

Hazards

Poems, 1928-1930

Wilfrid Gibson
1930

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HAZARDS

POEMS, 1928-1930

BY WILFRID GIBSON

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HAZARDS

BY

WILFRID GIBSON

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TO

ROBERT AND ELINOR FROST

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THE WINDY NIGHT

THE PEONIES

Someone had set a bowl of peonies
On the white table where they caught the light:
And as he roused from slumber, more at ease,
Their dewy crimson flashed upon his sight.

Lying in languor on his snowy bed,
Islanded in that vast austere white room,
The little crystal bowl of living red
Brimmed his age-wasted heart with summer-bloom:

And, drowsing now, his body seemed to glow
Again with raptures of long-spent desires . . .
Peonies bursting from deep drifts of snow,
Flame upon flame, flashed their exuberant fires

Through his closed eyelids: bloom on burning bloom
Blazed his starved senses to an ecstasy
Of clear red life, until the unseen room
Burned all about him, one vast peony—

One flower of fire! Nay, but the very world,
Petal on petal, flushed to sheer blood-red,
A globe of living flame about him furled,
Within whose furnace-heart he now lay dead!

THE BROKEN BRIDGE

Under the long unbroken stress the bridge
Collapsed, and hurled the company to disaster
Into the black gulf of the roaring torrent . . .

The regiment of thoughts that over his brain
Had marched so long in orderly array
From ridge to perilous ridge
Was stricken with dismay,
And fell
Pell-mell
In frantic disarray
Into the hurtling and abhorrent
Gulf of the swirling and insane
Furies of darkness, rushing fast and faster
Through labyrinthine corridors of hell . . .

And yet to us that bridge had seemed to be
Rock-founded and secure, a Roman way
On which in orderly array
From ridge to perilous ridge
Of eagle-haunted regions
His thoughts' unchallengeable legions
Might march for ever and a day,
Might march through time into eternity!

ON THE QUAY

Stifled all day by suffocating fluff
That filled the humming mill—at sunset free
She sauntered downward to the windy quay,
To clear her breathing of the choking stuff,
And rid her nostrils of the reek of jute,
Her senses, of the droning of the mill:
And she rejoiced to hear the eager hoot
Of the incoming whalers; and to fill
Her lungs with briny savours; and to see
The bearded, salt-encrusted venturers
Whose hearts had dared the sheer immensity
Of the whales' playground; and whose life, to hers—
Tied to a rattling loom through all her days
In a sick humid smothering atmosphere—
Seemed life, indeed, in shattering bright ways
Of wind-sheared shivering waters, tossing clear
To limitless horizons . . .

And to-night,
Sparkling, aware and eager eyed, she saw
The still blue eyes of a young whaler light
As he looked into hers; and sudden awe
Filled her young heart, as though the very sea,
Darkling and dangerous, claimed her for its bride,
And salt tumultuous waters thunderously
Crashed drowning over her, tide after tide.

THE FUSED WIRE

A wire had fused; and instantly
From sheerest brilliance he and she
Were dropped into obscurity
More pitchy than original night
To eyes accustomed to the white
Dazzle of incandescent light.
A moment since, they two had stood
Together in youth's hardihood
In their own world and found it good,
The world their love had made. Alone
Each stood now in a black unknown
Region that turned the heart to stone
An instant, an eternity,
By night divided, he and she—
Till candles came, when laughingly
They chattered with eyes kindling bright:
Yet evermore their world of light
Was haunted by the dread of night.

EARTHBOUND

As the plane banked in turning, far below
He saw the streets and houses of the town,
And felt like a new Gulliver looking down
On Liliput, toy dwellings row on row,
And tiny toy-like people scurrying round
In fussy little cars through street and square;
And on that thronged and smoky patch of ground,
Free of the blue serenity of air,
He looked amazed, and muttered—*Can this be
My native place? Are they my fellow men,
Those midgets?* Then his own house suddenly
He saw; and, as of all it held he thought,
With one desire his anxious heart was fraught—
To be with his own kind on earth again.

THE BLIND STRANGER

She switched her torch on in that shadowed place;
And, startled, saw a strained and staring face,
Dead white against a tree-trunk, where he stood
Stiller than any tree in that dark wood,
A stranger with the look of one whose sight
May never know the darkness from the light,
Whose blank unblinking eyes, though unaware
Of her existence even, appeared to stare
Right through her body till she seemed almost
To dwine beneath their spell into a ghost,
A wispy vapour floating in the air . . .

She dropped the torch: and daybreak found her there
Alone and senseless underneath the trees:
But soon the kindly light and freshening breeze
Revived her; and she rose to go her way.
Yet even in the ardent blaze of day
She shivered; and her heart could not forget
Those blind unblenching eyes upon her set
With an unseeing gaze that seemed to see
Sheer though the veil of her mortality:
And hour by hour life dwindled till she seemed
The ghost of her own self; and children screamed,
Suddenly coming on her in the shade,
And scuttled homeward trembling and afraid,
While she pressed onward through the failing light
To seek the stranger in the wood's deep night.

THE KING GOES TO BED

Somehow to-night
Unending, the familiar corridor
That he must travel to his room—
Unending, and familiar now no more,
And strangely filled with gloom . . .

Flight after flight
Of stairs he'd climbed with gasping breath;
And now, 'twould seem, that, weak and faint,
He had to pause awhile before
Ancestor after painted ancestor,
The generations of his fathers gone
Before him down to death—
To pause and peer until the paint
Flaked off; and in each frame there shone
An incandescent skeleton of white
And naked bone that grinned him a Good-night!

But when he reached the end and came at last
To his own father's portrait, it he passed
With eyes averted, fearing to discern
Even in that kind face
The grin of mockery:
For well he knew that never he
His faltering footsteps should retrace . . .
Though at a solemn, slow, unfaltering pace
Past each poor paint-and-canvas ancestor,
Frail fading relics of his once proud race,
He should return
Once more,
Borne shoulder-high, along the corridor.

MAY MORNING

A blackbird in the walnut, spilling crystal-
Clear drops of melody through unfledged branches
Into translucent cups of wine-bright tulips,

Into her quivering heart, too, spills his music—
Her heart, uplifted like a wine-bright tulip,
Till it is brimmed with joy to overflowing.

THE FLIGHT

A near thing! But he caught the plane: 'twas well
He did not miss it . . . Yet, 'twere hard to tell
Why he should catch it, why so anxiously
He should have hurried, or why he or we
Should fret and fuss at all to hold a place
In the fantastic frenzy of the race
Man keeps up, travelling at fanatic speed
From nowhere to nowhere—or why, indeed,
We should persist . . .

The plane soared to the blue;
And, as earth dropped away from us, I knew
The race is all in all, and not the goal;
That in the stress and strain man finds his soul:
Just to keep going gamely is the glory
Sufficient to itself, although the story
End with no fairy-tale felicity
Of living ever after happily.

QUITS

He said—So far, life's tricked and cheated me
Of all it promised; but life presently
Will find out its mistake
If it thinks I'll give in so easily:
Nay, rather has its treachery
But served as challenge to awake
My soul to anger, stinging it to strife,
Resolved to get its own back yet from life.

THE SOLITARIES

I touched his shrinking shoulder with my hand,
As he turned home, and said "I understand!"
And he glanced back at me with gratitude:
And yet, what was it that I understood?
If he had asked me, what could I have said?
I just felt sorry for that stricken head:
All that I understood was his distress,
And not the wherefore of his wretchedness.
He was to me as much a mystery
As each man to his fellowmen must be,
Even the nearest and the dearest friends—
Each living his own life to his own ends,
But clasping hands in fellowship, and then
Withdrawing each into himself again
The moment after. Oh, could we but live
A mutual life, however fugitive,
One in each ecstasy of joy and woe
With one another, would not we forgo
The lonely years that we must travel yet
Till each must face alone the last sunset!

A POET

His was no easy eloquence—
Not his the volubility
Of volatile vacuity:
So much he had to say,
Such crowded news he gathered by the way,
That his tongue stammered, struggling with a sense
Of the unutterable opulence
And unimaginable magnificence
Of every day.

THE LULL

The casement gave at last; and the whole night
Poured into the little chamber: squalls of rain
Swept sheer from the Atlantic waste on blasts
That whirled all round the room and out again—

And in and out, until a wilder gust
Whipped the white coverlet from off the bed:
And then the storm dropped suddenly as though
Awed by the face of the untroubled dead.

THE HAPPY TRAVELLER

Our lives but touched an instant, and a spark
Blazed the whole heavens for me: and then the dark
Shut down on me,
While onward, happily and heedlessly,
You took your way; and left me here alone
In midnight deeper than I'd ever known.

You go your way; and other lives to fire
Of momentary raptures of desire
Strike, as you go:
And naught, O happy traveller, you know,
While fresh flames ever blaze your way with light,
Of those you leave behind in deeper night.

IN OXFORD STREET

Against the stream of shoppers whose eyes are set,
Regardless of all else, on the display
Of opulence behind the burnished glass,
And heeding naught of them, he takes his way—

An old man in a long and bulging coat,
His wardrobe and his larder all in one,
And a slouch-hat that for full fifty years
Has sheltered that bowed head from rain and sun.

In faithful dateless rags of weedy green,
Through the bright-coloured throng of women dressed
In faithless fashion's momentary freak,
Indifferently he trudges, walking west.

He hardly sees the throng; and naught to him
Are those resplendent palaces of glass;
And they whose eyes look on their hearts' desire
Have not a glance to spare him as they pass—

That timeless figure trudging on, to whom
The world is but a road that every day
Brings the grave nearer—what is he to them,
The butterflies that flutter by the way?

AN EMPTY DAY

A lonely gull,
Hanging above the sea with famished eye,
Searches the barren tide in vain, and utters
Its harsh and hungry cry.

Even so, desire
Has hung all day above my barren mind,
Seeking for something to assuage its hunger,
Something it could not find—

Desire, sharp-set,
Searching the lightless deep with eager eye,
Till into night it sink, too spent to utter
Even a gull's harsh cry.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

Dead-level—he could always plane the deal
Dead-level; ay, his work was always true;
For every trick and turn of tools he knew,
And little you could teach him about steel;
And, after all these years, he understood
Something about the vagaries of wood:
With timber, oak or ash or pine, the grain
Gave him no sort of trouble: but with life
Outside his business, somehow always he
Wrought dead against the grain, and jarred his plane
On unexpected knots incessantly . . .
And womenfolk—how simple life would be
If a man could but wed a timber wife!

ESCAPE

When the fine metal of the brain
Has lost its virgin brilliance
And ringing keen resilience,
And, sleepy and brittle, cannot bear the strain
And sudden onrush of train after train
That life drives over it relentlessly
Again and yet again,
Till it may snap disastrously
At any instant—then comes Death, the ganger,
To tear us from the permanent way; and, cast
On the scrap-heap, we are free at last
Of the intolerable stress and clangour
Of traffic thundering down life's thoroughfare:
And surely it is good to lie
Quietly rusting under the quiet sky,
Resolving gradually in sun and rain
Till we are one again
With our original element of air?

NOVEMBER GOLD

With bended back and nose nigh touching toes,
Down the unending mangel-wurzel rows
All day he goes,
Lifting the roots, and slicing off the tops:
And, even to ease his back, he seldom stops,
Although the copse
That borders the Ten Acre is aflame
In the pale flame of blue November air
With gold more rare
And richly glowing than the dreams that hold
The hungry heart of man with wealth untold
Of fabled gold.

