

I Heard a
Sailor

Wilfrid Gibson
1925

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BY THE SAME WRITER

SHORT POEMS

THOROUGHFARES

WHIN

NEIGHBOURS

BATTLE

FRIENDS

VERSE TALES

FIRES

LIVELIHOOD

DRAMATIC POEMS

KESTREL EDGE

KRINDLESYKE

BORDERLANDS

DAILY BREAD

STONEFOLDS

I HEARD A SAILOR

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TORONTO

I HEARD A SAILOR

BY
WILFRID GIBSON

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1925

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TO
JOCELYN

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LUCK

*What bring you, sailor, home from the sea—
Coffers of gold and of ivory?*

When first I went to sea as a lad
A new jack-knife was all I had:

And I've sailed for fifty years and three
To the coasts of gold and of ivory:

And now at the end of a lucky life,
Well, still I've got my old jack-knife.

THE ANNIVERSARY

The clicking of the latch,
Then the scratch
Of a match
In the darkness and a sudden spurt of flame—

And I saw you standing there
All astare
In the flare,
And I stepped to meet you, crying on your name.

But the match went out, alack,
And the black
Night came back
To my heart, as I recalled with sudden fear

How upon your dying bed
You had said
That the dead
Return to haunt the faithless once a year.

THE WHITE WHIPPET

Squatted on their hunkers at the corner of the street
Outside the Pouter Pigeon a knot of pitmen sat
Waiting for the doors to open, cursing the raw sleet,
Or muttering with husky throats dully of this and that:

When suddenly within the ring of the street-lamp's gusty flame,
Out of the stormy shadows of the black November night,
Like a little slip of moonshine a snow-white whippet came
And stayed one breathless moment before their startled sight.

Speechless they gazed upon her as she stood with lifted paw,
Clean-limbed, with quivering muzzle and jetty eyes a gleam,
Nor heard the doors swing open wide as each lad looked with awe
One moment on the vision of his own heart's secret dream.

THE NEW OILSKINS

And him, in his new oilskins, too!

Was all she said
When up the brae and to her door
We bore her dead.

We laid the corpse the sea had stripped
Upon the bed,
And left the widow to her watch
Beside the dead.

And him, in his new oilskins, too!

Was all she said:
Yet when we sailed again at dawn
The wife was dead.

THE SACRIFICE

He slipped aside
The white-hot slide
And gazed upon the bubbling steel:
And stood astare
Until the glare
Had blinded him, and like a wheel
With white-hot felloe sparking red
His brain was turning in his head.

Night after night
He'd watched that white
And bubbling hell-broth seethe and boil:
His wits had fed
The furnace red
Till now, at last released from toil,
He shrivelled up without a whine
Before the fire-god's glowing shrine.

THE WRECK

She broke amidships: as the hull
Parted, the boxes from the hold
Poured crashing out, and she went down
Into a sea of ruddy gold:

And in a twinkling I was dropped
Into the swallow and the strife
Of surf, to battle in a swirl
Of floating oranges for life.

THE COLT

The colt kicked his heels in the air
And rolled in the dew,
As dandy and devil-may-care
I went out to woo.

Hock-deep in the mire and the muck
He stood in the rain,
As dowly and down on my luck
I crept home again.

My heart when I set out to woo
Was a colt in the sun,
But a drookit and draggle-tailed screw
When the wooing was done.

THE BLIND-WORM

When I stroked his cold dry skin,
His black tongue flickered out and in.

*Flicker your black tongue three times three
If my true love is safe at sea.*

I stroked him thrice and thrice, and then
I stroked his cold skin twice again:

And each time out the quick tongue came,
And flickered like a wee black flame.

At three times three, my fingers shook:
I shut my eyes, afraid to look;

And when I opened them the snake
Had vanished in the withered brake.

ADRIFT

We heaved the body overboard—
The tenth man who had died:
Then gasping side by side
Askance each other eyed.

The sea was glass, the sky was brass—
The boat a white-hot grid
Beneath that brazen lid
As to the thwarts we slid

Each eyeing still the other, each
Knowing the other knew
The one thought of the two—
Who should heave over who?

Which of the twain left out of twelve
On that dead sea accurst
Should first give in and first
Fall to the fiend of thirst?

Which of the twain be left to heave
A corpse of skin and bone
O'erboard to sink like stone;
And then drop back alone

Yet living to the thwarts, alone
On blistering boards to lie
Unburied 'neath that sky
Of brass, eternally

Thirsting for bottomless long draughts
Of home-brewed bitter beer,
Icy and amber-clear . . .
The barmaid holds so near,

So near the lips, then snatches back
Just as you stoop to drink,
And lets fall with a clink
And splash into the sink . . .

When suddenly his eyes burned red:
He rose and with a cry
Plunged overboard, and I,
Who somehow could not die,

Was left—to come once more to port . . .
And in my bed again
Heave over ten dead men
Night after night, and then

Watch jealously again while he
Dives headlong—mad to leap
With him into death's deep
And everlasting sleep!

NED NIXON AND HIS MAGGIE

Will you come with me, Maggie, to Stagshaw Bank Fair?

Come with you where—come with you where?

Do you fancy a lass has naught better to do

Than to go gallivanting, Ned Nixon, with you?

If you come with me, Maggie, I'll buy you a ring.

You'll do no such thing—you'll do no such thing.

Do you fancy I'd let my lad squander his pence

On tokens and trinkets and such-like nonsense?

Come, Maggie, come, Maggie, we're only once young!

Now hold your fool's tongue—now hold your fool's tongue!

If we're only young once it behoves us to be

A common-sense couple and act cannily.

Time enough, Maggie, for sense when were old.

Does copper turn gold—does copper turn gold,

Or a guff turn wiseacre at three-score-and-ten?

Anyhow, I'm for taking no chances with men.

Then must I go lonesome to Stagshaw Bank Fair?

What do I care—what do I care?

But if you go lonesome I'd have you to know

It's lonesome the rest of your life you will go.

DEAD MAN'S BROW

As for the first time over Dead Man's Brow
That snell November day I drove the share
The coulter struck a stone that checked the plough,
Tilting it upright with the hafts in air.

With arms well-nigh out of their sockets jerked
I tried to drag the handles down in vain;
Then, stooping, long with breaking back I worked
To free the coulter, till with thews astrain

At length I lifted a huge slab that lay
Lid-fashion on a kist of up-edged stones,
Uncovering to the light and air of day
A huddled skeleton of ash-grey bones.

With knee-joints drawn up to its jowl, it clasped
Its bony arms about its ribs, and seemed
To shudder from the icy east that rasped
My living cheek; and as the chill light gleamed

Upon its flawless teeth of fleckless white
The griming skull gaped at me with a groan—
Why have you broken in upon the night?
Why can't you let a buried man alone?

*This thousand-year I've lain in dreamless rest,
Forgetful of the wind that flicked my blood
And roused the hunting hunger in my breast
To course the fells and ford the brawling flood*

*Of burns that thundered in a winter spate,
Questing a quarry that for ever fled
Beyond the further fell-top, until fate
Tripped me and tumbled me among the dead;*

*And I at last knew peace and slept secure
Within my quiet little house of stones.
Must I another doom of life endure?
Why have you waked the hunger in my bones?*

I dropped the slab; and took the hafts and turned
My team, and made back homewards with my plough,
Leaving the hunter to the rest he'd earned
Beneath the windy bent of Dead Man's Brow.

THE ROSE

Standing on the hot white quay
With her hands upon her hips,
Gaily she glanced down at me,
A red rose between her lips.

