beset by memory,
Kindling his mind to flame, bright and intense

Kindling his mind to name-bright and intense
Visions of earlier days.

Again he sees

The housedoor flapping in the morning breeze,
Unheeded, while his mother, dry-eyed, bends
Over his father's body stretched in death
On his own hearthstone, by the enemy
His son awaits now, murdered callously
Because he still refused to serve their ends
By turning traitor to his native land . . .
Again he feels his mother's sobbing breath
Fanning his heart to fury . . .

Then, older now,

A quarryman, who, having fired the fuse
To blast the hanging rockface, quickly turns
To run for safety, he sees Gerda stand,
Bright in the April brilliance that burns
To flame straw-coloured tresses, on the brow
Of a far foothill with her flock of sheep
That crop the greensward silvered yet with dews.
She stands there dreaming, maybe, of the day
They are to wed; when up the grassy steep
A mob of soldiers swarms, and, seizing her,
Carries her struggling down the rocky way
Over the frontier, before he can stir
To rescue her, although he frantically
Plunges into the river's swollen spate
That swirls between them . . .

For an instant he

Again feels those cold waters close with him
As, caught within their coil, he tries to swim
Against the snowfed torrent's force in vain:
Till, snatching at a hanging bough, too late,
He scrambles to the bank, too late, too late!

And now his heart of ice is burned again
To a hot coal of murderous desire,
A smokeless fury of avenging fire

Unconsciously strengthening me,

Love's desolated heart consumed by hate,

As, overhead, he hears the muffled beat

Of soldiers marching down the Market Street;

And then a halt, as, at a raucous shout,

Grounding their arms, they hastily fall out

To search the ruined citadel: and he

Ignites the fatal fuse deliberately.

The Darner

Beside the depot window all the day
She sits, a bent old woman, gaunt and grey,
Darning the socks until the steely gleam
Of sunlight on the needle, in her eyes
Glancing, begins to slowly hypnotise
Her tired mind. And now, as in a dream,
She sees an endless khaki-coloured stream
Of soldiers marching, and the insistant beat
Of multitudinous dogged slogging feet
Monotonously thudding stuns her ears,
Until it seems her own exhausted brain
Is a long dusty road down which that train
Of soldiers marches to unending war—
Soldiers who have worn these socks to rags, and who
May wear them when they have been darned anew,
If they from battle should return. And now,
Shaking the grey locks from her wrinkled brow,
Her dark eyes strained with grief too tense for tears,
She thinks of her own grandsons, for whom she
Had knitted warm socks so industriously,
And now will need to knit or darn no more.

And once again within her head the beat
The neverending thud of young men's feet
Still marching on to meet unflinchingly
An unknown but imperious destiny
Resounds, as she bends lower in her chair
Over her work, and even more carefully
She darns the socks that other lads shall wear.

The Hill Farm

As he limped home again with riddled tank
And engine firing-short from the night-raid,
He had to bail out quickly as he crossed
The Pennines in thick cloud: and, as he sank,
Borne by his parachute that swung and swayed
With every gust, through the thick vapour-bank
That closed about his body, chill and dank,
It seemed to him that he was like a lost
Soul drifting through oblivion with the glare
Of hellfire, just escaped, still in his eyes.
For still he saw that enemy city flare
Beneath the bomb-loads screaming through the air
That, bursting, seemed to blast the very skies.

And now he wondered where he would come to earth—
Hardly a happy landing it would be,
Unless his luck changed! For already he
Had heard his craft crash on the crags. A shame
It had to go! But he was not to blame!
And, anyhow, they had had their money's worth
Of dropping death upon the enemy,
The people who had paid for it.

Yet, too bad

'Twould be, should he crash, too, and smash his bones
Upon a felltop pike of jagged stones
Where only the raven or the corbie-crow
Likely would ever find him—though he had had
Not such a lousy time of it, as things go
In these days.

Now the cloud thins, and he hears
A bleating far beneath him, to his ears,
Hillborn, himself, a homely sound and sweet.
More rapidly he drops, till suddenly
He feels a moving mass beneath his feet

He feels a moving mass beneath his feet
And, sprawling on wet fleeces, finds that he
Has landed slap into a flock of ewes,
The little horned blackfaces, that hastily
Across the felltop, bleating out the news,
Scatter, as now he struggles up, to free
His shoulders from the harness; and languidly
The parachute subsides into a brake
Of rusty bracken webbed with silver dews.

Now in the raw-edged morning, free to take
What road he will, he stands and looks around,
While in his ear he hears the welcome sound
Of brown burns tumbling down from the hill-moss.
He stands there, gazing, somewhat at a loss
Which way to turn. For he at first can spy
No dwelling within sight. But presently
His ranging eyes light on a house of stone
That stands stark on the naked fell alone
Beside a wind-wried solitary tree,
An ash, by its sparse leafage, seemingly.
So he sets off towards it, stumbling through
The heavy bents and splashing up the dew
At every step; and slowly blunders on,
Lightheaded with fatigue; yet with an edge
On his sharpset appetite that serves to keep
Him for the time from sinking down to sleep;
Until at length he scrambles over a ledge
Behind the house and sees at the backdoor
A grey old shepherd, lank and quiet-eyed,
Who, as he nears the threshold, steps aside,
That he may enter; yet without a word
Or question to this stranger who at dawn,
And, seemingly, a hungry early bird,
Has suddenly dropt on them from the moor.

Now, coming into the kitchen's friendly glow
Where on the open hearthstone dry neat burns

Where on the open hearthstone dry peat burns,
He sees an old wife stooping over a pan
Of frizzling rashers whose savour sharper whets
His hunger. Then, as the old woman turns,
She pauses a moment with astonished stare
To see a stranger accompany her good man.
But, without speaking, now she quietly sets
The Sunday dish of bacon on the bare
Deal table, scrubbed almost as white as snow.
And then the airman notes his host has drawn
A chair up for him, also: and down they sit
To eat, without a word, save now and then
When the old shepherd offers a polite
Remark about the weather or the crops.

And, as the stranger looks round that firelit
And quiet kitchen, his heart almost stops,
To think he may have really died last night
And dropt into an afterworld that knows
No rumour even of a world at war—
The old mad world where men still fight with men
As it collapses round them in death-throes—
To think he may at last have earned release
From service, and be left to live in peace
Among these hills . . . And, seeing again the pyres
Of that demolished city's funeral fires,
Half hopes he need return to life no more.

In the Cafe Royal

Alone in the Café Royal, among a crowd
Of service men on leave, the painter broods,
His mind plunged in the blackest of black moods;
And hardly hears the chatter and the loud
Laughter of men released from discipline
For a brief while, with leisure to recall
There are other things than fighting, after all:
Though they by brutal means alone can win
The desperate fight against brutality,
Destroying the destroyer, that life can yet
Yield moments of delight, if they forget
Even for an instant the compulsory
Business of dealing, and of defying, death.

