

# The Outpost

Poems

Wilfrid Gibson  
1944

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*By the Same Writer*

*The Searchlights*

*Challenge*

*The Alert*

*Coming and Going*

*(Oxford University Press)*

*Collected Poems, 1905-1925*

*The Golden Room*

*Hazards*

*Islands*

*Fuel*

*(Macmillan & Co.)*

*A Leaping Flame, A Sail!*

*(Privately Printed)*

WILFRID GIBSON

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THE OUTPOST

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# Contents

## THE BEECH LOGS

*The Whales*

*The Unseen Rider*

*In the Small Hours*

*And Now He Stumbles On . . .*

*The Snake*

*The Islander*

*The Jaws of Death*

*Now He is digging Sheep . . .*

*The Can*

*The Morass*

*The Butterfly*

*The Craneman*

*The Dead Fish*

*Mountain Death*

*Etna*

*Tantallon*

*The Kill*

*Always an Easy Temper . . .*

*The Orange*

*The Ticking Watch*

*The Home*

*The Lava*

*The Goldfish*

*The Rainbow*

*Down from the Apennines*

*Cassino*

*The Almond Tree*

*He Took Life Easy*

*The Calvary*

*The Wedding Ring*

*The Outpost*

*The Prisoner*

*The Tenement*

*The Sea Shell*

*The Song*

*The Plough*

*The Lizard*

*The Pillbox*

*The Rats*

*The Clerk*

*The Monk*

*The Kid*

*The Shadow*

*The Revenant*

*The Birds Return*

*The Face*

*The Respite*

*Down the Glen*

*The Summons*

*Embarkation Leave*

*The Match*

*Offerings*

*The Broken Pipe*

*The Home Bird*

*The Leather Jerkin*

*The Dance*

*The Little Room*

*The Stack of Straw*

*The Old Love*

*The Hero*

*The Lustre Jug*

*The Little Copse*

*The Cancelled Leave*

*In the Dead of the Night*

*Desert Night*

*She Watches on the Shore . . .*

*Drifts*

*The Silver Cup*

*Hill Music*

*The Night Grows late . . .*

*His Word*

*The Curtains*

*The Broken Tether*

*He came to her that Night . . .*

*The Waters of the Tyne*

*The Gift*

*The Chimneystack*

*The Letter*

*The Troth*

*It Always Was His Pride*

*Bread*

*The Last Flight*

*Border Watch*

*The Cheerful Blaze*

*The Watch*

*The Fluttered Doves*

*The Desolate Heart*

*Tantalus*

*The Link*

*The Blind Man*

*The Crest*

*And This, the End . . .*

*Alone*

*Munitions*

*The Tarn*

*The Children*

*The Lime*

*Snow*

*The Spar*

*Scorched Earth*

*The Hour*

*Under the Rowan*

*The Fire*

*Over*

*The Driver*

*The Victim*

*One Hour*

*Her Son*

*The Withered Branch*

*The Quiet Heart*

*The Family*

*The Test*

*The Adage*

*The Nurse*

*The Voyage*

*Heart of My Heart . . .*

*Sole Survivor*

*The Lesson*

*Employment*

*The Category*

*The Dragons*

*The Hit*

*The Weathercock*

*The Alabaster Earl*

*Companions*

*The Bland Face*

*The Vagrant*

*The Undertaker*

*The Spy*

*Salvage*

*Fuel*

*The Iron Days*

*So Brief a Life*

*The Heron*

*His Letter*

*The Miller's Pond*

*The Homecoming*

*Crocuses*

*The Invalid*

*The Cottage Garden*

*The Summer Moon*

*The Medal*

*Lives*

*The Weeping Beech*

*The Cost*

*The Young Poet*

*The Magpies*

*Hareshaw Linn*

*Ashes*

*The Woodpecker*

*Stars*

*And Still the Thrush Sings on . . .*

*The Folly*

*Dandelion Down*

*Toys*

*In the End*

*The Last Leave*

*The Canopy*

*The House Martins*

*The Golden Mile*

*For This?*

*The Broken Bridge*

*In Pride of Youth . . .*

*Rain*

*The Last Chapter*

*The Salmon*

*The Triumph*

*The Heart That Quivered*

*The Old Moon*

*O Wind!*

*The Raven*

*The Backward Glance*

*The New Washed Sheets*

*As the First Blackbird Sang . . .*

*England Aroused*

*Till Death . . .*

*The Change of Wind*

*Winter Wheat*

*The News*

*The Lull*

*The Victors*

*No Room in the Inn*

*The Happy Flight*

*Bethlehem*

*Like Cage Bred Birds Released*

*Hill Waters*

# *The Beech Logs*

*With lively flames of lemon and amethyst  
That flutter, twirl and twist  
The sizzling beech-logs burst into a blaze;  
And, watching, I recall the days  
When to the Ridgeway I would clamber  
Above the tidy cornlands, trimly hedged,  
And on the down's edge, under branches fledged  
With April emerald or October amber;  
Would brood upon a world at strife  
And mankind held  
In an unparalleled  
And universal agony;  
Until the hanging woodland came to be  
Sacrificed, too, to war's exigency—  
The boughs endangering  
The aircraft taking off at night  
For oversea  
In retributive flight  
To wreck arms-factories of the enemy.*

*And, as the beech-logs crumble, charred with fire,  
Dreaming, once more  
I hear those branches swing  
Before the West wind, gaily flourishing  
The gallant banner of their leafy life:  
And that memorial music seems to be  
A stormy threnody  
For all the brave, whose ecstasy*

*Upsurged in heady fountaining desire;  
Until they, too, in the full energy  
Of their exuberant youth fell, also doomed  
To be consumed  
Within the holocaust of total war.*

# *The Whales*

Suddenly in his brain  
With startling slam  
Door after door claps to . . . and, shuddering,  
He lifts his head and languidly  
Over the bulwarks peers across the sea,  
To find the boat surrounded by a gam  
Of sperm-whale, cows and calves, that, merrily  
Lob-tailing, slap the waves with flourished flukes,  
Then sound the ocean glooms, to rise again  
Spouting into the sun their spumy breath:  
And, even as he looks  
On the exhaustless energy  
Of those gay gambolling  
Undaunted creatures of the deep,  
He, who, long derelict with death,  
Had seemed to lie in his last sleep,  
Feels youth resilient in his veins once more,  
And with renewed vitality  
Determines, come what may, that, even yet,  
He will survive to set  
His foot again upon his native shore.

# *The Unseen Rider*

On the high down above the sea  
I lie and listen to the talk  
Of jackdaws roosting in the chalk  
Of the cliff-face that from the surf  
Of tumbling breakers rises sheer;  
When, through the water's monotone  
And chattering of daws, I hear  
A thud of hoofs across the turf.

I hear; but dare not turn my head,  
Lest I should break the spell the sound  
Of horseshoes drumming on soft ground  
For evermore must hold for me;  
I dare not turn, lest I see there  
Some casual horseman all unknown,  
And not the boy with tossing hair  
Who rides the downs of memory.

## *In the Small Hours*

Prey to all the evil powers  
Of the small black-hearted hours,  
Wakeful in her bed she lay  
Longing for the blink of day  
And the dawn-song of the lark;  
Though yet fearful of what morn  
Held for a world, battle-torn;  
When there shivered through the dark  
The sharp-edged and eerie crying  
Of a lych-owl in the park.

And that crying seemed to her  
Fraught with all the sinister  
Cruelty that ever drives  
Men's hag-ridden hunted lives,  
Till chance pounces, and they die:  
Though again and yet again,  
Clutching at the counterpane,  
To allay the agony  
Of her fluttering heart she murmured  
"It is only a bird's cry!"

## *And Now He Stumbles On . . .*

And now he stumbles on, a boy once more  
Among the slippery mangolds, crisped and hoar  
With sparkling rime—the heavy gamebag slung  
About his shoulder, and his nostril stung  
With icy tang and reek of fur and feather  
Warm bloody carcasses and perished leather—  
Then pauses, as, now overhead  
A covey whirrs, and one by one  
The partridge tumble dead  
About him, slaughtered by his father's gun. . .

He had always loathed that slaughter—and yet he,  
A bearded stripling, dressed in jungle-green,  
Seeking to outwit enemies unseen,  
Now bears a gun, himself, as, blunderingly,  
He slithers through the swamp in tropic rain;  
Condemned by forces terrible and blind  
To slaughter or be slain,  
A killer of his kind—  
He, whose dumb boyish heart could never find  
The bitter words  
To voice his pity for those stricken birds!

# *The Snake*

Out of the lush green brake  
The coiling snake  
In its sleek panoply  
Of rich reticulated bronze and jade  
Slithers; and, scarce awake,  
The soldier watches, unafraid,  
Who for five years has been outfacing death  
In all its violent variety.

# *The Islander*

A lad, he had longed to leave  
His native isle,  
And venture out into the world that lay  
Beyond the severing waters of the kyle:

But, now that war has borne  
Him oversea  
Further than ranges of his wildest dream,  
His heart knows only one desire, to be  
Secure at home within  
The little isle,  
Cut off for ever from a crazy world  
By the swift races of the severing kyle.

# *The Jaws of Death*

Barely has he escaped  
The alligator's jaws:  
And now upon the margin of the swamp  
He makes a pause  
To gain his breath,  
Glad to elude that brutal death;  
And then  
Into the jungle plunges, after all,  
Only to fall  
Trapped in an ambush by his fellow men.