With bended back and nose nigh touching toes,
Down the unending mangel-wurzel rows
Heedless he goes,
Earning a scanty wage with his sharp knife
To feed the hungry brood he and his wife
Have brought to life;
Heedless he goes of birch and beech that hold
For a brief season only wealth untold
Of fabled gold,
That only hold their pride of gold until
The night wind, sweeping down from Wilbury Hill,
Their treasure spill.

RENEWAL

Beneath the elms through the long afternoon
He gazes over the meadow's level tide
Of glistening buttercups, a surge of yellow
That breaks in a silvery hawthorn-foam beneath
The further cliff-like elms, whose cloudy masses
Seem but the shadows of the elm-like clouds,
Piling their snowy cumulus in the blue;
And, as his eyes drink in deep draughts of yellow,
Deep draughts of golden wine into his heart
Pour till his veins are filled with golden fire,
And all his body is one quivering flame
That ripples to the singing of the larks,
Fountain on fountain jetting in the air
And spilling in the sun a ceaseless music.

The draff and dross of man's mortality
And age's heaviness purged from his blood,
One golden afternoon again his heart
Glow as in boyhood with the singing fire
And golden fervour of immortal May.

JANUARY NIGHTFALL

A scintillating snake of jewelled light
Kindles the darkness as from forge and mill,
Free-wheeling gaily down the Letchworth hill,
The workers hurry home through early night.
Beneath the frosty stars, an endless stream,
One after one the little lamps shoot down
The long and gradual slope to Hitchin town;
And happy voices call and faces gleam
Suddenly from the shadows, as they pass—
Lasses and lads released from bench and loom,
From clanging foundry and from rattling room
Where all day long beneath the roof of glass
On whirring wheels the live belts strain and scream—
Released at last, for a few hours to be
Masters of their own time, a brief while free
To call the tune and dance, or drowse and dream.

“GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN”

“But not forgotten. . .” On the lichened stone,
Sunk half-awry in the neglected grave,
The words are barely legible, the words
That, newly cut, once looked so stout and brave—

That meant so much that desolate day to hearts
Bereft of her who’d given them life: and yet
The very life she’d given, it was, that surged
So strong in them, and helped them to forget.

Caught in the swirl of life that with new lives
Affianced theirs, that newer lives might be,
They brooded less and less upon the dead
And the memorials of mortality.

“But not forgotten. . .” while the race is run;
And lives that from her life sprung keep the track,
Although her name must perish, she yet lives
In hearts that never falter or turn back.

THE CHEERFUL SWEEP

From a deep pit of sleep
I rose, disgruntled, to let in the sweep
Who rattled loudly at the kitchen door;
And shuffling, slipped, down the stair,
Shivering in the nippy air,
Switched on the light
And turned the key,
And saw him standing there,
His black face gleaming in the glare
Against the tardy tarrying winter night:
When through the grime his smile broke merrily
As sunshine through a thundercloud, and he
Wished me "Good morning!"

Back to bed I crept,

To snuggle once again
Beneath the counterpane
Among warm cosy blankets, while he swept:
And as I lay
Awaiting day,
I wondered, if it had devolved on me,
The job of sweeping others' chimneys clean,
So that their hearthfires might burn cheerily,
If ever I'd have been
So single-hearted that all men might see
Through soot and grime the flame of life in me
Burning with such a crystal clarity.

WHEN ALL IS SAID . . .

When all is said . . . he gasped; and then his breath
Failed him, and falling dead
He lay with lips for ever sealed in death,
And still so much unsaid—

So much unsaid, it seemed, so much unsung:
Yet, as we mourned him dead,
Since stilled for ever was that golden tongue
We knew that all was said.

RESURRECTION

On one side of the wall, yew-shadowed graves, and on the other,
The blaze of buttercups beneath the sun, a meadow flaming
With the resurgent fires of the old earth's unfailing fervour . . .

Do they feel naught who, under shadowed mounds, lie in dark slumber,
With but a wall between them and the full and fiery ardour
Of summer that once also through their veins a flaming fury

Of rapture surged? Do they no longer feel the quickening fever
Pour from their hearts in streams of lucent gold? Do they no longer
Feel the old urge that will not let them rest? Will they not waken

Yet once again from cold and crumbling mounds; and shedding gladly
The cerements of mortality, flame after flame leap lightly
The sundering wall to mingle with the meadow-flame of Summer?

HE HEARS HIS BELL

Slowly the passing-bell tolls,
Tolls in the tower of All Souls,
Tolls, tolls, with an echo that rolls
Down the river and over the bar—
Over the bar and over the ocean
Rolls the tolling in time to the motion
Of foamless waters that gloom and glimmer
Under a lonely star . . .

And I am the bell that tolls—
The bell, the tower of All Souls,
The river, the bar,
The echo that rolls,
The foamless ocean, the lonely star,
As the light of the eye
Grows dimmer and dimmer;
And slowly the cold
Stiffens my old
Limbs as I lie
And hark to the tolling
Rolling . . . rolling . . .

THE GENERATIONS

“Mother has always been like that,” she said—
“Timid and fussy—seems to fancy I
Am still a child!” The mother shook her head
For sole reply.

And then she smiled, recalling how she’d said
Of her own mother those same words wellnigh;
And how she, too, had shaken a wise head
For sole reply—

Recalling, likely enough, the day she’d said
The very same words to her mother—ay,
And how her mother’d shaken a wise head
For sole reply—

Recalling how girl after girl had said
Each in her turn those words in days gone by:
Then, each in turn a mother, had shaken her head
For sole reply.

HOLIDAY

An acre-and-a-half of hawthorn-thicket,
And all a sunlit billowy snow of blossom,
Whose foamy crests surge level with the window;
And in whose covert countless thrushes sing . . .

Come, overnight, through dark and unknown country,
And freshly risen from crystal deeps of slumber,
The boy leans from the casement, tranced in wonder,
Drinking the dewy morning with bright eyes—

Leans drinking in the song and snow and perfume
With every sense of his delighted body—
Blossomy light and scent and music mingled
In one clear-welling draught of ecstasy—

No longer a mere boy—the very spirit
Of Spring awaking out of crystal slumbers
To a new Eden, breaking into flower
And song and fragrance out of his own heart!

THE HOUSEWIFE

“I’ve got a tidy bit to do
Before dark—
Ay, and how ever I’ll get through
I cannot tell!”—
This was the burden of her song
The whole day long:
Yet was her day too short, and in the throng
Of household cares night fell.

O lucky wife, with much to do
Before dark!
Pity the luckless who get through
Before night falls,
Who listlessly must linger still,
With time to kill,
And no dear duty to fulfil,
Until the long day palls.

THE INQUEST

What need to hold an inquest!—suicide
In a clear-seeing moment of despair
After long years of ceaseless agony:
Small need to question how or why she died.
Rather your inquest, coroner, should be
To find out why a victim should be born
For sacrifice to such a destiny.

MURDERERS

*And so we're hanging Robert Smith to-day.
We're hanging him?*

Ay, so the papers say.

But I'm no hangman.

No, to save your face,

You pay another man to take your place.

Mine? Nonsense! I know nothing of the case:

Murders are not in my line: I'd not heard

A thing about it—hadn't read a word . . .

Why, till you spoke just now, I didn't know

There'd even been a trial!

Ay, just so,

Murders are not in our line, as you say,

And yet we're taking a man's life to-day.

THE VOYAGE

In sailing it were good to have a chart
To steer a course by, and keep us in good heart
Throughout the voyage, even if in the end
We founder on unnoted shoals: but we,
Pressed for life's voyage, must venture recklessly,
Without a chart or compass, on and on,
Keeping precarious foothold on the slant
And slippery deck, o'er swallowing deeps, and run
Before the wind of hazard, ignorant
Even of the airt from which the wind is blowing
That drives us onward, and not even knowing
If there be any harbour to be won.

THE ANSWER

Give us security! to life we cry.

And would you, then, have death before you die?

IMMORTALITY

They tell us there is no stability,
That naught abides for ever anywhere;
The everlasting hills dissolve in air,
Frittered by wind and rain incessantly;
The solid rock is but a whirling motion
Of perishing dust, the sun, a failing fire;
A fleet evaporation, the old ocean;
And love, a self-consuming brief desire.

And yet, if evanescence be eternal—
Change, the one constant, this body of our death
Exists not: death were immobility;
And change is life, the spirit's very breath
Of being; and we are one with the supernal
Swirl of the ever-living ecstasy.

IN THE WAITING-ROOM, EUSTON

Midway between their old life and the new,
A company of Russian peasants, bound
For Canada, they sit and stare around,
Bewildered by the dream they are passing through—
This queer, incredible dream of sitting still
In trains or boats all day with naught to do
But sit—who even in childhood seldom knew
An hour without some duty to fulfil.

Too dazed for thought—they whose whole mother-wit
Is in their cunning hands' activities,
So strangely indolent with hands on knees,
Sick for the old home jobs, and ill at ease
In a new world of alien luxuries
And purgatorial idleness they sit.

WINTER NIGHTFALL

While in the last cold rays like birds of steel
The airmen poise and soar,
The ploughman, spinning homeward on his wheel,
'Lights at his cottage door,
Wearied of steering all the livelong day
His humming tractor through the heavy clay.

In highest heaven they move in eager flight:
But in the narrow lane
Already shadowed by oncoming night,
The lighted window-pane
Welcomes him to the heaven of his desire,
His own snug seat beside his own bright fire,

Where he—while they in restless fury fare
Under the frosty stars
Through the unfenced, unfurrowed fields of air—
Nodding beside the bars
Will drowse and dream, as still through heavy clay
His thoughts retrace the furrows of the day.

THE NAMELESS HEADSTONE

Above the time-obliterated mound
Still stands the headstone: but the graven name
Has all shaled off, and no man may recall
Who is the tenant of this little plot.

Yet when he died the world came to an end—
The world whose centre was his consciousness,
A world of hills and rivers, fields and woods,
Sunlit and starry skies, a world of men,
Of loves and hates and dreams and ecstasies,
An individual world that only in
His heart existed—his heart that in its compass
Held a whole universe by God created
For him and him alone, by God who died
Within him as the light failed, and as all
The imagination of his heart was darkened . . .

Yet of the man and of the universe
That perished with his passing no memorial
Remains, save this blank shaling slab of stone.

THE INDOMITABLE

Even as the body fails him and he dies,
Life, at all hazards! still man's spirit cries.

AGAINST THE PRICKS

Kicking against the pricks!—a foolish game
And mighty painful; and yet, all the same,
Isn't it better than just sitting still,
Letting misfortune work its own sweet will
Upon your carcass? Kicking keeps the blood
Hot in your body, racing at full flood:
And who'd not rather be, when all is said,
A donkey, kicking, than a donkey, dead?

THE PARSON

Not only as God's house, but as man's work,
The little church means much to him: he loves
Each stone dead men have handled, Saxon, Norman
And mediæval masons, men who took
Pride in their craft and laboured faithfully,
If not for love of God, for love of life—
Life that meant building something well and truly
To stand the weathering of time and serve
Their sons and their sons' sons through generations,
When, the sharp clink of chisels long since silent,
The builders slept about the unshaken walls
Their patient hands had builded.

But not dead men

Tallied in archæological categories
As Saxon, Norman, mediæval masons
Are they to him, but men alive even now—
Men such as yet live in the parish bounds,
Husbands and fathers of large families,
Who faithfully fulfil the common task
Destiny sets them, building well and truly,
If not in stone, with what lies to their hands
As well as they know how their house of life—
Such men as Abel Dodd and Michael Shield
And Stephen Hall and Nicholas Hetherington.

