



AUTUMN
MIDNIGHT

BY FRANCES CORNFORD



THE POETRY BOOKSHOP
PRICE TWO SHILLINGS & SIXPENCE

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BY
FRANCES CORNFORD



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AUTUMN MIDNIGHT



Why is it grown so suddenly cold at night?
The handles of the chest-of-drawers are bright
And round, and hard, and like an usurer's eyes—
Perhaps it is the moon's cold from the skies?
—I wish I had not wakened thus alone—
I think she pours a coldness of her own
On every loved leaf of the garden trees,
So that they never can recover. These
And ruined starry daisies all will say:

“Mother of the garden, now we go away,
Now we have known the cold of the moon that kills:
And though tomorrow all the garden fills
With golden light until the chill sun's set,
Though for an hour the midges minuet,
Though for an hour we glisten in the sun,
Our day, our day is done.”

.....

I'll sleep again in this warm cave of bed;
Tomorrow all the flowers will be dead.

BETTER



he air is still gray,
The buds are still cold;
The sun sets early
In a pool of dazzly gold.

But my Mamma got up to day and fastened on her gown,
And on the sheltered terraces went walking up and down.

Violets blue, violets white,
We found one of each;

She touched with her fingers
The buds on the peach.

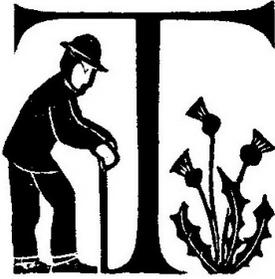
A cold-stalked snow-drop I put into her hand,
And we were both more glad than we could say, or understand.

ON THE ROADS



battered, burly woman selling lace
Tramps with a new-born baby on her breast.
Its little, helpless, angry, care-stained face
Peeps from her grimed plaid shawl, as from a nest.

ON THE DUNES



he thistles on the sandy flats
Are courtiers with crimson hats;
The ragworts growing tall and straight
Are emperors who stand in state,
And march about most proud and bold
In crowns of fairy-story gold.
The people passing home at night

Rejoice to see the shining sight;
They quite forget the sands and sea
Which are as grey as grey can be,
Nor ever heed the gulls who cry
Like peevish children in the sky.

THE NEW-BORN BABY'S SONG

When I was twenty inches long,
I could not hear the thrushes' song;
The radiance of morning skies
Was most displeasing to my eyes.

For loving looks, caressing words,
I cared no more than sun or birds;
But I could bite my mother's breast,
And that made up for all the rest.



THE COUNTRY BEDROOM



My room's a square and candle-lighted boat,
In the surrounding depths of night afloat.
My windows are the portholes, and the seas
The sound of rain on the dark apple-trees.

Seamster-like beneath, an old horse blows
A snort of darkness from his sleeping nose,
Below, among drowned daisies. Far off, hark!
Far off one owl amidst the waves of dark.

A COUNTRY LEGACY



old-headed rose, where bees do sup,
And vetch, and varnished buttercup,
And hollow-stalked hemlock—all are up.

Blue speedwell lovely as the dew,
And old brown-headed plantains too—
Before I knew myself these friends I knew.

O child to be, though my life ends
And change or chance your spirit rends,
With the same faces, these will be your friends.

THE HILLS



ut of the complicated house, come I
To walk beneath the sky.
Here mud and stones and turf, here everything
Is mutely comforting.
Now hung upon the twigs and thorns appear
A host of lovely rain-drops cold and clear.
And on the bank

Or deep in brambly hedges dank
The small birds nip about, and say:
“Brothers, the Spring is not so far away!”
The hills like mother-giantesses old
Lie in the cold.
And with a complete patience, let
The cows come cropping on their bosoms wet,
And even tolerate that such as I
Should wander by
With paltry leathern heel which cannot harm
Their bodies calm;
And, with a heart they cannot know, to bless
The enormous power of their peacefulness.

THE PRINCESS AND THE GYPSIES



s I looked out one May morning
I saw the tree-tops green;
I said: "My crown I will lay down
And live no more a queen."

Then I tripped down my golden steps
Dressed in my silken gown,

And when I stood in the open wood
I met some gypsies brown.