As I looked up from the stern
Suddenly that rose's red
In my blood began to burn
Till a fire was in my head,

And that hair as black as night
Up against the blazing blue,
And those jet eyes sparking bright
And that red rose slowly drew

All my very heart's blood out:
And I followed in a spell
When she smiled and turned about—
But I caught the rose's smell

As my lips to hers drew near:
And I paused . . . and stood again
With my arms round my own dear
By a rosebush in the rain.

Vanished was that hot white quay
In a garden's rainy gloam
As my heart came back to me
On the rose's breath of home.

NEW MOON

I

New moon, *he said*—the first
I've ever seen through glass:
Well, let us hope the worst
Won't come to pass.

A when new moons I've seen,
For I am ninety-three,
And never aught between
The moon and me.

She's bonnie still, *said he*,
Though something sharp and cold.
We'll see what we shall see
When she is old.

NEW MOON

II

A skirling squeaky piping—
Tweedledee, tweedledee,
And the drubbing of a drum,
Tum . . . tum . . .
And the niggers on the quay
Stole my young heart from the sea;
And I leapt ashore and shuffled with them,
Ruffled with them, scuffled with them,
Prancing to that piping—
Tweedledee, tweedledee,
To the piping sharp and thin
That gets underneath the skin,
And the drubbing of the drum,
Tum . . . tum . . .
That rumbles through the midriff like the roll of kingdom-come—
Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

And I couldn't face my messmates
When they'd seen me foot it there
To the drubbing of the drum—
Tum . . . tum . . .
Galumphing like a bear
Mother-naked to the air
With a lot of fantee stumping niggers,
Clumping belly-thumping niggers—
Lost to England, Home, and Beauty
By the piping sharp and thin
That gets underneath the skin,
And the drubbing of the drum—
Tum . . . tum . . .
That rumbles through the midriff like the roll of kingdom-come—
Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

NEW MOON

III

Night without a break
Brooded overhead
As we lay awake
On our bracken-bed.

So I shut my eyes,
Burdened by the weight
Of those starless skies
And our luckless fate.

But as I lay still
She sat up in bed:
Turn your coppers, Bill—
The new moon! she said.

THE CHESTNUT-BLOSSOM

The chestnut-blossom fell
In the dark waters of the well
As, crouching on the coping-stone, he hearkened
To catch the first note of the passing-bell.

*The blossom, white and red,
Floats lightly where it falls, he said—
But there are drowning deeps in those dark waters
For him who plunges boldly without dread.*

*One passing-bell, said he—
One bell shall serve for her and me,
To speed our souls upon their way together
Through the dark portals of eternity.*

But, even as he dreamed,
Thicklier the falling blossom streamed
Down the well-shaft and, settling on the water,
Like the white body of his love it seemed:

And, shot with sudden dread
As the first note boomed overhead,
He shrank from plunging through that drift of blossom,
And home, with fingers in his ears, he fled.

THE MAID AND HER MOTHER

Hark to the curlew

Whistling down the syke!

Curlew—curlew?

Who ever heard the like!

What bird may it be, then?

Never any bird

Whistled will you walk with me

That ever I heard.

Who can it be, then,

Whistling down the syke?

Some lonely laddie

Behind the stell-dyke.

What shall I answer?

Bless you, my bird,

No lassie ever questioned

That ever I heard.

AT THE PIT-HEAD

Black was his face
With the dust of the pit,
But bright as hot coals
His eyes burned in it

The first time I felt
His gaze fixed on me,
And wondering turned
Half-frightened to see

The fire of his heart
That paled the sunshine
Blazing out of the eyes
That looked into mine

Till an answering flame
In my bosom was lit
By those eyes burning out
From the mirk of the pit.

HE AND SHE

Come, give me your answer:
You know that I love you true.
Pluck me a speedwell,
And happen I'll answer you.

A speedwell! How should I
Know one from another bloom?
You must wait for your answer,
Then, till the day of doom.

You can't pick a speedwell,
And yet you've a fancy you
Can choose out a maiden?
And wed her and all, I do!

Though happen I mayn't know
One bloom from another bloom—
It's now for your answer,
And this be the day of doom.

BLACK-COUNTRY NIGHT

Suddenly the hiss of steam
In the quiet of the night—
And I wake to watch the gleam
Of the leaping furnace-light.

I have barely dropped asleep,
Barely for a breath forgot
The hot blasts of hate that keep
Anger in my heart still hot,

When that hissing in the dark,
Like the night deriding me,
Blows to blaze the smouldering spark—
To a glare that instantly

Fills the cauldron of my brain;
And I rise to pace the room
Till the labouring day again
Calls me with the buzzer's boom.

THE RAGGED BIRK

You have come back?—he said.

I have come back.

Tell me, is someone dead,
That you wear black?

Where have you been, my son—

Come, tell me where?

Life's now but little fun,
Tied to a chair

Brooding the whole day long

On days gone by

When I was young and strong—
I, even I!

Speak, lad, and tell me now

Where you have been?

*Over the Dead Man's Brow
To Birkshaw Green.*

Did John go with you, too?

Ay, he was there.

Walking, the two of you,
Taking the air?

Well to be young, my lad,

Tramping the heather—

Can't I just see you, gad,
Chattering together,

Careless and free and gay,

You and your brother!

*Little we found to say,
One to the other.*

What, you've not quarrelled, Ben?

Quarrelled? Nay, dad!

Where have you left him, then—

Quick, tell me, lad?

Where is my younger son?

Under the birk.

The birk? *Ay, the ragged one*

Hard by the kirk.

Left him, my little Jack,

There in the night?

And he—does he, too, wear black?

Nay, he wears white.

SALLY BLACK AND GEORDIE GREEN

Oh, where may you be going with your black mare sleeked so shinely,
With her four hoofs newly-varnished and her feathers combed so clean,
With her mane and tail straw-plaited, pranked so gay and smart and nattily
With red and yellow ribbons tied in lovelocks, Geordie Green?

I be going to the Fair

With my mare.

Then won't you take me with you, for I've never been to Stagshaw Bank,
Nor a hiring nor a hopping, though I'm nearly seventeen,
And I've never had a fairing, faldalal nor whigmaleerie nor
A red and yellow ribbon for my lovelocks, Geordie Green?

I can't manage but one mare

At the Fair.

Now what can you be fearing, and I but a young lassie, too,
And you, a lad of twenty? But if so it be you're mean,
I've saved up thirteen pennies, so no need to fear I'll beggar you
Or be beholden to you for one farthing, Geordie Green.

I'll be getting to the Fair

With my mare.

Then gan your gait and luck to you at Stagshaw Bank, your mare and you;
But maybe you'll be rueing when you see me like a queen
In Farmer Dodd's new dogcart with the shafts and spokes picked out with red
Overtake you on the road there and flash by you, Geordie Green.

Yet I'll happen reach the Fair

With my mare.

THREE

Three whaups rose from the moss
As I came by,
And, whistling, wheeled across
The darkening sky.

Three hoolets from the fern
Flew silently,
And vanished down the burn
In front of me.

And, stumbling through the gloam,
My heart's adread
For three I left at home
Hapt safe in bed.

THE WISHING-WELL

Lass, I've heard tell
That in this well
The Roman folk would chuck,
When things were going ill with them,
A coin or so for luck.

*And their great Wall's a ruin on the fell,
And naught of their camp living but this well!*

Ay, lass, that's so;
And yet although
Their rampart could not stand,
Who knows but luck meant getting back
Again to their own land?

*So, you've chucked our last copper in the well?
Well, what luck is or isn't, who can tell!*

THE PARROT

Long since I'd ceased to care
Though he should curse and swear
The little while he spent at home with me:
And yet I couldn't bear
To hear his parrot swear
The day I learned my man was drowned at sea.

