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Title: Islands

Author: Gibson, Wilfrid Wilson (1878-1962)

Date of first publication: 1932

Edition used as base for this ebook: London: Macmillan, 1932

Date first posted: 17 February 2013

Date last updated: October 13, 2014

Faded Page ebook#20141059

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

ISLANDS
POEMS, 1930-1932

ISLANDS

BY

WILFRID GIBSON

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON
1932

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BY R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, EDINBURGH

By WILFRID GIBSON

HAZARDS, 1930
THE GOLDEN ROOM, 1928
COLLECTED POEMS (1905-1925), 1926
SIXTY-THREE POEMS. A Selection for
use in Schools and Colleges

TO
DOROTHY UNA RATCLIFFE

CONTENTS

ADVENTURE

[The Blue-Peter](#)
[Jungle Drums](#)
[Above the Storm](#)
[Before the Wind](#)
[The Dancing Spears](#)
[Adventure](#)
[The Feathers](#)
[The White Stag](#)
[Avalanche](#)
[Dead Calm](#)
[The Minaret](#)
[Tempest](#)
[The Storm](#)
[In the King's Chamber](#)
[The Unseen Rider](#)
[The Sleeping Dragon](#)
[The Peak](#)
[Panic](#)
[Coaster](#)
[The Tryst](#)
[Islands](#)
[Guillemot](#)
[Olympus](#)
[Sail on, Sail on!](#)

TRAFFIC

[The Telephone](#)
[The Linn](#)
[The Glance](#)
[Sal](#)
[The Preacher](#)
[The Recollection](#)
[Taking them Unawares](#)
[The Surprise](#)
[The Years Between](#)
[The Dream](#)

[The Old Doctor](#)
[The Bright Glance](#)
[Her Death](#)
[The Unrevealed](#)
[The Cut](#)
[The Dark Forest](#)
[The Window](#)
[The Appointment](#)
[The Separate Bed](#)
[The End of the Game](#)
[Fruits of the Tree](#)
[His Last April](#)
[From Day to Day](#)
[All Souls](#)
[The Cows](#)
[Jocelyn](#)
[Come Life, come Death!](#)
[In the Dead Hour](#)
[The Broken Link](#)
[The Unseen Housemate](#)
[The Poplars](#)
[The Shifted Chair](#)
[Isolation](#)
[The Last Visit](#)
[Broken Toys](#)
[Moonstruck](#)
[Early to Bed](#)
[Coming upon Them](#)
[The Dark Gift](#)
[The Old Man Listens](#)
[The Easy Chair](#)
[Gone to Bed](#)
[The Sick Boy](#)
[Time, Gentlemen, please!](#)
[Marching on](#)
[The Hunter's Moon](#)

SAILS

[Out of the Air](#)
[Sea Swallow](#)
[The Outer Isles](#)
[Skye](#)
[Loch Shielraig](#)
[Singing Waters](#)
[Canna](#)
[The Island Bull](#)
[The Primrose](#)
[Gairloch](#)
[The Stag unseen](#)
[The Birds of Saint Bride](#)

[Green Cormorant](#)
[Dunvegan](#)
[Scur-nan-Gillean](#)
[From Night to Night](#)
[The Stormbow](#)
[Drifters, Mallaig](#)
[The Sleepers of the Isles](#)
[The Sound of Sleat](#)
[At Sea](#)
[The Singing Island](#)

CORONACH

[In Exile](#)
[Renewal](#) (In Memoriam, R. B.) (*For E. M., W. de la M. and L. A.*)
[Who shall remember?](#)
[The Singer of the Trees](#) (In Memoriam, John Freeman)
[No Son](#)
[In No-Man's-Land](#)
[Died of Wounds](#)
[The Singer of the Isles](#) (In Memoriam, Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser)
[Coronach](#)
[Draw close the Curtains](#)
[Are there no other Isles?](#)

HIGHLAND DAWN

[Song at Midnight](#)
[Winter's Breath](#)
[The Little Birds](#)
[The Swooping Wings](#)
[The Birch](#)
[Hear You Nothing in the Glen?](#)
[The Wishing-tree](#)
[The Raider](#)
[The Island Songs](#)
[Not Proven](#)
[Sheldrake](#)
[Island Dawn](#)
[The Last Word](#)
[His Fetch](#)
[On the Edge of the Tide](#)
[The Return](#)
[Too Late](#)
[Glencoe](#)
[The Old Wife](#)
[Red Ranald](#)
[The Little Croft](#)
[The Island Graveyard](#)

[The Golden Hill](#)
[Highland Spring](#)
[Flight](#)
[The Exiles](#)
[The First Flake](#)
[Highland Dawn](#)
[Eagles and Isles](#)

ADVENTURE

THE BLUE-PETER

The day has come for sailing; and at last
The brisk blue-peter flutters at the mast.
Too long beneath the mountains we have lain
While winds and waters called to us in vain:
Too long the inn has held us, and too long
Our ears have hearkened to the tavern-song.
The time has come to quit the company
Of those who dread the isolating sea,
Who, slumbering through night-watches, spend their days
Carousing in the ingle's drowsy blaze:
For what are they to us who are the sons
Of tempest, in whose veins the salt tide runs,
Whose pulses answer to the ebb and flow
Of all the seas that travel to and fro,
Whose feet have trod the tilting deck from birth
And stumble only on the stable earth,
Whose eyes can pierce the spindrift of the night
And blunder blindfold in the tavern light,
Whose hearts must ever in the throng and press
Ache with intolerable loneliness
Shut in by walls as in an airless grave,
Whose home is the unwalled unrafted wave,
Who each within himself can only find
In solitude the comrade to his mind,
And only in the lone sea-watch can be
At ease at length in his own company.

The brisk blue-peter beckons; and at last
Our souls shall ride full-sailed before the blast
Into the perilous security
Of strife with the uncompromising sea.

JUNGLE DRUMS

Huddling among the scared baboons, he watches
From his uneasy refuge in the boughs
The battle-royal as the lions roll,
A whirl of lashing tails and crashing limbs,
Round the contested carcass of the quarry,
But now, a lithe light-hearted springbok leaping
In the still crystal of the wizard moon;
When suddenly the snarls and skirls that rend
The tense expectancy of jungle-night,

Ripping his midriff, scooping out his vitals,
Stop dead—those steely clutching claws of sound
Blunted and muted to a thudding thrumming,
A far dull thudding, as of the jungle's heart-beat
Grown audible—the heart of occult evil
Pulsating with slow measured palpitation
Of sluggish blood, and the dumb sulking lions
Skulk through the brush, awed by that mesmerising
Monotonous redundant muttering menace,
Relinquishing their quarry that not even
One jackal stays to snuffle; and in the branches
No shuddering baboon beside him huddles,
All stolen off like soundless ghosts unheeded,
As nearer, clearer, rolls that stunning drubbing,
A ghostly rub-a-dubbing like the drumming
Of ghostly marchers ever closer coming,
The bloodless drumming of a bony army
Beating again to unremembered battles
On the taut tympan of the tom-toms rattling
In cracking fusillades, then dully grumbling
Like sullen thunder in far hills, then rumbling
Like earthquake underfoot, then sharply shattering
The zenith with a cataract of clattering
That peters to a pattering stuttering mutter,
Now seeming but the pulse of his own terror
Feebly aflutter, now a spate full-flooding
The strained walls of his thudding breast to bursting,
Then a slow drub of bludgeon blows nigh clubbing
His senses to unconsciousness, then startling
His frayed and fretted nerves awake
With crackles as of burning brake,
Then sinking slowly to a lamentation
Throbbing and sobbing through the wizard moonlight
Until the sobbing strangles in the tangles
Of crass embrangling creepers' throttling clutches
And, suffocating under smothering lumber
Of centuries that crashed in crushing cumber
To a gross bloated fever-ridden slumber
Glutted with all the blood-lust of the jungle,
Is muted to a muffled moaning mumble
Droning and dulling to a silent stupor
More dread than death—then rousing of a sudden
A rattling roulade on his very eardrums,
Reverberating through his shuddering midriff
Rending each anguished fibre of his being
Till, just a stretched skin on earth's hollow gourd,
He throbs and quivers, swinging at the thigh-bone
Of the old inexorable skull-faced Drummer
Madding the fearful hearts of men to war.

ABOVE THE STORM

Sheer through the storm into the sun the plane
Shot, streaming silver from its wings;
And he who'd won through volleys of blind rain
And baffling smother of dense cloud
To heights of rare
And eager air,
Keen-edged as icy wine,
Where only man's heart sings
In the celestial hyaline,
Where only man's heart sings, adoring,
Beyond the range even of the eagle's soaring—
He, who had braved the tempest's rage and roaring,
Sang out above the loud
Propeller's whirring
As in the crystal light
Above the curded white
Of billowy snows
He rose
Even to his own heart's height;
And happily in flashing flight
He soared and swooped
And zoomed and looped
With ease unerring
Through the unsearchable inane
In dizzy circles of insane
And death-defying insolence
Of youth's delight
Above the sunny dense
And seething cloud whereunder
Still rolled the thunder
Over an earth already drowned in night.

He soared and swooped again,
Exulting in the flawless enginery
Of hand and brain
That, even in the heady urgency
And wildest flight
Of his insatiable soul,
Obeying his intrepid will,
Still kept serene control
Of his frail plane
That hung
Ever on peril's edge and swung
In thin and scarce-sustaining air
As by a single hair,
When one missed heart-beat or untaken breath
Might lunge him in a fiery plunge to death.

And still in aerial ecstasy,
A fluttering midge in the infinity
Of heaven, he revelled till the light
Drained even from that celestial height,

And through the icy beryl of the night
Star after star dawned silverly.

BEFORE THE WIND

Aboard her craft once more, she breathed the air
Of hard-won freedom: standing by to take
Her trick at the helm, she watched green-water break
Over the bow; and, as she took the wheel,
Thrilled to its tug and wrench and the mate's "Take care
She doesn't gybe!" and thrilled again to feel
The exultant sea-lift as the slicing keel
Cut clean the flaking foamheads—body and mind
Braced, mettled and strung tensely as the taut
Mainsheet, to keep the ship before the wind,
Enraptured to escape from brooding, caught
Into the conflict of the wind and wave
That shook her soul free from the thrall of thought,
The dire obsession of futility
That for so long had darkened all her life:
And now she felt at last that she was free,
Recovering in the elemental strife
Her own identity and the zeal to save
Her soul alive. Clear-eyed, with tossing hair
And lifted brow, she breathed the sharp salt air,
Nerved to an urgency that held her mind
Steady on even keel, and proud to find
Her seamanship sufficing still to keep
Through the blind smother and welter of the deep
The cutter running well before the wind.