SNOW IN MAY

A week before, the storm would scarce have mattered,
Or a week later, when the fruit had set;
But at that moment it was sheer disaster—
The blizzard swooping down upon the valley
Of orchards, one vast rose of sunlit bloom
An hour ago. The tragical wild beauty
Of whirling flakes among the blossomed branches
Could not appease the anger in his heart
At all that promise wasted, all those months
Of labour brought to naught, but touched with terror
The spirit in him that must fight for life
Against such hazards, gods that with a gesture
Of idle malice could blast all his hopes,
Outwitting careful craft and foresight—he
In his little orchard-plot of fifteen acres
Pitted against the forces of the sky,
The merciless blind furies that unhindered
Range the illimitable airs of heaven,
A man against the incalculable weather—
Drought, Arctic wind and the black blighting East
And ruthless pests and scourges—one man against
The unaccountable capricious gods!
Yet were there years of plenty, as of dearth,
Fat years as well as lean, when the fates seemed,
In indolent indifference, almost kind,
And played no havoc with the apple-harvest.
And, even at the worst, had he not snatched
Out of disaster something? As the blizzard
In terrible beauty whirled through blossomed boughs
His very anger kindled in his heart
A flame of life more fervent than a succession
Of easy harvests could bring into being—
The fighting flame of human fortitude
No malice or caprice of reckless gods
Has ever quenched since from the dust man rose

To take up the unequal desperate struggle—
The flame that quickens in adversity
And, blazing to fresh fury from defeat,
Victorious o'er the victor leaps to heaven!

The storm had passed; and now the sun shone out,
Smiling upon the valley's devastation,
Boughs overburdened with the mocking bloom
Of shrouding snow, death to the living blossom
That one brief hour since under the same sun
Had glowed, one rosy promise of golden harvest.

THE WINDY NIGHT

All night the wind lashed at the pane
And slashed the glass with squalls of rain—
Wave after wave of tempest crashed
Against the little house in vain.

All night the man tossed on his bed,
And lost and found and lost the thread
Of intertwining thoughts that crossed
In mazy tangles in his head.

If but the wind would cease, he knew
He should lay hold upon the clue
Of all he now misunderstood . . .
But still the tempest blew and blew!

PHILOSOPHY

Not once the busy village-wife
Had time to pause and question life
About the why and wherefore of existence:

And yet 'twould seem life told to her
No less than the philosopher
Extracts with interrogative insistence.

FULL MOON

Ay, that's the moon: what of it? But the boy
Heard not the father's question, as he flew
Through airs of diamond newly washed with dew
On eager wings above the tallest tree
Towards that sphere of dazzling lucency.

*The moon—what of it? Surely you have seen
The moon before?* But still no answer came
From that young spirit towards the sheer white flame
Of the full moon awing in homing flight
And rapt already in celestial light.

ADAM'S SECRET

A snake of incandescent steel, the rail
As it was rolled out, with its searching glare
Seared his tired eyes. But this would be the last
To-day: his shift was ending. Rail on rail
Had slid from under the rollers, lightning-white
And blinding metal that but now had bubbled
Out of the furnace, till it seemed his brain
Was the sand through which they slid unceasingly—
Those scorching rails that he must cut in lengths,
Before they cooled into a dull red glow.

But all things ended, even shifts; and soon
'Twould be the home-shift—ay, the garden-shift:
And, in the garden's green, the white-hot glare
His eyes would soon forget, as his feet sank
In the wet mould, his feet that seemed to feel,
Even through his thick boots, the cindery grit.
Ay, and the quiet, the quiet of growing things,
Things growing quietly in sun and rain,
Things growing from the soil, not made with hands—
The garden-quiet after the foundry's clangour!

Trenching potatoes was the job for him,
Not chopping lifeless metal into lengths;
Ay, digging in the earth—to feel the spade
Beneath his hand slice deep into rich mould,
And snuff the savour of the soil through nostril,
Sore from the steam and smoke!—a healing smell,
The smell of earth! If he could only earn
His bread by digging: he was born to be
A digger in the earth, a very Adam;
And any garden would be Eden to him.
To own an acre, and know it, every inch,
From end to end—know it as intimately
As he knew his own heart—or thought he knew it:

For in a man's heart every now and again
Strange things sprang suddenly to light; to own
An acre and labour in it from dawn till dark!

But Eden wasn't for such as him to live in
In this world, seemingly: though some had luck:
And yet he wondered if they knew their luck,
The gardeners, any more than Adam knew his?
They'd never known, not they!—ay, that was it—
They'd never known aught else; they'd never felt
The searching glare of white-hot metal sliding
Through gritty brains, their heads one aching clangour!

Likely his relish was one half relief,
Coming from stifling heat and reek and racket
To the cool sweet savour and the green and quiet.

Was Eden Eden only to the exile,
And naught to Adam, who's known nothing else?

The factory then 'twould seem had given him much—
The secret of the garden, the true zest
Of labouring in the light with living things,
Letting him into the very heart of Eden.

BEAUTY

*She's just what I was at her age, they say;
For I was reckoned bonnie in my day,
Though you might scarcely think it now, said she—
And no one turns a head to look at me.*

I glanced at her and found it hard to see
The lithe young sapling in the old gnarled tree,
To find the daughter's birch-like suppleness
In that gaunt body with its clumsy dress,
So stiff and angular I couldn't trace,
As she went hobbling about the place,
One line or gesture of the young girl's grace.

Yet, as I looked into that wizened face,
With its worn features and its anxious eyes,
Grave and unsmiling, seeking to surprise
A gleam of her lost loveliness, I saw
Beauty that filled my heart with deeper awe
Than any laughing girlish liveliness
May waken, and I forgot the clumsy dress
And awkward limbs; and stood there marvelling
Before the beauty age alone can bring,
The Autumn beauty that outflames the Spring
In those whose life has been an offering
Burnt in the lustral fires of suffering.

THE ENTERPRISE

Down the long street he limps with anxious eye
Upon the close-shut doors, as he goes by
Hoping to see them open to his cry—
Old rags and bones and rabbit-skins!

While in a tenement, as he goes by,
A baby, opening a dazzled eye
And uttering a first bewildered cry,
The enterprise of life begins.

The old man does not hear the baby cry;
And it, regarding life with puzzled eye,
Knows naught of the old hawker passing by,
To whom the journey it begins

Is but a limping down long streets with eye
Upon the close-shut doors, as he goes by
Hoping to see them open to his cry—
Old rags and bones and rabbit-skins!

MIDNIGHT

Suddenly wide-awake in the black night,
He stared into the impenetrable darkness,
Wondering if this were not indeed the last
Long night of all, the night that knows no daybreak—
If from his eyes the light had gone for ever;
And all the world that lived but in the light,
The world that he had loved, since he so soon
Must leave it, with a desperate tenderness,
Was all gone now for ever—the first gleam
Of dawn on dewy hillsides; the blue noon
On windy waters; the rose and amber fires
Of sunset pierced by the first crystal planet;
The green of new-fledged larches; and the fresh
Translucency of young beech-leaves; the gold
And bronze and copper of the oaks in May
Above dark glinting hollies; and the foam
Of the cascades of hawthorn, pouring down
Sheer cliff-sides; and the stream of hyacinths
That sweep in one broad tide of purple, under
The tossing yellow foam of windy gorse
Down to the beryl of the western wave?

Was all gone from him now, the flowers, the faces—
Loved faces and the light of loving eyes,
The light wherein the world he loved had being . . .
Let there be light! God said; and there was Eden
For him in children's eyes, and in the eyes
Of her . . .

Just at that instant his trembling hand
Touched her warm-breathing body. She yet lived
For him: and hark, the far clear melody
Of the stream's falling waters, interlacing
The interweaving music of the murmur
Of the incoming tide!

He had not died then:

The darkness was no darkness of the grave;
For touch and hearing still were his; and colour
But slept within the heart of night, to kindle
At the first gleam of day, and fill his eyes
And heart with fresh delight.

The night would pass

Yet once again for him: once more the darkness
Break into flower of light, and in his eyes
Eden awoken from the dews of sleep.

COURAGE

Though time shall wreck the pitiful pretences
That are our sole defences
Against the onset of the enemy,
Yet in the hazards of the siege have we
Not found within ourselves security—
A danger-tempered courage to withstand
The last shock of mortality?

THE BASKET OF EGGS

THE BASKET OF EGGS

His boy drowned, Philip drowned—drowned in the lock . . .
A dozen and a half—he'd counted them,
Himself, into the basket—golden brown
For the most part, though some chalk-white, and still warm
To the touch, and heavy, nigh four ounces each:
None better in the whole of Oxfordshire,
He'd swear!—and as his lips had formed “eighteen,”
Laying the last frail oval top of all,
It flashed into his mind then, the old saw,
The proverb against putting all your eggs
Into one basket. . . . Strange it should have come
Into his mind that once of all the times
He'd filled the basket for the boy to take
To town of a morning—ay, and stranger still
He shouldn't have understood then what it meant,
Just what it meant to him, the saw—his eggs
All in one basket!—but had called his son
With no foreboding; and the lad had mounted
His wheel; and on the handlebar had slung
The fatal basket all too carelessly:
When he had bidden him sharply to take care,
Meaning he should be careful of the eggs.
Eggs! God, if only he had smashed the eggs,
Smashed them all there and then, and not set out!
But Philip had answered with a laughing word,
And shot off down the tow-path towards the town,
As on so many mornings. All your eggs . . .

He'd watched his son a moment as he rode
Whistling alongside the canal's grey stream
Of slower-moving waters: and just then
A young drake, finished preening his snowy feathers,
Half-rose and flapped his wings as though he meant
To take flight like his wilder kindred straight
For some far unknown seashore—his tame heart

Stirred for a moment to unwonted wildness—
Only to turn once more to tail-up grubbing
Among the weeds and marigolds that fringed
The sluggish waters. And he, too, had turned,
Clashing the gate behind him, and taken his hoe
To do his grubbing in the garden-patch;
While naught but hopes and fears for his potatoes
Troubled his mind, until he heard . . .

His eggs—

“Eighteen”—his lips had formed the unbreathed word,
All in one basket! Eighteen—three more in number
Than Philip’s years—Philip, his son, fifteen
That very morning . . . and now naught at all,
As though unborn . . .

The white drake with his ducks,
Still feeding in the marigolds—and yet
Philip . . .

They’d found his body in the lock
Beside the unharmed cycle, and the eggs—
Most of them still unbroken: but the basket
From which they’d spilled had floated down the stream:
The basket floated—the basket that as the wheel
Had jolted, swinging from the handlebar,
Suddenly slewed with all its weight of eggs—
Four times eighteen was seventy-two—somewhere
About five pounds, he’d reckon at the least—
And sent the cycle skidding down the bank,
Or so ’twas guessed. No one had seen the end,
The end of fifteen years, the end of all . . .
No one had heard a splash or the least cry—
If he’d had time to cry at all in that
Dread plunge to watery death! His corduroys
Caught in the pedal, he had been held down . . .
He’d been held down among the weeds and mud,
While his young life went up in airy bubbles
To where the basket floated—fifteen years
Of happy life went up in fifteen bubbles,

Maybe. . . . Ay, he could see them, even now,
Rise slowly from the bottom and then race,
Nearing the surface, as though they were eager
To escape the clinging element and mingle
In the free atmosphere. One after one,
The bubbles, Philip's life-breath . . . ten, eleven,
Burst in the sunshine . . . thirteen, fourteen, fifteen

Fifteen that very morning—and then, no more!
Yet, there were eighteen eggs, all in one basket . . .
But Philip, sixteen, let alone eighteen,
Would never see: fifteen, and then, no more.