"O gentle, gentle gypsies
That roam the wide world through,
Because I hate my crown and state,
O let me come with you!

"My councillors are old and gray
And sit in narrow chairs,
But you can hear the birds sing clear
And your hearts are as light as theirs."

"If you would come along with us
Then you must count the cost,
For though in Spring the sweet birds sing,
In Winter comes the frost.

"Your ladies serve you all the day
With courtesy and care,
Your fine-shod feet they tread so neat
But a gypsy's feet go bare.

"You wash in water running warm
Through basins all of gold;
The streams where we roam have silvery foam,

But the streams, the streams are cold.

“And barley bread is bitter to taste,
 Whilst sugary cakes they please.
Which will you choose, O which will you choose,
 Which will you choose of these?”

“For if you choose the mountain streams
 And barley bread to eat,
Your heart will be free as the birds in the tree
 But the stones will cut your feet.

“The mud will spoil your silken gown
 And stain your insteps high,
The dogs in the farm will wish you harm
 And bark as you go by.

“And though your heart grow deep and gay
 And your heart grow wise and rich,
The cold will make your bones to ache
 And you will die in a ditch.”

“O gentle, gentle gypsies
 That roam the wide world through,
Although I praise your wandering ways
 I dare not come with you.”

I hung about their fingers brown
 My ruby rings and chain,
And with my head as heavy as lead
 I turned me back again.

As I went up the palace steps
 I heard the gypsies laugh;
The birds of Spring so sweet did sing,
 My heart it broke in half.

SUSAN TO DIANA
A VILLANELLE



our youth is like a water-wetted stone,
A pebble by the living sea made rare,
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

Behold it flushed like flowers newly-blown,
Miraculously fresh beyond compare—
Your youth is like a water-wetted stone.

For when the triumphing tide recedes, alone
The stone will stay, and shine no longer there
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

But lie and dry as joyless as a bone,
Because the sorceress sea has gone elsewhere.
Your youth is like a water-wetted stone.

Then all your lovers will be children, shown
Their treasure only transitory-fair,
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

Remember this before your hour is flown;
O you, who are so glorious, beware!
Your youth is like a water-wetted stone,
Bright with a beauty that is not its own.

THE OLD NURSE



I am an old woman, comfortable, calm and wise
Often I see the spirits of the dead with my own eyes.
They come into my house. I am no more afraid
Than of the coal-scuttle or my breakfast newly laid.
One night over the fields the wind blew wild,
And I thought I heard in it the ravaging voice of a child.

Coldly and wild it swept over the cold lands,
Like the voice of a child who suddenly misses those only hands
That understood to make him safe, usual, and warm.
And it cried and cried, and I knew it was not the voice of the storm.

I tried to fall asleep; but how could I sleep,
And hear that little desperate thing continually weep?

Then to the grown spirits imploringly I said:
“Friends, give to me that new spirit who is lately dead,
Who cannot enter your strange world of light
Because he misses the hands of his mother this first night,
And she, poor soul, lies weeping tear on tear
And cannot pierce the night with love. But I hear.

Give me her wandering child!” Then, as I lay in bed,
Against my breast I felt a small and blunt-nosed head,
And a sob-quivering body slowly growing calm
And toes like round cold buds that warmed inside my palm.

Then in the warmth and hush, and in the darkness deep,
That little comforted spirit sighed and fell asleep,
And I slept too, most satisfied, until
I woke and found the morrow’s light, everywhere cold and still.

But out of my white bed where morning shone
Away from my enclosing arms the little spirit was gone.

Ungrievingly I knew, he was no more afraid,
But, in the new world’s light, with new toys played.



NO IMMORTALITY



Can it be possible, when we grow old
And Time destroys us, that the image of you,
Who brought to all, serenely, like a gift,
The eternal beauty of youth—as though you had lain,
A moment since, in English grass by the river,
Thinking and dreaming under the fresh sky
When May was in the hedges—can it be
This unique image of you, yourself, your smile,

(Which kept a secret sweetness, like a child's,
Though you might be most sad), your frowning eyes,
Must, when we die, in the vast air of Time
Be swallowed? Nothing, not a ghost, remain
To the revolving, hard, enamelled world
(For ever full of fears and births and deaths
And busyness) of all you were?