THE DANCING SPEARS

By dark glass shielded from the utter glare
Of colour razor-keen that cuts the air
With fiery lancing
Of purple emerald and ruby light,
His young eyes yet can hardly bear
The flicker and the flare
Of icy pinnacles and needles glancing
Beneath the flashing of the Dancing Spears;
And as he lingers by the mast,
While older shipmates huddle snug below
In the close cabin's reek and glow,
The Aurora of the Polar night
Suffusing steeppling berg and level floe,

And the sharp perilous sense of vast
Infinitudes of kindled ice and snow,
Sting his young heart to tears,
To tears that freeze
Ere they can fall—
Tears from a heart overcharged with joy to know
His dream come true, that he at last
Has won through all
The leaden labouring of sullen seas,
Butting and buffeting and blundering
Blindfold through fog and sleet and through the thundering
Of shattering cascading brine,
To this still crystalline
World of his heart's desire,
He who had hankered hungrily
For the sheer icy ecstasy
Of Boreal solitudes that hold
The secret of eternity,
Of Boreal solitudes whose spires
Kindle and bicker with the burning cold
Quick coloured fires
And icy flames of youth's desires.
And as he stands a tingling instant there,
Ere he must seek the human warmth below,
In the cold lustral glow
Of purple emerald and ruby light,
In quietude that only seems
Intenser for the rumble and creak and screams
Of far-off splitting bergs, he knows,
As only youth can know,
The utter ecstasy of solitude, and dreams
The unchallengeable dream an instant there
In a rapt trance, through which a shadowy bear
Shuffling across the visionary snow
Steals like the spirit of the Polar night.

ADVENTURE

As slowly from the gateways of the mills,
Whose monster crystal cubes of lighted glass
Still hum and glitter on the darkening hills,
Into the frosty dusk the tired hands pass,
They breathe the crisp chill of October air
Edged with an eager hint of early snow
With tingling lips; and grateful for the gloom,
Eyes, aching from the mills' electric glare,
Are lifted to the cold horizon where,
Against the smouldering amber afterglow,
Purple the dome of the gasometer
And the slim soaring stacks, each with its plume

Of smoky purple shot with rosy fire,
Over the labyrinthine city loom:
And as the apocalypse of colour fills
The eyes of lads and lasses, unaware
They pause in silence, and each bosom thrills
Pierced suddenly with pangs of sharp desire
For some unknown, unknowable delight,
Rapt an eternal instant in the dream
Of some strange city on the edge of night...
Till the glow shivers to an icy gleam
And darkness closes down upon the hills.

THE FEATHERS

Stridently cutting through
The diamond flame of heat
That holds the city in a glassy trance,
The searching chanting of the muezzin sings
Above the empty street
From the slim minaret whose lance
Of ivory pierces the dense blue,
Where on still planing wings
A solitary kite,
Dark as charred paper floating in the light,
Hangs hovering; when, as the call to prayer
Sinks to a murmur, suddenly a white
And startled pigeon flutters through the air
In tumbling flight,
And from the glittering height
Death drops on unheard wings;
And as again the dark kite swings
Into the blue, a snowy flutter
Of feathers falls in the deserted square,
And a lean mongrel snoozing in the gutter
Opens one eye and blinks
In the white glare,
Licking warm blood-drops from his muzzle, and sinks
Again in deep
Undreaming sleep:
But the child peering through the latticed shutter
Shivers with sudden cold
To see life stricken in mid-air
And heaven darken with the wings of death,
And instantly grown old
Already feels the cruel talons tear
His fluttering heart, and cowers with sobbing breath,
Eyeing with frightened stare
The scatter of white feathers lying there.

THE WHITE STAG

As down the mossy woodland ride the car
Shivered the quietude of forest night,
Our startled eyes saw suddenly afar,
Bedazzled by the wheeling shaft of light,
Under the boughs a young stag, strangely white
In the cold brilliance, with uplifted head
Of haughty-browed and antlered majesty.
As though the wild, a moment brought to bay
By our machine's invasion, sought to stay
The shattering onset, for one moment he
Challenged our coming, then unhurriedly
Followed the rustling unseen herd that sped
Through the dark brake, an undefeated king:
And as, into the turnpike hurrying,
We shot from out the brooding woodland shade
As though by panic terror put to flight,
Behind us once again the wild closed in,
Unruffled by the flurry, glare and din
Of our brief passage; and the undismayed
Lord of the forest ranged the realms of night.

AVALANCHE

He had but crossed a crumbling bridge
Of snow that crusted a crevasse
And gained a foothold on a jutting scar,
When his close-muffled ears
Caught a dull rumbling from afar;
And, glancing towards the ridge,
It seemed the mountain shrugged its shoulders
As if to shake off fleecing snows,
And his blood froze
To see the white folds stir
And loosen and slip downwards in a mass
With gathering roar and torrent race
Towards the spur
On which he stood, and almost instantly
About him hurled
A cataract of icy spears
And smothering snow and crashing boulders—
About him hurled and swirled
While he,
Save for a spray of splinters in his face,
Stood scatheless on that isle of rock
In the glissading devastating sea

Of terror shattering down the mountain-side:
Then in his ears the roaring died,
And once again the blizzard clearing
Settled to white tranquillity
Of smooth and scarcely ruffled snow,
As speeding to the valley far below
The avalanche swept out of sight and hearing:
While stunned and shaken by the shock
He stood with fluttering breath
As one come through the cataract of death
Trembling bewildered on the other side;
And to his still dazed eyes the light
Quietly shining on celestial snow
Burned with a strange unearthly glow
Intolerably bright;
As, still unrealising, he
Watched in tranced ecstasy
A solitary eagle glide,
A bird of gold
Circling through cold
Cerulean skies
About serene unshadowed peaks of paradise.

DEAD CALM

The gale
Dropped suddenly,
And losing way with slatting sail
We staggered on the sea

As men,
Bereft of breath,
Borne on the crest of life, and then
Dropped in the trough of death.

THE MINARET

Into the black gorge of an alleyway
He stepped aside to let the yelling pack
Of pariah dogs sweep down the moon-white street,
When suddenly the startling pistol-crack
Of a scared rider's whip rang out, and sent
The yelping rabble into his retreat:
And, overborne and tumbled in the mud
By the mad onset of that ravening flood
Glutting the alley's throat, nigh scared to death

Beneath the pad of frantic scurrying feet,
The panting bodies and the steamy breath
Of frothing muzzles, helplessly he lay,
Feeling as though the obscene and bestial herd
Of all the world's brutalities, released
From loathsome lairs and dens, in panic rout
Were driven over him to trample out
The breath of life: and even when at last
The lamest laggard of the curs had passed,
He lay there for a while and never stirred,
Bruised, crushed and shaken, breathless and terror-spent,
In the deserted alleyway still dazed,
Staring into the narrow lane of sky
That with the silver fire of moonlight blazed
Between the cliff-like houses looming high
Above him—still he lay with dazed eyes set
On the white slender spiring minaret
That soared into the still, cold, argent blaze
Above the noisome city's huddled ways
And noxious courts and kennels like the flame
Of the soul's intense resilient diamond fire
Of ardent unappeasable desire
That, springing from the pits and sties of shame
Ever towards heaven aspires: and gradually,
As in the distance died that brutal yelling
And healingly the assuaging quiet of night
Settled, life's eager quickening flood came welling
Back to his breast, and with eyes kindling bright
To that heaven-piercing shaft of lovely light,
Scarcely remembering the bestial pack
That seeks to trample man's heart into mire,
He rose and stumbled from the alley's black
Foul throat into the full moon's crystal fire.

TEMPEST

Caught in the tempest as we leave the creek,
With no return against the racing tide,
We must run on into the night, and seek,
All canvas save the storm-jib stowed, to ride
The gale out in mid-ocean, stripped and stark
To the dire fury of the raging dark.

Lashed to the wheel, the helmsman can but strive
To hold a course before the wind, and clear
The headlands, his one chance to save alive
The ship, to keep a steady helm and steer
Beyond the limits of the land and brave
The utter angers of the wind and wave—

Lost to the world, stript to the storm, and free
At last to pit the soul's integrity
Against the ultimate blast of destiny!

THE STORM

All night the fierce North-easter slashed the spray
Against the cottage window as she lay
With open aching eyes awaiting day;
And all night long her heart in agony
Tossed blindly in the welter of the sea,
A little boat that battled desperately,
Wave-scourged and stripped of sail and spar, to keep
Her lover safe from the devouring deep.
Wave after wave, she felt cold oceans sweep
Over and over her; and now she hung
On toppling precipices and was flung
Down cataracts to bottomless gulfs and swung
Up to the very stars it seemed, and fell
Once more into the roaring pits of hell
Whose icy swirl closed over her....

A bell

Tinkled beside the bed; and up she leapt,
Startled by the alarm, to find she'd slept:
Yet even in sleep her heart its trust had kept;
And she knew surely, as she watched the light
Of windless dawn gild the still-seething white,
His heart in hers had ridden out the night.

IN THE KING'S CHAMBER

In the King's Chamber, the cold empty heart
Of Cheops' pyramid, he stands alone,
Save for the fellahin who patiently
By the dim shafted entrance wait apart
In swart unhuman immobility
Like statues hewn from immemorial stone
To sentinel the vestibule of death
And ward the crumbling pride of majesty—
Silent he stands in the dark heart of time...
Still hearing in strained ears the crazing chime
Of camel-bells, still peering through the glaze
Of high-noon's merciless white blinding blaze
That seems to search the tomb's marmoreal night
With glancing needles of sharp stabbing light,
Stinging his eyes with sparking particles

Of flinty fire; still scorched and seared with glare
Of white-hot sandy barrens and breathing in
With labouring lungs the desert's furnace-breath,
With burning bones and cracking shrivelled skin
And fevered heart, he stands, awaiting there
Some miracle of healing, 'waiting stands
For an eternity with outstretched hands,
Until the oblivion of the buried past
Descends upon him gradually and fills
His breast with healing cold tranquillity,
And his way-weary heart finds peace at last
As petrifying icy numbness steals
Through all his being, and old darkness seals
His vision and, no longer an agony
Of quivering anguished human flesh and bone,
He sinks in that stone chamber quietly
To the undreaming quietude of stone.

THE UNSEEN RIDER

The roads blocked deep with drifts, when Helen died,
We had to cross the fells, scoured clean of snow,
To reach the little churchyard in the dale,
Her coffin strapped across the saddlebow
Of her young chestnut filly, Heatherbell,
Bridling and restive under the deadweight
Of that strange burden; when down Elkridgeside
There swirled a scathing blast of blinding hail;
And the young lad who held the bridle-rein,
Stumbling among the tussocks, slipped and fell;
And Heatherbell broke loose and plunged and reared;
Then, as the scared lad snatched at her in vain,
She dashed across the fell and disappeared
In the dense flurry of the squall: too late
We cantered after her; and never again
Was she or the dread burden that she bore
Seen by a living soul. Yet oft at night
The muffled drumming hoofs of Heatherbell
Are heard by lonely shepherds on the fell
As, high of heart as she would ride of old,
Helen, who that wild day in death's despite
Escaped the durance of the churchyard mould,
Ranges the fells she loved for evermore.