He'd taught the silly bird
To jabber word for word
Outlandish oaths that he'd picked up at sea;
And now it seemed I heard
In every wicked word
The dead man from the deep still cursing me.

A flood of easing tears,
Though I'd not wept for years,
Brought back old long-forgotten dreams to me,
The foolish hopes and fears
Of the first half-happy years
Before his soul was stolen by the sea.

THE BAT

She dreamed she lay in frozen fear,
Yet living, in the icy tomb . . .
And wakened in the dark to hear
A bat flit-flitter round her room.

Unseen in the cold pitchy night
It circled swiftly overhead
Unceasingly in frightened flight,
Till, as she quaked upon her bed,

Too overcome with fear to stir,
One icicle from head to feet,
The flit-flit-flitter seemed to her
The flurry of her own heart's beat—

Her young heart flying round and round
Imprisoned in its own despair—
The stone-cold chamber underground
With no escape to light and air,

No window to the sun, no door
To winds that call the wanderer,
Where she must dwell for evermore
Since life had broken faith with her.

ANNABEL ROSE AND JEREMIAH FAIRLEY

Why did you call me, Jeremiah Fairley—
Why did you call me as I went by?
Never had the blackbird sung more rarely,
Never had the sun shone brighter in the sky
Than when I heard you calling, crying on my name,
And into my young heart the strange trouble came.
Why did you answer me, Annabel Rose?
Goodness gracious only knows!
Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,
And that is just my answer too.

Why did you marry me, Jeremiah Fairley?
Why did you carry me home to your farm?
Bleak blows the wind and the sun shines rarely,
And little care you now if I should come to harm.
Why did you marry me and give me your name
To bring me to trouble and sorrow and shame?
Why did you come with me, Annabel Rose?
Goodness gracious only knows!
Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,
And that is just my answer too.

Why must a young lass be such a featherhead
To trip to the beck and nod of any man?
Life's never been all lying on a featherbed
For any farm-wife since the world began.
Why should a lass, then, unless she is mad,
Give up her freedom to drudge for any lad?
What's the use of asking, Annabel Rose?
Goodness gracious only knows!
Annabel Rose, you're speaking true,
And that is just my answer too.

A.B.

I've done with the sea, he said
Each time he came ashore;
But ever before the month was out
With empty pocket Melchisedek Prout
Signed on for one trip more.

And nothing at all he said
When it came to sink or swim:
It warn't for the likes of an old A.B.
To say that he was done with the sea
Till the sea was done with him.

THE CONCERTINA

The twangling of a zither
And the thin
Tinkle of a mandolin
With the plunking of guitars
Underneath the Naples stars
Is a pretty sort of music to while away a night
With delight:
But a concertina playing in a pub at Hartlepool
For a devil-rousing racket can put the lot to school.

If I'd only stayed at Naples
Evermore
In that café by the shore,
Listening to the pretty tunes
Of Italian pantaloons,
I'd still have hopes of glory and a mansion in the sky
By-and-by:
But the devil in his tangles took and tripped me like a fool
When he played a concertina in a pub at Hartlepool.

THE HAND

This hand, *Tod said*—you see this hand,
Four fingers and a thumb . . .
It's difficult to understand . . .
And Dan, in kingdom-come!

A hand like any other hand—
The very same that he
Gripped when he came, the first to land
After ten months at sea.

It's difficult to understand,
Now that Dan's lying dead,
That it's still plump and brown, my hand
That should be shrunk and red!

CLIP-CLOPCLOP

Clip-clopclop, clip-clopclop—
The overstepping mare,
And Farmer Hogg comes here again:
But I—what do I care?

While Dicky sports a spanking cob
That canters light as air,
I'll never wed a man that drives
An overstepping mare.

GIRL'S SONG

I was so happy that I hardly knew it,
Nor ever guessed that life was not all play,
And little dreamt I'd live to see the dawning
Of such a day—
Oh why, why should it be
That suddenly
Life should seem strange and terrible to me?

I'd never cared for lads like other lasses
Nor heeded overmuch what they might say,
And little dreamt I'd live to see the dawning
Of such a day—
Oh why, why should it be
That suddenly
A lad's word should mean life and death to me?

DROWNED AT SEA

His fathers sleep in steadfast graves
Under the unadventurous mould;
But him, who for the salt sea sold
His birthright, still the vagrant waves
In endless vagabondage hold.

Not his the kindly sleep of earth
Who ever scorned the soil in life:
Tied to no spot by bairns and wife,
Sea-called and chosen from his birth,
He keeps the way of salty strife:

Far from the quiet fields of home
Where all his folk clod-cumbered lie,
On tossing crests when winds are high
His spirit rides through crashing foam
And whistles to the whistling sky.

THE PROMISE

Faint as a watch's tick,
As Kate stood by the sea,
She seemed to hear his pick
Tapping unceasingly
In the dark workings of the pit
To earn the price of brat and bit.

She watched the light wind whisk
The curd from creaming waves
And glancing waters glisk
And glint in hanging caves,
While in her heart she heard the sound
Of Robert hewing underground.

And as she stood adream,
Her young heart keeping beat
With his in that dark seam
Fathoms beneath her feet,
Haze-gazing on the unseen tide,
She felt a new pulse in her side—

The pulse of waking life
That promised he and she
Not merely man and wife
Ever again should be,
Since now into their coil of cares
Came a small heart to beat with theirs.

THE WEAZEL

A streak of red, the weazel shot
Into the Gallows Wood:
I heard a dying rabbit squeal,
And for a moment stood

Uncertain—then, as by some spell,
Drawn in through briar and thorn,
I followed in the weazel's track,
By clutching brambles torn.

Blindly I followed till I came
To a clearing in the fir;
Then startled suddenly I stopped
As my glance lit on her—

The strapping red-haired tinker-wench
Who stood with hands on hips,
And watched me with defiant eyes
And parted panting lips.

At first I only saw her eyes,
Her lips, her hair's fierce red:
And then I saw the huddled man
Who at her feet lay dead.

She saw I saw, yet never blenched,
But still looked straight at me
With parted lips and steady eyes,
And muttered quietly—

*I'll go: no need to make a fuss,
Though you've come gey and quick:
You must have smelt the blood—and so
The hangman takes the trick!*

*But what care I, since I am free
Of him and all his lies,
Since I have stopped his dirty tongue
And shut his sneaky eyes.*

*What matter though I kick my heels
In air for settling Jim?
The vermin's dead: at least I'll make
A cleaner end than him.*

TARRAGONA

Before the *Tarragona* came
I'd never even heard her name,
Nor dreamt what it would mean to me
When she again put out to sea.

Before the *Tarragona* came
No one might breathe a word of blame
Of me, or look askance at me,
Since I was born beside the sea.

Now day and night the bitter name
Sounds in my ear the word of shame,
And *Tarragona* means to me
The false heart of the fickle sea.

KATHERINE VEITCH

He fell at Loos: and when she heard
The tidings, though she did not stir,
Some light within her at the word
Was darkened, and it seemed to her
Death sought to snatch her bairn from her—
To snatch her sucking babe from her:

And she forgot that he had grown
A hefty lad to be her pride,
A shepherd for skilled piping known
Throughout the hilly Borderside
Until death took him from her side,
No more to seek his minney's side.

By day or night she cannot rest—
Stravaging over Auchopecairn
She clutches to her naked breast
An old clout-dolly like a bairn,
And moans—*My bairn, my hinney bairn!*
Death shall not have my wee bit bairn!

WATTY LEE AND YOUNG DICK

Now where may you be gadding to with such a dandy buttonhole—
If my eyes do not deceive me it's a sweetheart-picotee,
And in your Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and bowler hat and all?
I'm going to Saint Andrew's Church, as surely you might see,
Watty Lee.
Ay, maybe!