Among the servicemen, himself too old
For service; and yet unable to keep hold
Of the urgency that was his very breath
And being, in a universe obsessed
With a passion for destruction and in days
When death blasts every land and all life's ways
Are blocked with ruin, he mourns for the old zest
Of effortless creation that no more takes
Possession of his spirit, although his will
May keep him drudging at his easel still,
Habitually daubing.

And now he wakes

Suddenly from his brooding as the sound
Of a lively voice beside him pierces through
His glum abstraction; and he stirs anew
To life, as, startled, he turns quickly round
And sees a youth with face deep-scarred by war
And yet alight with eagerness: and he,
On the white tablecloth soon happily
Pencilling, recovers his old touch once more.

The Floe

When coming to in the middle of the night,
He sees the ceiling even in that vague light
Gleam with a hard cold and unfriendly white
That sears sore eyes, it seems the Arctic snow
Is all about him yet—that on the floe
He is still adrift, and evermore shall know
Only this Winter world of ice-choked sea;
That, derelict, throughout eternity,
Beneath snow-mantled bergs stretched helplessly
In a frigid stupor under an icy sky
He, for his sins, has been condemned to lie,
Half-corpse, and yet, half-conscious, while gradually
His limbs congeal to ice, in numb amaze
That he who, since a lad, has spent his days
Feeding the hunger of that hellfire blaze,
Half-naked in the stokehold's swelter and glare,
Alone on an icefloe with a polar-bear
Should end!

 And now once more he seems aware
Of that great furry bulk that to and fro
Shambles and shuffles through the creaking snow,
Marooned with him on the famishing foodless floe,
Half-frightened and half-angry; and once more
He hears those grunts and growls.

 The chance of war!

A chance he had little guessed time held in store
For him, when with his shovel he had fed
The roaring and insatiable red
Ravening of the furnace—to lie dead,
Maybe, by that dead brute—an odd chance, ay!

Heaving the heavy coal incessantly
Into that glowing hellmouth, feverishly
Clutching the shovel with a desperate grip

Clutching the shovel with a desperate grip,
Once more he sweats and swears, while the doomed ship
Through midnight Northern seas on her last trip
Shoulders and shoves . . . a shattering shock . . . a bell
Dinning and dinning . . . Then, how, he cannot tell,
He finds that he has scrambled out of that hell
Of cateracting cinders, by a neck
Winning the race with death, and on the deck
Hangs for an instant as the heeling wreck
Settles, and plunges him into the black
And swallowing swirl . . .

And now once more he is back

Where all about him icebergs split and crack
With eldritch yelling, back with that old bear
Adrift on the floe: though how he clambered there,
The Lord alone knows! And yet, anywhere
Seems better to him than that blazing hold
Or those devouring deeps—back with that old
Growler and grunter; though, likely enough, the cold
Will quickly finish the business begun
And bungled by fire and water. It's poor fun
For death, it seems, to quit a game, unwon—
Death, always a bad loser!

And now his eyes,

Still staring up, begin to realise
With slow and half-incredulous surprise
The ceiling is a ceiling, indeed, and no
Mere overhanging cornice of frozen snow:
And, as the blood of life begins to flow
More strongly in his veins, at length aware
He has been rescued, he lies dreaming there
And wonders what became of that old bear.

The Recluse

Disgust at the folly of his fellowmen,
Their selfishness and levity, had fired
At first his youthful heart to anger. Then,
As the years passed and he grew bitter and old,
Cheated of all it fervently desired,
His heart within his breast turned hard and cold;
And, calloused in austere indifference,
From commerce with his fellows he retired
Within himself: and in his house that stood
Hid in the fastness of an ancient wood
He dwelt alone: and only issued thence
Now and again to buy necessities—
Content with the companionship of trees
That, though in the struggle for existence each
Contended with his neighbours, beech with beech,
Thrusting out roots and branches for more space
To spread themselves, unlike the human race,
In an unconscious undeliberate
Selfishness lived, rejecting no ideal
Of love and knowing neither scorn nor hate.

Thus, when on some unwelcome errand he
Must venture into town, it seemed to him
The folk who thronged the noisy thoroughfares
With silly smirking faces, or, dour and grim,
Led by illusion or obsessed with cares,
Lived out their whole existence in an unreal
And topsy-turvy world of fantasy:
And, with relief, to their futility
He left them, and returned to live at ease
With the unhurrying, unimpassioned trees.

So, even when he chanced to hear that war
Had broken out, it only seemed one more

had broken out, it only seemed one more
Instance of man's outrageous lunacy;
And he resolved to take no part, but leave
Them in their foolish frenzy to the blind
And witless work of murdering their own kind;
And though his sleep was broken in the night
By aircraft ranging with peace-shattering flight,
Above his woodland home, while he must grieve
To think man's war should violate the fair
Virginal innocence of the free air,
He still felt no desire to join the fight.

Yet, when one dusk he saw the heavens flare
With a pulsating flush of angry light,
And from the distant town heard thud on thud
Of bombs exploding, suddenly his cold blood
Was fired with a strange restlessness. So, ere day,
Still half-reluctantly, he took his way
Towards the city. But, even when he came
Into those streets destroyed by blast and flame,
He still felt something of his old scorn, to see
How man to man brought ruin and misery.

And then his eyes were drawn towards a crowd
About a shattered house, where in a cloud
Of smoke and dust men toiled with fire-scorched hair
And blackened faces—toiled, as in despair
Of rescuing the trapt family who lay
Helpless beneath the rafters and the rubble
Of their crashed home. And, looking on those drawn
And haggard faces in the light of dawn,
His heart was suddenly shaken by a trouble
Of fiery compassion as he gazed;
And, on an instant impulse, undismayed
By the risk of walls collapsing, from a dazed
Exhausted labourer he seized a spade.

The Enemy

Going at dawn to carry up the glen
Provisions for the partisans, she sees
On the hillside a crumpled parachute
Caught in the branches of the hanging trees,
And, lying underneath at the cragfoot,
A huddled body in the enemy's
Uniform dressed. With quicker step she makes
Towards it through rank grass and brambled brakes,
Soaking her skirt with chilly splashing dew:
Relieved to think that yet another foe
Has met his death before he had time to do
Much mischief, shot down, likely, by the men
Who guard the mountain-pass, and glad to know
One enemy less is left to land and loot
And burn and devastate the countryside.

But, reaching him and from a nearby stone
Scaring a watchful raven, with surprise
She finds he is not dead, although he lies,
A huddle of broken bones, with eyes set wide
In witless stare. For, as she stoops down low
By him, she hears a breathing, heavy and slow,
While twisted lips keep up a muttering,
Repeating over and over an unknown word.
And, shooing off again the hungry bird,
She wonders what it means, that senseless moan.