THE SLEEPING DRAGON

The sleeping dragon of the Gower Coast
Basks in the sunshine with gold-glancing scales,
Then slowly fades to a dim dreaming ghost
As daylight fails—
As daylight fails, and slowly the blue night
Droops over Carmarthen Bay her shadowy veils,
Her shadowy veils of shifting drifting white
Through which the full moon pours her witch's light
Through the long watches of enchanted night
That shrouds the slumbering dragon of old Wales.

THE PEAK

We sailed in sunshine; but the glen was black
As Tartarus with raven clouds that swirled
In a fantastic frenzy, closely furled
One moment round the hills; now, streaming, torn
To ribbons; then in bundling fleeces whirled
As in a witch's cauldron, leaving bare
The jagged ranges to the pallid glare
Of lightning: and we heard the thunder crack
In short sharp volleys like quick rifle-fire:
Then once again the firth in instant night
Was blotted out; while still in lively light
We sailed serenely on through the blue morn
Towards the islands of our heart's desire.

But, ere we lost the land, a brooding cloud
On the horizon, suddenly the shroud
Slipped from the shoulders of a single peak
That soared in sunshine like a soul set free
Of the gross turmoil of mortality:
And, as we gazed, our hearts, too full to speak,
Found in that vision all we sailed to seek.

PANIC

Shrewd as the Northern wind that blows
Iced with an inkling of near snows,
The breath of unknown terror froze
My courage, as I trod
The crackling bracken underfoot,
While the screech-owl's unhallowed hoot
Rang like the cruel mocking brute
Laugh of the woodland god:

And as I hung in utter fear
And shuddered like a stricken steer,
I felt an unseen presence near
And knew undying Pan
Kept still his ancient haunts, although
Men sang his dirge so long ago,
But waiting for time's overthrow
To sing the death of man.

COASTER

Blindly we steal
Through the blind night with ship's lamps dully gleaming
And siren screaming,
And now a sudden whirling wheel
And a sharp signal tinkling
To warn the engineer
As in a twinkling
We shift our course and steer
On the port-tack or the starboard-tack, to clear
A bottom-ripping reef or the too near
Suddenly looming ghost
That bears down on us threateningly
With bows that barely sheer
Clear of catastrophe—
Blindly we steal
With cautious searching keel
Along the unseen coast
Through the obscurity
Of blind white night
Momently mantling with the eerie gleam
Of the far Longstone Light
Whose baffled beam
Can scarcely pierce the fog; while everywhere
About us the incessant blare
Of sirens rends the shuddering numb air
With shriek and moan and howl
As unseen groping coasters prowl
So close we feel their wash about our hull.

And now an instant lull
When nothing stirs the brooding mystery
That merges sky and sea
Save the sharp eldritch yelling of a gull
Whose solitary railing
Sounds like the desolating scream
Of nightmare terror wailing
When the lost spirit, in uneasy sleep,
Still plunges desperately more deep
In suffocating labyrinths of fear:

Then, as the soul wakes and in smothering dread
Lies scarcely realising on the bed
That the familiar and dear
Daylight is glowing through the window-blind,
We seem to waken suddenly to find
The sea and sky swept clear
To the horizon and the summer night
Alive with glancing airs and scattering light
Beneath a heaven miraculous with stars;
And as we waken from blind dream
Our dazed eyes dazzle to the gleam
Of the far Longstone's wheeling beam
That like a flourished scimitar's
Cold flashing cuts the crystalline
Blue lucency of June midnight:
And like souls newly won
Through the blind regions of oblivion
We stand beneath the dripping spars
And in divine
And quivering delight
Drink deep the quick air tanged with brine.

THE TRYST

Gulls, whose voice is the cry
Of the ravening soul of the sea,
You call on my heart, as we lie
In harbour, to venture once more
Out from the shelter of shore,
Out where the hurricanes sweep
Through a crashing and deluging sky
Over the face of the deep.

Gulls, whose voice is the cry
Of my hungry unsatisfied breast,
You call on my heart, as we lie
In harbour, to venture once more
Out from the shelter of shore,
Out through the midnight to keep
In the swirl of the sea and the sky
My tryst with death on the deep.

ISLANDS

Six souls in one small craft, among the isles
We cruised day after day in harmony,

The glory of the mountains and the sea,
Sky-shouldering bens and glittering firths and kyles,
Holding us in enchantment, seemingly
At one in all things, all desires and dreams
Merged, as the voice of waves and mountain streams
In one austere exultant symphony.
One undivided soul we seemed; and yet
It was but seeming: perilous as the kyles
Whose torrent races separate the isles
The deeps that sunder soul from soul—each set
An individual island in life's sea,
Dissevered each from each eternally.

GUILLEMOT

As quietly chill day is breaking
Through storm-cleansed and unclouded skies,
On a low wave-lapped shelf he lies
With open but unseeing eyes
Slowly awaking
From the unconsciousness of deathly sleep—
Still desperately, it seems,
Struggling to keep
His head above the drowning wave
And drag himself clear of the ravening deep—
To drag his waterlogged numb body free
Of the cold clutching sea
And from annihilation save
Something that is, and yet is not, himself..
And now becoming gradually aware
Of the hard ridges of the rocky shelf,
He feels a sense of some security—
When through the dwindling darkness riving screams
That seem to tear
The tympan of his ear
Pierce the dark hollow of his heart with fear;
And he hangs listening for a spell
On the sharp brink of hell
While flapping fiends about him skirl and yell:
Then, as the sense of sight
Slowly returns he lies dimly perceiving
The living world about him, yet
Hardly believing
That he himself still lives, with vacant stare
Watching dark shooting shuttles weaving
A glittering fabric in the air
With ravelling skeins of light
As if they sought to snare
His weary body in a magic net....
And now, as his dazed vision clears,

Again those cries,
No longer sinister, but sharp
With the harsh urgency of life, he hears,
And sees quick-flapping wings and breasts of white,
As those dark shuttles suddenly
Change to swift birds that ceaselessly
Speed 'twixt the crag's high scarp
And the bright level of the sea;
And gradually
The dear lifelong familiarity
Of homely guillemot that come and go
About their business fussily
With clapping wings and breasts of snow
And short stretched necks and anxious cries,
Fills his tired heart with comfort and he lies
Watching them with untroubled eyes,
Glad but to know
Life still is his, that he has won
Through the black peril of shipwrecking night
Back to a world that kindles to the sun,
A world of lively airs and waves that fling
Bright scattering manes into the light;
And as he feels the sting
Of sharp life shooting through numb limbs he tries
With gasping breath to echo those harsh cries.

OLYMPUS

The clouds serenely parted and revealed
Beyond the dark Ægean remote Olympus,
The snow-cold empty throne of fallen gods,
A moment, then once more the heavenly peak
Resumed its ancient mystery of cloud.
Long years have passed since then; and they who stood
Beside me on the deck are long since dead;
And long the very ship on which we sailed
Has lain beneath the wave it rode so proudly:
Yet, even as in that cloudy dawn, my soul,
At moments in the strain and stress of life,
On that serene celestial snow-cold peak
Finds sanctuary with the forgotten gods.

SAIL ON, SAIL ON!

The day is dying and the steady breeze
Grows wild and gusty, working to a gale;

And through the threshing gloom the farther seas
Flash angrily. Shall we not shorten sail
And make for harbour while we have the light?
Sail on, sail on, sail on into the night!

The night is on us with a swoop and roar
That shudders through the ship from truck to keel:
And we may never reach another shore
On those uncharted deeps that surge and reel
Beyond the gleam of the last island-light.
Sail on, sail on, sail on into the night!

TRAFFIC

THE TELEPHONE

The shrill bell sings
Through the silent house
And scares to its hole
A venturing mouse:

But no other ear
Pays heed to the call;
And the form on the bed
Never troubles at all—

For nothing at all
To the form on the bed
Is the unknown who tries
To ring up the dead.

THE LINN

All day he broods beside the thunderous linn,
His eyes on the sun-burnished steel-bright curve
Of the sheer force, whose waters never swerve
A hair's breadth from their course, until the din
And steady dazzle make his senses spin
In a dazed ecstasy that drugs the nerve
Of anguish and the agonies that serve
To rend a soul racked with a sense of sin.
Though still he sees her drawn despairing face,
The tortured eyes that searched him through and through,
And hears that desolated cry, the race
Of hill-born waters through his being heals
His lacerated life: at last he feels
That there was nothing else for him to do.

THE GLANCE

Catching a glance betwixt them as they turned
To greet him smiling, in a flash he learned
They to each other were all in all, while he
To them was less than nothing, even though she
Was his betrothed who so light-heartedly

Greeted him with a smile. Without a word
He stood before them smiling, but scarcely heard
Their voices as they talked about the weather:
And presently they strolled away together,
Leaving him stricken by that lightning glance
Of mutual understanding, in a trance
Of dread prevision ... in a land of dream
Lit only by the welkin's pallid gleam
From which the chill rain dripped and dripped on three
Neglected graves through all eternity.

SAL

A sudden spasm racked her; and they said,
"Come, Sal, by rights you ought to be in bed."
But, when they sought to help her from her chair,
She, seeing death coming, with ignoring stare
Looked clear beyond them and without their aid
Stood up to death, serene and unafraid.

THE PREACHER

He stands in the deserted square and preaches
To all the world, though not a soul is listening,
His worn face white with fervour, his eyes glistening
With unshed tears, as his old voice beseeches
The world to heed his gospel and to save
Its soul alive from the devouring grave.

He speaks, unrealising that none hearkens;
He only knows 'tis his to love and cherish
His fellows and to warn them, lest they perish
In stubborn pride; and while the dull square darkens,
Entreating all to come to God he stands
With flame-bright face and flickering white hands.

THE RECOLLECTION

Little I fancied he could make me cry—
And after all these years! I should have said
I could have looked on Nicholas lying dead
Dry-eyed: yet when at last I saw him lie

Speechless and harmless, his one evil eye
With no more power to hurt me, on the bed
Wherein long since my last tear had been shed,
Something stirred in my heart, long dead and dry;
Something stirred in my heart as I recalled
How at the circus, lad and lass, we'd laughed
Together at the clown when he had chaffed
The proud ringmaster who, offended, hauled
The squealing fool by one ear round the ring;
And tears were in my eyes, remembering.

TAKING THEM UNAWARES...

Taking them unawares, he only smiled
And uttered no reproach; and yet they felt
The thought he left unuttered had defiled
Their innocent tenderness, and his glance had dealt
A deathblow to their love, though his eyes dwelt
Only an instant on them as they stood
Embarrassed, stiff as figures carved in wood:
Then murmuring, "A truly pleasant day!"
He turned upon his heel and strolled away.

THE SURPRISE

Why do you start and stare?
You don't see anyone behind my chair?
I seem to feel ... Wife, say there's no one there!

I cannot turn or rise,
And my old heart's too weak to stand surprise....
I feel a cold breath on my scalp.... My eyes—

Someone's blindfolding me
With icy fingers, and I cannot see....
Wife, wife, why don't you bid them let me be?