## *Now He is Digging Sheep . . .*

Now he is digging sheep  
Out of a fellside drift where, crouching low  
In the soft smother buried deep  
They huddle under hummocked snow:  
And, as he digs, the sweat  
Streams down his face:  
He digs and digs, and yet  
Comes on no trace  
Of his lost flock. . .  
Then, in the tropic night,  
He wakens with a shock  
From troubled sleep;  
And lies repining in the humid heat  
For Northern icy airs and the cold light  
Falling on dazzling folds of crystallized white.

# *The Can*

An old tin can is glittering in the sun  
Beyond the heaped-up corpses of the dead:  
And, as it holds his eyes, into his head  
Flashes the vision of some ancient man,  
Long after the last battle's lost, and won,  
And all the slain have sunk into the soil—  
Some ancient man, grown old in peaceful toil,  
Turning the mould and digging up that can  
Again to glitter in the morning sun.

# *The Morass*

His tank had stuck,  
Bogged deep in the morass—  
A stationary target—just his luck!  
And, when the guns should get the range, like glass  
They'd shatter it, or, leastways, knock it out,  
Battered like an old kettle kicked about  
From boy to boy across the grass  
Of his old village-green . . . And he, well he  
Was too done-in to worry; and, seemingly,  
For evermore would be  
Just part of the morass.

# *The Butterfly*

Out of the swamp into the chequered light  
Down the green jungle-glade  
A huge flamboyant butterfly  
Like the fantastic creature of a dream  
Flutters in brilliant flight  
Before his dazzled eyes:  
And, as he gazes at it in surprise,  
'Twould almost seem  
To him that, from the reeking slough of war,  
One day may yet arise  
Some flame-winged vision of new loveliness  
To lead men from the despond of distress.

# *The Craneman*

The travelling crane halts, and into the mould  
The tilting ladle pours  
The molten steel;  
And, as the whitehot glare  
Scorches his face and hair,  
The craneman's heart turns cold  
Within his breast as, in the glow,  
He sees a wave-washed tanker, battling on  
In swirls of icy spray and snow  
Through Arctic waters to far Russian shores,  
And his young son, so lately gone  
On convoy-duty, even now  
Half-frozen at the wheel.

# *The Dead Fish*

About the boat  
Upon the oily green  
The dead fish float,  
Killed by depth-charges when the submarine  
Was shattered—fish, fantastic and obscene  
Blind creatures of the ooze, from ocean-night,  
After long ages of obscurity  
In the primeval quiet of deep sea,  
By man's mad machinations brought to light.

# *Mountain Death*

Forced to bail out above the Alps, they quit  
One after one the burning plane, and float  
Down through dense cloud, escaping death by fire,  
Only on icy pinnacle and spire  
Caught in their parachutes to wait for death,  
Dangling in snowy solitudes, remote  
From all they loved in life, and yield their breath  
In sobbing gusts of agony  
Until  
The inexorable chill  
Freezes their youthful bodies, doomed to be  
Congealed in icy immortality.

# *Etna*

After uneasy tossing in the night,  
On even keel the craft rides easily  
The dwindling swell of the subsiding sea  
Through little chattering waves that sparkle bright,  
Rejoicing in the early April light:

And, as, down through the mine-sown straits we run,  
Looking towards the opal-misted strand,  
With brooding heart upon the deck I stand,  
Forlorn in the cold brilliance of a sun  
Creating a new world, from darkness won:

When over the dream-dim Sicilian shore  
The veils divide and in the dawning glow  
The peak of Etna, virginal in snow,  
Above grey puffs that from her craters pour  
In austere loveliness is seen to soar

In quietude, a lone aloof white crest  
That only, when the clouds an instant part,  
Consolingly to man's war-tortured heart,  
Stilling the lava-passions of his breast,  
Reveals the vision of eventual rest.

# *Tantallon*

Now he recalls  
Tantallon Castle with its ruined walls,  
Remembering how, an eager boy  
Rambling that Northern shore,  
Filled with the ecstasy of waking life,  
He had wondered why in ancient strife  
Mankind had battled, seeking to destroy  
Each other's homes and sap security  
In senseless siege of the exultant towers  
That other hands had built in soaring pride . . .  
Yet now, he, too, caught up in war  
And carried oversea,  
Storming this Southern mountainside,  
Is set on like destruction, to hurl down  
The embattled walls of this Sicilian town.

# *The Kill*

He saw a figure crouching in the crags,  
And fired; then charged with bayonet fixed, to find  
That writhing body, slumped behind  
A boulder on the rocky shelf,  
Was his own self.

## *Always an Easy Temper . . .*

Always an easy temper—and so he  
Even to battle went lightheartedly:  
But, when his friend fell, he with furious breath  
In whitehot anger hurled himself on death.

# *The Orange*

He plucks an orange from a tree,  
Plucks it, and marvels much that he  
By war's odd chance should come to be  
In this strange land where oranges  
Hang ripe on orchard trees.

And, gazing at that golden sphere,  
His thoughts whisk back full many a year—  
And, now, a boy, quite sharp and clear  
He hears wheels grind crisp Christmas snow,  
And draws an orange from the stocking-toe.

# *The Ticking Watch*

He holds his wristwatch to his ear  
And listens to time ticking out  
The seconds, as the hour draws near—  
The zero-hour, when he  
May chance to be  
Hurled into timeless and unmeasured  
Eternity;  
While still upon his pulseless wrist his watch  
Ticks on regardlessly.

# *The Home*

He looks upon the rubble that has been  
Once a Sicilian home, with troubled eyes . . .  
And then, in dream, he sees,  
Beneath the Coolins in the Hebrides,  
A little croft that crests a heathered rise—  
A low thatched croft with whitewashed walls that hold  
His heart's desire still in security:  
Then, turning from that brief  
Vision of peace, he shares the bitter grief  
Of this outcast Sicilian family.

# *The Lava*

Watching the lava-stream  
Out of Vesuvius pour,  
In the hot lurid gleam  
Of molten death that threatens  
The hillside homes, he only sees one more  
Tributary to the tide  
That sweeps this Southern land from side to side.

# *The Goldfish*

Beneath the flaring of the shell-shot sky,  
In the stone basin of the fountain lie  
The ageless carp with quivering gold fins,  
Indifferent to the transient despair  
In which man's generations fight and die.

# *The Rainbow*

The bloody battle many days ago  
Swept to the mountain-passes; and the plain  
Is strewn with corpses, rotting in the rain,  
The huddled heaps of the untimely slain,  
Spanned by the quivering cold lucency  
Of timeless heaven's evanescent bow.

## *Down from the Apennines . . .*

Down from the Apennines the snow-fed waters  
Roar, and the soldier now with quickening blood  
Recalls the brawling of fell-burns in flood;

And, gazing on the turbid hurly-burly  
Of tawny waters flashing into foam,  
For a glad instant almost feels at home

Among his Northern hills—no more an exile  
In a strange country, and no longer pines  
For his loved Pennines, in the Apennines.

# *Cassino*

Until his death, she had never even heard  
The name of that old town in Italy:  
But now for ever that strange foreign word  
For her is coupled in his memory

With Kielder, where her lover first drew breath,  
And little thought to leave his North Tyne home,  
And in outlandish mountains meet his death,  
Battling with Germans on the road to Rome.

Yet now, since, sailing to that Southern coast,  
He has fallen in the hazard of the war,  
Her heart must flit with his uneasy ghost  
'Twixt Kielder and Cassino evermore.

# *The Almond Trees*

The almond trees against far peaks of snow,  
First rosy flames of the quick-kindling Spring,  
In vivid loveliness  
Flicker and glow,  
And to his spirit bring  
A momentary solace as he gazes;  
And waken in his heart, that long  
Has blundered through the mazes  
Of horror and distress,  
A sudden burst of song.

# *He Took Life Easy . . .*

He took life easy in the days of peace  
And never of its worst made much ado:  
So, when chance caught him in the thick of fight,  
He took death easy, too.

# *The Calvary*

He lifts his eyes, to see  
Upon the craggy height  
The tortured figure, crudely carved in wood,  
That in the sunset-light  
Seems now to stream with freshly-flowing blood;  
When, even as he gazes, a stray shell  
Shatters the calvary.

# *The Wedding Ring*

The ring slipped from her finger suddenly  
As she was drawing water from the well;  
And, as down the dark shaft it fell,  
Her heart fell with it—and she knew that he,  
Her husband, fighting in far Italy,  
Had dropped in death that instant; and their life  
As man and wife,  
Caught in the casual chances of the war,  
Had vanished with the ring for evermore.

# *The Outpost*

When the call came to them, from far and wide  
They answered, leaving scattered homes—yet died  
Together, when the outpost fell at last,  
As brothers, side by side.

# *The Prisoner*

He stands, exhausted and bewildered,  
But still with hot heart on blind murder set,  
While, grinning, his disarming captor  
Proffers a cigarette.

# *The Tenement*

He climbs and climbs the stair  
To reach the room in the high tenement  
Where she awaits him; flight on flight,  
With lungs that labour in the stifling air,  
He climbs and climbs through an unending night,  
Climbs in despair  
Of ever coming there,  
Until, with spirit spent,  
He sinks . . . and wakens on the mountainside,  
Lying with shattered limbs; while far and wide  
Ranging from hill to hill  
The battle rages still  
With roar and flare.