Standing erect, at him she gazes down
With hard unpitying eyes, remembering all
The sorrow and unspeakable suffering
His kind have brought to her—her husband slain
And her young son, too—and what would befall
Her country if the enemy should win
And all the heroic resistance prove in vain—

And all the heroic resistance prove in vain—
Village on village and town after town
Going up in flame, and men and women shot
In cold blood, ranged against a blackened wall,
All of their ravaged homesteads to remain,
Old broken men and women whose only sin
Was to defend their hearths and from the lot
That had already befallen other lands
To try and save their fields, and from the hands
Of brutal soldiers shield their children's lives.
And, as she thinks of all the many wives
Like her already widowed, she stands there
Regarding him with unrelenting stare,
While in her ear that strange word sounds again
Over and over in a weak refrain,
That unknown word: and yet, she well can guess
Its meaning . . . Ay, but he may die of thirst,
For all she cares, and perish in distress
Without her minding—ay, the devil may die . . .
Then, while she gazes at him, suddenly
As dawnlight glances in his wide blue eyes,
It seems to her it is her own boy who lies
Broken and with the death-sweat on his brow,
Pleading to her in his last agony,
Pleading to her . . . And, in an instant burst
Of pity, she stoops down again, and sets
The waterbottle to his lips and wets
His parching tongue and throat. And quickly now
He stops his anguished mutter when the fresh
Wellwater touches his hot fevered flesh
And, spilling, trickles over his young breast;
And, like a tired lad, he turns to rest
As life goes from him with an easy sigh.

The Abbey Tower

On the parapet of the crenellated tower
He leans, fire-watching in the Summer night:
And, as with clear reverberating chimes
The clock below prepares to strike the hour
Of midnight, he recalls the far off times
When his forefathers from this very height
Kept watch for other enemies, the bands
Of Scottish reivers, bearing fiery brands,
Descending to maraud the market-town;
Hoping to ford the river Tyne and raid
Its merchant-riches and to batter down
The Abbey gates and pillage the Abbot's store,
Putting all to sack and slaughter. And he once more
Recalls how in an even earlier age
When the town was threatened by the heathen rage
Of Northern hordes all night Saint Wilfrid prayed
Among his monks, invoking the swift aid
Of God to thwart the invaders; when suddenly
The valley of the Tyne was filled with blind
White mist in which the baffled Norsemen strayed
Nightlong in scattered bands that failed to find
A ford; and how next day the river came down
In spate and barred all access to the town.
And now he muses, wondering if, maybe,
Over the town he loved in days gone by
Saint Wilfrid's spirit hovers protectingly
To shield it from the foreign foes who fly
Threatening it with destruction from the sky.

The Bells

The bells burst out in a rejoicing peal—
The bells that have been mute for two long years;
And at that sudden clangour her senses reel
As, leaning on her garden-gate, she hears
Those senseless bells that ring for victory,
For victory in Libya. And, dimmed by tears,
Although her troubled eyes no longer see
The pale November sun through the crisp air
Glinting on russet leaves that quietly
Fall from the churchyard-beeches, on the glare
Of torrid wastes of blazing desert sand
In a heart-searing agony they stare.

The land of victory—for her, the land
That holds her heart's defeat, where life lies dead
For her with him she loved, whose supple hand
No more shall slide the rope, while overhead
His well-loved tenor bell keeps tune and time
In the village peal, as in the days now fled,
Days that in her young heart kept up a chime
Of happiness until the threatened pain
Of parting jangled all. Now, like a rhyme,
A witless rhyme that beats a dull refrain,
While still she stares across the glaring sand,
She hears his bell again and yet again
Sound in the peal, rung by another's hand—
Still blind to the frosty light that pleasantly
Gilds wood and field of their familiar land
With Autumn glory—until no longer she
The burden of victorious bells can bear;
And turns, with fingers in ears, and hastily
Enters the house and stumbles up the stair.

The Fire-Fighter

He had always dreaded fire, or, fire, at least,
Escaped the hearth, that in a twinkling turned
From friend to fiend and, ravening like a beast,
Devoured men's homes in one ferocious feast
With fangs of flame. And now the whole world burned.

In one vast conflagration all the world
That he throughout his life with love had known
In all its beauty and terror now was hurled
Into destruction's pit of fire, and whirled
In ashes on the wind of fury blown
Up to the unheeding heavens, to which in vain
Men looked for help, to see in stunned amaze
No merciful release of quenching rain,
But only hordes of hate that in insane
Delirium added fuel to the blaze.

He had always dreaded fire. And now each night,
Not only spiritual fire that burns the mind,
But actual flames he and his mates must fight
With hatchet and hose in hell's own heat and light
With desperate hearts, choked lungs, and eyes, half-blind
That smart with smoke and scalding steam, to save
The homes of men.

And, even as he lies in
His bath's cool peace, once more the fierce flames rave
About him, and wave after blasting wave
Sweeps through his head with crackle roar and din . . .

And then in numb fatigue he seems to stand
Once more beside the embers in the dawn,
A trickling hose still in his blistered hand,
Among that hapless hopeless little band
Of homeless men and women, with faces drawn

OF HOMELESS MEN AND WOMEN, WITH FACES GROWN

And empty lightless eyes that stare and stare
On the red smouldering ruin of their lives,
All that through years of ceaseless worry and care
They had managed to gather together, in dumb despair—
Labour-scarred husbands and work-weary wives
With their bewildered children in the rain.

He had dreaded fire. And now in his soul the roar
Raves; and he knows that pity for the pain
Of those poor mortals who have toiled in vain
Must still consume his heart for evermore.

The Last Shift

The gate clangs and the nightshift cage descends;
And, with eyes closed against the dust and grit
That swirl up in the draught, into the pit
Once more he drops, he, with his boyhood's friends,
Old mates and cronies now this many a year,
Packed close about him; and thinking, too, maybe,
Of their sons serving in the war, as he,
Of his own lad. For, as they drop down sheer,
Down, down and down, a thousand feet or more,
Down, down and down and down into the black
And tortuous entrails of the earth, young Jack,
A pilot since the outbreak of the war,
Happen, even now, is climbing three miles high
Or thrice three miles, up, up into the rare
And icy upper reaches of the air,
Up, up and up into the brilliant night
To tackle enemy squadrons, bearing down
To pound with death some sleepy English town—
Jack, soaring through thin air in flashing flight,
As into the thick closeness of the earth
His father drops, to work nightlong and hew
The coal. Jack, fighting . . .

Yet, maybe, it's true

His own work, too, is fighting: for a dearth
Of fuel for the machines, without a doubt,
Would lose the war for us. Ay, sure enough,
Even planes could never soar unless the stuff,
Metal, and coal to smelt it, were dug out
Of earth's black bowels by such men as he,
The miner-sons of miners, who know the trick
Of handling tools, cutter and wedge and pick,
Almost by instinct.

And now suddenly

At the shaft-foot the cage stops with a jerk

At the shaft-foot the cage stops with a jerk
Beside the lamproom, and he takes his lamp,
Burnished and newly-tested against blackdamp;
Then mounts a tub to rattle to his work
Over the jolting trolley-rails and ride
Six miles or so along a gallery,
Long stript of coal, to where, beneath the sea,
Still richly-loaded measures run—the tide
Sweeping and surging in a welter of white
Far overhead, the island-circling deep
Where restless trawlers and destroyers keep
Unwinking watch throughout the livelong night . . .
And, over them, the sky where, full of pluck,
Jack fights!