For I'm too old, too old
For hoodman-blind ... and I am growing cold
As death... Wife, give me your warm hand to hold.

Wife, wife, are you not there?
I'm falling, falling down an endless stair...
And I, I cannot find you anywhere.

THE YEARS BETWEEN

The low light streams
Through the open door,
Turning to gold
The sanded floor.

I rise and look
To the glowing west
To see him come
Over Harelaw crest;

And as at last
He tops the hill
I catch a gleam
Of his shouldered bill,

And know a bare
Ten minutes more
Should bring him home...
Through the open door

The low light streams....
But how should he
Through twelve dead years
Come back to me?

THE DREAM

He could not sleep—and yet, if he'd not slept,
How came he in the wood? His bed he'd kept
Since first he'd taken to it years ago;
He'd never risen from it once; and so
It surely must have been in dream he'd stood
At night within the dark heart of the wood—
The dark heart of the middle of the night
Pierced only by one icy lance of light,
And all unruffled by the faintest breeze—
Stood like a tree among those quiet trees,
With arms outstretched like branches in the gleam,
Like still unswaying branches, and in dream
Upon his open hand the little bat
Alighted suddenly and cowered flat
And frightened in his palm—he still could feel
The cold wee fluttering body, and the steel
Of those sharp flinching eyes, that glittered bright
As needles in that one ray of moonlight,
Still pricked him to the heart—his heart that knew,

Even as it 'lighted, 'twas her soul that flew
To him for refuge from eternal night
Wherein she wandered, exiled from the light
She'd always loved.... And now again he stood
In the dead heart of that phantasmal wood,
A living man among cadaverous trees
That rustled now, but with no earthly breeze;
And strove to hold that quivering soul, and bear
His frightened love back to the light and air
Of living day, strove that she might regain
Her own sweet living body, strove in vain....
The dead trees closed about him, rank on rank,
Hiding the moon, and to the ground he sank,
Sank down and down in darkness and despair ...
And found again that he was lying there
In his accustomed chamber in the gleam
Of the unclouded moon whose crystal stream
Flooded the snowy quilt: an eager breeze
Ruffling and questing through the living trees
Outside the open window; and he heard
The flutter and cheep of the first wakened bird,
Soon with its fellows to put dreams to flight
In a full-throated chorus of delight.

And yet that quivering soul, those frightened eyes,
Shall haunt his heart until the day he dies.

THE OLD DOCTOR

Dropt dead at his own door they found
The doctor, back from his last round.
All day he had been listening
To histories of suffering
And seeking to alleviate
For others the shrewd pangs of fate;
Yet added not to their distress
A hint of his uneasiness,
Though but too well he knew that he,
Even as he fought for them, must be
The first to fall before the foe,
To fall, but not to fail—and so
Dead at his own door he was found
When he had finished his last round.

THE BRIGHT GLANCE

Her bright glance flitted round the room and dwelt
Unconsciously a moment on his face;
And, his eyes meeting hers, he suddenly felt
That they together out of time and space
Were swept into the swirl of singing stars....
And she—complacently discussing cars
With her companion, never even dreaming
Of his existence—sped with gold hair streaming,
The star of all that singing galaxy,
One moment his and for eternity.

HER DEATH

Now death at last had taken her; and they
Were free to live and let love have its way,
They who had held themselves in check so long
Lest they should hurt that tender heart, and wrong
Their love itself by letting it destroy
The affection that had been the only joy
Of her poor crippled life.... Now they were free—
And yet they stood there, hesitatingly,
And realised their love held in restraint
By tenderness had with the years grown faint,
That now between them there could only be
The affection of familiarity
And old habitual kindness.... Side by side
Speechless they stood, regretting she had died.

THE UNREVEALED

Always a door within a door we find
When curiously we venture to explore
The obscure and labyrinthine corridor
Of man's unsearchable immemorial mind—

Always a shrine within a shrine, when we
Would seek through courts and chambers crystalline
The temple's holy of holies, to divine
The secret of the soul's flame-folded mystery.

THE CUT

We quarrelled sorely, and I cut him dead
Day after day; then for a week or so
I missed him in the street; and gradually
The folly of it all came over me;
So I at last determined I would go
And make it up with him, but came too late,
Though just in time to meet him at the gate,
Leaving it for the last time; and as I
Stood to one side to let the bearers by
It seemed that there was nothing to be said,
Since I had cut my friend, had cut him dead.

THE DARK FOREST

You knew him?

Knew him? Who can thread with ease
The implications and intricacies
Of the dark forest of another's mind?
Why, even in my own, I stumble blind
And baffled through crass midnight and the dense
Thicket of cobwebbed branches, with no sense
Of sure direction, tangled in the brake,
Ever uncertain of the road to take
Through thorn and brambled sprays that trip and rasp:
And only rarely is it mine to grasp
The trenchant thought that cuts a pathway clear
Through matted undergrowths of doubt and fear.

THE WINDOW

I sit within the darkening room,
Watching the window's growing gloom
Until my eyes distinguish there
No glimmer of the night-filled square,
Thinking of her who, even now,
Feels death-dew settle on her brow,
Uneasy lest I suddenly
A white face at the window see,
And in the midnight silence hear
Her fingers fumbling, numb with fear,
The cold unseen dividing-glass
The exiled dead may never pass.

THE APPOINTMENT

"I should have wired to put you off: I know
I should have wired—I know I should have wired:
Over and over to myself I said
I ought to wire, I ought—but I was tired,
So tired, so tired ... I was so tired; and so..."
Then the old woman paused with trembling head
And still unseeing eyes, and said no more
A moment, as we stood beside the door.

"You see, it happened all so suddenly—
One moment, he stood there and looked at me—
The next, and he was lying on the floor...
And, after sixty years, to leave his wife
Without a word—though what he's left 'twould seem
Is little enough, God knows! I think my life
Went out with his ... I felt so tired, so tired.
I should have wired, I know I should have wired:
I knew that you were coming; and I said
I ought to wire ... and yet, 'twas all a dream
In which I wandered round in my own head
Where he lay staring at me with still eyes
That followed me and looked me through and through,
But never saw me....

 And still there he lies
Just where he fell: I couldn't move him, I
Was much too tired, and had to let him lie;
And no one else has been here.... But I knew
That there was something that I ought to do—
And meant to wire.... I know I should have wired
To put you off—but I was tired, so tired."

THE SEPARATE BED

"Is that you, Jenny?"
His voice rang clear
As he smiled in his sleep
And turned his head:

But how should she answer,
Or even hear,
Who six foot deep
Had made her bed?

THE END OF THE GAME

A shower of pebbles rattles on the door;
And then a scampering of little feet,
And laughing cries as down the village street
The children scatter into safe retreat—

The children scatter, and then turn and peep
Round coign and corner, and with cruel bright
Young eyes they watch the door in scared delight,
Ready, when it shall open, to take flight:

But nothing happens; and at length they tire
Of waiting, and so turn to some fresh game,
Since, for the first time, the old crazy dame
Has failed to let them see her anger flame:

While, colder than the ashes of her fire,
Beyond all anger, stretched upon the floor,
Safe from young cruelty, she lies asleep.

FRUITS OF THE TREE

No breath was stirring, and yet quietly
The leaves were falling from the chestnut tree,
Quietly through still air as clear as glass
Floating to rest upon the rimy grass,
Falling and falling in a golden shower
Till the whole tree was stripped in one short hour,
And naked on a golden carpet stood
Against the purple of the dark pine wood.

And from his chair beside the autumn blaze
The old man watched them falling, as his days
Were falling from him, leaf by shrivelled leaf,
In the still autumn of his life, so brief,
So endless-seeming in its golden quiet—
His days that once had been a glistening riot
Of quickening buds that thrust in April air;
And then a spreading foliage green and fair
Lighted with blossoms through enchanted May
And thrilled with song of birds the livelong day;
Then tranced in the still glow of summer sun....
His leaves were falling, falling one by one,
Quietly drifting to the earth, and now
But few were left upon the drooping bough....
His days were falling ... and the chestnut tree
Stood naked in the cold air.... Merrily
His laughing grandson burst in through the door,
Clutching in grubby hands a precious store

Of ruddy burnished nuts that on the ground
Beneath the naked branches he had found,
And dancing round his chair in restless glee
Held out his treasure for grandad to see.

HIS LAST APRIL

Silent he stands
Looking across the lighted meadowlands,
Remembering with tears
The daffodils of other years:

He stands alone
Recalling other Aprils he has known,
With eyes that see in dream
The asphodels of Enna gleam.

FROM DAY TO DAY..

From day to day, not too unhappily
We live, ignoring man's mortality,
We sleep and wake and work and eat and drink—
But what would happen if we stopped to think?

ALL SOULS

Lying awake in his lone bed,
Somehow he did not feel alone:
The icy aching darkness searched
His fevered body to the bone.

A chill breath prickled through his hair,
And as into the heart of fear
He stared with sightless eyes, he felt
That something slowly glided near—

Something that drew, in spite of him,
His clenched reluctant hand outside
The quilt; and as cold fingers closed
On his, he knew his foe had died.

THE COWS

He had to milk the cows; he couldn't keep
The poor beasts waiting, though he'd had no sleep,
Tossing and tumbling all night on his bed,
Turning things over and over in his head,
Turning things over and over all the night
Without a clue or hope of getting them right,
Fumbling them over and over in his mind
To the flap-flapping of the window-blind
That through the livelong night of wind and rain
The draught had fluttered at the window-pane—
The flap-flap-flapping that had seemed to be
The sound of his own thoughts so uselessly,
As he in sleepless torment tossed in bed,
Beating their wings inside his aching head—
Bats in a loft that seek in flurried flight
A chink to let them out into the night,
When someone's stopped up their accustomed chink—
But bats were bats, and didn't have to think—
At least not his thoughts, and without a doubt
They in the end would blunder their way out:
While he, for all his thinking, could not see
That any blundering would set him free.

He had to milk the cows; and he must rise:
They would be waiting; and their patient eyes
Would turn towards him in the lanthorn light
Calmly as though no storm had raged all night,
Rattling the loose tiles of the milking shed;
Ay, each would slowly turn a patient head
And look at him with grave untroubled eyes
That took things as they came without surprise,
Without foreboding, greeting each new day,
And, without brooding, munching their fresh hay:
And wise they were—nay, 'twas stupidity
That let them chew the cud contentedly
Day after day; and they would never know
The thoughts that tortured him... But, even so,
It would be healing to be with them now,
To press to their calm sides his throbbing brow,
And feel them heaving as the easy breath
Moved them, unfluttered by the thought of death,
To leave the tossing torment of his bed
For the cool quiet of the milking shed,
The quiet only broken by the sound
Of streaming milk—the quiet only found
With beasts that munch in deep placidity
The fodder of each morn unquestioningly,
Dreading no doomsday.

And another night
At least was over. He must strike a light,

And rise and milk the cows: he couldn't keep
The poor beasts waiting: though he'd had no sleep,
They must be tended. 'Twould be good to be
Again the servant of necessity,
Working among the quiet beasts again
With no dark blind flap-flapping in his brain.