# *The Sea Shell*

Crossing the Anzio strand,  
He picked up a sea-shell of pearly hue;  
And, as he held it in his hand  
And looked on its fantastic whorls, he knew  
How glad his little girl would be  
To add it to her treasury  
Of sea-shells gathered on the Northern shore,  
If only he might live to bring  
This fragile lovely thing  
Home to her from the war.

# *The Song*

Now in the gusty tent,  
While the storm threshes down the mountainside,  
The poet strives to write  
The song that through the hubbub of the fight  
Hummed in his head—  
The song of early days of lost delight,  
Before the battle-tide,  
Sweeping the world, in crashing chaos drowned  
All that he loved—the song that still shall sound  
His joy in other ears when he is dead.

# *The Plough*

Beside the smouldering farmstead he finds now,  
Stuck in a furrow, an abandoned plough,  
And longs to drop his weapons, and to hold  
The stilts and drive the coulter through the mould,  
Doing once more the job he loved of old.

# *The Lizard*

With a quicksilver quiver through the stones  
A lizard flicks in sight;  
And he feels something of a boy's delight  
To see that little slip of urgent life  
Going about its breathless business,  
Unconscious of the deadly strife.

# *The Pillbox*

Of old, behind a chemist's counter he  
Served customers with draughts and pills  
And powders to alleviate their ills:  
But now, as battle flares  
To fury, he, among the snowbound hills  
Of Southern Italy,  
Within a concrete pillbox busily  
Serves other customers with other wares.

# *The Rats*

Their pinpoint eyes aglint in cold moonlight,  
The brown rats scramble from their holes at night,  
Rejoiced that man's mad slaughtering should yield  
So rich a banquet on the stricken field.

# *The Clerk*

In civil life, he drove a patient pen  
On smooth white ledger-pages, harmlessly:  
Now up the rough road of a mountain-glen  
He drives a fell machine to cancel men.

# *The Monk*

Kneeling within his cell,  
The monk was praying when the fire-bombs fell;  
And so his soul, maybe,  
Evaded tedious purgatory—  
Rapt straight to heaven from hell.

## *The Kid*

He hears a bleating, and looks up, to see  
A tethered nanny-goat, wild-eyed,  
On a green shelf of the steep mountainside,  
Nuzzling the still white carcase of her kid,  
Slain by the random shot  
Of some far sniper, hid  
Down in the rocky glen:  
And now remorsefully  
He wonders it should be the lot  
Of that young innocent life  
To fall, a victim to the insane strife  
Of murderous men.

# *The Shadow*

Reaching the crest, laved in the sunset-glow  
He sees his shadow thrown across the snow  
Of a far hillside; and it seems to be  
The helmed shadow of the god of war  
Defiling nature's pristine purity.

# *The Revenant*

The ceilings sag, the rafters, thrust awry  
On tilted joists; through chinks in riven walls  
Filters the bleak light of the Winter sky;  
And fitfully the flaking plaster falls;

Casement and door, on hinges wrenched askew,  
'Twixt crooked jamb and lintel idly flap  
In every gusty draught, that shudders through  
The desolated rooms, with startling clap:

While he who built this house, and little dreamt  
Winged enemies should wreck its homely pride,  
Who all his life still kept it trim and kempt  
As on the day he brought to it his bride,

From the forgetful quiet of the tomb  
Recalled to his old home by its distress,  
Uneasily from room to shattered room  
Rambles in memory-anguished restlessness.

# *The Birds Return*

The cuckoos call and swallows slice the blue  
On sickle-wings, returned anew  
From Africa; but he, who sailed, before  
Their Autumn flight, towards that Southern shore.  
Comes back no more.

The cuckoos in her brain drum death's tattoo,  
And those sharp swallow-wings cut through  
Her very being, cleaving her heart's core . . .  
The birds return: but from that fatal shore  
He comes no more.

# *The Face*

Over the bow in the wreckage he caught  
A moment the glimmer of tangled gold hair;  
And, stooping yet lower, he looked on a face  
That gleamed in the flotsam, foam-cold and foam-fair—

A face that had come through the fury of storm  
And the fury of fight and of man's treachery,  
To dream in the dawnlight serenely awhile,  
Till it sank in the untroubled ooze of deep sea:

And, though bright be the glances and merry the smiles  
Of the girls in the village, he passes them by—  
Still held in his heart by the glimpse of a face  
That floated in peace beneath the dawn-sky.

## *The Respite*

Crouched at the coppice-edge with tommy-gun,  
Closely he scans the bracken-covered brae  
That basks and shimmers in the morning sun,  
Alert lest sudden-tossing fronds betray  
The lurking of an enemy in the dense  
Green brake; his body tingling with suspense  
In every fibre and each sense  
Whetted by hazard to a razor-keen  
And quickened apprehension: when, aware  
Of a familiar fragrance in the air,  
His nostrils quiver with delight, and he  
Relaxes, as into the sheltering green  
He thrusts a hand and eagerly  
Draws down long dangling honeysuckle sprays  
Still dewy, and breathes in with bliss intense  
Recovered sweets of early innocence;  
And, for a moment tranced in memory,  
Forgets all the outrageous violence  
And murderous madness of hate-harried days—  
A moment; then, refreshed, with sharper sight  
Searches the sun-glazed hill  
Whose bracken-thicket still  
Shimmers unstirring in heat-rippled light.

# *Down the Glen*

“Why do you still go traipsing down the glen  
Day after day?”

“I’m only following the pathway Ben  
Took, when he went away.”

“Better to keep on working; so that you  
Forget the dead.”

“Maybe—but what is left for me to do.  
Since I’ve made up his bed?”

# *The Summons*

In dream she seems to feel the clasp  
Of his strong fingers on her own—  
Then shrinks, to find her hand held in the grasp  
Of fleshless bone

And hear a voice “Though lone you lie,  
Bereaved, in the wide bed, more lone  
Lies he beneath the Libyan sky,  
Stript to the bone:

And he, who shared your sleep with you,  
Flesh of your flesh, now claims his own  
True love to share his slumber—true  
Bone of his bone.”

# *Embarkation Leave*

Arrived on leave too late the night before  
To visit his old workshop, now he turned  
The key of the shed; and, thrusting wide the door,  
In the cold light of the Winter dawn discerned,  
Propped up on chocks on the hard earthen floor,  
The keel of the ketch he had laid in happier days,  
Before the world crashed to catastrophe,  
And he had been called up. And, as he caught  
Again the chips' keen tang of turpentine  
With relish, his bright eyes with loving gaze  
From swerving bow to sternpost of red pine  
Followed once more the graceful sweeping line  
From which the curved ribs branched, that, skilfully,  
With sharp adze he had shaped, without a thought  
That he might never even live to see  
His dream-boat take the tide. And, as a gull  
Greeted with sudden skirl the rising sun  
Above the shed, he looked with deep distress  
On the unfinished shapely skeleton  
Of his desire, to think another's hand  
Should cut the strakes and warp them for her hull  
And fix the booms and rigging; and that he,  
Himself, might never launch her from the strand  
And proudly step the masts and bend the sails  
To take the breeze.

And then warm thankfulness  
Surged through his heart with hope that, anyhow,  
His leave would let him work upon her now  
For two whole days, and handle happily  
His tools, instead of weapons; and, as he  
Wrought at his bench, with the familiar wails  
Of gulls and the loved murmur of the sea  
Filling his ears, he might ignore awhile  
The business of destruction and of death,  
Doing his own true job. So, eagerly  
Drawing into his lungs the living breath  
Of dawn, he picked his plane up with a smile.



# *The Match*

He strikes a match to light a cigarette;  
And, at the flicker, something in his mind  
Rekindles: and, amazed he could forget  
One who had been so kind,  
He now recalls how night and day,  
When, sorely wounded, in the ward, half-blind  
And helpless, swathed in bandages he lay,  
She had served him hand and foot. And now again,  
As through a surge of pain,  
He sees her russet head  
While she beside the bed  
Leans over him to light  
That first consoling cigarette—  
Amazed he could forget,  
Forget that night!  
And yet,  
Even then he had hardly been aware  
Of the light glinting on her red-gold hair  
And little flames reflected in her eyes  
As they looked into his . . . Ay, he had been blind  
Then, and until this instant, when the scratch  
And flicker of a match  
Rekindles his dull mind—  
Blind, till this instant, blind!

# *Offerings*

Last year in sunshine she was plucking flowers,  
Snapping the juicy stalks of daffodils:  
Now in the factory-glare through endless hours  
Case after case she fills.

The blooms she picked for market brought delight  
And gladdened strangers with their golden bells:  
For strangers, too, she handles day and night  
Far other offerings—shells!

## *The Broken Pipe*

He'd broken his good briar, his constant friend,  
And one he had thought would see him to the end:  
Blown by the blast against the warehouse wall,  
Staggered by shock, somehow he had let it fall.  
'Twas bad luck, surely—his familiar pipe,  
Grown old with him, so mellow, brown and ripe—  
Bad luck, bad luck . . . And something in his head  
Burned like a redhot coal; and spots of red  
Were sparking in his eyes . . . He must stoop down  
To save the broken bits, though he should drown  
In the red tide that surged against his chest . . .  
He must stoop down; and, after, he could rest  
When all the bits were safe . . . his oldest friend—  
He'd known . . . he'd known 'twould see him to the end.