Though it's well enough on Sundays for the folk who've got naught else to do,
The church on weekday mornings is no place for you or me
Who've got our bread and cheese to earn; so what can you be after, Dick?
I'm going to be married there, as surely you might see,
Watty Lee.
Ay, maybe!

Then you don't know where you're going, Dick, for all your dandy buttonhole,
No more than any other lad who sports a picotee
And dons his Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and bowler hat and all.
You're surely hard of hearing or your wits are all at sea,
Watty Lee.
Ay, maybe!

THE MASTER

Nigh to the window-sill the snow
Had drifted when 'twas time to go,
And, lifted shoulder-high, we bore
The master from Starkacre door.

His wellbeloved fields in snow
Were shrouded when 'twas time to go,
And in the shieling snug and warm
His flock was sheltered from the storm.

Stormbound and blinded by the snow
Nor sheep nor pasture saw him go,
Although his whole heart's hopes and fears
Had been bound up in them for years.

Indifferent to the driving snow
He went when it was time to go,
And yet it's hard to think that he
Left flock and field indifferently.

WHY WON'T YOU STAY?

Why won't you stay at home with me?

How the devil should I know, mother?

I've never wanted to go to sea,

And yet, and yet, somehow or other . . .

Why won't you stay at home with me?

How the devil should I know, lass?

I've never wanted to go to sea,

Yet, somehow, when I've had a glass . . .

Why won't you stay at home with me?

How the devil should I know, wife?

I've never wanted to go to sea,

Yet, somehow, I've signed on for life.

MOTHER AND MAID

And where be you stravaging to at such an hour of night?
To look on Allen Water in the full moonlight.
Go your wilful ways then; but you will learn too soon
That no good comes to any lass from looking on the moon.

And where be you stravaging to at this unearthly hour?
To hearken to the hoolet that hoots by Staward Tower.
Round the Peel at midnight the brags and horneys prowl,
And no good comes to any lass from listening to the owl.

So don't say I've not warned you whatever may betide.
And what should I be fearing with Robert at my side?
What should you be fearing? Since the world began
No good has come to any lass from walking with a man.

DOWN THE DALE

Nannie's going down the dale—

Peter fleered as I went by.
Meaning soon I'd come to lie
In the graveyard by the Swale.

Hearing him I just stopped dead,
Turned and eyed him up and down
From the toecap to the crown,
But no single word I said.

Peter's years were just three score
Short of mine—a likely lad:
Yet, while I've the health I had,
Peter Perkins is no more.

To a scrag of skin and bone
Dwining like a body curst,
Peter reached the dalefoot first,
Overtaking the old crone.

THE RAVEN'S CROAK

The raven, he croaks on the cairn—
A wife had a bairn;
And the bairn was her heart's delight
From morning till night:
But when he grew up, with a knife
He let out her life;
And they took him and strung him on high
To dance in the sky,
Then cut down the corpse, and a cairn
Built over her bairn—
Ay, buried his mother's delight
In the dead of the night:
And naught but a rackle of bones
Lies under the stones.

So the old raven croaks on the cairn
As I dandle my bairn.

YOUNG RICHARD

Slicing the swedes for the steers
At the blink of the light,
Young Richard remembers with tears
The luck of last night—

Last night when he put to the test
His dream of a home,
And poured out the love of his breast
At the fall of the gloam—

To the spurting of milk in the pail
In the dusk of the byre,
Poured into Meg's ears the whole tale
With bosom afire;

Then waited, with blood running cold,
For a token of grace;
When the lass looked up brazen and bold
And laughed in his face;

And he flinched from the flick of her mirth
As a colt from the lash—
His golden dream crumbled to earth,
A heap of cold ash:

And he wandered the whole night forlorn
By braeside and slack
Till the first chilly glint of the morn
Brought day's labour back.

And now as he slices the swedes
It seems that the knife
Cuts clean through his heart, and it bleeds
A torrent of life—

A torrent of hot life unstayed;
Yet the quivering flesh
Re-knits, that each fall of the blade
May cleave it afresh.

MOTHERS

Of her calf bereft,
All night long she lows:
Of her firstling joy
Born of anguished throes
Naught to her is left.

Six sweet days of bliss
Swelled her heart with pride
While her baby boy
Nuzzled her warm side,
All to end in this—

Hollow echoing night,
One long empty ache
Moaning sleeplessly:
And I lie awake
Praying that the light

Of the morrow's morn
Bring to her the rest
Still denied to me,
Since from out my breast
My first love was torn.

BAG-OF-BONES

A bag-of-bones with nodding head

I met at Tavernspite.

You're old for travelling, I said,

Although you travel light.

I travel light enough, my son,

Though roads be stiff and steep,

Since my twelve children one by one

Have cried themselves to sleep,

And my old woman took to bed

A year come Christmas night.

With neither kith nor kin, he said,

An old man travels light.

BARRACOMB

In the dead man's bed I lay
Longing for the break of day—
Light enough for me to rise
And feast the first time eager eyes
On the pastures broad and fair
That had fallen to my share
As my uncle's only heir.

Last night in the wintry gloam
I had come to Barracomb:
Never in my life before
Had I opened the front door,
Never crossed the threshold-stone—
I who hadn't even known
The old man who'd lived alone

Reckless of his kin till death
Laid him low and choked his breath,
Forcing him to let his lands
Pass into a stranger's hands—
Forcing him to leave his home
High on windy Barracomb
For a lodging in the loam.

In the wide and creaky bed
All night long I'd tossed, my head
Filled with plans of all I'd do
Now good fortune had come true,
And the wealth he'd held so fast
In his miser-grip at last
Into better hands had passed:

When, as I lay there wide-eyed,
Someone seemed to quit my side,
Though all night alone I'd lain

Though all night alone I'd lain,
And against the window-pane
Stood a ghostly form and grey
Peering out across the brae
For the first chill glint of day.

Stark with dread I lay astare
Watching that strange shadow there,
Dark against the kindling sky;
And my blood ran cold as I
Wondered if that shape might be
The ghost of old John Heatherly
Or my own fetch awaiting me.

THE CHANCE-BAIRN

The corbie and the kestrel
Are robbers to all the rest,
But the corbie gives chase to the kestrel
That hovers too near his nest
When fatherhood's fierce tenderness
Kindles the corbie's breast.

The corbie and the kestrel
Are robbers to all the rest—
But better for you, my sorrow,
Sucking my bitter breast,
Better for you had you been born
In the fierce corbie's nest.

THE ESCAPE

Toothless, lanthorn-jawed and bald,
Bent and hobbling on two sticks,
Helpless by his burning ricks
Old Jake Jackson raged and called—
Bawled and called in vain for help:
All his hands were at the fair
Junketing, and none was there
To hear or heed his frantic yelp
As he watched the thirsty flame
Lapping up his golden wheat,
Till at last the glare and heat
His old senses overcame,
And he flung away his sticks—
Nimble as a two-year-old
Leapt into the roaring gold
And perished with his burning ricks.

When they came back from the fair
All in vain for him they called,
Round the steading searched and bawled—
Could not find him anywhere—
Bawled and called for him in vain:
Ricks and man were smouldering ash
Sizzling in the sudden splash
Of a burst of thunder-rain.

Though they raked the ashes through,
Of their master they found naught:
So the coffin he had bought
Second-hand, as good as new,
And beneath his bed had kept,
Was no bargain after all;
And the grave-plot by the wall
Nigh where his forefathers slept,
Held long wanted, wanted too!