JOCELYN

As one who finds in dews of dawn
The crystal of the sprinkled lawn
Printed with hoofmarks of a faun,
That under the new moon all night
Has danced in circles of delight—
So I with thrilling heart surprise
The elfin light that gleams and glances
In Jocelyn's enchanted eyes
As her wild spirit dances, dances....

COME LIFE, COME DEATH!

Come life with kindling strife,
That I in life may lose the fear of life!

Come death with drowsing breath
That I in death may lose the fear of death!

IN THE DEAD HOUR

Startled instantly awake
In the dead hour of the night
By some unknown urgency
Tingling through the icy air—

Knowing not if someone cries,
Some lost soul in evil plight
Sinking in the last despair
Cries his name despairingly—

For a dire eternity
Helpless in the dark he lies
Till a blackbird in the pear

Hails the reassuring light.

THE BROKEN LINK

She always seemed to flinch from him and shrink
Farther into her shell when he appeared,
Answering his sullen grunts as if she feared
To speak and hardly even dared to think
Her own thoughts in his presence, trained to sink
Her own identity in servitude
To his least whim, the slave of every mood,
Till his caprice or death should snap the link.
But when one winter night he did not come,
And slowly she was brought to realise
That he'd forsaken her, her stricken eyes
Fixed on the open door, with anguished stare
All night she watched and waited, deaf and dumb;
And dead at dawn they found her in her chair.

THE UNSEEN HOUSEMATE

A shuffling step across the upper floor,
Loose-fitting slippers flapping down the stair,
The handle turns and stealthily the door
Swings on its hinges, and there's no one there—
No one my eyes can see; but, happen, he
Who dwelt here ere I came had keener sight—
At least I wonder what he saw the night
He hanged himself from the old apple tree.

THE POPLARS

The poplars all the long unquiet night
Tossed to unsleeping stars their ruffling plumes;
But still gold flames tranced in the frosty light
Of dawn they soar above the mounded tombs—

Soar like gold flames, as flake on flake they shed
Their yellow fire, and bury yet more deep
In drift on drift of rustling gold the dead
Who never more shall waken from deep sleep—

Who never more shall waken in the night
To hear the threshing of unquiet trees,
Or see the poplars in the morning light
Soar like gold flames above the frozen leaze.

THE SHIFTED CHAIR

It seemed to be a chair ... assuredly
It was a chair, as far as he could see
With sleepy eyes.... A chair? Why not a chair?
And yet last night it surely wasn't there—
No chair had stood beside the bed last night
When he'd blown out the guttering candlelight,
Who could have moved the one chair from the wall
To his bedside, or needed to at all?

He'd lain for hours before he'd fallen asleep
Staring into the past: but fast and deep
He must have slumbered, or he should have heard
If any footstep in the dumb house stirred—
If any foot ... but no foot, well he knew,
Save his, had stirred the dust for years; and who
Should enter the barred house at night, and there
Sit, while he slept, beside him in a chair?
If only it were day ... in this half-light
He couldn't think: 'twas neither day nor night....
Yet, when he saw it first, the chair had been
Empty ... but now a figure, vaguely seen,
Sat drooping in the shadow.... Could it be—
And after all these years? But surely she
Had died? Beside her grave long years ago—
Or was it yesterday?—he'd watched the snow
Fall on the new-laid turf and bury deep
And deeper in cold drifts his heart asleep
Beside that silent sleeper.... And yet there
She sat beside him slumbering in a chair.

He must lie very quiet and not stir,
He must lie quiet and not waken her—
Quiet.... His eyes closed gradually, and deep
As hers in her dark grave was his last sleep.

ISOLATION

Knew him? I'd sworn I knew him through and through;
Yet, after all, it seems, like others, I knew

Only the surface he cared to let me see
Or didn't mind me seeing; or, it may be,
He'd no deliberate purpose to conceal
Anything from me, that no one may reveal
His innermost being even to a friend,
But each must hold in secret to the end
His self of selves; that even love can't find
The key to unlock the mind within the mind,
The heart within the heart; and though it seem,
As we together watch the first star gleam
Through the cold beryl of the afterglow
Or dayspring wash with pearl an alp of snow,
Our souls are one in mutual ecstasy,
Merged in emotional identity
Eternal and inviolable, that still
Each soul is isolated as the hill,
That even in love's embrace the lovers are
Divided soul from soul as star from star.

THE LAST VISIT

Gently the doctor closed the door, and stole
Between the borders of wet lavender
Down to the wicket quietly as though
His step from that deep sleep might startle her.

Day after day so long now had it been
His lot to visit unavailingly
That unquelled soul in its frail cage of bones
Racked on a bed of hopeless agony—

Day after day... His fingers touched the latch,
Chill in its silvering of dewy rime,
For the last time—his fingers that at dawn
Had closed those weary eyes for the last time.

And then he sighed, though for her sake relieved
By her release, as over him there came
A sense of all that life for him had lost
Since death had quenched that spirit's eager flame.

BROKEN TOYS

His toy is broken, and he seems to weep
His very heart out, till he falls asleep;
Yet when he wakes next morning some new toy

Catches his fancy, and his heart with joy
Brims bubbling over in a laughing stream....

But I must hug the fragments of my dream
And never know, as sleeplessly I lie,
The sweet relief of tears—too old to cry.

MOONSTRUCK

The moon has got into his blood
And runs, quicksilver, through his veins
And so he rambles all night long
About the fields and lanes:

And when he comes upon a pond
Wherein her image glitters bright,
He kicks his heels up in the air
And dances with delight.

He dances till the moon herself
And the mock moon are dancing too—
Quicksilver in his toes and heels,
He dances in the dew.

EARLY TO BED...

Lodged in the dead man's house, I climb the stair,
And halt a moment by the gilded chair
On the landing where he paused to rest half-way,
Rest and recover his breath on that last day,
Mounting the marble steps laboriously
For the last time. "Sent like a child," said he,
"Sent like a naughty child to bed by day!
I who've not once, since I could have my way,
Retired before midnight. Ah, well, they say
"Early to bed" ... Perhaps I shall grow wise
At last—the health and wealth I've had—and rise
Early; I must rise early, if the rhyme
Demands obedience"; and then for the last time
He looked at the great pendent chandelier,
Its numerous irised lustres glittering clear
In sunshine through the crystal lantern streaming;
And like a child's, enchanted by its gleaming,
His old eyes kindled to the coloured lights;
And then he slowly toiled up the last flights.

And I, who sojourn in his house, still hear

His chuckling words—"Perhaps I shall grow wise
At last: I must rise early—I must rise...."
And wonder what was in his mind when he
Struggled to rise at dawn so desperately.

COMING UPON THEM...

Coming upon them where they stood embraced,
His young wife and his bosom friend, he fell
Dumb at their feet. They drew apart in haste,
And stooped to succour him, but knew full well
The shock had been too much for his old heart,
That never now should he with eye or tongue
Reproach their faithlessness.... And still apart
They stood on either side of him, unstrung;
And, shuddering and sick at soul, they knew
That pitiful rigid body on the floor,
Whose love for them had been so warm and true,
Would lie betwixt them now for evermore.

THE DARK GIFT

"Let there be light!" God said; and there was light;
And man rejoiced at dawn; but all too soon
His eyes grew weary; and he cried at noon,
"Let there be darkness!" and God gave him night.

THE OLD MAN LISTENS

Behind his chair an unseen robin's trilling
Shivers the brittle silence to a tinkle
Of crystal notes; and as the old man listens
His worn face glistens and his thin mouth quivers,
And bright as a new shilling his eyes twinkle;
His old eyes twinkle bright as a new shilling
To hear again those trilling notes that sprinkle,
Sprinkle and spirtle in their crystal spilling
The quiet of old age with thoughts that tinkle,
Tinkle and twinkle like the clear bells shrilling,
The crystal bells of youth whose ting-a-linging,
Crystal in crystal, set a boy's heart ringing,
In far Septembers through a boy's heart thrilling,

Crystal Septembers thrilled with crystal singing,
In far Septembers his old heart remembers,
His heart that's now again a robin trilling.

THE EASY CHAIR

He drew the curtain to shut out the night,
The pitchy welkin of low brooding storm,
Hoping himself secure within the light
Of his accustomed room so snug and warm:

Yet, as he settled in his easy chair
And held his hands to the familiar glow,
A cold breath seemed to shiver through his hair,
Cold as the wind that blows from Polar snow;

And to his eyes the lamp's clear golden light
Clouded with shadows; and he knew that he
Had drawn in vain the curtains, for the night
Was in his heart—that he was doomed to be

Ever a traveller through the sleety gloom
Of that black bitter night when, passion-torn,
His bride had fled the comfort of his room
And left him to his cosy hearth, forlorn—

Left him to stumble over craggy scars
And through deep glens of his own heart's despair,
Blinded by fog, or mocked by cruel stars—
An old man brooding in his easy chair.

GONE TO BED

Ay, he has gone to bed, for he was tired.
What's that you say?
"Early for him, at his age!" Nay, man, nay!
He'd stayed up over-late and he was done:
And as he tumbled into bed
And turned to go to sleep he said,
"It's been a gey long day."

Ay, he has gone to bed, for he was tired.
What's that you say?
You wanted just a word with him? Nay, nay!
You've come too late to have a word with him:
You'll have to leave your word unsaid
Until he rises from his bed

At dawn of Judgement Day.

THE SICK BOY

He floated on the surface of the stream
And could not sink, although so desperately
He longed in some deep pool of night to lie
And never look again upon the sky.

On the bright surface of his hurrying dream
'Twixt sleep and waking all night restlessly
The fevered boy tossed, longing in profound
Oblivion of deep slumber to be drowned.

Ever the roaring in his ears, the gleam
And glitter in his eyes as towards the sea
On the swift torrent 'neath the tropic day
His weightless body spun upon its way—

Until a giant hand of ice, 'twould seem,
Was pressed on his hot brow; and gradually
Down, down he sank ... and watched the bubble beads
Of breath rise slowly through the swaying weeds.

Down, down he sank through icy deeps of dream,
Down, down and down through all eternity ...
Then, light of heart, new-risen from the dead,
Smiled as he saw his mother by the bed.

TIME, GENTLEMEN, PLEASE!

"Time, gentlemen, please!" The inexorable host
Calls out above the chattering and the laughter,
Flinging the door wide open to the night;
And out we stumble from the warmth and light
Into Hereafter—

One after one we go into the cold
Lampless oblivion that so long has haunted
Our hearts in pauses of the revelry,
Our bosoms emptied of the pride that we
So bravely flaunted.

"Time, gentlemen, time!" And we who long hobnobbed
With boon companions in the light and laughter,
Each, willy-nilly, must set out alone,
Stript to the naked soul, through the unknown

Homeless Hereafter.

MARCHING ON

John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave...