## *The Home Bird*

She knew that he was home, that he was lying  
Safely asleep in bed:  
She couldn't climb the stair, herself, to see,  
Not these days, with her crippled knee,  
Not even if he were dying  
Or lay dead. . .  
“Dead!”—that was what they said—  
They said that he was dead,  
Had died in battle: but, how could that be?  
He'd never held with fighting, John—and he,  
Always the home-bird! Such a tale to tell!  
And to his mother, too! And shouldn't she  
Know if her son were sleeping safe and well?

# *The Leather Jerkin*

Far from his home and all familiar things  
The lonely stripling on the foreign shore  
Keeps sentry, watching with bewildered eyes  
The Aurora leaping in the Northern skies  
In quivering flames of icy green and blue;  
And shudders at the strangeness as he stares:  
And then, though biting the snell wind stings,  
The thought some comfort to his young heart brings—  
Though home be far from him, at least he wears  
The leather jerkin that his father wore  
When he in old days did his duty, too.

# *The Dance*

Lads and lasses in service-dress  
Dancing, dancing,  
With lively limbs and gay eyes glancing  
Dancing to lilting rhythms, entrancing  
Minds overworn with the strain and the stress  
Of shattering days and nights,  
Into a dream of unchallenged delights  
Dancing, dancing!

# *The Little Room*

The wings of doom  
Hover above  
The little room  
That holds our love:

Yet, though death fall  
From out the night  
And shatter all  
Our life's delight,

Calm and strong-willed  
We'll meet our doom,  
Whose love has filled  
The little room.

# *The Stack of Straw*

On his last leave, though he was tired,  
He had turned to with the rest and helped to build  
The stack of straw; and, in his battle-dress,  
Forked the dry rustling gold and packed it tight—  
The stack of straw that, on the very night  
When he was killed,  
Patrolling the far Libyan wilderness,  
Went up, self-fired,  
In a wild blaze of furious heat and light.

# *The Old Love*

I fancied I at last  
Had wooed him from the sea,  
To hold him happily  
For ever safe and fast  
At home with me.

But when the curse of war  
Fresh hazards to the sea  
And seamen brought, then he  
Could rest in peace no more  
At home with me:

And to the calling tides  
Of his old love, the sea,  
He answered eagerly;  
And only heartbreak bides  
At home with me.

# *The Hero*

Life broke all promises: and gave, instead,  
Death for his daily bread;  
And he with every breath  
Drew in the reek of death:  
Life broke all promises; yet, as he died,  
He snatched in triumph all life had denied.

## *The Lustre Jug*

To-day my duster caught his favorite jug  
And sent it smashing to the floor;  
And, as its lustred splinters, littering  
The flagstones, held my eyes, I thought—No more  
From its broad spout he'll pour  
The amber frothing ale into a mug—  
And, listening to his linnet twittering,  
I stood, still dazzled by the glittering,  
And murmured to myself half-crazily—  
“No more, no more his hand will pour  
The amber ale when he . . . if he  
Should come back from the war.”

# *The Little Copse*

So, it was gone—they wrote—the little copse  
Of silver-birches by the singing stream,  
Shrivalled to ash by chance incendiaries—  
The little copse, so full of memories  
Of childhood's games and laughter! Yet, in dream,  
Driving through swirls of blinding searing sand  
Of this hell-burning land,  
Still through its April leafy flickering  
He sees the white boles in cool sunlight gleam,  
While startled squirrels set the boughs aswing.

# *The Cancelled Leave*

I watched the passengers alighting  
From the belated train;  
And anxiously my glance kept flitting,  
Kept flitting to and fro  
From face to face, in vain:

No eyes met mine in recognition;  
And, when all had gone past,  
I realised his leave was cancelled—  
That Death, the new C. O.,  
Had taken charge at last.

# *In the Dead of the Night*

Lying awake  
In the dead of the night,  
He hears the far roar  
Of aircraft in flight

And the skirl and the thud  
Of bombs plumping down  
On the houses and shops  
Of the old market-town;

And, troubled, recalls  
How he, as a boy,  
Set out each September  
With heart full of joy

To spend a great day  
At the Michaelmas Fair,  
When the stalls and the swings  
Filled the old Market Square:

And, living again  
That early delight,  
He grieves for the town  
In its pitiful plight—

The town that of old  
Was his city of dream:  
And now through his head  
The bombs hurl and scream;

And his heart is consumed  
By the fury and heat,  
As the old houses crumble  
In every loved street

in every loved street,

And it shrivels to ash,  
Forlorn in the glare  
Of the terror that rains  
On the old Market Square.

# *Desert Night*

What do you see as you pace the night  
To and fro  
On sentry-go?  
*The full moon trancing with light*  
*Cheviot silvered with snow!*

What do you smell as you pace the night  
On sentry-beat  
With burning feet?  
*Redesdale in morning light*  
*Foaming with meadowsweet!*

What do you hear as you pace the night  
Of breathless fear  
With straining ear?  
*The roar of the frothing white*  
*Lasher of Otterburn weir!*

# *She Watches on the Shore*

She watches on the shore,  
Blinded by spindrift, though no craft could ride  
The swirling surf of the rampageous tide;  
And, at the ending of the bitter night,  
Finds at her feet in daybreak's callous light  
Only a broken oar.

## *Drifts*

The drift, a good three-feet at the doorsill—  
And she must dig herself out now! How he  
Had always loved to clear away the snow,  
Driving the shovel deep and heftily  
Heaving it over the half-buried wall  
With easy swing and sweltering cheeks aglow!

Ay, she must dig herself out presently—  
A job she did not care about at all,  
A slow backbreaking job for her . . . while Will  
In a far sunscorched land  
Was even now, maybe,  
Digging his tank out of the silted sand.

# *The Silver Cup*

She burnishes the silver cup  
He won for the half-mile;  
Then carefully she sets it up  
Beneath the shade of speckless glass  
That seems to twinkle mockingly,  
As with a smile  
To think that she  
Should still be limping after death  
With troubled breath,  
While at the goal her son  
Already rests beneath the grass,  
His race well run.

## *Hill Music*

He climbs the benty brae  
Above Crag Lough where, rambling many a day  
In boyhood, he had rejoiced to hear the crake  
Of mallard and teal alighting on the lake  
That lapped the pillared basalt, and the call  
Of curlew in the quaggy slacks that lay  
North of the Roman Wall—  
Curlew whose fluting seemed to utter all  
His young heart's inarticulate ecstasy:  
And now, on his last leave, again he hears  
Those voices of old years  
That pierce him to the core  
As, with a new intensity  
He listens, lest it chance that he  
Should hear that wild hill-music nevermore.

# *The Night Grows Late . . .*

The night grows late;  
Yet he does not return:  
And, crouching by the glowing grate,  
She strains to hear the clanging of the gate  
Above the brawling of the burn in spate—

She strains to hear  
Above the brawling of the burn  
The yard-gate clanging sharp and clear:  
And, as the dark hours pass and day draws near,  
The hope within her bosom chills to fear.

The night grows late;  
Yet he does not return:  
The cinders smoulder in the grate,  
And lower sounds the swiftly-dwindling spate—  
Yet only the wind rattles the shut gate.

## *His Word*

He swore he'd never leave me, come what might;  
Yet broke his word.  
If he were captured, or fell in the fight,  
I never heard.

He went; and comes no more—but from my heart  
He has not stirred,  
Who, bidding me farewell, yet, for his part,  
Has kept his word.

# *The Curtains*

As his hand draws apart the thick curtains to let in the light,  
He looks for the last time, it seems, on his own countryside  
And watches a kestrel that hovers in glittering height  
Over the fells where, but for the war, he would ride  
Through gossamer-dew-sparkled bracken and blossoming ling;  
And though he rejoices at first to hear the lark sing  
As of old on such mornings, a shadow swoops over his eyes  
As a presage of quick-coming doom steals into his heart;  
And it seems that already in slumber unwaking he lies  
In a chamber whose curtains of darkness no hand draws apart.

# *The Broken Tether*

He had mended it again, the silver chain—  
His earliest token  
Of love for her, that she so carelessly had broken—  
His skilful hand had mended it again.

But now that death had snapt the living chain—  
The golden tether  
That through untroubled years had held their hearts together—  
What mortal hand could make it good again?

*He came to Her that Night*

He came to her that night  
Of wind and sleety rain  
When gust on gust the tempest  
Assailed the pane.

With dark eyes glinting bright  
He stood beside the bed,  
A wan unearthly glimmer  
About his head:

And suddenly his lips  
Moved, and he seemed to speak;  
When the wind lashed more wildly  
With frantic shriek

Against the house, and drowned  
His accents as they fell:  
And she but caught the murmur—  
“I always meant to tell. . .”

As, rushing down the dale,  
Yet louder raged the storm:  
And now she saw no longer  
That shadowy form:

And when the morning broke  
Behind the blinded pane  
She listened to the patter  
Of pelting rain

Wondering if in the end  
His heart to her were true:  
But what he came to tell her  
She never knew.

# *The Waters of the Tyne*

When last he watched the waters of the Tyne  
With a boy's heart fulfilling its delight  
In the tumultuous singing and the shine  
Of choral hillborn waters, amber-bright,  
How little he  
Imagined through what spates of misery,  
Crashing in swirling horror day and night,  
His soul must plunge in the ensuing years—  
How little his heart conceived what cruelty,  
Latent within the world's heart even then,  
Should shatter in an hour the ecstasy  
Of living, while his frenzied fellowmen,  
Hag-ridden by dark dreams and frantic fears,  
Lured on to self-destruction, headlong hurled,  
In a blind fury wrecking their own world!