Perhaps

A thousand years ago some Greek boy died,
So lovely-bodied, so adored, so young.
Like us they wept, and treasured little things,
And laughed with tears, remembering his laughter,
And there was friendship in the very sound
Of his forgotten name to them. But now,
Now we know nothing; nothing is richer now
Because of all he was.

O you we have loved,

Can it be so with you? and, if it can,
How futile, how absurd the life of man!

HOPE



here never will be peace till Hope is dead,"

A torn Heart said.

"Die, Hope, and plead no more. I cannot bear,

Each time you fall defeated, this despair."

But Hope replied: "Without me none can live.

I must creep back to you, torn Heart, forgive!

I must creep back, and sleep, and then recover

And you, O Heart, torn Heart, shall be my lover."



OUT OF DOORS



lie down O woman, let the September sun
Pour with huge bounty on your bleached skin,
The little, last, remaining spiders run
From the dry leaves about your fingers thin.

Heed not, O Sun, her cares or her desires;
Renew her body, let her spirit pass
Into the spirit of the autumn fires,
Far noises, mountains, and the stalks of grass.

AT NIGHT

My brain is like the ravaged shores—the sand
Torn cruelly by footsteps from the land.
O hushing waves; O profound sea of sleep,
Send your curved ripples surely-lapping. Creep,
Pour on the scarrèd surface of my brain;
With your vast pity, wash it smooth again.

RHYME FOR A PHONETICIAN

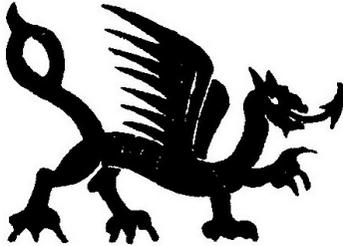
B

rave English language, you are strong as trees,
Yet intricate and stately—Thus one sees
Through branches clear-embroidered stars.

You please

Our sense as damask roses on the breeze,
And barns that smell of hay, and bread and cheese.
Rustic yet Roman—yours are dignities
Sonorous as the sea's sound. On my knees
I would give thanks for all your words. Yet these
—Our legacy and our delight—he'd squeeze

And nip and dock and drill, to write with ease
Comershul memoz faw the Pawchoogeese.



THE ALLEGORICAL DREAM



dreamt Death called my friend. And I
Went too—for both of us must die.

But neither of us dared alone
To face him sitting on his throne;

And so we called, both I and he,
On our Good Deeds for company.

I took a trumpet and a drum,
And proudly summoned mine to come.

I thought they could not hear at first;
I beat my drum until it burst,

I blew my trumpet—till at last
From that walled city of the past,

(Where in the inmost citadel
In luxury I let them dwell)

A little postern was undone
And out they struggled, one by one.

In thin procession on they came
They all seemed weak and mostly lame,

Their faces, smug and strained and small,
They turned to me. I knew them all.

Then spoke my comrade, haltingly:
“If you exist—then come to me.”

And suddenly, as swift as flame,
A host of dancing children came,

And like the waves, without an end
They danced and leapt about my friend.

He stared. He said: "For Heaven's sake,
Who are you? Here is some mistake."

But like the sea upon the shores
They thundered: "Father, we are yours!"

And even then a trumpet spoke:
"Come both before your Judge!"

—I woke.

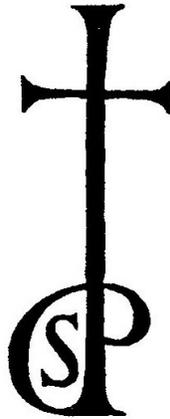
AUTHOR'S NOTE



thank the editors of the following papers for permission to reprint certain poems: *Country Life*, *The New Leader*, *The London Mercury*, *The Highway*. Also I thank Mr. Eric Gill for decorating these pages with wood engravings.
F.C.

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Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

The woodcut with *To J. & G.R. from F.C & E.G.* on the title page stands for *To Jacques & Gwen Raverat from Frances Cornford & Eric Gill.*

[The end of *Autumn Midnight* by Frances Cornford]