A rain-soaked shapeless huddle of sacks that showed
Nor head nor limbs came shuffling down the road:
And neither man nor woman could I descry
Within that bundle as it passed me by:
Yet from the sodden sackcloth hood a shrill
Old reedy voice piped, singing with a will—
And his soul goes marching on!

THE HUNTER'S MOON

Not yet the moon
Had topped the hill;
The moorland lay
In shadow still:

And still no tune
His heart could find,
No tune to sing
His care away.

But when at last
The dreaming blind
Dark leagues of ling
Leapt into light

Into the night
His care was cast,
And clear and high
A lively tune

Sang down the dale
And through the sky
Rang out to hail
The hunter's moon.

SAILS

OUT OF THE AIR

No song-bird will ever
Come to my call;
But when I am thinking
Of nothing at all,
Thinking of nothing
And going nowhere,
Out of the air
The crystal notes fall.

SEA SWALLOW

I

Bright as a tern's wet breast
Sea Swallow cleaves the crest
Of each dark wave that shivers
About her slender sprit,
Each wave that spills and shivers
In spray that pearls and quivers,
Quicksilver on the foresail
With iris lustres lit.

A white thought through my mind,
Sea Swallow cleaves the blind
Dark waves of baffled dreaming
That drowsed in deepest night—
Her white hull spills the dreaming
Dark waves to a salt gleaming
And glancing rainbow dazzle
Of quivering delight.

II

Where, shivering into brilliants, the beryl waters spray
The island crags and caverns, and gulls on silver wings
Hover in airs of crystal the livelong summer day,
My heart aboard the Sea Swallow for ever sails and sings:

And where about the ramparts of dark embattled isles
The unseen threshing tumult a moment flickers white,
It rides the roaring darkness of the races of the kyles

Through endless starry watches of the song-enchanted night.

THE OUTER ISLES

"Lee oh!" the cry rang, and scarce consciously
He ducked just as the boom swung overhead
With clack and rattle of blocks and slap of sail;
And still across the steely heaving sea
Of ever alternating hill and dale
He watched the scudding squall that northward sped,
Sweeping the Outer Islands with a trail
Of golden showers through which the sunset burned;
And as he looked through that translucent veil,
Momently glowing to intenser fire,
The sea-scourged islands of bleak rock were turned
To the Hesperides of his desire;
And even as the sun dipped and the squall
Was but a flying darkness and the night
Suddenly closed about the little yawl,
Still in his eyes those islands glittered bright,
Tranced in a glory of unearthly light.

SKYE

I

The squall had swept the heavens clear
At sundown and across the sea,
Relinquishing her veils of rain,
Skye burned, an emerald on our lee—

Over a tide of serpentine,
Chiselled by the keen diamond light
Out of the matrix of dark cloud,
It burned and glittered, jewel-bright.

The sun dipped swiftly, and the Isle,
Its peaks dissolved in amethyst,
As southerly we sailed, again
Vanished in veils of opal mist.

II

But for a breathing-space the witch,
Shedding her cloak of mystery,

Unveils her beauty to the light
Beyond the cold green glancing sea—
A moment, and then busily
Spinning, she swathes herself again
In a fresh web of mist and rain.

LOCH SHIELDAIG

After long pitching on uneasy seas,
As peacefully with canvas stowed we lay
In the unruffled and pelucid bay
And the young moon swung clear of the dark trees,

Shadow on shadow through the silvering gloam
Athwart the unclouded amber afterglow
We watched the heron sail, serenely slow,
Like ghosts of unquelled heroes coming home—

Against the embers of day's dying fire
They streamed in stately and unhurried flight,
Like souls of heroes from some ancient fight
Seeking the haven of their hearts' desire.

SINGING WATERS

One loud tumultuous deluge is the sky,
And all the hills are laced with flashing falls,
And clear from strath and glen as we sail by
The voice of water calls—

The voice of singing water; and the deep
Rock-cumbered wellspring that has slept so long
In the dark cavern of my heart from sleep
Wakens again to song.

CANNA

Our eyes peered through the rainy mirk until
We saw a deeper shadow in the night,
A square bluff sheerly rising from the sea,
The island of our quest; and presently,
Doubling the head, the winking harbour-light

Flashed us a welcome from the little quay:

And as to that dark dreaming isle that slept
Unconscious of our coming we at last
From the wild waste of the Atlantic came,
Our hearts were lighted by the little flame
Some friendly islander, now sleeping fast,
Had kindled, and we blessed his unknown name.

THE ISLAND BULL

Within the four-foot span of his great horns,
Beneath his brow's crisp curls of ruddy hair
With a smoulder of blue fire his brown eyes stare
At the unmastered snowy herds that sweep
Over the windy pastures of the deep:
And as he sees the breakers ranging free
Over the shining meadows of the sea
To even fiercer flame those unquelled fires
Quicken with old far-wandering desires.

THE PRIMROSE

As that August eve I rambled
Over benty braes and scrambled
Up the Canna crags I found,
Nestling closely to the ground
In a corrie of the cliff-top
One wee brave belated primrose
Flourishing in eager air;
And, as I stood dreaming there,
Far from that stern Northern shore
I was wandering once more
Happily, a boy, through Cornwall's
Primrose-lighted lanes of April—
Happily—yet more to me
Than the spendthrift blooms of April
In that chilly sunset hour
Meant that solitary flower
Blowing by the Northern sea.

GAIRLOCH

After long tossing on the uneasy swell
Under storm-rent apocalyptic skies
Along the embattled coast by hills that towered
In sunlight like the peaks of paradise
Above tormented clouds and straths that glowered
Black under tempest as the mouth of hell,
We ran our little boat in to the land
And wandered idly on the friendly strand,
Glad, after infinite visions, to explore
The tiny glittering treasures of the shore,
Glad for a while to rest awe-wearied eyes
On the infinitesimal marvels of the sand,
Each sparkling grain, each brittle rose-leaf shell,
Each lucent pebble a new miracle...
Until across the Minch the sunset light
Kindled the Outer Isles with stormy flare,
And winds and waters called to us once more
To ride again the ruffling surge and dare
The old adventure of Atlantic night.

THE STAG UNSEEN

Mist swathes the Coolins in a stormy swirl
As under Rum we sail; and all in vain
We peer through the grey glancing veils of rain,
Straining to catch a sight of some young stag
Exultant on an isolated crag
Of Haiskeval, vaunting his antlered pride
O'er unseen corries of the mountain-side—
Yet in our hearts a flying stormy gleam
Gilds the proud antlers of the stag of dream.

THE BIRDS OF SAINT BRIDE

In the fringe of the tide
All day in the sun
That glitters so bright
On bosom and back,
With a dazzle of white
And a kindling of black
The birds of Saint Bride
Flutter and run.
Hither and thither
Darting and dashing,
Hither and thither
Flirting and flashing,

With a dazzle of white
And a kindling of black
They flutter and flitter
To nowhere and back;
They glance and they glitter
In flickering flight,
Then over the wall
They wheel out of sight
With a clear crystal call
Like the voice of the light.

GREEN CORMORANT

On the wave-washed scarp of crag
Broods the haggard hungry shag
Over the green curdling sea,
Like some ancient huddled hag
Gloating o'er the witchery
Of her seething cauldron, brewing
Hell-broth for a king's undoing.

DUNVEGAN

Through the dark narrow channel in the night
We stole into the little sleeping bay,
And dropping anchor in the veiled starlight
Under the shadow of Dunvegan lay—

We who had ventured far across the surge,
Drawn as by siren music to that shore
Since first our hearts had heard Dunvegan's dirge
Sung by a voice that we should hear no more:

And as in that strange anchorage we dreamed
Under the haunted shadow of the hill,
The coronach of proud Dunvegan seemed
About his castle walls to echo still.

SCUIR-NAN-GILLEAN

The jagged Coolins through a stormy rent
Thrust their clean-chiselled peaks into the light

Of the last rays of the storm-harried sun
That, hurtling from the clear horizon, smite
The crest of Scur-nan-gillean with red lances,
And over straths and corries lapped in night
He towers a moment with fire-blazoned helm;
Then the sun sinks and from the East advances
The host of cloudy shadows that overwhelm
The old chieftain and his clan, and once again
He vanishes in darkness from our sight
Wrapped in his ragged maud of mist and rain.

FROM NIGHT TO NIGHT

The mainmast rakes the midnight sky
As on the slanting deck we lie
And watch the dark waves racing by—

The dark waves only flickering bright
A moment in the starboard light,
Then lost for ever in the night.

From night to night the dark waves go:
And we who watch them, even so
One dancing dazzling moment know—

One moment kindling to the glow
Of life as we too hurry by
In our swift course from night to night.

THE STORMBOW

As setting sail we left the creek
Within whose shelter all the night
Under Ben Aslak we had lain,
Lulled by the lap of waves and loud
Threshing of torrents big with rain
Cascading from the unseen peak,
A quivering lance of stormy light
Suddenly shivered the cold bleak
Low-brooding bank of Eastern cloud:
And, as we turned to bid farewell
To birchen brae and ferny dell
And the high-soaring cloud-capped ben,
A stormbow spanned the misty-glen;
And in our hearts through all that day
Of crashing showers and lashing spray

That miracle of rainy light
Quivered and sparkled Eden-bright.

DRIFTERS, MALLAIG

As, beating up against the wind, at last
We make the harbour in the failing light,
A fleet of smoky drifters, steaming past
Our little yawl, rides out into the night—

Rides out into the darkness and the storm
To labour night-long on the turbulent deep,
While in our quiet cabins snug and warm
We lie securely in untroubled sleep:

And when at last in sounder sleep we lie
In the last anchorage, men will yet dare
The midnight menace of the sea and sky
And vigilant through crashing darkness fare.

THE SLEEPERS OF THE ISLES

Who calls, who calls the sleepers of the Isles?
Who calls, who calls?
Only the low voice of the starlit kyles
And the deep voice of mountain waterfalls.

And do they turn, the sleepers in their graves,
And answer in their sleep—
Who ever loved the voices of the waves
And torrent waters crashing down the steep?

Who calls, who calls the sleepers of the Isles,
Who calls, who calls?
Only the low voice of the starlit kyles
And the deep voice of mountain waterfalls.

THE SOUND OF SLEAT

Squalls swirling round the mountain-side
Rush out on us from strath and glen
As down the Sound of Sleat we ride
With straining sails the racing tide

That bears us home again.

Lee oh! to let the great boom swing
We duck and scarce can keep our feet
As like a crazy living thing
With quivering keel and shrouds that sing
Sea Swallow rides the Sound of Sleat.

AT SEA

Only the wash of waves and creak
Of timbers as awake I lie
And watch the starry patch of sky
Through the companion... Oh, that I
On that last night of all may be
Still sailing in a ship at sea;
And even as I sink, too weak
To turn my heavy head or speak,
May I still hear the wash and creak
And see the starry sky!

THE SINGING ISLAND

Grass of Parnassus stars the salty turf
Of my heart's island in the Western seas
With blossoms cold and snowy as the surf
That breaks for ever on the Hebrides.