Yet, still the amber waters of the Tyne  
Greeted the day with singing and with shine. . .

# *The Gift*

And she had given him  
The little nickel torch  
That he had carelessly,  
As he approached the porch,  
Switched on that he might see  
The steps—the nickel torch,  
Her birthday gift, whose light  
Drew death from out the night.

# *The Chimneystack*

He sees the old familiar chimney-stack  
Flourish its reek aloft  
Above the little croft  
To welcome him from foreign-service back:

And, as he climbs the last stiff heather-brae,  
The tang of kindled peat  
Is wafted down to greet  
The old campaigner on his homeward way:

And he recalls how often in far lands  
In dreaming mirage he  
Had seemed to smell and see  
The home-reek rising from the burning sands.

# *The Letter*

Over mine-sown, torpedo-shuttled deeps,  
Undaunted by dive-bombers swooping low  
And all the old storm-perils of the sea,  
Some ancient tub has laboured hardily,  
And, winning into haven, brought to me  
In this frail envelope as white as snow  
Word of your welfare and your thought of me—  
Over dark wastes where danger never sleeps  
And death for ever ranges day and night,  
Safe in this envelope so frail and slight  
Has brought your heart to me.

# *The Troth*

She had broken with him just before he sailed:  
Yet, though he had never heard  
From her a single word,  
When the last desperate attack had failed,  
And he lay riddled-through,  
Clearly beyond the surging gloom  
He saw her, sitting lonely in her room;  
And in a flash he knew  
Her heart to him was true.

# *It Always Was His Pride . . .*

It always was his pride to be  
The first to hear the curlew call  
At blink of day or evenfall  
When April brought them from the sea.

The curlew call unceasingly  
Day after day, for him in vain. . .  
O come September quick again  
And send them flying back to sea!



# *The Last Flight*

At last the broken body slept  
Beneath the shattered plane;  
And straight the starry spirit leapt  
To take the air again  
On wings of flashing light and swept  
Beyond the bounds of mortal night.

# *Border Watch*

All night the roaring of the force  
That threshes down the narrow ghyll  
Has thundered through his head until  
Half-dazed he drowns on the hill:

And he is scarcely startled when  
In the full moonshine there appears  
A band of reivers, armed with spears  
And swords and bows of other years:

And, as an instant through his veins  
Runs the old Border-blood, full-spate,  
He turns to rouse before too late  
The dales to meet the hordes of hate:

Then laughs, to think himself a ghost  
Of his forebears who, man by man,  
Kept watch and ward, when, clan on clan,  
Scots thieves the Border over-ran.

# *The Cheerful Blaze*

With sleepy eyes and drowsy minds adaze  
The farmhands sat about the cheerful blaze  
Within the ingle, relishing the heat  
After long labour in the soaking sleet  
Throughout the bitter February day;  
And little dreamt the log-flames, leaping red  
Up the wide chimneystack, would serve to show  
In the black night a tell-tale glow  
To the lone raider, prowling over head,  
And so to sudden death give them away.

# *The Watch*

The watch I had given him he lost  
The night before he left; and he  
Was worried, thinking what it cost—  
The money wasted that I'd spent;  
And how, without it, he would be  
Always uncertain how time went  
And never sure if he were late:  
And, as I saw him to the gate,  
His last words were "I cannot think  
How I mislaid it!"

Yesterday

I found it, slipped into a chink  
Between the bed-head and the wall—  
Too late, too late! for, where he lies  
With slumber-sealed unworried eyes  
In a strange country far away  
Time never troubles him at all.

# *The Fluttered Doves*

When the bomb fell, the fluttered doves  
About the dovecote circled in affright,  
Tossing and tumbling in the starry night  
Whose glitter on their flashing pinions gleamed;  
Then one by one took courage to alight  
And go to roost once more; but little dreamed  
The whistling boy who scattered golden grain  
Would never call them from their cote again.

# *The Desolate Heart*

Now she must see to the black-out, before  
She switches on the light, though she,  
If only her own safety were at stake,  
Would scarcely take  
The trouble to draw down a blind,  
Even though the sky were full of flying death,  
To save her useless body, now that he  
Can come to her no more.

What matter, though a random bomb should break  
Her limbs and stop her breath . . .  
And might not she, perchance, awake to find  
That death had torn apart  
The curtains of her mind  
And stripped grief's black-out from her desolate heart?

# *Tantalus*

As, in the derelict boat  
That idly drifts in the soul-parching glare,  
He gazes overside  
With crazy stare  
And burning throat,  
He suddenly sees glass after glass  
Of good ale, amber-clear,  
Upon the sea afloat,  
And frothing tankards ride  
The salty swell: but when, with trembling fingers,  
He stoops to snatch them from the tide,  
One after one they pass  
Beyond his reach and vanish into air;  
While in his nostril lingers  
Only a ghostly whiff of phantom beer.

# *The Link*

She set the door ajar  
And watched with memory-lighted eyes the star  
Burning in beryl air above Hawk Scar:

And, as the lucency  
Transfused her spirit with serenity,  
She felt within her heart that oversea

He, too, in alien skies  
Was even then watching the planet rise  
With dark and quiet home-remembering eyes

And they, though severed far,  
Were linked still by the solace of the star  
They loved to watch of old above Hawk Scar.

# *The Blind Man*

Beneath collapsing skies,  
Half-stunned, with sightless eyes,  
Awhile he stands;  
Then seeks with groping hands  
And numbly-fumbling feet  
To find a safe retreat  
From smashing bomb and shell—  
Puzzled that men with sight  
Whose eyes were blest with light  
Should turn the world to hell;  
And that their hearts should be  
Stone-blind with treachery.

# *The Crest*

He had always meant to climb  
Helvellyan and from its high scarp look down  
On the grey houses of his native town,  
Huddled in its green dale: and, as the train  
Steams from the station, and he sees the sun  
Gilding the naked ridges after rain,  
He knows his eyes have looked for the last time  
On that familiar steep; yet vows, when war is done,  
His spirit, enfranchised in peace newly-won,  
Shall seek its lasting rest  
On that austere hill-crest.

## *And This, the End . . .*

And this, the end—to lie  
Under a brazen sky,  
Adrift in a boat, while one by one  
His mates about him die—  
His shipmates one by one  
Perish, cursing the sun—  
The sun that in a brazen sky,  
A lidless white unblinking eye,  
Watches with pitiless stare  
His mates that one by one,  
Their lips burnt black in the salty glare,  
With wordless curses die!

*Alone*

Flesh of my flesh  
And bone of my bone,  
In a far country  
He fights all alone.

Blood of my blood  
And mind of my mind,  
He fights with good comrades,  
But none of his kind:

He fights with good comrades;  
Yet fights all alone  
'Mid strangers who know not  
The things he has known—

The home of his heart;  
The light on the lawn  
When gossamers quiver  
With dews of the dawn;

The way the flames dance  
On the Winter hearthstone  
And gladden the faces  
Of folk of his own;

His bonnie bay mare;  
The dog he loves best;  
The voice of the river  
That sang him to rest.

Flesh of my flesh  
And bone of my bone,  
In a far country  
He fights all alone.

# *Munitions*

I fill the shells all day,  
While somewhere far away  
He mans a gun to keep  
The enemy at bay:  
And, even when at night  
I snatch uneasy sleep,  
I share with him the fight;  
And in my heart I pray  
That in some desperate stand  
On the sheer brink of hell  
Some shell filled by my hand  
May serve him well.

# *The Tarn*

He dives in a mountain-tarn,  
Bottomless, cold as death;  
Then struggles once more to the light  
With fluttering breath;

And, shivering, with limbs of ice  
In the tingling Northern air,  
Towels his body and shakes  
The wet from his hair. . .

And then he awakes, to find  
Himself in a nightmare land  
Still battling against the hot blast  
Of the scathing sand.

# *The Children*

The children on the Common, gathering  
Blackberries on a gold September day,  
Pluck ripe fruit from each curving bramble-spray,  
Laughing and chattering happily. . . .  
When suddenly  
On swooping wing  
A Heinkel dives towards the ground  
And spatters bullets all around;  
Then, zooming, soars and goes upon its way. . .  
And now no happy chattering  
Gladdens the golden day.

# *The Lime*

He always said, when he'd the time,  
He'd lop the boughs that overhung  
The window and shut out the light:  
And it would worry him at night  
When in the squalls of wind and rain  
Against the house a low branch swung  
And scabbled twigs against the pane. . .

When he'd the time. . . when he'd the time. . .  
Now with all time upon his hands  
He's sleeping somewhere oversea;  
And worries naught about the tree,  
Although on nights of wind and rain,  
Unlopped, with lashing boughs it stands  
And scabbles twigs against the pane.

# *Snow*

With shrill delighted cries  
And sparkling eyes  
And kindled cheeks aglow  
The child plays in crisp crystallized snow—  
The child whose heart is yet too young to know  
Aught of the war, or how the Winter lies  
Heavy as death on that strange Northern land  
Where even now, maybe, in a last stand  
With frozen limbs his father fronts the foe  
In overwhelming drifts of fatal snow.