The basket floated, the empty basket floated,
When Philip sank to the bottom: and he, too, floated,
An empty basket on a sluggish stream
Idly drifting—and Philip, in the grave!

All in one basket! and yet, why fifteen?
Fifteen, and then . . . Why should the boy have lived
To fifteen, if he'd never see sixteen?
Three score and ten, that was man's proper span:
But fifteen years, that was no time to end—
No time at all! The boy had just begun
To ripen into manhood; and now all . . .
In him, the Redes must end, it seemed: with him
What unborn generations perished! Why—
Why had God let him live for fifteen years,
Only to die for ever?

If he'd died

With her, his mother, who'd died in giving him life,
Who'd died in vain it seemed now—if he'd died
Then or had even never breathed at all,
Surely it had been better! Fifteen years
Of living in the light, and then to lie
In darkness everlasting: fifteen years,
His son's life, lying wasted in the grave;

And his own thirty-five, too, dead beside them:
For had he not died, too, when the word came?
The white drake still among the marigolds
That fringed the margin of the grey canal,
Whose waters still, though sluggishly, flowed on—
The white drake still with all his snowy dames
Scattered and splashed among the yellow flowers
And glittering green—while he and Philip lay
Dead in the grave. . . .

And now around the bend
A pied horse trod the tow-path; and on its back
Rode a young laughing lad—his happy father
Slouching along beside the horse's head
With hands in pockets and his heart at ease,
While the taut rope towed the slow-moving barge,
Blazoned in rainbow hues—the mother steering,
With calm untroubled eyes.

Nigh thirty ton
There must be in that barge, it rode so low
In the water with its cargo of cement:
And yet it rode, it floated, while his boy
Had gone to the bottom with his fifteen years—
But half the number. . . . Strange that fifteen years
Should sink, when thirty tons—just double . . . But then
His own years, too—fifteen and thirty-five
Made fifty; and it seemed that fifty years
Weighed heavier than the cargo of cement
A barge could carry.

Now the bargee lifted
His boy down from the horse: reluctantly
The lad slid off—(how Philip had loved horses,
For all his wheeling!) Round another bend,
Hidden by drooping willows, they disappeared,
Walking together; and now a shout of laughter
Burst from them; and the mother raised her head
To listen as the barge too disappeared.

And they'd go on together, go through life,
Father and son together, side by side;
While he and Philip, laid in death . . .

Nay! he

Must go on, and alone . . . yet not alone;
For by his side a lad of fifteen years—
Still fifteen—though he, himself, should live life out
And touch three-score-and-ten—a happy lad
Of fifteen would keep step with him, till he too
Beyond dim whispering willows disappeared—
Though scarce with laughter: and the grey canal,
Still flowing sluggishly beneath the sky,
Should never know them more.

LOOK IN YOUR HEART

LOOK IN YOUR HEART . . .

Look in your heart, and write . . .

I looked, and saw the infinite
Universe wheeling through unbounded space;
I looked again, and saw, race after race,
The endless and unwearied caravan
Of star-enchanted and death-haunted man;
Again, and saw a single star burn bright
Above a little home in the black night—
All in my heart, that holds, a fluttering breath,
Time and eternity and life and death.

SHINING SHOES

Your shining shoes
As you went gaily through the morning dews,
Flashed gleams of gold, reflecting the cold bright
Young day's delight.

But dulled and mired
Were they when slowly you returned home tired,
And caught no glimmer of the starry light
Of early night.

Dears, when your shoes,
That now I shine, flash through to-morrow's dews,
May your sleep-burnished spirits too flash bright
With fresh delight.

AS THE DAY DWINDLES

As the day dwindles and the senses tire
'Tis good to drowse within the ingle-glow:
Yet gladly would we not, O Love, forgo
The curtained evening's cosy golden ease
But once again at break of day to know
Dawn's hopes and fears and sharp anxieties—
The match's flare, the eager flame, the prick
Of stinging smoke in nostrils and the quick
Fierce crackle of the freshly kindled fire!

TO MICHAEL

I've taken my own way through life; and so,
If you don't follow in my steps, dear son,
But blaze your own trail, 'twill be good to know
At least you're doing just what I have done.

BUSINESS

Life keeps us busy, lest with time
Upon our hands we feel the weight
Of destiny, and sink too soon
Beneath the burden of our fate.

THE FAREWELL LETTER

I'd meant to come, you write: that every day
You said *I'll go to-morrow without fail*:
But something always happened to delay
Your farewell visit; and to-day you sail.

Already wave on wave the distance grows
Between us every hour; and presently
We shall be severed by the whole salt sea,
To meet again, if ever, when, God knows!

You'd meant . . . I know you meant it in your heart,
As we all mean so much we never do,
Allowing chance to play a tyrant's part
In our affairs, and cheat us of our due,
Until the hour of sailing comes, and we
Must quit the shores of earth regretfully.

ASSURANCE

I envy men who can assert *I know!*
And never hear God's laughter in the thunder:
But when they would assure me *It is so!*
I can but say *I wonder!*

FOLLY

Wisdom I sought laboriously
By day and night:
Yet 'twas a lucky lunacy
That filled my life with light.

FRIENDS

We never write; what need have we of words
Who hold each other's hearts within our own?
Who neither, while the other lives, with all
The world between, can ever be alone.

And shall death deal more harshly with us, then,
Whom life-long severance could not estrange?
Shall love not know a new security,
Freed of the accidents of time and change?

TO MICHAEL

Dear little son, when you
Fulfil at last your heart's desire to fly,
Forget not that of old your father flew
Before you through the sky.

On no mechanic wing
Your father soared, but on exultant words
In sheer celestial flights his heart would sing
Higher than any bird's.

So, when you have your will
And scour the crystal airs, even though no more
He trudge the ways of earth, his heart will still
Be with you when you soar.

GOLDEN HEART

I crossed her palm with silver, and she told
My fortune, giving for my silver, gold:

And the old wife's foretelling has been true
Beyond all dreams, dear heart, since I have you.

A FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY

I am not old while yet in me
The edge of expectation is undulled,
While in my heart, for every hope annulled,
A new hope quickens instantly.

Keen, as the blade that scythes the sedge
This gold October morning, my delight;
And it would seem that till the fall of night
Life still may keep a cutting edge.

TWELVE YEARS OLD

A birch-tree quivering with delight
Of opening buds in April air—
Slender and fair
Her fresh young spirit drinks the rare
And crystal dreams that from the height
Of youth's enchanted heaven shower,
Hour after happy hour.

And though storms come and dim the bright
Young eyes beneath the cloudy hair,
Again more fair
From momentary gloom, aware
Of deeper dreams, with fresh delight
Her spirit quivers into flower
To greet the golden hour.

NEWS

Dawn was still tardy, and the wind was surly
As, getting up, I went down early
To light the stove and clean the shoes,
With mind sharp-set for any news—

For any news of anything
Outside the little beaten ring
My thoughts kept in their daily round
Within my dull brain's narrow bound:

When, as I cleared the grate, I heard
The well-known singing of a bird—
Familiar, and yet, fresh with dews
Of dawn, it filled my heart with news.

IN AFTER YEARS

My dears,
In after years
If you should think of me,
Recollect not too bitterly
Some momentary fretfulness or brood
On harsh words uttered in an angry mood;
But in your charity
Remember that your father, even as you,
Trying to hold his own in life's affairs,
Had dreams and disappointments and despairs—
(Though he found rapture in the conflict too—
Ay, and such happiness as falls to few!)
And keep in mind the truth
That, even in the bitterest hours he knew,
Trying to reconcile
His heart to failure, 'twas the thought of you
In all the eager promise of your youth
That ever made the struggle well worth while.

SOME OTHER DAY . . .

You did not come to-day: we met the train;
And you were not a passenger: in vain
We sought your face in the indifferent throng.
“He’ll come some other morning before long—
Some other day. . . .”

Thus on our homeward way
The words beat in our hearts like a refrain—
“Some other day. . . .”

Awaiting us at home,
A wire that told us why you had not come
To us to-day; and that no other day
Would ever dawn for you: and never again
Need we set out to meet you at the train . . .
Yet still defiantly beats the refrain
In my incredulous heart—“Some other day. . . .”

IN ABSENCE

Half-waking, I stretch out a hand
To touch you. . . . And you are not there!
And still bemused by anxious dreams
My heart is helpless with despair
Of ever finding you again,
You who are all my love and care—

A moment deeming you are lost,
Are lost for evermore to me—
A moment, yet to my numb heart
That moment is eternity . . .
Till my requickening mind recalls
That you but sojourn oversea.

You will return. . . . Yet I knew all,
That moment, death will mean when I
In my last bed beneath the doom
Of everlasting night must lie
Alone without you—yea, dear Heart,
I have known what it is to die—

I have known what it is to die—
To die, and come to life once more,
Remembering. . . . Oh, when the grave
Holds me at last and all seems o'er,
May my dead heart recall that you
But sojourn by another shore—

My heart, requickening, recall
That you but sojourn oversea,
Reluctant to relinquish yet
The home we loved so tenderly,
Till at death's bidding you must come,
And, coming, bring new life to me.

THE UNWRITTEN LETTER

I did not write. I always meant to write,
But somehow never did, from day to day
Obsessed by all the trivial business
That seemed excuse sufficient for delay;
And yet there was so much I meant to say.

I did not write; and now I cannot write—
Or, rather, it were useless: no king's head
That pence or pounds might purchase may secure
Delivery in the regions of the dead—
And all I meant to say remains unsaid.

THE QUESTION

Well, I don't know: it doesn't seem to me
A question you can answer easily—
At least for some few thousand years or so
Sons have been asking it day after day;
And even now your father can but say—
Well, I don't know.

Some have found answers, ay, and seemingly
Were satisfied; and it may even be
You'll find your own solution: yet even so
When your son comes to question by and by,
If he'll be satisfied with your reply—
Well, I don't know.

REUNION

TO ROBERT FROST

Without, the October chestnuts' still gold flame;
Within, the lively flicker of the logs
Of the first Autumn fire, as once again
We sit beside the hearth—the four of us
Who once were nine, and by another hearth
Than that we knew of old in Gloucestershire
Before war overwhelmed our world and scattered,
As sparks before the wind, our little circle
Of friendly spirits broadcast. . . .

Fourteen years

Of silence lie between us—fourteen years
The windy wilderness of the Atlantic
Has severed us with wave on wandering wave
Of ever-changing changelessness; and we,
Over whom time's waves have washed, and who are left
Changed to the world and to each other's eyes
Maybe—are we, too, not unchanged at heart?

Disastrous years have had their way with us:
Terrors and desolations and distresses,
That put a sudden period to our youth
Just when our powers were ripening, left us aged
Before our time: yet now we sit at peace
Talking once more together, as we talked
With Abercrombie, Brooke and Thomas then
Of the old craft of words.

We talk of words,
And pause, and talk again, and pause; and they
Are with us in the silences, our friends,
The absent living and the living dead. . . .

The hour of parting nears: and soon once more
The windy wilderness of the Atlantic

Will separate us, for how long, who knows?

Yet, though we meet no more, what wave shall ever
Divide old friends whose faith is Solomon's,
Singing defiance of the many waters?

6th October 1928.