Star after star the blue unclouded night
Blossoms above Sea Swallow's raking spars—
And I shall see again at morning light
The singing island of the snowy stars.

CORONACH

IN EXILE

How shall he rest
With the lift and the shiver and swing
Of seas in his breast?

How shall he rest
With the soar and the flutter and sweep
Of wings in his breast?

Inland he lies;
But how in the grave shall he sleep
When the mallard's keen cries

Startle the night
As seaward in starlight they wing
Flight upon flight?

How shall he rest
While still the waves shiver and swing
Round the isles in his breast?

RENEWAL

(IN MEMORIAM, R. B.)

(For E. M., W. de la M. and L. A.)

Gathered together in the room he loved
About the fire that to a jewelled glow,
As of some fabulous Arabian cavern,
Kindles the picture-covered walls, we talk
Of things that were the very breath of life
To him who, all the while, no dubious shade,
But a quick golden presence in the room,
Listens with smiling eyes to his old friends
Still talking, talking....

Time has dealt with us

After its wont; and something we have lost
Of the old resilience, under the long stress
Of troubled years and numbing hammer-blows
Of all the unbearable things that men must bear:
Yet, as we pause, the undiminished flame
Of his unchallengeable singing youth

Ripples and quivers through our lighted veins,
Requicken the Phoenix in each heart,
Till, the dun plumage of mortality
Consumed, our souls, fledged with immortal youth,
Are one with the young singer and his song.
1930

WHO SHALL REMEMBER?

Who shall remember when the day is done
The lark-song ere the rising of the sun?

Who shall remember at the fall of night
The rosy feathering of dawning light?

Who shall remember when the day is over
The silvering of the dew-pearls in the clover?

Who shall remember when an old man dies
The morning light and laughter of his eyes?

THE SINGER OF THE TREES

(IN MEMORIAM, JOHN FREEMAN)

Like golden torches all about the land
Above the frozen fields the great elms stand,
Their massy darkness kindled to clear flame....
And thus they stood the day their singer came,
Came and rejoiced with us to see them there
In the cold glitter of November air
Like fires within a magic crystal burning....
Once more they burn; but there is no returning
For him within whose eyes the golden bright
Exultant beauty quickened such delight,
For him who sought so soon the shadow land,
Exiled from all he loved.... The great elms stand
Like golden torches year by year until
The slashing squalls of sudden tempest spill
Their glory broadcast, as on that wild day
Of wind and rain the singer went away
From these beloved fields to fields that know
No flower-foamed springtide or autumnal glow,
And where no trees, the best beloved of all,
No trees to beauty burn and no leaves fall.

NO SON

No son to stand at last beside the bed
Where she lies dead;
And yet on that same bed with labour sore
Three sons she bore—
Sons who when death should come to her might still
Her life fulfil—
Three sons war took ere half her years were told,
Leaving her old
Before her time with heart too numb for tears
To face the years—
The empty widowed childless years, and live
With naught to give—
She who had given all; and so was left
To die bereft
Even of the last despairing tenderness
Of love's caress—
She who four deaths had died, yet lived, to find
Only death kind
At last: but safe from life at length she lies
With dreamless eyes.

IN NO-MAN'S-LAND

I shot him as he stooped to finish me;
And all night long across my shattered chest
His stiffening body lay—an enemy
No longer, but a weary lad at rest,
Dropped from that devil's conflict suddenly
Into deep slumber on a brother's breast.

DIED OF WOUNDS

He died of wounds, they wrote me—not a word
To say how he was wounded, yet I know.
How could they hope to keep the truth from me
When I was with him in the agony
Of his last dawn? Had I not seen him go,
The night they took him from me, with the eyes
Of a poor frightened child who fears the night—
The eyes of the poor baby-boy who'd clung
To me, his mother, as he went to bed?

They took him ... and he died of wounds they said.
How could they hope to fool me—I who heard
The rattle of the rifles and the cries
He never uttered? He who loved the light,
Because he was so innocent and young
And could not face old evil, could not fight
Fear, into the most fearful night of all
He had to go without me.... They just said
He died of wounds ... and in his last lone bed
They laid him, little dreaming I was there,
I who had stood with him against the wall,
Though my eyes were not bandaged....

They would keep

The truth from me: but where he lies asleep
I soon shall lie beside him, sleeping light
Lest he should wake in terror in the night.

THE SINGER OF THE ISLES

(IN MEMORIAM, MARJORIE KENNEDY-FRASER)

Night settles on the Coolins and its wing
Shadows the restless waters of the kyles
As slowly with a heart too tired to sing
Sails home the weary Singer of the Isles—

Sails home in silence, she who sang of home
To island hearts exiled beyond the seas,
Seeking at last beyond the surge and foam
Some heavenly haven in the Hebrides.

CORONACH

Cold the fires of sunset smoulder
Over Scur-nan-gilleann's shoulder,
And the sunset wind blows colder
Over the cold moaning surge.

Moaning surge and cold wind sighing,
Singing spray and seamews crying,
Voices of the day's cold dying
Sound the island singer's dirge.

DRAW CLOSE THE CURTAINS

Draw close the curtains, make the windows fast,
Shut out the restless voices of the night.

*Nay, but he loved the soughing of the trees
And the far murmur of the island seas!*

But what to him, so still and sleeping fast,
Are now the restless voices of the night,
The soughing of the wind among the trees
And the far murmur of the island seas?

He cannot hear them where he sleeps so fast
In the deaf grave, the voices of the night.

*And yet he loved the soughing of the trees
And the far murmur of the island seas.*

He loved ... but I ... Oh, make the windows fast
Against the restless voices of the night—
The old heart-breaking soughing of the trees,
The old heart-breaking murmur of the far seas!

ARE THERE NO OTHER ISLES?

Are there no other isles beyond
The waters of the west?
If we set sail with questing keel
At sundown towards the dying gleam
Shall not another dawn reveal
The unknown islands of our dream,
The summer isles of rest?
Are there no other isles beyond
The waters of the west?

Through wastes of windy dark must we
Venture in endless quest,
Through everduring midnight sail
A havenless eternity.
And in no virgin dayspring hail
Over a yet unvoyaged sea
The inviolable crest
Of dream-familiar isles beyond
The waters of the west?

HIGHLAND DAWN

SONG AT MIDNIGHT

Something flutters through my mind
Like a bird at dead of night
From its perch in slumber shaken,
Hither, thither, beating blind
In a wild bewildered flight
Through the thicket's baffling branches.

Yet at length the dawn will come,
And to greet the living light
From the greenwood's highest tree-top
Happily the bird will sing
Dewy songs of welcoming,
All its midnight fear forgotten.

Something flutters blind and dumb
Through the thicket of my mind
Hither, thither, panic-stricken—
Yet it, too, will hail the light
With a sudden song and find
All its fear resolved in singing.

WINTER'S BREATH

When winter's breath has strewn with diamond splinters
The brambled brake and steeled the lake
And stripped the rowan trees through which we rambled
And glassed the granite screes up which we scrambled,
The heart that still remembers
The scarlet and the amber of September's
Last flaring of the summer's smouldering embers
Rejoices yet, rekindling to December's
Austerer flame of icy fire, and glows
With crystal ardours of the Cairngorm snows.

THE LITTLE BIRDS

No weasel's yelp
Or fox's bark

Shivers the brooding
Leafy dark:

No screech-owl's cry
Comes shudderingly;
Yet on the branches
Of each tree

The little birds'
Hearts quake, aware
Of stealthy hunters
Everywhere.

THE SWOOPING WINGS

Suddenly, as I crouched low on a ledge
For shelter as a hailstorm raked the crag,
An eagle swooped, the gust of his descent
Fanning me as he passed, and smote a stag
That unaware belled on the precipice edge
A blinding blow with his death-dealing wing,
And toppled him from his precarious perch
Where he had stood exultant, challenging
The stags of all the earth in royal pride.
And sent him hurtling down the mountain-side,
Helplessly crashing through the silver birch;
Then, swerving to recover poise, once more
Swooped on his mangled victim, lying spent
Among the boulders of the Atlantic shore,
Soused in the spindrift of the flowing tide.
The squall ceased; and the wet walls of the pass
In instant sunshine gleamed like burnished glass:
But still I huddled there with sobbing breath,
My soul still shaken by the winnowing
Of the down-rushing of the wings of death.

THE BIRCH

The birch grew weary of her leaves
And shed them on the sward,
And danced in naked loveliness
Before the sun, her lord—

And as that blue October day
She danced and waved to him
He gilded with his loving light

Each glancing naked limb.

HEAR YOU NOTHING IN THE GLEN?

Hear you nothing in the glen
Save the singing of the waters
When the light of day is failing
And the hosts of darkness gather,
Sweeping over bent and heather?

Hear you nothing in the glen—
No unearthly pibroch wailing
Through the singing of the waters,
Summoning the ghostly clan
When the light of day is failing?

Hear you nothing in the glen—
No gruff muttering of men,
Ghosts of men o'er brae and corrie
To the pibroch's ghostly wailing
Swarming to the midnight foray?

Hear you nothing in the glen
Save the singing of the waters
When the light of day is failing—
No low sound of women weeping,
No lament of wives and daughters
Over mounds of heroes sleeping,
Ghostly wives and ghostly daughters
To the pibroch's ghostly wailing
Keening for the slaughtered clan,
Women bowed in unavailing
Sorrow since the world began,
Mourning for the sons of men?

When the light of day is failing
Hear you nothing in the glen
Save the singing of the waters?

THE WISHING-TREE

Year after year each pilgrim who has come
To this green rustling isle of Loch Maree
Has wedged his penny in the soft birch-bark
Of the old Wishing-tree.

And now there's scarce a chink left in the trunk

To take another coin and we must search
On tiptoe straining if we'd try our luck
With the old wizard birch.

So thickly copper-studded is the bark
The birch is now just a dead metal tree:
And they who wished—how many ever came
Again to Loch Maree?

THE RAIDER

Through the witchlight of the glen,
Like a sudden skirl of pipes
Summoning the scattered clan,
Sings the screech-owl's hunting cry,
As through ghostly silver birches
The night-raiding restless spirit
Of some ancient cateran
To the foray brushes by.

THE ISLAND SONGS

As the lift of the wave to the venturing keel,
As the spark that is stricken from steel upon steel
As the sea-light that lures in the eyes of the seal,

As the soar and the swoop of the seagull in flight,
As the grip of the foe in the thick of the fight,
As the grasp of a friend in the heart of the night,

As a loved sail lost in the gold of the west,
As the laughter of God in a baby's breast,
As the lights of the haven, the end of the quest—

To me, these songs in the island tongue
That reivers and weavers and fishers have sung—
Songs that are old as the earth, and as young.

1909

NOT PROVEN

Somebody stirring in the glen—a light
Stealing among the birches, ghostly white....

Yet who would venture up the strath at night?

In all the dreary years she'd dwelt alone
Since Donald's killing, never had she known
A visitor to cross her threshold-stone—
Since Donald came at midnight as the clock
Struck twelve.... Again she hears his knuckles knock
On the half-door—and left, as the byre-cock
Sang out the hour ere daybreak....