Nay, he must not let his mind run
On suchlike thoughts! Jack is their only son;
But Jack, as other men must take his luck.
And, even in the pit. . . Where should he be,
Himself, if he let his thoughts loose, sniffing all
The risks, the hundred things that might befall?
Life, at the best, was chancey: though, certainly,
War has increased the hazards: and even his wife,
Lying now snug in bed, God knows what might
Drop down on her from out of the clear night!
But he could not let his thoughts . . . And such was life
For all of us in these days; everywhere
Folk faced such hazards, knowing that each breath
Might be their last: ay, all hobnobbed with death,
Hail-fellow-well-met! by sea or land or air.

'Twas strange to-night, though, how his thoughts had run
On dangers. Ay, and reaching the pithead,
He had felt like turning back again, instead
Of stepping into the cage as he had done
So often without giving it a thought,
As if he fancied he might break his neck!
And, taking his lamp and handing in his check
To the lamman old Dick Dodd he had even caught

TO THE MIPPHAN, OR DICK DOGS, HE HAD EVEN SAUGH
Himself out, muttering "So long!" to him,
As though he would not see his old mug again,
Or cared much if he didn't! It was plain,
Plain as Dick's mug—and that was something grim—
His wits . . .

His wife slept snug—Jack, overhead,
A red-haired guardian angel on the alert!
And, likely enough, neither would come to hurt
To-night: and in the morning from her bed
His wife would rise as usual. For no wars
Could keep down Susan, always game and gay
To get things done. Even the Judgement Day
Would likely find her singing at her chores.
Ay, she would rise as usual to prepare
His breakfast and his tub and set things straight,
Against his coming. She was never late;
And he would always find things fair and square
On his return from the pit.

And, as for Jack—

His folk had been pitfolk time out of mind;
And it took something special to down that kind
Or get them windy, even when things looked black.
Hazard was in their blood. They lived on risk,
And relished it, or, took it as it came.

And now he hears somebody shout his name
Above the racket of the tubs; and brisk
And sharp he turns to answer an old jest—
He, always more than a match for anyone
When it came to ragging—while the trucks still run
Through the low dripping dusk, to come to rest,
Reaching their journey's end, with squealing brakes.
Then, nimbler yet than any, down he leaps;
And, scrambling over rocks and coaldust heaps,
And splashing through black puddles, now he takes
His way yet further alone the narrow seam;
Stooping yet lower as the roof slopes down.

Rock-studded, threatening to crack his crown,
For all his leather cap; and wades a stream
That trickles from a rift in the coal-face.
Then, nigh on hands and knees, 'twixt closing walls
Into a three-foot seam he slowly crawls
And by his own coalcutter takes his place.

Crouched all night long, he works with aching bones,
Half-blind with dust and sweat: while all around
He hears the pit “talk” as the stresses shift
And cutters grinding with harsh rasping sound,
While now and then a rattle of falling stones
Strikes sharply in his ear. Throughout the night
His thoughts are with his folk—his wife, asleep,
He trusts, in well-earned slumber, snug and deep;
And Jack, above the clouds in reckless flight.
All night he works till, as the shift at last
Draws to an end, the cutter jams; and now,
Stopping to wipe a trickle from his brow,
He hears a long low rumble down the drift
That thunders nearer and nearer . . . Roof and walls
Heave all about him, cracking . . . Blast on blast
Shatters his world for him . . . till gradually
A dreadful quiet settles; and, by falls
Of rock cut off from life, he finds himself,
Together with his old mates, Bill and Joe,
Half-stifled, blind and dazed, as they crouch low,
Huddled in darkness on a narrow shelf.

Speechless they crouch through an eternity;
Then, chuckling brokenly, he mutters “Come, Bill,
Let’s clear our throats and turn a tune, until
They find us—and you, Joe! What shall it be?
Come, lads, pipe up! And, happen, they may hear,
And reach us easier.” Huskily, “The Keel Row”
He starts; then, shyly joined by Bill and Joe,
His voice through the hot dark rings true and clear.

—

—

All Souls Eve

Watching her lonely hearthfire dully burn,
On All Souls Eve she sits with haunted eyes.
Then, taking up her work again, she sighs
“If it were only true that they return—
If it were only true!” And, as she sews,
Her needle, twinkling briskly to and fro,
Keeps her mind busy for a while, although
Her heart within her widowed bosom knows
No solace or surcease from grief, but yearns
Again to hear him speak her name and see
Him smiling at her, half-amusedly,
Because of her concern with his concerns.

The fire burns clearer; but still quietly
She keeps on sewing, till her needle stops,
And from her lap the snowy linen drops
Suddenly as a flame shoots suddenly
Out of the crackling coal with a red flare,
Dazzling her eyes; and, searched with hope and fear,
Her heart now quivers, fluttering, to hear
A ghostly rustle close behind her chair.

Yet, knowing her desire has been fulfilled,
She sits transfixed and dare not turn her head,
Afraid to meet the anguish of the dead
Eyes of her love, in bloody battle killed.

The Wild Swans

He stands beside a Highland firth in dream
Watching the first rays touch with kindling gleam
The salty ripples, as the laggard sun,
Nigh to the shadowing ben-tops having won,
Over the saddles of the Eastward hills
Glances and then extravagantly spills
His spendthrift gold across the flooding tide.
And now into the quivering radiance glide
Swans, convoying their cygnets, with curved white
Wings arched above their backs as in the light
They sweep in circles, with a wary eye
For hawks and gulls that hover in the sky;
While those buff balls of fluffy innocence
Venture unconscious into the immense
Dangers of sea and sky, without a care,
Bobbing and cheeping, even unaware
Of their proud parents' vigilance. With eyes
On the lively brood, and hearing their eager cries,
The lad on leave, after Dunkirk, recalls
His own young days when, even as those downy balls
Of innocent curiosity, he, too,
Launched on these very waters, and scarcely knew
Of any hazard, or cared—so he might float
Through shower and sunshine in his little boat
All the unending Northern Summer day
That only for a few short hours makes way
To twilight—in his boat that buoyantly
Bore him so bravely out upon the sea
Of life's adventure, life, that in those years
Of boyhood, still unshadowed by war's fears,
Had seemed to promise all desired delight
While he, scarce conscious how by day and night
The watchful eyes of love that never slept
About his way a constant vigil kept

About his way a constant vigil kept,

Sailed on . . . his boat . . .

And now he sees once more

Another boat that from another shore
Bears him by sandy spits and tricky shoals,
One of the troops of battle-weary souls,
Barely escaped from hell, beneath a sky
Wherein above them still the hell-hawks fly
And swoop in pouncing death . . .