He a long renter, wasted too!
Not for him in clammy gloom
To await the crack of doom,
Seeped and sodden through and through
In the sour and wormy mould
Where his outstripped kinsmen lie—
He the first to reach the sky
Charioted in fiery gold!

HAUNTED

The forepeak raked the stars
As we drove upon the Scars,
Then dipped into a boiling broth of hell:
With his arms about my neck,
I was sinking with the wreck,
When I drew my little knife and used it well—

In his thrapple to the haft
Sheathed my gully, and I laughed
As I felt his death-grip loosen round my own;
And I struck out for the land,
And was slung upon the strand
By a wave that took and tossed me like a stone.

Stunned and senseless there I lay
Till I roused at blink of day
To feel a leaden burden on my chest;
And as I strove to rise
I looked down into the eyes
Of the dead man's head that lolled upon my breast.

Stark and staring he lay there,
And the waves had stripped him bare
Ere they'd flung his broken body over me:
And I rose as if in sleep,
Howked a hole, and dark and deep
I buried him beside the Northern sea—

Rolled a rock above his grave
Lest a sudden scouring wave
Should scoop his naked carcase from the sand:
Then I left him—so I thought—
Dead and done with, and I sought
Food and shelter from the people of the land—

Left him buried. . . . But for me
There's no sleep by land or sea,
For always when I'm dropping off to rest
I am startled wide awake,
And all night I lie and quake
With the deadweight of a corpse upon my chest.

Yet never in this life
Have I used the butcher's knife,
Never sailed the seas nor left my native shore;
And I know not from what deep
Stirs the doom that breaks my sleep
To keep lykewake with the dead for evermore.

RACHEL REED

*Dance for your daddy,
My canny laddie,
Dance for your mammy,
My wee lamb. . . .*

Daylong beside the smouldering slack
She dodders, crooning with a grin—
Who, one wanchancy seven-night back,
Was hale to work day out day in—

Who'd rise at the first glisk of light,
And take no ease until the sun
Behind Black Belling dipped from sight,
Her long and lonesome day's darg done.

And as she singled swedes she had
Just one thought ever in her mind—
How one fine night her headstrong lad
That she could neither hold nor bind

Would come again to Callerlea
When he had had his coltish fling
To rest beneath his own roofree
Dog-weary with calleevering.

Bone-tired she crept to bed that night
And slumbered sound till twelve o'clock,
Then started, listening, bolt-upright,
Awaked by some unearthly shock.

She heard his footstep on the stair:
She heard the clicking of the sneck:
The door swung wide, and he stood there—
A ghostly halter round his neck.

*Dance for your daddy,
My canny laddie,
Dance for your mammy,
My wee lamb. . . .*

STILLCHESTERS

Three hundred years the Forsters' flocks had grazed
Stillchesters, by the ploughshare never broken,
Till the wanchancy day the word was spoken
That gave the strangers leave to dig, and raised
The dead to trouble us and drive us crazed.

They told us that Stillchesters once had been
A Roman camp, and that the walls yet lay
Beneath the smooth turf buried from the day.
Would God those broken walls still lay unseen
Beneath the kindly turfs unbroken green!

They took us with their talk of fighting men,
Of Spanish cohorts, altars, and rich treasure,
And so I gave them leave to have their pleasure
With my best pasture, little dreaming then
Stillchesters never should know peace again.

It's true my poor old mother tried to warn
Her foolish son, and looked at me sore-frightened,
But when I saw how my young wife's eyes brightened
At their fine words I granted leave. The morn
They cut the turf our only son was born.

Although till then the Forsters had been fair,
And though his mother's hair was yellow too,
And her bright eyes like mine a Northern blue,
The bairn was sallow-skinned and had dark hair,
And looked at us with big black eyes astare.

His mother loved her headstrong gipsy sore,
But he was aye a changeling from that day,
Until he broke her heart and went away
To be a soldier, 'listing for a war
In foreign lands, and never come back more

in foreign lands, and never came back more.

Three hundred years the Forsters' flocks had grazed
Stillchesters, till a light word rashly said
Unearthed old quarrels of the ancient dead,
And some black Spaniard's restless spirit raised
To drive the last of all the Forsters crazed—

To drive the last of all the Forsters fey,
Rousing the fighting fever in his blood
Whose sires had all been shepherds since the Flood:
So when my time comes, as it must one day,
Whose flocks shall graze Stillchesters, who can say?

I HEARD A SAILOR . . .

*I heard a sailor talking,
As he tossed upon his bed
In hot uneasy slumber,
And this is what he said:*

Why does she shake her head at me
Until her ear-rings tinkle,
Though all the while her merry smile
Keeps her blue eyes atwinkle?

Why does she slyly glance at me
As she pours out the wine,
Then pucker up her pretty lips
And hold them up to mine?

Why does she suddenly draw back
And o'er my shoulder stare?
Why does that silly parrot screech?
Why does the gas-jet flare?

And who's the lad that's running round
Upon the heaving floor
With a knife betwixt his shoulder-blades—
And cannot find the door?

Why does the scarlet parrot screech?
Why does the gas flare red?
Why do her tinkling ear-rings dance
A horn-pipe in my head?

GALLOWS' BANK

Last night, as I was stepping ben
Just as the Abbey clock struck ten,
My heart thrilled to the tramp of men
That climbed the Gallows' Bank:
And turning to the open door
I watched them trudging, four and four,
Breasting the brae with moonlight hoar,
Rank after ragged rank.

Their arms against their sides were bound:
Their mouths were gagged; and not a sound
Their feet made on the frozen ground
Nor cast a shadow there,
As up the unreturning road
They shuffled, hobbled, limped and strode
With eyes set on the tree that showed
Stark in the snell night air—

The gallows' tree of stout ash-wood
That handy on the fell-top stood
For folk who come to little good
Against the star-pricked sky.
Horse-copers, tinkers, thieving herds,
And doxies flaunting fakish flerds,
An endless gang of gallows' birds,
I watched them wamble by—

I watched them hirple up the hill,
Drawn up and up against their will,
Those grey ghosts shadowless and still—
For only in my heart
Had echoed that tramp-tramp of feet,
And nothing but my own heart's beat
Had drawn me to the haunted street—
When with a sudden start

WHEN WITH A SUDDEN START

I saw the whole rapscaillon rout
Each man of blood and sleiching lout
Stop all at once and wheel about
And fix their eyes on me:
And as I watched, the starry skies
And moonlit road and heathy rise
Vanished, and naught was there but eyes
That glowered murderously—

Hundreds of eyes that stared in mine,
Of lads and lasses clarty-fine
Who'd perished by the banks of Tyne
When first it topped the fell,
That tree new-tarred with hempen noose,
Straw-coloured, dangling long and loose
For any chance-come traveller's use
To sling him slick to hell.

And then the eyes of everyone—
The eyes of the whole gairishon,
Each daddy's daughter, mother's son,
Who'd danced with heels in air
Since reivers rode the Borderside,
And men had thieved and fought and died,
And wenched and murdered, sneaked and lied—
Shrank to a single stare:

And as from out the heart of night
Those dead eyes searched me wildfire-bright
I looked into their murder-light
And startled, knew, alas,
That I was staring in my own
Scared eyes where, frozen to the bone,
New-risen from sleep I stood alone
Before my looking-glass.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

THE FOWLER

A wild bird filled the morning air
With dewy-hearted song:
I took it in a golden snare
With meshes close and strong.

But where is now the song I heard?
For all my cunning art,
I who would house a singing-bird
Have caged a broken heart.

“ . . . AS SCARLET . . . ”

Scarlet the toadstools burn
In black mould by the linn,
Yet not more fiery red
Than my soul's sin.

Sodden as last year's leaves,
My life seemed cold and dead,
When suddenly the black
Burst into red.