He was found

Among the birches, as though sleeping sound;
And sound he slumbered on the blood-soaked ground.
They found him sleeping with her knife between
His shoulder-blades: and not a soul had been
Across her threshold, she had hardly seen
A neighbour from the clachan, since the day
They tried her, and they let her come away,
Her guilt, not proven.

She'd grown old and grey

Since then, a wrinkled shuffle-footed crone
Living in the dark haunted glen alone
Until her heart was turned into a stone:
But young she'd been, as Donald, on the night
He left, in spite of all that she....

The light

Stole nearer: she could see his face dead-white,
White as the silver birches: like a flame
It burned among the birches: Donald came,
Came back at last to end the years of shame....
And now his knuckles ... Donald at the door;
And she must let him in, to leave no more—
But she, she could not cross the rocking floor....
And still he kept on knocking, knock, knock, knock,
To the floors rocking; and the long-dumb clock
Was striking twelve ... and, hark, a crowing cock!

SHELDRAKE

The sheldrake streaming in clean arrowed flight
Into the sunset of the western tide,
Their burnished plumage gilded by the light
Of the last radiance, swiftly out of sight,
Like fire-birds fleeing from pursuing night,
Into the glory glide—
Like fire-birds homing to the heart of fire:
And as she watches them her arrowy bright
Young dreams on flaming pinions of delight
Take wing with them towards her heart's desire.

ISLAND DAWN

At dawn the seamews shrill and wrangle
About the storm-wrack of sea-tangle
And clotted froth of curded waves
That glut the entrance to the caves:
And little heeds he, who lies there
With cold sea-tangle in his hair,
The gulls that wrangle in the air.

At dawn the wife's eyes desperately
Search all the sail-less leagues of sea;
And she as little heeds the wrangle
Of seagulls over the sea-tangle;
And little guesses who lies there
With cold sea-tangle in his hair
While gulls still wrangle in the air.

Yet, though no more his heart shall heed
The gulls that shrill above the weed,
Her heart shall lie in cold sea-tangle
For evermore and hear the wrangle,
Her heart shall lie, as he lies there,
In the cold tangle of despair
While gulls still wrangle in the air.

THE LAST WORD

Speechless at last she seemed, as on the bed
She sank, and too far gone to see or hear:
But, when he signed to us the end was near,
Towards the doctor craning her old head,
She fixed him with a kindling eye, and said—
"You, Jock McCall, you've always been a fool,
Ay, from the day I knew you first at school
Till double-fool you turned the day you wed—
A fool and liar; and if you fancy I,
Because you choose to say so, mean to die,
You're sore mistaken! Die? not I, my lad—
Not if I know it!" and she, who'd always had
The last word, even with her latest breath
Gasp'd her defiance in the face of death.

HIS FETCH

"You come again?" she said—
"You come again to bid a last 'Good-bye '?"
He stood bewildered by his mother's bed—
For what could he reply—

He who had not till then
Set foot within his mother's house all day?
"I'd hardly looked to see you, lad, again
Before you went away.

"But, son, you must not miss
The tide for me," she murmured with a smile.
"Come, give your mother one last hug and kiss.
We part but for a while."

Speechless to her he bent,
Then stumbled from the cottage towards the shore
Knowing too surely that the way he went
His fetch had gone before.

ON THE EDGE OF THE TIDE

She stands on the edge of the tide
With eyes that stare into the sea;
And, as I creep up to her side,
Knows nothing of me.

And my heart quivers cold as I steal
From my love where she dreams by the sea,
Lest the dark yearning eyes of a seal
She turn upon me.

THE RETURN

She saw him, smiling on the threshold-stone,
Home from his voyage unexpectedly,
And stepped to greet him ... yet it was not he
Who'd left her, but a week ago, alone—

Not Neil, her husband, dour and gnarled and grey,
Who but a week ago had left her there—
This lad with crisp and curly yellow hair
And young eyes smiling like the break of day?

Yet, surely Neil, the very lad she'd wed

Just forty years ago, young Neil, come back...
And then she saw with reeling sense the black
Cold widowing waters close above his head.

TOO LATE

And he had turned and left without a word,
While she stood hearkening to a silly bird,
Hearkening, although she scarcely knew she heard
A single note as she stayed rooted there:
But ever after she could hardly bear
To hear that tinkling through the crystal air,
And almost hated robins: he had gone,
Leaving her in dumb wretchedness alone;
And still the silly sun in heaven shone
And all the frosted bracken spangled bright
With brittle glitter of cold splintered light
Prickling dry eyes that ached and ached for night,
For never-ending night: and night at last
Had come, clear-starred and staring, and had passed,
Leaving her heart unsoled; and, overcast,
New day had stolen on a bleak empty earth
Of glooming mountain and ungleaming firth:
And still she pined through days and nights of dearth
Because her foolish traitor of a tongue
Let slip the bitter idle word that stung,
And could not, though her very heart was wrung
With anguish as she saw his agony,
Utter her quick remorse, struck suddenly
Dumb till too late, too late: and ever she,
When robins sing in bracken bright with rime,
Hears in her hollow heart the dark words chime
Too late, too late, until the end of time.

GLENCOE

On the big tops still deep
Snow dwells and April squalls
Between the mountain walls
In feathery flurries sweep.

Low on the hills, the deer
Amid the dithering flakes
Like phantoms through dim brakes
Appear and disappear:

Bewildered by the snow
They haunt the shadowy brae
Like souls that lost their way
When death swept down Glencoe.

THE OLD WIFE

"Is that you, Donald?" the old wife said,
Peeking and peering with dithering head
And craning neck at the darkening door:
But the shape that cheated her failing sight
Was only a deeper shadow of night,
And the step that sounded in her old head
Was only the echo of days long dead,
And never would waken her threshold more.

RED RANALD

With the yelp of a weasel
He sprang from the corrie
Where crouched in the bracken
He'd watched from the ben,
And slinging his ragged
Plaid over his shoulder
Headlong through the bracken
He plunged down the glen.

Through bracken and birches
He crashed in red anger
Till he came to the sheiling
That stood by the stream,
And stealthily striding
Across the dark threshold
Stooped over the lovers
Still clasped in their dream—

Stooped over the lovers
Still lapped in sweet slumber
And muttered above them—
"So doucely you sleep,
O blithe bonnie lovers,
'Twere pity to wake you!
Sleep on and sleep deeper...."
And drove his dirk deep.

THE LITTLE CROFT

Sheer from the mountain shoulder to the foam
Of the salt tide the flashing torrent falls,
And to the seaman slowly making home
Clear through the wash of waves its loved voice calls—

Calls to his heart, and as he sways aloft,
Trapping the slatting topsail with a will,
His heart already seeks the little croft
In a green pocket of the craggy hill.

THE ISLAND GRAVEYARD

In shallow rocky graves among the roots
Of old wind-writhen silver birches sleep
These Highland hearts as sound as they who lie
In rich mould of the Lowlands buried deep.

They sleep as sound in their last island home,
Lulled by the whispering waves of Loch Maree—
The water's susurrations rippling through
The silver birch's sighing threnody.

They sleep as sound—and yet when winter pipes
His skirling challenge down dark strath and glen,
Do they not turn in shallow sleep and sigh
To face the blast again as living men?

THE GOLDEN HILL

She watched the light fade from the golden fleece
Of silver birches in October leaf
That shawled the slopes and shoulders of the ben—
She watched the light fade slowly that with brief
Glory of rainy gold had filled the glen
And filled her tempest-troubled heart with peace—

A shining peace that failed not as the light
Faded from crag and corrie, peace that still
Would soar, a glowing presence, in her mind,
A golden-peaked inviolable hill
Of refuge when the valley-ways were blind

Beneath the roaring cataract of night.

HIGHLAND SPRING

Caught in the white squall sweeping down the pass,
On baffled wings the old raven flaps in vain
Against the blast, then with a raucous cry
Drops like a stone, dead in the whitening grass;
When, answering life's last despairing call,
From a snug bield of birchen brake hard by
The first lamb bleats; and life's voice once again
Re-echoes from the mountain's granite wall.

FLIGHT

Slowly he labours up the sun-baked strath
Over sparse bracken and the blackened peat
And charred heath-stalks that crackle in the heat,
When suddenly across the scorching path
A wide-winged shadow sweeps: he lifts his head
And sees with eyes that tingle in the glare
Above him hanging in the quivering air
A golden eagle with great pinions spread:
And he no longer labours; from him falls
The burden of day, as, on imperious wings
He hovers over the glen and sweeps and swings
In the cool swirls and eddies of his own flight,
Then soars with eyes undazzled by the light
And to his mate in their far eyrie calls.

THE EXILES

Their souls return, though far from home they sojourn.
Whose eyes still keep the sea-light of the Isles,
Their souls return at night while they lie sleeping
And cry among the seamews of the kyles.

Their souls return, flight after flight the exiles
Flock home at midnight from the foreign shore;
And when the sea-light from their eyes has perished
Their souls return, to leave the Isles no more.

THE FIRST FLAKE

Stript by the eager wind that sings and searches
All day among the granite screes and corries
And round the pinnacles and eagle-perches
Of needle-scars that stab the steely glitter
Of bleak November's icy blue, October's
Fleeces of gold have fallen from the birches
That clamber up the ben and bloom with purple
The steeper braes, beyond the lucent amber
Of sun-filled bracken, slashed with bramble-scarlet—
October's gold has fallen from the birches,
And soon the steely wind that sings and searches
All day among the granite screes and corries,
Clouding with falling flakes the eagle-perches,
Will veil the purple bloom of trees that clamber
The steeper braes and veil the lucent amber,
The scarlet-brambled amber of the bracken;
Shrouding in one white sheet November's glories.
And even now the first chill crystal flutters
Out of the blue and settles on the forehead
Of the old shepherd as he seeks the clachan;
And as he feels the first flake's death-cold tingle
Upon his brow, his old heart knows too surely
His eyes have looked their last on gold and purple,
Amber and scarlet, his eyes already dazzled
By the blind snows of unawakening winter.

HIGHLAND DAWN

I watched a stag that snuffed the kindling air,
A golden eagle gliding in the light;
Then, glancing up the brae, I saw you there,
The wind of morning rippling through your hair,
And bade farewell to night.

The stag sped up the mountain out of sight;
The eagle dwindled in the dazzling blue;
But fleeter yet my happy heart took flight
From the last valley-shadows of the night
To lose itself in you.

EAGLES AND ISLES

Eagles and isles and unaccompanied peaks,
The self-reliant isolated things,
Release my soul, embrangled in the stress
Of all day's crass and cluttered business,
Release my soul in song and give it wings—
And even where the traffic roars and rings,
With senses stunned and beaten deaf and blind,
My soul withdraws into itself and seeks
The peaks and isles and eagles of the mind.

THE END

Printed in Great Britain by R. & R. CLARK, LIMITED, Edinburgh.

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