## *Scorched Earth*

The wheat that in his little patch he had sown  
And watched in April springing green,  
And with his hoe  
Row after row  
Had weeded clean,  
Until, full-grown,  
Long-strawed and plump of head,  
He had rejoiced to see it stand,  
The richest crop in all the land—  
The wheat that he had cherished as his own  
And hoped to garner—others came  
And harvested with flame:  
And now his treasure, charred and grey,  
A waste of smoking ashes lay,  
While he went hungry for a crust of bread.

# *The Hour*

When the hour struck for him, although  
'Twas tinkled and boomed out  
From belfries all about,  
I did not know—  
I did not know that it was his last hour;  
And, as it tolled from steeple and from tower,  
I only grieved that time should go so slow—  
Time that, for him, was gone for evermore,  
Too fleetly flown!—and in impatience rose  
To set ajar the door  
For his return, the door  
That his hand nevermore  
Should open or close.

# *Under the Rowan*

Under the rowan  
He bade me farewell  
When the berries were ruddy  
Against the brown fell.

Under the rowan  
I heard of his death;  
And the sweet creamy blossom  
Half-stifled my breath.

Under the rowan  
Again burning red,  
A year since we parted  
I tryst with the dead.

# *The Fire*

Now she, herself, must fetch the wood and coal  
To start the kitchen fire, which always he,  
Leaving her drowsing still, each morning lit  
To make for her an early cup of tea.

Dear knows, she sorely missed that morning cup:  
And she was but numb-fingered when it came  
To fires; and always now the wood seemed damp;  
And, damp or dry, 'twas hard to start a flame.

Ay, he'd a hand with fires, and other things—  
Things she'd scarce noticed till they came to part:  
And, lying wakeful in her lonely bed,  
She longed to feel his hand upon her heart.

# *Over*

Well, it was over and done—  
Over for him, at least:  
For the battle still raged; and never he'd know  
Who'd lost and who'd won  
When it ceased—  
And yet, could the heart in his breast  
In cold indifference rest  
If the triumphing feet of the foe  
Trampled down all he loved best?

# *The Driver*

Last year he drove in the Five Acre Field,  
Glowing beneath unclouded English skies,  
A tractor, reaping amber grain for bread—  
The bread of life. This year, instead,  
He drives a tank across strange lands that yield  
Another crop—a sterile crop that lies  
In dark swathes splashed with red.

# *The Victim*

She worried sore lest he should fall  
In a far-distant fight  
And never come to her again:  
And yet, that very night,  
The victim of a raiding plane,  
Crushed under a bomb-shattered wall  
She lay; while he came safe through all.

# *One Hour*

In time of peace afar  
They dwelt apart, unknown;  
But, when in total war  
Nations were overthrown,  
Together, from the strife  
Caught up in chance's net,  
Beneath a wild red star  
At last they met;  
And, blending blood and breath,  
One hour of reckless life  
They snatched from death.

# *Her Son*

She had to let him go,  
Although the rending pain  
Of his first coming tore her life again,  
She had to let him go.

# *The Withered Branch*

In the full-foliaged tree a withered branch,  
Snapt by the tempest, droops its shrivelled leaves  
That rustle overhead:  
And, hearing them, the father quietly grieves,  
Remembering his son, in battle dead.

# *The Quiet Heart*

And now her heart was quiet, nevermore  
To be torn, anguished, betwixt hope and fear:  
For now she knew; and neither hope nor fear  
Might trouble her dead heart for evermore.

# *The Family*

A log whose rings record a century  
May in a hundred minutes be consumed;  
Yet even in briefer time this family  
That had outlived tree after forest-tree  
To perish in war's holocaust was doomed.

# *The Test*

He often wondered how he would meet  
The test: yet, when the instant came,  
All doubt was shrivelled in exultant flame  
As he stood up to death  
And rallied the retreat  
With his last breath,  
And, dying, kindled victory from defeat.

# *The Adage*

Over and over again  
The adage runs through her mind,  
Beating a tune in her brain—  
“Fast bind, safe find!”

For, though, when death wrenched them apart  
He was lost to her at the last,  
In the sanctuary of her heart  
She holds him fast.

# *The Nurse*

While bombs crash all about  
And night is terror-torn,  
Within the shattered home  
She tends the labouring wife  
And calmly fights for life  
Till, in the house of death,  
A child is born.

# *The Voyage*

“I’ll see you without fail  
Before you leave”—  
He wrote; and little reckoned he,  
Before the morning I was due to sail,  
Should be embarked upon a lonelier sea;  
And I, bereft,  
The one life left  
To grieve.

# *Heart of My Heart . . .*

Heart of my heart, though you lie  
In a grave unknown  
Under an alien sky;  
Though heavy your slumber and deep,  
Know this, that you never may sleep,  
Heart of my heart, alone.

# *Sole Survivor*

“You were the sole survivor? All the rest,  
When the ship struck the floating mine, went down?  
You should thank God, who rescued you. . .”

“And left

My mates to drown?”

# *The Lesson*

God save us, when, the bread of life to earn,  
To forge death's weapons boys and girls must learn!

# *Employment*

In wartime no one need be unemployed—  
At least while aught is left to be destroyed.

# *The Category*

A 1—and fit for anything—  
Fit to live out man's three-score-years-and-ten,  
And then, again,  
Fit to be killed within this very hour,  
Caught in the murderous shower  
Of a machine-gun's random spattering.

# *The Dragons*

'Twas "Once upon a time. . ." But now the war  
Brings back again those fabled days of yore  
And men may see with unastonished eyes  
Fire-belching dragons roaring through the skies.

# *The Hit*

Though many bombs were dropt on Little Dene  
Before they fled our fighters hurriedly,  
They only left behind one casualty,  
The war-memorial on the village-green.

# *The Weathercock*

Over the hill the sunlight on the vane  
Had always held his eyes;  
And loveliest it glanced when rainy skies  
Let through a shaft to strike it gold again,

Pluming with light the challenging bright bird  
Who gallantly would veer  
To face the blast of Winter without fear,  
Or idly twirled when Summer breezes stirred.

But now nor sun nor moon at any hour  
Shall turn to silver or gold  
The proud cock, lying broken in the mould  
Beneath the rubble of the shattered tower.

# *The Alabaster Earl*

The alabaster earl who lay  
Beneath a gilded canopy  
For century on century  
Within the rich cathedral gloom,  
Now on the wreckage of his tomb  
Lies all exposed to common day.

# *Companions*

He saw a sleek dark head  
Beside him in the sea,  
As, in the bombed ship's wake,  
He struggled pluckily:  
And "What cheer, mate!" said he—  
"So, you've been made to take  
An extra bath, like me!"

"We've both been dipped" he said  
"Together, you and me,  
Though it's not our bath-night—  
A cold dip, too!" said he. . .  
When, swiftly out of sight  
The seal dived silently.

# *The Bland Face*

The bland face in its frame  
Of tarnished gilt still beamed  
From the sole segment of the parlour-wall  
That yet remained,  
Smoke-smirched and water-stained,  
When as bombs plunged and screamed,  
The house went up in flame,  
And in that fury all—  
All else had perished—all  
Save the bland face that in its frame  
Of tarnished gilt still beamed.

# *The Vagrant*

They have broken him in  
With duties and drill,  
Who all his life long  
Has wandered at will;  
And he marches in step  
With the rest of the line,  
Who rambled and shambled  
Through shower and shine:  
Yet, though with a bayonet  
They teach him to kill,  
With the hawk over Carter  
His heart hovers still  
Or lollops fleet-foot  
With the hare overhill.

# *The Undertaker*

So often, following his father's trade,  
Snug elm and oaken coffins he has made  
To keep his fellowmen, when they were laid  
To rest in earth, at least for a brief term,  
Secure against the all-devouring worm:  
Yet, unprotected on the desert stones  
His own corpse lies, while vultures pick his bones.

# *The Spy*

Reptiles he'd always feared; and, as he crept  
Among the desert-scrub and chanced to lay  
His fingers on a clammy coil that slept  
Against a boulder, he let out,  
Unwittingly a stifled shout—  
When straight a bullet singing through the air  
Shattered his temple; and he bit the grey  
Hot desert-dust; but only half-aware  
That his own kind had given him away.

# *Salvage*

When the house flared, it was too late to search  
His treasures out; so, seizing the first thing  
That came to hand, he rushed into the night:  
And by the ashes in the morning light  
He stands, his sole possession, a fluttering  
And angry parrot screeching on its perch.

# *Fuel*

The unwanted poet's works, in sheets unbound,  
Stacked in a London warehouse, quire on quire,  
At least did something to increase the blaze,  
Even though they had failed to set the Thames on fire.

# *The Iron Days*

The iron days, that, with sharp prongs of pain  
Harrow our lives relentlessly, may serve  
To break the clodded mould; that once again  
The soil shall bear the green and living grain.

# *So Brief a Life . . .*

So brief a life, and yet  
Lived to the full, till death  
Fired it to heaven-soaring ecstasy  
With flaming breath!

# *The Heron*

'Mid silver shallows of the moonlit mere  
With plumage silver-chased the heron stands,  
The spirit of that watery solitude,  
Still in his memory, as on that old night;  
And the calm image slakes with liquid light  
His parching fear,  
As now he marches on through torrid lands  
With courage unsubdued.

## *His Letter*

She takes his letter from its envelope  
And reads his words with eyes that burn,  
The cheery letter, full of hope  
Of his return—  
The letter that has only reached her since the brief  
Official message came  
To burn her heart up in a shrivelling flame;  
And, as she reads his jesting words, she hears  
His voice, that to her breast brings the relief  
Of easing tears.