Fall quickly winter snow
To bury all from sight
In drift on drift of death's
Cold dazzling white.

THE BURIED CAMP

Fear not: the dead are dead,
And fallen pomp and power
Leave no pale ghosts to prowl
Above their earthly bed:
'Twas no dead Roman but a living owl
That startled us beside the ruined tower.

*And yet, that beak, those eyes
That blazed out from the night!
Surely 'twas Cæsar's soul
That with sharp stabbing cries
Swept by, as through the buried camp we stole,
Spurring dead cohorts on to one last fight.*

THE ROCKET

Into the night
The rocket soars:
Ah, could but I
In flashing flight
O'er the dull lamps
Of earth swing high—
One moment poise
And perish there
In the full blaze
Of kindled air:
What matter though
A charred stick fall
Into the night
That swallows all.

STARS

Who travelling through a midnight wood
Tilts up his chin to watch the stars
Will like enough trip over roots
Or bark his shins against the knars:

But who, benighted in blind ways,
Struggles to thrust close boughs apart
Will never win from out the wood
Unless the stars are in his heart.

THE RIDER OF THE WHITE HORSE

Climbing the bridge's slope, a little lad,
I looked up and beheld in bright sunlight,
Against a billowing April cloud, blue-black,
Heavy with threat of hail, a monster white
High-stepping steed with the rider scarlet-clad
Like a flame-robed archangel on its back.

The spark-red nostril and the flashing eye,
The scarlet rider in the sun afire
Against the storm-cloud—shot with thrilling dread
My little heart a-hunger with desire
Of angel visions: then, as they went by,
I knew 'twas old Jake Dodd in hunting-red—

Jake Dodd, the whipper-in, on his white Jill.
The sun was blotted out; the hail threshed down,
Scattering the glory. Jake and his old mare
Have long been dust—yet, on the bridge's crown,
In the child's heart within my heart, Jake still
Rides, an archangel burning through the air.

WHERE NEITHER MOTH NOR RUST . . .

Treasures three
Life's given me—

Opal-Heart of dawning dreams
Shot with restless fiery gleams:

Crystal-Heart by day and night
Glowing with the living light:

Amber-heart that wells with mirth
Of the sun-enchanted earth.

Every dawn's a golden key
To unlock my treasury—
Heaven here and now for me!

THE VOICE

At sunrise, swimming out to sea,
I heard a clear voice calling me
From the little wood whose branches lean
Over the restless water—
I heard, half-dreaming that I heard
The voice of some enchanted bird;
And glancing back, among the green
I saw my little daughter.

When I must breast the stiller sea
That stretches everlastingly
Beneath the starless unknown night,
The darkness round me falling,
May it be given me to hear
Life calling me as crystal-clear—
To glance back once through failing light
And answer that sweet calling.

AUDREY

On the sea's edge she dances—
Her glistening body bare
Amid the light foam glances,
Foam-light with tossing hair,
Eager for all that chances
By land or sea or air.

She dances yet undreaming
Of life's oncoming tide:
Yet when wild water streaming
Surge round her deep and wide
Her soul foam-light and gleaming
Shall every danger ride.

THE WIND-BELLS

Listening to the glassy tinkle
Of the painted Japanese
Wind-bells swaying in the breeze,
Michael sees
Butterflies of light that twinkle
Round the walls with golden glancing,
Glancing, dancing to the ringing
Of the crystal wind-bells swinging.

As he stands there listening, dreaming,
Fairer even than the flight
Of the butterflies of light
Flit the bright
Fancies in his blue eyes gleaming—
In his happy heart a rarer,
Rarer fairer music singing
Than the wind-bells' crystal ringing.

MICHAEL'S SONG

Because I set no snare
But leave them flying free,
All the birds of the air
Belong to me.

From the bluetit on the sloe
To the eagle on the height
Uncaged they come and go
For my delight.

And so the sunward way
I soar on the eagle's wings,
And in my heart all day
The bluetit sings.

TO MICHAEL

Dear Crystal-Heart, I pray that you
May do what I set out to do,
Easily and happily attain
What I have striven for in vain,
All that, for some infirmity
Of soul, life has denied to me.

May you breathe out as some blithe bird
All that my heart awaking heard
And laboured daylong to express
Through cloudy passion and sharp stress
Till gushing from its crystal spring
Your song in all men's hearts shall sing:

And in that music clear and true
Even I at last attain through you.

A GARLAND FOR JOCELYN

I

Little flame that barely kindled
Flickered low,
Little flame that paled and dwindled
As we watched you, grieving so,
That the life our love had wakened
To the dark again should go.

How we strove and strove to win you
From the night,
Till the baby-spirit in you
Slowly conquered, burning bright,
And the jealous shades were scattered,
And our hearts were filled with light!

II

When I think of you I see
A flame-winged fritillary
Glancing over daffodils.
When I think of you I hear
Leaping laughing amber-clear
Sun-enchanted rills.

III

Lively as a trout,
Flashing in and out
The golden mesh of sunlight
That nets the crystal river—

Darting here and there
Through the dewy air
My little lassie frolics
With laughing life a-quiver.

IV

When you dance
Amber-bright the sunbeams glance
In your tossing hair;

So your name
Calls to mind a little flame
Dancing in the air—

Little flame for ever dancing
In the rain-washed air of April,
Amber flame through crystal glancing.

V

A charm of goldfinches
That flutter and flicker
Over daffodils flashing
Through sunny showers—

The light of your laughter
Flashes out of the silence
Though you have been sleeping
In dreamland for hours.

A CHILD'S DELIGHT

Traps for mice and snares for birds—
But who can take in a net of words
Fancies in their aery flight
To the crystal height
Of a child's delight?

Now a golden fount of light
Spraying to a rainbow bright,
Then again
Tinkling drops of sunny rain
That turn to flaming butterflies
Ere they reach the earth and rise
In a cloud of changing dyes,
In a cloud that spans the skies
With a fiery flickering bow
Melting into flakes of snow
That falling change to starry flowers—
Flowers that from the earth take flight
Again on wings of singing light—
On and on through endless hours . . .

Traps for mice and snares for birds—
But empty is my net of words.

THE POOL

Her mind's a shallow bowl
Round which in naked light
The homeless goldfish glance
Like flame in all men's sight.

Dazzled I watch, then turn
Home-coming to the cool
Star-haunted secrecies
Of the dream-shadowed pool.

THE BOAT

Two were at the oars and two,
Trailing hands, lolled in the bow
When the boat stole into sight
Round Emmanuel Head just now.

The sky was one fierce flame of sun,
The sea, a burnished glassy lake:
No creak or splash of oars was there:
The cleaving keel left no white wake.

I blinked a moment, my hot eyes
Bedazzled by the blinding light:
And when I looked about again
The silent boat had sunk from sight.

Then fearfully my heart recalled
How those most dear of all to me—
The four in that phantasmal boat—
Yet sojourned by another sea.

THE ADDER

Coiled on a hot white stone
The adder basks
And nothing asks
Save to be let alone.

Yet somewhere in the ling
An enemy
Crawls stealthily
To rouse him up to sting:

So he must lift his head
Once more to fight,
Till in the light
He or his foe lie dead.

O heart, that you might rest,
And naught again
Rouse from their den
The angers of my breast!

IN THE BURROW

On every hand beset
It seems we're trapped, and yet
Even now it's not too late
To try and outwit fate.

Who cowers in skulking dread
Of death's already dead?
While there's a breath or glisk
Of light let's take the risk.

Better to bolt and run
And chance the random gun
Than wait in huddled fear
The red-eyed ferret here.