AFTERMATH

THE LUCK

*If I'd not got him, he'd have got me:
If I'd not shot him, he'd have shot me. . . .*

Over and over in my head
Each night before I go to bed—
Half-dozing in the cosy glow,
And thinking of twelve years ago—
The rhyme keeps turning and re-turning.

In No-Man's-Land we met—a flare
Went up, and showed him crouching there—
The luck was mine; so in my chair
I sit and watch the beech-logs burning.
I sit beside the hearth; but he
In No-Man's-Land is 'waiting me;
And every night his bony hand
Beckons me back to No-Man's-Land.

And by my side my mother knits,
Happy to have me still; she sits
And knits and knits contentedly:
And somewhere, too, in Germany
Another mother sits—but she,
What does she think of as she knits?

*If I'd not got him, he'd have got me:
If I'd not shot him, he'd have shot me.*

JOHN'S WIFE

No, no, I shouldn't call old Esther mad,
Though she would seem at times to think her lad,
The one that died at Loos, is living yet.

Only the other night she set a plate
For him, and wondered why he should be late
For supper: but at whiles we all forget

The dead are dead. How could I carry on,
If I must always bear in mind that John
Will never cross the threshold any more?

Why, only now, if I must tell you true,
I heard a step, and . . . well, it wasn't you
That I ran down to welcome at the door.

THE BEE-KEEPER

*I send out broods to India—quite a feat
To pack them so that they survive the heat
Of the Red Sea. . . . The Isle of Wight disease?
No need at all to fear it for your bees,
If you re-queen your hives each year. I get
My queens from North America. He set
The stripped comb in the whirling drum. Of course
You see it is the centrifugal force
That draws the honey out; and the clean comb
Goes back into the hive. . . .*

As I turned home,
I thought of the last time that I had seen
The keeper of the bees, when he had been
Struggling thigh-deep across the Flemish mire
Towards the German trenches, under fire—
He whose whole soul's delight it was to spread
With luscious honey our dry daily bread!

THE RECOGNITION

*And so—he said—
You hadn't even heard that I was dead?*

*Yet, since I died,
We've always marched together side by side.*

*And now you swear
You never had a notion I was there!*

*Well, well, maybe
You couldn't know till you were dead like me.*

*You're not, you say?
Not dead? They dropped you sure enough to-day.*

*Ay lad, it's true.
Though your skull's thick, they got a bullet through.*

*You always were
Slow-witted, but that should have caused a stir—*

*Ay, A lick, man,
That should have caused a stir in your brain-pan.*

*Come, come, thick-head,
Don't tell me you don't even know you're dead!*

FRANCE

France, what had France been to her but a name
That she might hear by chance,
Till John was taken from her, and news came
He'd been the first to fall in the advance—
And now her heart is just a grave in France.

“THE GLORIOUS DEAD”

He talked about “the glorious dead,”
And how we always should remember them;
And then she turned on him and said—
*If you mean Willie, Dick and Jem,
The living lads they took from me
To blow to pieces with artillery—
Much good to them ’twill do
To be remembered by the likes of you;
And as for “glorious memory,”
What’s that, think you, to me
When out of sleep I start up in my bed
Remembering my little lads are dead?*

THE BROKEN LATCH

As the big yard-gate swung with broken latch
All night on creaky hinges to and fro,
Her mind swung with it, creaking with the thought,
If he'd not gone, and fallen as he fought,
That latch would have been mended long ago—

If he'd not gone, if there had been no war,
Or if his company had held its ground,
Or someone else had fallen in his stead,
How soundly I'd be sleeping in my bed
This windy night!—but only he sleeps sound.

MEETING IN WARTIME

I hadn't thought it strange that we should meet
As we had met so many times before,
When, as I sauntered idly down the street,
He passed me and turned in at his own door,

Till, as I crossed the Strand, it flashed on me
That he'd not been in khaki, when few men
Were out of uniform, though I knew he
Had fought at Passchendaele; but, even then

I failed to gather the significance
Of our encounter in the street, till I
Chanced on the news that he'd been killed in France
The very afternoon he passed me by—

He passed me by, as one who walks in dream,
Without a smile or word, to my surprise:
And then I knew the meaning of the gleam
In those strange still unrecognising eyes.

ARTILLERY

All night I sat beside the bed
And watched that senseless moaning head
Backwards and forwards toss and toss,
When suddenly he sat upright
And fixed his eyes upon the light
With sightless glassy stare and said—
*We filled the ditch up with the dead
To get the guns across.*

HER SON

No one remembers—only in my heart
He lives, and dies; though solemnly they said
We never shall forget the glorious dead!
The dead are dead for them, and have no part
Or lot in life's activities. The race
Is to the swift, the battle to the strong;
And they who fell. . . . Who shall remember long
The light and laughter of a dead lad's face?

NOVEMBER 11TH

She wakened in the night to hear
Her son's voice moaning in her ear—
I cannot rest, I cannot sleep . . .
Day after day I hear you weep,
And even in deepest slumber, yet
Your heart remembers. Oh, forget,
Forget your son, dear mother! I,
Till you forget me, cannot die,
I cannot wholly die, for still
About the battle-shattered hill
My ghost must wander restlessly
While anyone remembers me. . . .
Long since the living folk I knew
Have all forgotten, all but you;
And sore I long to rest, to die
Once and for ever, long to lie
At peace, and sleep and sleep . . . but I,
I cannot sleep till you forget.

THE SILENCE

I

Two minutes' silence! Nay, but there has been
For fourteen years a silence in my heart
Since first I heard. . . . Two minutes, and a gun
To tell his mother when she's got to start
Remembering her son!

Two minutes' silence—then a gun again,
And free to gabble and forget are we
Another twelve-month! . . . Yet no gun has stirred
The silence that must hold my heart till he
Shall greet me with a word.

II

They stopped the screeching saws,
And in the pause
A queer uncanny silence seemed to fill
The idle mill
Until
Old Bill—
Who, just twelve years since under Vimy Hill
Had hung for forty hours, caught in the wire—
Yelled suddenly *My God, why don't they fire*
And end it! I can't bear . . . and dropped. The gun
Sounded, the silence done.

The saws screamed out once more;
But old Bill still lay quiet on the floor.

III

Two minutes' silence—(*Jock, do you remember
The day they got me, some time in November—
The tenth or thereabouts, if I'm not wrong?*)

*Well, I was gay that morning, for I'd heard
From Hetty Cooper; and she'd said the word,
The word she'd kept me waiting for so long:*

*She'd given her word at last to marry me
When the war ended; and it seemed to be
Just petering out—and me without a scratch,*

*When something got me clean below the belt—
What, I've no notion: I just know I felt
A red-hot pain, and went out like a match.*

*Well, you were friends with Hetty—ay, I knew
That you liked Hetty and she liked you too;
She liked you, Jock, because you were my friend:*

*And so I want to whisper in your ear
A message for her . . . Say, lad, can't you hear? . . .)*
Two minutes' silence—Will it never end!

IV

*I'm deaf, and may not even hear the gun;
So at eleven give a sign to me
That I may know the silence has begun,
And not be breaking it before it's done.*

*I've always kept the silence quietly
Repeating over and over in my heart
The last few happy words he said to me
Before he went to fight with Germany.*

But vain my signal, when the sudden gun
Shattered the quiet of the little room,
To her for whose old heart, its travail done,
The everlasting silence had begun.

THE TELEGRAM

No, lass, you can't fool me—the War's not over
Or Robert would be home.
He said he'd telegraph to me from Dover
The minute that he landed: it's not come,
The telegram. . . . No, no, you can't fool me;
For I've known Robert twenty years, you see.

Coming on leave he is . . . What's that you say?
Eleven years ago!
Havers, my lass! 'twas just the other day
I had his letter; and if I don't know
My husband's ways, I'd like to know who should.
What Robert promises he aye makes good.

I've never known him say he'd do a thing
And fail to do it yet:
And you will see another day will bring
That telegram to say . . . But I forget
Somebody had a telegram that said
Some other man of the same name was dead.

At first, just for a moment, it is true
I fancied it meant him. . . .
Not really, of course; for well I knew
He'd keep his word, ay, if he'd got to swim
Across the sea to telegraph from Dover!
No, lass, you can't fool me—the War's not over.

AFTER TEN YEARS

He came to-day, our whilom foe—
An enemy ten years ago—
At least our country's enemy,
Even as I was forced to be
An enemy of his: he came;
And by the hearth we watched the flame
Flourish the logs with gold, as we
Together talked of poetry,
Or sat, each silent in his seat,
Rapt in the healing, quiet, sweet
Companionship of kindred minds
And human fellowship that binds
The broken spirit and makes whole
The horror-lacerated soul.

We, who'd been forced by fate to dwell
Four years in opposite camps of hell,
Were liberated now, and free
Of the sweet heaven of poetry,
After long years of exile come
To our true native country, home.

October 1928.

POET, BEWARE!

POET, BEWARE!

I

Beware the pedestal; and keep your feet
Familiar with the common earth—
The earth your fellows tread, that you with them
May ever share their grief and mirth.

Who quits the living earth, to perch alone
In hierophantic robes, from all
His kind cut off, in barren eminence
Must crumble on his pedestal.

II

Veil not your soul in vague and baffling verse:
Obscurity is not profundity:
Rather, O poet, let each poem be
A crystal through which all may see
Your soul's integrity.

III

Men may not sing as easily as birds
Whose April notes are fresh and dewy-clear
For each new singer of the virgin year,
Since time and use have burdened all our words
With multitudinous associations,
And even the lightest carry implications
Of passionate primeval histories
And shadows of dark brooding memories;
So, Poet, you must labour sore and long
If you would pour your soul out in a song
To rival the clear-welling melody
Of yonder blackbird in the apple-tree.

IV

Who cheats himself with transcendental dreams
And vague abstractions, moony vapourings,
Shirking life's clear-cut issues, scared to look
Unblenching on the naked truth of things,
Can mutter but vain words and fugitive,
And never speak the word by which men live.

RELEASE

When the black mould
Quickens with crocuses and lights
With daffodils,
Soon we forget the cold
And dismal endlessness of winter nights
And winter's aches and chills.

So, when the numbing gloom
That holds my heart, to sudden song
Awakes one day,
The black moods that consume
And waste the spirit fruitlessly, too long
My masters, flee away:

And, as of old,
Quickened with crocuses and lights
Of daffodils,
Kindles my heart's black mould;
And the dumb frost of endless winter nights
Its hoarded treasure spills.

THE SMOKE

How dull and grey the words in which I write
The tale of my delight,
Obscuring, not revealing the desire
That burns my heart up with its lambent flame:
Yet may the smother to the world proclaim
Once more the truth—No smoke without a fire!

TROY

I looked into a book of verse, and learned
The very latest news—that Troy was burned;

And as I idly scanned the rhyming tale
It seemed to me the poet's news was stale—

Nay! rather false than stale: for all his learning,
He'd got the rumour wrong: for Troy's still burning

In quenchless conflagration that began
When life first kindled in the heart of man

With ever-toppling towers that cannot crash
Until the last man's heart is burnt to ash.

TRAGEDY

In accident can be no tragedy,
For there's no struggle against destiny,
Protagonist against protagonist,
No hero fighting against desperate odds
In man's unceasing warfare with the gods;
The victim's but the victim of blind chance,
And no predestined warrior. . . .

Maybe,

*And yet, who knows? Who can with certainty
Say what is chance and what is destiny?*

TONGUE AND PEN

I said that, did I? Then it was not I,
Not my essential self, that spoke just then;
For this my body is infested by
The spirits of a dozen different men,
Most of them fools or rascals more or less,
Who use my name and claim to speak for me,
Twisting my tongue to utter traitorously
Unjust and angry words or foolishness.