## *The Miller's Pond*

Had she the heart to go  
Down to the Miller's Pond, now she would see  
The waterlilies in full blow,  
As on the day when he and she,  
Together, happily  
Looked on those chalices of lucent snow;  
And once again, maybe,  
Out of the reeds in flashing flight  
The kingfisher would dart,  
The dazzling spirit of their young delight  
Flickering to and fro  
Above the dreaming pond's tranquility  
Of green and white—  
Had she the heart to go,  
Alone, had she the heart. . .

# *The Homecoming*

The raft has stranded on the shingled beach  
And in a shroud of foam  
The dead man lies, who never thought to reach  
Again his native shore—  
The seas that held his living heart in thrall,  
The seas to whose stern service he gave all,  
The seas have borne him home,  
Have brought him home once more.

# *Crocuses*

On his last leave he planted in the lawn  
A thousand bulbs: and in the light of dawn  
She sees a thousand gold upthrusting spears  
That stab her heart to tears.

# *The Invalid*

It seemed that he through lingering years must lie  
And give up life with slowly gasping breath;  
When all at once wings swept the midnight sky  
And cut life short with swift mechanic death.

# *The Cottage Garden*

This little plot of soil  
Held his heart's love through all the evening hours  
When he with patient toil  
Won from the rich mould vegetables and flowers;  
And now with faithful will,  
Though in remembering eyes the quick tears start,  
His widow turns to till  
The garden into which he dug his heart.

# *The Summer Moon*

He little thought that he  
Should ever dread to see  
The Summer moon ensilvering the tide  
On a still stormless night,  
Or that its lovely light  
Should ever seem a treachery  
Betraying him to slinking foes that glide  
Beneath the glittering tranquility!

# *The Medal*

A son they had, begotten of their love  
To carry on their blood-stream, and to know  
A fuller life than theirs, more free of risk—  
A son they had, so short a while ago;  
But now, a metal disk  
Is all they have to show.



# *The Weeping Beech*

In the green gloom beneath the weeping beech  
Of the college-garden with abstracted eyes  
The convalescent soldier lies  
In seeming peace—yet still he hears the screech  
Of hurtling shells and the relentless roar  
Of tanks, and sees on that far hostile shore  
His comrades fighting still, and fervently  
Longs once again to be  
Sharing with them the hazards of the war.

# *The Cost*

Only six planes,  
In all were lost—  
Official brains  
Assess the cost,  
As night by night  
Flight after flight  
On reckless raids  
Across the sky  
Our young sons fly  
To death propelled  
By whirring blades. . .

Only six planes,  
In all, were lost—  
Official brains  
Assess the cost.

# *The Young Poet*

Born to express his urgent sense of life  
In living words whose breath  
Should outlast death,  
While yet he strove to utter the delight  
Of earth-enchanted eyes,  
Caught in the senseless strife,  
Baffled he fell; and now he lies  
Dumb in the night.

# *The Magpies*

*One for sorrow,  
Two for mirth—  
The magpies fly  
Across the sky;  
And, as she sees them passing by  
Beyond the far hill-brow,  
In the new desolation and the dearth  
Of shattered life she knows that now  
No omen may restore  
Hope to her widowed heart for evermore.*

# *Hareshaw Linn*

At length the din  
Of battle dulls in dying ears. . .  
And now his spirit hears  
Once more the well-remembered roar  
Of Hareshaw Linn—  
Of Hareshaw Linn at flood,  
In snowfed torrent dashing down  
From the high fells: and now the blood  
From his young body seems to pour  
And mingle with the gleaming brown  
Untrammelled waters that ere long shall be,  
Merged in the sweeping current of the Tyne,  
Borne on towards the bitter brine  
Of the oblivious sea.

# *Ashes*

He picks the bellows up and indolently  
Puffs the expiring fire  
Into reviving flame;  
And wishes that he might as easily  
Rouse with a breath  
His dead desire  
Of life, that crumbled instantly  
To ashes, when the message came  
Of his son's death.

# *The Woodpecker*

Waking at dawn within the ward, he hears  
The sharp staccato rattle  
Of a woodpecker on the hollow elm,  
Like a machine-gun's brattle:  
And, as that tapping fills his ears,  
He knows that nevermore  
May he escape the memories of the war.

# *Stars*

A moment since, the Winter sky  
Was a serenity of starry light:  
But now it roars with fury, as a flight  
Of bombers booms towards the sea  
And squadroned stars of red and green  
Fantastically fly,  
Ephemerally bright,  
Across the startled heavens—till, presently,  
The war-planes pass; and once again  
In majesty serene  
The eternal stars resume their ancient reign  
In the cold azure of untroubled night.

## *And Still the Thrush Sings on . . .*

And still the thrush sings on  
That sang an hour ere dawn,  
Before the messenger, with hasty feet  
Spilling the dews  
That glimmered on the lawn,  
Brought the dread news—  
The thrush sings on, to greet  
The day, newborn,  
The day that in a breath  
Brought her heart's death.

# *The Folly*

On a high knoll was built  
A picturesque sham ruin in old days  
By the first owner, who could little guess  
That even crasser foolishness  
Should blast his lordly mansion to a blaze,  
And that its pride should fall  
In more fantastic ruin, after all.

# *Dandelion Down*

She watches dandelion-down,  
Seed-laden, drifting through the air. . .  
And sees in agony acute  
Her son drop with his parachute  
Amid the barrage of a hostile town.

# *Toys*

With model tank and bomber-aeroplane  
The little boy plays in all innocence  
Of how mankind destroys  
All that makes life worth living, in insane  
Infatuation with such deadly toys.

# *In the End*

Throughout his days death seemed to be  
The one inveterate enemy;  
Yet, when life failed him in the end,  
He found in death a bosom-friend.

# *The Last Leave*

He nearly missed the train,  
As he returned from leave  
To go to sea again:

And, watching the cold rain,  
She, who is left to grieve,  
Murmurs in dull refrain

Again and yet again  
Murmurs from dawn to eve—  
“He nearly missed the train. . .”

# *The Canopy*

Billow on languorous billow, the water about the frail craft  
That, derelict, lazily drifted in the wash of the tropical sea  
Broke, spraying in irised brilliance, as idly it wallowed and swung,  
Over the motionless slumberers sprawled on the salt-lustred raft,  
While in the blue incandescence of a heaven that blazed without breath,  
Flashing on flickering pinions the shrill laughing herring-gulls hung  
Weaving and interweaving a wavering white canopy  
Above the nigh-foundering indolent waterlogged craft of death.

# *The House Martins*

Wing-weary and with failing strength  
After their stormy flight  
By day and night  
From Africa, the martins reach at length  
Their English home, where, under cottage-eaves,  
Year after year they built their nest of clay  
And reared their little brood  
Among thick clustering creeper-leaves,  
Only to find the site  
A fire-charred ashen grey  
Bomb-devastated solitude.

# *The Golden Mile*

As down the Golden Mile I strode  
Between the ranked laburnums, all the while  
My heart was with the men who'd walked that road  
And watched those fountains of rejoicing gold  
Tossing in sunlight of old April days:  
And wondered, now, as over parched  
Sun-blinded desert ways  
Day after day they marched,  
If still their hearts might hold  
Some grateful vision of the Golden Mile.

# *For This?*

Was it for this our love  
Brought him to birth,  
And toiled to feed his frame  
With the good fruits of earth?

Was it for this we charged  
His questing mind  
With all the quickening lore  
That poets have divined?

Was it for this we watched  
His spirit's fire  
Kindle to flame and soar  
In golden-winged desire?

For this—that he might yield  
His eager breath  
In desperate fight, and go  
Before us down to death?

# *The Broken Bridge*

The old bridge that for centuries  
With slender bow had spanned the glen,  
And whose smooth highroad served to ease  
The back and forward journeys of  
Far-faring and homecoming men  
Among the boulders of the stream  
A useless heap of rubble lies,  
Destroyed in one night, as the dream  
Of peaceful ways by which man hoped  
To fare one day to paradise.

## *In Pride of Youth . . .*

In pride of youth he stormed the ramped hillbrow,  
Valiant for victory on the embattled height:  
Yet now  
His body, that rejoiced to feel the sun  
Filling his veins with vigour, caught in death  
And forced to yield its quick exultant breath  
In that old half-forgotten fight,  
Is but a skeleton  
Clutching a rusty gun.

# *Rain*

Down pours the rain;  
And, as I hear it lashing at the pane,  
I almost pray  
That it may never cease  
Until it flood all lands, and every shore  
Be drowned in a new Deluge; and the old  
Diseased world be washed clean and sweet again  
Of human evil; and, in the clear and cold  
Light of the virgin day,  
The Ark of Righteousness shall rest at peace  
On Ararat once more.

# *The Last Chapter*

So quietly  
The book had opened, and the story  
Seemed but to promise a monotony  
Of ventureless tranquility,  
Laced here and there with comedy:  
And little did he guess that he,  
Before time's hand should lay him on the shelf,  
Should in the final chapter find himself  
Involved in a world-tragedy—  
That in the end his life should prove to be  
A tale of terror, not untouched of glory.