UNITY

When the cooling tyre contracts
Round the felloe of the wheel,
Do not spokes that once were boughs
In close-knitting fibres feel
A glow in being ironbound
In unity secure and round
For conquest of untravelled ground?

SABBATH

Lowring of cattle as the twilight falls
Over green pastures and still waters deep;
Then not a sound save where a late thrush calls
Good-night to all, and turns to sleep.

Till, as I dreaming watch the moon's first beam
Silver the river's smooth and silent flood,
The cheerful Christians in their chapel scream—
There is a fountain filled with blood . . .

FABLE

Said the raven to the wren:

Why are you afraid of men?

You are nothing but a craven,

Said the raven.

While the raven still was talking,

Came a boy behind him stalking,

Caught him up and clipped his wings.

Still uncaptured Jenny sings.

PROVERB

The pitcher that goes often to the well . . .

And where's the tragedy in what you tell?

Better go every day for half a year

To fetch your fill of water cool and clear

And, brimmed with living crystal, happen fall

In shards and perish thus once and for all,

Than stand, a dust and fly-trap, on the shelf

For centuries with other useless delf.

THE GUILLOTINE

Obedient to the will of men
The giant blade descends again,
Slicing the molten steel like cheese
Just as the grimy pigmies please:

And something makes me laugh to see
One mass of metal quietly
Slicing another at the will
Of bow-legged Mike and one-eyed Bill.

EPITAPH

Deeply he drank of life, and scorned
The timid soul who sips,
And stumbled out into the night
With laughter on his lips.

Oh, grudge me not the like, O life,
When I too must depart—
A gallant stirrup-cup to warm
The cockles of my heart!

THE PIT

*With twinkling watery eyes and wheezily
Old Peter Walker laughed
And gave his chest a thump—
Well, if you're sick of living, you may easily
Drop down the empty shaft,
And lie in the black sump
In peace till the last trump.*

Yet, I've a notion, like the rest of us,
You'll take the cage, my friend,
For going down the pit;
And be as eager as the best of us
For the night-shift to end—
To see the last of it
When you've been down a bit.

IN COURSE OF TIME

The sarsen-stone,
Door-post of temple, altar-throne
Of some old god, or monument
Erected by a warrior-host
To mark the fallen chieftain's tomb,
In course of time has come
To serve the old black sow for scratching-post.

A lad's light word,
Breathed low and scarcely heard
Or heeded in the babblement
And blare of other tongues, has time
Remembered, and the souls of men
Again and yet again
Take fire at that dead lad's undying rhyme.

PIG-IRON

The crowbars loosed the plug of clay,
And bursting from the furnace' side
The spouting molten metal gushed
In a tumultuous seething tide

That surged into the winter night
With an exultant white-hot flare
And blinded heaven and all its stars
And the cold moon in one fierce glare,

Till in the mould of channelled sand
It cooled to red: then dull and slow
It crawled in grey congealing streams
That gradually ceased to flow:

When clinking crowbars snapped the chilled
And brittle metal short, and soon
In stark cold pigs the iron lay
Rigid beneath the icy moon.

And so the passionate seething tide
Of youth, the fury and the fire
That burned up heaven and earth in one
Exultant outburst of desire,

Grows dull and sluggish; and too soon
Shall my heart's metal, dead and cold,
Await the crowbar's snapping stroke
Indifferent in its channelled mould.

LABOUR-IN-VAIN

Snell moans the East-wind,
Chill drizzles the rain
Round the lone steading
Of Labour-in-vain.

Blind are the windows
With never a pane,
And reekless the chimneys
Of Labour-in-vain.

Byres empty of cattle,
Barns empty of grain,
And naked the roof-tree
Of Labour-in-vain.

Yet, gaunt, peaked and sallow
As moons on the wane,
The ghosts of old tenants
Haunt Labour-in-vain.

And shriller than peesweeps
Their voices complain
And greet for the ruin
Of Labour-in-vain—

*Though life was one heartbreak
Of trouble and pain,
Would we were still living
At Labour-in-vain.*

*Though life was a struggle,
The stress and the strain
Knitted our heart-strings
To Labour-in-vain.*

*We tilled the sour acres
And sowed the scant grain,
And hoped for a harvest
At Labour-in-vain.*

*And beaten and broken
In body and brain
We breathed our last sadly
At Labour-in-vain.*

*In death there is nothing
To lose or to gain,
While at least hope was left us
At Labour-in-vain.*

Snell moans the East-wind,
Chill drizzles the rain
Round the lone steading
Of Labour-in-vain.

And shriller than peesweeps
Their voices complain
And greet for the ruin
Of Labour-in-vain.

THE PURPLE ORCHIS

You pluck the bloom to pieces with a smile,
Chattering heedlessly the while,
And I watch you strip the stalk
Of its purple pride of petals as you talk;
And the flower that when you came
Burst to flame
In the sunlight of your eyes
Petal after petal dies,
As you pluck my heart to pieces with a smile,
Chattering heedlessly the while.

THE SAIL

A boat in the bay,
You say,
And watch with delight
The sail flash white.

A sail in the blue
For you,
A sail—but for me
My heart at sea.

ALL BEING WELL

*All being well, I'll come to you,
Sweetheart, before the year is through;
And we shall find so much to do,
So much to tell.*

I read your letter through and through,
And dreamt of all we'd say and do,
Till in my heart the thought of you
Rang like a bell.

Now the bell tolls, my love, for you;
For long before the year is through
You've gone where there is naught to do
And naught to tell.

Yet mayn't I find when life is through
The best is still to say and do,
When I at last may come to you,
All being well?

IN THE WOOD

The day you came upon us in the wood
You said no word but only glanced at me,
And then went on to talk of something else.

How could I tell you you'd misunderstood
When you—you said no word of it to me,
But talked so steadily of something else?

If you had only spoken out I could
Have told you all and you forgiven me,
But you thought best to talk of something else.

Because your heart was troubled you thought good
To say no word about it and spare me:
So we must always talk of something else.

BURIED LOVE

I hear your spade
Delving the soft wet garden-mould,
And listen half-afraid
Lest you should chance dig up again the old
Long-buried golden dream that died
The day you came upon us side by side—

Lest unaware
And only half-remembering
You suddenly lay bare
Your love of me that perished in the Spring,
And only see among the stones
A huddle of unknown time-whitened bones:

And so forget the heart of golden flame
That died the night misunderstanding came.

THE DARK GLEN

As we drop downward we shall lose the moon
That in high heaven kept pace with us all night.
What matter? I am wearied, of her light.

Between the crags we shall not see the sun
Kindle the fell-top with his earliest ray.
What matter though we slumber through the day?

What, lose the golden days, the silver nights,
For which so eagerly we climbed the steep?
Love, I am weary, and I long for sleep.

Yet, rapt in slumber, we'll not even know,
Lost in blind dreams, that we together rest.
I only know sleep comes, and sleep is best.

NO BARREN FLAME

The poppy's flame has died,
But sprinkled far and wide
Its seeds abide
Another harvest-tide.

Though passion's flame sink low,
The seeds of fire we sow
For weal or woe
Through time shall burn and blow.

SURVIVAL

If the worst comes to the worst
We can die but once, you said;
Then you ventured all and first
Took your place among the dead.

Sound you sleep, while I who dare
Venture naught but quailing stay
On the quag-edge of despair
Die a hundred deaths a day—

Die and live to die again:
Yet it's much to know that you
Did not venture all in vain,
That the worst you never knew.

HEWER OF WOOD

The timber I have hewn, stacked high,
Would overtop Saint Mary's spire
That soars into the windy sky,
Yet it has only served for fuel
To feed one little cottage-fire—

Has only served to keep aglow
One inglenook when winter's storm
Raked heaven and earth with blinding snow—
A forest felled and life-long labour
To keep a little household warm.