Yea, most are traitors, though they use my tongue,
These superficial selves, so volatile
And voluble, who keep on all the while
Chattering of this and that to old and young,
Shaming my real self that broods alone
And inarticulate, to all unknown.

II

To all unknown, or all but all: yet, though
My babbling tongue betray, at times my pen,
Seeming to speak the thoughts of other men,
Declaring their hearts' secret joy or woe,
Reveals the true self, the essential I
To all who read the little rhymes I write—
At least to those who more in them descry
Than printed words on paper, black on white.

For I in lives of others truly live
My own life, and most surely can express
Through theirs my own heart's grief or happiness,
When, self forgot, I mingle in the stress
And struggle of my brothers' lives that give
My rhymes their life, however fugitive.

THE WHISTLING BOY

When life was but a twilit empty street
Of shuttered houses, the blithe whistling boy
Turned down it, searching its dumb gloom with sweet
Heart-piercing trills of joy.

Now all the houses are astir, and light
Floods every window; and a happy throng
Makes my long-silent heart by day and night
A thoroughfare of song.

HAZARDS

THE ENCOUNTER

Out of the rimy fog they suddenly loomed,
The steamy chestnut and the cart piled high
With steamy gold manure. The lumbering grind
Of horse and cart along the iron ruts
For some time past had sounded in her ears:
But she'd not guessed, or, leastways, had not dared
To hope 'twould be his cart. Yet, there he strode
By Dickon, as she always pictured him,
With grey curls straying from under the tilted cap,
And grey eyes staring stonily ahead—
Eyes that yet caught no glimpse of her, where she
Stood, breathless, under naked dripping elms
Whose unseen tops already felt the sun's
First melting touch.

 If she should speak to him,
He would stop, startled, doubtless, but would he melt?
Would the grey ice of those still staring eyes
Melt as of old to laughing tenderness?
And yet, why should they—why, at sight of her,
When she it was who'd frozen that warm heart,
And touched with winter the chestnut curls, and fixed
That icy gleam in Randal's kindly eyes?

Yet, the sun touched the elm-tops: tinkling showers
Of icicles fell round her; and the fog
Parted; and in a sudden burst of sun
Chestnut and cart were all one steam of gold.

But Randal strode on, staring straight ahead,
Unthawed, unseeing: and the fog closed in
Upon her heart: and he was lost to sight.

She stood a moment, trembling; then turned back
The road she'd come, knowing that never again
Home would be home for her in Hertfordshire.

SO EARLY IN THE MORNING . . .

Rising at three o'clock the summer through
To raise his garden-stuff for marketing,
Punctually on the stroke in winter too
He wakens, though there isn't anything,
Until the daylight comes, for him to do.

So, handy by his bed he keeps his flute
And book of airs; and in the candlelight
Forgets awhile his vegetables and fruit
In making music, while, without, the night
Lies sleeping still, save for the lone owl's hoot.

Toot-tootle-too, he pipes his melody;
Tu-whit-tu-who, the owl's shrill answer rings
Upon the frosty air, now from a tree,
Now scouring the dark on soundless wings:
And so they keep it up, the owl and he.

THE LILAC-TREE

Time had not left her soul unscarred:
Earning her bread
At twelve, and wed
At eighteen, she had had to struggle hard
To rear her thirteen children and to keep
Her ever-ailing husband, never free
An instant from anxiety
Or getting a full night's untroubled sleep—
Yet, as she scoured her little yard,
That morning when the lilac-tree
In crystal airs of Spring
Shook out its purple blooms, she turned to me
And said with eyes that sparkled happily,
“I've always loved to work beside a living thing.”

THE LATIN INSCRIPTION

A scholar and a gentleman, his life
He lived aloof, ay, even from his wife;
For she, though when they wed a pretty, young
And ardent wench, knew but the vulgar tongue;
And as for his parishioners, why, they
Were privileged upon the Sabbath Day
To hear a discourse set with many a gem
Of classical allusion, Greek to them:
And when, translated to celestial spheres,
He left them in the plenitude of years,
An epitaph no vulgar eye could scan
Proclaimed him even in Heaven a gentleman.

THE QUAKER BOTANIST

(For REGINALD HINE)

My chief delight, said William Dawson, *is gathering moss in gentle rain—*
And he, whose heart for things to cherish on earth was never at a loss,
Surely is wandering down some heavenly, and not-too-unlike-Hertford, lane
Through soft celestial sunny showers, gathering paradisaal moss.

THE REVEREND RICHARD

Couched in the clicking couplets of the time,
A stilted epitaph in modish rhyme,
Inscribed with flourishes extravagant,
Proclaims his virtues with an elegant
Bland artifice of praise that to the ear
Of modern readers scarcely sounds sincere. . . .

And yet, for all the faded rhetoric,
While he yet lived and laughed among the quick,
No man or wife in Little Bottlewick
But worshipped old pot-bellied Parson Dick.

HER EPITAPH

*Weep not for me, my friends so dear, for I am only gone to see
That precious house my dearest Lord is furnishing for me.*

Dear Betsy Brown, remembering how all
Your chairs and tables shone with such a gloss—
They seemed to smile a welcome—I feel sure
You chose the verse that's cut upon your cross;
For in a heaven without furniture
To polish you'd be sorely at a loss;
And your idea of paradise would be
A mansion furnished in mahogany
To be spring-cleaned throughout eternity.

BIRDS AND MEN

As quarrelsome as pigeons in the Spring,
Just fret and fuss the whole long blessed day,
Rookety-cooing and flap-flap of wing
As the cocks fight each other—'twas the way
That they enjoyed life seemingly, birds and men,
Just pausing whiles to preen their feathers, then,
Strutting and ruffling, at it once again.

If they'd but leave her to herself and not
Drag her into their quarrels, 'twouldn't be
So bad; a girl of seventeen had got
Enough to mind without their tricks—and she
With the whole dairy on her hands! But then
There's no accounting for the ways of men . . .
And here came Peter bothering her again!

THE LAST WORDS

What was it Jacob said before he went?
Some silly thing, no doubt.
'Twas hard to know sometimes just what he meant—
He'd talk such nonsense, then go laughing out
And leave her wondering what 'twas all about. . . .

She had been waiting with the table spread
And kippers for his tea
When someone came and told her he was dead. . . .
But who, or how . . . 'Twould help if only she
Could call to mind the last few words that he
Had said, however foolish they might be.

THE OLD SAILOR

*I've sailed the whole world round and round
And everywhere a welcome found;
For everywhere there's women, you see,
And the women are always good to me,
Said old Dick Palmer at seventy-three.*

*Now hush, said his wife, now hush! she said,
It's time you were getting your bones to bed,
Ashamed of yourself. . . . Not me, said he,
For everywhere there's women, you see,
And the women are always good to me.*

THE HUMAN CANNON-BALL

Being a human cannon-ball don't take up all your time—
And few the turns I couldn't do when I was in my prime;
But now the folk I talk to seem to marvel most of all
To think old Dolly Dobbs was once a human cannon-ball.

'Twas only for a year or two, and then just twice a day,
And, circus-bred-and-born, to me 'twas nothing out of the way:
I couldn't stand it now of course, with aches and pains and all;
But where's the young wench wouldn't be a human cannon-ball?

Though, mind you, I'm not saying that I ever shall forget
How dizzy-like I felt when first I landed in the net;
But, sure, the jolts life gives you, not expecting them at all,
Upset you ten times worse than being a human cannon-ball.

I'd never think to mention it, if I could have my way;
But then folks wouldn't listen to what I've got to say:
That I'm the mother of six sons don't interest at all
The fools that gape to hear about a human cannon-ball.

THE LIVING PENDULUM

He thought, as, hanging by his toes, he swung
Her body by the ankles through the air,
So it has come at last to this, that we
But hang together of necessity,
But hang together nowadays to earn
A living, partners only in a turn
That we've been trained to since we both were young—
The Living Pendulum, the Peerless Pair!

White faces heaved towards him, as they swayed
From side to side above the crowded ring,
Full fifty feet below, at seeming ease,
As though, in unison with the trapeze,
They moved in perfect concord, man and wife,
True mates, one body and one soul, through life
Swinging light-heartedly, and unafraid,
In their agility, of anything.

Yet all his thought was, as with panting breath,
He struggled with his jealousy, and gripped
Her ankles still—there are worse things than death;
And we'd be one for ever, if I slipped.

PICTURES

*Nothing I see in them town-shows, nothing at all, said Old John,
I'd rather be looking across a meadow
To see how it's getting on.*

*Yet off they go to the pictures of a night, my son and my daughter;
But I've always loved best of an evening
Looking down through the trees on the water.*

HIS TRUE MATE

She knew, of course she knew; yet how could she
Give up her husband to the gallows-tree?

Her husband! . . . Was it true that she had wed
A body with a soul already dead?

Yet, was he hers at all? Might it not be
That he'd long since betrothed the gallows-tree?

And who was she, mere makeshift legal wife,
To keep him from the love of his whole life?

ON THE ROAD FROM THE PIT

Into the icy glitter of the day
Shot sharply from the deep pit's sultry mirk,
He blinks and shivers as he takes his way
Wearily with his mates towards the town,
Till suddenly among the girls at work
Lifting the swedes and slicing off the tops,
He catches sight of Nelly stooping down,
And whistles on his fingers, when she stops,
Straightens her aching back, stiff with the cold,
Breathes on her hands, almost too numb to hold
The knife, then turns to Angus with a grin;
And he grins back at her: and so they stand,
Forgetful of the wind that through their thin
Scant clothing seemed to pierce them to the bone
A moment since—they stand, they two alone,
A lad and lass with happy eyes alight,
Together in a new and unknown land
That in the North wind glitters jewel-bright.

TATTERY JACK

A vagabond scarecrow of seventy-five,
The raggedest, sorriest mortal alive,
Trudging the turnpike day after day,
He whines, as he goes on his aimless way,

Over and over the whole day long
The burden of some old music-hall song,
Whines to the tune that killed the cow—
If only my mother could see me now!

If only his mother . . . but long and sound
His mother's slept under an unknown mound,
And little she recks in her worryless rest
Of the baby she suckled at her young breast.

NO GRAVEN STONE

No graven stone
Marked her last bed;
But at her head
A lilac-tree.
Where all alone
She'd made her bed
A lilac shed
Its fragrancy
Above her head.
*No stone, she said,
No stone for me:
When I alone
Lie quietly
Set at my head
No lifeless stone;
But plant instead
A living tree.*

WOOLLY-WITTED JOE

Woolly-witted Joe would go
About his business to and fro,
Harmless as a lamb,
Till, how, no one seems to know,
Dropt a spark into the tow
Of his simple brain—

Dropt a spark into his head,
And he suddenly saw red;
And with antic leaps insane
Started butting like a ram
Everybody that he met
In the Lovers' Lane,
Till they flung the pigcart net
Over him and threw him, dead.

To and fro and to and fro
A dull eighty years or so
Went poor woolly-witted Joe
Till a spark, dropped in the tow,
Flared to frenzy through his brain,
And he ended his drab days
In a sudden scarlet blaze.

THE DEATH OF MRS. BRIGGS

A fat old body in a sham seal-coat,
Chic hat and feather boa, she dodders by
Indifferent, till her almost sightless eye
Lights on a patch of buttercups and daisies,
And the clear colour kindles once again
The light of childhood in her darkening brain. . . .