Then he recalls

How, a defeated remnant, from the walls
Of a devastated city they marched out,
By overwhelming forces put to rout,
And struggled towards the low unsheltered coast
Hardpressed by a triumphant armoured host.
Now he can hear again the hammerbeat
Of boots that clatter through the long retreat
On the hard road that leads towards the sea—
Clat-clatter day and night, till suddenly
They stumble in eerie silence through deep sand.
And now again he waits on that bare strand,
With his packed comrades waits, night after night,
Day after day, beneath a dinning flight
Of craft that deluge death or rake the ranks
With fire . . . While out beyond the low seabanks
The little boats of England pitch and toss
On the groundswell, summoned hastily to cross
The enemy-infested seas, to reach
And rescue England's sons from Hell's own beach,
He awaits his turn until he, too, may wade
Neckdeep in the cold tide, where, undismayed
By low dive-bombers hurling down their hate,
In their small craft the eager seamen wait
To haul him safe aboard . . .

And so once more

He stands alive on the loved rockbound shore
Of his familiar firth—again a boy
For a brief while sharing the innocent joy

For a brief while sharing the innocent joy
Of those young cygnets in adventuring,
Regardless of the ever-hovering wing
Of death, into the world of Spring's delight—
For a brief while, until again to fight
Duty recalls him . . . to his death, maybe . . .
Yet, fate has spared him once . . .

And on the sea

The vigilant swans still circle restlessly
Guarding their brood . . .
to death, maybe . . .

And yet,

In the hour of doom England did not forget.

The Harvest

He looked across the full-eared stand of wheat
Ambered for harvest, in stiff ranks arrayed
In the still light like soldiers on parade;
And thanked his stars it was his job to defeat
The ravaging armies of the enemy
And bring to naught the menace of blockade
By U-boats slinking through the encircling sea.
For he, at least, could follow his own trade
In wartime, even, and serve his country best
By raising up the stuff of life, instead
Of trafficking with death. Assuredly
A godlike task was this of his, to see
That folk each day should have their daily bread!
And he was only called to stand the test
Of labour, labour that he loved, and fight
No foe but those whose every trick he knew
Of old, the weather and disease and pest.
And this year even the weather had seemed a friend
Set only on seeing the harvest safely through,
Working with him to bring a golden end
To his endeavours.

In the evening light

The ripe ears rustled as a brief breath stirred
Among the straws; and in that rustle he heard
The whispers of foreboding that strenuously
By sheer hard labour he had striven to keep mute
Within his heart; so toiling that each night
He should drop, dog-tired, and sleep sound as a brute,
With no chance left for brooding. For, though he
And three sons had been spared to work the land,
His youngest boy was fighting oversea
Where death reaped harvest from the tank-ploughed sand,
Rich harvest of young lives remorselessly.

And, as he looked across the rippling grain,
He stood on the station-platform once again,
As, from the window of the crowded train,
Getting up speed with fussy puffs, Bill leant
With laughing face and waving cheerily—
Bill, in his thoughtless boyhood, only bent
On following adventure to the end,
And even careless of what that end might be;
Just set on squandering all he had to spend.

To-morrow they would be reaping: even now
Scythes were at work round the edges of each field
Cutting a road for the tractors. A bumper yield
It was like to prove: and next year he must plough
The upper pasture, too, and try to win
Even a heavier crop . . .

And Bill, maybe,

Next year would be back home, or . . .

Suddenly

His ears were filled with a dry grinding din;
And for a while he seemed, himself, to stand
Fighting with Bill in scathing baffling sand . . .
And then, back in his homefields once again,
He stared, unseeing, at the amber grain . . .
A bumper yield—and yet, if Bill should fall,
A bitter barren harvest, after all!

On the Acropolis

He had always hoped to see Greece and to stand
Among the ruins of the Acropolis
And look afar to fabled Salamis,
And watch the Aegean washing on the strand
Of the Homeric legendary coast:
And he was here at last! Yet, little he
Had guessed that with a rifle he should be
Crouched among blocks of marble, while a host
Of bombers swarming overhead lunged down
Death and destruction on his land of dream;
And like a raging devastating stream
In spite the Huns swept on from town to town.

He had always hoped to see Greece and explore
The battlefields of freedom, and to look
On the actual scenes that, brooding over his book,
He had envisaged many times before
Through his imagination in the light
Of poetry. And now life's irony
Had realised his vision mockingly
And rushed him to his land of dream, to fight,
While the hordes of barbarism menaced all
Its chiselled beauty, blasting with bomb and shell
The marble columns about him; and freedom fell
Stricken and bleeding: and he, too, must fall
In hopeless battle . . .

Louder yet the roar
Closed down on him; and something pierced his brow
With fire . . .

He had always hoped to see . . .
And now
He knew that he should leave Greece never more.

The Bomb

He only wished he were well out of it,
Back in his workshop, shaping with his knife
The tiny beasts: for he in army life
Could never be much else than a misfit—
He, with his knack of carving cunning toys
To give delight to little girls and boys.

If only he were back, it would be good
To smell once more the scent of new-cut wood
And even the thick odour of hot glue,
Instead of khaki-dye and the foul stench
As the bombs burst, his men in practice threw
So inexpertly . . .

 And now another fell
Short of the target and towards the trench
Rolled unexploded: and, before he well
Could realise what he was after, he
Flung himself down on it as shatteringly
It burst; and perished, cursing with his last breath
The fumbling fools he died to save from death.

The Waterlily

He had best not think of it, but keep his brain
From reckoning the risks. So, as the train
Moves cautiously towards the front, sand-blind,
Across the desert, he recalls to mind
The quietest of memories: and again
Under boughs lusted with fresh-fallen rain
He stands beside the still mid-forest pool
And looks into the leaf-reflecting cool
Green lucency on which a lily lies,
The first to open; while two dragonflies
With emerald glitter in the early light
Flicker above it in a dizzy flight,
Whose restlessness, in its rapidity,
The flower's pelucid immobility
Had seemed to render even more intense.
And as, in dream, he drinks through every sense
Tranquility from the lily's light-filled bowl
Of alabaster petals, his troubled soul
Recovers itself, and he regards again,
Unmoved, the destination of the train.

The Break of Day

In the chill Winter break of day they labour, unceasing, to shift
The rubble of splintered slate and stone and the fire-charred wood
Of the cottage by bombers demolished, that, unscathed, for so long has
withstood

The sapping of time's decay, frost's gnawing and seeping of rain
And the onset of Autumn gales and the Winters that time and again
Have buried it over the lintels, smothered in swirling snowdrift—
Withstood three centuries' weathering, only at length, after all,
In an instant of swift, unforeseen, calamitous night to fall,
Levelled at last by destruction plunging down out of the sky.