And that small fire that still devours
Fresh timber burns my life away:
The tale of gold and glooming hours
Of tree and man's the selfsame story—
Green flame, red flame and ashes grey.

BEAUTY FOR ASHES

You may burn the golden glory of the gorse,
But the roots into the rocky earth run deep,
And the living bush will only glow to rarer fire of beauty
When at last beneath the mould you lie asleep.

Beauty dies not though you blast and lay it waste,
Though you turn the whole earth to a cinder heap,
From the ashes of your factories once again the everliving
Shall awake one April morning out of sleep.

THE PARTING

There was no reason why he should not smile,
Bidding good-bye to me,
And go his way light-heartedly—
And yet!

There was no reason why I should not smile
Happily for his sake,
No reason why my heart should break—
And yet!

THE DISASTER

Against the sunset's rose
Purple the pit-heap glows—
The mound of slate and slack
That all day long gloomed black:

And the gaunt shaft-wheel seems
Hub to a wheel of dreams,
With flaming spokes that whirl
In a celestial swirl

Of hues beneath whose fire,
With patience naught can tire,
Quiet, with close-shawled head,
Each woman 'waits her dead.

THE MOSS

*The cold bog-water clucks
At every step across
The black and quaking hags
Of Dead Man's Moss—*

And what's the hurry, squire,
To reach the house you hate?
Where there's no welcome none
Can come too late.

Why should you labour now
To lift another foot
When peace lies all about
The rushes' root?

Your empty house but holds
The dead dream of a fool:
But the end of all things waits
In any pool—

In any still black pool
Oblivion dark and deep
Awaits the heart that would
Forget in sleep.

YOUNG MAN CATCHIESIDE AND OLD MAN JOBLING

*Old man, old man, whither are you hobbling?
Old man Jobling, whither are you going—
Battered hat and tattered coat and clogs in need of cobbling—
And the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing?*

Young man Catchieside, and if I go afairing
Who's declaring I'm too old for going—
Dressed in Sunday-best and all? And why should I be caring
For the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing?

*Ay, but what will 'come of you as drifts get deep and deeper,
Steep roads steeper and your shanks too numb for going?
Happen I shall nap—I was ever a good sleeper
With the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing.*

*Deep will be your sleep . . . It's truth you are declaring—
After fairing, whichever way we're going,
Deep will be the sleep of all; so why should I be caring
For the snell wind lowing and the mirk lift snowing?*

THE LITTLE RED CALF

The little red calf
For a day and a half
Has blinked in the light—
His blue eyes adaze
In the buttercup-blaze,
He fancies the world is one bright
Fresh field, green and yellow,
A world where a fellow
Whatever betide
May snuggle in safety his mother's warm side.

Little brother, I too
Once fancied as you
The world was one fair
Fresh meadow of flowers
Until the black hours
Burst on me and stripped the mead bare.
O little red brother,
Keep close to your mother
Whatever betide,
And snuggle as long as you may to her side!

THE BED AT THE INN

*Never, I said,
Shall anything sever
Hearts that are wed
For ever and ever:
And the swinging inn-sign
Took up the refrain,
Creaking and squeaking
Again and again:
For ever and ever—
Ay, so they said,
All the young lovers
Who've lain on that bed.
They swore the same vow,
The true or false-hearted,
Yet all of them now
Has life or death parted,
All of them parted
For ever and ever—
And ever new lovers
Brag boldly of 'Never!'*

THE STONES

The plank was covered, so last night
I had to leap the flooded burn;
And as I landed in the fern
I scared an owl to startled flight.

Sharp in my ear it screeched; its cry
Sang through my very marrow-bones,
Curdling my heart's blood, as the Stones
Loomed gaunt against the starless sky.

As through my being's black unknown
Caverns that skirl went echoing,
My feet were drawn into the ring
Of huddled shapes of druid-stone:

Victim of some ancestral dread,
My gullet bared to meet the knife,
Hanging upon the edge of life
Over the unseen clutching dead

Crouched in the core of night, the sheer
Primeval horror of the dark,
I cowered—when at my feet a lark
Rose with a twitter sweet and clear:

And as he sang the song he sings
An hour before the break of day,
The spell snapped, and above the brae
My heart too soared on dewy wings.

THE QUARRY

As the windhover
Drops on the shrew,
Love, O young lover,
Swoops down on you,
Bears your heart heavenward,
Tears it in two;

Swift with his capture
Soars through the light—
Yours the fierce rapture
Of agonized flight,
Talon-torn, terror-winged,
Into blind night.

THE PEARL

And is this all
You bring up from the bottom of the sea?
I watched you strip and poise and recklessly
Dive headlong down, as though to wrest the key
From the profundity
Of time's unfathomable mystery—

Only a pearl,
A little fragile globe of fleckless white,
You bring up, breathless, in your palm clutched tight,
Trinket to make a girl's eyes kindle bright—
Naught else you bring to light
From the dark chambers of old ocean's night?

*Only a pearl—
All colour fused in one white glow, all sound
In breathless silence blended, all form bound
In the clean compass of the perfect round—
Beauty, in chaos drowned,
Borne to the living light from deeps profound!*

THE TOLL

Ho, ferry, ho!

The river is in spate:

You cannot cross to-night.

Yet I must go

To-night: I cannot wait

Till morning light.

Come, you too then

Must grasp the guiding-rope

And haul the boat with me—

Grasp as doomed men

Clutching at their last hope.

Ay, willingly!

Before we land

Come, pay your passage, if you'd live

To draw another breath—

Unloose one hand . . .

See, with both hands I give

The full toll—death!

NORTHERN SPRING

O skein of wild-geese, flying
Through April's starry blue,
Your harsh and eager crying
Searches through and through
My heart till it takes flight
Arrow-like with you
To pierce the Northern night,
Shedding flakes of light
From wings of flashing white
Through tingling airs a-quiver
On tossing waves that shiver
Crystal berg and floe—
On crashing ghylls and forces of winter's melting snow.

When down the water-courses
The spate of April dins,
Like hoofs of countless horses
Thunder the threshing linns
As leaping 'twixt the scars
Bright froth spurts and spins
And sprays the leafing spars
Of woods that rake the stars;
And shattering bonds and bars
My spirit pours in thunder
Of torrents, trampling under
Dead winter's slothful dreams,
Till life's a singing tumult of April-wakened streams.

THE UNDYING FIRE

What will become of you, flesh and bone,
When I at last must leave you alone?

*When you have left us, bird of the breast,
Thankfully, endlessly we shall rest.
Long have you fluttered us, urging us ever
To ventures beyond our utmost endeavour,
Fretting us, driving us on and on
Until, breath failing and strength nigh gone,
We have longed for the day when buried deep
In the passionless earth we shall sink to sleep,
When you shall be free to wander the air
And we shall neither know nor care.*

Think you, poor dreamers, you shall find rest
Even in earth's most secret breast?
Know you not then that life's desire
Has burned in the earth with a heart of fire
Ever since out of chaos she came
Borne on pinions of singing flame,
And not an atom, but in hot strife
Perishing, flares to a fuller life,
And death that seems a dreamless sleep
Is but life burning more fierce and deep?

OUTWARD BOUND

The harbour-lights have dwindled
To sparks on a grey shore
Which fades into the sunset
That we shall see no more
Above our own land kindled.

As one by one extinguished
The lights of home go out,
It's time to face the onset
Of night, to turn about—
All thoughts of ease relinquished—

To face the whirling welter,
And drive before the storm
That knows not dawn nor sunset—
Our wits to keep us warm,
And courage our sole shelter.

NOTE

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