No longer poor old doting Mrs. Briggs—
Once more, bedazzled by the flowery tide
Of glancing gold and silver, with eyes wide,
Knee-deep among the buttercups and daisies,
She stands entranced with outstretched baby hands
In her old home's forgotten meadowlands. . . .

Not childish now, with child-like glee she stoops,
Forgetting age and its infirmities,
To gather all the treasure that she sees—
But down among the buttercups and daisies
Sinks, overstrained, with gently ebbing breath,
Too young at heart to dread or dream of death.

And there through the long afternoon she lies
Among the flowers whose glancing happiness
Had filled her baby heart—the dismal dress
Dusted with golden pollen—the snowy daisies,
Her life's first loves, a glory round the head
Quietly resting on that queenly bed.

THE FOUL

He'd never said a word of it to her,
And it was not until he died, and all
Came out, she'd even known he'd had a fall—
Fouled by her brother as he snatched the ball:
Though he'd been stunned and had to come away,
Shaken and dazed before the end of play.

Why, until this, if but his finger ached,
She'd had to know about it; naught could he
Keep back from her—as nervous as could be
About his health, coddling himself till she
Would lose all patience. . . . Yet about the fall
He'd said no word, he'd said no word at all.

A MEAN ADVANTAGE

I wondered at that twinkle in his eye,
And guessed that it meant mischief: he was sly,
Was Silas; but who could have guessed that he,
Because we said that he had starved his wife,
Would put us in the wrong so utterly
By taking his own life?

ANGEL STREET

Happily drunk, she plods no longer
With dragging feet,
But treads light-footed as a dancer
The sodden street.

Forgiving life that he has beaten
Her to her knees,
She rallies him with long-lost girlhood's
Hilarities—

The pains that come of endless scrubbing
Of endless stairs
Forgotten, as she trips and ambles
With gracious airs

Down dismal Angel Street, unconscious
Of mocking faces—
A careless, proud, high-hearted creature
Of airs and graces.

Her hard-earned pence at least have purchased
Old Sally Lee
A momentary blest oblivion
Of drudgery.

The greasy copper coins transmuted
To liquid gold
Have fired her old veins with an essence
No longer old—

No longer thin and old and feeble
The blood of life
That surges in the billowy bosom
Of that old wife

As, dizzy with a golden rapture,
She sails along
Celestial pavements in a glory
Of light and song.

THE CONNOISSEUR

A connoisseur is florid Father Biddle,
In self-indulgence grown obese and old;
And at his silken-vested paunch he dangles
A crucifix of gold—

A pretty trinket that for thirty pieces
Of silver none would sell, save at a loss,
Nor even for twice the price of Him who perished
On a cheap wooden cross.

WHEN WILLIAM DROVE . . .

When William drove the pig-cart down the street,
She never gave a glance at him, although
He was a proper lad and clean and neat
And earning every week a pound or so.

But when she saw him perched so proud and prim
One day upon the box-seat of a hearse
She fell in love with his top-hat and him
And married him for better or for worse.

THE TIDINGS

She did not hear the postman at the door:
The letter tumbled through the letter-slit
And lay with others on the lobby floor
Until at last the staircase gas was lit.

She picked it up, glanced at it carelessly,
Not recognising any hand she knew,
Dreaming of him and wondering why he
Had sent no word, although his boat was due.

And then, half-absentmindedly, she ripped
The envelope, and dreaming still, she read
The tidings set out in a clerkly script
That told, yet did not tell her, he was dead. . . .

At least, not dead as other men might be . . .
She would have known. . . . It couldn't come, the news,
Like this, just in a letter, casually
Dropped through the slit with bills for gloves and shoes . . .

She would have known. . . . Why, all the afternoon
She had been practising the latest thing
In foxtrots, such a ripping, rattling tune—
The kind he liked . . . she had been practising . . .

She had been practising. . . . And how could she
Have strummed so happily if, even then,
He had been lying, laid out quietly. . . .
Doubtless men died—but they were other men.

THE LIVE-WIRE

He chanced to touch
A naked live-wire, and it dropped him, dead.

*'Twas queer that he
Who knew so much—
All that is known of electricity,
Should be so careless!* that was what they said.

Yet, if they'd guessed the thoughts that filled his head
That night, would they have found it strange that he,
Who knew so much—
All that is known of electricity,
Manipulating it to earn
His daily bread—

That he should turn
In that dark hour
When he,
By life brought to the touch,
Had lost control,
That he should turn to that dread unknown power,
Invoking it to free his soul
In its extremity?

THE TREE

There'd be some money in that elm—so he
Sold it: the sawyer came; and presently
He'd money in his pocket, but no tree—

No living tree before his threshold-stone;
And, well, he missed it, living there alone,
The bonnie tree that he had always known.

'Twas queer to think the living tree was dead,
Just dry white planks now in the sawyer's shed,
While he still lived: and yet, when all was said,

He'd got the money: brass was always brass,
And never came amiss. That flesh is grass
He'd overlooked, until it came to pass

He slept too long one morning—didn't wake:
And he was missed; and they were forced to break
His bolted cottage door in with a stake.

The brass was spent upon his funeral: he
Between the coffin-boards lay presently
And close in touch again with his old tree.

THE FAREWELL

So that was what Pete meant! I hadn't guessed
He'd taken it so hardly. It just shows
You cannot judge folks' feelings by their clothes,
And that not every broken heart is dressed
In a full suit of mourning. But, if I'd known

He, in his way, was bidding me good-bye
For evermore, and going home alone
For the last time, I might . . . yet what could I
Have said or done, when in his heart Pete knew
That there was nothing left to say or do?

THAT'S LIFE, MRS. DODD . . .

“I fancied I’d be settled when I married Abey,” said
Abraham Dodd’s young wife,
“But it’s just one worry on another instead.”
That’s life, Mrs. Dodd, that’s life.

“From the first blink of day when I’m driven from my bed,
It’s little but trouble and strife;
And whiles I’m that fretted I wonder why I wed.”
That’s life, Mrs. Dodd, that’s life.

“And long before darkening I’m ready for my bed,
With a pain at my heart like a knife,
And a buzzing in my brain and my feet like lead.”
That’s life, Mrs. Dodd, that’s life.

“Yet you, Mrs. Aiken, though you’re seventy,” she said,
“And the Lord knows how many years a wife,
You never even seem to have a worry in your head.”
That’s life, Mrs. Dodd, that’s life.

THE WOMEN

Dry-eyed, they walk the beach at dawn, awaiting
Their men's home-coming with the tide—
Their menfolk who'll sail gaily home no more
In the *Endeavour*, that the storm already
Has tossed up, ripped and splintered, on the shore.

Dry-eyed, they walk the beach at dawn, unblinded
By useless tears that would but dim the keen
And searching eyes that through the spindrift peer,
Dreading to see among the breakers something
Heartbreakingly familiar and dear.

Dry-eyed, they walk the beach at dawn; and lightly
They bade their men farewell when they put out,
Too proud to make a show of fear or grief—
Dry-eyed, and braving life with still set faces,
Seeking in easy tears no quick relief.

PREVISION

Lean as a rake was she—
But he,
As stout a strapping lad as you could see.

She gave him all she had,
And glad
To give her little all to rear her lad.

Outworn at last lies she;
But he
With plump young Jenny walks out lovingly.

Yet, in the dim half-light
To-night
He turns to look on Jenny in a fright. . . .

Lean as a rake stands she,
And he
In her his mother's image seems to see.

WEAK HEART

A weak heart, she! She died of a weak heart?
Well, if you say so, I suppose it's true:
But forty years of field-work on a farm,
Ay, and a family of twelve children too,
Must need a gey stout heart to pull you through,
Still smiling: and she never passed this way,
Coming or going, but she had some jest
Or some titbit of news to tell with zest—
And yet she died of a weak heart, you say?

THE HAGGLER

*No one has ever bested me
In all my life, said he,
Though 'twasn't for the want of trying
Certainly.*

*No one has ever bested me,
He cackled cunningly
With toothless jaws as he lay dying—
Tee-hee! Tee-hee!*

*No one has ever bested . . . He
Dropped backward suddenly,
With set jaws grinning, still defying
The Enemy.*

RAIN IN THE CHESTNUTS

Rain in the chestnuts, a still, steady drench
Through the great blossom-lighted domes of green
That stand about the little red-roofed church. . . .

Rain in the chestnuts: does he hear it now,
Who always loved the noise of heavy rain
Falling through foliage, pattering on the leaves?

Rain in the chestnuts, dropping ceaselessly
From leaf to drooping leaf above his grave—
His new bed, but a few yards from the old.

Rain in the chestnuts—in the big bed set
In the open window, of a summer's night
He would lie listening in a waking trance.

Rain in the chestnuts—and his window shut
In the dark parsonage, and a steady drench
Pattering, through the chestnuts, on his grave.

IN A RESTAURANT

He dipped a stick of celery in salt,
And bit it crisply, cranching it with zest;
And then he muttered—*It was her own fault*
I left her; and perhaps it's for the best.

Then with a smirk of satisfaction he
Sat listening to the band that tried, in vain,
To drown the clatter of the cutlery
And voices in a sentimental strain:

While watching him behind a flowery screen,
And deaf to all, she sat with bright eyes set
On his complacent face, by him unseen,
Her teeth clenched on an unlit cigarette.

THE ACCIDENT

It wasn't my fault: any one could see
That I came round the corner carefully.
He must have heard the horn, I'd swear, yet he—
Well, he just staggered right across the way.
He must have been blind-drunk. . . .

Blind-drunk, you say?

They hanged his son at Durham Gaol to-day.

TELLING THE TALE

So that is all there is to it. He ended
His story; tapped his briar on the hob
To clear it; filled it once again with shag,
And then sat smoking contemplatively.
And though I knew that he had not intended
To hold back aught essential, or to rob
His hearers of the clue, I watched the hag
Who'd sat with eyes fixed on his face, while he
Had told his tale: and as he stopped she drew
Again into her corner with a leer
Of satisfaction. Then I surely knew,
Although his lips had moved, and his slow tongue
The solemn words had uttered, it was she
Who'd told the tale that she would have us hear:
That, while she lived, no man would ever learn
Aught but his mother's version of how his young
And newly-wedded wife had come to die—
That he was but a puppet to twist and turn
With life-like motions and talk mechanically
Under the evil spell of her one eye.

SWEETBRIAR

Sweetbriar at the gate—a real welcome,
A welcome home; for there had always been
Sweetbriar at the gate of home for him
Since he could recollect. The poignant scent
Searched his whole being with tingling memories
As, hand on latch, he mused awhile, before
Entering his new home, the secluded cottage
That was to be his last abode on earth.

Sweetbriar at the gate—a little lad,
Playing beside the lodge of his first home,
The home that had been his from everlasting,
Or so it seemed, the piercing leafy fragrance
Puzzled him as he drew it slowly through
Quick quivering nostrils with sharp relish, until
He called to mind the rafted apple-loft—
The keen ripe odour of the yellow Keswicks,
Ranged on the floor at equal distances,
Row upon row of succulent temptation,
Till the dim loft seemed an Aladdin's cave
Of treasure far beyond the computation
Of his five-fingered reckoning: the briar-scent
Had something of the eager tang of apples. . . .
But, as he'd mused, his father, from behind
Had stooped out of the sky, and lifted him,
And set him on his shoulder, perched, it seemed,
As on a tree-top: and beneath the elms,
That seemed scarce taller, up the avenue
He'd ridden like Launcelot to where his mother
Awaited them on the doorstep with a smile.