And now, as their lifelong neighbour stoops down with the others, to lift
The blackened rafters whereunder deep-buried the old couple lie
Overwhelmed in the ruins of their home, where unapprehensively they
Had lived for full three score of years contentedly day after day,
His heart is heavy within his old bosom and slowly his strength
Seems to fail from his overstrained sinews. But when, uncovered at length
In the harsh wan icy glimmer of the raw and rime-laden air
Of the haggard white daybreak he sees the broken old bodies lie there
In the ultimate peace together so quietly side by side
He stands with grizzled head bowed. Yet, gradually in his sad heart
Consolation wells up, and he thinks how at least they have died
Unsevered, and knows now there's nothing that ever can tear them apart.
And, bending over them still, he recalls with slow heart-easing tears
A voice from his boyhood's memories of the early and untroubled years
And he sees in a vision once more that silver-haired reader stand
By the glittering brass eagle lectern with delicate white lifted hand,
As the Summer sunset brilliance from a Western lancet falls
On the wrinkled old upturned face, and, echoing from the walls,
He hears that silver-clear voice in a tender triumph declare
“And in death they were not divided . . .”

And now the chill morning air
Quickens to glowing gold about them as they lie there.

The Escape

Out from the fiord with muffled oars the boat
Steals through the merciful bank of fog that holds
The land and sea obscured in smothering folds,
So that no sentry or watcher from the sky,
Waiting to pounce on stooping wings, may spy
Anything on the midnight tide afloat.
And, crouched on the wet thwarts, as though in fear
Those unseen enemies might chance to hear
Their very breathing or the beating of their hearts,
The father and mother with their family
Of sons and daughters, fugitives who flee
The conquerors of their homeland, speak no word,
And tremble when a fog-bewildered bird
Suddenly out of the opacity darts
With startling scream, that seems the actual cry
Of their own tortured spirits. And, when the bank
Traacherously for an eternal instant parts,
And the moon stares down on them from the sky
As though in league with all the devils who fly,
Seeking their prey, they curse the very light
They have rejoiced to see on many a night
Of peacetime silvering the fiord. But dank
And cold the friendly fleece enfolds once more
Their little craft; and, though it seems to chill
Their bodies to the bone, they welcome it
With sharp relief: and, bending to the oar,
Each rower rows on with a sturdier will
Through the white swathes with shimmering moonshine lit.

Then, as night ends, they see a warship loom
Out of the fog; and for a moment it seems
That they have but escaped, to meet their doom
Under its bow and perish in midsea:
And, listening to the younger children's screams

And, listening to the younger children's screams,
The parents almost wish that this might be
The end of their tribulations, and that they
Together, an undivided family,
Might swiftly sink to dream-unhaunted sleep
In the absolute oblivion of the deep.

Yet, as, unfounded, on the wash the boat
Tosses, and through the mist the break of day
Glimmers, they steer once more upon their way,
Marvelling to find their frail craft still afloat,
With lighter hearts and eyes that hope to see,
Together yet, the country of the free.

The Starry Skies

He walked through a strange countryside at night
Where war-dark windows showed no friendly gleam
Of lamplight or companionable firelight,
While in his ear only a flooded stream
Poured its cold music, as he stumbled on
With heart in denser dark, its last hope gone,
And spirit straying in bewildered blind
Distress, as he turned over and over again,
Over and over and over in his mind
The news the day had brought; until his brain
Was but a channel through which incessantly
Reiterated words of tragedy
Poured even colder than the icy spate
Or snowfed hillborn waters. Then, at length,
He stopt to rest against a farmyard gate,
Breathlessly, to recover his wilting strength;
And, leaning on the steady wooden bars,
Lifted his eyes and suddenly saw the stars.

He saw the stars with strangely dazzled sight
As though for the first time, as if his eyes
Never before had kindled to those bright
Celestial scintillations in the skies
Of earlier Decembers. And now he knew
'Twas not his own eyes that he saw them through
But John's—John's eyes that never would quicken again
To see stars sparkling in the icy air—
John's, as a boy . . .

And now in that dark lane
On that old Christmas Eve with hoarfrost fair,
John's fingers warmly clasping his lefthand
In tense delight, once more he seems to stand
And hear again those shrill excited cries
Ring in his ear, as when, for the first time

ring in his ear, as, when, for the first time
The baby-boy looked on the starry skies
Glittering over a world of frosty rime . . .

And even now his dead son seems to be
Beside him, staring in tranced ecstasy.

The Last Hoop

He smells the sawdust, hears the whiplash sing
And crack, and quick hoofs thudding round the ring,
As, in his spangled tights, with steady eyes
On the flaming hoop, he crouches for the spring,
Tense on his hunkers: when, slipping suddenly,
His horse beneath him falls, and, crashing, he
Finds . . .

 that in tattered battledress he lies
Pinned under a stranded tank; while furiously
The fight about him rages with a flare
Of hellfire . . . hell . . .

 And now sharp talons tear
His guts, as all around him roar and yell
The infernal fiends, while he lies roasting there
On the hot coals, and devils like giant lice
Swarming about his body stab and slice
His wincing flesh . . . when a yet louder shell
Screams in his ear; and to a block of ice
He slowly freezes . . .

 Now down a leafy lane
The caravan is jolting; and again
He sees low branches in the early light
Spangled with sparkling beads of April rain,
While on an upper bough somewhere unseen
A blackbird sings, and through the glistening green
The gay notes ripple and tinkle, clear and bright
As the fresh raindrops falling cold and clean
Through the sweet country air that he breathes in
With eager nostril; glad once more to win
Free of the town's stale atmosphere, at last,
And all the senseless scurry and the din
Of swarming streets. Then, topping a sharp rise,
They leave the shade; and with delighted eyes
He sees a young foal scampering free and fast

He sees a young foal scampering free and fast
With frisking hoofs about its dam who lies
In the green pasture, with adoring stare
Following her offspring: and he knows that there
In that limber curd-white colt at last he has found
The steed of all his dreams, that anywhere
He had scarcely looked to find, alive . . .

Once more

His ears are filled with the racket and uproar
Of battle . . .

And yet, at the same time, around
The ring he is gaily riding, as never before,
On those white haunches lightly balancing . . .
Then, crouching, clears the hoop with easy spring.

The Cave

When, as a boy, he so adventurously
Had sought the long-abandoned Robbers Cave,
He had little thought that, as a refugee,
One day he would seek it hurriedly, to save
His very life from his own countrymen—
That he should need to flee his home and lurk,
Crouched like a hunted creature in its den,
From townsmen, hired to do the butcherwork
Of upstart tyranny, hiding—men he knew,
Lifelong acquaintances with whom it seemed
He would get on easily his whole life through,
As in their childhood. Little had he dreamed
When he was playing among them as a lad,
Quarrelling at times and scrapping harmlessly
Between the games, one day they would go mad,
Bitten by a mad dog's ferocity,
And turn on friends and neighbours!

It was well

He found the cave alone that Summer day
And never had been tempted even to tell
His closest bosom-friend he knew the way.
Some instinct must have checked him, some strange blind
Presentiment, it would seem; and it might be,
Since no one knew his secret, they would find
Some difficulty, tracing him, till he
Could seek securer sanctuary: although,
With every road stopt and the frontier shut
And those mad hunters ranging to and fro,
Searching for him in every peasant's hut,
They might pick up the trail. The cave, no doubt,
Would still be known to some old forester
Who would be forced to let the secret out
Under the threat of some vile torturer.