# *The Salmon*

Dazed by the thunder, dazzled by the glitter,  
He sees them leap the lasher of the weir;  
And muses how each year  
The salmon leave the ocean's salty surges  
In silver-shining schools  
And breast the waterfalls, to breed in quiet  
Of still freshwater pools—

Musing, he watches, longing for the season  
When men, too, weary of the battle-strife,  
Will give up death, for life;  
And quit the bitter seas of self-destruction,  
To seek again the ways  
Of peace and labour gladly in the quiet  
Of full and fruitful days.

# *The Triumph*

“That I should live to see such times” he said—  
“The world collapsing in barbarity!  
Well may we envy now the lucky dead  
Who in a semblance of security  
Lived out their lives and never knew the worst!”

Just then with flare and roar and crashing burst  
The battle in fresh fury overhead:  
And now he pondered “Ay, they never knew  
The bitter worst—yet, something else missed, too,  
Who drowsed, secure; and did not live to see  
The spirit’s triumph in extremity;  
’Mid stress of the last conflict flaming higher  
Even than destruction’s all-consuming fire!

# *The Heart That Quivered*

The heart that quivered at the touch of sorrow,  
Now under blow on blow  
Of tragedy no longer even winces,  
Numbed to quiescence by the weight of woe—

Numbed by the worldwide misery that burdens  
These black and bitter years—  
And yet the sudden lilt of children's laughter  
May quicken it to tears.

# *The Old Moon*

The old moon, haggard and cadaverous,  
Hangs in the iron vault of Polar sky  
That domes the snowy plain where corpses lie  
Frozen to passionless frigidity,  
Fallen enemy by fallen enemy,  
Who late,  
Locked in hot-blooded hate,  
Shattered the icy peace with furious  
Onslaught of mortal anger; till again,  
Their frenzy spent, the old moon rose, to see  
Immortal quiet reign  
Once more unchallenged on the Polar plain.

## *O Wind!*

Though I have always loved  
Your murmur through the leaves,  
Golden with quivering lights  
On Summer eves;  
And on black Winter nights  
Rejoiced to hear you roar  
Through threshing boughs, O Wind  
Take pity now on me,  
O Wind of Memory,  
And blow no more!

# *The Raven*

Stationed at the hill watching-post alone,  
Amid the slush of snows that slowly melt,  
He hears a raven, croaking on the stone  
That marks the site  
Of some half-legendary fight  
Betwixt long-perished tribes of Pict and Celt:  
And, though he knows  
The bird is only welcoming  
The coming of the Spring  
And the near passing of the Winter snows,  
Yet, now that war  
Threatens the dales and hills  
Of his beloved countryside once more,  
That raucous croaking fills  
His heart with cold foreboding and seems to be  
The very voice of all calamity.

# *The Backward Glance*

Pausing amid war's bloody business,  
He gives a hasty backward glance;  
And for a moment stands as in a trance,  
Staring into the old incredible years  
When only ordinary hopes and fears  
Troubled his usual happiness:  
And then once more  
He turns and desperately  
He strains with anxious eyes  
To peer into the future; but can see  
Nothing of what yet lies  
Beyond the fume and fury of the war:  
And yet that backward glancing has instilled  
His heart with hope old dreams may be fulfilled.

# *The New Washed Sheets*

The new-washed sheets hang in the sun,  
To virgin whiteness freshly won;  
And she who toiled to make them white  
Watches them flapping in the light  
And wishes she  
As easily  
Might wash the old world clean and bright.

# *As the First Blackbird Sang . . .*

As the first blackbird sang,  
Into the deep dark well  
Of his heart's wordless grief  
The clear notes fell  
One after one, and, echoing,  
Between the dank walls rang,  
Until his heart to brief  
Forgetfulness was stirred,  
And with the happy bird  
Began to sing.

# *England Aroused*

Serenely sails the swan in proud pretence  
Of bland indifference  
Towards her fluffy brood  
Of cheeping cygnets; yet, should foot intrude  
On the lake's marge, she bridles in defence;  
And even the fox is eager to be gone  
Before the icy fury of the swan—  
Plumes arched in anger, and far-darting bill  
Whipping and snapping on the snaky neck;  
And slashing pinions lashing to a froth  
The tranquil waters. . . .

So, in the lassitude  
Of armistice, it seemed that England still,  
Forgetful of her dreams, indifferently  
In foolish pride of cold placidity  
Brooded, till danger threatened all, when she  
Arose in swan-like wrath  
And plumed embattled majesty, to check  
The insolent menace of barbarity.

## *Till Death . . .*

“Till death. . .”—but it was life,  
Suddenly flaring into worldwide strife,  
That parted us: and now each lonely heart  
Wonders in separation whether  
It may be death that in the end shall bind us  
Eternally together?

# *The Change of Wind*

The rain-charged wind had shifted in the night,  
With instant icy breath transfixing all  
The drenched and dripping coppice; and in dawn-light  
It glittered like a frozen waterfall—

Pendent from saplings bowed and sheathed in glass,  
Long tapering lustres drooping over the brake  
Of spangled fern and brittle-bladed grass  
And crystallised bramble bordering the lake—

Transmuting the dark season's dank distress  
That long had held us in despondency,  
Fevered and fretful, to a quietness  
Of cold pellucid immobility

Forecasting to hearts conflict-torn and tossed  
The ultimate dark hour that brings surcease,  
When, at a change of wind, perpetual frost  
Shall seal earth's trouble in unpassioned peace.

## *Winter Wheat*

Between the new-turned tilth's rich gleaming brown  
And the bleached tussocks of the open down  
Glitters an emerald slope of Winter wheat—  
The low November sunlight scintillating  
On each dew-sprinkled blade of living green—  
Even in the old year's rout, betokening  
That earth knows no defeat;  
That still from seed unseen  
Urge of renewal quickens unabating  
With the fresh promise of resurgent Spring.

# *The News*

“Here is the news” proclaims the calm announcer:  
Yet he might spare his breath;  
For it is news no longer, this old story,  
This day-by-day reiterated tragedy  
Of the world’s endless agony  
And young men’s lives annihilated by  
Indifferent, indiscriminating death.

## *The Lull*

The sea-green beanfield tosses with the breeze  
A scarlet foam of poppies in the sun;  
And now the soldier, momentarily at ease  
Beside his A.A. gun,  
Recalls the surf of the Atlantic seas  
That sweep the skerries of the Hebrides;  
And in his heart he longs to be  
Far from war-ravaged Normandy,  
In the old life where he need only brave  
Perils of wind and wave.

# *The Victors*

Ploughing the waste, we turn up from the clay  
The bones of warriors in some old affray  
Fallen: but, what they fought for in their day,  
Or who the victors were, now none can say.

# *No Room in the Inn*

No room in the inn this starless Christmas night  
For fugitives from Herod's soldiery  
Who ruthlessly  
Slaughter the innocents in every land—  
No room, no shelter in the inn  
Whose rent walls roofless stand  
Amid the havoc and the din,  
Blasted and charred; while, flight on flight,  
Hell's squadrons sweep the sky,  
Hurling destruction through the air  
And scattering  
Cascades of devastating fire—  
No room, no shelter anywhere  
For the homeless Mother in her travailing,  
And for her Son no welcoming,  
Not even from the kindly beasts, who lie,  
Carcases, smouldering  
Within the burnt-out byre!

# *The Happy Flight*

A multitude of starlings fly  
Above me, flecking the blue sky  
As far as eye can see  
With dark swift-shuttled patternings  
Of whirring and exultant wings:  
And all the crystal morning rings  
With their wild whistling glee.

With sudden soft explosive sound  
They rose as one bird from the ground  
Where in the new-turned earth  
They followed the loam-cleaving share,  
Moved by one impulse to declare  
Their life's delight and fill the air  
With frenzy of shrill mirth.

And I, who plodded slowly by,  
Brooding on war's long agony,  
Felt my heart flutter, too,  
With instant urge to scale the height  
Of heaven with them in happy flight  
And revel in the glittering light  
Of Winter's windy blue.

# *Bethlehem*

Even though the fates condemn  
Man's heart to Calvary,  
Still may his spirit face unflinchingly  
The final agony,  
Recalling on the cross his Bethlehem.

# *Like Cage Bred Birds Released*

Like cage-bred birds released by accident  
Into the unknown hazards of the night,  
Our long peace-sheltered spirits in affright  
Fluttered in darkness laced with livid light  
When the world shattered in tempestuous strife,  
And our home-loving hearts by panic rent  
Longed to resume the old secure sweet life  
Behind the accustomed bars:  
Yet, in the tempest tossed, our wings at length  
Have gained fresh strength  
To ride the terrors of the unknown skies,  
And through torn thunderclouds our eyes  
Have kindled to new vision at the sight  
Of unfamiliar stars.

# *Hill Waters*

As the skeins of sleep unravel  
And, from slumber slowly waking,  
Light in golden glints is breaking  
Through his mind, so long benighted,  
Now he hears with heart delighted  
Crystal streams that swiftly travel  
Over shoals of amber gravel—

Crystal streams, in cold airs springing  
From snow-mantled mountain-shoulders  
That have tumbled over boulders  
Down steep braes of bent and heather,  
In celestial April weather  
With their amber light and singing  
New life to his spirit bringing:

And his heart, that, in the slaughter  
Felt death's pang, once more rejoices  
As again he hears hill-voices—  
He, who even now lay dying,  
Waked in paradise, and lying,  
Far beyond the field of slaughter,  
By the streams of living water.



# *TRANSCRIBER NOTES*

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

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

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