Sweetbriar at the gate—the welcome home
From many happy journeys, junketings
And holidays, when coming home had seemed
The holiday of holidays after all—

Till that last day, when he'd been summoned back
From Otahiti by an urgent cable,
And only the sweetbriar had welcomed him
To the desolated house. How he recalled
The sudden surge of perfume through the rain,
The soft June rain that drenched the leafy quickset,
Familiar, and yet shot with a new sharp
Heart-piercing pang, since in his absence they,
His father and mother, had passed through the lodge-gate,
Oblivious of that scent on their last journey,
To come again no more to their old home.

Sweetbriar at the gate—with what delight
That golden summer day of quivering heat
She'd paused to breathe the heady odour in
With tilted chin and eager lighted eyes—
The golden summer day he brought her home,
Home to his home, no longer only his,
But theirs, and to be theirs for everlasting
It seemed! Yet, all too soon, she too had passed,
After a brief score of enchanted years,
Oblivious of that fragrance, through the gate
Of no return.

And now upon the threshold
Of his last harborage the familiar perfume,
Rapturously and heartbreakingly familiar,
Welcomed him once again, so sweet with happy,
So poignant with regretful, memories
Whose aroma would be with him till the day
When even the quick smell of the drenched leaves
Should fail to set his nostril quivering.

And yet, who knows? When he should come at last
To the dark unknown portal, might he not find
Sweetbriar at the gate—a welcome home?

A thrush was singing; and a thrush had sung

Unseen among the elm-tops when he first
With tingling baby nostrils had sniffed that scent—
And song and odour in his memory
Were mingled in one essence of delight . . .
A singing thrush—sweetbriar at the gate!

POISON

She did not kill his body, or depend
On arsenic
To do the trick,
And bring about his end.

Not, grain by grain mixed with his food, did she
With cunning care
His death prepare,
But worked more craftily;

And drop by drop her own mind's poison poured
Into his brain,
Until, insane,
He did the deed abhorred.

And so his body lives, yet hale, although
His young soul died,
A suicide,
Just twenty years ago.

THE FIRST

But, what to do with it, when it should come!
They both had work enough to keep them going—
Ay, keep them going all the blessed day,
Without a baby getting in the way.

It came, in spite of them: and then, somehow,
They wondered what till then had kept them going,
And how they'd managed to get through the day
Without a baby getting in the way.

IN SOHO SQUARE

An old outlandish figure, gaunt and wried,
In Soho Square he jigs on his old pins,
Shaking a tambourine with ribbons tied.

His hat bedecked with streamers blue and red,
Over his straggly locks and ragged beard
Fluttering feebly as he nods his head,

He jigs forlornly with his thin lips set
In a wide grin, and as he jerks his limbs
Like a stiff-jointed, battered marionette,

A pitiful old clown, a sight for tears
He seems: and yet, who knows? His heart may still
Be dancing as it danced in other years.

Who knows but still in his dim consciousness
He cuts a gallant figure, debonair
And dashing in a dazzling gala dress—

A gallant figure dancing in the sun
To the gay jingling of his tambourine,
The very soul of frolic and of fun?

TEMPORARY INSANITY

The jury brought the verdict in—she'd taken
Her own life in a fit of—well, you know
The phrase they use to soften the smart blow
To their own self-esteem that it would be
To think 'twas aught but sheer insanity
To take this precious life of ours: and so,
Because she thought two company and three
None, and could see no other kind of way
Out of the situation . . . Well, they took
Her body from the weeds of Wimble Brook . . .
And Jacob weds his second wife to-day.

IN MARKET STREET

Amid the jostling crowd and in the flare
Of naphtha the two bargain eagerly—
The blowsy old saleswoman and the spare
Young anxious housewife, until suddenly

The huckster's sharp old eyes light on the child,
The baby sleeping in its mother's shawl;
And the hard gleam in them grows soft and mild,
And the fat greedy grasping hands let fall

The remnant she was haggling over, while,
Motherhood waked once more in her old heart,
She questions the young mother with a smile;
And, rapt in tender talk, they two apart

Stand, all unmindful of the roaring street
Of bargains and of bargainers; and then,
Their hearts poured out, they quietly complete
Their business, and are strangers once again.

PLANTING BULBS

Work slack at his accustomed job, old Nick
The coffin-maker tills
His little plot, and sets it thick
With bulbs of daffodils
And crocuses and squills.

He smiles, as in rich mould he sets each dry
And wizened bulb with care,
As though already to his eye
The flowers were blooming there,
And flourishing and fair:

For, looking past December's sleet and snow,
His heart already thrills
To see his cottage garden glow
Alive with daffodils
And crocuses and squills.

DANDY JACK

Whitmonday—he must take the usual stroll
He'd always taken on Bank holiday
For fifty years and more; though now that he
Must go alone, it wasn't quite so gay.

Ay, and his clothes, though they were decent black,
And still his best, weren't quite what they had been
When he had donned them first in '87
For the first Jubilee of the old Queen—

Not quite so rich a black now, it was true,
And not so suited for festivities—
A trifle shabby at the seams they'd gone,
And shiny at the elbows and the knees.

And he'd been always something of a beau
When he'd strolled in the park at Whitsuntide.
What could he do to smarten himself up?
Well—it was not so easy to decide.

If he'd had coppers for a buttonhole,
He would have been as happy as a king.
A buttonhole worked wonders. . . . Then his eye
Lit on the safety-pin—the very thing!

The gilded safety-pin that he'd picked up
Last evening in the gutter; 'twould look gay,
Stuck in the lapel of his coat—ay, ay,
Quite rich and dressy, you might almost say!

With trembling hands he fixed the glittering pin
In his worn broadcloth: but it shone less bright
Than his black eyes beneath his napless tile
Twinkling with proud and innocent delight.

SAL'S HUSBAND

It wasn't till the moment came for him
To turn his back on her grave that he quite knew
What had been happening to him these last days:
Till now, there'd been so much for him to do,
With one thing and another—his wife in bed
For a whole week; and, even when Sal died,
There'd been the funeral to arrange: he'd tried
To do his best for her—her sister'd said,
Sal would have been gey proud, could she have seen
The lovely hearse he'd hired, ay, and the wreath,
So sweetly pretty with its white and green. . . .
But now,
What was there left for him to do but go—
Go, where? Why, home, of course. Where else was there
For him to go but home? He wiped his brow,
Standing upon the grave's edge in the snow;
But could not turn his back upon her yet.

Somebody touched his arm. "Come, Stephen, come."

"Come where?"

"Why, home, of course."

"And leave her here?"

"Why, Stephen, lad, there's nothing else to do."

"There's nothing else to do—ay, true, ay, true:

There's nothing else to do; and I must go,

I must go home—I must go home, you say?

True, true. . . ."

He stumbled; then sank down, and lay
Quietly on the grave's edge in the snow.

SAM

“There’s just one thing I cannot thole,
And that’s monotony,”
Said Sam, at ninety-three.

“So, whiles I have a sausage, whiles
A kipper with my tea:

And whiles I toddle up the brae,
And whiles beside the sea:

And catch me lying in one spot
For all eternity!

So, don’t you fancy, when I’m dead
That you’ll be shot of me.

I’ll walk if ever ghost walked yet,
And may you live to see,”
Said Sam, at ninety-three.

THE CURATE'S CHAIR

Reseating a dilapidated chair,
He sat outside the curate's garden gate,
Manipulating the lithe yellow cane
With cunning fingers. *At a special rate*
I always work for curates—so he said—
The poor unlucky beggars, whose hard fate
It is to have to earn their daily bread,
Year after year, all weathers, sun and rain,
By plucking infants from the burning coals,
And swilling tea, and what's worse, taking care
Of flighty female souls.

THE CRYSTAL DAY

And, through such hazards he had come to this!
Come scatheless through four years of war, and all
The countless chances of disablement
That lurk for any lad in any pit—
Not reckoning the disaster when his mates,
Ay, almost to a man, had been entombed,
Beyond all hope of rescue—he who'd come
Untouched through all, who'd almost seemed to bear
A charmed life, on a bit of orange-peel
To slip, and tumble into an early grave
Where he must lie all day in living death—
This bed, so often sought so eagerly
After long shifts: but now an aching prison
He'd never leave until they lifted him!

A bit of orange-peel—and all his world
Shrunk to a space of ten-by-twelve, shut in
By four drab walls, a ceiling and a floor,
With no escape, even for eyes, save where
The little window, two-and-a-half-by-three,
Gave him a distant view of the pit-head,
The cage-wheel and the ever-smoking stack.

A bit of orange-peel—he's aye been fond
Of oranges: after a long shift in the pit,
The colour to his eyes, and the cool juice
To dusty lips and throat brought rare refreshment.

But oranges! only talk of oranges,
And in a twinkling he was back again
Off Jaffa in the third year of the War—
A blue unbreaking sea, and little boats
About the troopship, piled from stem to stern
With golden cargoes of ripe oranges,
Ripe to the bursting! Folk in England here

Never knew what sun-ripened oranges were:
You'd easily squeeze the whole delicious pulp
Through the tiniest hole and leave a clean-sucked skin:
But 'twas the colour, blue sea and amber cargo
Burning in the sheer crystal of the air!
He'd never guessed this world could be such colours,
That men might live their lives out in the light
In such a gay clear-coloured world—their world
Of every day!

From the pit-head the stack
Ceaselessly vomited its pitchy smoke
In endless convolutions over the grey
And blasted fields . . . And yet at night a tinge
Of orange flared into those murky coils:
And as he watched them drowsily it seemed
They glowed yet ruddier until all the sky
Was thronged with huge sun-ripened oranges,
Rolling and rolling, spheres of amber flame,
Over a sea one flame of blue. . . .

He'd slipped—

A bit of orange-peel had brought him down,
Of orange-peel some careless hand had dropped:
An orange, fetched from Jaffa likely enough,
Had brought him to disaster. How little he
Had guessed that day, seeing the laden boats
Rowed by those screeching hawkers, that any orange . . .
And he so fond of oranges! But that
Was where the joke came in, as you might say:
Ay, that was life: you never knew your luck,
Or where the bit of orange-peel might lie
That should end all. Little use now to think
What dreams had tumbled, broken, when he fell.
A burden on his mother—he, who'd hoped
To wed and rear a family of his own:
A bit of orange-peel—and one home less. . . .

One home! nay, countless homes, a long succession

Stretching through time till doomsday—his sons' homes
And homes of his sons' sons! The chain was snapped
That stretched from the beginning of the world—
And he, the broken link. . . .

The day was dying;
And the black rolling smoke was shot with flame.
Would those great pitchy coils resolve themselves
Once more to rolling spheres of ruddy gold
Over the sea's blue flame—and he once more
Sail through cerulean noons and silver nights,
Sail ever on and on . . . ?

At least his heart
Held all unsullied that incredible day
Of crystal colour, his for evermore.

OH, WHO SHALL EVER CALL A HALT . . .

Oh, who shall ever call a halt
To this unending march of men
That tramp the highways of the earth
Beneath the unregarding stars,
Whose footsteps echo 'neath the vault
Of steely heavens. . . .

This march of men

Foredoomed to woe or joy from birth
That tramp the highways of my heart,
The hills and hollows of my heart,
Whose songs of sorrow and of mirth
For ever echo through my heart—
Oh, who shall ever call a halt!

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

In several cases where poems crossed page boundaries, it was impossible to determine whether a stanza break had occurred.

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