For in these days the world had slipt right back
Into the habit of barbarity,
Bodies and spirits stretched upon the rack,
While murder walked the highway openly.
And even they were murderers, those false friends
Who, though in their own bodies they moved still,
Were dead souls, murdered to serve murder's ends
And wreak like puppets the arch-murderer's will—
Murderers and victims, both, or, at the worst,
Soul-suicides.

And yet, not all; for some
Had fought for freedom, facing the accurst
Forces of tyranny; and, should it come
That he must die as they died, in the end,
His soul, in exile, would not be alone,
As now his body was, without a friend,
Crouched in a cavern of dank and dripping stone.

And, sure enough, it would end thus, even should
The hunters fail to find him. When he fled
The evil that the faithful had withstood,
He had forgotten hunger, the most dread
Ally of tyrants, and that the cave could be
No final refuge. When men would enslave
Their fellowmen, there is no sanctuary
For any soul, even in the deepest cave.
Better to perish, fighting in the light
For freedom at hope's forlorn last barricade.

And now he rose and left the cavern's night
And turned towards the town, no more afraid.

The Snow

Snow falling out of the low tawny sky
And whisked into his face with stinging dry
Crystals, the kind of snow likely to lie
And pile up, flake on flake, into a deep
Obliterating blanket that would keep
The brown earth hapt in undissolving sleep
Week after week, the kind of snow that he
In boyhood always longed so fervently,
As Christmas Day drew slowly near, to see
Transmute the sombre landscape overnight
Into a strange blue-shadowed glistening white
And unfamiliar country of delight.

Snow falling—yet, as on his sentry-beat
He trudges through the hours with numbing feet
And body losing rapidly all heat,
It hardly fills his heart with the old glow
To feel the crisp flakes driving, and to know
That he has got to face a night of snow!

But what, in such a world, could bring the joy
It brought in the old days when, as a boy,
He little dreamt the future would destroy
All that made life worth while, that he should see
The whole world plunged at once in misery
By the black forces of brutality!

Yet, as he paces briskly to and fro,
He sees in dream a shining hill of snow
Flushed by the tardy Winter dawn's red glow,
And himself trudging up—the wind's keen edge
Tingling his cheek—dragging a squeaky sledge;
And then from the steep summit's frozen ledge
He launches down the slope of stainless white

He launches down the slope of stainless white,
Bedazzled in the full clear morning light.

And now he almost wishes that he might
In that far day's delirious ecstasy
Of heady speed have shot unknowingly
Into the oblivion of infinity.

He almost wishes he had never grown
To find himself in an alien world alone,
Stript of delight and all that he had known
Of home and happiness, too good to last,
Caught in a whirlwind and before the blast
Into the maelstrom of destruction cast.

Snow falling—and now he longs that it might fall
And fall till in white death it buries all
His ravaged world beneath its icy pall.

The Searchlights

After her long shift in the factory
Exhausted by the gruelling heat and din,
Ready for bed, she switches off the light
And draws the blackout curtains, to let in
The Summer airs: then stands spellbound, to see
The searchlights sweep the star-encrusted night
With wheeling rays that, over the dark town
Describing each its zenith-ranging arc,
Cross and recross, weaving incessantly
Fantastic patterns in the sky, that seem
The occult silver symbols of some strange
Unhuman and celestial mystery.

And, by her attic window that looks far
Over the silent spaces of the park,
With elbows on the sill she crouches down
To watch the slowly-swivelled beams that range
The heavens, unmindful of their sinister
Significance, held in a quiet dream
By the cold fascination of the bright
Blades that outflash the brightest burning star,
Moving in ceremonial ritual
Of beauty that brings healing to her mind,
Which but a moment since had seemed to her
In its fatigue to reel in dizzy blind
And utter helplessness. Now she forgets
For a brief blest oblivious interval
The factory's ceaseless racket and the frets
And worries of the daytime, when she stands,
Her body all one ache, and her deft hands,
Minding her tyrannous machine, must move
Machinelike in an everlasting round
Of automatic action, that still lets
Her fancy in distracted frenzy rove

Her fancy in distracted frenzy love

The hazard-haunted spaces of the sea,
Where, in a tanker, bearing in its hold
A freight of high-flash petrol, over a tide
Within whose depth sharklike the U-boats glide,
And under the constant menace of a sky
Through which the dread dive-bombers hawklike fly,
Steve, even now, maybe, sails homewardbound:
Until her heart with him in one fierce flare
Consumes to ash, one instant, and the next,
Is plunged into the green devouring cold
Death of the ocean.

But, as the freshening air
Of midnight breathes on her flushed aching brow
With soothing solace, into her soul, perplexed
Beyond endurance by the world's distress
And harassed by the hazards that beset
Their innocent love on every hand, there steals
A sense of beauty in the terror, as now
She watches a broad ray that, even yet
Brighter, serenely sweeps the starry sky,
Dazzling her drowsy sight, and gradually
She droops in slumber's kind forgetfulness.

The Bellbuoy

Just as his strength was petering out, he reached
The clanging bellbuoy, and his fingers clutched
An iron rib of the great cage that swung
On the slow-surgingswell: though, as he touched
The crusted vibrant metal, quivering
As the bell's hammer struck at every swing,
Jarring and jangling, a gull, passing, screeched
Into his ear so startlingly he nigh
Let go his hold. But, in an agony
Of drowning desperation, now he clung
With stubborn barnacle-like tenacity
To the last chance of life; till he, at length
Recovering by a miracle his strength,
As though by superhuman power possessed,
Could hoist himself from the cold clinging sea,
Reluctant to release him from her clasp
Of fathomless malevolence, and could grasp
The ring that topped the buoy with rusty crest;
And with his belt to the swinging cage contrived
To lash himself securely. And, now slung
To that uneasy perch, he slowly swung
With the buoy's motion, deafened by the clamour
Of the bell's strident and nerve-shattering hammer
That rasped each fibre of his frame, till he,
Racked on vibrating iron, swayed helplessly
In a stunned stupor drowsed above the tide—
The solitary soul who had survived
The striking of the mine. Throughout the night
Still helpless on the dipping cage he hung
As, in the waste of waters wallowing,
The rolling tolling buoy unceasing swung
With iron clangour, through the cold starlight
Reverberating harshly far and wide,
Knelling his shipmates' death

knowing his shipmates' death . . .

Yet, in the blind

Unconsciousness of his sound-battered mind
A feeble flame of life kept flickering,
Fed by remembrances of early days.
Though, limp as a drowned corpse soused in the chill
Of death, his body drooped inertly, still
In spirit he was rambling stony braes
Above his highland home; and from a height
Caught in a sudden dazzle of stormy light
His earliest glimpse of far alluring seas
Silvering the horizon; and first felt
The tug of tidal waters in his breast
That nevermore would leave his heart at ease
Nor let his venturesome spirit ever rest
Shut in its native strath beneath a belt
Of gloomy prisoning pine . . .

And then again

On glittering waters slashed with squally rain
In his first craft, the *Jenny*, that led the fleet
Of herring-drifters, a lighthearted boy,
He put out from the firth into a West
Of sunset brilliance, tingling with the joy
Of salt and lusty living; while in tune
And time with slapping waves his pulses beat
And through his veins the blood raced headily
With the swift swirling rhythms of the sea;
Until, the strong air drugging him, he drowsed.
Then suddenly a yell of "Herring!" roused
His startled wits to action; and again
He hauled hard on the nets, a man with men;
While over the low bulwarks silver cold
Bright shoals of herring slithered down the hold
In flickering torrent, till the *Jenny* rode
Low in the water with her precious load
Of deepsea wealth, three hundred cran or more,
As slowly back they steamed towards the shore . . .
And then at dawn his senses clogged with sleep

And when at last, his senses clogged with sleep,
Unsteadily he stumbled with bowed head
Beneath the burden of the heavy creel
Along the quay towards the gutting-shed
Where wives and lasses awaited him, and laughed
To see him stagger dizzily, and chaffed
When his foot tripped and with a sudden reel
He slumped full-length beneath a clammy heap
Of slippery herring . . .

that changed suddenly

To a great bell of iron in which he swung
Backwards and forwards, a cold clashing tongue
Of jangling metal, shattering the black
And hollow plangent night that seemed to be
Somehow in his own head. And, at each swing,
The clanging of the clapper seemed to crack
His brittle skull, that shivered, splintering
In flying fragments, like a bursting shell,
Whose flinders, flaring through the darkness, fell
Sizzling into the tide, a scarlet-scaled
And flame-finned shoal of herring that singed the mesh
Of the dragnet to tinder . . .

And now he sailed

Once more the waters of a darker sea
With other shipmates, trawling other fish
With nets of saw-toothed wire, instead of string,
Sweeping the deep for mines amid the thresh
Of slashing sleet and the stinging icy swish
Of scudding spray through an unending night . . .
When, caught in a sudden squall, the trawler struck
A mine that by some devilish ill-luck
Had dodged the nets and bobbed against the bow . . .
A blinding heaven-shattering burst . . . and now,
By crashing waters overwhelmed, he drank
The ocean at a gulp and swiftly sank,
Dragged down by his logged seaboots through a dense
Uproarious darkness of unfathomed night—
Down. down and down . . . Then. as his waking sense

Became aware of the first sullen light
Of Winter daybreak, he discovered he
Was swimming all alone in a wide sea
With numb and feeble strokes, until a bell
Tolled faintly in his ear across the swell,
And towards the buoy he struck out desperately . . .

And, as he hung now, swaying with the slow
And circling motion of the cage, again
Through half-recovered consciousness the clang
Of iron striking sharp on iron rang,
Grinding his very bones with icy pain,
Till it was drowned in the swift furious roar,
As a chance friendly reconnoitering plane,
Spotting the buoy's strange burden, swept down low;
And, seeing him marooned there, soared again
And S.O.S.'d a message to the shore.

The Sniper

Crouched in the covert of the reeds he lay,
Vigilant lest it chance the enemy
Should in his desperation choose to take
The risk of crossing the deep-frozen lake
To outflank the defenders of the town,
Now that the ice was thick enough to bear
Even the weight of the artillery
And lumbering tanks . . .

 He crouched as he'd crouched there
Of old, so often on a Winter's day,
Alert, but bent on quite a different sport,
And, with the best luck, counting to bring down
Only a brace or so of mallard or teal
Or pochard; and with quite a different sort
Of gun, too!

 In the moon like burnished steel
The grey ice glinted; but no sound he heard,
Save now and then the rustle of a bird
Roosted among the reeds. Well, they could sleep
Secure to-night without a fear that he
Were after them, now he had other game:
And he had no dog to flush them into flight;
And, even should they rise up in the night
So thickly that their wings shut out the light,
He would not risk a shot. Ay, they could keep
Their heads tucked in and slumber peacefully,
As far as it concerned him, now it came
To shooting other fowl, and fowl that fought,
Instead of flying. Almost now he caught
Himself deploring his old skill and all
The seasons he had spent in slaughtering
The harmless creatures who could not fight back.
He had always liked to see them in the Spring
Nesting among the reeds, or in the light

nesting among the reeds, or, in the night
Flashing and flirting in their courting-flight
With lustrous plumage, bronze and green and black,
In all its Springtide brilliance royal and rich,
Reflecting golden gleams of April sun.
And even he, somehow, without a gun
At hand to tempt him, rarely felt the itch
To kill. But there were always mouths to feed;
And, in the Winter when a heavy fall
Blocked every road and all the world around
Under a stringent frost was held snowbound,
He had had to slaughter birds from utter need.

And now in every land, on every sea
And in the very air men killed and killed
Their fellowmen; and, even had he willed
To keep his hand from slaying, there would be
A bitter price to pay if his home fell
Before the invader, and his family,
Into the clutches of the enemy,
A bitter price to pay, a bitter price.

And now he hears across the level ice
A distant roar of engines and the clank
And clatter as tank after armoured tank
Out of the covert of the further bank
Ventures upon the surface of the lake,
That quivers, buckling, under the great weight
Creaking and rumbling as the tanks roll on.

Well, when they come, they will not find him gone;
And his luck will be out, if he should not
Send at the least one driver to his fate:
And, happen, he'll not need to fire a shot,
If, roused by all the racket, God should wake
From his long slumber, and the ice should break!

The Red Deer

Down the steep braeside of the island ben
The red-stag scrambles into the deep glen,
Leading his troop of does and fawns; and then,
Snuffing the seabreeze, tosses his head and shakes
The lingering films of sleep away; and takes,
Now lightly trotting through dew-darkened brakes
Of russet bracken, his way towards the strand
To graze the machair. And soon the little band
Of mild-eyed followers about him stand
Hock-deep in saffron weed and, wondering, stare
Across the waves that in the morning air
Flourish their foam like shocks of snowy hair
About their gleaming shoulders. Then, quietly
Turning their backs upon the restive sea,
They leave the weedy tangle, and eagerly
Browse the green juicy turf with teeth that crop
The wet blades crisply, till they reach the top
Of a low howe; when all at once they stop,
Startled, with pricking ears, and round once more
Towards the kyle, over which with desperate roar
A plane swerves drunkenly; then, to the shore
Crashing in clouds of smoke, bursts into a blaze
Of petrol. One long moment the deer gaze
Upon the flames in paralysed amaze,
Dark eyes reflecting with red flicker the fire
And rampant fury of that roaring pyre:
Then all together, moved by one desire
To quit for evermore the haunts of men,
They scamper in panic back towards the ben
And seek the peaceful shelter of the glen.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been retained.

It was hard to determine across page breaks whether there was a stanza break or not.

With some offset lines, it was hard to determine if the intent was to be relative to the previous line, or right justified, or simply a consequence of the original typography.

[The end of *The Searchlights* by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson]