

★ ★ ★ ★ THE ISLAND ★ ★ ★ ★



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# THE ISLAND

THE WORKS OF  
FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

UNDERGROWTH  
(with E. Brett Young)  
DEEP SEA  
THE DARK TOWER  
IRON AGE  
THE CRESCENT MOON  
THE YOUNG PHYSICIAN  
THE TRAGIC BRIDE  
THE BLACK DIAMOND  
THE RED KNIGHT  
PILGRIM'S REST  
WOODSMOKE  
COLD HARBOUR  
SEA HORSES  
PORTRAIT OF CLARE  
MY BROTHER JONATHAN  
BLACK ROSES  
JIM REDLAKE  
MR. AND MRS. PENNINGTON  
THE HOUSE UNDER THE WATER  
THIS LITTLE WORLD  
WHITE LADIES  
FAR FOREST  
THEY SEEK A COUNTRY  
DR. BRADLEY REMEMBERS  
THE CITY OF GOLD  
MR. LUCTON'S FREEDOM  
A MAN ABOUT THE HOUSE  
THE ISLAND  
FIVE DEGREES SOUTH  
POEMS: 1914-1918  
MARCHING ON TANGA  
ROBERT BRIDGES  
PORTRAIT OF A VILLAGE  
IN SOUTH AFRICA

# THE ISLAND

BY

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

*Vouchsafe to those that have not read the story,  
That I may prompt them; and of such as have,  
I humbly pray them to admit the excuse  
Of time, of numbers, and due course of things  
Which cannot in their huge and proper life  
Be here presented . . .*

SHAKESPEARE. HENRY V.



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FOR

JESSICA

1904—1944

Dearest, in all my life I have known but two  
Unwavering loves: for England, and for you:  
What then more just than that this tribute paid  
To one should at the other's feet be laid?





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FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

M.B., CH.B., D.LITT.,

Physician, Poet, Novelist,  
1884-1954

His ashes were interred within the Cathedral of Worcester on  
3RD JULY, 1954

“And when they asked him where he would lie, he bethought him  
Of our church of St. Mary at Worcester, saying: ‘*I commend  
My body and soul to God and to Saint Wulstan.*’  
So here we buried him. . . .”

—*The Island.*

During the Service the following tribute was made  
to the author and his achievement  
by Professor Humphrey Humphreys  
O.B.E., M.C., T.D., LL.D., etc.  
Formerly Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham

## A TRIBUTE

“I have been asked,” said Professor Humphrey Humphreys, “to pay a tribute to Francis Brett Young on this occasion as one of his oldest friends. Although we were both Worcestershire born and bred, we first met as medical students fifty years ago and were drawn together by our common tastes and our passion for this pastoral heart of England, whose pulse we had both felt beating so strongly in our formative years. This is not the place to recall those far-away student days though naturally many of their incidents crowd my memory—rural rides and walks, widely ranging talks such as young men love, and—perhaps most vividly remembered of all—musical evenings. For though Francis had a strong urge to artistic creation of several kinds, music was his first medium—composing accompaniments to songs. It was a Worcestershire poet, A. E. Housman, who first attracted him in this way, and his settings of verses from ‘The Shropshire Lad’ still seem to me most happily married to the words. Others that he wrote for some poetry of Robert Bridges later found a publisher: but he had had no real musical training, and without training success in any art is difficult to achieve. His passion for music was lifelong, and he had a special fondness for Elgar, another Worcestershire artist, whose ‘Nimrod’ we have just heard: he would recall hearing the first performance of the ‘Dream of Gerontius’ in this cathedral.

“Those student days provided material for one of his earliest novels *The Young Physician*, and brief experience as a locum tenens in the Black Country coupled with memories of the parental practice—his father was a doctor in this county—later flowered in *My Brother Jonathan* and *Dr. Bradley Remembers*. As soon as possible after qualifying he married and lived happily ever after. For the first chapter in the new story he acquired a not too busy practice at Brixham in South Devon with the deliberate intention of devoting as much time as possible to writing. Now success in any art requires first original talent, next its improvement by training and practice, finally, of course, something which the artist wishes to express in the particular medium of his choice. Francis was richly gifted with the first but a number of years passed before his professional duties gave him enough leisure to improve it to a standard that satisfied a publisher. In poetry, where inspiration counts for more and practice for less, success came earlier and his verses appeared regularly in the later volumes of ‘Georgian Poetry’ that were published during, and just after the 1914-18 war. Indeed it was this war

that really launched him on his new career. Joining the R.A.M.C. he was posted to East Africa and served as medical officer to a Rhodesian regiment under General Smuts. This experience produced *Marching on Tanga*, generally acclaimed by the critics as a war narrative of the highest class; a novel with a local setting; a book of verse; *Five Degrees South*; and friendships in Rhodesia and South Africa which resulted in visits there during the post-war years; also a number of novels with a South African background. By the end of the war he felt confident he could earn a modest living as a writer, and with the encouragement of his wife, to whose self-sacrifice, devotion and care he owed much of his success, he decided to migrate to Italy and took a villa on the island of Capri. He was attracted by the climate, since his health, never robust, had suffered from his campaign in the tropics and he no longer felt equal to the physical strain of medical practice. He felt drawn too by the prospective company of brother artists, Compton Mackenzie, D. H. Lawrence, Axel Munthe and others. In this stimulating atmosphere he produced a regular series of novels so successful that by 1930 he was prosperous enough to acquire a *pied-à-terre* in England, first by Esthwaite Water in Westmorland and later at Craycombe House in his native Worcestershire. There followed some of the happiest years of an extremely happy life. He wrote regularly and diligently, took an interest in county cricket, attended the musical festivals in this cathedral and generally played a part in the life of the county. Then came the Second World War. Too old for service he devoted himself to writing his epic of English History published under the title of *The Island*. It was dedicated to his wife in words which all his friends recognised as profoundly true:

‘Dearest, in all my life I have known but two  
Unwavering loves: for England and for you.’

The effort of writing this long sequence of poems, together with six war years in England, produced a serious deterioration in his health, and as soon as the war was over he migrated permanently to South Africa, though he paid occasional brief visits to this country. On one of these he received the Honorary Degree of D.Litt. from his old University. His health slowly failed but he bore this with courage and cheerfulness sustained by his characteristic *joie de vivre*, and by the tributes he constantly received expressing the pleasure his writings gave to unnumbered fellow countrymen and to a large reading public in America.

“Every artist, whatever his medium, expresses primarily his own experiences, personal or imaginary, and Francis Brett Young’s picture of life was coloured from first to last by his native county, which he loved so well.

We started this Service singing some verses by Milton. I will conclude by quoting Milton again:”

‘Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail,  
Or knock the breast . . . nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.’ ”

# I

## INVOCATION

To you, dear brethren of the Seven Seas  
And the Five Continents, strong progeny  
Of one earth-girdling brood—to you, whose Hopes,  
Wills, Visions, Aspirations, are moved as ours  
By living memory or the more profound  
Surge of the unremembered; you, in whose ears  
Words of a common stem and heritage  
Waken the self-same echoes; you, from whose lips  
High-syllabled names of legendary scenes  
Fall neither more beloved nor less familiar  
Than those of shires, cities or villages,  
That gave your forbears birth and burial—  
To you, from her wave-battered, war-swept shore  
The Muse of Britain calls.

First unto you,  
Wielders of axe and plough, who in midmost West  
Patiently watch your wheat-sown prairie quicken  
With fledgeling green, warm to red wealth of harvest  
(Before your phœnix maple flames in death),  
Then whiten with the powdery incandescence  
Of Arctic snowlights, till, at a milder waft,  
Their frozen sap shatters the living trees  
In loud reverberation, and ice-locked lumber,  
Loosened from glassy fetters, yields to the undertow  
Of snow-fed cataracts falling  
To lakes that swim like seas, and torrents lashed  
By shoals of spring-run salmon—till, once again,  
The axe rings in the sodden woods, the mould  
Turns from your cleaving share in corduroy  
Of tawny velvet, and Autumn's ivory grain  
Once more is drilled or scattered on the fallows.  
Next you, whom that old sorceress Africa  
Bewitched with her hot potions of welling light  
And airs pellucid: you, twixt veld and sky,

Long-stirrured, falcon-eyed, riding for ever Northward  
From pinnacled dolomite of stark Drakensberg  
Trembling against the inviolable blue  
To where Zambesi's smoke  
Rolls from his thunderous chasm: you, that in galleries  
Torrid with neighbourhood of Earth's radiant core  
Blast grains of gold from niggard quartz to slake  
The greed of cities; you that, saddle-propped  
Beneath your trinket cross and old Magellan's  
Star-cloudy galaxies, hear in the breathless night  
The whine of fever's wings; the leafy rustle  
Of stealthy-treading paws, or grosser wallowings  
Of monsters that once ruled the wild, but now  
Quail at the scent of man . . .  
Then you, my brothers,  
Who, ceiled by selfsame stars, but in a clime  
Less terrible for aught beside its silence,  
Deep in smooth-pillared eucalyptus, hear  
The brittle chatter of bark, like cobra-casts  
Sloughed from the living tree;  
Or startled scream of halcyon parakeets  
Splashing the blue-green twilight—you who, poised  
Between parched earth and salamander sky,  
Range the dun Austral sheepwalks, choked with dust  
Of myriad-pattering flocks and the hot reek  
Of burdened fleeces; you who, more venturous  
Through thickset tropical tangles penetrate  
The trackless Never-Never Land, or Northward  
By Carpentaria and the Coral Sea,  
Through hyaline glooms  
Watch the sleek Philipino grope for pearls:  
You, harlequin crowds,  
Who, on loud ocean-beaches, lazily  
View the Pacific gather in indigo deeps  
His cumulative surges, where, rank on rank,  
His shuddering rollers break, plunge, pound, and seethe  
Over the hissing sands to kiss your feet  
With warm, sun-dazzled fringes of faint foam . . .  
You, Eastward of the stormy Tasman housed,  
Youngest in heart and blood,  
Most distant yet most near;



Islanders, like ourselves, braced by the breath  
Blown from another Pole—who hear, as we,  
Dawn-song of lark and ousel and homely rooks;  
Who, from your ferny mountain corries, see  
The red stag toss his antlers, and far beneath,  
Sheep-dappled downs and comfortable farms  
Where, when the South whitens your hills with snow,  
And timber-fires burn bright,  
The old songs are sung, the old tales re-told . . .  
To you, more lonely,  
Who, on blanched coral beaches, where man's blood  
Grows thin with tropic languors, from Antilles  
To hot Malacca, see the identical fringe  
Of leaning palm-fronds seaward, landward, sway  
On tides of tepid air diurnally  
Ebbing and flowing; you, who by steamy estuaries  
Of mud and mangrove gloomed with melancholy  
Thickets that neither Spring nor Autumn know,  
Swelter and languish; you who in jungle-clearings  
Watch viscous rubber from the wounded bark  
Drip and congeal;  
You, who on orient uplands, holly-green  
With kempt plantation, raise flinching lids to meet  
The dazzle of heaped Himalaya's glaciers  
Taunting dry lips; you, who in shuttered chambers  
Above the babel of murmurous bazaars,  
Lulled by the lazy punkah and the shuffle  
Of bare or sandalled feet, must chain your wits  
To tallies, files and ledgers, checking bales  
Of musky merchandise—yet often pause,  
Pen in mid-air, closing your eyes to see  
The king-cup watermeadows and dewy lawns  
Hushed in bird-haunted twilight . . .  
You, no less,  
Whom a crazed king and his crass minister  
With feeble mercenary arms provoked  
Affronted and estranged (but in a struggle  
Less bitter than the later feud that reft  
Your brotherhood) and thereby sealed those freedoms  
Of thought and speech ungrudged and unafraid  
Which are our common pride in kinship deeper

Than that of blood or tongue—whose eager brains  
And tireless thews have wrested from the soil  
Of an unpeopled continent such wealth  
And power as never Empire yet on earth  
Has known, casting the mantle of your might  
In three short centuries from the frozen shores  
Of Massachusetts and the pinnacles  
Of many-towered Manhattan to far sands  
Where the Pacific thunders—and from the ice  
Of our unguarded frontiers to the warm seas  
Where New Orleans swelters and the silt  
Of Mississippi clouds the steamy gulf  
Of Mexico—you, whose most noble spirit,  
Re-minting the rough ore of Runnymede  
At bloody Gettysburg, stamped on it the shape  
Of a new currency that rings as bright  
In our ears as in yours, for ever honoured  
By them that stand for liberty and prize  
The rights of the defenceless . . .

Unto you all,

Now, in this awful hour, when earth's foundations  
Quaver as when, long since, her cooling crust  
Wrinkled in slow convulsions, overwhelming  
Oceans and lands—now, when the patient flesh  
Of frail, brief-sojourning man sustains anew  
Fate's most barbaric insults, let us remember  
How that our heritage was ever rooted  
In stress and turmoil—nay, how the very soil  
We cherish, our sovereign isle, was born of tumult:  
Vexed by titanic forces, blasted, riven,  
Torn from her mother-continent, then moulded  
By mortal drift of long-forgotten seas;  
Her basalt core by frost and torrent fretted,  
Her mountains etched with ice.

Let us remember

What fierce and gentle strains war in our blood,  
Colour our eyes and hair; the innumerable richness  
Of entropy that gives our chequered race  
Its greatness. For Britain is not one, but many:  
She is Brython and Saxon and Norse; she is Brennus, twin son  
Of the Gaul Dunwallon, who cast

His Celtic sword in the ransom-balance of Rome:  
She is Shakespeare and Burns, Jane Austen and Jonathan Swift;  
John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, Pitt and Washington;  
Gloriana, and Florence Nightingale—and Nell Gwynn.  
She is rude Stonehenge and ageless Avebury no less  
Than Hadrian's rampart and Durham's Norman Keep;  
Paul's guardian dome and Lincoln's aery Gothic.  
Hers are the Pennine scarps; the stormy summits  
Of Grampian and Cader Idris and helmed Blencathra;  
Smooth Sussex downs, dappled with shine and cloud;  
The patient central ploughlands; the cherry-blossom  
Of Teme and Medway. Hers are the silent rivers  
And singing streams we love: strong-flowing Severn,  
Spey's snow-fed torrent; Test's pellucid slides  
And emerald-weeded stickles; those dimpling rivulets  
That, born of Cotswold, feed the lordly flood  
Of many-masted Thames. All these are hers;  
Yet the core of her coasts is granite; the salt in her blood  
Is drawn from no mediterranean puddle, foul  
With the ordure and deliquescence of dead dynasties,  
But from ocean's running surges, the fury that beats  
On iron-bound cliffs from Cornwall to Cape Wrath,  
Rimed with Atlantic spray: the seas that sever:  
The seas that make us one! Come then, my brothers,  
Hear, and behold!

## II

### PANORAMA AND CHANTS OF THE AGES

*From an exalted station upon the confines of stellar space, the terrestrial globe is seen. The view-point is sufficiently low for certain general features of the planet's surface to be vaguely discernible; yet so high that the curved outline of the Northern Hemisphere, immediately beneath our eyes, can be marked as it rolls over, within its enveloping atmosphere, against the background of space, through which it is travelling, and in which it revolves. The turning of the globe becomes appreciable not so much through any details in the variation of its surface (which indeed are but dimly seen) as through the manner in which it appears to heave its bulk out of darkness, and, as day succeeds night, into sunlight which suddenly quenches those volcanic coruscations that, like the glow from the flank of a smouldering pit-mound, or sparkles of ignited carbon amid the soot of a fire-back, break out in a series of quick pin-points and serpentine lines of flame. From this contemplation the voice of the First Age summons us.*

Come then, and from this breathless height,  
Where, through the silent stratosphere  
Dead planets blaze with borrowed light  
And live suns sparkle doubly clear;  
Where the cold moon, but lately torn  
From her parent's riven sides,  
Circling, captive and forlorn,  
Drags at the lava-tides;  
Where, in an incandescent dust,  
Meteorites, like Lucifer  
Falling, burst their iron hearts,  
Sputter, and disappear:  
See the lumbering Earth upthrust  
Out of darkness into day  
One segment of her cooling crust,  
Gleam for a while, then roll away  
From out the creeping sickle of light,  
To sink beneath night's blinding veils,  
Flecked with spurts of flame and bright

With red serpiginous trails;  
Where, piercing Earth's integuments,  
The flux of molten magma spills  
Through fissures and red-throated vents  
Of domed volcanic hills:  
Till seas go up in plumes of steam,  
Threshed by the fiery flail  
Of spent lapilli, and ocean-beds  
Lie choked in pumice hail;  
Till new-formed plains are rent again  
By fiercer shocks and quakes,  
And sands are strewed with lava spewed  
From out the heaving lakes;  
Till the last cooling crater spends  
Its last Titanic ire,  
And a cold quietude descends  
On the First Age of Fire!

*As the tempestuous chant of the Archæan Age dies away, the Earth is seen to be wrapped in vapours condensed from her seas during these phlegmæan convulsions: a shroud of dangling whiteness defines and magnifies the invisible sphere. By degrees, the mist thins and dissipates, and through its vestiges, faintly at first, the calmer chant of the Second Age is heard.*

No more, no more, tormented planet  
Suffer birth-pangs such as these!  
Earth's cold heart shrinks; her limbs of granite  
Sprawl to embrace the Cambrian Seas.  
Bemused she sleeps; if she be shaken  
'Tis by the swell of earth-storms spent  
That heave her bulk but cannot waken  
The new Atlantic continent.  
No sound her slumber breaks; naught changes  
Her form but fretting of the tides,  
Or polar winds that scour the ranges  
With grits from their dead crater-sides.  
Lifeless the lands, and deathlike-seeming  
The mask of ocean; yet beneath  
That crushing weight of water teeming,  
A myriad lives grapple with death:

Dreamy Medusa trails her springes  
For floating prey, and Trilobite  
Gropes eyeless through the coral fringes  
Blanched by the deep sea's timeless night;  
And carrion of that carnage, drifting  
With land-born debris swept from shore,  
Death's silt, perpetually sifting,  
Settles in slime on the sea-floor,  
A new, dim continent devising—  
Till, a chained monster, ill at ease,  
Earth burst her granite bonds uprising,  
And shook the oceans from her knees;  
Till, mountain-high, the waters, helmed  
With emerald spindrift, surged and tossed;  
And, in white fury overwhelmed,  
Atlantis foundered and was lost . . .  
Was lost, for ever lost . . . And yet,  
See, where the patient corals built  
Their galleries, a domed island set  
On slimes of powdered shell and silt.  
That dome (whose brittle matrix shrank  
To bone of Malvern, yet to be,)  
Loomed for an age; then slowly sank  
In a tumultuous sea  
That seethed and simmered as when schools  
Of whales in polar waters sport,  
Or grey amphibians, in the pools  
Of green Limpopo wallowing, snort—  
Heaving their leaden sides to shake  
The river from their streaming flanks,  
And, sounding, spread a wave to wake  
The saurians basking on her banks.  
So, from that sea, emergent shapes  
Of mountain sent a great wave forth  
That lashed the Hebridean capes  
And woke the craters of the North  
To frenzies of a second birth  
In sheeted flame amid the roar  
Of waters. And bewildered Earth  
Is lost to sight once more.  
Birth and Destruction . . . So they run;

Yet each is granted little room:  
The new theme, tenderly begun,  
Fades, silenced by the drums of doom;  
Buds, cheated of their blossoming,  
Fall to feed the common mould;  
And ever new creations spring  
From the dust of the old.  
So, recking neither toil nor waste,  
Creative Earth's indifferent eye  
Sees each new chronicle erased  
Before the ink is dry—  
As when some eager poet, swayed  
By exaltations of fierce thought,  
Pores on the music he has made  
And knows it for a thing of nought,  
Then, challenged by that mocking gage,  
Crumples the paper, lifts his pen,  
And pondering on the vacant page  
Fashions his faulty dream again.

*In this cataclysmic scene we have witnessed nothing less than the birth-pangs of Europe. Again and again the amphibian ranges lift their whale-backs and subside; until, at last, land and sea appear to have reached a state of equilibrium, and the monsters emerge as a series of mountain chains of an Alpine magnificence—resembling the fingers of a prone hand, in the intervals between which lie a number of diagonal firths and elongated lakes of fresh or brackish water: the obverse, as it were, of the Caledonian orograph. But though the ranges gather clouds from the sea, and torrents, born of these, eat into their flanks with deep erosions, draining into the Devonian lakes and friths, at their feet lie thirsty steppes swept by pillars of dust and veiled in sandstorms—the earth caked and cracked with heat, or pitted with infrequent rain; and though the bases on which this continent rests may seem to be built for eternity, the forces of subsidence and destruction are already at work; and lo, before the volcanic fires have flickered out, this new continent collapses—volcanoes and peaks, firths, lakes and inland seas commingled in what is neither wholly sea nor land: a vast swamp of black pools and crevasses, and one immense delta, where conterminous rivers, wider than Mississippi or Amazon, discharge the silt and debris of that destruction. Through warm, moisture-laden air, the chant of the Third Age is heard.*

Yet mark how from this waste of fire and mud  
Steaming and seething with mephitic gases  
That break in bubbles from its black morasses,  
Wells, with incontinent haste, the living flood  
Of high, impetuous growth: how root with root,  
In subterranean struggle for survival,  
Wrestles to overwhelm its bitterest rival;  
How leaves with predatory leaves dispute  
The ambience of moist air, that, like a lens  
Gathers and concentrates upon the fens  
Rays fiercer than our planet's denizens  
Have ever known. See, in this carnival  
Of lush proliferation, how the tall  
Lycopod drinks the light and steals the breath  
Of humbler creatures stifling underneath  
Her dome of shade; and how the gorgon hair  
Of Sigillaria with aerial tresses  
Sucks moisture from the sodden swamp's recesses,  
Then droops to earth to find new foothold, where  
Fanwise the fern-frond sways, and epiphyte  
In crevice of bark or mossy fork entreed  
Drains the sap blindly creeping toward the light;  
How, in this world that knows nor flower nor seed,  
The sexless spores shed from green leaves and breed,  
Unravished by wantoning of breeze or beel  
Yet wingéd life there is: from tree to tree  
Bright Archeoptilus, like a dragon-fly  
Rustling his gauzy pinions, quivers and flits,  
And clouds of locusts darken pools of sky  
Reflected in the coal-swamp's inky pits;  
While spider, roach and cricket grave their trails  
On the smooth mud-bank's palimpsest, and scales  
Of armoured ganoids gleam as each pursues  
His prey of shrinking molluscs in the ooze.  
So, on that dreamlike world, deep silence broods  
For all its restless vehemence—save when floods  
Of swollen sea, bursting its bars of sand,  
Surge through the estuaries and drown the land,  
Through creek and channel curiously creeping,  
Brimming the lone lagoons with brine, and seeping  
To rot each rootlet with a salty kiss,



Till the whole forest wilts and perishes!  
And see how, revelling on that poisonous tide,  
The plunging shapes of sea-born creatures ride;  
Shoals of lean sharks, with crushing pavement-teeth  
Explore their new-found pastures, and beneath  
Ridges of shell-bank delve with routing heads  
To crunch the blind crustaceans on their beds!  
Time and again, the inflowing salty tide  
Sickened those forests, and the green trees died  
And fell and rotted; in the age between,  
Time and again, they quicken with new green,  
And coldly by their chlorophyll, encage  
The sunlight that shall warm a distant age.

*And now (it is almost as if the Earth herself grew intolerant of these endless alternations of growth and decay that seem to lead nowhere) a new cataclysm shakes those regions of drowned Atlantis from which the bastions of Armorica still tower unsubmerged. From their bases an earth-wave spreads Northward, rippling the ocean-floor, and breaking, at last, on the rudimentary ridge of the Malverns, which it overrides with so great a pressure that their basalt is buckled and curled over to enfold the verges of the coal-swamp. And now that this barrier has been lowered, torrential floods, charged with alluvium from the flanks of the quiescent Western volcanoes, pour into the swamp and seal it; and later, amid these flats of solidifying sand, which resemble those that surround the Dead Sea and the Caspian, there is born a pellucid lake; and the water sucked up from that lake in innumerable summers descends as rain, so that the basin, extending its margins by constant erosion, at length breaks its banks and lets in the Sea of the Oolite, warm from the tropics and rich with new forms of life. From the borders of that sea the Chant of the Fourth Age is heard.*

Beneath my corals, locked in death  
Of ebony, the coal-swamps lie;  
And, for an age, no living breath  
Ruffles my tepid air or wakes  
The slumber of my silken sea—  
Till, sudden from the silence, breaks  
The Scherzo of Time's Symphony!  
Now behold the labouring Earth  
Delivered of a monstrous birth,  
As from creative fancy swarms

A welter of fantastic forms:  
See, where the fruitful sea impinges  
Upon my sands, the palmy fringes  
Of cycads thrust their clustered spears,  
And forests of flowered conifers  
In myrtle and magnolia mingle  
Honey and resin. On slopes of shingle  
The crocodile with languid eye  
Stares into a steamy sky,  
And wandering through cypress-groves  
Nightmare creatures of this age  
Make their gigantic pasturage  
Or celebrate their monstrous loves:  
Here, with deliberation, moves  
Bird-footed Iguanodon  
To curve his slender neck and slake  
His thirst within the Wealden Lake  
Or pools where Ichthyosaurs and lithe  
Water-serpents swarm and writhe,  
And through the blue-green opal gleams  
The moon-pale radiance of the chalk;  
Or sprawls where Pterodactyls stalk  
And, lighting, furl their bat-like wings  
To stamp upon the forming cliff  
Their footprints' feeble hieroglyph.  
Inland, ravening forest plains,  
Hear the more formidable brood  
Of Dinosaurs crash through the wood,  
Rending their unsuspecting prey  
With sabred fangs and vulture claws,  
Or, if a rival bars their way,  
Engrappled with ferocious jaws;  
While, at the first loud challenge flung,  
Fleet marsupials pouch their young  
And scatter, like the animate spray  
Of flying-fish when dolphins play;  
And every beast that feels the ground  
Shudder with clash of armoured sides,  
And heaven shaken by the sound  
Of those tremendous battle-cries,  
Cowers in the trampled fern and hides

Until the deadly work is done,  
As the vanquished roars and dies  
And the dazed victor stumbles on.  
So, in those resinous woods, and glades  
Of honey-sweet magnolia, fades  
This pageant of fantastic Time:  
The mailed reptiles sink to slime:  
Dinosaur, Iguanodon  
And Pterodactyl, all are gone,  
And o'er their unrecorded grave  
Shimmers again the lustral wave.

*This is indeed the greatest deluge of all. Unceasingly the chalky seas pour out of the Asian tropics through the gulf of Greenland, until all that remains of the British lands, over which the great reptiles roamed, is an archipelago of islands—the greater of which are based on the Grampians, the Snowdon massif, the Brecon Beacons and the Carmarthen Vans. In the strait between these and the perdurable Armorican granite, the white dome of the Weald uprises, then sinks, and then reappears as part of a promontory jutting Northward from what is now the European mainland, presenting the profile of a human head in a peaked hood, and vaguely foreshadowing the shape of the British Isles.*

*But this promise, too, fails of fulfilment. Fire's last and most violent protest, launched from the volcanic chain that bounds the North from Antrim to Hecla, overwhelms this rudimentary Britain in a flow of lava—and all that can be seen is an inferno of fire and water fiercely contending. When the lava-flow cools and sets, rains furrow its slaggy surface, and, streaming Southward, carve out of the silt left by the last sea, the courses of two great rivers. One, impeded by Pennine, sweeps over the bed of the Irish Sea and flows into the Atlantic; the second shies from what remains of the Malvern ridge to break through the Southern Cotswold and join the Channel. Though it is still part of Europe, the shape of Britain begins to define itself and the Chant of the Fifth Age is heard.*

From Ushant unto Orkney spread  
Green lies my land, new-forested  
With oak and ilex, birch and ash,  
Made musical by streams that splash  
To silence in their river-bed.  
Green lies my land: a temperate air  
Wavers and wanders everywhere

Through wood and marsh and water-meadow.  
To dapple with a moving shadow  
Of cloud the downland bare.  
Green lies my land: from dusk to dawn  
Peace broods upon the forest lawn,  
And ever mistier starlight spills  
Its silver on sleep-folded hills,  
Till darkness be withdrawn,  
And my bird-nestling woodland wakes  
In tender tremolos and shakes  
And muted whimperings that fill  
Its leafy clerestories, until  
Morning's full music breaks.  
Hear my woodlarks, tossed in bright  
Fountain-jets of sheer delight,  
From their palpitating throats  
Let fall a shower of limpid notes  
Like raindrops sprayed with light,  
And sinking on extended wings  
Bestir the thrush to murmurings  
Of sweet, reiterated phrases,  
While the bolder blackbird raises  
His orange bill, and flings  
Reveille through the echoing wood  
Waking the drowsy multitude  
That through the tapestry of leaves  
A web of tenderer music weaves  
Till noonday silence brood  
Unruffled on that leafy sea  
Save for the drone of honey-bee,  
Or doves that croon, or whispering  
Of branches where the squirrels spring  
Nimbly from tree to tree.  
Yet ever, from the whirling snows  
Of deserts where the ice-wind blows  
Cutting the tundras like a knife,  
A slow tide of warm-blooded life  
Into my pleasance flows:  
See the light-stepping reindeer nip  
Young lichens with a velvet lip,  
While herds of roes and dappled fallows

Pause to drink from minnowed shallows,  
Where hare and marmot sip  
Dew from blades of springing grass,  
And in the bittern's moist morass,  
Knee-deep, with antlers tossing high,  
The red stag roars his rutting-cry,  
And droves of lemmings pass:  
Like calm thoughts in a dream they roam,  
Seeking an unimagined home;  
And the brown bear's inquiring snout  
Snuffles and sucks the sweetness out  
From the wild-bee's honeycomb,  
Where, deep in sunless forests, grey  
Rhinoceros and mammoth stray,  
Brushing bent saplings from their knees,  
And through the wrack of shattered trees  
Forging their ruthless way.  
And when the pride of day is done,  
Creatures that in the friendly sun  
Browsed without terror, rise and slink  
To reedy waterpools and drink  
Timidly, one by one.  
Beneath the dark's protective shield,  
In thicket, bush and brake concealed,  
They sink and cower out of sight,  
When the fierce hunters of the night  
Breathe fear upon the field;  
When, from her caverned resting-place,  
The tigress, with deliberate grace  
Steals, and the lion licks his jaw  
And yawns, or with a curving paw  
Washes his golden face,  
When startled on the darkening plain  
The wary aurochs shakes his mane,  
And stamps and snorts and sniffs the airs  
That eddy from the charnel lairs  
Wherein their cubs have lain.  
Through wood and weald and waving grass  
The hunters and the hunted pass;  
And mingling in this carnival,  
A shape more terrible than all,

Deadliest that ever was,  
Man, with soft skin and brittle bone  
And puny sinew, hunts alone,  
In his brain's many-shuttled looms  
Weaving more complicated dooms  
Than life had ever known;  
In his dim armoury of wit,  
By fear's imaginations lit,  
Fashioning pikes of wood and bone,  
Flint-headed lance and throwing-stone,  
And thongs for axe-heads split:  
Man, who in loops of springe and snare  
Trammels the heron and the hare,  
And with stone axe or bludgeon clubs  
The litters of blind tiger-cubs  
Mewling within their lair:  
Whose mind, more swift, can overtake  
The fleetfoot reindeer herds, and break  
In sunken pits the mammoth's pride,  
Laughing to see that shaggy hide  
Pierced by the pitfall stake.  
Man, whose inventive fingers crave  
Perpetual artifice, and grave  
The imaged victims of his sleight  
On ivory, or the stalagmite  
That glazes his dark cave;  
Ever, with cumulative skill  
Sharpening his wits and flints, until  
Hunters and hunted wince to hear  
His voice, and sniff his scent with fear,  
And perish at his will,  
Or, like the wild dog, cringe and cower  
To serve. Yet, even in this hour  
Of man's first mastery, he and they  
Together quailed beneath the sway  
Of a more pitiless power,  
When flying flakes of owl-soft snow  
Whirled from the fields of Arctic floe  
Weighed on the forest's sagging crown  
And sent the green vault crashing down  
On the warm life below;

And, winging these, an icier breath,  
Foretaste of a crystal death,  
Sealed the lakes in sheeted glass  
And froze the lemmings to the grass  
They nibbled underneath;  
And crept into foul caverns where  
Man, with the tiger and the bear  
And cowed hyæna, huddles near  
Fires whose very flames appear  
To freeze upon the air,  
Till, mustering his numb wits, he sees  
How blue-green glaciers lap the knees  
Of mountains, and the glacial wave  
Sets on the threshold of his cave,  
And, cold with terror, flees.  
Southward, to where the blood-red sun  
Sickens at noon in vapours dun,  
He stumbles with the fear-tamed herds  
Of savage beasts, while homeless birds  
Waft over, one by one.  
So, in dumb fellowship of pain,  
Man, with his victims, limps the plain;  
And he that lags or falters feels  
Ice-cold fingers clip his heels,  
And staggers on again,  
Or falling, crushed beneath the tread  
Of starved hordes trampling overhead,  
Stiffens, and still for ever lies  
Under the glassy shroud of ice  
That cures those frozen dead.  
Thrice the grey glaciers melted—thrice  
They clamped the mammoth in a vice,  
Moulded the fell and scoured the plain  
With boulder-drift and sharp moraine,  
While, lost beneath the ice,  
Their voiceless waters patiently  
Furrowed new river-bed and sea,  
And chiselled under moving floe  
The lineaments of the land we know,  
Peerless epitome  
Of all sweet shapes and tender hues;

Land that the girdling sea imbues  
With misty radiance, clothing green  
Mountain and meadow with the sheen  
Of its pellucid dews.

Yet, year on year, the greedy tide  
Swelled from the West, unsatisfied,  
And ever, with impatient fret,  
Gnawed at the bridge of land that yet  
Bound her to Europe's side;  
And currents of the hungry Rhine  
Rifted that bridge with creek and chine,  
Crept to the base of every baulk  
That propped the flint ribs of the chalk  
And rotted it with brine;  
And undermined the chalky lea  
Till, in a foaming ecstasy  
The twin tides kiss—and, like a ship  
That shudders from the launching-slip,  
An Island takes the sea!



### III

THE COAST OF GAUL      AUGUST 25TH, 55 B.C.

Through years unnumbered now the Western tide  
Boring and fretting has poured into the breach  
And scoured the crumbling funnel of the chalk.  
And now, behold, the Kentish cliffs, clear-cut  
Above their hissing beaches of chesil, frown  
Upon a sea that knows its continents.  
Mark, on the Gallic shore,  
Two bony promontories, Blancnez and Grisnez,  
Resistant remnants of that broken causeway,  
Gape to engulf a shallow crescent of sand  
And one precarious roadstead: *Portus Itius*,  
Where, rocking at their anchors, or careened  
Above the driftwood tidemark, see assembled  
Cæsar's diverse armada: high-pooped carracks  
With leather lugsails and thonged rigging, reft  
From the vanquished Veneti; Gaulish coracles  
Of hide and wattle, that like water-spiders  
Skim between shore and ship; lean Roman galleys,  
Iron-rammed and beaked, fitter for tideless waters  
Than these capricious surges: an ominous throng  
Of eighty ships and more.

Here, on the crown  
Of Grisnez's thrifty turf, it is so calm,  
So still, this breathless evening, you can hear  
Voices of seamen in the anchored fleet  
Crying from ship to ship—and from inland dunes,  
Where the two legions lie, an undertone  
Like noise of babbling water or starling-flocks  
Roosted in reed-beds; see, from their bivouac-fires,  
A dove-grey smoke-film dim the harbour's glass  
Like a breath-misted mirror; smell the pungency  
Of woodsmoke wavering where the breath of thyme  
Mingles with salt marsh savours . . . It is so clear  
That the silken channel, shot with the iridescence

Of a pigeon's throat or milky mother-of-pearl,  
Swims like a tide-brimmed estuary, and the downs  
Beyond the cliffs of Kent float unsubstantial  
As layered cloudbanks.

Here, set upon the summit,  
A group of reed-thatched hutments, ragged by the wind,  
Shelter headquarters; and here, that evening,  
Three men bareheaded walk: First, Titus Labienus,  
Stocky and shaggy as a moor-fed colt,  
Gruff-voiced, short-spoken, with decisive gesture,  
And a skin tanned as leathery as his tunic  
By three years hard campaigning in the hungry  
Winters of Gaul. Next, Quintus Cicero,  
Thin-lipped, dark eyed, and elegantly-fashioned  
With more Greek subtlety than Roman iron,  
Mocks, with the indolent flicker of a smile,  
The old campaigner's earnestness, interjecting  
The lancet of a finely-pointed phrase  
That makes the elder pause suspiciously,  
Knitting his brows in doubt whether the word  
Be bitter jest or earnest,—then laugh to hide  
His solemn mind's perplexities. Last, Julius Cæsar,  
Triumvir and Proconsul of Transalpine Gaul,  
A spare man, taller than either of these, whose mien  
Combines both qualities—the literal pragmatism  
Of Labienus, and Quintus' Attic subtlety:  
Master of word and deed, and yet the slave  
Of single-minded purpose; soldier and orator,  
Schemer and dreamer. His furrowed face betrays  
Anxieties unshared; the firm mouth, faintly drooping,  
Ruthless self-confidence; that width of brow  
From which fair curls retreat untimely, carries  
The vision of a widening world unguessed  
By lesser minds; and, though he seems to heed  
The chaffering of his legates, and sometimes smiles  
When Cicero's lazy wit pricks at his humour,  
His eyes, chained to the master brain behind,  
Brood on the silken straits, and probe incessantly  
The darkening shores of Cantion. He speaks:  
"It seems so near," he says . . .

Labienus stiffens:

“So near? The width of water has been computed  
At thirty thousand paces—or, by the reckoning  
Of the barbarians, eleven leagues.”  
Cicero laughs: “Too wide, too far, for me!  
If Balbus and his engineers could bridge it  
As once they bridged the Rhine, I’d like it better.  
Give me firm land! There’s width enough in Gaul  
To keep my legion tramping, and enough  
Booty to gild the spectacle of a triumph  
Would make Rome yell with rapture. Why go to Britain  
With Gaul but half subdued? This gentle sea  
Fawns like a leopardess, whose very velvet  
Sheathes iron talons. Listen how she purrs,  
And licks the shingles with a rasping tongue;  
But when she rises, your flat-bottomed craft  
May feel her teeth. Why, even her monstrous tides . . .”  
“The tides, too, have been measured,” snaps Labienus.  
“At Springs, with the full moon as now, they rise  
To twenty Roman feet, two palms, one digit,  
Varying, of course, with the wind’s strength and quarter;  
And now there is none.” Cicero spreads his hands  
In a gesture that is all Greek. “No wind to-night:  
But what of winds to-morrow? I’m neither augur  
Nor seaman, and Poseidon never smiled  
Upon my stomach. He may have dark designs  
In store for us, and, speaking with respect,  
Cæsar, your obstinate phantasy . . .”

The black eyes burn.

Then smile on him. “Phantasy, Quintus, phantasy?  
That word is Greek. Imagination  
Is better Latin; and, if Imagination  
Set my feet on a path, nothing but reason  
Will ever keep them there. It’s an old tale  
(Your brother knows it well)—how this one image, Britain,  
Has lured me like a marsh-fire, ever since,  
Flying from Sulla’s tyrannies, I sailed  
For Rhodes; how, leeward of Pharmacuse, the wind  
Failed us, and as we rocked with flapping canvas  
Becalmed, a pirate galley of Cilicia  
Swooped, like a famished falcon on a quail,  
And held our souls to ransom. In that hulk,

Stinking with bitumen and sun-dried fish,  
There was one man (or monster) whom our captors  
Favoured as their familiar laughing-stock:  
A wizened bow-legged antic, that swarmed the mast  
With half-articulate cries and fierce grimaces.  
Naked he swung, but for a leather loin-cloth  
And torque of iron forged about his neck;  
And from that torque there hung an amulet,  
A disk of graven metal. A hundred times  
With scraps and blandishments I tempted him  
To let me touch his trinket; and, when at last  
I tamed him—lo, a coin of gold, resembling  
A stater of Philip of Macedon as rudely  
As he resembled Man. Oft and again  
(For the time hung heavy on my hands) I pressed him  
To tell me whence that relic came, until  
One day, unasked, he blurted out my answer  
In bastard Greek: “From the Pretanic Isles . . .”  
“The Pretanic Isles,” he said, “the Pretanic Isles . . .”  
A name and nothing more . . .  
Now mark the sequel: when, our ransom paid,  
I landed at Piræus and made my way  
To the house of your wife’s brother, Atticus,  
There, in his library, I found an inky slave  
Squatting among his parchments. The work he copied  
Was the geography of Posidonius:  
And, once again, the name of Britain flashed  
Into my mind and stirred it. Greedily  
I snatched the rolls, and read them to the end:  
They told of a great island, forested  
With green woods, under skies for ever veiled  
In ocean mists, whose ultimate cliffs divided  
The Frozen Sea; of painted men who wrought  
Weapons of curious bronze, and threshed their grain  
In barns, and brewed of it a honey-wine;  
Of a craggy promontory, Belerium,  
Where troglodytes on breathing embers smelted  
The tin they dredged from rivulets or delved  
With uncouth hands from crannies of the rocks;  
And there were grains of gold, and pearls . . .”

Cicero started:

“A pearl, a pearl,” he thought. “There is the simile  
For which I laboured. There it lies, an island  
Luminous as a pearl born from the nacre  
Of the sea’s iris. I must remember this.”  
Once more Cæsar’s eyes held him: “Gold and pearls . . .  
When one is young, my friend, intangible treasure  
Dazzles our sight, our fingers itch to clutch it;  
Yet ageing eyes see not the thing itself  
But what it buys—the wills of other men,  
With power to bend or use them; and, in the play  
Of restless wits that, like corpse-candles, flickered  
Over dead Athens, that island-image faded—  
While Rome, the richer treasure, dazzled me,  
And might have led me, blinded, to calamity  
Had I not found that neither birth nor eloquence  
Nor wealth (as witness Crassus!) can tip the beam  
Against the naked sword. And I had none.  
Therefore I left the wine of young ambition  
To season; sailed for Spain, and nursed my legions,  
And learnt the weightier art of War. Yet even in Spain  
Reminders of that lost image came to me,  
In ships that nosed the wharves of Gabes, captained  
By slim Phœnicians (friends of our good Balbus)  
Men who had seen Belerium, and trafficked  
Made wares for British ingots. So the vision  
Grew nearer and more real. And when I marched  
My legions into Gaul and broke the Veneti,  
I found their fleets were fed and manned from Britain,  
And that their chiefs sought sanctuary in Britain  
To brew rebellion. I am no mystic, Quintus,  
Nor Platonist; Aristotle is my master:  
Yet I believe my destiny is linked  
With Britain’s; and, to purge my mind of Britain,  
I must subdue it—not pursuing any phantasy,  
Nor slaves nor gold nor commerce, but compelled  
By the cold logic of necessity.  
Listen: To-night I hold Gaul in my hands,  
But as a fluttering eaglet; if I unclasp  
My fingers she escapes me. Beyond the Rhine  
Enemies far more formidable and fiercer,  
The bloody German horde, shadow my flank,

And know (for they are cunning) I cannot venture  
Beyond their marches and crush them in their forests  
With Gaul, unfettered, rising in the rear;  
And Gaul I cannot wholly break while Britain  
Remains her arsenal: my Gallic enemies  
Gather the threads and weave their plots unseen  
In that veiled island. Gaul can never know  
Peace, with those German savages untamed;  
Yet, if I turn to tame them, I must risk  
War on a double front . . .

This is the strategy

Of all Transalpine Europe, as I read it,  
Now and for ever: No power that hath not gained  
Mastery of Britain and her seas can hold  
Gaul and the frontier of the Rhine. No other power,  
Lacking the mastery of those narrow seas,  
Can long hold Gaul or Britain in subjection.”  
He smiled. “I think you have your answer, Quintus.  
The sea is calm; the land-breeze stirs. At midnight  
We sail for Britain. The Gallic cavalry,  
Embarking at the nether port, will join us  
Tomorrow. You, Cicero, will go with me;  
You, Labienus, stay.”  
And now, before late moonrise, see the dunes  
Flicker with marsh-fire lanterns. On the shore  
Two legions stand to arms, the Seventh and Tenth,  
With complement of swart Numidian bowmen  
And Balearic slingers. Hear, as they muster,  
The trumpet-calls and sharp words of command,  
And, as each cohort forms its ranks and marches,  
Methodical plod of hobnails pounding shingle  
Or shuffling through soft sands to plunge knee-deep  
And launch the galleys. Hear the metallic clink  
Of javelin and sword on iron-banded corselets;  
The creaking of taut halyards in the tackle;  
The shudder of rowlocks and the measured plash  
Of sweeps that dip as one. Now, as the full moon rises,  
See the whole fleet afloat, and all the roadstead  
Rippled with broken moon-flakes: galley and carrack  
Burnished alike with clustered helms and eagles.  
Then, as the land-breeze freshens, watch them steal

Seaward, between the headlands—till the chuckling  
Waters are silent, and the moony wakes  
Lost in the outer channel.

Labienus,

Lonely on Grisnez, saw them out of sight;  
Then wrapped his cloak around him, and turned, and slept.  
And, as he slept, the foremost galleys, clearing  
The windward headland, led the fleet of sail  
West of the Lodestar's bearing, like pilot-fish  
Guiding a shoal of sharks; but with the dawn  
(Dawn ominous for Britain) the land-breeze freshened,  
Veering into the sun, and held the transports  
Floundering a league astern. On the larboard bow  
Unscalable scarps of chalk loomed through the mist  
And drove the galleys northward to a breach  
Where the cliffs fell away, and running surges  
Crashed on a shore of shingle. It was a landfall  
To quell the most adventurous. But time pressed:  
Already watchful eyes, piercing the mist,  
Had spied the straggling flecks of sail. Already  
The brazen wail of war-horns drifted inland  
To wake the hornets' nests; already the beaches  
Swarmed with blue-painted warriors and rang  
With battle-cries.

Two galleys of the Tenth,  
Urged by swift strokes, shot forward, and shuddering  
Grounded in shelving sand. Swept by a hail  
Of slingstones and a whirling sleet of spears  
They stopped. A hoarse cry broke: "All overboard!  
Charge for the shore!" But not a soldier stirred.  
"What, would you shame your leader and your eagles,  
Men of the Tenth?" The legion's signifer  
Clambered the bows and plunged in, shoulder-deep,  
His eagle held on high. Another followed  
And soon the shallows frothed with half a cohort  
Floundering and staggering shoreward up the shelf,  
Tripped as the undertow dragged back the shingles,  
Yet ever stumbling on, until firm foothold  
Gives purchase for the javelin-throw. And soon,  
Before that inexorable wave of iron  
Creeping from out the wave of sea, the British

Quaver and break, leaving their dead awash  
In blood-stained foam—yet never lessening  
Their hail of taunts and missiles.

See that drenched cohort  
Straggle ashore and stamp and shake themselves  
Like water-spaniels, laughing as they press  
Salt from their smarting lids and curse the plague  
Of gadfly missiles—yet each no sooner set  
Foot on firm sand than the iron habit of discipline  
Led him, unthinking, to his appointed place  
In the fixed battle-order. Now, with locked shields,  
The armoured tortoise crawled, when, suddenly  
Launched from the woods, a formidable host  
Fell on their flank: a charge of chariots,  
Fierce as a breaking coamer helmed with fury,  
Smote on them and surged over. Dazed and deafened  
By wild cries, thunderous hoofs, and the shrill whinnying  
Of horses maddened by lash and spearprick; blinded  
With clouds of javelins and spatters of sand  
And rattling chesil thrown from rapid wheels;  
Shorn from their severed feet by blades that flashed  
From every spinning felloe, the dwindled cohort  
Still held its ground—but, from the foremost rank,  
The maimed and dead lay strewn like corn in swathes  
Shed from the mowers' scythes. And, even before  
The rearward files sprang forward, sword in hand,  
To mend the ranks and close the riven carapace  
Of shields, the charioteers had whirled away  
And wheeled behind them—and the bloody scythes  
Swung through the second cohort, straggling forward  
Knee-deep to aid its fellow!

Thrice the wheeled fury swept  
On the linked lines of shields, and thrice it shore  
Through them and shredded them to particles  
Of stubborn valour, fighting back to back,  
Broken, but still unvanquished: till the British,  
Drunken with pride and blood, and over-eager  
To clinch their triumph, leapt from their running chariots  
And rushed, incontinent, to make an end  
Of the shorn fragments, battling, hand to hand,  
In single combat. Then the iron of Rome,



Forged in the furnace of wild Gaul and tempered  
On battle's anvils, proved its mastery  
O'er mere impetuous courage, stroke by stroke  
Hacking a pathway through the light-armed rabble  
Of Britain—till their Celtic fury spent  
Its vehemence, and the painted warriors  
Confused, ran for the chariots and scattered  
To shelter of their woods . . .

It was a moment

When, in the tilting balance, victory  
Lay for the taking, could but the fingers grasp it.  
“Pursue, pursue!” men cried: but what pursuit  
Of plodding foot could hope to overtake  
Wheeled chariots? “Where are our cursed cavalry?”  
The old centurions swore, straining their eyes  
For sight of nearing sails, but seeing only  
Blank waters lashed by ever-rising wind  
And not a sail in sight.

That night, the legions  
Dug fosse and vallum, and entrenched a camp  
Foursquare above the beach, hauling their galleys  
High on the shingle, while the transports rode  
At anchor, where they had grounded.

On the morrow

There came an embassy from the chiefs of Kent  
Entreating Cæsar's pardon for the hot-headedness  
Of their impetuous youth; offering hostages  
With full submission; humbly beseeching  
The grace of an alliance and protection  
Against more savage neighbours. Cæsar listened  
Gravely, and granted all. It was the story  
Of Gaul again: for every word betokened  
That malady of which the Celtic spirit  
Sickened—those jealousies of tribes and feuds  
Of princes which had lately rotted Gaul  
And, shrewdly fostered, might soon deliver Britain  
Into his hands with even scantier shedding  
Of Roman blood. Therefore he frowned, and bade them  
Bring in their hostages, fencing, with words, for time  
And kindlier winds, knowing (as they knew not)  
That, without cavalry, he could neither master

Their chariots nor keep what land he held.  
But, on the third day, when the tardy convoy  
Dipped like a flock of kittiwakes in the troughs  
Of off-shore waves, he saw the reefed sails suddenly  
Gybe, put about, and scatter, till all were hidden  
In white spume shredded from the outer sea;  
And, that same night, the risen North Easter, stiffening  
To a full gale, drove the full moon's spring-tide  
Over the roaring chesil, to brim the fosse,  
And breach the parapets, till the camp was drenched  
Knee-deep in icy brine—while wind and tide,  
Rioting together, snatched at the grounded galleys  
With fierce teeth, tossing them like windlestraws  
To crash on grinding shingle; and half the carracks  
Carried away their anchors and were spewed  
Out of the channel's throat or, caught abeam,  
Flung through mid-air and cast above the tidemark.  
So, through the dusk  
Of stormy dawn and moonset, Cæsar saw  
Only grey desolation: half the fleet  
Vanished or stove or floundered, and, of the rest,  
Not a third seaworthy. Shivering in their camp,  
Amid salt-sodden victuals and quenched embers,  
The legions murmured: "Better we had stayed in Gaul  
Where, at the worst, an army can draw back  
Upon its bases, than have hazarded  
Starvation on this barren shelf of sand,  
The impassable sea behind us, and before  
The bloody chariot-scythes!" And others cried:  
"We are lost: the unpropitiated gods  
Of these barbarians scourge us. How should we  
Who are mortal match our valour against mysteries  
Of air and water? Ay, and where is the plunder  
With which we were lured: the vaunted gold and pearls  
Of Britain; the rich pastures, the sleek herds,  
The white-armed captives? There is more tangible loot  
In one square league of Gaul than in all Britain!  
Say what you will, our leader's wits have erred,  
Tricked by the malice of some jealous god  
Who grudged his easy triumphs—and we, chained  
To the falling star, fall with it."

So the camp

Seethed like an ant-nest, till the centurions  
Brought word to Cæsar's tent: and he, straightway,  
Summoned the mutinous troops with trumpet-call  
To stand to arms, and held the murmurers clamped  
In rigid ranks of discipline. Some of the Tenth  
He set to salvage of the wrack, and gathering  
Of broken flotsam; shattered spars and timbers  
Tumbled in the waves' wash, and floating sweeps  
And nests of tangled tackle. Others, more skilled  
In the shipwright's craft, caulked bulging seams and botched  
The riven hulls with bolts of copper hammered  
Out of the driftwood—till the beaches rang  
With busy adze and matchet and the blithe voices  
Of men heartened by toil. The Seventh Legion,  
Screened by a single maniple, marched inland,  
Scouring the woods for fuel and seeking grain  
To eke their ruined rations; and now the sun,  
Which had withheld his blessing from that scene  
Of comfortless frustration, broke through and flooded  
The mournful land with light, and every heart  
Quickened to feel his warmth and see the fleets  
Of dazzling cumulus scud through a lightened sky  
And a sea no longer sullen-faced, but dancing  
With gay sapphire and crisped by wavelets capped  
With joyous foam. Even those sombre woodlands  
Of oak no longer boded ill, but showed  
Through sunlit glades the green of pastures, misted  
With ivory of meadowsweet, traversed by streams  
Winding through minty marsh-land, and the gleam  
Of cornfields ripe for harvest but unreaped  
That rippled like the sea. Then, as a flock  
Of noisy daws swoops on a stubble, the Seventh  
Broke ranks and scattered, and fell upon the corn  
With swords for sickles, boisterously calling  
And laughing as they reaped. Some, faint with hunger  
And lack of sleep, sprawled on the headlands, lazily  
Watching their comrades toil; others, who reaped,  
Stripped to their woollen tunics, shed their armour  
And piled their shields and javelins in the shade,  
Unwary, not unseen . . .

For this fair day  
Had brought new hope to Britain. From the downs  
Above the ravaged cornfields, and from the cliffs  
That frowned upon the beaches, watchful eyes  
Marked the wrecked fleet of Rome, and saw their enemies,  
Disarmed and unsuspecting, pillage their harvest.  
And, swarming to their camps, the headier youth  
Called on their faint-heart elders to send no more  
Hostages, but rather, summoning strength and courage,  
Fall on the crippled foe and hurl him, broken,  
Into the sea. So, in the heat of noon,  
When broom-pods crackled and the slumbrous crooning  
Of stock-doves in the drowsy woodlands lulled  
The harvesters to stretch their limbs and sleep—  
Deep in those silent woods, their footfalls muted  
By felting of soft leaf-mould, horse and chariots  
And spearmen mustered; all the armed might of Kent  
Waiting upon a word; and, that word spoken,  
Whirled through the hapless reapers like the wind  
That wakes a thunderstorm. But that storm broke  
Before they knew it near . . .

A mile and more away  
On the busy beaches, deafened by the sullen  
Pounding of the spent sea and the perpetual  
Brisk clatter of adze and hammer, Cæsar heard  
Naught of this sudden onslaught—yet, forearmed  
By that taut wariness which is the instinct  
Of the tried soldier, and ever glancing inland,  
Suddenly saw the dark woods topped with clouds  
Of turbulent dust churned from the chariot-wheels  
Of the invisible battle, and instantly  
Called out the guard, two cohorts of the Tenth,  
And bade the rest equip themselves and follow  
As swiftly as they could. Another moment,  
And he had been too late! Even as he reached  
The trampled corn, reft fragments of the Seventh,  
Like empty husks whirled from a threshing-floor,  
Streamed back to meet him—nor could he hope to stay  
The rout, but opened ranks to let them pass  
Through his advancing cohorts—then closed the ring  
Of iron shields behind them, and stubbornly

Fighting a rearguard action, foot by foot,  
Withdrew within the camp.

That night, two ships,  
The remnant of the storm-tossed fleet of transports,  
Made land, and disembarked a single squadron  
Of sick, bedraggled cavalry, but not a bale  
Of stores, and only scanty, salt-spoilt forage.  
And now, the long storm spent, motionless clouds  
Drank up the moonlight and, in darkness, drenched  
The huddled legions: two days, unceasingly,  
A pitiless rain came down, and fouled the camp  
With trampled quagmire—and still the tattered sky  
Hung black with unshed water . . .

“Autumn has come,”

The old men murmured. “Ay, and if this be Autumn,  
What danker misery faces us? What of Winter,  
When, as they tell, the sun is hardly seen  
And the rain never ceases, and the waves  
Are never still? If we must die,” they cried,  
“Then let us perish in Gaul among our comrades;  
Or, at the worst, go forth and fall like men,  
Fighting, rather than perish like clemmed rats  
Drowned in their holes!”

Hearing these murmurs, Cæsar  
Held conference with his legates—more to test  
The legions’ dubious temper than to take  
Counsel—and, in cold judgement, struck a balance  
Of loss and profit: First, twelve ships destroyed  
Or wrecked beyond repair; of men,—two cohorts  
Lost or put out of action, and the rest  
Weakened by want of food; of booty—nothing;  
Of captives—but a handful of ragged hostages  
Unfit for sale or triumph. Against these  
Debts of misfortune, he set some solid gains:  
Much bitter knowledge of the island’s crags  
And hazardous landings; more of its evil tides  
And freakish climate; most, of its natives’ mettle,  
That breathless valour which gave the British chariot  
(A weapon old as Troy!) the mastery  
Of men who fought on foot; something, again,  
Of Britain’s weaknesses—her lack of leadership,

Divided will, and dim-witted neglect  
To man her invulnerable moat and stem  
Invasion on her seas; enough, in all,  
To make the prospect of a second landing,  
With stronger force of cavalry and more propitious  
Season, secure of victory. This year  
He could not conquer Britain; but, lest his men  
Should carry back to Gaul the bitter aftertaste  
Of failure, and the enemy reap unmixed  
Glory from their retirement, he determined  
To offer battle.

No bloodier day than this  
Had ever dawned on Britain. Hour after hour,  
Gigantic in white sea-mist, wave on wave  
Of British chivalry, their horses spattered  
With flakes of blood and foam and terrified  
By fierce cries, cast themselves on the locked shields  
Of Rome—to be tossed forth like broken water  
Spewed from a basalt cliff, and then sucked seaward  
To gather from the deep new spite and strength  
To charge and charge again. But still, at sunset,  
The iron wall held firm—and at its feet,  
Like a fringe of driftwood lodged upon a tidemark,  
Lay wrack of horse and horseman, broken chariots,  
Cleft helms and twisted weapons—all the bronze panoply  
Of Britain dashed to pieces! And in the night,  
While the bruised Britons licked their wounds and wrangled  
Over new means to breach the wall of shields  
Or sap its stubborn bases, the worn legions  
Hoisted full sail and manned the galley-sweeps;  
So, in the darkness fading like a ghost,  
The fleet set course for Gaul, leaving their fires  
To burn out, and their very dead unburied  
In the deserted camp. And when the sun  
Rose on the reddened beaches, all were gone.

## IV

SONG OF THE DEAD MEN ON BREDON

A.D. 55

On Bredon Cloud the starveling grass  
No echoes made  
To hooves in loose-reined canter threading  
The firwood's needly shade  
To where an earthen rampart, ledged  
Like a peregrine's nest  
High on the badger-scrabbled scarp,  
Brooded on the West.  
Statue-still at the falling brink  
My horse and I  
Paused, in an element that seemed  
Neither of Earth nor Sky;  
While downward-plunging sight, through glaze  
Of denser airs,  
Marked tower and steeple blossom-misted  
In Avon's steely snares:  
All that dry firth where salty tides  
Once inward swirled,  
Breaking on basalt barrier-cliffs  
Of an old western world.  
So still that air, so mute that hour  
Rapt and sublime,  
The solitary mind must turn  
To thoughts of Life and Time;  
Yet, meditating, never guessed  
How near beneath  
The rabbit-nibbled sward lay strewn  
A hecatomb of Death;  
Herdsmen, who on that airy dome  
(Alas, in vain!)  
Sought refuge from the treacherous woods  
Of Severn's firth and plain,  
Pastured their lank-ribbed beasts and wrought  
With pick and spade

Rampart and fosse and guarded gate,  
And dwelt there, unafraid;  
Yet woke, one startled midnight, blinded  
By fire and blood;  
Swarmed to their broken gates in panic,  
And perished where they stood.  
Axe-cloven skull and splintered thigh,  
Those dead lay prone  
Till kites had pecked the marrow out  
And wolves gnawed flesh from bone;  
Till greedy beak and claw had stripped  
Their carrion prize,  
And wood-wolves sniffed in vain to sate  
The hunger in their eyes;  
Till blistering sun and icy wind  
Bleached the bones dry,  
And only brittle fragments crumbled  
Beneath the empty sky;  
Till wind-blown dust and sailing seed  
Silted between,  
And wove about the mortal wrack  
A soft shroud of green;  
Till, a palm's depth new sward beneath,  
Those dead men lay  
Flattened, like shapes of Pleistosaurs  
Locked in the Lias Clay . . .  
Two thousand years the missel-thrush  
His challenge loud  
Flung in the teeth of Winter riding  
On banks of snow-black cloud;  
Two thousand Springs the risen lark  
In twittering flight  
Rained there on hand-clasped lovers' ears  
His ripples of delight.  
Lirra, lirra, trills the lark,  
While lovers list,  
Finger to lip, that silvery shower  
Filtering through the mist . . .  
That day I rode on Bredon Cloud  
Loud sang the lark;  
Yet a shadow of undiscovered dooms



Made my mind dark;  
My horse, too, trembled and snatched the rein,  
Restless to depart,  
And the shiver that spread from his body to mine  
Troubled my heart.  
So I turned his head from the hidden death  
And rode like the wind,  
Galloping back through the firwood shade,  
But dared not look behind.  
What was it plucked at my heart that day  
With fingers cold?  
I cannot tell . . . I only know  
That Man's mind is old,  
And the memory of Man a mystery:  
That in my veins  
There may run, (who knows?) the blood of one  
Who fled that night to the plains;  
That, in my brain, some timeless cell  
May still be endowed  
With a dim dream of the massacre  
That reddened Bredon Cloud.

## EPISODE OF THE GARRULOUS CENTURION

*Middle England, A.D. 78. The Scene is on the Southern boundary of the country of the Cornavii, fifteen miles North of the settlement of Glevum (Gloucester). To modern eyes the landscape would be almost unrecognisable; for the shrinking Severn Sea still retains its estuarine character, and the Hams of Severn are huge mud-flats, submerged, at Spring-tides, by the Bore, and scattered at low water (as now) with flocks of waders and other water-fowl.*

*On the left bank of the river, a dense bush of dwarf oak and ash and holly covers the triangle between Severn and Avon; but West of the greater river the woodland lies more open, with grassy slades, in which herds of roedeer are grazing, interspersed with vivid green patches of swamp. The only familiar features in this countryside are the summits of the hills that bound the plain: the wide dome of Bredon, with the ramparts of a deserted camp crowning its escarpment, and the serrated outline of the Malverns rising stark from a sea of forest which overflows their Northern prolongations, the Ankerdine and Abberley Hills.*

*On the Southern slope of Bredon, in the midst of a considerable clearing, stands a solitary white habitation: a small, half-timbered villa, consisting of a long, low range of rooms facing South, with a covered terrace in front of it, an entrance in the middle of the façade, and two wings protruding at right-angles to enclose a courtyard (or farmyard), in the midst of which stands an ornamental well-head, with a wrought-iron pulley and tackle for hoisting water.*

*On this terrace, enjoying the air of the early autumn evening, walks the owner: a small, spare, rustic figure, with a round head still covered by a close crop of white hair—a time-expired centurion, named Caius Petronius. He is shod with laced sandals of ox-hide, home-made, with the hairy side outward; and wears strips of wool wound round his legs like puttees, and, above these, a short-sleeved coarse woollen tunic, open at the neck and loosely girt about the waist by a belt of leather. As he walks to and fro, like a ship-master pacing his quarterdeck, his eyes rest idly on the moss of rank forest that clothes the plain at his feet; but, at the end of one turn, he stops and shades his eyes to focus a trail of dust which he has seen slowly rising and creeping forward above the treetops. After a moment he hurries to the*

*door of the villa and shouts instructions in Latin to the slaves at the back of the building. Then he tucks up his tunic, tightens his belt, and sets off, with an agility remarkable in a man of his age, down a steep path which, judging from the direction of the dust-trail, seems likely to intercept its course at the foot of the hill. And indeed, as he reaches the level, well in front of the advancing dust, he steps out on to a rudimentary road, which has once been metalled but is now overgrown with grass. Here he stands waiting, slightly out of breath from his rapid descent, until he hears the sound he has been expecting, the rhythmical plodding of hobnails, and sees, in front of the dust, the head of a column of soldiers slowly advancing and led by a tall young man, more lightly and elegantly clothed: a subaltern commanding a vexillation of the Twentieth Legion. The young officer wears a plumed helmet of bronze and carries no shield; and his sword, longer than those of his detachment, is slung from his girdle. As he approaches, the old centurion hails him cheerily, and holds up his hand; and the optio, returning his salute, calls his men to a halt. Caius Petronius speaks.*

Hail, comrade! Welcome, and welcome again! Do you know,  
When I saw your dust topping the woods by Severnside  
I said to myself: "By Hercules, there's a draft  
Coming up from Glevum!" And that's a rare thing nowadays—  
Though thirty years ago, when we made this road  
In the time of Caratacus, it wore out some shoe-leather  
And no grass ever grew on it! Why, not a day passed  
Without troops on the march; while now . . . But bless my soul,  
You don't know who I am! My name's Caius Petronius,  
Centurion of the Third Cohort of the Second Augusta,  
Time-expired these many years. And yours? Claudius Terentius?  
Terentius . . . Yes, I remember a man named Terentius;  
But he was a Thracian horseman, while you are Italian:  
That's easily known from your speech, and damned good to hear  
In these days, when the legions are stiff with barbarians  
Who can't speak articulate Latin. So you're in the Twentieth,  
Valeria Victrix? Oh yes, *I* know the Twentieth:  
They're old comrades of ours: came over from Gaul with us  
And the Fourteenth Gemina in the year of the big invasion  
Under Aulus Plautius—but the Fourteenth Gemina,  
Or all that was left of them, were transferred to Armenia  
Soon after the trouble with Boudicca. That's a long time ago,  
And you've probably never heard of it. Still, ours and the Twentieth  
And the poor old Ninth are regular British legions:

And I always say, no man who hasn't done service  
In Britain has any right to call himself soldier.  
Well now . . . We'd better step to it. The sun's nearly down.  
The best thing you can do is tell your lads to fall out  
And bivouac here. They'll find plenty of dry wood about  
For a fire to keep off the wolves, and excellent water.  
You, of course, will come up to my farm and drink something better.  
*Vile potabis modicis Sabinum cantharis.* What?  
Do young soldiers ever read Horace nowadays?  
I don't suppose so. I'm not much of a reader myself;  
But it happens that I was born in the Sabine Hills,  
And the poet's farm—the one Mæcenas gave him,  
To keep him out of the way as I always think,—  
Was near my grandad's; and he used to drop in of an evening  
And spout verse by the hour, for lack of a better audience,  
Though the old man was deaf as a post. Flaccus must have been  
An odd fellow by all accounts; yet his verse has a way  
Of sticking in one's head—not the odes in which he buttered  
Mæcenas and Augustus, but those that remind me  
Of the country I knew as a lad and haven't set eyes on  
Since long before you were born. *Eheu fugaces* . . .  
Yes, they shoved me into the army when I was eighteen,  
Being a younger son with a taste for women and gladiators,  
And because a neighbour of ours, Vespasian,  
Commanded the Second in those days, and promised my dad  
He'd keep an eye on me.

I can't say I've ever regretted it,  
Nor yet that Fate took me to Britain. Let me tell you something  
For the good of your soul: When first I came here, I felt  
I'd slipped over the edge of the world. It was the light, or the lack of  
it,  
And the endless rain that made my heart sink to my boots;  
But after a while, when my eyes grew used to the change,  
I found this light kinder to them than the glare that beats back  
From Apennine rocks or the black dust of Campania;  
And the older I grow, the better I like it. You know,  
Many's the time, when I was a lad, I used to think  
Summer was the only season worth living in: how good it was  
To wake in the cool of the morning and pick black mulberries  
Or figs when the dew was on them, and lie all day  
Under a pinetree, watching the lizards, and snaring them

With a noose of grass—ay, and listening to the crickets  
Trilling in the ilex-woods or the wind-blached olives  
Till the very sky seemed to simmer—and sometimes a serpent  
Swarmed over your legs and blinked with little flat eyes  
Before he dared put out his nickering tongue to sip  
At our fountain . . . Yes, yes, but when you are middle-aged  
And glad to loosen your belt, you begin to feel  
The sun a torment and Summer too long—while here  
It's never too hot nor too cold. Of course there are things  
One can't help missing at first. It's no use pretending  
This clammy soil's as fertile as the red Tuscan earth;  
And you haven't the sense of space you feel when you see  
The foothills falling away from the knees of Soracte  
To the Tyrrhenian shore. And yet there are compensations  
And even likenesses . . . Do you mind if I halt a moment?  
Of late years I have found it wiser to take things easily  
Up a stiff pitch like this: the old bellows aren't what they were.  
That's better . . . What was I saying? Ah, yes, likenesses . . .  
Observe how the land slopes downward from here to the ford  
By the fifteenth milestone from Glevum—in your itinerary  
They call it *Ad Antonam*. Now half-close your eyelids.  
Remark that undulant mountain-line in the West,  
And tell me, candidly, if it doesn't resemble  
The Alban Hills where they bar the Appian Way?  
Now look half-left, where you see my vineyard reddened  
With Autumn (the vines change colour earlier here)  
And imagine those thorn-trees olives, which isn't difficult  
In the fading light. Now doesn't that remind you  
Of Latium as it did me when first I saw it?  
No? Well, you're honest enough. Perhaps I've forgotten  
What Latium looks like—and I shan't ever see it again;  
But that's how it struck me, all those years ago,  
When my gang was at work on the road, and I built a hut  
Just where we're standing now. I remember, that evening,  
I said to myself: "Why keep on hankering after Rome  
When you know very well, by the time your service is over  
There won't be a living soul left there to remember you,  
And everything will have changed?" And not only that.  
During all those years of soldiering with the Second  
I'd seen a good bit of Britain, from Vectis, the island  
That guards the Great Port, to the moors of Belerium

And then north again to Isca, where the legion was stationed  
To keep the Silures quiet; and during that time—  
Though it may seem odd to you—I'd taken a fancy to Britain.  
Why? That's not so easy to answer; but I think the first thing  
That attracted me was its quietness. Of course we had fighting  
Now and again; but war is a soldier's duty,  
And fighting's what he's paid for. Yet, here in Britain,  
Our life was secure and placid beyond measure  
Compared with life in Rome or even in Gaul.  
Consider a moment; during my forty years' service  
There have been four Cæsars—and every jack man of them  
Has died by violence! Claudius, Caligula, Nero,  
And Galba. And every time an emperor's died  
He's dragged his friends to the grave with him, and left  
Our poor distracted Italy to be vexed  
By plots and jealousies, persecutions, portents  
And judgements of the gods: Rome burnt to ashes,  
Pompeii buried in pumice—while here—in Britain,  
Year stole on year unvexed by any violence  
But of our changing seasons, and not a ripple  
Of the storms that lashed the empire ever reached us  
Across the blessed sea. And, since man lives but once  
I think he may as well live peaceably,  
And no land is more peaceful than Britain to-day.  
Now here's another thing that may surprise you:  
I like the Britons as much as I like their island.  
Of course you are bound to have heard a lot of nonsense  
About them at home, where nobody sees any farther  
Than Mons Albanus or Tibur; but when you've travelled  
As I have, you'll find that (but for the Germans and Scythians,  
Who are utter barbarians) men are much of a muchness,  
And one people as good as the next. These Gauls and Britons  
Have ancient virtues that have grown old-fashioned in Rome,  
More's the pity. As slaves they may not be so intelligent  
As the Greeks—but who wants to be a slave or a Greek?  
While as for calling them 'bloody savages'  
'Brutal barbarians' and all the rest of it—  
That's just the flattering writers' way of saying  
What fine fellows we were for licking them—just as if  
We'd fought them on equal terms and with equal weapons;  
While, in fact, they faced us without any body-armour

And with swords of untempered iron, ay, and gave us a run  
For our money too! If you could only have seen—  
As, thanks be, you probably never will now—a British host  
With their waving plumes and blue-painted chariots;  
Their rainbow-coloured kilts of saffron and emerald,  
Azure and Tyrian, and their helmets of bronze,  
You'd think you were back in the age of Troy, and wonder  
How anything so brilliant could have happened  
Under these Boreal skies. The shield of Achilles  
Was not more finely wrought than those which Caradoc  
And the Silurian chieftains bore in battle.  
They died like heroes too . . . No, Britons, take my word for it,  
Are neither better nor worse than you or me.  
They have their own way of life; their own dignities;  
Their own strait standards of honour; their own religion—  
Which is much like ours, by the way, though the names of their gods  
May be different. And when it comes to the arts of peace,  
Their craftsmen can teach us a lot. When we reach the farm,  
The wine you drink may be tart, but the cups you'll drink from  
Are choicer in shape than Samian. Our greatest mistake  
Is our arrogance in forcing these Britons into the mould  
Of Rome, and sneering at all they do or make,  
Not because it's worse than ours, but simply because  
It's British and different . . .

Suppose we quicken  
Our pace a little? I should like you to see  
The view from my terrace before we lose the sun  
And recline for supper. I've told you what I think  
Of the British men. But what of the British women?  
You've been warned against them, no doubt; but take no heed  
Of that, my boy. Should you go ramping round  
Like a randy young bull, it's possible you will get  
More than you bargained for. If your hand is heavy  
You may find you are fondling a tigress. Boudicca was one;  
And Cartimandua, the Brigantine witch  
Who betrayed Caradoc another: and both were queens!  
But tell me: were there never such queens in Rome?  
Even we, in dim, benighted Britain, have heard  
Of Messalina's poisons, and how she played  
With her poor cuckold Claudius—while Agrippina  
Was handy with the same medicine—as Claudius

Found to his cost, and Nero might have found  
To his, had not another queen (and poisoner),  
His sweet Poppæa, taught him matricide!  
Yet I will tell you of one British woman  
Who was no queen, yet queenly in all graces  
And dignities. Her name was Placida,  
And placid was her spirit. We lived together  
For more than thirty years, and she is dead;  
(Gods of the Shades, be gracious!) but no woman  
Of any race could have been wiser, stronger,  
Or tenderer than she—ay, or more beautiful  
In her clean, swift youth—though beauty is a thing  
The memory cannot hold for long. My wife  
Bore me three sons. I wish they were here this evening.  
One is a signifier of the Fourteenth,  
Now on the Danube; the second a centurion  
In my sister legion, Adjutrix, stationed at Deva;  
The third, alas, had little taste for soldiering,  
But may go farther than either of his brothers  
In this long peace: he's a decurion  
Of Verulamium—a coming man  
By all accounts, although I never see him,  
Being a rough old farmer. But all three  
Have half of Britain in their blood, and that  
Seems good to me. You think I'm talking treason?  
But then, an old man as lonely as myself,  
Browsing on memories, has much time for thought;  
And I have often wondered why this empire  
Of ours should have more permanence than those  
Which rose and fell before us: Athens, Macedon,  
Carthage and Egypt . . . Rome will not last for ever;  
And if she withers like a stricken oak,  
Maybe—who knows?—that which was best in her  
May live in lands where the acorns were scattered  
In her green prime—perhaps even in this Britain  
Which she despised. Sometimes I think I see  
This Island as the ultimate sanctuary  
Of ordered life—in which a new Deucalion  
Shall ground his Ark upon a new Parnassus  
To populate a world that has been drowned  
Beneath barbaric floods with the old stock



Of homely, civil virtues. A new Parnassus . . .  
Why not? Who knows but that the Muses may find  
Foothold in Britain?

Enough . . . This is sober talk  
For a lusty lad like you. Old minds are prone  
To meditate upon the past and probe  
A future they will never know—while Youth  
Has far too much to think of in its present,  
Too much to grasp, to worry about either.  
And here's my villa! Note how I have placed it  
To catch the light from dawn to dusk. You may think  
The scale ambitious for a humble veteran;  
But old bones covet comfort. Let me tell you  
What fortune made me master of it. We will sit here  
A moment while we talk; this tawny stone  
Drinks in the sunlight and dispels its warmth  
Slowly . . .

I left the legion, time-expired,  
Ten years ago. The Second had gone West  
To permanent quarters in Isca of the Silures;  
And we, its veterans, had been granted holdings  
In our old station, the new city of Glevum,  
To drag out our declining years—and many  
Were grateful. But not I. I'm a born countryman  
And hate the smell of towns: the city life  
Irked me unbearably. It was about the time  
Of Nero's murder, when the Spanish legions  
Had lifted Galba on their shields. No sooner  
Had he assumed his honours than we, in Britain,  
To whom his name meant next to nothing, heard  
That he, too, had fallen: Otho and Vitellius  
Were scrabbling for the purple like a couple  
Of curs worrying a bone. We only shrugged  
Our shoulders—for it mattered little to us  
Who ruled in Rome so long as we enjoyed  
The peace of Rome in Britain. Then, of a sudden,  
Great news for me! My old friend and commander  
Vespasian had left Judæa to his son Titus,  
And marched on Rome. It seemed the time had come  
When quarrelsome rogues were silenced, and honest men  
Might get their dues. Next year he came to Britain,

And halted at Glevum on his way to inspect  
His old command at Isca. That was a day  
Worth waiting for! Ha . . . I can see it now:  
The great brand-new forum densely lined  
With files of cheering veterans; the Prætorium  
Thick-set with spears and trumpeters—and, in the midst,  
That spare old figure in the faded purple  
Limping along the lines, his wrinkled eyes  
Bright as a bird's, searching the ranks to find  
The face of an old comrade. When he came  
Abreast of me, he halted; and the old smile  
Lightened his leathery face: "What, you, Petronius,  
Old friend? I hardly knew you; for your head's  
White as Soracte in Winter! Many snows  
Have fallen and melted there since last we met.  
So come this evening: we will sup together  
To talk of Tibur and the Sabine Hills,  
And make the lost years live again."

That night  
We talked and laughed till daybreak, happily  
Recalling the small things old men remember,  
And joking in the rough mountain dialect  
We spoke when we were boys—a saltier tongue  
Than your smooth Latin, which was the mean language  
Of plebs and plain-dwellers! And, in the end,  
He tempted me: "Petronius," he said,  
"Why not come back with me to Rome? I shall have need  
Of men whom I can trust—and they are rare."  
And when I shook my head, and told him frankly  
My roots were deep in Britain, he only laughed  
And wrinkled his bright eyes: "Perhaps you are right.  
My friendship may prove dangerous. But tell me,  
Before we part, if you are so determined  
To die in Britain, what can I do for you  
In token of our comradeship?"

I had no shame  
In taking what he offered: I think I had earned it  
By solid years of service, better than many  
Who fawned on him like dogs begging for scraps.  
So, with the gold he gave me, I built this house  
And cleared the forest, and broke up the fields

With a wheeled Gallic *caruca* whose iron coulter  
Bites deeper than the share of the *aratrum*  
With which we plough in Italy; and here  
I set my vineyard with soaked vine-shoots packed  
In moss that Cæsar sent me by his couriers  
From our old Sabine Hills, and trained and pruned them  
With my Calenian knife: no Britain knows  
The vine, or ever will. And here I have lived  
Eight lonely years since my wife Placida  
Left me. You see her tablet: DIIS MANIBUS  
PLACIDA ANNORUM QUINQUAGINTA  
CURAM AGENTE CONJUGE ANNORUM  
TRIGINTA. Yes, thirty years . . . The lettering  
Was chiselled by my foreman. So were these altars  
To our Lares and Penates and Mars, my patron.  
Nodens—that puzzles you?—is a British deity  
Of my wife's country, the March of the Silures:  
She had great faith in Nodens . . .

But sit you down.

Let the dogs sniff your knees: you need have no fear of them  
For all their snarling looks—they know the difference  
Between master and slave without my telling them,  
And keep their fangs for wolves. These British hunting-dogs  
Are famous the world over. Ay, sit you down,  
While the girls light the lamps and cool your wine,  
The *vile Sabinum* of which I spoke to you.  
It's no choice vintage, but you'll find it wholesomer  
And far less heady than the honey-wine  
The Britons brew, or even the barley-beer  
Which they call *Courmi*—not a headache in it!  
And now let your mouth water: we will dine  
On a fish more tasty than any bearded mullet  
That ever floundered in the porphyry fishponds  
Of the new-rich at Baiae: a noble monster,  
With succulent flakes as pink as rosebuds, netted  
By coracle-fishers in the foamy stickles  
Of clear Sabrina this very day. The salmon  
We call it. *Salmo*—the fish that leaps. You'd know  
The reason for the name if once you'd seen them  
Hurling themselves in the air, again and again,  
With the curve of a Parthian bow. And after that

You shall eat well-spiced venison, which that fine fellow  
Who licks your hand bowled over in the woods  
A week ago—and then a roasted pheasant  
Fattened in my pens. We do not fare so badly  
In our outlandish back-of-beyond. In Rome  
Such living as ours would cost a poor pensioner  
A mint of money; nor is my house so comfortless  
As the farm in which I was born. This pavement, bright  
With tesserae of marble, is cool to the feet  
In Summer; but later in the year, when Boreas  
Howls in the thatch and snatches at the shutters,  
The hypocaust, fed with logs of seasoned oak  
And crackling brushwood, warms it so thoroughly  
That a man may walk bare-footed. I love our Winters  
As well as any season, though now, alas,  
My nights are long and lonely, and the days  
Seem shorter than they used to be. That is why  
I welcome visitors, and probably,  
Being old and prosy, bore them with a spate  
Of inconsequent garrulousness. I ask your pardon,  
Claudius Terentius, and will talk no more.  
I lift my cup to you! Dinner is served!

## VI

HIC JACET ARTHURUS REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS . . .

Arthur is gone . . . Tristram in Careol  
Sleeps, with a broken sword—and Yseult sleeps  
Beside him, where the westering waters roll  
Over drowned Lyonesse to the outer deeps.  
Lancelot is fallen . . . The ardent helms that shone  
So knightly and the splintered lances rust  
In the anonymous mould of Avalon:  
Gawain and Gareth and Galahad—all are dust!  
Where do the vanes and towers of Camelot  
And tall Tintagil crumble? where do those tragic  
Lovers and all their bright-eyed ladies rot?  
We cannot tell—for lost is Merlin's magic.  
And Guinevere—call her not back again  
Lest she betray the loveliness Time lent  
A name that blends the rapture and the pain  
Linked in the lonely nightingale's lament,  
Nor pry too deeply, lest you should discover  
The bower of Astolat a smoky hut  
Of mud and wattle—find the knightliest lover  
A braggart, and his Lily Maid a slut;  
And all that coloured tale a tapestry  
Woven by poets. As the spider's skeins  
Are spun of its own substance, so have they  
Embroidered empty legend. What remains?  
This: That when Rome fell, like a writhen oak  
That age had sapped and cankered at the root,  
Resistant, from her topmost bough there broke  
The miracle of one unwithering shoot  
Which was the spirit of Britain—that certain men,  
Uncouth, untutored, of our island brood  
Loved freedom better than their lives; and when  
The tempest crashed about them, rose and stood  
And charged into the storm's black heart, with sword  
Lifted, or lance in rest, and rode there, helmed

With a strange majesty that the heathen horde  
Remembered after all were overwhelmed;  
And made of them a legend, to their chief,  
Arthur, Ambrosius—no man knows his name—  
Granting a gallantry beyond belief,  
And to his knights imperishable fame.  
They were so few . . . We know not in what manner  
Or where or when they fell—whether they went  
Riding into the dark under Christ's banner  
Or died beneath the blood-red dragon of Gwent;  
But this we know: That, when the Saxon rout  
Swept over them, the sun no longer shone  
On Britain, and the last lights flickered out;  
And men in darkness murmured: Arthur is gone . . .

## VII

### NIGHTFALL BY WANSDYKE

*Wessex, A.D. 878. The Scene is the western edge of the limestone escarpment of Mendip. It is a frosty winter evening, and the air is so dry that from this point of vantage the greater part of the swamp of Somerset can be seen outstretched from the foot of these hills to the muddy waters of the Severn Firth. At this season, indeed, the colour of the land is hardly distinguishable from that of the tidal flats; and the seaward prolongations of the Mendip range—Wavering Down, Brean and Bleadon, together with its detached outliers—Brent, Glastonbury Tor, the knoll of Athelny and the little hill of Nyland, appear as insular in character as the two veritable islands—the Steep Holme and the Flat Holme—whose dim shapes are seen in the distance of mid-channel. Apart from these elevations, the whole of the Somerset plain, from Mendip to Quantock, is an undrained morass—a vast sponge of land, over which the tributaries of Axe and Brue and Parret spread a network of stagnant water, made brackish at spring tides by the invasion of the Atlantic.*

*For melancholy, this landscape would be hard to match in any part of Britain save the East Anglian fens or the mosses of Solway; and this sense of desolation is increased by the presence, in the middle distance, of the ruins of what must once have been a human habitation, now fallen to waste, which would have been covered long since by brushwood and weed had the site been less exposed to the violence of the South Wester; and, near this, a reed-thatched hovel shaped like a bee-skip, from the apex of which a thin spiral of pale blue smoke now rises into the still air filling it with the reek of smouldering turves. Outside this hovel there burns another fire of sticks, and two shaggy men are sitting by it, with thick woollen cloaks wrapped over their byrnies of chain-mail. They are, in fact, two of the King's Thegns, or bodyguard, of Ælfred of Wessex. The elder is Ælfric, an atheling of the royal house and of the blood of Cerdic. The younger is Edred, son of the Ældorman of Wilsætán. Both are weary with their long flight from the defeat of the fyrd of Wessex at Chippenham at the hands of the Danes under Halfdene; but Edred, who sits huddled close to the fire; appears to feel the cold more keenly than his grizzled companion.*

EDRED:

How far are we from Athelny?

ÆLFRIC:

Another night  
Of stiff plodding over the hills, and then  
We drop to Glastonbury. Look . . . there it lies.  
The high tor marks it. If we took to the fen  
In these dank winter days we might well flounder  
Knee-deep another week before we reached  
Our bourne.

EDRED:

Yet how I hate these hills: They smell  
Of death. See how those barrows on the down  
Brood over us! I have seen the like before  
Where I was bred, and heard the old men tell  
How, at midnight, dry bones that moulder in them  
Take flesh, and withered fingers clutch their weapons,  
And ghosts of dead men gibber at the doors  
Or sit in awful dumbness. And these stark walls  
That crumble behind us . . . Who knows what witchery  
Clings to their stones? There is a haunted chester  
Hard by my home at Wilton that has lain waste  
Years beyond reckoning—a wilderness  
Of dust and nettles. None of our churls dare dwell  
Beside it or draw near it, even in daylight;  
But when night falls in winter, and the wind  
Howls through its empty streets, the stones awaken  
To shrieks of woe and the loud clashing of shields,  
And panic clatter of hurrying feet that run  
This way and that in shiftless dread. . . .

ÆLFRIC:

They hear  
The rattle of driven leaves, or pads of wolves  
Hunting for conies, and shrieks of night-owls harrying  
Their small game. Stones are speechless; and the dead  
That walk the night, sad souls, grow dim and falter  
If but you sign yourself.



EDRED:

Yet these hills fright me.  
I think we must have come to the world's end,  
And this bank be the brink of it. Have you ever seen  
A waste more threatening than this soaked marshland  
That lies beneath us—its net of waterways  
Brimmed by the red of sunset—as though they ran  
With the blood of an old slaughter, or foretold  
Slaughters to be? Why need our lord have chosen  
A halt unhallowed as this?

ÆLFRIC:

The king was sick,  
And held till his strength dwindled. This is the ill  
That smote him first upon his wedding's morrow  
And lies in wait—so that he never knows  
What time the blow may fall. You have seen the swiftness  
With which it sets on him. First his eyes dazzle;  
Then his head swims, and he must stagger, blind  
As Paul upon the road to Philippi;  
And eft an arrowy ache bores through his skull  
And splits it like an axe, and numbness wilts  
His thews to watery weakness, so that he halts  
Like a foot-rotted wether. It is a mischief  
That neither prayers nor leeches can allay;  
So lie he must until the evil lifteth,  
And we must tarry with him. It ill becomes  
A king's thegn and thegn's son to show such scant  
Forbearance. Asser, the Welch priest, will warn us  
When the pain's fetters slacken. Better snatch  
What sleep you can, as I do; for when he rises  
We must plod on to Athelny.

EDRED:

Forgive me,  
But I am overdone. This homeless faring  
Through the mired ways of Winter quenches all hope  
That ever was in me. It would not irk me, Ælfric,  
If we could see an end to it.

ÆLFRIC:

It is not for us  
To plot the end or seek it. That is work  
For wits more cunning than yours or mine. Enough  
For us that Ælfred leads, and that we follow  
Our king.

EDRED:

A landless king of waste and water!  
There are no kingdoms left in England now.  
See how the wave of heathenesse overflows  
And whelms them one by one! Bernicia,  
Northumbria, Mercia . . .

ÆLFRIC:

Mercia has always played  
Loose with her neighbours. Mercia is English—  
Which is to say half-Dane, more than half-heathen.  
There's not a Mercian but would gloat to see  
The doom of Wessex, and the Danish ravens  
Fattened on her torn flesh!

EDRED:

There your teeth grit  
Upon the gall of truth. Our house is cleft  
Within itself; and how shall we of Wessex  
Tauten the sagging timbers—our king in flight,  
His fyrd dwindled and scattered? I may seem to you  
Redeless and callow; yet I see the years  
That stretch before us yawn as emptily  
As those drear marshlands. I think we have been born  
Beneath a creeping shadow, ruthless as that  
Which erstwhile swallowed up the morning sun  
And made noon midnight. We are the ill-begotten  
Brood of a thriftless fatherhead who, while we lay  
Like a litter of blind whelps, besotted with milk  
And sleep, gave up our birthright and let us wake  
To meet their reckoning. If they had stopped  
The first cracks in the dyke—if they had shown  
Their spunk and driven the first Danes from Sheppey,  
Or drowned them on the seas before they fastened  
Deep roots in Kentish earth, we might have hoped

To stem the seepage. First they were only flighted  
Like woodcock on the North wind driven: now  
There is no tide nor airt that does not bring  
The winged helms and the red sails bearing on us  
From East or South or West: white Danes of Norway,  
Black Danes of Ireland—we are meat for all.  
And now it is too late . . . They have horsed themselves  
On the wild hengests of the Anglian woods,  
And sweep the land, swift as a swaling fire  
In a high wind. There is no inch of England  
From Lindisfarne to Exeter unreddened  
By fire and blood; there is no hidden creek  
But the oared dragons have thrust their greedy snouts  
Within it, snuffling for flesh and plunder.  
And God is blind or deaf . . . Minster and chantry  
Topple their spires together; the holy images  
Are hacked and hewn; Christ's very roods now feed  
The fires that roast His ministers! How could this be  
If He had not forsaken and foredoomed us  
To utter loss? Why, there is nothing fair  
Or seemly but these heathen run to wreck it;  
No learning that they loathe not, and no law  
But they must trample on. Within their pack  
No man has any rights but what he can wrest  
Wolflike from weaker wolves than he. What boots it  
That our king, or another, and his wise men  
Have set down dooms to bind us, if the writ runs  
Unheeded? There is neither law nor learning  
Alive in England now—nor ever will be,  
From what I see of it. This is the end  
Of all our civility: Egyptian night  
Smothers the land; no spark will wink in it  
But one thin taper flickering like a marsh-light  
In Athelny so long as Ælfred lives,  
And, after that, the darkness . . .

ÆLFRIC:

I am neither learned  
Nor over godly—but if my eyes were as yours  
I would liever have left them on the field at Chippenham  
In the last folk-fight to be pecked from their sockets

By Thor's ravens! This is a nothing's talk.  
I'll hear no more of it. If we must die,  
What then? Do we not know that God still whets  
The keen sword of vengeance on the behalf  
Of those who bleed for Christendom, and for a king  
Whom Christ's own vicar has anealed? Our meed  
Is bliss in heaven or freedom on British earth.  
I ask none other. Whist . . . I hear footsteps.  
Hand to your hilt!

*From the ruins of the waste villa a gnomish figure emerges furtively. It is that of a small, dark man, with a bristling grey beard. He is clothed in a leather smock, and his bow-legs are clumsily strapped with bands of the same material. Over his shoulder he carries a bundle of nets. At the sight of the two Saxons he hesitates and halts, looking around him nervously for a way of escape. The loud laugh with which ÆLFRIC greets his appearance seems to reassure him. He changes his mind and comes nearer. There is a look of shy curiosity in the black, humorous eyes that shine through his unkempt thickets of hair. EDRED, too, laughs uneasily, and releases the sword-hilt he has grasped.*

ÆLFRIC:

Who are you, churl? What do you here?

THE MAN:

What do I here? So said the cuckoo's brat  
To the wagtail that hatched him! This is my own toft—  
Or so I thought it. I am a groovier,  
And delve for lead in Mendip; and now I go  
To snare my morrow's meat.

ÆLFRIC:

Who is your lord?

THE MAN:

The first that feeds me. We have no lords in Mendip  
But cold and toil and hunger. We fend for ourselves,  
And ask no leave of any man for the right  
To bide where we were born.

ÆLFRIC:

Tell me your name, then.

THE MAN:

My name is Maccus, son of Rum of the Holloway.

ÆLFRIC:

That is no Christian name! You are a Welchman,  
Or kin of Welch.

THE MAN:

I am a man of Mendip:  
We have no kinship with any other folk,  
And need none. Have you done with me?

ÆLFRIC:

Wait a while!  
Tell me: have any Danes been seen of late  
About your hills?

THE MAN:

Danes? Danes? You mean Redshanks?  
Ay, there was a deal of that fair-headed devilry  
Came to the marshes back of Parret-mouth  
Last harvest, filching corn. You could see their fires  
Specking all Somerset to the fords of Severn;  
But none set foot on Mendip, and we took  
No heed of them.

ÆLFRIC:

You would heed them sore enough  
If once you met with them!

THE MAN:

What should we fear?  
There is naught for them to take and naught for us  
To lose but our lank bones—and them they would never  
Set teeth on, for the hills are riddled with dens  
And grooves and swallet-holes where we could lurk  
As our fathers hid before us till they were gone.  
No outland folk ever abode in Mendip  
Longer than snow on Mayday—though, in old time,

Many have come and gone again. Once, they say,  
Came web-foot men who propped their nests like dabchicks  
On eyots in the meres, and lived like herons  
On fish they jagged—but these were over-nesh  
For Mendip winters, and soon trickled back  
Starved to their fens. They were a sorry folk,  
And baneless. Next, out of the sunrise, came  
An angrier breed, red-maned and horsed in war-wains,  
Who bore the grinning heads of boars and wolves  
And dyed their bodies with woad. These men were tall  
As gods that ride on clouds above a field  
Of slaughter; but when our fathers hid, they fell  
To fighting with one another, and so dwindled  
Till the Romans drove them westward. These same Romans  
Were a cunning folk, of our own hue and kidney,  
Who knew the groovier's craft, and cast the ore  
Our fathers found in shapes of sand and stamped it  
With their king's runes. They brought their gods with them  
And built stone housen, and a shallow pit  
Where cocks and men were set to fight. Long ages  
They dwelt with us; then, like the swallows, packed  
And flew from Mendip, leaving their gods to crumble  
In the waste Chester; and a guileless brood,  
Skirted like women, with close-shaven heads,  
Sailed over Severn from Gwent and broke their altars,  
Bidding us worship a man the Romans slew,  
Yet found us and our hills too cold, and took  
Their god to Glastonbury. Next came King Ceawlin,  
With a wild host flaxen-haired, who swung the axe  
And guzzled ale like swine . . .

ÆLFRIC:

Now heed your words!

This Ceawlin was a Saxon, and those stout drinkers  
Were our forefathers!

THE MAN:

Time has ripened their sons  
And made them milder. It has been so with all  
Who ever dwelt in Mendip but us, whose roots  
Are tough as those of hews bird-sown in clefts

And cracks of thirsty stone, and have no pride  
Of branch but the brine burns and the wind lops it,  
Keeping us hard and lowly. Your folk will last  
No longer than the Roman. Now come these Redshanks.  
They, too, will bide their while and go their ways  
As Merlin's rede foretold.

ÆLFRIC:

Who was this Merlin?

THE MAN:

What? Know you not Merlin? He was the wisest druid  
That ever went in Britain, and this his weird:  
“*Woe to the Red Dragon,*” he said—and that was Rome—  
“*The White Dragon shall seize his lurking holes*”—  
That was the Saxon—“*and Britain shall lie wet  
With night tears. Then shall the Danish wood be stirred.  
And cry, on a man's speech: 'Come, Cambria!  
Bind Cornwall to thy side; tell Winchester  
The earth shall swallow her!' Usk shall burn seven months  
And Badon's baths grow cold. The bones of Kings  
Shall bleach upon the waste. The floors of harvest  
Shall turn again to forest, and evil weeds  
Riot within the City of the Legions  
And all men starve—till, out of Winchester,  
Three streams shall break, and these three sunder Britain  
Into three shares, and the twelfth Bretwalda  
Shall build a fleet of ships . . .*”

ÆLFRIC:

Enough, enough  
Of this rambling. I see no wisdom in it.

THE MAN:

It has this wisdom: that, when you are gone  
And those that follow you, Britain will still be Britain  
And Mendip ours . . . till the King come again.

ÆLFRIC:

Your king is come.

THE MAN:

What? Arthur?

ÆLFRIC:

He is named Alfred

Of the West Saxons.

THE MAN:

I never heard that name.

ÆLFRIC:

Nor yet I Arthur's. Who is this king of yours?

THE MAN:

Arthur is gone . . . But he will come again  
Riding to Camelot on a May morning  
When hawthorn-buds are swollen, and the dykes  
Golden with water-blobs and fringed with spears  
Of yellow marsh-flags; and a glittering host  
Will ride behind him—Tristram and Lancelot  
And Gawain—to give back freedom to the earth  
And Britain to her own . . .

ÆLFRIC:

Quick! On your knees!

Here comes the King!

*(Two figures emerge from the hut. The first is a cleric, ASSER, the Welchman, newly appointed bishop of Sherborne. He is a dark little man, hardly taller than the groovier, with eager, intelligent features and a Roman tonsure. The second is ÆLFRED himself: a fair man of slender build and middle height. His face, clean-shaven but for a reddish moustache, is still pale and pinched with pain, and his blue eyes are narrowed, as if they still feared the light, though it is now dusk. When he sees the two thegns he raises his hands and smiles.)*

ÆLFRED:

I have kept you a long while; but now it is over  
And I am myself again. Who is this knave?

ÆLFRIC:



A man of the hills. He has whiled away our waiting  
With his silly talk.

ÆLFRED:

Better let him be gone.  
I have much to tell you of what ran through my mind  
While I lay gripped with anguish: At such times,  
Though outwardly I be blinded, the inward eye  
Sees sharper in grief's night, than in health's noon;  
And, when pain dims the sight, that which was clouded  
Takes hopeful shape. And even as the burdock  
That soothes the nettle's sting grows next the nettle,  
So, next the mischief of to-day, I have seen  
The healing of tomorrow. Britain is broken  
Beyond mending—there's not one kingdom can boast  
Strength greater than another's: therefore should those  
Who grudged their neighbours' might take heart from it,  
Old wrongs forgotten, and clasp hands to stay  
The ill that threatens all. This is the time  
When one strong will may weld all broken folk  
Who share our blood in Britain—from Hadrian's dyke—  
Ay, and beyond it—to the Exe, to stand  
By their lost brotherhood. One land, one folk  
Forged in war's smithy . . .

ÆLFRIC:

None will ever bring  
Mercia to stand by Wessex, or Northumbria  
To stand by either—and the East English love us  
As little as the West Welch.

ÆLFRIC:

Your eyes are bleared  
By an old, backward-looking bitterness.  
What say you, Edred?

EDRED:

Mayhap mine are too young  
To see beyond to-morrow. I can say nothing  
But that the King's sight flies too far for me  
To follow.

ÆLFRED:

Yet you may be young enough  
To see the end I have dreamed of. Here's a vision  
For shorter-sighted eyes. Your fathers and mine  
Were erst sea-faring folk who sailed to Britain  
Over salt water, but found so fat a living  
That they forgot their seacraft. Now we are tied  
To the plough's tail, and dread to dab our feet  
In the brine that we were born to; while these Danes  
Fare where they will and flick at us like gadflies  
From every wind. Therefore, if we would thwart them,  
We must turn seamen. Our flat-bottomed hoys  
Of Frisian build can never match their longships  
In speed or handling—but there's no lack of oak  
Nor yet of shipwright's cunning in the coves  
And creeks of Britain. Our first need is ships  
More speedy and more heavily-oared than theirs  
And loftier in the bulwark, so that they loom  
Above their benches and they cannot board us.  
Such is the work that I have set myself  
While we lie lost in Athelny, gathering  
Our dwindled strength. I will build such a fleet  
Of ships . . .

ÆLFRIC:

Hearken, Edred! This is the weird  
Of Merlin. Do you mind it? *The twelfth Bretwalda*  
*Shall build a fleet of ships . . .*

ÆLFRED:

Who is this Merlin?

ASSER:

That I can tell you. He was a devilish wizard  
Of Gwent, who cast so many haphazard prophecies  
Into the winnowing wind that some few grains  
Of sooth still settle from his clouds of chaff  
And make the credulous gape. I would have burned him  
And all his prophecies!

ÆLFRED:

Yet he spoke truth:  
For I am Bretwalda—and, by the Grace of God,  
I will build my fleet. So, on to Athelny!

## VIII

THE BALLAD OF ST. KENELM

A.D. 821

In our sweet shires of Mercia  
Five blessed Saints we had;  
Four were proud Princes of the Church,  
And one was a little lad.  
Wistan, Wulstan, Oswald, Chad:  
Each hallowed Mercia's realm;  
But the saint we love all others above  
Is little Saint Kenelm.  
Kenelm was but a child of seven  
And his father seven weeks dead,  
When in Lichfield town they set the crown  
Of kingship on his head,  
And hailed him as their anointed king,  
While all the Mercian lords  
Took oath to stand at Kenelm's hand  
On the cross-hilts of their swords;  
And the bronze bells of Lichfield clanged  
And rocked their towers of stone,  
That God had sent an innocent  
To sit on Offa's throne;  
While folk that laboured in the fields  
Heard the bells clang with joy,  
And thronged the ways to cheer and gaze  
On the beauty of the boy.  
But his sister Quendryth in her bower  
Brooding stayed apart;  
Alone she sate, with naught but hate  
And black gall in her heart,  
And a sour face thrawn with bitterness  
That this weak child should own  
The shining prize for which her eyes  
Most lusted: Mercia's crown.  
So sent she for her paramour—  
Lord Escebert was his name—

And whispered near his willing ear  
These words of dark shame:  
“We twain are one in will and flesh,  
And but for one small thing  
I should have been thy crowned queen  
And thou my wedded king;  
“And that small thing is but the breath  
Of my father’s brat, Kenelm.  
Give me his life, and wed me wife,  
And we will share this realm!”  
Then Escebert, her paramour,  
Pondered Quendrytha’s rede,  
And searched his mind some way to find  
To compass that dark deed.  
And as it chanced, that very month,  
The Lords of Mercia went  
To hunt the wolf in Offa’s Wood  
That shags the hills of Clent:  
A deep wood and a dark wood,  
For black deeds meet, where grew  
A brambled brash of oak and ash,  
Hazel and holly and yew.  
And when into the wood’s green heart  
He saw the hunters ride,  
Then Escebert slipped behind, and clipped  
Himself to Kenelm’s side.  
“Good Escebert, they ride too fast:  
Forsake me not, I pray,  
When through the thorns the wail of horns  
Shivers and dies away!”  
“Let them ride on, my little king:  
No matter how far they go,  
You need have no fear of wolf or bear  
With me at your saddle-bow.”  
“Good Escebert, a thorn has hurt  
My pony’s hoof, I fear:  
The dusk now broods on these wild woods  
And the black of night draws near.”  
“Content thyself, my little king,  
Nor dread the fading light:  
Full well I wot of a woodward’s cot

Where we may bide this night.”  
“Good Escebert, I am athirst,  
And my tongue cleaves to my mouth.”  
“I know of a spring, my little king,  
To slake and quench thy drouth.”  
But when they came to a woodland brook,  
And the child, unaware,  
Knelt by the brink and bent to drink,  
A sword flashed in the air;  
And the shorn head of little Kenelm  
Reddened the brook with blood,  
While Escebert leapt to his saddle and crept  
Like a wolf from Offa’s Wood.  
Loose-reined he rode through the dark night  
Till he came to the hall of a thane  
Where the huntsmen rolled with ale and told  
Of the fierce wolves they had slain.  
“Ho, Escebert, good lord,” they cried,  
“Come join our wassailing!  
For you have missed our drinking-tryst  
To ride with the little king.”  
Then Escebert’s false cheek grew wan:  
“God witness what I say!  
I have not seen Kenelm, I ween,  
Since noon of yesterday,  
“Nor can I guess what ways he strayed:  
So quit your wassail-board,  
That all may search oak ash and birch  
To find our little lord!”  
A weary week those woods they searched  
By holt and holm and glade;  
But neither eye nor foot drew nigh  
The place where he was laid;  
And never a single whisper woke  
Those brambly solitudes  
But the rustle that spreads from the wind-stirred heads  
Of wild trees in the woods.  
(Hazel, hazel, bend your boughs  
Over the streamlet’s bed,  
And with your primrose pollen gild  
A halo for his head!

Holly, holly, shake your branch  
Till the brittle leaves rain down,  
And weave about the dead child's brow  
A martyr's thorny crown!  
Cherry, cherry, shed your snow  
Of petals in a cloud,  
And on the little limbs below  
Spread a soft shroud!  
Yew tree, yew tree, over him  
Your funeral pennons wave;  
But let not your bright berries drip  
Their blood upon his grave,  
To fleck the whiteness of the shroud  
That the wild cherry strewed  
On the gentlest fawn that ever was torn  
By wolf in Offa's Wood!)  
So home the hunt to Lichfield rode  
And the bronze bells clanged again  
A muffled toll for the innocent soul  
Of the child that had been slain;  
And folk who heard the tolling wept,  
For they knew what it must mean;  
And the Mercian Lords swore on their swords  
To hold Quendrytha queen.  
Now far away in Italy,  
Under Peter's dome,  
Frail and old on his throne of gold  
Slept Paschal, Pope of Rome.  
A weary man, an aged man  
Of four score years and seven;  
And in his listless hands he held  
The Crossed Keys of Heaven.  
*Holy, Holy, Holy!*  
The children's voices swell,  
While sweet and loud, through the incense-cloud  
Shivers the Sanctus Bell;  
And as they heard the silvery chime,  
From the clouded vault above  
Like a falling flake of cherry-bloom  
Fluttered a milk-white dove  
That held a quill in his golden bill

And laid it on the Host,  
And all the people rose and cried:  
“See, see: the Holy Ghost!”  
“A miracle . . . A miracle!”  
So loud a cry there broke  
That the old Pope rubbed his rheumy eyes  
And dropt his keys, and woke!  
And he called three scarlet cardinals  
To read out what was writ  
On the parchment folded within the quill,  
But they could not fathom it.  
“These words are writ in rhyme,” they said,  
“And the tongue of a far land  
That none in Rome or Christendom  
Is like to understand.  
“Yet all strange peoples come to Rome,  
So let the rhyme be heard;  
Some ear may catch the sound and match  
The sense to fit the word”:  
*In Clent coubethe Kenelm Kynebear lith  
Under thorne hævedes bereaft.*  
Then up spoke an old Saxon clerk:  
“Sirs, you have given news  
Of the bloodiest deed that ever was done  
Since Christ was slain by the Jews:  
“That in Cowbeath, which is by Clent,  
Midmost in Mercia’s realm,  
Beneath a thorn, his head off-shorn,  
Lieth our king, Kenelm.”  
So the Pope blessed that screed, and with  
The ring of Peter sealed,  
And bade that Saxon carry it  
To his Bishop, in Lichfield.  
Then, once again, from Lichfield towers,  
The bells boomed overhead;  
And the Mercian thanes rode out again  
To search for Kenelm’s head;  
And when they came to the woods of Clent  
And rode into the shade,  
Behold—a shaft of blinding light  
Fell where the child was laid!



So, tenderly, they lifted him  
And bore him to his tomb  
In Winchcombe, where our Mercian kings  
Lie till the Day of Doom;  
But as through Winchcombe's mourning street  
They passed by slow degrees,  
Quendrytha at her window sate  
With the Bible on her knees.  
She read of false Queen Jezebel,  
And when they spied the hearse  
That carried Kenelm, her wicked eyes  
Spat blood upon the verse.  
And the common folk, who saw this thing,  
Knew what it meant full well,  
And flung her down into the street  
To lie like Jezebel;  
And Escebert, her foul paramour,  
They slew him where he stood;  
And those twain lay for a week and a day,  
And the dogs lapped their blood.  
But the king's lords buried little Kenelm  
With pomp in Winchcombe's fane,  
And built a chantry for pilgrim-folk  
By the brook where he was slain;  
And the waters that well from where he fell  
All mortal ills assuage—  
Not even Saint Thomas of Canterbury  
Hath greater pilgrimage  
Than the innocent king of Mercia  
That his sister's leman slew  
And hid in the brash of oak and ash,  
Hazel and holly and yew!  
Wistan, Wulstan, Oswald, Chad:  
All pray for Mercia's realm;  
But our loveliest saint was a little lad;  
King Kynewulf's son, Kenelm.

## IX

THE TALE OF ÆDWULF THE DISPOSSESSED      A.D. 1080

It was the black year when King Edward died,  
And the Octave of Easter in April, that Wulfgeat, my father,  
Dragged me forth from deep sleep and flung wide the window-shutters  
Bidding me gaze at the heavens, and, therein hanging  
Bright over Bredon, the star men called the Comet  
Trailing its horrid tresses with such fierceness  
That lesser lights grew wan, as when the moon  
Quenches their shine. And my father said to me:  
“Son, this is no mean portent, but one that foreshadoweth  
Dooms that we dream not. No living eye hath seen  
The like of it since the time when Swegen and Olaf  
Reddened the reign of Ethelred the Redeless;  
And let none doubt but that God’s sword is unsheathed  
To flash and fall on England. Wherefore, at daybreak,  
We will ride to Evesham and make our peace with heaven  
Ere worse befall. Our kinsman, Ælfwine the Abbot,  
Shall shrive our souls; and I will give his Abbey  
The lands by the Whitsun brook and the watermill  
Which was your brother’s portion before he turned monk  
And left us.”

So I, Ædwulf, arose, sore in heart,  
And rode with him sullenly—for, being the eldest,  
I grudged to see those fair fields and the watermill  
By the pools where I had fished for perch as a lad  
Go to feed the fat Abbey of Evesham. Yet was I dutiful  
As became my father’s son—and in aftertime  
Have had cause to bless the cold hand that robbed me then  
Of my rights; since now I would rather see them sealed  
In the Abbey’s honour than wrung from me like the rest  
By the Norman Urse and his bear-cubs!

A full week

The comet shone in the sky; and many were driven  
By dread to shiftless penitence; yet the doom  
Betokened fell not on them—though many rumours

Ran through the shires: how that Duke William, the Bastard,  
False kinsman of our new King, Harold Godwineson,  
Denied his right, boasting he had sworn away  
That heritage in his favour; how William stayed  
Gathering sails in Normandy to swoop  
On England unawares, and had suborned  
Pope Alexander to hallow his enterprise;  
How that King Harold, stedfast in the certainty  
Of his chrismed kingship and the inheritance  
King Edward, dying, gave him, now swept the channel  
With such a well-found fleet as had not furrowed  
The waves since Alfred died, and his weak heirs  
Left half his ships to lie with rotting ribs  
In the Cornish creeks. Neither did these tales fright us  
(Mayhap King Edward's peace had sapped our wits)  
Nor had we dread of foreigners: many such  
Had dwelt long time among us: some thanes of Denmark,  
Old servants of King Cnut, and some few Normans—  
Earl Ralph of Hereford, Richard son of Scrob,  
Who, riding from their towers on Offa's Dyke  
(That now sprang up like mushrooms in an orchard  
Grazed by a stallion,) and keeping the March of Powys,  
Clipped the Welsh dragon's claws and stayed his ravaging  
Of Severnside. Nor had we any fear  
Of William and his barons; since we knew  
Harold a proven warrior, and his housecarls  
Unmatched in battle. So, shriven, we slept sound  
While the doom-star flared beneath a waxing moon  
And waned to a snuffed candle-wick, and went out,  
And the mild, familiar stars stole over Bredon  
Once more from dusk to dawn.

That was a season

Of kindest showers and warm sun, promising  
A plenteous harvest; but, when the bearded grain  
Bent its ripe ears for reaping, there came word  
That Harold Hardrada had broken forth from Norway  
And fallen on Northumbria, while Harold of England  
Now rode loose-reined to meet him. And my father,  
Being a king's thane, and bounden by that honour,  
Took down his rusty mail and whetted the bite  
Of his double-handed battle-axe. Hotly I pleaded

To ride with him; but he denied me, saying:  
“This is no stripling’s play. You are over-young  
For such stern service. See, I have but two sons,  
And one vowed to the cloister. Should you fare with me  
And we two fall together, who would fend  
For your mother and sisters? Nay, if I take the sword,  
Take you the sickle and tend the fields and see  
Our harvest reaped and garnered. If I should die  
In the King’s battle, then will he care for you  
As the son of one who served him. But if fortune  
Turn against Harold, remember: you are his man,  
And owe him a thane’s fealty till your death.”  
Then he spoke darkly: “These are but the first-fruits  
Of the dooms that star foretold. Let no man doubt  
That our fyrd can crack the Northmen; for we are swift  
In movement, and our Saxon battle-axes  
Bite deeper than theirs, I reckon. But if news travel  
By any traitorous tongue to Normandy  
Whispering Duke William that the English fleet  
Keeps not the southern sea, and that our King  
Speeds to the North to grapple with Hardrada  
A hundred leagues away, then may he catch  
His moment, and hurl his host on the naked shores  
Of Kent and Sussex—and, if that befall,  
Then God help England!—for no lesser hand  
Can save our necks from the dominion  
Of a foreign yoke. Such ills could never have been  
Were we but one in spirit; but the King’s realm  
Is riven by bitter jealousies and sapped  
By treasons that have burrowed underground  
Like oonts since Edward’s faltering hand forsook  
The sceptre for the breviary, and, fumbling  
For a heavenly diadem, left the crown of England  
Fallen in the dust while subtle foreign priests  
Battened on English bishoprics: Robert of Jumièges  
Sat throned in Canterbury, and William, the king’s chaplain,  
Still holds the see of London; and other strangers  
Have Wells and Hereford. Nor can the sons  
Of Godwine, the King’s blood-brothers, be fully trusted  
To take his part: Tostig has ranged himself  
With Harold Hardrada; and the Northern Earls,

Edwin and Morcar, sit lightly in their saddles,  
Unstirrupped, to leap which side they list should Harold  
Falter or fall. Now all our loyalties  
Lie in God's hand; and you, lad, should be grateful—  
Though you looked crabbed about it!—that I gave  
The Whitsun lands to Evesham.”

So he blessed me,  
And spake no more, but smiled, and bade me follow him  
To the Manor, where my sisters Eadhild and Eadgyth  
Scrubbed his chain-shirt and burnished it with sand  
From the Whitsun brook's bright shallows, laughing, child-like,  
And vying with one another for the prize  
Of polishing his head-piece. And my mother  
Laughed with her lips to see them; but her eyes  
Though tearless had no brightness, and I guessed  
Her heart was emptier than mine. And once  
I saw my father look at her, and her lips  
Trembled, yet smiled again; and she turned away  
Hurriedly, calling on the maids to bring  
Meats from her store to stuff his saddlebags  
With provender for the journey. Then little Eadhild  
Chirped like a wren: “Father! Come, father! See  
How silver-bright your helm is burnished. Look!  
You must put it on and see yourself in the mirror!”  
But Eadgyth sulked: “It is no better burnished  
Than the ugly shirt I scrubbed. See how the rust  
Reddens my finger-nails!” And he, to please them,  
With a grave mien armed himself, cap-à-pie,  
As the Normans say, turning this way and that  
To show his glory—while our great hound Bran  
Gazed at him with anxious eyes and thrashed his tail,  
Not knowing what mood could have moved so grave a man  
As his master to play; and the two children danced  
About him, boasting of their handiwork,  
Crying: “Rode there ever a king's thane out of Mercia  
More knightly than our father? When the King sees him  
His eyes will dazzle! Ay, and father will tell  
How two small maidens in Worcestershire, Eadgyth and Eadhild,  
Thus preened him for the fight. But now,” they said,  
“We must burnish sword and axe.” And when she heard them  
My mother's brows were knitted, as though her eyes

Were hurt by the fancy that such gentle fingers  
Should handle such grim tools. So she forbade them.  
And now came Cerdic—he who first taught me to ride,  
And was our staller, a halting, bright-eyed old man  
With a slant mouth and a shrewd face as warty  
As a notched crook cut from a blackthorn thicket, leading  
Two saddled horses: one was my father's grey,  
A Picard stallion with hot blood of Aragon  
Lightening his bone to fleetness, and the other  
Our plodding thill-horse, Grim, that was twelve year old,  
Slow-paced and patient-natured, having been wont  
To plough in the yoke with oxen—yet wise enow  
To guide the furrow straight if the ploughman nodded;  
And Cerdic held both of them dearer than his wife  
(Who was a shrewish body) and they, in return,  
Loved him as rarely, though when the grey was younger  
And mettlesome in mating, it had cracked a leg for him  
And made him limp for life!

I reckon my father  
Was loth to tarry longer; for he kissed the two maids  
And swung himself to the saddle nimbly, for all  
The weight of his harness. But when my mother drew near  
He stooped, and took her face in his hands, and kissed her,  
But spoke no word; and she kissed him again, with closed eyes.  
Now I knew naught of love, being but a boy  
And simple in all such ways; yet I think no kiss  
Spoke ever deeper of love than theirs, being given  
Not in the heat of desire but in pure tenderness  
To a woman whose beauty had waned long since in the bearing  
Of children and homely labours. And she laid her fingers,  
That were roughened by toil, on his hand that held the rein,  
Till the tall grey tossed his head and moved on,  
And her hand fell limp to her side, and she turned and went  
With downbent eyes to her bower . . .

But the great hound, Bran, who had stood  
With head on one side, in doubt of what was afoot,  
When he saw the two riders move to the verge of the woods  
Threw back his jowl and bayed for joy, for he thought  
They were going a-hunting wolves, and leapt after them eagerly  
With his long loping stride, till my father swerved in his saddle  
Halloaing 'Home, Bran! Home!'; and the hound, for a moment,

Stood still with one paw uplifted, gazing after them,  
Then trotted back, cowed and puzzled; nor would he heed me  
Howsoever I petted and called him. . . So they rode Northward;  
And I, with a dreary heart, betook myself  
To the fields of harvest and toiled there, thinking thereby  
To lighten my load of gloom—but all in vain.  
Now this was the twentieth day of September, the feast  
Of Saint Matthew Evangelist, and a week and a day to go  
To Michaelmas. Never in all my life have I seen  
An Autumn more richly dight; for early frost  
Had touched the elms, and the corn-lands of Avon  
Lay floored with golden stubbles. The apple-orchards  
Drooped with their bounteous burdens, and the wild pears  
Robed with vermilion flared in pyramids  
Of flame against the darkening woods. By night  
The brown owls swooped across the stars and filled  
The sky with whinnings and hag-like scratches,  
Hunting for shrews and flittermice, so that none  
Could sleep for their shrill carnival. One such night  
When Bran was couched beside me—for since the hour  
That my father went he had moped all day in the hall  
Miserable of mute bereavement, more like a Christian  
Than a dumb brute, for ever cherishing  
A cast clout of his master's that still kept  
The smell of him—on one such night, I say,  
In the dark of the moon, Bran started to his feet  
And opened his fanged throat in such a bellow  
As made the rafters shake; nor could I calm him,  
For the dog was distraught, and panted and paced the hall  
Like a sad soul in purgatory, dismally howling  
As one that bays the moon. But there was no moon . . .  
So at dawn my mother stole to my side and said:  
“What was amiss with Bran?” And I lied to her,  
Saying he was angered by the pattering feet  
Of rats in the thatch, and that bats had flown into the hall,  
Chased by the owls, and fluttering in aimless circles  
Had maddened him. Whereat the maidens, hearing  
My tongue stammer of bats, screamed out in fear  
Of the foul mice tangling their unbraided tresses;  
But my mother sighed and gazed and shook her head;  
And I ran afield rather than face her, knowing, as she did

That my father had fallen . . .

There were partridges in the stubble  
Pecking for ungleaned grain; but I never thought  
To set a springe for them; and the grey fisherman  
That pored on the minnowed shallow flapped his wings  
And flew unscathed to his heronry—for I had no heart  
To fly my falcons, though the young peregrine  
Was a fierce hearner. And a week passed.

It was Michaelmas  
When the ill word came by old Cerdic, limping home  
With the lamed thiller, and, slung from his saddle-bow,  
My father's sword and helm and the shirt of mail  
They had stripped, at my father's behest, from his warm body  
Before they buried him. "Take these," he had said,  
"To my son Ædwulf. Tell him that Harold Godwinson  
Hath utterly broken the host of Harold Hardrada  
At Stamfordbridge on Derwent, and his king  
Now hastens southward to uphold his rights  
Against his cousin of Normandy, disembarked  
At Pevensey. And tell Ædwulf that his hand  
Must grasp this sword that has dropped from mine, and wield it  
In Harold's service and in the honour of England  
Unto his death. And so God help him!" Then I  
Took the sword from him, kissing the hilt, and swore  
To serve as my father had bidden me, and put on  
My father's helm and byrnie, and strode to the bower  
To tell my mother; and she, first seeing me  
Loom in the doorway with the light behind,  
Thought it had been my father, and stretched out her hands  
To clasp me, crying: "Dear love, art thou come indeed?  
I had thought thee lost for ever and my heart was broken."  
Then little Ædhild laughed: "This is not my father,  
But brother Ædwulf. I know him by the brown mole  
At the side of his nosepiece." And I cried: "Mother,  
It is I . . ." But she thrust me from her in anger. I think  
She never forgave me the trick I played that day,  
Though indeed it was no trick, but the thoughtless vanity  
Of a youngster pranked in armour.

She was a strange woman,  
Kin to that lady Godiva, wife of Earl Leofric,  
Who rode stark-stripped through Coventry; and I never knew her



As a son should know his mother; for all her love  
Had been given to my father, and none left for her sons,  
And I never saw tears in her eyes but on that one day.  
Thus, on the morrow, I went from my home, ill-mounted  
For a thane and a thane's son, on the halting thill-horse,  
And Cerdic behind me, riding on a shaggy pony  
That was half-Welchman and barely broke. Old Bran  
Watched me go listless; for his spirit was gone, and the ribs  
Stared through his brindled hide. One look he gave me  
Of neither joy nor pain; then dropped his head  
On his paws and blinked his eyes. Four days we rode  
Clean over Cotswold to the cold clay stubbles  
Of Essex, where Harold lay gathering his powers  
At Waltham Holy Cross. And though doom still darkened  
My mind, yet must I grant that this sudden journey,  
With the glory of battle before it, quickened the blood  
Of a youth who had never ranged farther than Worcester, and now  
Beheld the world opened wide, and had come to manhood  
And the pride of arms in a single hour, and for copper  
Bore gold in his purse. So, when I rode through the city  
Of Oxford, it seemed to me gowned merchants gaped  
To see so gallant a warrior, and maidens stared  
At my tall helm, smiling kindly—though, like as not,  
They were wondering in what outlandish wood or waste  
Of uttermost Mercia this uncouth stripling-in-arms  
Had gotten his horse from the tail of the plough and dragged  
His shaggy hind to follow him!

On the fifth day we came  
To the new Abbey of Waltham, where I did homage  
To Harold of England; and the King, in requital  
For my father's blood, gave me, by writ and seal,  
Seizin of all his lands, free of redemption;  
Yet he hardly looked at me—and I who had yearned  
To see him royally robed in ermine with a gold crown  
On a high throne, saw a plain man, no taller than myself,  
Wan-featured, haggard-eyed, and garbed not in gold  
But in a woollen shirt, such as my mother wove,  
Bearing no token of kingship: and I felt I was cheated,  
Like a child, when minstrel and mummer come not at Christmas,  
Being mired in mud or snowdrift.

But two things I saw there

Bide with me yet: how, first, in the hush of evening  
I saw the King walk with a woman in the closed garth  
Of the Abbey cloisters. Never had I dreamt such rareness  
In shape or hue as hers—for her hair, unbraided  
Shone like wind-rippled barley, and her throat  
Showed moonpale in the dusk as doth the wild cherry  
Or March windflower in Werewood; and when she bent  
Her lissom body toward him she swayed like a birch-tree  
Or aspen puffed by a gust of April, that curtseys  
But to recover; and when they walked more swiftly  
She seemed to feather the earth rather than tread it,  
As doth the lightfoot plover that skims to her landing  
And runs before she lights. So, when I stood ravished  
By her beauty, and asked her name of a man-at-arms  
Who stared beside me, he laughed: “What? Have you not heard  
Of Eadgyth Swan-neck, the King’s paramour? It is she—  
And a tastier morsel, I reckon, than the Welch King’s widow,  
Who is his lawful wife! See what it is  
To be a king, and gobble the first dainty  
That whets your fancy!” And I, having been nursed  
In the rustic modesty of my mother’s ways,  
Felt shamed by the King’s lightness, yet, no less, stirred  
By the warmth of his dalliance.

Next, I remember

How, on the morrow, Harold, with kingly pomp  
And lordly company, paid his last penance,  
Laying upon the high altar a rich oblation  
Of treasure, and holy relics reft from the shrine  
Of King Edward in Westminster. Humbly he prayed  
For the grace of victory, vowing, if that were granted,  
To be God’s ransomed servant all his days.  
Then turned he to depart; and the black-robed canons  
Slow-footed followed him under the new-cut ashlar  
Of their pillared nave. But when he came to the galilee  
Where the Holy Rood of Montacute fronts the West,  
He flung himself down in the dust, and lay abased,  
Flat on his face; and the thorn-crowned head of Christ  
Bowed sorrowfully above him and bent downward,  
As though the carved lips murmured: “It is finished . . .”  
But this omen the King saw not, though Thurkill, the Sacrist,  
Marked and remembered it; and Harold, for sure,

Thought that his prayer had been granted; for now his face shone  
Like that of a saint in glory, and the splendour  
Of its majesty overbore me through all that day  
While we rode to the city of London, and crossed the bridge  
Where grim heads of traitors grinned from the parapet  
Of the gatehouse, and a gay throng babbled about us,  
Noisy as crows at Craycombe in their nesting  
When the twigged trivets are tossed, and the March wind  
Roars through the naked wood.

Six days we tarried

In London, undetermined; for Gyrth, the King's brother,  
Earl of East Anglia, withstood his purpose  
To fall on William with that dwindled host,  
Hard-riden and battle-weary. "Rather," he said,  
"Let me ride forth short-handed, and call the Norman  
To single combat, seeing I am not bounden  
By any oath of homage, however given,  
So risk no charge of perjury; and if he disdain  
To lift my gage, then let me harry the shires  
From London to the sea, and burn the harvest  
So that he starve in the waste!"

And the court cried

This was good counsel; but Harold would have none of it.  
"Never," he swore, "will I burn an English village  
Or an English house! Never will I hurt the lands  
Or goods of any Englishman! How should I plunder  
The folk who ate put under me to govern  
As their just King?"

Thus, on the seventh day,

He led us forth from London over the marshes  
To the white-scarred Kentish downland, pied with cloud  
And crisped with crinkling hoar-frost—a rare field  
For falconry; but by sunset we were swallowed  
By the forest of the Weald, where the shy roebuck  
Scattered like ghosts (and I wished old Bran were with me!)  
Till night fell, and the charcoal-burner's fires  
And gleed of smelting-hearths winked through dim glades  
Wreathed in sweet-smelling woodsmoke. Darkling we rode  
Till we came at dawn to the Andrædasweald,  
Where a waste Chester crumbles, that was once  
A city of the Romans, and from the verge

Of smooth downs stared upon the glassy sea  
Where the fleet of Normandy bobbed like a flight of mallard  
Floating upon a mere, and their sprinkled sails  
Scudded this way and that as when the breast-feathers  
Are plucked from a goose at Michaelmas.

It was the Eve

Of Saint Calixtus (though who Calixtus was  
Or why Rome hallowed him I know not) when,  
On the long ridge called Senlac we pitched our camp  
By the hoar apple-tree. Many have asked me  
What force we had at Hastings; and the Normans,  
To gild their own glory, have magnified our number  
Beyond belief or measure. Yet this I know:  
There were nigh three thousand housecarls, sorely-trying  
In the battle with Harold Hardrada, and besides  
Eight or nine thousand more, free men, such as I,  
Who had ridden from far shires alone, and many  
Who brought their followers: Breme of East Anglia;  
Esegar the Staller, Sheriff of Middlesex,  
Who led the fyrd of London; Ælfric of Huntingdon;  
Godric of Fifhide; Thurkill, the Dane, a Lord  
Of Berkshire; two mitred Abbots—Ælfric of Winchester,  
Who was the King's own uncle, Earl Godwine's brother,  
With twelve monks from his Abbey, and Leofric  
Abbot of Peterborough, with his own chaplain  
Easric the Deacon—ay, and a dozen more  
Whose names I disremember. But there was none  
Rode from Northumbria, where the earls Edwin and Morcar  
Still waited on the issue. It was the East  
And the South that fed us with a multitude  
Of homespun folk who had dropped their sickles and flocked  
From Wessex and East Anglia, armed with few weapons  
But the tools of their husbandry—pikels and flails,  
Hayforks and blackthorn staves hacked from the hedge—  
And had no body-armour and no buckler  
But their lust for freedom and their fixed intent  
To rid their land of strangers.

On that night

Few slept, for all their weariness. I have been told  
The Normans kept vigil on their knees and were shriven  
By the fierce Bishop of Bayeux—who had better

Repented his own deeds of blood than pardoned  
The sins of others—but we were a merry folk  
By nature—and the merrier that our consciences  
Were lighter than theirs; so, while the watchfires flared  
And the harps twanged, we gathered round them, roaring  
The battle-song of Brunanburh, and sang  
Of the three who kept the bridge against the Dane  
When Byrhtnoth fell at Maldon; and every heart  
Waxed great with courage of our right. So dawned  
The day of Saint Calixtus . . .

Harold had set  
Our line of battle cunningly. Behind us  
Lay the woods of Anderida; on our right  
We were girdled by a sluggard stream that wound  
Through a sogged marsh, while on the other flank  
And the full front, the slope fell to the plain  
So steep, no charge of cavalry could breast it  
With wind unspent. On our right, where the brook guarded them,  
He had ranged his right-armed levies; in the centre  
Set the main battle—the iron of his housecarls  
Locked in three ranks of shields so densely knit  
There was bare room to sweep and swing the axe  
That had cracked Hardrada's pride; and at their feet  
We had dug a fosse to cast the floundering cavalry  
Into confusion. Behind this triple barrier  
Of iron, where the thrawn crabtree stood, he raised  
His banners: first, the ancient Dragon of Wessex  
That Ælfred bore to victory at Ethandun  
And Æthelstan at Brunanburh, and beside it  
Flaunted the standard of the Fighting Man,  
A gonfanon of gold, broidered with gems,  
That drooped of its own richness. There, between them,  
With axe slung from the shoulder and spear in hand,  
Stood Harold the King, and his own kinsmen: Hakon,  
Son of his brother Swegen, Gyrth and Leofwine,  
And his uncle Æthelwig, Abbot of Winchester,  
The monk's cowl tucked within his helm—the pride  
Of the great house of Godwine.

This was the charge  
The King laid on us: that all should hold their ground  
And let the horsed Norman fury spend itself

On spear and shield, until the terrible axe  
Had tamed it; and that none, however tempted  
By triumph or wrath of battle, should break his ranks,  
Or we were lost; for, if the shield-wall held,  
He knew there was no earthly power could break us,  
And Heaven fought on our side.

It was the hour  
Of Prime, three before noonday, when the battle  
First broke. Well I remember how we had waited  
Gazing across the valley to Telham Hill  
Where they had trenched their camp, with a tower of wood  
In the midst; how, in the steely light of morn,  
Their lifted lances glinted like icicles  
Dripped from a thatch; how the sea-breeze, arising  
Wafted the smoke of camp-fires and the hoarse challenge  
Of their battle-cry ‘Dex aie!’, and we roared back  
Our own cries: ‘Holy Rood!’ and ‘God Almighty!’;  
How next the glinting lance-icicles melted  
Into an iron-grey wave that slowly crept  
Across the sere grass of Autumn; and how there passed  
Suddenly a sleet of arrows, whispering  
Like the wing-beats of packed starlings when they wheel  
Over a reed-bed—but these wings whispered Death,  
And one glanced from my father’s byrnie, splintering  
The shaft to fragments; yet I felt the blow  
As though a mailed fist had smitten me: an inch higher,  
And I had not lived to tell this tale! But now  
My heart, that had been drunk with the fummy wine  
Of war’s adventure, halted, and grew cold  
As that of a partridge flattened in the stubble  
When my falcon stooped; and I knew I was afraid  
Of a sport in which I was quarry; the next I knew  
That the grey wave I had watched was made of men  
Ready to slay me, who had done them no wrong,  
And there was kindled in me a hot anger  
Against these men I knew not; and its flame, rising,  
Consumed both fear and anger in one desire—  
To have at him who would hurt me; and this, I reckon  
Was what most men call Courage, though I was a boy  
And did not stop to question, only knowing  
I would liever slay than be slain. So I grit my teeth,

That were chattering of themselves like knuckle-bones,  
And laughed at the splintered arrow-shaft—though verily  
My laugh had no mirth in it, and my lips bivered  
Like a child's when the trumpet blared, and under the sleet  
Of bolts and arrows the Norman foot rolled forward  
To fall on us.

Now a strange thing befell:

For, through their opened ranks full-tilt, there rode  
An antic horseman, who threw his sword in the air  
And caught it like a juggler when it flashed  
Before him. This was the minstrel Taillefer;  
And, as he charged, he stood in the stirrups, singing  
The high song of Charlemagne, Roland and Oliver  
And the vassals that died at Roncesvalles. When we saw him  
Hurl himself single-handed on all our host,  
We laughed—but the fool was bolder than we reckoned,  
For ere the axes felled him in the fosse  
He had spitted one housecarl on his lance, and cleft  
A second with his sword. And the heavy footmen,  
Spurred by this crazy valour, cast themselves  
Reckless upon the shield-wall. Then I saw  
A sight of terror: the line of great axes rising,  
Flashing, and falling as one, and the mortal wrack  
Mown down before them till the fosse was cluttered  
With maimed and dead—and I heard the housecarls roaring  
“Out! Out!” with every stroke; and the axe-heads clanged  
On cloven helms like hammers in a smithy  
Smiting on anvils; but the shield-wall, unbreached,  
Still fronted the broken remnant, and they fled.  
Then were we itching to pursue, but minded  
The King's strict counsel that we should not swerve  
But hold our ground: and it was well we heeded him;  
For now, through the rout of flying foot, Duke William  
Launched the full pride of Normandy, lance in rest,  
To crash through the iron barrier by sheer weight  
Of metal and maddened horseflesh. Four thousand knights,  
Choicest of Europe's chivalry, hurled themselves  
Upon us like a thunder-wind; and the dust  
Was churned from their thudding hooves, so that they rode  
Wrapped in the heart of a storm-cloud. And before them  
Came William and his brother, the black-hearted

Prelate of Satan, bloodier than he,  
Odo of Bayeux, armed not with sword or lance  
But with maces of iron, heavier than the battle-axes  
The housecarls swung two-handed, yet these men whirled them  
With one. And round his bull-neck William wore  
The relics on which King Harold had sworn away  
(As he said) the crown of England; and behind them  
Billowed the banner of the Apostle, blessed  
By their pander, the Pope of Rome. Now in the clash  
Of the main battle I could see naught but a mellay  
Of helms that rose and fell and arms that flashed  
Through the dust the wind blew over them. Yet I saw  
That the Dragon of Wessex still flew, and the Fighting Man,  
Which had drooped of its weight of gems and gold, now streamed  
On the wind; and though there were times when the wall of shields  
Seemed bent or buckled, it straightened itself, and the knights  
Of Normandy were rolled backward down the long slope  
To form and charge again till their spent steeds panted  
For lack of breath. And once I heard a great cry  
Rising above the tumult, that William was down,  
And the shaken cavalry snatched at their reins to turn  
Their horses and flee; but out of the fosse's carnage  
I saw a tall man arise and tear the helm  
From his fiery face. "Madmen," he cried, "Why flee ye?  
There is death behind you, and victory before.  
I am living—and by the grace of God I will conquer!"  
So he snatched a spear from a fallen hand to rally  
The fugitives, and they turned; and once again  
His tall bare head and flushed face were lost in the dust  
Of battle. No doubt but the Bastard bore himself well;  
For, now the black destrier that the Spanish King  
Had sent him was fallen, he called on a knight of Maine  
To give him his horse, and when this knight refused it  
He felled him with one fierce blow of the mace and leapt  
To the empty saddle; and when this horse, too, fell pierced  
By the thrust of an English spear, he called on Eustace,  
Count of Boulogne, for his. Three times in all  
Was William unhorsed, and twice mounted; and with his own hand  
He slew Gyrth, the King's brother; and Odo the Bishop slew  
Leafwine:  
So that now, of the sons of Godwine, was only one left,



And that Harold of England; but him the Duke could not reach,  
For the King was hedged by the shield-wall of his housecarls  
And the swinging axes that none could pass; and the flag  
Of the Fighting Man still flew. So, at last, the Normans,  
Having had more than a bellyful, thundered back to their camp  
And gave us breathing-space.

God knows we needed it:

For the fight had been joined at the hour of Prime, and now  
The hour of Vespers drew nigh, and the sun that had crept  
Westward over the sea, now slowly sank,  
Staining the bloody field with a baleful light.  
Six hours had we fought, and the battle hung still in the balance  
Though the beam seemed to tilt in our favour. Sol drew breath  
And gulped a mouthful of muddy water old Cerdic  
Had cupped from the brook in the helm of some dead Breton;  
And as I moistened my throat, I became aware  
That blood dripped in the cup from my brow where a bolt had grazed  
it,

And my tunic-skirt was stiff with caked blood that had run  
From a wound that ripped my flank, but I had not heeded it  
In the heat of battle. And I thought how strange it was  
That I, Ædwulf, a country lad with no care  
For aught but my hawks and hounds and the simple ways  
Of husbandry, should be sitting there on the brow  
Of Senlac, weary and bleeding, with the wide sea  
Before me, and the dark woods behind, and never a soul  
I knew, save Cerdic, near me. Yet before I had wiped  
The blood from my cheek, I heard men crying: "Ware. Ware!  
They are on us again!" So I dragged myself to my feet  
And gripped my father's sword, though its weight seemed the double  
Of what it had been when the fight began, and my fingers  
Felt numb and nerveless.

Now this, though I knew it not,  
Was the turning-point of the fray; for when William saw  
That no spite could breach the shield-wall, he contrived  
A subtler stratagem, and sent forth the levies  
Of Maine and Poitou, with the Welch of Brittany  
Led by Count Alan, and flung them on that flank  
Where the low sun beat in the eyes of the light-armed fyrd  
Of Wessex—but bade them let their onslaught seem  
Half-hearted. And when these simple country-folk

Saw the French falter, they straight forgot the charge  
Harold had laid on them, and broke their ranks  
To rush upon them with their pikes, pursuing  
The feigned flight in a rabble. And now the Bastard,  
Having gotten his end and cracked the line that held  
The hilltop, launched his lances in a wedge  
That split the scattered fyrd of Wessex, and gained  
The vantage of ground to smite us on the side  
Their reckless zeal had breached.

Then, then indeed  
Were we hard beset: for though the shield-wall swung  
Westward to meet them, now we faced two fronts;  
And the horse that swerved between us and the woods,  
Drove in upon our rear—so that the housecarls,  
Girdling the standard of the Fighting Man  
With steel, rose like a spray-stripped island crag  
Or an eyot in a mill-race; and though they wielded  
Their axes in the same awful unison,  
The shield-wall shrank and the narrowing ranks were pressed  
Inward upon the standards, where Harold towered  
Above his two slain brethren. One desperate knight,  
Robert Fitz-Erneis, kin to Ralph of Tesson,  
Shore through three ranks of housecarls, only to fall  
As his hand clutched the standard, and the wave  
Of the heaving mellay broke on him and covered him  
With swathes of newly-slain, and the breach he had made  
Was healed anew with flesh and steel, and rivetted  
By the valour of Harold's housecarls, and held fast  
By the grace of a miracle. So we fought on; but ever,  
Above that changing battle, I saw two faces:  
The Bastard's fiery jowl, grown black with rage,  
And the fair head of Harold, streaked with blood  
And sweat, yet ever kingly. And once again,  
Foiled of their purpose, the Norman horse fell back,  
While a crimson sunset, barred with black cloud, dyed  
That dreadful hill with the hue of blood and dazzled  
Our blinking eyes—and I prayed it would set soon  
And twilight bring us respite.

William no less  
Saw how the dark might save us, and summoning  
His knights to a last onslaught, bade the archers

Shoot to the sky, so that their arrowy sleet  
Beat on us from above, unseen, and centre  
This falling terror on that one small space  
Where Harold and the remnant of the housecarls  
Ringed the two standards. Thus, when the trumpets wailed  
And his knights charged on us, the air was threshed  
By a winged storm that smote us unawares,  
Soundless and shadowless, falling ere we knew  
That death was on us. Many a helm was pierced  
By shafts that dropped as plumb as a falcon stooping  
To kill his quarry. Many lifted their shields  
For shelter, and so laid their bodies bare  
To thrust of lance or sword-stroke. Some, dismayed,  
Threw back their heads to see whence the winged fury  
Fell, and were smitten as they stared. Three times  
I plucked away three glancing arrows caught  
In the chain-links on my shoulder; and as I turned  
To pluck the last I saw King Harold topple  
Like a tree struck by lightning, and he fell  
At the standard's foot with an arrow in his eye,  
Pierced to the brain. And a cry came to my lips,  
But I could not utter it; for, as I gazed at him  
With eyes distraught, a lance-point ripped my ribs  
And flung me flat and senseless, where I lay  
Sprawling amid the dead. . . .

Full night had fallen,  
When a whisper woke me, and the hoarse voice of Cerdic  
Bade me lie still and stir not, but feign death  
For fear of it; telling me the fight was over  
And lost, and that my life hung upon silence.  
At first I knew not what he said, or where  
I was lying—though it seemed to me for a while  
I was stretched in the hall at home, and that old Bran  
Tugged at a jingling chain, and I was racked  
By a fierce pain in my side. But soon my senses  
Fought back to clearness, and I knew that sound  
Was the clink of mailed men, walking in their armour,  
Who laughed, and swore in French. And when I winced  
To blink my narrowed eyelids, I saw the light  
Of lurid torches flaring, and lit by these  
A great man with a fiery face, who sat

Unhelmed upon a mound of dead, and hungrily  
Munched bread, sliced with his bloody dagger, and swilled  
From a flagon of dark wine. Beneath his spurs  
They had spread the proud Dragon of Wessex, dagged  
With dirt and blood; and when he had filled his belly  
He clapped his brother Odo on the shoulder  
And the twain rolled off together . . .

Then I slept

For a while; and when next I woke it was daylight,  
And the wives of the dead came to bear their bodies away,  
Though the King's wife came not. Yet two good canons of Waltham,  
Old Osgod and Æthelric the Childmaster,  
Who had followed the host, but fought not, being better Christians  
Than the Bishop of Bayeux, sought for the King's body  
Amid the mounds of slain—yet found it not  
Till the lady Eadgyth Swansneck, who searched with them,  
Marked on his mangled groin a mole that none  
But she had known; and they covered his mauled limbs  
And the marred kingly head, with a purple cloak,  
And bore him to the shore and buried him  
Beneath a cairn of stones. Thus ended Harold  
Of England—and England with him. . . .

And what more can I tell—but that I lay  
Athirst, and still as Christ upon his cross,  
In feigned death all that day, and how, at eve,  
When the field was emptied, leaning on old Cerdic,  
I limped into the Weald; how, for a month,  
We lurked in the woods of Wessex and woodwards' huts,  
And crossed Cotswold by Fairford, and came at last  
To Evesham, plodding through snow, and I was healed  
Of my jagged lance-wound? But these were but the start  
Of the woes that fell upon me; for my mother,  
Who might have loved me better, feared to house me  
By my own hearth; and my kinsman, Abbot Ælfwine,  
Disowned me for a traitor—though he and Wulstan  
Bishop of Worcester had treacherously ridden  
On the morrow of Hastings fight to Berkhamstead  
And truckled to the Norman, and for this  
I scorned them ever after, though some have called  
Wulstan a saint. Therefore (though none but he  
Knew I had fought at Hastings) I hid myself

For prudence in Cerdic's hovel, ever hopeful  
That the storm would blow over. But soon the Normans,  
That smooth-faced seed of Sodom, with their greedy  
Womanish cruelties, lapped up all the shires;  
And soon the Bishop and Abbots were contending  
With the king's sheriff, Urse d'Abitot, who should snatch  
The choicest lands our Saxon thanes had held  
Since Alfred ruled—and mine were reft, with the rest,  
To swell the roll of Urse, save only my house  
And a few lean fields beside it, that were left,  
As the King's alms, to my mother, who had claimed them  
As her morning-gift with which she was endowed  
On the morrow of her marriage.

So I went landless  
And dispossessed, being neither churl nor thane,  
But a wanderer in the waste—and the very woods  
Where I had hawked and hunted for meat were closed  
By Urse's foresters, so that we should have starven  
But that my monkish brother, who had become  
Prior of the Abbey of Evesham, in grudging charity  
Granted me lease of the lands my father had given  
His Abbey on the morn the Comet shone,  
To hold them at his pleasure and for the payment  
Of some three pound a year—which are hard to come by  
In these bare days! Here, since my mother died,  
And the old hall fell to ruin for lack of money  
To mend it, and my two sisters married, I have dwelt  
In bitter idleness at the little watermill  
(That is no longer mine) by the Whitsun Brook  
And the pools where I fished for perch when I was a lad;  
Though I have no heart to angle now, but live  
Listless, and ever dreaming of that sweet time  
That wilted when the Comet came, and was lost  
For ever when King Harold fell at Hastings.

*Cold heart and bloody hand  
Now rule fair England.*

## X

### FAREWELL TO ARMS

In the mid-watches of night Ruthe spake to me  
Reproachfully: “See, you have smudged another page  
Of your island-annals red; and I foresee  
No respite from this cruel heritage  
Of bloody deeds that tragic Man calls Glory,  
Quaffing the dreadful cup to quell his fears  
Or lull his conscience. Yet must all your story  
Be written in the ink of blood and tears?”  
Then said I: “Mistress, though your plaint be guided  
By Reason, you reckon not how Man’s nature is riven  
Twixt that same Reason and Instinct, thus divided  
Between the opposing sways of hell and heaven;  
How, in his blood, cell with invasive cell  
Struggles to keep its territory whole,  
And guard within that fleshly citadel  
The seed of Self that flowers in Man’s soul;  
How, thus, each nascent brood, by instinct tied  
To hold Self’s heritage holy, must maintain  
The pattern breed has given, and the pride  
Of its discrete integrity—nay, is fain  
To court destruction rather than forsake  
Its tribal virtues, fearing neither strife  
Nor peril should another dare to shake  
The freedom it loves dearer than its life;  
How tribes that saw this nearing doom and feared  
To lose their oneness, wan for lack of strength,  
Clung to their kindlier neighbours and cohered  
Like globules of bright quicksilver—and at length  
Out of such fusion rose new nations, bound  
By blood and tongue and custom to defend  
All that they held in common and the ground  
Their common forbears tilled. So, in the end,  
An ampler Self was born; and in the roll  
Of heroes those are held in honour most

Who gave their lives to save their nation's soul  
And, losing all else, counted nothing lost.  
Nor is such faith the special heritage  
Of Man, but grounded in the marrow and pith  
Of humbler creatures that know not the gage  
Of glory, yet will die to fend their kith  
Against aggression. See with what valiant might  
The nesting stickleback defies the rival  
That fans his favoured waters, and will fight  
Till one be vanquished, reckless of survival!  
See how the fiery robin-redbreast stakes  
His chosen territories, and sounds the clarion  
Of shrill defiance to challenge him who breaks  
His marches or disputes his gauzy carrion!  
See how the sexless droves of emmets band  
Themselves in black-mailed legions; and honey-bees  
Cluster them round their queenship to withstand  
The death-moth's fingers on the sill; yet these  
Feeble and small-brained folk will yield their stings,  
And with their stings their lives, that they may see  
Their threshold undefiled by alien wings!  
There is no Ruthe in Nature, nor will be.  
And Man, imperfect Man, as her prime heir,  
Bears that red birthmark yet—nor had he risen  
So high, nor fallen so low, did he not wear  
Stamped on his brow the brand of Nature's prison;  
Yet, since its hue affrights you, I will set  
A song of rivers—Severn, with her mild daughters  
Avon and Teme—and you shall thus forget  
The noise of War in the running of sweet waters.”

# XI

## SONGS OF THE THREE RIVERS

### (1)

Severn is born of the sodden mosses  
Where smooth Plynlimmon's dome is bowed  
Under the rain the West Wind tosses  
From tattered fleeces of sea-born cloud;  
Where the sour-grass moors lie wet and wan,  
And the mawn-pool's mirror is misted glass,  
And the skirts of the sky's pavilion  
Daggle the lint-white cotton-grass;  
Where wild the curlew whinnies and cries  
And whimbrels wheel in windy weather  
And buzzards peck at the glazing eyes  
Of sick lambs lost in the rain-lodged heather.  
Only the carrion wings rejoice  
Screaming above the smell of slaughter;  
For the mountain's voice is but the voice  
Of wind-stripped grasses and welling water:  
Of water that whispers as it seeps  
And water that tinkles as it drips  
In a cup of stone before it creeps  
To the moss where the meadow-pipit sips;  
Of water that gurgles underground  
To gush anew in the bubbling spring  
Of brooks that run with the ripply sound  
Of dimpling pebbles—and streams that sing  
Such innocent strains as have their birth  
In the joy of morning and maidenhood  
And ambience of the April earth,  
When the primrose blooms are pale, and the bud  
Of the blackthorn breaketh snowy-cool.  
Such songs they sing, so laughs their light  
From glancing stickle to amber pool;  
And their bubbled foam, it danceth white



From the waterfall as lambs that leap  
In meadows on April evenings  
When the fledgeling woods are stirred from sleep  
And first the willow-warbler sings;  
Till the wet wild moorlands fall behind  
And the murmur of brooks and streams is blent  
In the roar of a river that hath no mind  
Of its mountain birth, but turbulent  
As an untamed colt with foam-flecked shoulders  
And fiery eyes and streaming mane,  
Thunders over its bed of boulders  
And falls in tumult to the plain.  
So swollen Severn rolleth proud  
Under the domed green hills of Wales  
Dappled with flocks like shadows of cloud  
In Summer; and all the Powys vales  
Grow loud where the tumultuous floods  
Of Vyrnwy, brimmed with Berwyn's snows,  
Pour from their craggy solitudes  
To stain her torrent. But Severn flows  
With the graveness of a deepening stream,  
Till her waters part—and high in air  
The steeple vanes of Shrewsbury dream  
Caught within her silver snare,  
And her voice is stilled; for now she hath  
Forgotten the madrigals that she sung  
In the dalliance of her downward path  
And the lilt of the valleys where she was young,  
But hath put away such childish things  
With the merriment of light-heart youth;  
And the memory of her mountain springs  
Is all forgotten—for now in sooth  
She floweth mantled in sober state,  
Laced with the fire of the rising sun,  
And the turbid sully of Vyrnwy's spate—  
Where the silver-sided salmon run  
To their gravelly redds—doth not abate  
The majesty of her tawny tide  
Solemnly flowing towards the gate  
Where the dark woods of Wenlock hide  
Their brambled scarp, and Wrekin's dome

Shaggy with forest broodeth on  
That crumbled city of Old Rome  
Which dead men once called Uricon—  
That white-walled City of the Woods  
Whose stark, fire-blackened ruin guards  
The mortal ashes of multitudes  
Scattered amid their broken shards.  
Yet the river recks not of the doom  
Of the hapless folk who throve and died  
And saw the white wild cherry-bloom  
Lighten and rust on Severnside,  
Who lived and loved and fell to dust  
As the cherry-blow that whitens and wanes;  
For her waters are timeless, and the lust  
Of the salt stirs ever in her veins—  
So the broom and the cherries of Wenlock Edge  
Spend gold and snow for her in vain  
As she roars through the cleft of Ironbridge  
And veereth Southward to the plain  
Where the blood-red rock of Bridgenorth frowns  
On shoals of sand where the ravening Danes  
Beached their dragons and burnt the towns  
And lashed the land like Lammas rains  
And spread afield like a Lammas flood,  
Stripping the ripened cornlands bare.  
Yet Severn recks not of fire or blood,  
For she is timeless—nor tarryeth there,  
But rolleth past on her seaward road  
By villages that know not Time:  
Alveley and Arley and Hampton Loade,  
Whose gentle names together chime  
Sweet as their Sunday church-bells ringing  
For evensong in the month of June  
When the lazy throstle mutes his singing  
And the cuckoo flattens his April tune,  
When the clang of their bells is wafted over  
The moving water, to mingle and meet  
In dim airs drenched with the honey of clover  
And drowsy scents of meadowsweet . . .  
But see! The river livens her pace  
As she tugs at the ties of Arley ferry

And plunges headlong into the race  
Of the Folly Rapids, and maketh merry,  
And racing under the woods of Wyre  
Like a two-year filly-foal recaptures  
In one brief revel her youthful fire  
And the ardour of youth and youth's fierce raptures;  
Where Werewood broods on the water's brink  
And leaf-shades dapple the delicate fallow  
That steals from the shadow at eve to drink  
From foam-fringed eddy and wave-lapped shallow.  
But this fleeting zest is the last she will know  
Of her morning joy—for the burden of years  
And the load of care weigh heavily now  
On the sobered water that laps the piers  
Of Bewdley bridge, and the solemn stream  
That ebbeth sullenly mile on mile  
Without a voice, without a smile.  
Yet rare and fugitive, hour by hour,  
Fade on the moving mirror's face  
The imaged beauty of Worcester tower  
And Tewkesbury tower, and the stony lace  
Of Gloucester's fretted parapet;  
And the mournful stone of Berkeley's keep  
Saddens her surface—but not yet  
Shall dreaming Severn awake from sleep,  
Not till the green vale opens wide  
And the wrath of the bore rolls in from sea  
And the stinging salt of the sudden tide  
Mindeth her of her destiny.  
Till, moving with more majestic gait,  
She taketh seizin of the skies,  
And robed in ever queenlier state  
Spreadeth the firth in which she lies  
With azure of the imaged vault  
And clouds dove-grey and blinding white  
And steely gleams of cool cobalt;  
And the galaxies of indigo night  
Spangle her raiment with cold fire  
And burn within her broadened breast,  
Till the hungry sea hath his desire  
And she sinketh in his arms to rest.

Water to water . . . Her life is o'er,  
And the sea-born mists that fell to earth  
On the mountain-tops are merged once more  
In the bitter waves that gave them birth.  
*Yet, Mistress Ruthe, do not forget  
How the seal of Liberty was set  
On our rights when free men fought and died  
For God's Crowning Mercy on Severnside.*

(2)

Teme is Severn's wild, sweet daughter,  
A wayward child; and her limpid water  
Gushes and wells from the gentler rills  
That trickle from the Kerry hills,  
Where pale, cloud-tented sheepwalks lie  
Meek beneath a rain-washed sky  
In airs that are thin and crystal-clear  
As spring-water, where the idle ear  
Listening heareth little else  
Than the rustle of harebells and heather-bells,  
Or the boom of blundering bumble-bees  
Drunken with honey culled from these,  
Or the whisper of grasses, that is almost  
Silence, or bleating of weak lambs, lost  
In bracken too tall for them to spy  
Their anxious dams—and so they cry  
Desolately, but dare not move  
For the hungry wings that hover above . . .  
But virgin Teme knows naught of these  
As she lapseth under her alder-trees  
From pool to stickle and stickle to slide  
Threading the thin-strung woods that hide  
Her hesitant meanderings,  
Where the pied water-ouzel sings,  
Bobbing his breast on an island stone—  
(Stir but a finger, and he is flown,  
Whirring upstream from the shadow of harm  
With a startled stutter of alarm  
That is like two pebbles clashed together!)

Where, in the drowsier Summer weather,  
Gleams for a moment and is gone  
The burning blue of Halcyon;  
And the redstart flits from a crannied wall,  
Flashing above the waterfall  
The rufous glow of a feebler fire;  
And the light-hearted pipits spire  
Tossing their bodies high in air  
And twittering as they hover there.  
So, with alternate gloom and shine,  
Teme falls by Llanfairwaterdine  
To Knucklas village and Knighton Vale,  
Where the felled woods lie silver-pale  
With floss of silken willow-weed;  
And on her face the windblown seed  
Lighteth softer than thistledown  
To drift and skim, like mayflies blown  
To their death in June—till a tiny waft  
Of light air lifteth it aloft,  
And the seed goes sailing on its way,  
While sweet Teme floweth without stay  
Between the wild flags' clustered swords,  
Where gentle, wide-horned Herefords  
Bend their white-muzzled heads to drink  
From muddy pools on the trampled brink;  
Or stand knee-deep in the cool stream  
In an unimaginable dream  
And slowly swing their tails, while flies  
Settle on their uncurious eyes;  
Till the roofs of a rising village strown  
On a steep hillside, and a tower of stone,  
Stand in her path and halt her flow,  
And clear Teme feels the undertow  
Of denser waters that have run  
From the marly dales of Corve and Clun,  
And the streams of the confluent rivers mingle  
In a deep pool that laps the shingle  
Where the twin sisters meet and twine  
Under the bridge at Leintwardine  
And the two waters flow as one . . .  
So swollen Teme goes tumbling down

Over the rapids to Trippleton,  
Then falls to peace in a shadowy slide  
Where tall trees lean on either side,  
And their drooping boughs are arched above  
Water that hardly seems to move  
Save for the drift of scum that floats  
Dappled by foam and dense with motes  
Of silt suspended in mid-stream.  
Here, by the banks, the great trout dream  
Daylong in sunless sanctuaries  
Of root and snag—but when the skies  
Grow cool, and the last loaded wain  
Creaks home to Trippleton again,  
Forth from their haunts they steal and lie  
Heading upstream, with greedy eye  
Waiting, a bare palm's depth beneath  
The surface, for the drift of death  
Or winged life that the current then  
Washes within their hungry ken,  
And, lifted on a quivering fin,  
Suck the delicious morsel in  
So gently that the water's skin  
Is barely dimpled; but if their prey  
Flutters or dips to flit away,  
Then will they leap to snatch it, heaving  
Their black backs arched in air, and leaving  
On the broken water a ring that spreads  
To rock the dabchicks in the reeds,  
Or, borne in widening circles, fades  
In the shallow tail of the pool, where shades  
Of silvery umbers, ghostly-grey,  
Sway on the gravelly ledge; for they  
Hover not under the water's face,  
But spring upright from their resting-place  
To gulp their prey in the toothless gape  
Of small, smooth lips—yet the grayling's shape  
Outshines the stippled trout's in its mail  
Of imbricate silver, for his broad tail  
And fins are dipped in crimson dyes,  
And when, forspent, on the bank he lies  
He smelleth sweetly of mountain-thyme

Or cool cucumber. And in the prime  
Of the mayfly-hatch, when Teme grows warm  
And the limp-winged drakes are whirled like a storm  
Of flurried snowflakes to spin and dip  
In the brief, hapless fellowship  
Of their nuptial flight, and, spent, go sailing  
With draggled vanes—then trout and grayling  
Forget their wariness and fall  
With one accord to the carnival  
Of June's fierce gluttony in the slaughter  
Of gauzy myriads, and the water  
Boils with the rises of great fish springing  
Into the air, and swirling and flinging  
Their silver bodies this way and that  
In wanton greed—and the tiniest sprat  
Of a fingerling may take his fill,  
Till the mayfly-storm drifts by, and the still  
Surface is turned again to glass,  
Unflawed and lifeless as it was—  
Mere mirror of the dusk that hears  
Naught but the wimpling of the weirs  
And murmur of the pebbled shallows.  
Then zig-zag bats that swoop like swallows  
Dart and flutter on web-winged fingers  
Hawking the last mayfly that lingers  
Unharm'd in that fierce hecatomb  
Of watery death. And when night's gloom  
Falls deeper on the starlit dubs,  
The otter whistles her frolicsome cubs  
To cease their gambolling and tear  
The eels she has dragged to the dripping weir  
In her pointed teeth. But when day breaks,  
A wild, aerial music wakes  
The valley, in the curlew's calling  
And cat-like cries of lapwings falling  
Like tumbler-pigeons from the sky,  
And the clear trilling of the shy  
Hovering sandpipers that trip  
With delicate feet on an island strip  
Of sand, or the dipper's wren-like notes.  
Sometimes through morning mist there floats

The shrilling of vigilant greenshanks,  
Where, beneath grass-tussocked banks,  
Grey wagtails, with their yellow breast  
And gorget of black velvet, nest  
In a cleft of clay, and flutter near  
With a soft brilliance that hath no peer  
In the English air . . . So Teme runs on  
From Leintwardine to Burrington,  
Stealing with a soberer pace  
Past Downton Rocks to Bringewood Chase:  
And here she floweth without sound;  
For Bringewood Chase is holy ground,  
Where *Comus* and his sisterhood  
Of laughing dryads ruled the wood,  
And wove about the enchanted vale  
Their silvan magic—that was frail  
As morning gossamer, yet fraught  
With such strange potency, it caught  
The mind of *Milton* in its net;  
And leafy Bringewood liveth yet  
With Vallombrosa's leaves, for ever  
Sacred in song . . .

So the hushed river  
Hurrieth, as her waters sweep  
Under Ludlow's storied keep,  
Where the castle's crumbling walls look down  
Upon the many-chimneyed town,  
And the sweet-tempered Ludlow chimes  
Waver through wreathing smoke that climbs  
From the draughty vale—and still they seem  
Rapt in the other-worldly dream  
That thrall'd them in the haunted wood  
Of *Comus*—and this raptured mood  
Dwells with those waters as they glide  
Through tranquil meadowlands and wide  
Stubbles, where seagulls, fluttering low,  
Whiten the furrow behind the plough  
And hover above the ploughman's head,  
Watching the burnished mould-board spread  
Its furrow-slice, and lighting there  
To raven their choice inland fare



Of wireworms in the cloven turf  
As greedily as they comb the surf  
Of their native surge . . . So Abdon Burf  
Falleth behind, and Titterstone Glee  
Looms on the left—and Teme runs free  
Through the spreading vale to Saltmoor Well  
And the elms of Ashford Carbonell,  
To drown the last of her panic fear  
In the deep green of Worcestershire;  
Where her marl-reddened currents fret  
Cliffs of red sand, and hopyards set  
With intricate trellises of twine  
In quaint cat's-cradles, and the bine,  
With eager tendrils spiring, weaves  
Its clerestory of translucent leaves  
Vaulting the alleys with their slight  
Radiance of cool green light.  
Here the gnarled cider-orchard breaks  
Its shell-pink buds; here Autumn shakes  
The ripe wind-fallen fruit to lie  
Hid in lush grass—and when men pry,  
Raking the windfalls into heaps,  
A drowsy smell of pomace steeps  
The valley. Yet Teme's chiefest pride  
Is her miracle of Eastertide  
When the white cherry-blow is whirled  
In drifts upon a dazzled world,  
And billowy blossom, tossed on high,  
Beggars the brightness of the sky  
With an innocence beyond belief  
On this aged earth—yet fugitive  
As the radiance of April's moon  
Whitening the ghostly boughs—and soon  
The mirror of Teme hath naught to show  
But the lesser light of hawthorn-blow;  
And ivory-plumed elder throws  
Its image on a stream that flows  
Deep-sunken through the tawny clay  
Of the cold plain, and ebbs away  
Sullenly, with the sluggard pace  
Of age—till Severn's arms embrace

Her tired daughter, and tenderly  
Carry her, sleeping, to the sea.  
*Yet, Sister Ruthe, remember well  
How the first blow for freedom fell  
Upon the powers of privilege  
Where Teme joins Severn at Powick Bridge!*

(3)

Avon springs from the mints and cresses  
Of a gentle pastureland that lies  
Midmost in Mercia's green recesses  
Beneath mild-tempered midland sides;  
Little she knows of the fierce birth  
Of Severn her mother or sister Teme,  
For her waters well from a kindlier earth,  
And her youth is quiet as a dream  
Unbroken by any stormy splendour  
Of moor or mountain, or the loud  
Tumult of torrents. Gay and tender,  
She moveth idly as a cloud  
In Summer, or a careless child  
On a spring morning gathering posies  
Of wet marsh-marigolds, and wild  
Forgetmenots, and faint primroses,  
And yellow-varnished celandine,  
And rushes pithed as white as milk,  
And sallies flossed with smoky silk,  
And lilac ladies-smocks, and all  
The moisture-loving flowers that twine  
In April's dewy coronal;  
For innocent are Avon's ways,  
And meditative is her mien  
As through the minty marsh she strays  
In a shallow vale that runs between  
Low hills of rolling grassland, pied  
With gorse and spinneys of oak and ash  
Where the horsemen halt at the covert-side  
Till twenty dappled couples crash  
In a burst of music, and the wail

Of the hunting-horn's sweet quavers  
Wakens the leafless woods, and wavers  
Over her water to the pale  
Chequer of forty-acre fields  
That the quick-set bullfinch shields  
With triple thorn . . . So, like a skein  
Of scarlet threading the green weft,  
The bright hunt straggles over plain  
And hillock, and Avon's vale is left  
Empty—as when, on this same field  
Of Naseby, Cromwell's Roundheads broke  
Rash Rupert's cavalry—and they reeled  
And scattered on the wold like smoke  
And vanished . . .

    But Avon floweth still,  
Gathering to her nascent stream  
Clear tributary waters: *Leam*  
And *Swift*; and many a nameless rill  
Steals through the rushy watermeads  
To filter through her fringing reeds  
Unseen. And many a water-mill,  
Fed by the borrowed race, returns  
The flow the slatted mill-wheel churns  
In a bright cataract that re-fills  
Her dwindled trickle. And lifted high  
On the smooth skyline of the hills,  
Sails of gaunt windmills sweep the sky  
With cumbrous lattice, languidly  
Turning the low-g geared pinion wheel  
That rolls the gritstone, till the meal  
Dusts the miller's shoulders white  
As a mealy cockchafer or bee  
That in high summer you may see  
With pallid clover-pollen dight . . .  
So Avon girdles in her sleep  
The gabled roofs of Warwick town  
Where the King-maker's castle-keep  
Shadows her face, and floweth down  
Into the unmysterious glades  
Of Arden's oaks, no longer haunted  
By dappled fallow—yet the shades

Of the sweet meinie that enchanted  
This leafy wildwood, in the Spring  
Of Shakespeare's youthful fancy, still  
Brood on the twilight lanes and bring  
Their magic with them, when the trill  
Of May's last nightingale awakes  
Infinite yearnings, and the fall  
Of his dwindling cadenza shakes  
The heart with hushed delight—and all  
Arden lies breathless, listening  
For the light step of Rosalind  
And Amiens' song . . . Yet still the spring  
Of a nimble squirrel that in the thinned  
Woodland leaps from tree to tree  
Trailing his feathery brush, is free  
To traverse all the ancient girth  
Of Arden without touching earth;  
Still the glade's bracken-fronds unfold  
Their croziers of mealy gold;  
Still Arden's bluebells fan the verges  
With silvan fragrance, and wood-spruces  
With triple cups of golden green  
Betray the woodland's old demesne—  
And the lost forest lives in these  
Its lowlier denizens, that held  
Their stations when the mightier trees  
Sheltering their humble growth were felled  
To keel the fleets that kept the seas  
In the days of great Elizabeth,  
And carried to Virginian leas  
Those words that are the very breath  
Of England . . . But Avon knoweth naught  
Of any music but her own,  
And nothing of the magic wrought  
By him who sleeps beneath the stone  
Of Stratford's airy spire, and yet  
Makes our imaginations seem  
As thoughts that flower in a dream  
And wilt on waking, or are flown.  
Yet, swan-sweet Avon, can you forget  
How one whose meanest word was lit

By passionate perfection, stood  
Mirrored in your translucent flood,  
Or idly on your banks would sit  
Trailing his fingers in the water?  
O swan-sweet Avon, Severn's daughter,  
Do you remember how he moved  
Through the pied meadows that he loved,  
And how he smiled to catch those sweet  
Elusive images, as fleet  
And fiery as the kingfisher's  
Arrowy azure, in his verse?  
And did you hear his rustic tongue  
Savour each salty syllable  
Shaped on his lips when he was young?  
Saw you him ever when he leant,  
Undazzled by the glancing looks  
That flickered from your stream, intent  
Upon the many-storied books  
Of Plutarch, or the turgid flow  
Of Holinshed's grim chronicle?  
And did you see his dark eyes glow  
When fierce imagination fell  
To burn upon the prosy page,  
Till the wide skies became a stage  
And, in the light of that rich birth,  
Heroes walked again on earth?  
But Avon answers naught, for she  
Was passing-old when he was young,  
And still may flow when all he sung  
Shall live but in man's memory  
As a crabbed text in a dead tongue.  
So Arden's wasted woodlands sink  
Behind; and white on Avon's brink  
The widening Vale of Evesham throws  
Its benison of blossomed boughs.  
So dazzling-bright the orchards lie,  
It seems as though the April sky  
Had fallen upon earth and strewn  
Its cloudy billows there—and when  
Night falls on Bredon, and the moon  
Silvers the prodigal blossom, then

The orchards of the vale seem lost  
In a soundless sea of mist that laps  
The bases of the hills and wraps  
Their sleeping knees—where like a ghost  
The dome of Bredon glimmers pale,  
Islanded in the misty Vale . . .  
But when lascivious winds of May  
Have ravished the light petal-cloud  
And fruit swells on the leafy spray,  
Then are the plum-trees' branches bowed  
With tasselled clusters of cool green  
That August's bounty, warms to gold  
Or deepening orange—and some are seen  
Drooping with purple and tawny-red,  
So closely set no branch can hold  
Its juicy burden, but will shed  
Ripe fruit at the first finger-touch;  
And the bruised flesh, fallen, spills  
Its heavy-sugared juice and fills  
The Vale with vinous fragrance. Such  
Are the Summer languors Avon loves:  
For when the weedy lock-gates close,  
Her listless current barely moves  
Under the drooping willow-boughs  
Where the deep-bellied, sullen chub,  
Gaping through the scum and froth  
That eddies in a sunless dub,  
Sucks in the velvet of a moth  
Faint-fluttering with sodden wings  
In hapless circles—or hungrily  
Heaving his slimy body, springs  
To gulp it in mid-air, and sends  
A ripple to the beds of reed  
Where pike with olive-mottled flanks  
Bask on the mud of shelving banks,  
So drowsily, they will not heed  
The shadowy roach that swim in shoals,  
Or spectral perch with tiger-stripes  
Lurking in their deep water-holes;  
But when October's rigour tips  
The elms with pallid leprosy,

And the first gales of Autumn shiver  
The rustling reedbeds, then the river  
Wakes from her lethargy: and you see  
Slow Avon crisped with waves and rippled  
With wind—and clouds of babbling stares  
Wheel from their granaries in the stippled  
Stubbles to roost in reedy cover.

And now the dome of Bredon wears  
Its richest liveries—for over  
Her falling flanks the tall elms stand  
Robed in bright gold; and over all  
The orchards spreads the yellow pall  
Of Autumn; and the meadowland  
Of Avon seems to hold its breath  
In the mute majesty of death:  
Till ice, with brittle crystal, edges  
The shallows, and the frozen sedges  
Grow stiff with rime. So Avon sweeps  
Unsmiling through more sullen deeps  
In a null nescience flowing down  
By Nafford Mill and Eckington  
To the wide, flood-whitened fields that lie  
Beneath the tower of Tewkesbury:  
A weary river that hath run  
Her course—sunk in oblivion  
So death-like that she hardly hears  
The hollow thunder of the weirs  
That draw her listless to her rest  
In mother Severn's ancient breast.

*Yet, Sister Ruthe, remember too  
That day when freedom flamed anew  
To perish in the darkened hour  
When Montfort fell by Evesham Tower.*

## XII

THE TALE OF JOHN DE MATHON      A.D. 1280

*The Scene is the Infirmary in the Monastery of Our Lady of Worcester, a capacious chamber; with a high-roof of rough-hewn timber, dimly lit by slender lancets. In its darkest corner, on a narrow pallet-bed, lies the mummy-like form of Brother John de Mathon, an old man clothed in the habit of a Benedictine monk. He is so ancient, indeed, as to seem hardly human. The wrinkled scalp that defines the shape of his skull is the colour of dirty leather; his orbits are so cavernous that the blind eyes are invisible, lost in their depths; and the only parts of his anatomy that betray any sign of life are his hands, disproportionately large compared with the stick-like wrists, whose taloned fingers pluck with a restless automatism at the grimy coverlet which has been thrown over him. By his side, on the stone-flagged floor, a florid young man, robed in a similar habit, sits cross-legged, with a parchment on his knees, a pen in his hand, and an ink-horn within easy reach. He looks alternately bored and faintly amused as he bends over the malodorous pallet to catch the words that issue from Brother John's toothless mouth. Occasionally he scratches a perfunctory note on the parchment; but for the most part he is content (or constrained) to listen to a rambling tale that has little of interest for him, as the old man speaks in a thin, toneless voice:*

Art thou still there, my son, and canst thou hear me?  
It were well to press my hand lightly now and again,  
For thus I may know that my scanty breath is not wasted,  
And, should I fall asleep, thy touch will awaken me  
And pluck my mind from dreaming. What did I say?  
*The days of our years are three score years and ten:  
And if, by reason of strength, they be fourscore years,  
Then is their strength but sorrow.*

I was born

In the first year of Richard Lion-Heart,  
When the Welsh kings rode to Worcester to make peace  
With John Sansterre his brother; and of my boyhood  
I have naught to tell—albeit therein my memory  
Burns with the brightness of a lamp new-lit,



Discovering trivial things as doth the shaft  
Of a mote-laden sunbeam. Little I recked  
Of the realm's turmoil, or the march and counter-march  
Of turbulent barons; for mine own earth was bounded  
By the enfolding hills, and was no larger  
Than the sweet-smelling cowslip-balls we made  
In the meadows of Malvern Chase.

I was but eighteen  
When I trudged my way to Worcester, and first donned  
The habit of our order, that I have worn  
For well-nigh seventy years; and Prior Simon,  
Marking my true, sweet voice, gave me more favour  
Than a raw lad merited; and when I had learnt  
My notes and conned the canticles, chose me to lead  
The singing on high festivals. Many came  
To hear me sing, and I, being callow, was puffed  
With the glory I owed to God, who had endowed me  
With this pretty talent. Ay, and I well remember  
(But for Christ's sake set not this down!) how one bold wench,  
Who was wife to a brewer in Silver Street, by the Shambles,  
Heard Mass whensoever I sang; and as the procession  
Trailed by where she knelt on the stones, and I passed so near  
(For so had she placed herself) that I all but brushed  
Her hair, which was mouselike in hue and sweetly-scented  
As musk or clover in Summer—then did she peek at me  
Through her crossed fingers, smiling, and blinked one eye!  
At which I—as any might guess—blushed red to the crown  
Of my tonsure, but, none the less, when those high notes came  
In which I excelled, and I saw she still gazed my way,  
Her face calm and pale in the distance, then did I carol  
(God pardon me!) like any cock-chaffinch, perched  
On an apple-tree's topmost bough, that fluffs his breast  
To bursting with the might of his brazen challenge!  
Yet, albeit I was a young fellow then and well-favoured,  
I think there was more lust of pride than of concupiscence  
In my error; and though, indeed, I made no confession  
Till fifty years later, one day when I thought I was dying,  
Yet doth the memory of her glance and the musky spice  
Of her hair abide—though she, fond soul, is dust,  
And I am a man no longer. Beyond doubt,  
There is little true sanctity untried by temptation,

As Augustine knew to his cost. My sin was Pride;  
And Time hath humbled me—as thou shouldst perceive,  
Hearing the thin, cracked pipe of one who has ravished  
The ears of kings . . .

Kings, do I say? There were two  
For whom I sang. The first was John the Landless;  
And never, some say, was king more unkingly than he  
In his treacheries; though I, being cloister-reared  
And unworldly, saw not this blackness of heart, but was dazzled  
By the mere shine of kingship, glorying in the flattery  
Of a prince who favoured our house, and often abode here  
With his lackey, Walter the Bishop (the same who stood  
By his side at Runnymede) for the high festivals  
Of our church, and ever delighted in the sweet music  
We made—but even more in our Severn salmon  
And lamperns and royal sturgeon washed down with the wines  
Of Gascony and Touraine, when he made of Lent  
A season of prodigal banquets. John was a man  
Of ruddy and open countenance, well-fattened, and easy  
Of laughter for them that pleased him; yet, were he crossed  
In the meanest trifle, then would his Angevin blood  
Blacken his face with wrath till the veins in his temples  
Were swollen to bursting, and his small body was shaken  
With such a tempest that he would writhe on the ground,  
Rolling his eyes, and catch up sticks and straws  
To chew them like a madman. Such, I have heard,  
Were his ravings at Runnymede, when the magnates bound him  
By dooms he had no intent to suffer; though we, being swayed  
By his kingly graces and the words of our Bishop,  
Walter de Gray, held this poor king ill-used,  
And deemed the Barons' charter less an instrument  
Of liberty for the common folk than a change  
From the rule of one man, who had loved us well, to the power  
Of a many who loved but themselves. For, mark you, my son,  
There was naught in their vaunted charter that had not been granted  
Long since by King Henry the First, and more concern  
For their own rights than for those of Holy Church,  
As Pope Innocent surely knew when he laid his ban  
On those barons and their shrewd counsellor, Stephen Langton,  
Making the king's cause ours. So we of Worcester  
Stood by our lawful liege, and reckoned his enemies

Accursed—the more so when Geoffrey de Mandeville  
Called on King Philip of France to send his Dauphin  
To conquer England and filch John's kingship from him:  
For, know you this: when I was a lad we still called  
One man a Norman and another English;  
But now those Normans who had dispossessed  
Our Saxon forbears boasted their Englishness,  
And hated the foreigner fiercely as they themselves  
Had once been hated; and when the Frenchman set foot  
On the shore of Essex and marched his knights toward London,  
Then was all England one, save for those few  
Who, by duress, had bound the king at Runnymede  
And sworn to oust him . . .

It was then that the cruelty  
Of the king's heart first showed itself, as he fell  
On the rebels of the North. Never have I known  
Such a passionate fury as burned in his body and drove him  
This way and that through the length of England, snapping  
Like a mad cur at all that crossed his path,  
Whether they were friend or foe, and never sleeping  
Two nights in the same bed. Yet those who condemn him  
Remember not that the king was hard beset  
As a hunted wolf; and if his fangs were reddened  
With innocent blood, his hunters' hands were no cleaner;  
Nor that the Holy Father himself had frowned  
On their lawlessness. It was intemperate haste  
That drove him to his doom; for, as he strained  
Northward to harry Lincoln, with less wisdom  
Than King Canute tempting the mighty malice  
Of the untameable tides, his baggage-train  
Sank in the quicksands of the Wash, and was lost;  
And the king himself, struggling so far as Swineshead  
To dry the draggled remnant, there fell sick  
Of a mortal flux. There is a story told  
How that he died of a surfeit of peaches swilled  
With fresh-made cider—and I, of my own eyes,  
Know him a glutton, having seen him bloated  
With meat at the Bishop's board; yet that which slew him  
Was but the flame of hatred, that burnt out  
Like a fierce bonfire, consuming his tortured body  
As they bore him to Lincoln, ever panting and groaning,

On a litter of horsecloth stiffened with woven withies  
From the fen; and there, on the third day after, he died,  
Duly shriven (as should be told) by the Abbot of Croxton,  
And when they asked him where he would lie, he bethought him  
Of our church of St. Mary at Worcester, saying: "*I commend  
My body and soul to God, and to Saint Wulstan.*"  
So here we buried him, even as Merlin foretold,  
With the bones of Wulstan on one hand, and on the other  
The relics of Oswald; that, when the trumpet sounds  
And the graves give up their dead, he might take his place  
In the bright company of Heaven—though some  
Still call him Nature's enemy, and maintain  
That not even their saintly sponsorship shall save  
His perjured soul. Yet never will I believe  
That any burn in hell who have died in grace  
As he did. And, whatsoever havoc he wrought  
In his evil life, his death brought England peace,  
As is graven on his tomb: *Hoc in sarcophago  
Sepelitur regis imago, qui moriens multum  
Sedavit in orbe tumultum*—which is lame Latin  
And middling rhyme, but, in the essence, true.  
So may God rest his spirit, I say, who gave  
His realm rest by his dying . . .

The second king

Before whom I sang (and never sang I more sweetly  
Than on that day) was Henry, his son; a child  
But nine years old, whom a splendid company  
Of barons, earls, bishops and mitred abbots  
Carried to Worcester for the dedication  
Of the new cathedral church. And of this I will tell thee  
A tale—though whether or no thou shouldst set it down  
I am doubtful, seeing that it brings little credit  
To our new bishop Silvester, once our prior.  
Yet the story hath this moral: that impatience  
May sink to sacrilege . . .

Know you, then, we had fashioned  
A new shrine for Saint Wulstan, since the old  
Had been stripped of all its richness to provide  
The fine we were mulcted for our forced submission  
To the French Dauphin. Never was a saint's shrine  
More gloriously wrought. But when we came

To set Saint Wulstan's body therein, we found  
The mason had mismeasured, the saint's stature  
Being greater than ordinary. Then Bishop Silvester,  
Vexed by our hesitations, and determined  
To have done with the business, stripped off his robes  
And with his own ringed fingers hacked and hauled  
Saint Wulstan's body asunder, cramming his bones  
Into the coffin, ay, and even boasted  
Of his own ruthlessness, calling the sacred relics  
Naught but dry bones. That was the sixth of June,  
As I remember well, and six weeks later  
All but two days, he died; and afterward,  
On the festival of Saint Andrew, a whirling wind  
Cast down two towers on either side the apse  
Of the minster. From which signs let no man doubt  
But that saints in deathless glory still are swayed  
By mortal spites and passions . . .

Once again

My ill-shepherded thoughts have erred; it would be pleasant  
To let them stray thus browsing on the sweeter  
Pastures of memory; and much could I tell  
Of Silvester's successor, William de Blois,  
Whom Gualo, the Pope's legate, thrust upon us;  
For this man was a rare builder, and up-raised  
The soaring arches of a new sanctuary  
Above Our Lady's altar; and, being warned  
Doubtless by poor Silvester's doom, disposed  
The buried bones his masons marred in a pit  
Beneath the new-built charnery, where mine  
Shall rest when God so wills it. But of him  
I will speak no more; for now my chronicle  
Takes sterner shape, being shadowed by the presences  
Of three huge men, who rise above the press  
Of pettier persons as the craggy peaks  
Of Ararat towered over the drowned wastes  
Of Noah's deluge: first, Walter de Cantelupe,  
My lord of Worcester; next Robert Grosseteste,  
Bishop of Lincoln; last, and greater than either,  
Earl Simon, called de Montfort, the noblest man  
England has ever known—which is the stranger  
In that this knightly paragon was born

In Normandy, and lived the greater part  
Of his stormy days in Gascony. See, already  
I have overshot my mark! Hear then, my son,  
How that fair child whose kingly presence honoured  
Our dedication, grew to belie the promise  
Of innocent boyhood. Hapless is the realm,  
Men say, in which a child is king: and never  
Was saying more grimly proved than in the fruit  
Of this enhavocked reign; for, from the day  
When he was chrismed, his sapling strength was twisted  
By the ambitions of ruthless men who schemed  
But for themselves; and by their flatteries  
Nourished a weak-willed tyrant, as unstable  
As a wind-tossed aspen flurried this way and that  
By every changeful gust—whereby our country  
Became once more the prey of foreigners  
Who batted on her bones. It was an evil day—  
Though little we guessed—when John, his father, drowning  
In surges of rebellion, clutched at the rock  
Of Rome, and made the honour of England part  
Of Peter's patrimony. For now the claws  
Of the Roman dragon gripped our Church's throat,  
And, throttling, squeezed forth the last gout of blood  
From her blanched carcass—not only in exactions  
Of treasure to feed sinews of temporal might  
In lands we knew not (first a tenth part of all  
We had, then, appetite growing with gluttony,  
One fifth) but also in the greedy gullocking  
Of vacant benefices, from bishoprics  
To simple chaplaincies that we had reckoned  
Our natural right, till every cure was filled  
With predatory aliens and pluralists  
Who never set foot on English earth and spoke not  
One word of English. And King Henry's court  
Was little better, being crammed with sycophants  
Of Anjou and Poitiers—the hungry crew  
That, in the time of the Confessor, tempted  
The Conqueror to Hastings. And when the King  
Wedded the Princess Eleanor, to these  
Was added a locust-swarm of Provençals  
Who stripped all that was left, and soon, inflaming

The king's mind with vain schemes of foreign conquest  
That fell to nothing, pitted his light wits  
Against more practised players, till his crown  
Seemed but a pawn upon the chequer-board  
Of shrewd dynastic gamesters, and Church and Laity,  
Being thrust at length into each other's arms,  
Were joined as never before. Then was a murmur  
Of protest, loud though late, wrung from the lips  
Of England. Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln,  
Was our first champion, an old man steeped  
In ancient wisdoms; and our own Bishop, Walter,  
His friend and my loved master, stood beside him  
With Simon, Earl of Leicester, when they brought  
The King to Oxford—even as his father before him  
Was haled to Runnymede. I, as Walter's chaplain,  
Rode with him over Cotswold. There was the weakness  
Of the King made plain; for when he saw the powers  
Of Church and Baronage in arms, he cried:  
"Am I your prisoner?" Whereon Roger Bigod  
(For so I heard him) answered: "Nay, my Lord King;  
For all we ask is that your Poitevins  
And the alien placemen who have dispossessed  
Both folk and faith of freedom, shall be banished  
For the realm's honour and welfare. And we demand  
That you and your son the Prince shall solemnly swear  
To lay no burdens on us but with the leave  
Of counsellors we shall choose." Then did King Henry,  
Powerless to do aught else, submit himself,  
Swearing as he was bidden; and by that Parliament  
Of Oxford, clerk and layman, rich and poor,  
Obtained protection, under the firm hand  
Of Simon and his fellows. It was as if  
We had waked from nightmare dreams into the peace  
Of a clear dawn—though they that watched more shrewdly  
Saw the sky streaked with presage of the tempest  
That followed after . . .

I have little to tell  
Of the wars that wracked us then; for my own knowledge  
Is naught but hearsay, save that the King forswore  
That oath, in his father's fashion, soaking the land  
With innocent blood, and that the jealous Pope





Ere he could join his father. But of this  
The Earl knew naught; and, on the second day  
Of August, marching from Hereford, crossed Severn  
At Kempsey, where my master, Bishop Cantelupe,  
Lodged him within our manor. There I saw him,  
And marked how cares had aged him, though his mien  
Was calm and noble as ever, and his eye  
Bright as a boy's beneath his grizzled brow.  
There as we sate that evening, I heard him speak  
With my lord, Bishop Walter, of how he planned  
To mould a better England, when the legionary  
Factions that rent her had been exorcised,  
Saying: "There is none other land nor folk  
Worthier of peace than ours, nor yet more temperate  
In the uses of their freedom, be they but left  
To its unvexed enjoyment. Such a firm peace,  
Under such guidance, it is my intent,  
By God's good grace, to give them." Then he spoke  
Of his counsel for the morrow: how he would march  
By Avonside to Evesham, where his friend,  
Henry the Abbot, would house him till he could join  
Young Simon at Kenilworth, and they together  
Circle the Prince with greater force and scatter  
The embers of rebellion. Then Bishop Walter  
Bade me march with Earl Simon, being himself  
Too feeble for such adventure—though I, in truth,  
Was older than he.

That night we tramped fifteen miles,  
And came footsore to Evesham as the dawn  
Broke over Cotswold; and I, beside the king  
(Who told me he remembered how once I had sung  
Before him, but I, though flattered, disbelieved him)  
Heard the monks' Mass, and broke my fast. But Simon  
Would neither eat nor pray with us, but climbed  
To the tower's top to meditate alone,  
Brooding upon the kingdoms of this earth  
As Christ in his temptation; and fairer kingdom  
No mortal eye could see than that ripened vale  
Caught in the loops of Avon. It was noon  
Ere he rejoined us; and even as his foot  
Touched earth, there came a message: that the woods

To northward were alive with marching men  
And bright with banners. One whose sight was keener  
Than ours, his barber, Nicholas, clomb the tower  
To see those banners blazoned with the bearings  
Of Simon the Younger—and then he cried again  
That this was true, but that the men who bore them  
Were none of ours, but our sworn enemies.  
And now, as they drew nearer, we could see  
That those who led them wore the blood-red cross  
The barons of the King had borne at Lewes,  
And that the advancing host outnumbered ours  
By three to one. Then would a feebler heart  
Have quailed, but Simon's quailed not; for he smiled,  
Saying: "By the arm of Saint James, they come on bravely,  
But it was I who taught them this order! Let us commend  
Our souls to God, for surely our bodies are theirs."  
Then the monks thronged about us, urging Simon  
To flee while there was time; and he himself  
Begged his son, Henry, and Hugh Despenser, to ride  
Over the bridge behind us; but already  
The horsemen of Mortimer had swum the river  
And barred their crossing. And when they told him this:  
"Come then," he said, "and let us die like men,  
For if we have fasted here we shall breakfast in Heaven!"  
Then called he me by name, and did enjoin me  
Not to adventure my brittle bones in battle  
But to seek sanctuary. And I, in sorrow,  
Turned from him, slowly climbing to the parapet  
Of the great bell-tower; and from that vantage-point  
Saw, though I was no soldier, the hopelessness  
Of our case; for we were snared in the deep loops  
Of the river, that embraced us on every side  
Save one, where the road to Worcester ran between  
The scarps of Crawcombe and the impassable ditch  
Of Avon—one narrow sleeve of watermeadow.  
And, as I stood there gazing, the sky darkened  
To raven blackness, and a baleful blight  
Settled upon the scene, as on that day  
When Christ was crucified, and the temple veil  
Was rent asunder. So, of that awful slaughter  
(For battle none may call it) I saw little

But a tumult of living waves, tossed back and forth  
From the bases of the hills to that bloody river  
Choked with the carrion of the fugitive Welsh  
Drowned in their thousands, whom William de Beauchamp's men  
From his castle of Elmley clubbed with pikes and staves,  
So that those few who floundered to the bank  
Were drowned no less. But of the tempest's heart  
Where Simon, like a strong tower, rose above  
The cowering king, with his two-handed sword  
Sweeping a deadly circle, I saw naught,  
And only heard thereafter how he had fallen  
Crying 'Dieu merci', while the royal craven  
Uncovered by his falling, whined and whimpered:  
'I am Henry of Windsor, your king—for God's sake strike not:  
I am too old to fight'—though, in very truth  
He was younger than Earl Simon. And at the hour  
When Montfort fell, the western sky grew dark,  
So that we could not see to chant out vespers  
In the abbey quire—as though the sun itself  
Disdained to show so foul a deed; but fouler  
Was yet to come, when the Prince's butchers dragged  
His naked corpse to Evesham, and Maltravers—  
Cursed be his memory!—lopped off limbs and head.  
And with a grosser obscenity mutilated  
Those venerable loins, making a laughing-stock  
Of the grisly members, as do the Saracens  
Who know no better; but this man was called Christian.  
And the young prince, now King, sent that grey head  
To Mortimer's wolfish mother Maud, at Wigmore,  
As a warning to the Welsh. Such was the end  
Of Montfort, the strong mountain of our freedoms  
And fortress of our hopes . . .

So, sorrowfully,  
I tottered home to Worcester, broken in spirit  
And stricken in years, to end my dwindling days  
In the service of God and Our Lady, and humble prayers  
For the rest of that great soul; for never again  
Did I leave this cloister, and never more will leave it  
Till they carry my light bones to the charnery,  
And I pray that it be soon—for, even in the telling,  
This tale hath mortally wearied me. Give me a sip

Of water, my son, and leave my side . . . For now  
I fain would sleep.

### XIII

SONG OF THE THIRD CRUSADE

A.D. 1191

We were the fools that trudged away  
From ridge and furrow of chalk and clay,  
From scythe and mattock and plough and cart  
To follow King Richard Lionheart:  
The plodding, patient English foot  
That got no wage but drink and loot  
And the glory promised to them that fell  
Fighting against the infidel.  
We knew hunger and we knew sweat  
And the scorpion desert's blinding heat;  
But never once did we know dread—  
We were too slow-witted, the Frenchmen said.  
And never did our uncurious eyes  
Widen with wonder or surprise;  
For whatever they saw in foreign parts  
We still had England in our hearts.  
We bawled our snatch and cracked our joke  
In the reek of Etna's brimstone smoke,  
And coughed in clouds of sand that hid  
The feet of sphinx and pyramid;  
Yet ever mid alien sand and stone  
Nursed a green vision of our own,  
And through the hot mirage of Nile  
Saw the cool watermeadow smile.  
We groused and bickered and swore and wenched  
And roared our bawdy songs, and drenched  
Our fiery throats with Cyprus wine  
And the sun-warmed fruits of Palestine;  
Yet each would willingly have given  
His days on earth and hopes of heaven  
To plunge his cracked mouth in a pail  
Of Worcester perry or Stratford ale,  
And thrown their peach and fig to rot  
With the sun-freckled apricot

If but his teeth might crunch the fresh  
Cool crispness of a pippin's flesh;  
And each would gladly have cast aside  
The dusky, amorous, almond-eyed  
Women of Asia, once to quench  
His want in the arms of an English wench!  
But they shipped us North and matched our skin  
With the Damascene blades of Saladin;  
So we sacked Acre and trudged on  
Through sleet and snow to Ascalon,  
And hunted the Saracen like a fox  
From cover to cover in Hebron's rocks  
Till we'd shut the heathen seed of Shem  
In the blood-red walls of Jerusalem;  
Where we held them girdled with steel and fire  
And took an oath we would not tire  
Till we set the Cross we had sworn to bear  
On the brink of the Holy Sepulchre.  
But while we laid that siege, the sun  
Clomb to the Lion's flaming zone,  
And the parched soil was cracked and cleft  
Till not a blade of green was left;  
And the meat we butchered, blown with flies,  
Grew quick with maggots beneath our eyes;  
And the drinking-pools where our water stood  
Curdled and stank and turned to mud;  
And the air we gaped was like the breath  
Of a jackal's throat that smells of death;  
For a secret murrain that had no cure  
Rotted the flesh of great and poor;  
And many with madness in their eyes  
Stared gibbering at the white-hot skies  
Where foul birds, circling overhead,  
Shadowed the living and the dead,  
So high they seemed no bigger than flies—  
But or ever men reached their agonies  
The air was thrashed by the flutterings  
Of a hundred hungry noisome wings.  
And the secret murrain that none could stay  
Wasted and wore our strength away,  
Till the Lion Heart, that had beat so bold,

Suddenly faltered and then grew cold;  
And he sailed and left us to pine away  
Within sight of sad Gethsemane:  
Not even Christ in those darkest hours  
Knew passion more desolate than ours!  
While they that had lured us forth rode home  
Shriven and blessed by all Christendom,  
To boast of the sacrifice they made  
When they bore the Cross in Christ's crusade;  
And their bones lie snug in the hallowed earth  
Of the villages that gave us birth,  
Covered by carven effigies  
With their mailed legs crossed beneath the knees;  
While ours, that earned no meaner fame,  
Are lost in graves without a name,  
Or bleached on the unhallowed sand  
Of a waste miscalled the Holy Land:  
The plodding, patient English folk  
That never wavered and never broke,  
And knew not why they fought and fell  
In the deserts of the Infidel;  
That had no crown but a crown of thorn  
And perished unshriven and forlorn,  
And gained no glory and won no wage  
But the toil of a fruitless pilgrimage.

## XIV

RETURN OF THE NATIVE      A.D. 1380

*The Scene—though one would hardly recognise it after the intervening centuries—is the slope of Bredon Hill, a few hundred feet below the ramparts of the Iron Age Herdsmen’s camp, and not far from the site of the garrulous Centurion’s villa. All traces of this have long since disappeared beneath thorns and brambles, which, undisturbed by superstitious hands, have formed an impenetrable thicket. The plain, too, has changed. It is noticeably less densely wooded; and where the forest of scrub-oak once stretched unbroken, a number of clearings can now be seen, each occupied by a village in which humble buildings of daub and wattle are clustered about a church and tower and manor, and surrounded by the cultivated land of the ‘common field,’ divided into elongated strips by linchet-ridges. Although there are no hedgerows and few elms, the landscape has lost much of its ancient wildness, and a great part of it is now deforested. On the northern horizon the choir and nave of the Abbey of Pershore rise above the roofs of the little town which has grown about it, and a tall tower, as yet uncompleted, shows that this foundation has not yet reached the full pitch of its pride. At the point where the Centurion and his visitor halted for a while to observe the view, there now stands the dwelling of Hob the Shepherd, a free labourer on the roll of the Abbot of Pershore. His home is little more than a hut consisting of a framework of rough-hewn timber filled in with mud, with a single door and two unglazed windows. There is no chimney: the smoke of the fire which serves for heating and cooking escapes as best it can from a hole in the thatch. The room’s only furniture is a trestle-bed, a long narrow table made of one plank of oak, and two settles of the same wood. It is a mild May evening, the still air is drenched with the heavy odour of hawthorn-blossom whose whiteness powders the flank of Bredon like a snowstorm, and the birds are in full song. A lazy smoke rises through the hole in the thatch from the fire on which Hob’s supper is seething, and mingles a faint reek of woodsmoke with the breath of the may. The owner of the house sits on a wooden settle before his door and idly contemplates the wide landscape which stretches beyond Severn to the serrated ridge of the Malverns. Hob is a lanky old man, with a mop of white hair, an unkempt beard, and craggy features, of a certain rugged nobility. He is dressed in a coarse woollen tunic, and his long legs are strapped with thongs of leather.*



*The blue eyes which brood on the distance become suddenly aware of a solitary figure toiling up the slope of the hill towards him. It is that of a spare man, as lanky as himself, tonsured, and clothed in a torn cassock which is tucked about his loins with a girdle of rope. Over his shoulder he carries a long staff, with a bundle slung from it; but in spite of his shambling gait, he is evidently a man of unusual strength; for he makes nothing of the steep pitch and climbs it without slackening his pace. As he draws near, his ill-shaven face lights up, and he waves his free hand to Hob. It is a grim, sad face, but marked by a curious innocence and simplicity and an air of refinement hardly in keeping with his personal uncouthness. Hob returns his salute and rises to meet him.*

THE CLERK:

Good evening to you, friend. Can you spare a traveller  
Shelter from storm and harbourage for the night?  
Black clouds are massed on Malvern, and the tempest  
Will soon be on us.

HOB:

I have no great liking for strangers. From your habit  
I see you are clerklly. You should rather have rapped  
At the rich Abbey of Pershore than thrust your company  
On poor folk who know you not.

THE CLERK:

When I was a lad  
Hearts were warmer in Worcestershire. Am I so aged  
That you know me not, Hob of the Hill?

HOB:

My sight is dimmed,  
And my heart grown cold with sorrows. You have my name,  
But your face is strange to me.

THE CLERK:

Cast your thought backward  
To an evening such as this thirty years ago  
And one who halted here on his road from Malvern  
To his father's at Wychwood on Cotswold. Do you not mind  
A lanky lad whom people called Long Will?

HOB:

What? Bist thee William Langland? That is a name  
Known to the ears of many; but little I thought  
To see you again in these parts, though I should have known you  
By your lambering gait and your gown. Ay, your face is not changed;  
But I reckoned you had turned Londoner for good and all  
And forsook old friends in Worcestershire. Come, sit you down;  
Ease those long shanks and tell me how you have fared;  
And then we will share a snack of boiled bacon and drink  
A pint of perry together. That's the best I can offer;  
But you're welcome to all I have. What brings you here  
In these changeful times?

THE CLERK:

Alas, I am trudging back  
To my prison-house in London, the land of strangers,  
With empty belly and purse. But why I am here  
Is a different matter. When April came, and I saw  
The sally-buds puffed with silk in the water meadows  
By Fleet and Tyburn, the sap began to stir  
In my limbs and irked my feet, that are corned by the cobbles  
Of stone-paved streets, to tread on green grass again;  
And my head was ravished in sleep by taunting visions  
Of Temeside cherry-blow, and white clouds sailing  
Over dappled Malvern, and primrose-banks  
And nodding daffodils and the smell of the may,  
Till I could abide it no longer; and so, one morning  
When Spring blew through the city, I stuffed my pack  
And kissed my dear wife Kitty and little Calotte,  
And strode out over Chiltern, blithe as a bee  
Winging to clover verges. And when I had trugged  
Four days on end, with a gay and humble heart  
And my muddled brain washed crystal by clean air  
And sweet verse chiming in time to my step, and I saw  
From Cotswold's brow those hills I loved as a boy,  
Then fell I down on my knees and gave Heaven thanks  
That God still bides in Worcestershire. Yet this paradise  
Dures but the breath of Spring; and when the daffodil  
Hung his gold head, and the cherry-blow was dashed  
And hawthorn rusted on Malvern—then I knew

That this miracle was over, with one more Spring  
Notched on my dwindling tally, and turned my face  
Like Adam, from the angel-guarded gates,  
Home to my dusty livelihood.

HOB:

What make you there, Will?

THE CLERK:

My bare living, by murmuring of *Placebos*  
And *Domine diriges* and the Seven Psalms  
For the good of my lean purse and better men's souls.  
Sometimes I toil at copying of crabbed texts  
In Paul's Walk for fat lawyers, that like leeches  
Suck blood from quarrelsome fools; but oftenest  
I stray the idle streets, telling the rosary  
Of beaded words that I have strung together,  
Year after year and bead on bead, to fashion  
My vision of Piers Plowman—which is but the vision  
Of poor Long Will. Often folk gape to see me  
Go muttering on my way, and in the stews  
Of Tyburn raddled Flanders bawds will set  
Their curs to snap my ankles, and rock to see  
My draggled hems in tatters. Often I lean  
By tavern-doors to catch the blasphemies  
Of sots and gluttons. Often my cheek is spattered  
With mud thrown from the horses' hooves of lords  
Riding to Westminster. Often I mingle  
With chaffering crowds on Garlic-hythe, and routs  
Of holiday prentices making cudgel-play  
Or roaring to the cock-fight—yet all these folk,  
Gentle or simple, fair or foul, are meat  
For my imaginings, and find their place  
In the stringing of my rosary, though many  
Defy my cunning. Sometimes, when I have lain  
Starven with cold in my garret of Cornhill,  
A brave line sparks the night with lettering  
Of fire, and I must rouse my wife and light  
A rush to set it down by—but, like as not,  
By dawn the gleam has faded, and the faggots  
That flared so bright have fallen to grey tinder.

Yet still my rosary lengthens, and by long fingering  
I think the beads grow smooth. 'Tis a strange life  
We poets live; for half the things we dream  
Slip back into the darkness whence they flickered  
Like marsh-lights from the swamp of sleep to lure  
Our minds in muddy flounderings. I had been happier  
If I had not been learned, and had kept sheep  
On Bredon Hill like you, Hob. I have grown old,  
And wearier than my years warrant: a gnarled thorn,  
Niggard of blossom now . . .

HOB:

Yet your Spring's burgeons  
Bloomed not in vain. Piers' coulter has driven deep,  
And the wordy seed you scattered, borne on the breath  
Of common men and blown from mouth to mouth,  
Hath fallen in fertile furrows, and sprouted valiant  
As winter wheat in a mild season. Rightly  
You dub yourself a thorn: your spines have pricked  
A mort of bloated bubbles, and made folk laugh  
Who had little stomach for laughter—or much else  
In these unhappy days.

THE CLERK:

Enough, enough  
Of Piers and him who made him! Tell me, friend,  
How you have fared these many years, and your wife  
And your three lads? You see my memory  
Is not so flimsy, though by now I reckon  
They have children of their own.

HOB:

All gone, all gone . . .  
A careworn man am I, who pines alone  
Like an old stag in the thickets. It was the Death,  
The Black Death, that widowed and bereft me  
Of wife and child.

THE CLERK:

That was the deadliest frost  
That ever nipped green England. Well do I know it;

For I was lodged in Cornhill when the Pestilence  
First broke on London—where the dead lay drifted  
Like Autumn leaves in Wychwood, and Winter's snow  
Fell on them yet unburied: street and alley,  
Charnel and graveyard, clogged with Christian carrion,  
Till Bishop Ralph, out of Paul's patrimony,  
Bought No Man's Land in Spittle Croft, and dug  
Plague-pits to hold the nameless. Fifty thousand  
Had perished by Pentecost. Yet I moved among  
The mounds of dead unscathed,—having made strict vows  
To Blessed Saint Petronel—ay, and carried many  
On my bent back to heave them in the pits,  
With my mouth and nostrils muffled in singed rags  
To stem the stench of death. In those dread months  
I saw strange sights, and listened to stranger words;  
For, mark you, Bishop Ralph, seeing how multitudes  
Went straight to hell unshriven, gave power to clerks  
Of lesser orders to hear the last confessions  
Of folk in dread of death—and I, who hearkened,  
Reeled back in horror from the brimstone pits  
Of black iniquity that yawned in souls  
Of innocent-seeming men. Yet ever my mind,  
Being given to tale-making, strained at the shackles  
Of secrecy; and, but that my lips were locked,  
I could have writ such tales as young Dan Chaucer,  
With his new-fangled measures, never dreamed of;  
Such loves, hates, lusts, torments and vanities  
As would have made all Christendom hang on my lips  
And plead for more.

There is another story  
I might have made had I been younger, telling  
Of how the Death began: how, in mid-Asia,  
The hordes of Tartary besieged a city  
Called Caffa, and, as they lay encamped about it,  
Sudden the Pestilence smote them—how, in revenge  
For what they deemed a hostile magic, they loaded  
Their catapults with corpses, and hurled their dead  
Into the leagured town; how certain merchants  
Of Genoa, fleeing from that terror, carried  
The seeds to Italy, and how thence it crept  
By Avenon, through Gascony, to Bordeaux,

And so by ship to Melcombe in the shire  
Of Dorset. That would have made a tale to freeze  
The blood of generations, and stamped my fame  
So deep, King Richard might have granted me  
The boons he gave Dan Chaucer and his Philippa:  
A pitcher of wine a day, ten pounds of pension,  
And the Petty Customs of Wine in the Port of London!  
But that will never be. You see how fond  
Ambition's dreams have made me: the very pestilence  
Brings grist to my mind's millstones . . .

Forgive me, friend

I had not guessed the Death had dealt so foully  
With you in Worcestershire.

HOB:

Raise but your eyes

And scan the fields; the half our fathers won  
By the patient plough has fallen back to grass,  
A waste of riotous weeds: pass through our villages  
And mark the sagging thatch, the mess of nettle  
And bramble tangling hearths where homely gleeds  
Once burned! Go to the mills of Avon and see  
The broken sluices, the still wheels shagged with moss,  
The rumbling gritstones moveless, the very rats  
Grown gaunt for lack of grain. See how the tower  
Of Pershore bites the sky like a broken tooth  
As witness of our want. There is no dwelling  
Nigh Bredon Hill but mourns the ruthless reaping  
Of that black harvest and its aftermath  
Of misery. We have neither will nor strength  
To mould our sorry world anew. All England  
Goes mourning to the grave of all her hopes  
And hears no passing bell—for they that tolled  
Lie mouldering with the rest; and there's no remedy  
That men can see. The kite has built her nest  
In the Tree of Life and caws for carrion,  
While lords in London drown her hungry scritch  
With drunken song—and you—you sniff the may  
To mask the taint of death.

THE CLERK:

You humble me.  
Tell me your tale; I'll make a song of it  
To prick uneasy consciences.

HOB:

Songs? Songs?  
Throats that are clemmed with hunger have no spittle  
For aught but *Dies Irae*! Yet will I tell you  
How this fair-seeming roseland, on which May smiles  
So soft, within is cankered.

You know well  
How in old time, we villeins of each manor  
Paid our lords' dues in labour—so many days  
At plough, haysel and harvest—and, in return,  
Held our own strips of field, and shared the commonage  
In the waste; and none complained—we were merry folk,  
With ale a penny a gallon and hogs in plenty  
Routing the woods for acorns. Then some lords  
Impatient of our slow husbandry, made bargains  
To pay our toil in silver. Such was the poison  
First marred our peace; for hired men, over-spending  
The pence they earned, light-headed with false freedom,  
Forsook their forbears' settled ways and left  
Their plots to fallow; and much good land lay waste  
While they that should have tilled it went their ways  
As labourers, bound neither to lord nor land  
But to their new-filled purses, faring wastefully  
In prodigal seasons, and in years of want  
Sullen and starved . . .

Then came the winnowing  
Of the Black Murrain: when not one man in three  
Was spared to drive a plough. The dwindled tilth  
Shrank yet more piteously. That year's harvest stood  
Unreaped and sprouting on the stalk. Loose cattle,  
Straying unherded, trampled through fields of grain  
Rotted untimely and unground, while Famine  
Grinned at our door, and money earned or saved  
By those who had boasted freedom (having lost  
The land that made them free) was not enough  
To buy bread for their brats. And, mark you, their lords  
Were in no better case, seeing that the King

Still swung them with fierce taxes to arm and feed  
His fighting-men in France—and not one farthing  
Dropped in their coffers save they sold their corn!  
But when they called for reapers, the landless folk  
Laughed in their faces: “What? You would pay us twopence  
For a day’s harvesting, when our children starve  
And corn is scarce and rye-bread costs us treble  
Of what we gave before the Pestilence?  
Nay, sixpence is our hire; and if you grudge it,  
Then let your harvest rot!”

Then all the gentry  
Huddled together, and rode forth to London,  
Cozening Parliament to frame a Statute  
That bound all labourers to take the wage  
They had won in days of plenty, and their masters  
To pay no more—a penny a day for haymaking,  
Threepence, at most, for reaping—and if they bowed not  
To this decree, then should the lords pay forfeit  
And labourers, bond or free, be haled to justice  
And cast in prison. Yet still the harvest lay  
Ungarnered; for land-bound folk were few, and landless  
Had naught to lose, while they that were clapped in jail  
Could swing no sickle. So the Hunger grew,  
While houses fell to rubble, and the fallows  
Lay foul with dock and thistle, and clogged ditches  
Turned land in good heart sour. Then our taskmasters,  
Still vexed by the King’s taxes, grew ever more greedy  
Of petty tolls and penalties: each man must render  
A fine when his daughter wedded; all must carry  
The corn they grew to their lord’s mill, and pay  
A monstrous fee for grinding; none could oppose  
Oppression—since no land-bound serf might plead  
Against his lord in the King’s courts, or leave  
The land that failed to feed him. Thus, desperate men  
Banded themselves together and took flight,  
Straying from town to town and shire to shire  
In search of labour where none knew their names  
Nor whence they came—so half England was harried  
By homeless, lawless men, who dwelt like wolves  
In the woods, and preyed on simple villages  
To filch a livelihood; and our empty fields



Became a wilderness . . .

THE CLERK:

Yet you bode here on Bredon?

HOB:

I was too old and sad for such adventuring,  
And had no land to bind me; yet my roots  
Are so deep-set that, if they had been wrenched  
From this dear soil that bred me, I should have pined  
And perished.

THE CLERK:

Tell me, then: what is the cure  
For all these ills?

HOB:

There is no sovereign remedy  
That I can tell, nor counsel save the cold comfort  
That old wives give to a young girl in labour:  
“You must be worse before you are better!” And yet  
I feel the first pangs of a great travail begin  
To shake me. Mark how yon storm shadows the Chase  
From Malvern foot to Ripple, and how the wind  
That runs before it tosses the hawthorn-blow  
And turns the hornbeam white with terror! Thus  
Restless, the storm-wind wafts through England now—  
Though whence it comes and whither it will carry us  
I know not. But this I know: there is no secret  
Cranny or nook it has not pierced; no bush  
Nor humble bent but feels it. First it bore  
But a vague whispering, such as those measured words  
Minted by Piers your Plowman, that kindle the mind  
And smoulder there unquenched, like a red ember  
Kindling unquiet heat. But of late we have heard  
Words homelier than yours, pointed with rhymes  
That stamp them on the memory, which are made  
By one called ‘Jack the Miller’—such as these:  
*‘John the Miller hath ground small, small, small.  
The King’s son of heaven shall pay for all.  
Be ware or ye be wo;*

*Know your friend from your foe.  
Have enough, and say "Ho!"  
And do well and better and flee sin  
And seek peace and hold therein  
And so bid John Trueman and all his fellows.'*

THE CLERK:

These are lame verses, with neither sense nor measure.  
Jack Miller is no poet.

HOB:

For the measure,  
I have but little knowledge; but the sense  
Is plain to common folk. There is another  
Word that has passed through all the countryside,  
Whispered from mouth to mouth:

*'John Schep, some time Saint Mary's priest of York, and now of Colchester,  
greeteth well John Nameless and John Miller and John Carter, and  
biddeth them that they beware of guile in the borough and stand together  
in God's name, and biddeth Piers Plowman go to his work, and chastise  
well Hob the Robber, and take with you John Trueman, and no mo; and  
look you sharp to one-head and no mo.'*

THE CLERK:

He has borrowed my Piers Plowman without leave.  
The rest is windy raving; I can see  
No meaning in it.

HOB:

Then you are duller-witted  
Than ever I thought. I will tell you its meaning:  
That the withers of common folk, who till for others  
The soil that is their birthright, are galled to the bone  
By the bonds that fetter them; and that some few  
Who boast more wits than the many have asked this question  
"Since we are one in Christ, and in his Kingdom  
There are neither bond nor free, but Adam's heritage  
Is rightly shared by all his breed, how comes it  
That most men fare afoot, perished with hunger,  
While others ride full-fed and spend the substance

Won by their brethren's toil in waste and gluttony?  
Answer us that!"

THE CLERK:

This has been fully answered  
By Master John Wycliffe of Oxford, in the treatise  
*De Dominio Civili*. All things, he says,  
Belong to God, and are held of him directly;  
Yet what men hold is only truly held  
If they be righteous. The tenure of the wicked  
Is unsubstantial; and what they seem to hold  
Is never theirs in truth—seeing that the righteous  
Already, in virtue of their righteousness,  
Are seized of all God's heritage. Wherefore  
It is idle for the righteous to dispute  
Possession of what the wicked seem but to hold,  
And have no seizin in. Further: if righteous men  
Serve wicked lords and masters, for all that wickedness  
They owe no less obedience; since it is written:  
*Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's*  
*And unto God the things that are God's.*

HOB:

That is no answer  
To stop mouths clemmed with famine, but a mere juggling  
With words and twisting of scripture that sounds strange  
On the lips of one whose tongue was once as sharp  
As a crab-apple and rough as a perry-pear  
That would rasp the roof from your mouth!

THE CLERK:

Both brew good liquor . . .  
Yet you are right: when I was young I was teart  
As Tewkesbury cider; but marriage melloweth man,  
And the sweets of cities are as raisins or honey  
Dropped in the cask; so, when the froth of youth  
Hath bubbled from the bung-hole, the liquor softens  
To a cheerful smoothness—though, mark you, with age  
It may grow ropey and turn again to vinegar  
That hath no virtue but to pickle neats'-tongues  
And sets men's teeth on edge.

HOB:

A rougher answer

Will yet be given, and sooner than you guess,  
By men who deal in deeds, and having known  
Hunger in freedom, deem it preferable  
To plenty in slavery. *The wind bloweth  
Whither it listeth*; and this wind bloweth strong  
And shrewd out of the East, where Jack the Miller  
And his bitter kith have sworn to stand together  
To see the new wrongs righted, and give men back  
The ancient liberties wrested at Runnymede  
From John Sansterre. And when that wind has gathered  
And the storm breaks, the towers of privilege  
Will crash before it as the walls of Jericho  
Fell when God's people shouted. They shall no more  
Withstand it than fond Canute could quell the tide,  
Or we two, perched on Bredon, stay those ranks  
Of heaped cloud charging on us. (Hark! Already  
Low thunder rumbles in the Vale, and lightning  
Rips their black bellies! We had best take shelter  
Before we are caught.) But mark you this, Long Will!  
Though this storm sweep all England, and in its wake  
Tall oaks and elms lie toppled, torn from their roots  
Or lopped of rotten timber, lowlier growths  
And nearer to the soil, as we and ours,  
Shall lose no leaf; and when the tempest passeth,  
Stand glistening with raindrops in the May sun  
And watch the coloured span of God's bow arching  
Blue Cotswold . . .

Come, then. Hasten! The first drops fall.

## XV

A BALLAD OF JOHN BALL

A.D. 1381

John Ball was moulded from the clays  
Of the cold vale of Ouse,  
Blunt of speech and bold of gaze  
Great of bone and thews,  
And through his bitter blood there ran  
The gall of a lonely, landless man.  
He dwelt in plenty among the priests  
In Saint Mary's Abbey of York,  
But had no stomach for their feasts  
Nor patience for their talk  
Of heaven, when pestilence and dearth  
Painted hell on English earth,  
Where he saw the ermined gentry ride  
Warm-clad as they had lain,  
While folk that furnished them their pride  
Trudged cold through wind and rain—  
And their very dogs were better fed  
Than the brats of the poor who whined for bread;  
Where logs that warmed fur-slippered feet  
Were hewn by frozen hands,  
And the wealth they spent on wine and meat  
Was wrung from stolen lands  
By landless folk whose sires had won  
Those very fields from barren stone,  
But were now serfs, bounden to the soil  
And galled beneath the yoke  
Of the few who battened on their toil  
Till body and soul were broke,  
And their starved carcasses at last  
Into the nameless charnels cast,  
While orphans gleaned the hungry lands  
In ragged multitudes,  
And fugitives in lawless bands  
Like wolves lay in the woods,

Prowling forth at night to prey  
On folk no better fed than they.  
So from Ball's anguished heart there broke  
At length a gathering tide  
Of long-pent anger, and he spoke  
His bitter mind, and cried:  
"When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?  
"For we are all God's sons by birth,  
And save for mortal sin  
Each one inheriteth God's earth  
And all that is therein;  
And if, in this, we flout God's will,  
What wonder that the world goes ill?"  
Then (for this doctrine touched their greeds)  
The monks arose in wrath;  
They stripped John Ball of his clerkly weeds  
And drove him from the North,  
Bounden to silence by the strict  
Ban of their Bishop's interdict.  
So he kicked the clods of his native clay  
From his shoes and sought the South;  
And they reckoned themselves well-rid that they  
Had stopped this blabbing mouth  
That dared to speak forth without fear  
The truths they hated most to hear.  
Southward he wandered without haste  
To the agued Essex fen,  
Lurking in hovels of the waste  
With landless, hopeless men  
Whose thoughts, for utter want, had grown  
Darker and bitterer than his own;  
And though no bishop would let him preach  
In temples made with hands,  
Men flocked to hear the forthright speech  
That a plain folk understands  
Better than mumbled Latin read  
By priests who give them stones for bread;  
For his rede was no fine-tempered sword,  
But a bludgeon of tough oak  
That hammered-in each uncouth word

Till those down-trodden folk,  
Dumb with toil and blind with pain,  
Blinked their bleared eyes and saw again;  
Till hapless men in hundreds heard  
The words John Ball had said,  
Till from the fens the ferment stirred  
Like brewsters' barm in bread,  
And spreading forth from East to West  
Leavened the hearts of the oppressed.  
And the hapless hundreds all agreed  
As one man to maintain  
The bare rights gained at Runnymede  
And take their own again,  
That freedom of their native earth  
Be given to men of English birth;  
Till, when the young king's officers  
Sent his tax-gatherers forth  
For gold to feed their foreign wars,  
All Essex rose in wrath  
And beat them from the shire, and sent  
Word to their brother-men in Kent;  
And starved serfs gathered everywhere  
As the shire of Kent awoke,  
And Canterbury and Rochester  
Roared to heaven in smoke  
While half the harvest's garnered stores  
Lay spilt upon the threshing-floors;  
And starven Kent, with pike and flail,  
Swept through the Medway plains,  
To break the walls of Maidstone jail  
Where John Ball lay in chains,  
And set him free and bore him on  
To the barred gates of London town,  
Where, on the bank of Thames, the rout  
Surged like a foamy sea:  
They burnt the palace of Lambeth out  
And sacked the Marshalsea,  
Calling on them that kept the gate  
To give up London to its fate.  
Then did the folk of London cower,  
Seeing they were bestead;

For the King was shut within the Tower,  
And the Queen, his mother, fled,  
And the merchants had no spunk to fight  
Against a cause they knew was right;  
So Alderman Sybele, who stood alone  
And was scared for his own skin,  
Sent the great drawbridge rattling down  
To let the rabble in:  
And the gutters bubbled with a flood  
Of broached wine frothed with human blood.  
For dazed men knew not what they did  
And cared not whom they slew,  
And nothing recked so they be rid  
Of the stony-hearted crew  
That had docked them of their dwindled wage  
And robbed them of their heritage.  
So, with no lust but to destroy,  
Fierce Kent surged through the street  
To burn the Palace of Savoy  
And the Flemings of the Fleet,  
While, from the North, the turbid spate  
Of Essex thundered through Aldgate;  
Till London was a shambles lit  
With flame and drenched in gore,  
And blood and fire in fury beat  
On the bastions of the Tower,  
Where the King, with his craven court,  
Huddled in fear, but could do naught.  
Then young King Richard rose and spoke:  
“How should a king disown  
These rude, benighted countryfolk  
Who are subjects of his crown?  
Rather will I ride forth to find  
What maggot rots my people’s mind.  
“And if I deem their wrongs well-found,  
Then will I do them right;  
For so I swore when I was crowned,  
And must fulfil the plight  
I pledged them as their lawful king  
To give them justice in everything.”  
So the King, by Aldersgate, rode out



To Smithfield Square; and when  
They saw this noble child, that rout  
Of simple, hapless men  
Forgot their bitter wrongs, and cried:  
“The King, the King is on our side!”  
And Walter Tyler, who was their chief,  
Set forth their just demands;  
And the young king promised them relief  
From tax, and that the lands  
And forests should be theirs once more,  
And lords no longer grind the poor.  
But while he spoke this soothing word  
And granted them their due,  
The Mayor of London stripped his sword  
And ran Wat Tyler through;  
And when they saw their leader dead,  
The crowd, bewildered, broke and fled;  
And his aldermen called out the wards  
To smite them in the rear,  
And the men of London drenched their swords  
In such a massacre  
As the shambles of Smithfield had never seen  
And never will know again, I ween;  
And through all England the butchers rode  
From Suffolk to Somerset  
Wherever a feeble ember glowed  
Of the gleed John Ball had lit;  
And summer fields, from York to Kent,  
Smoked with the blood of the innocent.  
They caught John Ball in Coventry  
And dragged him South in shame,  
They broke his neck on the gallows-tree  
And quartered his lean frame;  
And they brought his carcass to London, and set  
His head on the bridge-house parapet;  
It grinned there, shrivelling day by day,  
That mouth of speech bereft,  
Till weather had sloughed the lips away  
And naught but bone was left,  
And careless folk who passed the gate  
Thought no more of John Ball’s fate.

And now the guard-house gate is gone  
And razed the parapet;  
But that mouth still asks the question  
That none dares answer yet:  
*When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?*

## XVI

### Interlude

THE WARS OF THE ROSES

A.D. 1455-1485

Behold a more tempestuous age  
Than England ever yet hath known:  
See the embattled Roses rage  
In tumult round a redeless throne:  
See all her braggart chivalry  
Driven from Gascony and Maine  
Headlong to the narrow sea,  
Dragging in their dishevelled train  
The louts that laughed to burn the Maid,  
Yet faltered when the shining lance  
Of bold Dunois and Guesclin's blade  
Flashed and smote them out of France:  
Whose rustic wits could understand  
No cleaner trades than rape and plunder;  
Who fell upon their native land  
And tore her living limbs asunder,  
Who sold their mercenary might  
To them that bid the most, and bled  
Till the Red Rose was blanched white  
And the White Rose blotched with red!  
See the fierce falcons from the harsh  
Eyries of Mortimer soar to fling  
Their terror from the Powys March  
To Verulam, where the hapless King  
In predatory talons caught  
Is rapt and caged and set at naught!  
*Yet while that changeful battle swayed  
The bells of Alban's minster rang  
For Vespers, and the barley-blade  
From Verulam's buried ruins sprang  
Enriched with death anew to yield  
Life from the trampled battlefield.*

See how the angry queen bereft  
Rallies her broken host and falls  
On York and Neville in Ludford cleft  
And holds them locked in Ludlow's walls,  
And the fierce Red Roses whirl away  
The White Rose and the Ragged Staff  
Like vapours blown at break of day  
From Temeside, or wind-winnowed chaff  
That is flurried from a threshing-floor:  
Till Teme is sullied with the stain  
Of death, as when dense waters pour  
From Corvedale red with Lammas rain!

*Yet even in that bitter hour  
When York was broken and betrayed,  
The masons perched on Ludlow Tower  
Plied their patient craft, and laid  
Course upon course the quarried stones  
That made that miracle of grace  
To bear the mellow chime whose tones  
Waver above the market-place.*

But see: the Ragged Staff returning  
Ravages the midland plain:  
See Northampton sacked and burning  
And the crazed King caught again!  
See the resurgent White Rose wilt  
At Wakefield, where the rebel blood  
Of stubborn York himself is spilt—  
While March, last hawk of that fierce brood,  
Wings to the West and whets the sword  
That shall avenge his father's loss  
On Pembroke's levies, where the ford  
Straddles the Lugg at Mortimer's Cross!

*Yet even as the fallen hopes  
Of Lancaster lay drowning there,  
The woodman's axe on Lingen's slopes  
Rang through the February air,  
And in the frosty folds that lie  
On Lingen's sheepwalks, shepherds kept  
Their starlit vigil, till the sky  
Grew dim with dawn, and turned and slept  
In peace, with neither ruth nor cares*

*For a quarrel that was none of theirs.*  
Once more on Verulam see the wrath  
Of the Red Rose flame—as Neville reels  
Driven in terror to the North  
With Lancaster upon his heels,  
Nor stays his rout nor stands his ground  
Till the royal roses are laid low  
By York’s usurper, newly crowned,  
At Towton in the crimson snow;  
Till Neville’s bitter brother slew  
Percy at Hedgeley Moor, and caged  
That fierce Queen, Margaret of Anjou!  
So, for a while, the fires that raged  
Through England’s length and breadth are spent  
In a smoulder of sullen discontent.

*Yet even as the arrowy hail  
Mingled with snow on helm and shield,  
The plowmen of the Towton Vale  
Led their patient teams afield;  
And shepherds on the heathery moor  
Of Hexham heard the plaintive bleat  
Of yeanling lambs above the roar  
Of battle raging at their feet,  
Carried the orphans in their arms  
To the warm ingles of their farms,  
And laid them by the smoking peat.*

See how the germ of vengeance breaks  
From bloody seed at Hexham sown,  
When Neville’s treachery unmakes  
The king he made, and on the throne  
Plants the weak fool he first forswore!  
See, nourished by the dynast’s hand,  
The Rose of Lancaster once more  
Flaunt above a sullen land—  
Till York, supplanted and betrayed,  
Rides from the North to claim his right  
And the Kingmaker is unmade  
On Easter Eve in Barnet fight,  
While his vanquisher pursues the rout  
Of Barnet to the Severn Sea,  
And stamps the last red embers out

In the bloody meadow at Tewkesbury!  
*Yet, while the sun of Lancaster  
Blood-red in Severn's bosom sets,  
The fishermen from Tewkesbury weir  
Launch their boats and stake their nets  
In channels where allice and salmon run  
To seek their gravelly spawning-redd,  
And little recked who lost or won  
The battle so their mouths were fed;  
And graziers from the wattled folds  
Of Cotswold carried bales of fleece  
To stow them in the greedy holds  
Of Flanders gaping at the quays,  
And rode back to their windy wold  
On horse-packs stuffed with Flemish gold.*

So, for long time, a bloodless truce  
Broods on an exhausted realm—  
Till dying York in death lets loose  
His crippled brother, to overwhelm  
Kinsman and foe in one red flood  
Of indiscriminate slaughter, wading  
To climb the throne knee-deep in blood;  
Till the White Rose with the Red Rose fading  
Fell together on Bosworth field,  
Where the cold craft of Richmond brought  
The savage Crouchback to his knees,  
And in his brain's shrewd smithy wrought  
The double emblem that annealed  
Those two tempestuous flowers in one,  
And with a kindlier wisdom sealed  
His merciful dominion  
In the long Tudor peace.

*Yet while those barbarous warriors died  
At Bosworth for a tawdry gage,  
The patient printer Caxton plied  
His craft, and from the virgin page  
The magic of immortal words  
Shone with a beauty to outlast  
The scars their transitory swords  
Graved on the tablets of the past;  
And while ambitious dynasts broke*

*Their thews to prop a transient throne,  
The spirit of the common folk  
Flowered in imperishable stone—  
When men whose names will ne'er be known,  
The rude, anonymous builders, raised  
Their village belfries to the skies  
That God might be the better praised;  
And master-glaziers' jewelled dyes  
Shot the gloomy Norman vault  
With shafts of sapphire and cobalt,  
And from their silvery clerestories  
Shed floods of radiance and fires  
Of ruby on the shadowy quires;  
And while the ruthless baronage  
Flew at one another's throats,  
The folk who paid the builders' wage  
Gathered within their manor-moats  
The meed of husbandry that heaped  
Their granaries with the spoils of peace,  
And shepherded their flocks and reaped  
The harvest of the golden fleece;  
And when the flames of that fierce age  
With Bohun and Mortimer were spent,  
These plain folk claimed the heritage  
Of honourable toil, content  
To see a soberer England rise  
From the charred ruins of the old,  
And welcome, with undazzled eyes,  
The dawning of an Age of Gold.*

## XVII

NORTH-WEST PASSAGE

A.D. 1497

On the second day of the month of May  
When the cuckoo cried in the woods of Leigh,  
The *Matthew* shipped her trade and slipped  
Her mooring-cable from Bristol Quay.  
Bristol-made and Bristol-manned,  
With a crew as tough as any afloat,  
She sailed that day in search of land,  
And her captain's name was John Cabote:  
A salty, swarthy Venetian,  
Born of that race of roving men  
That know the seas from Matapan  
To the whirlpool of the Lofoden,  
From the hungry fangs of Finisterre  
And the sun-white sands of the Azores  
To the banks of dripping fog that bear  
The crags that girdle Iceland's shores.  
Yet they who watched the *Matthew* drift  
Baremasted on the falling tide  
That ebbed through Avon's oozy cleft,  
And hailed us from the waterside  
To speed our parting, little guessed  
(And we, her crew, no more than they)  
The hazards of the lonely quest  
That lured John Cabote on his way:  
How, cold as was his outward eye,  
There ever burned within his brain  
A vision of new lands that lie  
Westward of the Spanish main,  
And a lust for landfalls stranger still  
Than fiery Hecla's girdling ice:  
For he saw the island of Brazille  
And far Cipango's Isles of Spice,  
Where, in a palace paved with gold  
The Great Khan wields his awful sway



On slavish multitudes untold  
In the seven Cities of Cathay.  
Over Avon's oozy bed  
We drifted seaward mile on mile  
Till we cleared the bluffs of Portishead  
And weathered Lundy Isle;  
And hoisted sail at the tide's turn  
Where the last known headlands one by one  
With the loom of Lundy fell astern,  
And we laid our course on the sinking sun  
That set with never a sail in sight  
Nor ever a single landward gleam  
As the *Matthew* bore on through the night  
With the lodestar dipped on her starboard beam.  
Through empty leagues, with never a speck  
Of sail, a week we ran close-hauled,  
And a short sea spewed the after-deck  
With icy sheets of emerald,  
Till, where a haze of shredded spray  
Whitened the fringes of Cape Clear,  
The brisk North Easter died away  
And the cold wind began to veer;  
And for a second week, the wrath  
Of a warm gale in the tropics bred  
Drove us reeling to the North  
With the drunken lodestar full ahead.  
The hot wind in the halyards screamed  
The wild wind stripped the shrouds,  
The reefed sails split because of it  
And were blown away like clouds;  
It carried the foremast by the board  
And cracked the mainsail-boom:  
We could do naught but thank the Lord  
At least we had sea-room.  
Too dazed were we to care or ask  
How soon our end might be,  
As the *Matthew*, like a broken cask,  
Plunged in the pits of sea,  
Or like a spar of driftwood clung  
To the wave's glassy cheek,  
And climbed, and for a moment hung

Poised on the combing peak,  
Straddled with bow and stern in air,  
Enough to break her back:  
And as the *Matthew* shuddered there,  
We heard the keelson crack;  
We looked to see the whole hull riven  
And her timbers fly apart,  
And vowed our sinful souls to heaven  
With fear in every heart;  
Till, strange as was the miracle  
Christ wrought in Galilee,  
The gale that so misused us fell,  
And with it fell the sea  
To a creaming swell as gentle grown  
As a mother that rocks her babe;  
And we checked our course anew, by stone  
And needle and astrolabe.  
Into the empty West we had sailed,  
Three hundred leagues almost,  
When the soft breeze from the South'ard failed,  
And I smelt the breath of frost;  
An icy Arctic current set  
Upon our starboard bow,  
Till the limp sails with fog were wet  
And sprent with flurried snow.  
The breath of yet-unfallen snows  
Stiffened our clammy hair;  
It crept into our mouths and froze  
Our breath upon the air.  
Blindly through fog the *Matthew* lurched  
Till Cabote's cabin-boy  
Sebastian, in the crow's nest perched,  
Shouted 'Land ahoy!'  
Then all the crew with one accord  
Ran to the bows and blessed  
Sweet Mary, Mother of our Lord,  
Who loves poor seamen best;  
But as I peered and arched my hand  
To shade my straining eyes,  
I knew this landfall was no land  
But isles of floating ice.

Like the risen ghosts of mountains vast  
In deeps of ocean drowned,  
Their white-robed shapes came drifting past  
Without a sigh or sound:  
Without a sigh, without a sound  
That ears of man could hear,  
Those silent spectres gathered round  
Like mutes about a bier;  
And the seeping vapours that they shed  
From icy flank and peak  
Fell like the fingers of the dead  
Upon each bloodless cheek.  
Shrouded in snow and cased in veils  
Of mist they loomed above:  
They stole the wind from our slack sails  
So that we could not move;  
And the foolish whispered words we spoke  
To bate our mortal dread  
Backward in mocking echoes broke  
And bellowed overhead.  
So, clamped within that cruel vice,  
We floated as the snow-light fell,  
And waited for the grinding ice  
To crunch us like a filbert-shell.  
Huddled on the glazing deck,  
We brooded on our hopeless plight,  
And heard the riven icebergs crack  
Like thunder round us in the night,  
Till the dim snow-light paled again,  
And a huge phantom of the sun  
Rose wanly from the watery plain,  
And lo!—the ice was gone!  
A warm waft filled the frozen sails  
And shed their crusted rime,  
As the *Matthew* dipped her bows and crept  
Into a kindlier clime.  
Two hundred leagues and more we sailed  
On the same westward course,  
Till, through a haze of surf, we hailed  
The sight of unknown shores,  
Where the tall shape of a lonely cape

Shadowed a woody strand;  
And the Master christened the cape, St. John's,  
And the shores the New Found Land.  
So we broached a keg of Gascony  
To drink John Cabote's health,  
Who had brought us safe through the icy seas  
To lands of untold wealth  
Where our eyes, he told, might soon behold  
Those fabled Cities of Cathay  
Where common streets were paved with gold  
And flowers bloomed alway;  
Where fruits hung down from blossomed trees  
And bright wings flashed through groves of spice,  
And sea-worn men might take their ease  
In airs of paradise.  
Such were the vain delights we planned  
And such the empty hopes we nursed,  
And guessed not that our New Found Land  
Was desert and accurst:  
For naught was there but a wilderness  
Of barren rock, and trackless wood  
Where no sound broke the silences  
Of a deathlike solitude  
But the boom of rollers on the beach  
And the scream of seabirds overhead;  
That awful silence muted speech  
And crushed our hearts with dread.  
Yet, though we spake not, every man  
Saw panic written plain  
In his comrades' eyes, and turned and ran  
Back to the boats again.  
Three weeks the *Matthew* southward bore,  
Hugging that haunted coast;  
Yet none that landed ever saw  
So much as a man's ghost,  
Nor any footprint but his own,  
Nor any work of human hands  
But a netting-needle of carved bone  
Cast on the wave-ribbed sands;  
Nor any curl of smoke by day  
Nor glint of fire by night:

And our greedy visions thinned away  
Like phantoms, out of sight.  
Thus in our hearts a hatred grew  
For this homeless faring without end  
And a longing for the ways we knew,  
For wife and child and friend.  
So we begged our captain John Cabote  
To cease his fruitless quest,  
And he gybed and put the ship about  
And set the course due East.  
The elder bloomed on Clifton Down  
And the cuckoo was flown from the woods of Leigh  
When we saw the roofs of Bristol Town  
And stepped ashore on Bristol Quay,  
Where merchant folk that thronged the port  
Stood agape on every hand  
To see what booty we had brought  
Back from the New Found Land.  
But their curious faces fell, to know  
That booty we had none,  
And that all the treasure we could show  
Was a netting-needle of bone;  
And that all the marvels we could bring  
Their eager ears was nothing more  
Than a tale of bootless voyaging  
And of a barren shore.  
And now the *Matthew* of Bristol plies  
A trade of greater gain,  
For she carries the rich merchandise  
Of Gascony and Spain;  
But though Cabote his pension got  
And we had but our wage,  
Yet would I fain put forth again  
On such a pilgrimage:  
For oft, as in my bunk I dream,  
Rocked within hail of friendlier land,  
I hear the homeless seabirds scream  
Above that haunted strand,  
And I smell the mould of the forest sod  
That never human eyes nor feet  
Save ours alone have seen or trod,

And find it strangely sweet;  
And my nights are lit by the wild gleam  
Of the passion that beguiles  
The hearts of islanders to dream  
Of undiscovered isles,  
Of chasms that no lead can sound  
And deserts never crossed,  
And the search for what no man hath found  
And the finding of the lost;  
And in those dreams I grope my way  
North-westward through the grinding ice  
To the Seven Cities of Cathay  
And the fabled Isles of Spice.

## XVIII

ADAM WOODWARD AND THE SHIPWRIGHT

A.D. 1525

*Once more the Scene is Worcestershire. To the skylark's eye the face of the land on which Hob of the Hill and Will Langland looked down does not seem greatly changed in a hundred and forty years. In the foreground the tower of Pershore Abbey, then unfinished, has now reached its full height, and the extent of the monastic buildings betokens the dignity of a rich and powerful community—already doomed, did they but know it, to untimely dispersal. The wild region of Malvern Chase remains much as it was, and the area of tilth in the valleys of Severn and Avon does not appear larger than it was before the Black Death, although the landscape has grown generally paler through the thinning of trees for fuel. Only North of Avon the great Mercian woodlands remain: the forests of Arden and Feckenham stretching in a dark band from East to West and merging, in the neighbourhood of Bewdley, into the dense oakwood of Wyre, which here embraces and overflows the course of Severn to peter out on the less hospitable flanks of the Clees. Through the midst of this forest the Dowles Brook lapses quietly over its ledges of sandstone to join Severn; and, roughly parallel with its meanderings, through a shallow valley choked with brushwood, a sled-scored track penetrates the lonely recesses of aboriginal oak.*

*It is an early morning in middle June, with the cuckoo abroad, and though the oaks have broken into leaf, their foliage has not yet darkened to the opacity which, in late Summer, fills the forest with gloom. Yet Wyrewood lies strangely silent. No sound can be heard but the murmur of the brook, the sudden screeches of jays and magpies, or the laugh of the stock-eagle. Over the track, already invaded by springing bracken, there slowly advances a horseman, on a shaggy pony, leading a packhorse, laden with two ill-balanced saddle-bags. The rider is a sturdy, black-bearded young man in maroon trunk-hose and doublet. He wears a velvet cap of the same colour furnished with a silver medal of Saint Christopher, whose protection he might well feel the need of in such an outlandish spot—the more so in that he rides unarmed. At the end of several miles of collar-work the track opens into a clearing occupied by two thatched hovels protected by a stone wall on which the flayed hides of deer are stretched out to dry in the sun. Outside*

*this wall, within a circle of black ash, the mound of a charcoal-burner smoulders, emitting from its summit a thin spiral of milk-blue smoke.*

*At the sight of these signs of habitation, the rider, Hugh Baker, son of James Baker, the famous shipwright of Southampton, cautiously pulls up, and the led horse immediately lowers his head to crop the grass that springs between the bronze croziers of unfolding bracken; then tosses it abruptly, startled by his master's shout, in response to which an uncouth figure stalks out of the nearer hut. It is that of a gigantic man, clothed from neck to foot in leather. The parts of his face left uncovered by his shaggy blond beard, are blackened by charcoal-dust which intensifies the whiteness of his eye-balls and teeth and gives his craggy face a ferocious aspect. In his enormous left hand he grasps a long-bow, to whose string he has fitted an arrow. He is Adam Woodward, servant of Sir William Compton, lately appointed Rider and Verderer of the royal forest of Wyre. From the shelter of his stone wall he challenges the intruder.*

ADAM:

Who bist thee, stranger—and what makest thou  
In the king's woodland without leave or warrant?

HUGH:

I am called Hugh Baker, shipwright of Southampton,  
And travel in the king's service by the leave  
Of your master, Sir William Compton, to make a tally  
Of the wood's standing timber. For my warrant:  
It is here . . . But for Christ's sake first unstring that arrow!

ADAM:

I cannot read.

HUGH:

See, then, the sheriff's signet  
Stamped on the seal.

ADAM:

What would you of me?

HUGH:

Your counsel,  
And what charity you can spare—against just payment—



For a stomach that is empty these fifteen hours.

ADAM:

Here is no hostelry. Better you had filled it  
In the inn at Bewdley.

HUGH:

So had I, but that I came  
To the bridge-house after nightfall and found it barred,  
Nor would they loose the bolt.

ADAM:

Came you thither from Worcester?

HUGH:

Ay, and so told them.

ADAM:

Then there is little wonder  
The folk misliked you: there is disaccord  
Twixt Bewdley and Worcester over the water-traffic  
Of Severn—though had you passed the bridge I doubt  
You would have gotten bed or victual; for the Council  
Bides now in Bewdley, and the town's beset  
With greedy gizzards like a carrion  
Pestered by wood-ants. Within another month  
The Lady Mary cometh to dwell at Tickenhill,  
And swarms of bustling tradesmen flock to fettle  
The palace for her court: there has not been  
So foul a press in Bewdley since Prince Arthur  
Her brother's corpse lay there upon the way  
To burial in Worcester! Hobble your horses:  
If they should range in the woods no eye could track them  
Save mine. Then, if you will, you shall eat with me  
A mess of venison, and slake your gullet,  
So it be not too mimping, with a swill  
Of the teart liquor that we forest-folk  
Crush from choke-pear and crab-apple.

HUGH:

Were it verjuice

My throat would relish it. I give you thanks,  
Woodward.

ADAM:

You owe me none. I give no welcome  
To meddlesome trespass save a goose-winged shaft;  
But you, who come in peace and with right warrant,  
I reckon as my guest till you have stepped  
Beyond the forest's liberties. Come, sit you down  
Till the pot seethe.

HUGH:

I have told you my name.  
But yours I do not know.

ADAM:

I am called Adam,  
Woodward of Wyre.

HUGH:

You have dwelt long in this forest?

ADAM:

I was born and bred in it, like my father before me  
And his again. My grandfather was servant  
To the Mortimers of Wigmore who once held  
This chase. He fell at Tewkesbury . . .

HUGH:

You dwell alone?

ADAM:

Alone? Alone? How should my days be lonely  
Amid the living multitude of creatures  
That bear me company? There is no tree  
In all Wyrewood but knows me for his neighbour  
And one that loves him! I have fleeter friends:  
Hart, hind, hare, wolf and boar, the five wild beasts  
Of venery, and a mort of humbler folk  
That list my step but fear not: the russet squirrel  
Who chitters on the bough and fearless fills

His garner at my threshold; fitchet, weasel  
And spitfire catamount—and those shy rieviers  
That slink by night: vixen and brindled brock,  
And the sleek-skinned otter-bitch that dives to snatch  
The great lax swimming in her golden livery  
Of Michaelmas to find my Lenten fare.  
All these are my familiars; yet I do reckon  
I love the tall trees best: they are no runagates,  
And quiet best befits this wilderness.

HUGH:

Quiet? Knew I no livelier company  
I should go mumping-mad. My tongue would shrink  
For want of wagging, and my ear-drums thicken  
Till I grew adder-deaf.

ADAM:

Friend, you are wrong.

HUGH:

What? Can these dumb stocks mark your word or make  
Articulate answer?

ADAM:

Ay, and with many voices,  
So you but hearken and the ear be tuned  
To catch their tone and cadence. Every tree  
Has its own speech in season: the showery abele  
That sighs when all are hushed and the weak air  
Stirreth no other leaf; the timid whitebeam  
That whispers faint alarm when the wind blenches  
Her ravelled tresses; why, even the stiff holly,  
That broodeth mute and sullen in her thickets  
Till mightier boughs be bared, breaketh her silence  
In brittle chatter when November strips  
All other leaves but hers. That is the season  
When, in their nakedness, the great oaks stand  
Girt with such godlike majesty that a heathen  
Who knew not Christ might sink upon his knees  
And worship them.

HUGH:

This is idolatry!  
Surely your mind must have been mazed by solitude  
To breed such wicked blasphemies.

ADAM:

Behappen

It is sounder than you reckon. I do but tell  
The wild thoughts it has harboured in that season  
Of deathlike stillness when the starlight falls  
On a world cased in snow, and even the brooks  
Ice-muted cease their babbling. There is no silence  
Holier than this, or stranger. Yet I confess  
I love my woodland best when all its voices  
Are raised in riot: as when Lammas gales  
Roar through the huddled treetops, and torn boughs  
Leaf-burdened crash into the shuddering brake  
With shrieks of rending anguish—and there is war  
In heaven, as when the winged archangels battled  
With the dark hosts of Lucifer and swept  
His fiends into the pit. Then my brave oaks  
Unbent proclaim their majesty, defying  
The demons of the air. Oft have I leaned  
With my ear pressed against them, striving to share  
That fierce aerial tumult—yet not a tremor  
Shaketh their steadfast boles! No progeny  
Of earth is nobler or mightier than these—  
No, nor yet wiser.

HUGH:

Wiser? That is too much  
For a plain man to stomach! Would you maintain  
That these familiars partake the natures  
And passions of mankind?

ADAM:

Did you but know them  
As I, you would not doubt it. For their natures:  
These are as manifold in variety  
As their hues, shapes and statures. Some are frail—  
Witness the frightened aspen that for ever

Shivers with needless fear, and is so cold  
At heart she will not burn—while some are gay  
And light of utter innocence, like the birch  
That laughs when the wind fondles her, yet is bold  
To loose her shift of satin and stand poised  
In slim and silvery nakedness, like a maid  
Upon the river's brink. Others are gracious  
As the honey-dripping and bee-haunted lime  
Whose tender leaves my gentle fallows nip  
With lips of velvet. Some, though seeming fair,  
Are jealous—as the shallow-rooted beech,  
Whose greed, for all her graces, will not brook  
Consort or rival—so that no blade of green  
Can thrive beneath her, and the very oak  
Pines in her company. Some are treacherous—  
Witness the elm, whose brittle branches fall  
To build a coffin for the fool who trusts  
His life to her false shelter. Some are crabbed  
And stony-hearted—as the grudgeful yew  
That dwells apart, black-visaged and withdrawn  
Like a Welshman of the marches, and hath no joy  
But in her length of days. Others are spiteful—  
As is the poison-dripping ash that sheds  
Death on the sward beneath her. There are many  
Lesser and lowlier trees with neither malice  
Nor virtue in their natures: the rugged alder  
That sways her ravelled rootlets in our brooks  
And smoulders into charcoal; the tough hornbeam,  
That like a candle flares, yet is so stubborn  
She dints the axe—and all the pliable tribe  
Of water-loving withies whose silver buds,  
Breaking in floss of palest primrose, kindle  
The first cold fires of Spring. Yet, of all these,  
I love the oak most dearly . . .

HUGH:

Your wise oaks!

ADAM:

How should he not be wise who hath outlived  
Mankind's allotted span before he sets

A single acorn, and is not meet for timber  
Ere he hath doubled it? There are oaks in Wyre  
That had weathered their first winters when the Roman  
Set foot in Britain, and had but reached their prime  
When Harold fell at Hastings, yet still stand  
Hale to the root.

HUGH:

I am too staid to follow  
Such lightfoot fancies; yet I do confess  
They are lordly trees: as pretty a standel of timber  
As I have seen this twelvemonth. In the South  
We have no such forests now. The Wealden woods  
Have fed the smelters' furnaces and slaked  
Their charcoal-mounds with sap. Our slips lie empty  
For lack of sizeable timber-trees to build  
The hulls this realm needs most. I think your oaks  
Might end their days more nobly than by drowsing  
To death in this dim cloister. Lay me that giant,  
And from his fallen carcase the adze will fashion  
Garboard, strakes, ribs and knees for such a ship  
As never took salt water! From yonder elm  
Sawyers will shear planking to case her decks  
And carve both keel and kelson. Cross-grained knots  
Shaped by the turner's chisel-edge shall furnish  
Dead-eyes and pulley-blocks; your stubborn hornbeam  
Yield tree-nails that shall marry oak to elm  
So the twain be one flesh; your springy ash  
Find yards and cross-trees. From the pliable poplar  
Coopers will hammer water-butts and kegs  
For gunpowder—whereof the fieriest  
Is mixed with alder-charcoal. Thus your staid forest  
Wrought by man's artifice shall sweep the seas  
In a more splendid shape and prouder guise,  
Dight with new dread and beauty!

ADAM:

I have never  
Beheld the sea, nor any vessel nobler  
Than the great drags and trowes that float our cordwood  
Down Severn to Gloucester.

HUGH:

You would not count such craft  
Great were you seaward-bred, or had you but seen  
The huge bark *Princess Mary*, that my father,  
James Baker, built at Hampton. Six hundred tons  
Of portage, manned by seven hundred souls:  
Of mould so clean beneath, of sail so swift,  
Above so sweet-proportioned—castles, coins  
And fights so cunningly disposed for majesty  
And terror of the enemy—yet withal  
So weatherly and maniable! Ah, had you watched her  
Upon the day she thundered from the slips  
And floated on the water like a swan  
Amid a flight of mallard—then had you granted  
The empire of the Hampton shipwrights' artifice  
Above all others. Yet the *Princess Mary*  
Seems but a shallop to me, whose eyes have seen  
The *Henry Grace à Dieu*, that seamen lovingly  
Call the *Great Harry*, lately launched at Erith,  
Whose portage is a thousand, and her crew  
Double the *Princess Mary's*, manning five tiers  
Of brazen ordnance—cannons, demi-cannons,  
Culverins, sakers and falcons, to say naught  
Of her iron slings, fowlers and hail-shot pieces  
And murderous hand-guns. There is no battle-ship—  
Be she galleasse of Portugal or galleon  
Of Spain or Venice—that can quench the fire  
Of this formidable paragon. Yet now we plan  
To build a greater.

ADAM:

I cannot understand  
Why we, a comfortable folk, should court  
The perils of unquiet waves, or seek  
Dominion of the seas that God hath set  
To guard our natural liberties.

HUGH:

There speaks  
The landsman! Know you not that the fickle waters  
Which fend us can prove traitor, giving passage





She were outnumbered, show such nimble heels  
No foe could catch her—for this kingly ship  
Is limber as a greyhound. It is strange  
That an instrument of war so terrible  
Should be so beautiful. When first I saw her  
Towed on the flood-tide of the Thames from Erith  
To Barking Creek (for there my father had sent me  
To spy upon her) I judged her lines uncomely  
Beside our race-built Hampton craft—and once  
She all but grounded on the shelving silt  
Eastward of Roding river. That was jealousy  
Feeding false hope: she was not yet rigged or sparred  
With the tall masts of tapered spruce-wood felled  
In the forests of the Hansa; and I told  
My father she was but a monstrous drone,  
Paunchy and sluggard. But when next I saw her  
Put forth from Dover, carrying the King's Grace  
To parley with his royal cousin Francis  
Twixt Guynes and Arde in Flanders, then, suddenly,  
My heart leapt to my mouth, like a young lad's  
When first he sees his love, of sheer delight  
In her perfection: for this huge hulk steered  
Light as a pinnacle and made our *Princess Mary*  
Seem but a slut beside her. Never was ship  
More gloriously appavelled; for all her sails  
Were damasked cloth-of-gold. Upon the cagework  
Of her high castles flew four royal standards,  
Each flagstaff tipped with a gold fleur-de-lys,  
And from her four mast-heads the golden tongues  
Of flame-like pennants flickered. From the quarters  
Of her main deck hung four white banners bearing  
The red cross of St. George, that drooped athwart  
A tier of heater-shields or targets charged  
With the same blood-red ensign, alternate  
With France's silver lilies and the rose  
Of Tudor, and a gold portcullis blazoned  
Upon a field of green; while on her forecastle,  
Carven beneath a lion figure-head,  
She bore the arms of France and England, quartered  
And crowned within the Garter, and supported  
By the Lion and the Dragon. These things I saw

But at a venture; for my eyes were fixed  
Upon the crowded main-deck, where King Harry,  
Ruddy and stalwart, towered above the press  
Of halberdiers and courtiers, clad in gold  
Edged with pied ermine: I had never guessed  
He was so lofty, but that the snow-white plume  
Which bound his bonnet over-topped the tallest  
A double hand's-breadth. Smiling, he gave the word  
To sound the trumpets and to hoist the sails,  
And the *Great Harry*, like a tower of gold,  
Bore on her course to Calais, leaving me  
Rocked in the wash of her tremendous wake  
And dazzled by her glory. When she had faded  
Beyond my envious sight, I could have wept  
For pride—not envy—that such a miracle  
Should have been wrought in England . . . I rode home  
Wildered and shaken, yet the more determined  
To drain my utmost wits and match this beauty  
Before I perished. Five years have I bowed  
Above my draughtsman's board, bemused and haunted  
By that rich vision: five years have I laboured  
Seeking that vision's shape; and now, at last,  
My plans are finished: all I need is timber  
To give them substance. Let us be done with talk!  
Find me oak, ash and elm—and in a twelvemonth  
Your moveless forest shall be winged with sail  
And float till fire or water give it burial  
Beneath the waves. Come then, for I am burning  
To make my choice!

## XIX

### Interlude

A SONG OF THE LONG GALLERY. HAMPTON COURT: A.D. 1587

Rosy-pale the Palace lies  
Mute beneath the moon:  
It is the season of the rose  
And a night of June;  
Honey-sweet the jasmine's breath  
Mingles with the musk  
Of néw-mówn hay  
In the midsummer dusk;  
Milky down the winding walk  
Steals the mist of Thames—  
You can hear the petals fall  
From the bent rose-stems;  
Softly through the alleyed yew  
A moth's wings move:  
It is the season of the rose  
And the hour of love—  
When woven out of moon and mist,  
In silver and white,  
The ghosts of the Long Gallery  
Dance by candle-light.  
The maids of the Long Gallery  
Are dust these many years,  
And none that listens now may hear  
Their laughter or tears;  
The twang of lutes and virginals  
Or the rustle of their shoon  
As their feet brush the flooring  
With swéet-rúsh strewn;  
The dry swish of taffetas  
And whispering mousseline  
As their skirts sweep the daīs  
Of the great, cold Queen.

Stiff in her jewelled robe she sits,  
Austere and pale,  
While Perrico, the little dog,  
Peeps from her farthingale;  
A ruff of cambric picarded  
Props her pointed chin;  
A stomacher of seed-pearls girds  
Her proud heart in;  
Her cheeks are drawn parchment  
Blotched with crimson dyes,  
And in that raddled mask there burn  
Her hot Tudor eyes;  
While, shrewd behind their smoulder,  
The cool Tudor brain  
Sifts and winnows word and look  
And gives them shape again.  
Hopes, ambitions, treacheries,  
Envies, loves, lusts,  
Shame and honour—all she sees,  
Yet none she trusts.  
Soft-tongued ambassadors  
Tempt her with their wiles  
And strive to pry her secrets out:  
The cold Queen smiles.  
Captains and counsellors  
Cluster round her throne:  
The Queen's eyes see them all,  
Her heart heeds none:  
Wise Burleigh and Walsingham  
Wait on her command,  
While Raleigh grips the sudden sword  
Hilted in his hand,  
While Leicester plies his flatteries  
To keep the favourite's place,  
And Sidney leans to catch the light  
From Stella's starry face  
As through their mazy galliards  
In silver and white  
The limber maids-of-honour dance  
Deep into the night;  
And the cold Queen's lonely heart

Is troubled as they dance  
By many a sweet, unspoken thought  
And shy, secret glance;  
Her heart is warmed and troubled—  
But all that she sees  
Is the face of Robin Devereux  
Crouched by her knees:  
That young face and the other  
Of parchment and of bone:  
An old raddled woman  
Sitting on a throne . . .  
Down the darkening gallery  
Fades the phantom rout:  
The moon sinks in the river-mists,  
The candles burn out;  
The river-mist thickens,  
It droops upon the lawn;  
Slowly over Richmond Hill  
Creeps a grey dawn.  
Gaunt and grim the palace lies  
Mere brick and stone:  
The ghosts of the Long Gallery—  
All, all are gone.

Thus to begin: In the third week of July,  
 And the one-and-thirtieth year of the Queen's reign,  
 We saw the *Golden Hind* pinnacle scudding up-channel,  
 With a strong tide making and a following wind  
 From the South West, into Plymouth. And Fleming, her captain,  
 Stumping uphill to the Hoe in his sodden seaboots,  
 Told Lord High Admiral Howard how, South of the Lizard,  
 He had sighted ten great galleons of Andalusia  
 Quartering the empty waves like a cry of hounds  
 That are strayed or shed from the pack, and go feathering  
 For scent at the covert-side. And this, indeed,  
 Was their case—for the Duke of Medina-Sidonia  
 Had mistook his tryst and lagged fifty miles astern  
 In the stormy loom of the Scillies; so here was a prize  
 To be snapped up with little ado if but we might pounce  
 On this portion before they were whipped together, though we  
 Were ill-placed for the spring, our English fleet being crowded  
 To leeward within the Sound and held there enleashed  
 By the freshening gale.

Yet no sooner had Fleming told  
 His tale than the happy news, like storm-water, ran  
 From the Hoe, where our captains were gathered, down every street  
 To the Barbican and the Cattewater: the bells of St. Andrew's  
 Clashing forth: "They are come . . . They are come!" and a hundred  
 beacons  
 Casting their flames down-wind like the swaling-fires  
 Of Spring from headland to headland and hill to hill—  
 Till this wildfire swept all England, and farming folk  
 That watched for the morrow's weather saw the dark land  
 Lit like a star-pricked firmament.

But we in Plymouth  
 Had more instant work on hand; for had we been trapped  
 In that leeward haven, we knew we should fare no better  
 Than the Spaniards, a year before, when Sir Francis Drake

With *Elizabeth Bonaventure*, *Rainbow* and *Lion*,  
Ran into the gullet of Cadiz, raked by the guns  
Of Matagorda, and left that roadstead cluttered  
With sixty ships, sunk, grounded, or set adrift  
With fire in their bellies. So, all that night, we toiled  
By torch and cresset, cramming our ships with shot  
And warping them out with hawser-work, one by one,  
Until, by dawn, there were fifty-four of them clear  
Of the land, strung out abreast of the Eddystone  
And tacking into a wind which began to weaken  
As rain fell steadily—so that the waves that ran  
In a long swell out of Biscay grew smooth and sullen,  
Flattened by the grey drizzle. So there we lay  
Heaving, mist-blinded, with lowered sails, and waited  
For what should next befall us, hearkening  
To the cries of the wild mews and knowing naught  
Of where the foe might be . . .

But, as night neared,  
A fishing-smack that had stolen from the Sound  
With plashing sweeps, gave hail; and her skipper, hoisted  
On board the *Ark Royal*, blinking in the light  
Of her cuddy's lantern, stammered a halting tale  
Of how certain fisherfolk that watched on the Dodman,  
(Which like the blunt snout of a basking whale  
Juts forth from Mevagissey) had suddenly spied  
Through an opening in the mist, a spectacle  
Of innumerable majesty: Spain's embattled might  
Hove-to four leagues off-shore, in a half-moon  
Seven mile from tip to tip. How many there were  
They could but roughly reckon, for the haze  
Thickened and thinned so swiftly, and by times  
Their substance seemed but phantoms; yet one man swore  
To a hundred and thirty sail, and of these no less  
Than forty ships of battle, and half a hundred  
Armed galleons of the Gold Fleet, with a swarm  
Of fly-boats, pinnaces, and such nimbler craft,  
Which, like torn fleeces of a thundercloud,  
Trailed from the main fleet's denser heart to guard  
The rearward hulks and transports. And at one moment,  
When shafted sunlight pierced the rack and smote  
Upon their vanguard, one huge ship had broken

Her banner at the main—an oriflamme  
Whose gold burned through the mist; and they that heard  
Guessed her Sidonia's ship, the great *St. Martin*,  
And her banner the standard that the Pope of Rome  
Had blessed, bearing the images of Christ Crucified  
And his Mother, the Holy Virgin.

Yet all that day  
We could do nothing, being at the pleasure  
Of a moveless air, but lay with sodden sails  
Listlessly flapping, and whistled for a breeze  
To waft us seaward of the Spaniard's rear;  
And all that night enshrouded in dense mist,  
Unseen and blind as we, the Armada crept  
Past us upon the tide.

It was still dark  
When the dank air freshened somewhat, and the wind  
Veered to the North of Westward, dissipating  
The watery haze that hid them, so that by dawn  
No shred of cloud was left between the blues  
Of sky and sea. Then, through the crystalline  
Of rain-washed air, at last we saw that vision  
Of dread and of desire: the Spanish fleet  
In order of battle standing up the sleeve  
With the wind on their port quarter. Slowly they moved  
(Or so it seemed) as though the very wind  
Grew tired with carrying them, and the sea groaned  
Under their wallowing bulk. Four galleasses  
Of Naples, with sweep of flashing oar-blades, cleft  
The unfurrowed deep before them; next there came  
Sidonia's main battle-fleet: weathermost,  
Ten galleons of Portugal, their greatest  
The vast *Grangrina*, eleven hundred tons;  
Starboard of these, ten of the Indian Guard  
With four ships of New Spain—and, in between,  
Sidonia's own flagship, the *St. Martin*;  
Next, four fleet pinnaces, that like snapping curs  
Roved in and out, busily shepherding  
The sluggard flock of hulks and victuallers  
That floundered in the midst, and behind these  
Four squadrons of their rearguard battle, ships  
Of Biscay, Guipuscoa, the Levant



And swarthy Andalusia: twenty galleons  
Of vast lading and armament; and a fifth,  
Lighter of burthen, moving in a cloud  
Of agile pinnaces where, last of all,  
Two watchful galeasses closed the rear,  
Looking to windward.

When the Spaniards saw us  
Heeled over on the port tack and sweeping down  
Fast on their rear, Sidonia gave orders  
To haul in sheets and beat towards the land,  
With a cunning of double purpose; first to waylay  
The remnant of our force, which, one by one,  
Still straggled out of Plymouth, and next to weather  
Our main fleet—neither guessing how nimble-heeled  
And maniable were we, nor yet how slovenly  
Were his own lumbering hulks. So, as they beat  
To windward of the Cornish coast, we swept  
Athwart their rearguard's starboard quarter, raking  
The *Levantiska* of Leyva as we passed,  
With a hot broadside of cannon-shot. Then we gybed  
And closed upon their windward flank, where none  
But that grim sea-dog Recalde, who, not long since,  
Crossed wits and blades with Drake in Lisbon River,  
Defied us, boldly bringing into action  
The *Santa Ana* and the great *Grangrina*  
Of Biscay; for they that followed fell away  
In a piteous huddle, but these twain stood up to us  
Till the *Santa Ana's* forestay was cut through  
And two roundshot lodged in her mainmast; when Sidonia  
Bore up beside her, right into the wind,  
While Valdes, with the squadron of Andalusia,  
Formed up behind him. So Lord Howard bade  
The battle to be broken, albeit the day  
Had scarce begun. But this he reckoned shrewdly:  
That the Spaniards now had beat too far to leeward  
To trouble Plymouth; that, in those pregnant hours,  
Forty fresh sail had swelled our complement  
To five-score fighting-ships—not thirty less  
Than theirs—and that no craft in all the Armada  
(Save for the great *Grangrina*, the *Santa Ana*,  
The *Raggazona*, and the admiral ship

Of Andalusia) was of greater portage  
Than our *White Bear* and *Triumph*; nay, even more,  
That none of theirs could match our best in swiftness  
Or weight of deadly metal—to say naught  
Of seamanship, while, in the narrow seas,  
Where that grim lion Parma waited, crouching  
To spring upon our shores, a second fleet  
Under Lord Henry Seymour stood to bar  
The straits. Therefore we let Sidonia fly  
Up-channel, dragging on his windward flank  
The wounded *Santa Ana*, through the smoke  
Of burnt-out beacons smouldering on the cliffs  
Of the South Hams, and we hung upon his heels  
Like an ambling wolf-pack that has tasted blood  
And gotten the measure of its prey, but waits  
Until the victim tires before it falls  
To ravening. And, in mid-afternoon,  
It seemed that hour had come: for suddenly  
Their galleon *San Salvador*, of the squadron  
Of Guipuscoa, blew up—her fighting-decks  
Flying into the air and her shattered poop  
Blown clear; but, as we closed on her, the Spaniards  
Sent in their galeasses, and we drew off.  
Next, by the Start, Pedro de Valdes' flagship  
*Our Lady of the Rosary* fell foul  
Of two Biscayans. The first broke her foreyard,  
The next her bowsprit—and when Valdes boldly  
Put up his tiller to come into the wind,  
The mainmast snapped close by the board and crashed  
Athwart her bulwarks, draping her with torn sails  
And cordage; so once again we closed, until  
The *San Cristóbal* and the *San Francisco*  
Covered her, and a Naples galeasse  
Took her in tow—yet cravenly forsook her  
When a pert London coaster, the *John and Margaret*  
Of a bare two hundred tons, challenged their escort;  
And we laughed to see so huge a victim falling  
Into such puny hands.

But now, since wind  
And sea were rising, the Lord Admiral  
Bade the whole fleet heave-to, and called a council

On board the *Ark* to plan the strategy  
Of the morrow's battle; and there it was determined  
That our Vice Admiral, Drake, should lead the van,  
His lantern on the poop of the *Revenge*  
Guiding our course, with hope to overhaul  
Sidonia and bring his fleet to action  
West of the Needles, thereby heading him  
From off Southampton. So, at midnight, we sailed  
With a stiff Westerly breeze and a short sea  
That made the spark on the *Revenge's* poop  
Dance like a graveyard corpselight dizzily  
Amid the sober stars; till, of a sudden,  
That drunken light went out like a snuffed candle  
And left us guideless; so we slackened sail  
And hove-to, baffled, blinded, and perplexed,  
While the Lord Admiral, in the *Ark Royal*,  
With the *Mary Rose* and the *White Bear*, held on  
The selfsame course, and the main fleet lay scattered  
To rearward in the waste of troubled water  
That foams above the Skerries; and when daylight  
Broke over Berry Head, these three bold ships  
Found themselves unaccompanied, without the topsail  
Of a friend in sight, and the Armada's rearguard  
A culverin-shot ahead—so that the Spaniards,  
Had they been abler seamen, could have borne up  
And utterly destroyed them. But of this  
They failed: their jealous captains being busied  
With licking of their wounds and bickering  
One with another, so this pregnant hour  
Was wasted, and by noon our nightbound stragglers  
Drew up to the *Ark Royal*—save for the squadron  
Of Drake, who (if his tale were true) had chased  
Five great ships of the Hansa which, in the dark,  
He had mistook for Spaniards; but Martin Frobisher  
In his blunt Yorkshire tongue flatly maintained  
This was a lie, and that naught but pirate greed,  
O'er-mastering Drake's scant honour, had tempted him  
To slip us in the dark and search the rear  
For Valdes' galleon that, hulled and mastless,  
Lagged there adrift. Yet Drake stuck to his tale,  
Admitting, howbeit, that on the windward reach

Home from that fruitless chase he had fallen in  
With *Our Lady of the Rosary*, and thought fit  
To send her into Dartmouth with a prize-crew  
Aboard her. And now, seeing both words and looks  
Grow heated and hands fly to hilts, Lord Howard  
Bound these two fiery captains to keep peace  
Between themselves, and their malice for the Spaniards.  
So Drake, being well-contented with his prize,  
Laughing, consented, and the other grudgingly  
Bated his jealousy, while we bore on  
Eastward before a weakening wind that died  
At nightfall—yet not before Sidonia  
Had shed a second ship, the *San Salvador*,  
Which, maimed and burning, he turned loose to drift  
Athwart our course; and Hawkins, in the *Victory*  
Towed her charred hulk to Weymouth . . .

All that night

The two fleets lay becalmed beneath the moon  
Just out of gunshot: the warm air so still,  
We could hear the Spaniards' voices, and the boom  
Of a weary groundswell pounding on the stones  
Of the Chesil Beach. At dawn the dead wind quickened  
To a brisk North-easter, giving Sidonia  
The weather-gauge; whereat he tacked about  
To bear upon us, but Howard turned aside  
On a long board to the North-West, thereby hoping  
To fetch to East between them and the land  
And steal the weather from them; and the Spaniards  
Now showed their seamanship, sailing on the same tack  
To cheat us; so Howard went about and beat  
Close-hauled to Eastward, with the *Victory*,  
*Nonpareil* and nine others close astern.  
Yet these held on their board too long and left  
Their admiral at the mercy of Recalde,  
Who now came bowling down, with sixteen sail  
In line abreast, abaft the *Nonpareil*—  
All but their greatest ship, the *Raggazona*,  
The mighty *Levantisca*—that held straight on  
To cut off the *Ark Royal*.

And now Lord Howard  
Lay in great jeopardy—for the *Ark Royal's* portage

Was but two-thirds the Spaniards', and her crew  
But half; and had the *Raggazona* grappled  
And thrown aboard her pikemen, he had been lost  
And the fight ended. Yet, though he could not weather  
The *Levantisca*, Howard's ship was handier  
And, with her rapid firing, so confused  
The Spaniard that he faltered—and the *Ark*  
Stood off unscathed.

But now a greater peril  
Threatened our fleet; for in that windless night  
Our left wing, led by Frobisher, had been caught  
In the Portland Race and carried far inshore  
To windward of the Armada; and Sidonia,  
Seeing the *Triumph*, with five armed merchantmen  
Of London, helpless on the leeward shore,  
Thrust his oared galeasses into the wind  
To make an end of them, while he, in haste,  
Pursued our broken vanguard—yet was so blinded  
By lust of easy conquest and the reek  
Of our rapid gunfire that he failed to spy  
Drake's wing of fifty fast sail weathering  
Recalde's rearward squadron, and coming up  
Upon them through the smoke—the wind having backed  
To South-South-West. Thus, while Recalde turned  
And fled to join Sidonia, Lord Howard,  
Freed from that instant menace, sailed inshore  
With the *Elizabeth Jonas*, *Leicester*, *Victory*,  
*Dreadnought* and *Swallow*, to succour Frobisher,  
And as Sidonia ran towards Portland Bill  
To intercept, Howard bore up, until  
He had the wind upon his starboard quarter  
And the *St. Martin's* fo'c'sle straight ahead.  
Three times he crossed Sidonia's bows, and thrice  
Landed a thumping broadside, then, returning,  
Gave her the other; and now, as he swept on  
Toward Frobisher, Drake followed in his rear  
With a fierce weight of metal that pierced her hull—  
That ripped the holy standard from her main  
And left her making water fast and groaning  
With half a hundred dead and sixty more  
Bloodily wounded—while the galeasses

Whose teeth were in the *Triumph* dropped their prey  
And fled in terror. Thus ended the fourth day  
Of that running battle, and the first encounter  
Of the main fleets, which, but for our sore lack  
Of shot and powder, and the crippling wind,  
Might well have ended all . . .

That day we swam  
Like wildfowl on a glassy mere becalmed  
While the friendly Portsmouth folk replenished us  
With bread and shot and powder, and Lord Howard  
Re-formed us in four squadrons: on the larboard  
Frobisher in his war-scarred *Triumph*; next  
John Hawkins in the *Victory*; and to starboard  
Lord Thomas Howard in the *Golden Lion*  
And Drake in the *Revenge*.

Now on the morrow  
(It being St. James's Day) two Spanish ships  
The *Santa Ana*, that had been winged off Plymouth,  
And the *San Luis*, limping fell astern;  
And a cloud of petty English craft, like ants  
Ravening a beetle's carcase, swarmed about them  
And would have boarded—but that four galleasses  
Like proudly-swerving peregrines swept between  
And scattered them. Then Howard, in the *Ark*  
And his cousin in the *Lion* towed their two ships  
Into the tussle with longboats, and shot away  
The lantern of one galleasse and the beakhead  
Of her sister, while a third drifted away  
With the crippled *Santa Ana*, heavily listing,  
And might have fallen to us but that our launches  
Were so peppered by the Spanish musketry  
They could not tow us further; and as we stood  
To hoist them all aboard, the wind arose  
Once more out of the South, casting Lord Howard  
To leeward of Sidonia, who now bore down  
In the *St. Martin* with the fourth galleasse  
And, having got the weather, so fiercely mangled  
Both *Lion* and *Ark Royal* that they were fain  
To fall away inshore, while Frobisher  
Took up the fight—but paid dear for his daring;  
For, as the wind veered West, Recalde ran

Twixt him and Howard, and with a chance shot splintered  
His rudder; and though eleven launches strove  
To tow the *Triumph* out of range, it seemed  
She (and the *Ark* no less!) was lost—until,  
In the article of doom her shipwrights botched  
The broken rudder, and at the same moment  
The fickle wind backed South—and Frobisher  
Cast off the launches and so slipped away  
On a long reach to Westward . . .

But already

The Spaniards had found cause to rue their rashness:  
For Drake and Hawkins, profiting by that shift  
Of wind that saved the *Triumph*, stole about  
Their larboard wing, and with the *Nonpareil*,  
*Revenge* and *Mary Rose*, drove their *St. Matthew*,  
The weathermost of Sidonia's squadron, crashing  
Into their huddled rearguard, crowding them  
To leeward on the sandbank of the Owers,  
Where they had grounded—but that, in the fury  
Of that hot fight we had burnt up all our powder  
And emptied our shot-lockers. Thus, when they lay  
Confused, we could not press them, and the promise  
Of victory slipped from us as they cleared  
The shoals and fled on Eastward up the sleeve—  
Not without scathe: for, by this day, the rumour  
Of the running battle had crept along the coast;  
And many spirited gentlemen that were fain  
For heart-love of their country to adventure  
Their skins upon salt water, hired themselves  
At their own charge boats, shallops, skiffs and hoys,  
And sallied forth in haste, like jolly ploughmen  
To a bout of cudgel-play or London prentices  
That go roaring to the bear-pit: yet the quarrey  
They baited was no sullen bruin, chained  
And spiritless, but a horned fighting-bull  
Of Andalusia, that these picadors  
And pert banderilleros boldly pestered  
With pricks and lances—running in and out  
Of the stately Spanish fleet like dabchicks darting  
Amid a game of swans. But, though we laughed  
To see their reckless daring, yet were we troubled

By their impudent seamanship, that often placed  
Themselves and us in peril. But no counsel  
Could quell their gallant mischief; and, as both fleets  
Stood up the channel wafted by the wind  
That in the dog-days blows from the South-West  
We soon outsailed them . . .

So, by evening

Of the seventh day, we had cleared Dungeness  
To see the chalk-white cliffs of Dover dyed  
By a red sunset, and the friendly topsails  
Of Seymour fleck the straits. Whereat Sidonia  
Veered towards France, hoping thereby to gain  
The forty Flemish flyboats he had begged  
Of Parma, that, so strengthened, he might cover  
The Spaniards' crossing; but not one sail came forth  
From Dunkirk or Ostend: so, being counselled  
That if he ventured further the fierce tide  
Might carry him beyond the straits, he cast  
Anchor in Calais roads—with Howard's fleet  
A culverin-shot to windward, full astern,  
And, on the lee, the sunken sandbanks stretching  
From Sandettie and Outer Ruytingen  
To the Wandelaar—a treacherous berth for such  
As knew those soundings ill. Hither, at nightfall,  
Fenton and Seymour, with six-and-thirty sail  
Thirsting for battle, beat up from England, bearing  
Meat and munitions, and the heartening news  
That in the port of Dover they had made ready  
A fleet of fireships that, loosed upon the tide  
And sent down in the dead of night, might smoke  
Or burn the foxy Spaniard from his holt  
Ere Parma's pikemen mustered—but since no moment  
Was to be lost (for the tide turned at midnight)  
Lord Howard called for ships out of the fleet  
So to be cast away. Then Drake, free-handed,  
Offered the *Thomas*, and John Young the *Bear*,  
A bark of seven-score tons; and other captains  
Made up the tale to eight, which, being besmeared  
With wildfire, pitch and resin, their bellies crammed  
With brimstone, and every piece of ordnance charged  
With cannon-balls and chain-shot, Young himself



Led them into the wind, with the tide racing  
At full—nor loosed his tiller ere their decks  
Were lit from stem to stern, and hot flames licked  
The longboats lashed beside them. Thus they swept  
Unhelmed into the black heart of the fleet  
Of Spain, with cannon thundering and roundshot  
Hurling on every hand; and when the Spaniards  
Woke to this fiery peril they were cast  
Into utter panic, reckoning it the work  
Of the devil or Drake his offspring, in confusion  
Hastening this way and that, incontinently  
Hacking their anchor-cables and running foul  
Each of his helpless neighbour—and, in a wrack  
Of splintered spars and ragged cordage, swept  
Out of the roads of Calais, through the straits,  
Into the wild North Sea—while Howard's fireships  
Burnt themselves out to leeward, and denser darkness  
Fell on the deep . . .

Now, as the great *St. Martin*  
Lay tangled in that tide-borne rout, Sidonia  
Signalled the scattered galleons to re-form  
About him—but none obeyed save the *San Marcos*  
And a handful more. Thus, when the break of dawn  
Whitened the shoalings, this mean force appeared  
Head to the wind, and all the rest astraggle  
Six mile astern, off Gravelines. Then Lord Howard  
Re-formed our line: himself, in the *Ark Royal*,  
Midmost; to port, Seymour and Frobisher;  
To starboard, Drake and Hawkins—but, as they swooped,  
Five squadrons all abreast, his watch espied  
Spain's last unwounded galeasse, *San Lorenzo*,  
Dragged Eastward, rudderless, under the guns  
Of the castle of Calais; so, close-hauled, he drew  
Out of the line to take her, while the rest  
Swung smart to starboard, hoping thus to run  
Between Sidonia and Dunkirk and throw  
His left wing on his centre, driving both  
Upon the Flemish sandbanks. But Sidonia,  
Albeit a lame seaman, had no lack  
Of manhood, and stood firm till the *Revenge*  
Came within musket-shot, shattering his forecastle

With her bow-guns, then luffed, poured in her broadside,  
And so bore on into the very midst  
Of the huddled rearguard beating up to aid him;  
While Hawkins, Winter, Seymour and Frobisher,  
Swept past the great *San Martin* one by one,  
Pounding her with their cannon till she heaved  
With yards and rigging torn, and hull shot through  
By one great ball of fifty pounds that holed  
Her bowels upon the waterline. Yet still  
She fought them off undaunted; and the squadrons  
Of Lisbon, Guipuscoa, and Andalusia  
Gathered about her in a huge half-moon  
That slowly beat to the North Westward, striving  
Not to o'ershoot Dunkirk, where Parma's force  
Lay fretting (as they reckoned) to embark  
For the assault on England; and so stoutly  
Did they persist that, ere the sun had soared  
Half way towards the zenith, fifty ships  
Had gained their battle-stations—with Recalde  
In the *San Juan* keeping the weather flank,  
Sidonia in the centre, and, to leeward,  
Oquendo and Leyva in the Levantiscas  
And Guipuscoans. Thus, while Hawkins held  
Sidonia's mainguard, where the great *St. Martin*,  
Shaken, but dauntless, thundered through the smoke  
Of her own sullen broadsides, Seymour's squadron  
Harried the wing to windward, and sheared off  
Two ships, the *San Felipe* and *San Matteo*,  
Which, though Recalde strove to cover them,  
Lay so shot-riddled they could neither hold  
Water nor wind, and, helpless, fell astern  
Crippling two more—*Our Lady of Begona*  
And the *San Juan of Sicily*; and these four  
With yards and ropes entangled drifted down  
Under the fire of Winter, in the *Vanguard*,  
Whose nimble squadron charged in and went about  
Like dancers in a galliard. Twice the *Matteo*  
Shook herself free and turned on them; twice more  
They closed upon her, firing their culverins  
Point-blank at musket-range—but the *San Juan*  
Had no fight left in her, being so shattered

That through her gaping portholes one could see  
Her decks awash with blood. Nor could Sidonia  
Come to her aid, being even more bitterly  
Beset, with Drake and Hawkins placed athwart  
Both bows and stern, and hanging on his flanks  
Like grim bear-baiting mastiffs in the pit  
At Southwark, while the wind, suddenly veering  
Into the West, brought up three more great ships,  
The *Ark*, the *Bonaventure*, and the *White Bear*,  
Which, having sacked their crippled galesse  
Upon the beach at Calais, now bore down  
Like monstrous phantoms towering through the reek  
Of battle—which having seen, Drake put about,  
Leaving the great *St. Martin* to their charge,  
And while the *San Matteo*, and *San Felipe*  
With the *San Marcos*, drifted to their doom  
On the deadly Zealand sandbanks, the *Revenge*,  
Like to a cunning sheepdog, singled out  
The stragglers of their left wing, one by one,  
And shed them on the shoalings: fifteen ships  
Out of Sidonia's fifty—the bold remnant,  
Outpaced, outsailed, outnumbered and outgunned  
By four to one, and, in God's grace, delivered  
Into our hands by such a miracle  
As we had prayed for! Yet, in the article  
Of victory, that same wind that had so blessed us  
Snatched from our mortal hands the means to strike  
The death-blow—for suddenly a black squall leapt  
From the South-West and beat upon the sails  
Of both embattled fleets, heeling them over;  
And every captain cried: "All hands aloft!  
Reef topsails, or we founder!" And we who served  
The reeking culverins cast away our tinder  
To be sodden by the rain, and clomb the shrouds  
To shorten sail, as our ships held to the wind;  
And from the lofty stations where we swayed  
Like wind-tossed rooks, through sheets of icy rain  
And stinging spindrift, our bleared eyes beheld  
A sight most strange and terrible; all that was left  
Of that proud Armada, the pomp and boast of Spain,  
Scudding like windlestraws upon the foam

Of the Zealand banks—a mightier hand than ours  
Having compassed their destruction.

Yet, even as we watched  
Those doomed ships driven to their end, the wind  
Veered to full South, and, as they gybed, it spewed them  
Out of the very throat of death to seaward,  
Nor could we overhaul them or come to grips  
Again that day: for now they had sea-room,  
And we no press of sail to clip their heels  
As they fled before us. Nor had we any comfort  
But that their spite was foiled, and that no Spaniard  
Could now set foot on England. Of the rest  
I can but speak by hearsay—for we were set  
To guard the straits again and keep a watch  
On Parma at Dunkirk. But I have heard  
That, on the morrow, an even mightier gale  
Rose from the West and drove them on the coasts  
Of Norway; that there the foulest pestilence  
Raged in their sweltering down-battened holds  
And stinking cockpits, where the wounded lay  
Festering above the dead, and that the lack  
Of water and food so weakened them that few  
Had strength to man the ropes. Therefore Sidonia  
Decreed the Northern course to Spain, and led them  
Through the fierce Pentland Firth, rounding Cape Wrath  
And slinking through the Hebrides, where some  
Were cast upon those iron coasts and gutted  
Of life and treasure, while others staggering  
Westward of Ireland, and falling on the fangs  
Of Connemara, sank in sight of land;  
And the sorry remnant of starved, sullen men,  
In their maimed galleons, brought their anguish home  
To Lisbon and to Vigo and the Groyne  
And Port St. Mary, where Sidonia  
Sulked in his orange-groves until he died,  
A broken, ageing man . . .

As for the memory  
Of this great mercy: men may read the medal  
That the Queen stamped, saying—*He blew with His wind  
And they were scattered*: and doubtless it is just  
To give to God the glory—yet I do reckon

That we, her seamen, had some small part in it.

## XXI

### Interlude

#### AN ENGLISH GARLAND

Musing Meleáger once  
In Gádara a garland made  
Of herbs and blossoms that the suns  
Of envious Time shall never fade:  
Gifts of the Galilean meads  
And Hermon's lonely hill, where slain  
Adonis in the springtime bleeds,  
With drifts of fierce anemones  
Staining anew the Syrian plain.  
Thus I, with neither grace nor powers  
To match that orient music, twine  
A chaplet lowlier than his:  
A coronal of English flowers  
The more beloved that they are mine.  
Pluck first those eager Celandines  
Whose gay, new-minted metal shines  
In February hedgerows where  
Hooded Lords and Ladies peer  
From out their pallid wimples. Next  
Gather me catkins of wind-vext  
Hazel, and, ere the petal-snow  
Be shed, a sprig of thorny sloe,  
Scentless though it be. To these  
Marry me frail Anemones  
Ruffled in the copse when March  
Crimsons the tassels of the Larch  
And the first venturous Primrose frees  
Her frozen heart. Now search the leys  
For mealy Cowslip-bells that fill  
Poor pastures, where the Daffodil  
Dances, with perfumes headier yet  
Than wafts of the White Violet

That shyly droops her head within  
Grass-tussocks newly-fledged; and when  
In glimmering pools the Bluebells lie  
(But pluck not these, because they die  
So soon) and turbulent Hawthorn floods  
The air with spices—from the woods  
Bear me one branch of living snow  
From the Wild Cherry's bridal-show;  
And see you tarry not—for now  
The warm earth's bounties spring so fast,  
They are no sooner seen than past  
Their prime: so haste, before June suck  
May's moisture from the marsh, to pluck  
The valiant King-cup's globes of gold,  
And in her sappy leaves enfold  
Flags and Forgetmenots, and heads  
Of plummy Meadowsweet that sheds  
High Summer's drowsiest incense  
Over the musky hayfield. Thence  
Skirt me the standing wheat to glean  
Black-pollen'd Poppies, and, between,  
Cornflowers, whose royal azures dim  
The Speedwell's bright eyes till they seem  
Lustreless as the cooler blues  
Of Alkanet. Next I bid you choose  
From the dank ditch Hemp-Agrimony  
And pungent Horse-Mint; from the sunny  
Verges, where Broom-pods in the heat  
Of noonday snap, bring honey-sweet  
Claws of White Clover—nor despise  
The Scarlet Pimpernel whose eyes,  
Widened in sunlight, blink in shade,  
With silvery Mulleins arrayed  
In silk sleek as a leveret's ear,  
And spendthrift Ragwort-stems that wear  
Their gold like harlots; dock and sorrel  
Decked in their panicles of coral,  
And brittle Teazle-heads that slake  
Their drought with dewdrops. Now forsake  
The trampled verge's needy sward  
To gather Foxglove spires that guard

Rampant hedgerows flaunting high  
Their ivory trophies of July:  
Where hemlocks, and the greeny-white  
Elder-flowers conspire at night  
With feathery kexes to imprison  
Moonlight ere the moon be risen  
And starshine when the stars have set  
In Summer's timeless twilight; yet  
I pray you let not evening end  
In these enchantments ere you bend  
One trailer of the Briar down—  
And see her buds be not o'erblown,  
Lest the faint-flushed petals fall  
From the arching spray, and all  
Her attar waste. Here, too, untwine  
The rosy fingers of Woodbine  
That, though her waxen trumpets breathe  
Ravishment, will crush to death  
The Hazel-rods round which they climb.  
Next, from bare downlands, gather Thyme,  
And, from their beechen hangers, green  
Flowers of pallid Helleborine,  
And, stippled on the high sheep-walk,  
Orchises that love the chalk;  
While from granite moors aglow  
With the imperial lava-flow  
Of August's Tyrian, you shall bring  
Bunches of purple Heath and Ling  
And Harebells, dim as dusk, that seem  
To dance when no wind stirreth them:  
Yet cull not these till you have found  
By peaty pools on marish ground  
Nodding above the emerald moss  
Grass of Parnassus and the floss  
Of milk-white Cotton-grass, where, bent  
To pick them, you may catch the scent  
Of Buck-bean and Bog Asphodels,  
Or stoop to pick the violet bells  
Of frosted Butterwort; and descending  
Toward the plain at the day's ending  
See meadows mantled in a mist



Of the Sheep-bit's amethyst,  
Or lawns with lilac Saffron strewn  
To cup September dews. Too soon,  
Alas! my hedgerows tarnish now;  
The sap sinks, and the fires burn low;  
Yet growths that in the sober green  
Of Summer dressed were hardly seen,  
Now, tinged by Autumn's icy breath,  
Flame in the article of death  
So fiercely we forget almost  
To mourn the blossoms that are lost;  
And, though their earlier wealth be spent,  
Stand laden with such increment  
Of splendour that beholding eyes  
Are dazzled. So, before their dyes  
Be faded, and their mortal gold  
Blacken in the common mould,  
From hanging boughs I pray you reach  
One bright fan of the flagrant Beech,  
And from the Cherry's funeral-pyre  
That sets the smouldering woods on fire  
A brighter guerdon. Gather too  
The crimson cuplets of the Yew  
Brimmed with sweet mucilage; and bring  
Translucent Nightshade-drops that cling  
Like Bryony's to the naked bine,  
Shaming the Spindle-tree's carmine  
As doth the fruited Rose eclipse  
The Hawthorn with her flaming hips.  
Next, from the tangled thicket, tear  
Reluctant Bramble-shoots that bear  
Clusters of dew-bright berries, dark  
As a young gipsy's eyes; and mark  
How now the moon-pale Elder shows  
Berries jettier than the Sloe's;  
And last, from Winter's sodden weeds  
Pluck Gladwins and the poison-seeds  
Of Cuckoo-pints, whose fires will glow  
When leafless woods are laid with snow,  
And through their blackened boughs the sun  
Fades like an ember. . . . I have done!

O Meleáger, wistful ghost  
Roaming amid the ashen flowers  
Of Acheron, couldst thou ever boast  
A garland goodlier than ours?

## THE TALE OF THE FAINT-HEARTED PILGRIM

PLYMOUTH HOE: A.D. 1620

I, Robert Cushman, wool-comber of Canterbury  
And lately of Leyden, in Holland, having been seized  
With an infirmity of body that I fear  
Will carry me to my burial, and afflicted  
With manifold reproaches and revilements  
Wholly unmerited, at the cruel hands  
Of most unloving brethren, do now rehearse  
The truth of what befell. Of how our Church  
Came first to Amsterdam, being driven forth  
From our own dear country by the persecutions  
Of prelates and their clergy; of how there  
A further schism reft us; of how we settled  
In the sweet city of Leyden, and abode there  
Ten years in peace and piety, having won  
The right to worship God in our own way  
Unhindered by contentions, though oppressed  
By toil and poverty—of all these matters  
I will not tell, but rather how one evening  
In Winter, when the Leyden waterways  
Were locked in ice, and the bare lindens shivered  
Beside them, pinched and naked as ourselves,  
John Robinson, our pastor, summoned all  
To the house we had bought in Cloch Staech, by the belfry  
Of St. Peter's church, wherein we had our meetings,  
There, after prayers and fastings, to debate  
The adventure of Virginia that had warmed  
Our shrinking souls a twelvemonth with the promise  
Of comfort and of freedom. For, though the Dutch  
Kindly entreated us, and gave our people  
Full praise for industry, sobriety,  
And godly living, yet were we ever irked  
By certain discontents: how that our poorer folk

Lived scantlier than in England; how the rich  
Had ate up all their means, and could no more  
Succour their needy brethren; how it seemed  
A grievous thing that we must bend our necks  
To the yoke of foreign regiment, and so lose  
Our speech and name of English; how, alas,  
Our ghostly husbandry was vain, the seed  
Being scattered on a stony soil and falling  
To waste, in that our neighbours were so steeped  
In carnal sin and fain to desecrate  
God's Sabbath, that our children, for the lack  
Of proper tutelage, ran the risk to catch  
These foul contagions; how of our brotherhood  
Many grew aged, and, if they went not soon,  
Must lay their bones in Babylon, and the Church  
Fail of their wisdom; last, how the ten-year truce  
Twixt the States General and the tyrannies  
Of Spain was near to end—and, with that day,  
The broken dykes of Holland would let in  
A welter of bloody warfare, or, at best,  
A popish persecution.

Now, to these things,  
The major part consented; yet some that prized  
Their bodies above their souls were loth to leave  
The scant fleshpots of Leyden, and afraid  
Of the sea's casualties—not for themselves  
(As they protested) but for the weaker vessels,  
Their wives and children. "For what else," they cried,  
"Waits us in the Virginias but want,  
Famine, and nakedness, with the dubious change  
Of diet, air and water—and what neighbours  
But heathen savages that shall devour  
Our living flesh in collops?" Or again:  
"How shall our dwindled means support the cost  
Of this portentous voyage, and provide  
Our needs when landed? Is it not ill enough  
That we came to Holland, a near-by country, rich  
In gold and civility?" But others said,  
(And these the weightier) that no worthy deed  
Nor honourable action ever was done  
But with great hindrance; and these carking fears

Might never come to pass, or, being met,  
Prove antic scarecrows flapping in the mist  
Of ignorance, by their affrighted eyes  
Magnified beyond measure, as are mites  
Seen through a burning-glass. For those fierce cannibals  
They feared: Were they so deaf they could not hear  
The muttered throbbing of the angry drums  
And clank of deadly weapons that foretold  
War pestilence and famine in the streets  
Of Holland—and were the Spanish soldiery  
Kinder than savages?

So they that feared  
Were silent, and we fell to the debate  
Of whither we should go. Now some were earnest  
For voyaging to Guiana, where, they said,  
Spring smiled for ever on wide valleys blest  
With a perpetual greenness, bringing forth  
Nature's abundant fruits without the labour  
Or art of Man—and, in that radiant clime,  
The poor would soon grow rich, having no need  
For costly raiment or the kindling  
Of hearths in Winter; nor had the jealous Spaniards  
Planted yet in Guiana, having all  
The colonies they could keep. But others said:  
Such lands, uncleansed by cold, were pestified  
By manifold diseases and impediments  
Noisome to English bodies, as a tilth  
Whose clods no frost hath powdered, yields a crop  
Throttled by tare and bindweed. For the Spaniards:  
These would but wait till we grew fat to filch  
Our gains and so displant us, as they did  
With the poor French in Florida, and we  
Too feeble to resist. Then they that pressed  
The project of Guiana murmured, complaining  
That were we landed in the settled parts  
Of the Virginias we were like to suffer  
No lesser whips and scorpions for the cause  
Of our religion than we had known in England—  
And maybe greater. So it was resolved  
By the larger number that we should acknowledge  
The general governance of Virginia,

Yet settle by ourselves, and sue the King,  
By godly friends at court, to grant us freedom  
Of worship and belief—unto which end  
We framed a Declaration of our Faith,  
Showing in what slight measure we dissented  
From that established; and it was agreed  
That Master Brewster and I set forth to London,  
There to spy out the land and seek the favour  
Of Sir Edwin Sandys, the chief and treasurer  
Of the Virginia Company, whom Brewster  
Counted his friend, having held the Manor of Scrooby  
From his father, the Archbishop, and kept him company  
In the embassy of Holland. I deem it just  
That the lot fell on Brewster, a grave elder  
Of weighty means and learning; but why their voices  
Were cast for me I know not; for I had small  
Pretence save humble probity. Yet I do think  
This choice occasioned envy, some preferring  
Young Master Winslow, who was the better bred;  
A gentleman of Worcestershire, whose father  
Boiled salt at Droitwich, and was familiar  
With Sir Edwin's brother, Samuel Sandys, that dwelt  
Nearby at Ambresley . . . But of this no more—  
Save that, had he been chosen, I had been spared  
A grievous cross to carry, and the sharp thorns  
Of cruel crimination.

So we two sailed  
To London, and Sir Edwin Sandys received us  
As a loving brother, promising to bring  
Our suit to the King's ears—which, when he heard  
His Grace approved our purpose, yea, and called it  
A good and honest motion, shrewdly asking  
What profits we attended. And when Sir Edwin  
Told him we would be fishermen, he cried:  
“So God have my soul, this is an honest trade!  
Such was the Apostles' calling.” And instantly  
It seemed the wind blew fair; but the King's mind  
Spun like a flighty weathercock, and he said:  
“Let them advise with the Bishop of Canterbury  
And the Bishop of London”—which was an ill turn,  
For no prelate could abide us. So we determined

To leave that prickly path and to draw back  
Upon our former course, begging a patent  
Of the Virginia Company, which, by the care  
Of our loving friend, was granted at their court  
Sitting in his house by Aldersgate. Thus were we freed  
To settle in Virginia, and this progress  
Momently dazzled us, so that we saw not  
The darkness of our venture. But when we begged  
The Company for craft to make the voyage,  
They put us off, saying they had neither ships  
Nor yet the means to furnish them, having been brought  
To the brink of failing by the ill-success  
Of earlier ventures and their servants' greed.  
So turned we to the Dutch, craving the use  
Of warships that might bear us to the port  
They had named New Amsterdam, or a rough passage  
In the fur-traders' barks. But the States General  
Would have none of us, and, in this pass, we saw  
Our project blighted, and the lively hopes  
We had engendered blacken in the bud.  
For, mark you well, we were but humble folk  
Of poor condition that had only scratched  
A bare living; and that the wealthier sort  
(Though none was rich) had fret away their substance  
In charity—so who could find provision  
To float so vast a venture?

In such a strait  
Perplexed and daunted, there came to us at Leyden  
A merchant, Master Weston, who, having heard  
Our charter had been sealed, enheartened us  
Not to be downcast, neither to lament  
Our want of ships and money—for that himself,  
And others that were his friends, would find us both,  
Adventuring their fortunes and our slight means  
In a common stock. And cheerfully he bade us  
Think no more of Virginia, and have no truck  
With the stingy Dutch—for that a new Plantation  
Was planned, without the bounds and governance  
Of the Virginias, to be called New England,  
And thither we should go. So we took heart,  
Subscribing the Articles that Master Weston

And his friends set before us, putting off  
Our properties in Leyden; and though some few  
Still hankering for Virginia, withheld  
Their monies and themselves, we heaped together  
Twelve hundred pounds, the Adventurers promising  
Six thousand more. Thus, once again, they sent me  
To England with Master Carver, there to make  
Provision for the voyage—he in Hampton  
To seek a proper ship, and I in London  
To keep the common purse. There Master Weston  
Came to me, with a face long as a fiddle,  
Saying the Adventurers had grown ill-content  
With our agreed conditions, and would draw back  
Were they not more advantaged, two small things  
Sticking in their throats: the first that, at the end  
Of seven years, the dwellings we had built  
Were not accounted common property  
In which they had their several shares; the second  
That, by these articles, they had no surety  
That men would sweat but for themselves, neglecting  
The general good. Therefore they now demanded  
Their part, proportionate, in all we builded  
And, of each labouring week, two days allotted  
To serve the common wealth. And when I asked  
What they would do if we refused, he said:  
“Then all is likely to be dashed, for none  
Will stake a single farthing—though myself,  
Having pledged my promise for five hundred pounds,  
Will stick to it—albeit it were a pity  
That such a goodly project should be sunk  
By cavilling at trifles when the voyage  
Is under way, and, if we sail not soon,  
The season will be lost.” Then was I put  
In a sad quandary, being so far removed  
From the counsels of my brethren and invested  
With such a heavy trust. But now, since time  
And season pressed, and since their claims appeared  
Not without rightness, oh, most unhappily  
And rashly, I gave way—though not before  
I had acquainted both my fellow-agents,  
Carver and Martin, who, alike, consented



Unto the changed conditions, and conjured me  
To doubt no more. Therefore I wrote to Leyden  
Telling what I had done, in confidence  
Of their approval, and moreover told them  
How swiftly all matured, good Master Carver  
Having hired a ship, the *Mayflower*, fit to carry  
All to America, while I had treated  
With a Pilot of repute, one Master Reynolds,  
To lift them out of Holland in the *Speedwell*  
That had been bought in Leyden, and that the rest  
Might wait our joyful meeting. But there came back  
From Leyden a stern missive of reproach  
And accusation: that I had overstept  
The bounds of my commission and had acted  
With levity and negligence—not as the man  
Of wisdom they had thought me, but the gudgeon  
Of couzeners that with a specious bait  
Had tricked my silly wits! Then, then indeed  
My stomach rose in anger! Negligence?  
Negligence? Negligence? Was I then negligent  
Who, dazed with cyphering, had lain awake  
Night after night, while antic figures skipt  
Like inky mountebanks through my fuddled brain  
Taunting my will to take them? I, who had clamped  
The belt about my belly to compress  
The fretful void of hunger, lest a penny  
That I could save be spent? I, who had trudged  
These London streets until their cobbles corned  
My aching feet to serve them? Negligent,  
I, who had neither thought nor spoke nor dreamed  
These many months of aught but what could further  
This darling enterprise? Why, if they deemed me  
So faint a fool, had they not sent one better  
Instructed and more zealous? Negligence?  
Enough, enough! Even as I speak my head  
Weakens and whirls! Yet stay—for now my breath  
Heaves less tempestuous, and the headlong blood  
Answers the curb of reason. Let me be calm . . .  
I tell you, sirs, I am a simple man,  
A wool-comber of Canterbury, and I wrought  
According to my conscience. If I erred,

Theirs was the fault that sent me—and so I told them  
Answering their cruel charge. Further, I said  
That since they had so miscalled me I would lief  
Be quit of the whole business, keeping nothing  
But the poor clothes on my back. But no reply  
Came to my comfort ere the *Speedwell* dropt  
Her anchor at Southampton.

On the morrow

Our Ruling Elder, Master Brewster, haled me  
Before the assembled church, there to be judged  
Like a bawd in a white sheet or malefactor  
Clapt in the stocks for pelting; and when I rose  
In that hushed gathering I saw men nod  
And nudge and shoot their lips, and seemed to hear  
Malicious whispers: *Cushman . . . This is Cushman . . .*  
*See this vile serpent Cushman that hath sold*  
*Our bodies into servitude! Robert Cushman:*  
*This is the man!* But when, at last, I spake,  
My voice dried in my throat, so that they craned  
With leering looks to hear my plea, and smirked  
To see me so discomfited. At which  
My lips moved soundless, and all I would have urged  
In my defence fled from my mind, while tears  
Dripped down my cheeks. Then silently I turned,  
Gazing at Master Carver and Master Martin  
Who had been my partners; but neither of them spoke,  
And the cock crew not . . .

And though I was assoiled  
Of criminous intent or wilful error,  
Yet, ever afterwards, I was the butt  
Of pointing fingers and wry looks that told  
Of scorn, not charity. And when, at length,  
We were put forth from Hampton, contrary winds  
Having hindered us a week, then I was lodged  
In the lesser ship, under the regiment  
Of a tormentor: that same Master Martin  
Who lately had forsook me. Of this man  
I will speak as little as I may, for fear  
My tongue should master me; but of the ship  
And her false captain, Reynolds, I must tell  
The truth, and fear not. Know, then, that the *Speedwell*

Was bought in Leyden, and the Hollanders—  
For lust of gain, and in the certitude  
Our folk knew not the sea—had overmasted  
Her hull so grievously that, ere she made  
Southampton, she was leaking. And Master Reynolds  
(Or so he said) durst not put out to sea  
In such a sieve till she was searched and mended,  
At a sore charge to our scanty purses. Next,  
When we put forth under a press of sail,  
He said the leak was worsened, and took us in  
To Dartmouth for new scrutinies that showed  
The Hampton shipwrights had as little honour  
As they of Holland—for in the bilge was found  
A piece of planking that a man could shift  
With his fingers, and salt water pouring in  
As through a mole-hole. So, once more, we trimmed  
The vessel, and to meet the reckoning sold  
Of butter four score firkins, ill to spare  
On such a lengthy voyage, and, having lost  
Of the favourable season ten more days,  
Put forth in hope. But when she met the waves  
That Westward of the Scilly Islands swell  
Out of the main Atlantic, this poor ship  
Sprang yet another leak; and the sea flowed  
Into her hold so fiercely that the captain  
Feared she would founder straight. Little cared I  
(But for my luckless brethren) whether she sank  
Or swam! So foully had the heaving sea  
Misused my stomach, and the cunning spite  
Of Master Martin racked my bruised mind  
With brags and insults, that when the captain cried  
For hands to man the pumps I could not raise  
My quivering limbs, but like a carcass lay  
Lifting and falling as the *Speedwell* groaned  
And shuddered as in anguish, and the bilge  
Soused my insensible body. Gladly then  
Had I given up the ghost, freely committing  
That body to the deep, and to my Maker  
A trustful soul that in humility  
Looked for the Resurrection. There, beside me,  
Lay Master William King; and oft we wondered

Which of us twain should first be thrown to feed  
The fishes; yet, so wondering, sank at last  
Into a profound nescience that was nearer  
To death than sleep. But when, at last, I woke,  
And Master Martin rudely summoned me  
To mount the ladder to the deck, I saw  
The *Mayflower* close beside us, and the roofs  
Of a grey city rising from the verge  
Of quiet waters, that the seamen said  
Was Plymouth. And though I fell upon my knees  
To thank God for the miracle that had brought us  
Out of those ravening waves, yet did I shudder  
To think of setting forth once more. But that  
Was not to be; for Reynolds, who I know  
Had no liking for the venture and his promise  
To bide with us a year, now flatly swore  
He would never take the *Speedwell*, were she trimmed  
A hundred times! Therefore it was determined  
(And I too faint to question) that such of us  
As had the courage should be put aboard  
The *Mayflower* and continue on the voyage.  
But I, alas! had none—my sufferings  
Having utterly undone me—and was carried  
To land upon the Barbican, where I lay  
Nine days light-headed; for when my eyes were shut  
The bed still heaved beneath me as though swayed  
By the storm's groundswell. Thither, on the tenth,  
Came Master King, who told me that the *Mayflower*  
Had weighed and put to sea, and led me forth,  
Leaning upon his arm, with painful steps  
To climb the Hoe. As fair a sight it was  
As Moses from the Mount of Pisgah saw  
Gazing on Palestine: beneath our feet  
The close-packed roofs of Plymouth; before our eyes  
The firth, within its greening girdle, flecked  
With tawny wings of fishing-craft that skimmed  
The crinkled waves like seamews—and far, far,  
Dipped in the watery horizont, a tower  
Of lonely canvas, alabaster-white  
In the seaward sun's pure radiance; a ship  
Transfigured, yet so far away she seemed

Moveless and visionary. But I knew  
This was indeed the *Mayflower*, and that she moved  
With crowded sail to Westward on the course  
Of the Virginias—yea, and that all my heart  
And hopes had gone aboard her, with the friends  
I had loved and served so faithfully, yet was I cast  
Away like a worn clout, and so abandoned  
To miserable emptiness . . . Forgive me,  
Sirs, I can speak no more.

## XXIII

### Interlude

ATLANTIC CHARTER      A.D. 1620-1942

What were you carrying, Pilgrims, Pilgrims?

What did you carry beyond the sea?

*We carried the Book, we carried the Sword,  
A steadfast heart in the fear of the Lord,  
And a living faith in His plighted word  
That all men should be free.*

What were your memories, Pilgrims, Pilgrims?

What of the dreams you bore away?

*We carried the songs our fathers sung  
By the hearths of home when they were young,  
And the comely words of the mother-tongue  
In which they learnt to pray.*

What did you find there, Pilgrims, Pilgrims?

What did you find beyond the waves?

*A stubborn land and a barren shore,  
Hunger and want and sickness sore:  
All these we found and gladly bore  
Rather than be slaves.*

How did you fare there, Pilgrims, Pilgrims?

What did you build in that stubborn land?

*We felled the forest and tilled the sod  
Of a continent no man had trod  
And we stablished there, in the Grace of God,  
The rights whereby we stand.*

What are you bringing us, Pilgrims, Pilgrims?

Bringing us back in this bitter day?

*The selfsame things we carried away:  
The Book, the Sword,  
The fear of the Lord,  
And the boons our fathers dearly bought:  
Freedom of Worship, Speech and Thought,  
Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear,*

*The Liberties we hold most dear,  
And who shall say us Nay?*

## XXIV

THE TAVERNER'S TALE

A.D. 1653

The plain tale of Bill Shelton, taverner,  
At the sign of the Talbot (which most men call 'the Dog')  
In the city of Worcester, where I was born and bred  
And still, thank God, continue—having endured  
More changeful fortunes in these ten short years  
Than most men in their lives—though, now they are past,  
I would not change my lot for any other's,  
Nor yet regret them. Well do I remember  
How first the word of War came to my ears  
By the mouth of young Sam Butler, whom I had known  
As a boy at Bartonbridge, and now abode  
At Strensham, where his father leased a farm  
Of Sir William Russell. Sam was a strong-set fellow,  
High-coloured, with a head of sorrel hair,  
And a tart tongue that lapped my sack more gladly  
Than his dad's buttermilk, yet so fanciful  
I never knew whether he spoke in jest  
Or earnest. And Sam winked at me and said:  
"Well, William, so 'tis war." And I, mistrusting  
His vein, laughed in his face, till he, more gravely,  
Told how the festering dissidence that had grown  
'Twi' King and Commons, now had reached a head,  
And with a wilful lancet-thrust the King  
Had pricked it, leaving Windsor to set up  
His flag at Nottingham, whence he had called  
On all men of goodwill to arm themselves  
And prove their lealty, and on all the sheriffs  
To muster their militias. But when I swore  
I was glad we dwelt in Worcester, where no harm  
Could come to us, Sam Butler laughed again  
And slapped me on the back and went his way,  
Leaving me in a ferment. For strange it is  
That this very syllable of War has power  
To whip the pulses and inflame the thoughts



Of ordinary folk, who have no liking  
For violence, yet will run a hundred yards  
To watch a dogfight or a drunken bout  
Of fisticuffs, yea, and take sides. Thus I,  
Who cared nothing for the Parliament, and little  
For the King's Majesty, found myself stirred  
To sudden excitation, and ran indoors  
Breathless to tell my good wife, Kate, who stood  
A-scouring of the pewter, and, when she saw me  
Red-faced and bivering, bade me souse my head  
Under the pump to cool it, saying that this  
Was but another of Sam's fooleries,  
And I an oaf to credit him. But, for once,  
Hers was the greater folly, as we knew  
Within a week when ten troops of dragoons  
Rode clanking through the Sidbury Gate, and some  
Were billeted upon us: Sir John Byron,  
Their colonel, and his lieutenant usurping  
Our very bed. And in Kate's buttery  
They locked some hundredweight of silver brought  
From the colleges at Oxford. Many have said  
That the King's cavalry were a vile crew  
Of profligate pillagers; but most that came  
To Worcester with Sir John were simple lads,  
Small farmers' sons and country gentlemen  
Of the lesser quality, who brought the Talbot  
Good custom—yea, and paid their reckonings  
In ready money, nor ever laid a hand  
On wife or maid unwilling; though some few  
Were roaring blades bred in the insolence  
Of foreign wars, whose braggart manners changed  
When once they found I had learnt to use my fists  
In the boxing-booth of Pitchcroft at the fair  
Of Barnabas. So, a full month, we lived  
Right prosperous and merry, till word came  
That Lord Essex, with some twenty thousand men,  
Was marching upon Worcester. That same night  
We woke to hear the rattle of musketry  
And a battering on the Sidbury Gate, a stonethrow  
From where we slept: whereat I leapt from bed  
And clutched my sword, determined to defend

My native city; but Kate snatched at the tail  
Of my shirt and hauled me back, miscalling me  
A fool to make or meddle in a business  
That was none of ours—and since I knew no sword  
(Once it was drawn) was sharper than Kate's tongue,  
I got me back to bed and lay there, strained  
To listen, while the musket-shots and the hammerings  
On Sidbury Gate died down, and the great bell  
We call Hautclere in the cathedral rang  
At the first hour for Matins. All that night  
I slept no wink; but early on the morrow  
Heard how a body of Roundhead cavalry  
Under Nathaniel Fiennes, thrusting in front  
Of Essex's main force, had hoped to find  
The gate unguarded, but, their courage failing  
In the event, had faltered and ridden on  
By Pixham Ford or Clevelode to the West  
Of Severn, where now they sate astride the road  
To Shrewsbury, waiting for the rest to close  
On Worcester from the East. And next we heard,  
By messengers from Bewdley, that Prince Rupert  
Was pressing South to succour Sir John Byron  
And pluck him forth ere he was ground to meal  
Between two millstones. But we little knew,  
When Byron's trumpet called his men to horse,  
That Rupert was already come and bivouacked  
By Powick in the Wickfield. Here as he lay  
Beneath a thorn, and his horse grazed beside him  
Knee-haltered, suddenly there rose a cry:  
"The enemy is upon us!"—Fiennes's troop  
Having crossed in double file the narrow bridge  
That spans the Teme at Powick, and straggled through  
A narrower lane that skirts the Chequers Inn  
To spread abroad in Wickfield. Instantly  
Prince Rupert and his brother Maurice leapt  
Into their saddles—and a short space behind  
Came Wilmot, Digby, and Sir Lewis Dives,  
Launched on a charge; and these five cavaliers  
Tore like a thunderbolt into the midst  
Of those bewildered Roundheads, while the rest  
Of Rupert's horsemen, swiftly following,

Fell on the scattered van and hurled them back  
On their advancing comrades, crowding all  
Into the sunken track that, to this day,  
Is known as Cut-throat Lane. Ay, many throats  
Were slit in this encounter, but even more  
Bodies and limbs down-trampled in the mellay  
Of plunging horses that crashed through the hedge  
On either hand to crush them. And the remnant  
That reached the bridge to Powick, fled flock-meal  
Till they were safe in Pershore! Such was the first  
Battle of Worcester: a rousing victory  
For the King's cause, and, to my simple mind,  
A husk blown from the threshing-floor to show  
How moved the wind. For surely now, I thought,  
We might sleep in our own comfortable bed  
Until the war was over; but Kate, more prone  
To see things darkly, said they must be worse  
Ere they were better—and God in heaven knows  
She was right for once: no sooner had Rupert gone  
With Byron and his precious plate to Shrewsbury,  
Than out we went again—our bed being filled  
By a renegade cousin of Sir Samuel Sandys  
Wounded at Powick; and next day at noon  
Essex's army, of twenty thousand men,  
Poured in through Sidbury Gate and overflowed  
Our streets and dwellings, like the locust-plague  
That ate up Egypt; and these Parliament men  
Were not as Byron's lads, who spoke our tongue  
And knew our ways, but an unbridled host  
Of Cambridge and East Anglia, that reckoned  
Worcester a conquered Canaan, and its people  
Idolatrous Amalekites to be harried  
And smitten, hip and thigh. There was not a house  
In the city left unpillaged, not a man  
Of worth not held to ransom, not a church  
Unrobbed or undefiled; and when these brutes  
That labelled themselves godly men had rifled  
The taverns of the city, and reeled forth  
O'erflown with drunken arrogance, they broke down  
The doors of the cathedral, where they turned  
The nave into a camp, lighted by fires

Fed from the organ-casing; and they made  
The choir and aisles their privies, and the cloisters  
A stable for their horses, with a midden  
Heaped in the garth—while some, that deemed themselves  
Most righteous, fell upon our monuments  
And sacred images, hacking off the noses  
Of prelate and of saint, and shattering  
The painted windows, till the polluted aisles  
Were paved with splintered glass. And the dragoons  
Of Essex, in their orange scarves, put on  
The canons' vestments, prancing on College Green  
In blasphemous buffoonery, and mocked  
Service and sacrament. It has been said  
That Oliver did these injuries; but I know,  
Having seen with my own eyes, that they were wrought  
By the rabble of Lord Essex. From that day  
I have hated every Roundhead—and Kate, my wife,  
Was bitterer than I. For three hard months  
They batted on our substance, till defeat  
At Edgehill made them fearful, so Lord Essex  
Abandoned Worcester to the King, and left us  
To lick our sores in peace. Peace, did I say?  
Ay, there is peace in death—and Worcester now  
Was but a fly-blown carcase, or an oak  
Blasted by lightning, that, when Spring returns,  
Puts forth a feeble show of wonted leaf  
Though hollow at the heart. So, when that tempest  
Had rolled away from Worcester, she was left  
A hungry, sullen city, on every hand  
Compass'd by neighbouring tumult, and within  
So rent by civil faction that none dared  
Speak his mind openly—nor could one venture  
Beyond the gates for fear of roving bands  
Of either party, that now profited  
By the storm's aftermath to make a prey  
Of hapless travellers. Now no provision  
Of wine or victuals reached us: for the roads  
Were mired by trampling horsemen and the wheels  
Of heavy guns and limbers, and every bridge  
Was cracked or broken down. Therefore my wife,  
Wise in her generation, did conjure me

To bide indoors and keep my blabbing mouth  
Tight-padlocked—which was irksome for a man  
Companionable by nature, and no less  
For the purpose of his trade! Thus we abode,  
Shut in the Talbot, while the bloody tides  
Swung to and fro about us; and though it seemed  
The royal cause went ill, no rebel force  
Dared touch us for a twelvemonth, till, at last,  
They sent Sir William Waller—him they called  
The Night-owl—with three thousand horse and foot  
To take the city; and his trumpeter  
Rode to the Sidbury Gate, and sounded there  
His summons to surrender. But William Sandys  
Gave back a scornful answer, telling him:  
“This was not Hereford.” Whereat the Gloucester Blues  
Charged on the Friary Gate, but were thrown back,  
While Waller’s cannon loosed their fire on Sidbury,  
Nor could we answer them—for Will Berkeley’s house,  
Without the gate, covered their batteries—  
Till, in the night, we sallied forth and razed  
That hindrance to the ground; and all our women,  
My wife among them, with mattock, spade and shovel,  
Levelled our field of fire, uprooting hedges  
Fences and mounds to give the gunners ease.  
And Waller, hearing that Prince Maurice came  
From Oxford to relieve us, slunk away  
With his tail between his legs—for, as he said,  
He had no luck in Worcestershire—and left us  
Unfallen, if not unscathed. In the fourth year  
Of this lamentable war our plight grew graver,  
Dudley and Hartlebury and Madresfield  
Having fallen to the Roundheads, one by one,  
Like over-ripened choke-pears, and at last,  
No loyal garrison in all Worcestershire  
Save ours surviving, Fairfax, who then beset  
The City of Oxford, sent forth Colonel Whalley  
To make an end of us. Two woeful months,  
All but one day, we were besieged and bore  
The weight of Whalley’s cannon that cast their shot  
Whither they would, till every second house  
In Sidbury was riddled like a colander,

And many fired. Little do I remember  
What happened day by day. There is a measure  
In human torment when the mind grows void  
Of feeling and is numbed, and, though the body  
Goes through the actions of a living man,  
The heart is mortified—when pain and hunger  
Nay, even death itself, seem incidents  
That have no power to move us. But this I know:  
That, on the day Prince Maurice sent us word  
Oxford was fallen, and we could no longer  
Hope to resist, and when our gates, so boldly  
Defended, were thrown open to the enemy,  
We hardly knew the import, but stood dazed  
And staring on the street as they marched in.  
And this I know: that those who stood beside me,  
My neighbours and familiars, seemed shrunken  
To gaunt anatomies; and I, not guessing  
How I was withered too, looked at my wife  
And found her an old woman. Then a wave  
Of pity overcame me, and fierce anger  
Against the crass stupidity of the passions  
That had set us by the ears—so that I cared  
Neither for King nor Parliament, but only  
That we might go about our ways in peace  
And die in our own bed. But when I spoke  
My mind, my wife's eyes quickened, and she chid me  
For a despicable chicken-hearted recreant,  
Saying that while the King was yet alive  
We were bounden to stand by him and to serve  
His cause, no matter what the cost. So I,  
Rather than vex her (for I loved this woman  
Most dearly) did consent, and locked my grudge  
Within my breast. Three miserable winters  
The war dragged on, while we grew spare and wan  
With waiting, till the Scots betrayed the King  
To Cromwell, and his bloody-handed crew  
Condemned their hapless prisoner to suffer  
A traitor's death. At this a dreadful shudder  
Shook the whole body of England; for even they  
Who had borne arms against him never had looked  
For such a monstrous ending. My poor Kate

Wept for a week, inconsolate, and I  
Who had seen him in his glory, could not but feel  
Compassion for this little man—no bigger  
He looked, than a child's puppet—yet withal  
So rich in majesty, who had been dragged  
To the shambles by such butchers. Yet, for myself,  
I must own I was less shaken—this sacrifice  
Foreshadowing the end, that blessed day  
When men with God's name on their lips would cease  
From the slaughter of their brethren. But my wife  
Rated me through her tears: "True, they have slain  
Our King, but not his Kingship; that lives on  
In Charles, his son." Whereat I held my peace  
And let her have her say, knowing, alas!  
How bloodshed breedeth bloodshed without end,  
And nothing but exhaustion can abort  
This foul fecundity—till, at length, we heard  
That the Prince was landed in the North and marching  
Hot foot on London, with an avenging host  
Of eighteen thousand Scots; and, as he came,  
The great Lords of the North and loyal gentry  
Of Wales and Westmorland and Lancashire  
Flocked to his banners. So speedily they moved  
We could not count their progress, hearing one day  
He was at Kendal, the next at Lancaster,  
And in a week at Warrington, where we reckoned  
He would turn aside to Shrewsbury, but instead  
He held straight on for Worcester, confident  
Of our proven loyalty. That joyful eve  
The bells clanged ceaselessly, and bonfires lit  
The venerable cathedral that had lain  
Cold as a tomb and sightless since the Roundheads  
Shattered the painted glass—but now it seemed  
To be warmed to life once more; and on the morrow,  
When I saw the King go there to pray, I thought him  
More manly than his father, and little less  
Majestic in his mien; a swarthy fellow  
Who laughed like any other when he was pleased,  
And had a jest for all, and a bold eye  
To make a maiden blush—which common manhood,  
In one that was so great, kindled my loyalty

Anew—though I confess it burned less briskly  
Than my poor wife's, who would have given her soul  
To please him. What is this strange emanation  
Of royalty, that beclouds the sight and dizzies  
The brain like liquor? Who was this lanky lad  
Black-browed and dusky-visaged, that I should risk  
My skin to honour him? Yet it is true  
I liked him well enough—but for the Scots,  
Now camped on Pitchcroft, I had neither liking  
Nor reverence: for sorrier soldiery  
I never saw—the very lees and leavings  
Of an impoverished land, as ill-equipped  
In spirit as in raiment, more uncouth  
Than the Welsh drovers whose bedraggled ewes  
Limp into Hereford! For body-armour  
They had naught but buff-coats, and for weapons, durk,  
Clever, half-pike and cutlass; as for their horses:  
They had no more sinew in their spavined hocks  
Than would drag them to the knacker's. So, when I thought  
Of the well-fettled steeds and tough cuirasses  
Of Cromwell's redcoat Ironsides, my heart fell,  
Boding disaster—though I little guessed  
How, at that very moment, Oliver,  
Having spurred southward on a parallel road,  
Had ridden into Evesham, where, reinforced  
By Lambert and Fleetwood, he lay between the King  
And London. Thus the chequerboard was set  
For the Second Battle of Worcester, and the last  
Of this insensate strife, whereof the issue  
Was never in doubt: for they outnumbered us  
By two to one, of these the greater part  
Toughened by war and tempered by the will  
Of a famous captain—while the wayworn Scots  
And levies of the North were far from home,  
Ill-armed, ill-horsed, ill-nourished, and worse-fed,  
With little spunk for fighting in the face  
Of insufferable numbers, and consumed  
By intestine jealousies. Only the King,  
Serene and sunlike, smiled above the gloom  
Of his faint-hearted followers, whether deluded  
By flatterers or in deliberate despite



Of dooms foreseen, I know not; but he moved  
Gaily among them, sedulous to compose  
Their differences, and with a glancing wit  
Rallying the doubtful. Ere the battle broke,  
On the Second of September, he clomb the tower  
Of the cathedral, where we saw him strut—  
A manikin, no bigger than a fly  
That specks the ceiling—with his optic-glass  
Propped on the parapet. But what he saw  
(And we saw not) had daunted stouter heart  
Than his: the city caught in a snare of steel,  
Made visible where glinting metal flashed  
Through summer's heavy leafage or between  
The stocks of ripened cornfields. On the hills  
To eastward, from the verge of Perry Wood  
To Severnside, the regiments of Fairfax  
And Cromwell in a drooping crescent closed  
The roads to Bath and Evesham. Beyond Severn,  
Where Keith held Powick and Piscotty's foot  
The hams above Teme's confluence, he espied  
Fleetwood, with Deane and Lambert, who had straddled  
The broken bridge at Upton, and, advancing  
Northward by night, now menaced the main line  
Of his defences: the deep-sunken channel  
By which Teme, slinking through the marly meads,  
Empties herself in Severn. Thus it appeared  
That Cromwell's purpose was a double drive  
Along both banks of Severn: and thereby  
He courted mischief—for, if either thrust  
Faltered, the King could hurry his reserves  
Across the bridge at Worcester, and press home  
The immediate mastery, while the Roundheads wasted  
Inestimable hours in crossing Severn  
Six miles downstream over the broken bridge  
At Upton. But this Cromwell, who had learnt  
War in the school of failure, was no dunce;  
And on the morn of battle—which was the Third  
Day of September, and the sun more fierce  
Than midsummer—he threw a bridge of boats  
Over the deeps of Severn, a pistol-shot  
Above the mouth of Teme; and Fleetwood cast

Another over Teme, thereby contriving  
To cancel our advantage; and, at the signal  
That both were passable, then, East and West  
The double thrust began. First Fleetwood launched  
A hot assault on Powick, driving back  
Keith's outposts from the church, while Lambert crossed  
The second bridge to fall upon Piscotty,  
And, East of Severn, Cromwell's culverins  
Opened upon the earthwork of Fort Royal  
That guards the Sidbury Gate, foreshadowing  
An attempt upon the city. But though Keith  
Gave ground awhile, and fierce Piscotty's highlanders  
Momently wavered, yet they held their lines  
Unbroken, and fought back so valiantly  
That Fleetwood first, then Lambert, each was fain  
To give them best, and sullenly withdrew  
To whence they came. Then was the mystery  
Of Cromwell's battle-craft made plain: for now,  
Seeing his generals on the westward bank  
Repulsed, he gathered to him three brigades  
Of his own invincible Ironsides, and led them  
Over the creaking bridge of boats, impetuous  
As a hedge-skimming sparrow-hawk, and his van  
Smote on Piscotty's flank, right shoulder forward,  
Scattering the highlanders, and by this rout  
Uncovering Keith, whom, caught upon two sides,  
Deane overpowered and drove him out of Powick  
Fighting from bank to bank, over the bridge  
Into that very Wickfield where Prince Rupert  
First thrashed Nathaniel Fiennes! When the King saw  
How ill Keith fared, he fervently besought  
Leslie, on Pitchcroft, to throw the Scottish horse  
Into the wavering battle; but Leslie said:  
That, "well as they might look, they would not fight";  
Whereon this royal youth, with greater gallantry  
And more resource than had been credited,  
Burst forth from Sidbury Gate into the teeth  
Of the roundhead cannon, hoping thus to breach  
Their eastern lines now weakened by the lack  
Of Cromwell's Ironsides. As he rode out,  
With a recklessness not Rupert's self had equalled,

The Duke of Hamilton swerved left, and carried  
The guns in Perry Wood, while the young King  
Charged in the van full on their centre, driving  
Lord Fairfax from the crest. Then, then indeed,  
Had Leslie's cavalry been worth their keep,  
Or shown one spark of loyalty to follow  
Their King, the battle had been won, and Britain  
Vowed to a different destiny! But none  
Budged from his tent; and as the doubtful fight  
Swayed on the hill-top, Cromwell's Ironsides  
Came thundering back from Powick and rode through  
The faltering ranks of foot, which, taking heart  
From this mighty reinforcement, now surged back  
Over the bloody crest and then swept down  
Upon Fort Royal, irresistible  
As the foam-capped bore of Severn that in a wall  
Of angry water, when the moon is full,  
Roars from the brimming estuary to be spent  
On Diglis Weir. So that resistless tide  
Of men engulfed Fort Royal; and as the flow  
Of Severn is heaped upon itself and whirled  
Backward, so now the very pith and flower  
Of the King's army, in a direful rout,  
Poured through the conduit of the Sidbury Gate  
Into the city's heart—and where of late  
The Lion of Scotland had flaunted on the fort  
Fluttered the rebel blue, while from the scarp  
The parliament gunners turned the captured cannon  
To blast a way before. Yet, even now,  
The King fought on, fearlessly rallying  
A handful of his bravest—and had been taken  
At the Commandery door, but that Will Bagnall,  
A simple waggoner, lugged his plunging team  
Betwixt him and the rebels, while he slipped  
Within the gate to safety, and, once again,  
Rallied the fugitives to turn and face  
His enemies. Yet no sooner had he gathered  
A faithful few about him, than he heard  
A clatter of galloping hooves, and turned to see  
The winnowed remnant of his cavalry  
Whirling like chaff down Lich Street in full flight

From Fleetwood's men and Lambert's, that had carried  
The Severn Bridge. Then, then, alas, he knew  
The battle lost—and only then bethought him  
Of his own safety, though whither he should flee  
'Twas hard to tell: the Foregate being blocked  
With stones, and Bridge Gate, Friar's Gate and Sidbury  
Held by the Roundheads! But one loyal soul  
(Whose name, for his skin's sake, I will not utter,  
Though you may guess it) led him roundabout  
Back of the Cornmarket to St. Martin's Gate  
And a green lane running northward. From that hour  
This man hath heard no word of him, though it is said  
He is safe in France; but of our city's fate  
Much may be told: for now we knew the difference  
Between a city ceded and one sacked.  
All day, till it was dark, the roundheads hewed  
Their way through teeming streets and wet their blades  
In the bodies of the innocent, and by nightfall  
Sidbury was strewn with powder-blackened dead  
Lying in swathes like beanstraw, and the gutters  
Smelt like a shambles smoking with warm blood.  
A body of braggart redcoats took the Talbot  
For their Lord General's quarters, whither he came  
At midnight, and there slept, if such a man  
Could close his eyelids after such a deed  
As was the sack of Worcester! Now that night  
We did not see him, for neither Kate nor I  
Could bear to look upon him; but next morning  
They told us he was hungered, and commanded  
That we should give him meat—whereon my wife  
Swore we had not a morsel; but they brandished  
Their swords so threateningly that I, to save her  
From worse, consented, saying that all we had  
Was a stale crust and a tankard of small beer,  
Which I set upon a platter and bore upstairs  
To the Lord General's chamber. Thrice I knocked,  
But had no answer; then, with shrunken courage,  
Entered, and saw there were but two men within:  
The one, a clerk or secretary, sate  
With a paper on his knees, and in his hand  
A quill, intently listening. The other

Stood with his back to me: a thickset man  
Of middling height, in a buff doublet, girt  
With a scabbard-belt—and when he stirred, his sword  
Clanked on the floorboards. And this man, I guessed,  
Was the Lord General Cromwell—but neither he  
Nor the clerk heeded me as I stood waiting  
And the platter dithered in my hands. At last  
He spoke, in a harsh voice: “What hast thou written?”  
And the penman, softly: “*Great fruit of the success . . .*”  
“Ay, that was it: “*Great fruit of the success . . .*”  
*Of the success . . .* Now dip thy pen again:  
*The dimensions of this Mercy are above*  
*My thoughts. . . . My thoughts. . . . It is, for all I know,*  
*A crowning Mercy. Lord God Almighty, frame*  
*Our hearts to real thankfulness for this*  
*Which is alone his doing!”* Then he paused  
While the pen creaked, and pausing, looked on me  
Who stood abashed and quaking. But I doubt  
He saw me; for his melancholy eyes,  
Deep-sunken in the blotched and furrowed face  
Of an ailing, ageing, weary man, stared forth  
As blank as lightless windows—nor could I guess  
What dark impenetrable brooding filled  
The sombre brain behind them. But those eyes,  
And that face, so sad in victory, are stamped  
Upon my vision yet; and still I see  
That craggy frame, whose shape might have been hewn  
From a block of Malvern granite, stand before me,  
Not as a ruthless conqueror, but a man  
Of sorrows. And this also I perceived,  
That the presence of this commoner breathed forth  
A majesty so awful and a power  
So palpable that the King, for all his valour,  
Seemed only pitiful, and the princely graces  
That had won my heart, mere gauds and ornaments  
Beside this homespun greatness. Suddenly  
Cromwell’s eyes fastened on me, and his face  
Flushed as he clutched his sword-hilt: “Who art thou?  
Who gave thee leave to enter?” Then, seeing me  
Unarmed and stammering, he shot back the sword  
Into the scabbard and laughed aloud. And now

His voice seemed kindly, and the saddened eyes  
Good-humoured. “What?” said he. “Hast brought me breakfast?  
Then art thou welcome! This is the first bread  
I ever broke in this malignant city!  
Who knows if it be poisoned?” But when I said  
I could swear there was no harm in it, he frowned,  
Bidding me not to swear after the manner  
Of the ungodly; but this reproof, I reckon,  
Was not unfriendly meant, for then he smiled  
And took the platter, bidding me be gone  
And strive to mend my speech. But when my wife  
Waylaid me on the stair and badgered me  
To tell her all, and I, poor fool, affirmed  
That this monster (as she called him) was a gentleman  
Humane and kindly, then she rated me  
For a giddling weathercock, saying she rued  
The day that we were wed, and from that hour  
Never forgave me. Yet I still maintain—  
And none shall shake me—that the Lord Protector  
Was an honest man, who, having set his hand  
To the plough, scorned to turn back, but drove his furrow  
Straight to the end foreseen, and that the harvest  
Of our present peace would never have been garnered  
But for the coulter of this ruthless ploughman:  
For he that sows in tears, the Psalmist saith  
Shall reap in joy, and doubtless come again  
Bringing his sheaves with him. . . .

*Twice in the fires of sacrifice  
Consumed has London lain:  
Twice has London burned, and twice  
Has London lived again.*

First there came the lustral flame  
That in a woeful day  
Was sent to cleanse the pestilence  
And burn her sins away;  
When through her crumbling tinder  
Winged by the frenzied East  
The fire that none could hinder  
Ran like a ravening beast.  
From East to West the wildfire swept,  
It flew from street to street;  
It carried Temple Bar and leapt  
The Tyburn and the Fleet;  
Then, wheeling back in the wind's teeth,  
It licked the city's walls  
And kindled with its panting breath  
The roof of old St. Paul's,  
Whose fragments flown from white-hot stone  
Like plunging round-shot fell,  
While molten lead from overhead  
Flowed fast down Ludgate Hill,  
And shepherds from the lonely height  
Of Hampstead gazing down  
Saw heaving in a lake of light  
The heart of London town,  
And heard, like distant thunder,  
Roofs, towers and temples crash,  
As London's heart sank under  
A shroud of smoking ash.  
Yet on that charred and cindery shard  
Of ash and calcined stone

There rose a London lovelier  
Than ever man had known,  
Of towers and spires and pinnacles  
Whiter than cloud or foam:  
And over all the church of Paul  
Upreared its kingly dome.  
From chambered spire and steeple  
Each with a different voice  
Her belfries called her people  
To mourn or to rejoice;  
Their chime and change and clanging peals  
The risen city crowned,  
And wove above her roaring wheels  
Their fabric of sweet sound.  
Their voices sang of shine and gloom,  
Of triumph and of rue;  
Men heard them boom o'er Nelson's tomb  
And peal for Waterloo.  
But in the end there came a day  
With darker boding filled,  
When the wings of hate were at her gate  
And London's bells were stilled;  
When from Penzance to John o'Groats  
The bells no longer swung—  
For a seal was set upon their throats  
And clamped each iron tongue;  
When on the chimeless chantries,  
On steeple dome and spire,  
The Prussian's dread fire-raisers shed  
A night-long rain of fire  
That kindled rafters overhead  
And cleft the graves below,  
Thrusting the unremembered dead  
Into the furnace-glow;  
When soaring sparks whirled through the dark,  
And towering billows tossed  
Their crimson foam where Paul's grey dome  
Rose like a deathless ghost.  
Night after night in droning flight  
We heard the raiders come;  
Our steeples crashed about our feet



But still their bells were dumb;  
And still we wait, for soon or late  
Those bells will speak once more,  
And the belfries reel with such a peal  
As never was rung before,  
To give these folk who never broke  
The guerdon of their pain:  
That the peace they earned when London burned  
Has come to her again;  
And on the soil they loved so well,  
Their gay and dauntless eyes  
Shall see from out that blackened shell  
A phoenix city rise.

*Twice in the fires of sacrifice  
Consumed has London lain:  
Twice has London burned—and twice  
Shall London rise again!*

## XXVI

### Interlude

#### THE ISLE OF VOICES

Ours is an isle of voices whose mild air  
And gentle skies are sweetened everywhere  
With a winged music that by day and night  
Instils an essence of supreme delight  
Or secret rapture on the listening ear,  
Where is no season of the changing year  
But hath its meed of song. Often in days  
Of midmost Winter when the miry ways  
Crinkle with cat-ice and the ebon thorn  
Is sheathed in crystal shall a cloudy morn  
Ring with the rapid notes the redbreast throws  
To skies o'erburdened with unfallen snows,  
When over frosty furrow and sere steep  
One hears the whirring flocks of fieldfares sweep  
With harsh, exultant clamour as they glean  
Their beggarly harvest: often have I seen  
The missel-thrush his stormy challenge cast  
Full in the teeth of Winter's foulest blast,  
While brindled dunnocks humbly chirp and stir  
In starveling bushes of grey lavender;  
While in the crannied wood-pile the wren flirts  
His tail and frees his song in fiery spurts,  
And the tiny goldcrest, like a flittermouse,  
Cheeps in the swarthy cedar's topmost boughs.  
And when at midnight the cold catalyst  
Of arctic air has cleared the enshrouding mist  
To star-shot crystal, and the earth revealed  
Lies wan and desolate as a lunar field,  
Out of that spectral stillness, beyond view,  
Ripples the mellow quavering halloo  
Of snow-soft owls that from the luminous dark  
Answer the mating vixen's peevish bark.

Oft when grim days of February gird  
The chastened brooks with iron have I heard  
The chuckle of garrulous rooks that prize and peer  
Within their ragged homes of yester-year,  
Or lighting on the wind-swayed trivets test  
The strength of twigs to bear the new year's nest;  
Oft over seaward crags, where thrift and thyme  
Are mingled, watched the pairing ravens climb  
In widening circles, while the curlew pours  
That liquid laughter which shall wake the moors  
When snows are gone—and heard the whimbrel shrill  
O'er saltings where dun estuaries spill  
Their tidal fringe. Yet these disjointed cries  
Are but the prelude of the pæans that rise  
When the South West unseals the frozen springs,  
And every bush is quick with whimperings  
And flutings, as each tiny instrument  
Strives to perfect the theme that shall be blent  
In April's airy counterpoint. How sweet  
The morn when the first chiff-chaff doth repeat  
His tenuous distich that is pure and frail  
As blackthorn petals that a whiff of hail  
Or sleet can tarnish! How far richer then  
The limpid cadence of the willow-wren,  
And those clear torrents of excited song  
The spiring whitethroat sheds! How blithe and strong  
Waxes the blackbird's whistle as he weaves  
His leisurely melismas—though he leaves  
The spendthrift phrase unfinished in despite  
Of laboured artifice! With what rich delight,  
Ere the first gleam of orient amber breaks,  
The thistle's jubilant reveille wakes  
A multitudinous chorus to proclaim  
Unclouded hope, sheer bliss without a name  
Or reason—save that it is doubly sweet  
To live and love in April, and to greet  
The first-created miracle of light  
As it were unfamiliar. There's no night  
In April now but wafts upon their way  
New clouds of witnesses—no dawn of day  
But brings its new diversity of notes

To swell this ambient music from the throats  
Of new-come singers, while from overhead  
The sunlit carolings of the lark are shed  
Like glancing raindrops, silvered as they fall.  
Now from bare orchards bursts the clarion call  
Of the bold chaffinch, where the firetail flits  
With anxious chirpings; now the ox-eye whets  
His rasping scissors, and the reedy plaint  
Of the yellow-hammer wheezes far and faint;  
Now, in shy coverts, where translucent leaves  
Half hide her nestling, the green linnet weaves  
Her heart-subduing tissue of soft trills  
And inward murmurs; now on windy hills  
The curlew whinnies wild, and tawny springs  
Feed the fierce torrents where the ouzel sings  
His wren-like snatch; now over upland vales  
In wide-winged majesty the buzzard sails—  
So high, his feeble melancholy call  
Scarce reaches earth; now pewits swoop or fall  
Harrying the air with frenzied catlike cry  
Far from the nests where their pied fledgelings lie;  
Now on the brambly waste, when eve is still  
The blackcap and the garden-warbler thrill  
The brake with flutings that the prentice ear  
Deems the first nightingale's—but when we hear  
That mastersong of May, without a peer,  
In the swift lapsing of the lover's moon  
We smile to think the blackcap's artless tune  
Could ever have bewitched us, and remain  
Rapt in mute ravishment as that golden strain  
Rises and falls . . . and rises once again.  
And oft we wonder how the sounds that shower  
From that small syrinx can transcend the power  
Of the mightiest music-makers to express,  
In one brief burst of song, despair, distress,  
Exultant joy, serenest happiness,  
Hope, triumph, dread, inconsolable woe,  
And pity such as none but angels know—  
Till, with one exquisite note, more finely drawn,  
The lingering cadenza fades on dawn  
Or moonless dusk, and in our ears bereft

Of that ineffable beauty naught is left  
But the craking of shy landrails as they cower  
Couched in the dewy grass and hour on hour  
Utter their rasping plaint—until the skies  
Of May are mellowed by the cuckoo's cries  
Gladdening the mists of morning as he floats  
From elm to elm—and in these wayward notes,  
So richly confident, we seem to hear  
The authentic theme of Summer, though the ear  
Grows weary of his clamours before June  
Has cracked his voice—when, in the heat of noon,  
Only the croonings of the ringdove lull  
The leafy woods, and hedgerows that were full  
Of song are silent as their singers lie  
Mute in the tired contentment of July:  
For now their greedy fledgelings are all flown,  
And who should sing of love that sings alone?  
These are the deeps of silence; never more  
Returns the tenderness we knew before  
The wild rose shed its petals: now we hear  
Naught but harsh notes of petulance and fear  
Or angry chattering as the magpies break  
Their cover, and the jay's excited shriek  
Startles the stillness, while from orchards bowed  
Beneath their luscious burden rings the loud  
Wild laughter of the yaffle, when between  
Dark boughs he flashes in a streak of green  
More brilliant than the hues of any bird  
Save halcyon's azure. Now no more are heard  
The swallow's twitterings as her fledgeling leaves  
Her cup of dabbled clay beneath the eaves;  
For the first brood is sunward flown, and they  
That linger grow more venturous, day by day  
Fettling weak wings for their prodigious flight  
To the far South, as in the dwindling light  
Of August evenings, when thin clouds of gnats  
Dance in the dusk, they vie with flickering bats  
To hawk this gauzy carrion—while on high  
Shrill storms of swifts whirl through the darkened sky  
Circling their dizzy steeple till no gleam  
Of day is left, and, faint as in a dream,

We hear the nightlong clouds of waders pass  
To their warm sands and saltings. Now, alas,  
Dawn brings no murmurs of content nor songs  
Of hope—but hurried wing-beats as the throngs  
Of frightened linnets, scurrying overhead,  
Whirr to the silken-seeded thistle-bed,  
With greenfinch, twite, and amoret to dispute  
Its plummy granaries; now from the scarlet fruit  
Of yews and rowans, stealthy throistles gulp  
Mouthfuls of sapid nectar and sweet pulp,  
And from the berried elder blackbirds cull  
Vinous ambrosia till their craws are full;  
Now, on the new-turned tilth, wide-ranging flocks  
Of daws and starlings feed, and patient rooks  
Explore each furrow with deliberate care  
And awkward gait—yet, when the cooling air  
Of eve with risen vapours rings the sun  
These hordes of silent foragers rise as one:  
Slowly the rooks flap homeward, while the stares  
In myriads gather, till the sky appears  
Black with their cloudy cohorts as they sink  
To their foul roosts upon the river's brink  
Amid the shivering reeds and withy-beds,  
Where from their hidden multitude there spreads  
A babble of wild water . . . Long before  
September lawns are spangled with the hoar  
Of silvery cobweb where the spider spins  
His weft of dewy gossamer, begins  
The secret flight of singers that by day  
Have long been silent, but now steal away  
Borne on invisible wafts of air that glide  
For ever Southward, like a soundless tide  
That ebbs in darkness—till of those bright strains  
That thrilled the prime of April, none remains  
But the first-come, last-lingering chiff-chaff's call,  
Fitful and feeble now—and with the fall  
Of the first yellowing leaf, he, too, is fled.  
Yet sometimes, in the opulent drowsihead  
Of Luke's or Martin's Summer, comes a day  
Of golden stillness, when the woods that lay  
Bemused in deep autumnal slumber wake

To hear a flood of sudden music break  
From out their tangled thickets—and it seems  
That Spring has come again, and Winter's dreams  
Are surely ended. Never rings more clear  
The redbreast's voice than when the dying year  
Chastens his ardour. Never did throstle sing  
Louder in the green lustihood of Spring  
Than when the glory of the stricken leaf  
Lightens the glooms of Winter! Brief, too brief  
Are these enchanted moments: soon dun floods  
Shall drown the valleys, and November woods  
Stripped of their mortal raiment naked stand:  
Yet, even when December's leprous hand  
Blanches our garden walks, the robin flits  
With bright eyes peering at the frozen spits  
Of tawny mould turned from the gardener's spade,  
And, like a gay familiar, unafraid,  
Perches on his bent shoulders as he breaks  
The crumbling clod, and, fluttering downward, takes  
His morsel. But, at last, a season comes  
When birds and men alike must keep their homes;  
When, in still night, the flying snowflakes sift  
Upon the dying year her funeral shift;  
When, from our breath-bleared windows, we espy  
A silent earth beneath a songless sky—  
And of the vanished singers naught may know  
But their starry signets printed on soft snow.

## XXVII

### DIASPORA

Salute we now the first adventurers  
Of those storm-clouded or unsullied seas  
That in their jewelled ambience enclasp  
This many-coloured island: yet remember  
How these were ever bred in cognisance  
Of the sea's neighbourhood: there is no brook  
Of midmost Mercia but can taste the brine  
Of Trent or Severn, when the tidal floods  
Of bore and eagre meet their lapsing flow  
Of mountain-waters—no lark-haunted down  
Nor upland arable but the sea-mew's wings  
Whiten the ploughman's furrow, no native blood  
Unstirred by those salt savours that beguiled  
Celt, Saxon, Dane and Norman to forsake  
Their homely garths and fields, and to explore  
Mysterious oceans! So John Cabote sailed  
From Bristol in the *Matthew*; so the *Mayflower*  
Westward to barren Massachusetts bore  
The zealots of a sterner creed; so Drake,  
Half poet and half pirate, wholly brave,  
Girdled the watery globe, and ballasted  
With spice and silver, brought the *Golden Hind*,  
By the Horn's perilous seaways and the Cape  
Of Storms, safe home to Plymouth; so Chancellor,  
In the *Edward Bonaventure*, braved the fangs  
Of the fabled North-east Passage to Cathay,  
And thwarted of that icy enterprise,  
Over froze steppe and snowy tundra trudged  
To Muscovy's drear heart, there to unveil  
An empery undreamed of; so Ralph Fitch  
In the *Tiger*, out of London, disembarked  
At Tripolis in Lebanon, and bewitched  
By the lure of beckoning distances, fared on  
To fierce Aleppo, where the caravans



Of Babylon were gathered, and from thence,  
Launched on the huge Euphrates, drifted down  
To Bussorah, whose burning gulf divides  
Desert Arabia from the ochreous isle  
Of Hormuz—yet, provoked by discontent  
Of such tame voyaging, must set forth anew  
To Bantam, where the slant-eyed Javanese  
Crawled to their hideous gods; so Frobisher,  
Probing the deadly icepack on the coasts  
Of arctic Labrador, furl'd his frozen sails  
In Hudson's Bay, and with squat Eskimos  
Trafficked his English wares for the sleek pelts  
Of fox and sable; so a hundred more  
Anonymous voyagers followed in their wake  
Down the far vistas of a widening world—  
Not of a settled purpose, nor in lust  
Of treasure, like the Spaniard, but constrained  
By mysterious compulsions to seek out  
Strange climes and customs. Thus, when the dead hand  
Of grudgeful Spain, loosened at Gravelines,  
Relaxed its grip, then did the energy  
Pent in this plodding island breed burst forth  
Strong as a snow-fed torrent in the prime  
Of lusty Spring, and, by that generous flood  
Nursed and refreshed, a new-born nation rose  
Sudden to its full stature. Never before  
Was such a blossoming: heart hand and brain  
Nerved by such ardour that the very skies  
Seemed to be lifted and earth's bounds dissolved,  
As, from imagination's loftiest peaks,  
Their eyes, undazzled, saw a world in fee  
To their bright daring, and in seas unknown  
Their natural birthright. Now, from cove and creek,  
These venturous islanders put forth, their holds  
Crammed with the product of a nation rich  
In handicraft and husbandry, for gold,  
Silver and fragrant spices and soft silks,  
Bartering their homespun fleeces from the looms  
Of Cotswold—till there was no landfall left  
In the known world but saw their topsails float  
Like clouds on the horizon as they stole

Shoreward to anchor, no dusky race but knew  
The uncouth accents of their island speech  
And their bluff island ways. From the storm-vexed  
Antilles to the tideless seas that lave  
Old Tyre and Sidon, from the Golden Horn  
To ageless Egypt, from the Baltic ice  
To sweltering Madagascar and the flats  
Of Mozambique, from the Arabian gulf  
To jealous Goa and the coralline sands  
Of the palm-fringed Moluccas forth they fared,  
Wafted on tireless sails—and where they went,  
Shrewd merchants followed after, stablishing  
Marts for their musky trade, and from excess  
Of unimaginable wealth, sent home  
Fleets of fantastic lading and rich wares  
That made this thrifty isle the cynosure  
Of envious nations and chief counting-house  
Of the old world, luring ambitious youth  
To stranger voyaging. Many there were  
Cut loose the ties that held them and forsook  
Their motherland, transported by the zest  
Of obstinate endeavour to subdue  
The spite of stubborn nature and remould  
Their chosen wilderness—yet gave their dreams  
Familiar forms and substance, in the void  
Shaping another England; and when their strength  
Faltered, their progeny took up the task  
Left by their fathers' fingers, to maintain  
Their heritage of custom, faith and speech  
Inviolate. But of all the alien lands  
Wooed by these daring wanderers there was one  
Most consonant with their nature, and most kind—  
For all its rigours—to a blood that craved  
The salt Atlantic air. It was a land  
Hard on the coulter, where reluctant soil  
Yielded a niggard harvest, and the fruits  
Of earth were few; it was a treacherous land  
Of tangled forests and swift waters, haunted  
By fierce elusive enemies; a land  
Vast and impenetrable, whose farthest bounds  
No human strength could compass; a mute land

Of silences more terrible than sound;  
A land of harsh extremes—of durable snow  
Alternate with insufferable heat;  
Of calms and hurricanes; of drought and flood;  
Yet here these English settled, and here throve,  
Their senses quickened with adversity,  
Their sinew steeled by hazard, and their hopes  
Buoyed by unfading visions of a bourn  
Infinite in promise, ever beckoning  
Yet ever unfulfilled; and, of their loins,  
Within one toilful century, was begotten  
A nation of a million souls, diverse  
In creed and polity, yet one in race,  
Custom and speech—their ancient blood refreshed  
By the strange soil's infusions, yet the same  
In virtue and defect. Thus, from the bounds  
Of French Acadia, where St. Lawrence pours  
His lake-fed torrents; from the woods of Maine  
And Massachusetts to the palisades  
Of Hudson and New Jersey; from the creeks  
Of Maryland, where the great Delaware  
Flows full from Pennsylvania, to the swamps  
Of old Virginia and the coastal sands  
Of southmost Carolina—there this breed  
Gathered their strength, forgetful of the seas  
That drew their fathers forth, their landward eyes  
For ever brooding on the wealth that lay  
Westward beyond the ranges, challenging  
Their stalwart thews and spirits to forestall  
The subtler Frenchmen who from North and South  
Bade fair to fill their marches in the plains  
Of Mississippi. Such was America:  
Such were her sons . . . Toward our island too  
In that same hour, stole an imperious shade  
Cast by the Sun-King's glory. Little her wealth  
Availed her, should the predatory power  
Of rising France and fallen Spain be joined  
In enmity—for now her pride of bloom  
Seemed over and her branches overburdened  
With rotten fruit; her ancient pieties  
Relaxed in greed and luxury, her crown

Pledged in the dynast's pawnshop, while the fleets  
Launched by the great Protector lay dispersed  
Abandoned or unmanned. Yet, in those days  
Of shame and peril, when that shadow stole  
Across the plains of Flanders, menacing  
Her narrow seas that were both livelihood  
And safeguard, suddenly our land awoke;  
Brushed from his throne the last of that light race  
Whose perjuries had abased her, and sought out  
Two saviours: first Dutch William, a dour man  
Who loved her little and was less beloved  
Save that he stood for liberty—the second,  
War's matchless chieftain, Marlborough, mightiest  
Of all her native warriors, whose cool mind,  
Patient beyond belief, serene, humane,  
Clear, swift, dispassionate, neither the guiles  
Of labyrinthine Europe nor the malice  
Of envious faction could confuse or turn  
From his appointed task, that was to free  
The coasts of Flanders from the dominance  
Of overweening France, and this dear isle  
From fierce aggressions. Four and twenty years  
He waged unceasing war, time and again  
Victorious, though frustrated by the doubt  
Or sloth of timorous allies, yet returning  
Patient as toilful Sisyphus to surmount  
The pinnacles of hope—and, in the end  
Gave back to the faint hearts that sent him forth  
The peace they craved, the honour they had lost,  
And with his palsied fingers turned a page  
Bright with the glories of the Augustan Age.

## XXVIII

SONG OF THE BRITISH GRENADIERS

A.D. 1713

From plough and cart, from byre and mart,  
 From hamlet, heath and town,  
 They pressed us out to swell the rout  
 And pull the French king down;  
 From jail and tavern, doss and ditch  
 We heard the fifers squeal:  
*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*  
*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*  
 In distant lands our clumsy hands  
 Took to the butcher's trade;  
 They learnt the use of flint and fuse  
 And smouldering grenade—  
 To keep the firelock's tinder dry  
 And whet the bayonet's steel:  
*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*  
*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*  
 We crossed the reedy Maas and freed  
 The marches of Brabant;  
 We laid our siege about Liège  
 And drove Boufflers to Ghent;  
 We loosed Venloo and Ruremond  
 From the invader's heel:  
*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*  
*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*  
 'Twas in the pride of cherry-tide  
 They turned us from the Rhine  
 By mountain roads that overflowed  
 With honey-coloured wine;  
 Through the soft vale where Neckar's stream  
 Turns many a water-wheel:  
*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*  
*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*  
 When fruit hung low on the August bough  
 And the corn was in the ear,

From Nevel's banks our red-coat ranks  
Swept round on Tallard's rear  
From Blenheim to the Danube's brink  
In a ring of fire and steel:

*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*

*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*

When Flanders ways were mired in May

And the Whitsun fog lay white

For mile on mile along the Dyle,

Villeroi came out to fight;

Through the green rye to Ramillies

We made his whitecoats reel:

*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*

*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*

When earth grew dry in a hot July

The Frenchmen stole about

Our rearward guard at Oudenarde,

And turned to fight it out;

But we beat Vendôme and chased him home

To lick his wounds in Lille:

*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*

*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*

September rain had drenched the plain

When Marlborough met Villars

On the bitter day of Malplaquet

In the bloody wood of Sars—

When we drove the French from hedge to trench

And brought their king to heel:

*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*

*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*

But now this grudgeful land we trudge,

Forgotten as our dead;

And we that freed the world must needs

Cringe for a crust of bread

From folk who cheered us when they heard

The bells for Blenheim peal:

*Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guer-re*

*Mais quand reviendra-t-il?*

## XXIX

PASTORAL SYMPHONY      A.D. 1743

*Ille terrarum mihi praeter omnes  
Angulus ridet . . .*

*The Scene, again, is Worcestershire: this time the extreme North of the county, where the main watershed of middle England divides the sources of streams flowing into Severn and the Atlantic Ocean from those which feed the tributaries of Trent and are discharged into the North Sea. This is a countryside very different from the vales of Severn and Avon, which, when we last saw them, a hundred years ago, consisted either of aboriginal oak-forest or hedgeless fields. Here one might imagine oneself on the borders of Wales; for the landscape is wild and tumbled and (as its politer inhabitants would call it) 'bosky': a country of combe and coppice, sparsely cultivated, and cloven by deep valleys through which flow the numerous brooks that are joined to form the Stour. Though English agriculture has not yet been 'regulated' by general enclosure, there are many hedged fields, of small size and irregular shape, of the kind that characterise Herefordshire and Shropshire to-day. Indeed, the little market town of Hales Owen, which lies in the cup of the Stour valley, is actually attached to the County of Salop. On a shelving slope half-way down the face of this well-wooded escarpment, stands an undistinguished farmhouse, which, during the seventeen years of its present occupancy, has become (according to Dr. Johnson) 'the envy of the great and the admiration of the skilful.' At this moment 'the great' are doing it the honour of a visit: a distinguished company having just alighted from the horses which have carried them over the rough road from Hagley, the seat of Sir Thomas Lyttelton, past the graceful spire of Hales Owen church and the nailmakers' tinkling anvils, to view Mr. Shenstone's walks and inspect his improvements. A chaise, drawn by a tandem, and carrying a plump, middle-aged man with a solemn face and large, sleepy eyes, brings up the rear of the cavalcade. The leader of the party is George Lyttelton: a tall, thin loose-limbed man of thirty-four. He is dressed, with slovenly elegance, in a full wig, which frames his long, serious features, a purple riding-coat, tight breeches, and silver-buckled shoes: his attire a compromise between that of a courtier or clubman and that of a rustic squire, and a contrast, in any case, to that of Mr. Shenstone, whose ill-fitting*

*grey coat and red waistcoat, unbuttoned and dusted with snuff, do not add to the grace of a figure already going to seed. Mr. Shenstone, moreover, 'wears his own hair', and has apparently paid little attention to it. The other visitors are a robust, jolly-looking fellow, with a rubicund face and lively eyes; a young sailor, a lad of sixteen, to whom he appears to be much attached; and a figure of far greater distinction, in a tie-wig: small headed, grey-eyed and thin-lipped, with a prominent aquiline nose. From a cage above the front door, a dishevelled blackbird surveys the scene without interest, while Mr. Lyttelton makes apologies and introductions in a mellifluous voice and measured phrases which largely mitigate his physical awkwardness.*

LYTTELTON:

Dear Mr. Shenstone, I pray you will forgive  
This sudden visitation; for my guests  
Would have thought little of my entertainment  
Had they not seen your Leasowes, and paid homage  
To its creator. You know my sailor brother,  
Tom Smith?

*(The rubicund gentleman smiles and bows.)*

His young companion's Alec Hood,  
His servant in the *Romney*.

*(The boy grins and bows awkwardly.)*

Mr. Pitt

You surely must remember? We had the privilege  
Of coming here ten years ago—since when  
The world has heard much more of him—and you, Sir.

SHENSTONE:

A name and face not easily forgotten.

LYTTELTON:

But wait! My chief surprise!

*(The plump gentleman has dismounted, with difficulty, from the tandem chaise, and strolls aimlessly towards them, pausing to look at the view.)*

Another servant

Of the Sacred Nine: my good friend Mr. Thomson.  
Jamie, for heaven's sake wake up! Our host  
Awaits your pleasure.



THOMSON:

*(With a start)* Sir I beg your pardon  
And Mr. Shenstone's. I am quite bemused  
With the languor of a prospect that would turn  
A clod into a poet: a Parnassus  
Whose very air breathes music. Mr. Shenstone,  
I envy you your heritage.

CAPT. SMITH:

*(With a mischievous twinkle)* Do you reckon  
It equals Hagley, Jamie?

THOMSON:

*(With a strong Scots accent)* Sir, comparisons  
May sometimes illustrate, but never prove,  
And seldom edify. *(He sighs.)* My indolent Muse,  
Inspired by such environs, might have ventured  
On more ambitious wings.

SHENSTONE:

Sir, she has soared  
Beyond my sight already in your *Seasons*.  
If she flew higher still, she would be lost  
In heaven—and we the poorer. But your envy  
Seems disingenuous in one who dwells  
At Kew Foot Lane, within an hour of town,  
Where wits are tempered by the Social Flame  
And sharpened by the talk of Men of Taste,  
While mine grow dull and rusty. If a man  
Could eat his cake and have it, I would choose  
Your lot rather than mine, Sir; but, alas!  
My fare's but bread and water, as becomes  
My rural hermitage, and nothing varies  
Its plainness but the occasional condescensions  
Of cultivated neighbours, who convey  
Their friends to view my walks. This happy day  
Shall mark the lonely Shepherd's calendar  
With a red letter, long to be remembered  
In his tedious annals.

PITT:

I think you undervalue  
Your blessings, Sir. Indeed, Nature has done  
Everything for you.

SHENSTONE:

I dare to hope I, too,  
Have done something for Nature. I shall be honoured  
If you will judge the improvements I have made  
In my *ferme ornée*. . . .

SMITH:

(*Glancing at his watch*) Ay, ay, Sir: Let's weigh anchor,  
Or we shall miss the tide and spoil our dinner.  
Eight bells, upon my soul!

HOOD:

(*In a whisper*) What is that bird, Sir?

SHENSTONE:

My blackbird: a poor fledgeling my man Tom  
Found fluttering near the nest: a quill of spirit  
And elegance, both masculine and musical.  
But, like his modest master, he don't sing  
To order or in company. A true poet!  
Eh, Mr. Thomson?

THOMSON:

Then he's like to starve  
For lack of patronage. Send him to London,  
And he'll soon learn that lesson!

SHENSTONE:

If Master Hood  
Fancies a cage-bird, I have little doubt  
My man could find another that would bring  
His native woodnotes to an ear that knows  
Only the roaring seas.

SMITH:

What say you, Alec?

HOOD:

Thank you, Sir. But I'd rather have a parrot  
That swears in Spanish, like the bo'sun had  
On board the *Romney*—or the blue mockaw  
He got from Pernambuco.

SHENSTONE:

Then, by your leave,  
I will precede you, gentlemen. Mr. Pitt,  
Doubtless you will perceive how I have wound  
This walk, to cheat the eye, lest it foresee  
The ground the foot must travel? At this alcove  
It opens on an avenue composed  
By smooth transitions to produce the effect  
Of distancing.

PITT:

How so, Sir?

SHENSTONE:

You will observe  
This end is planted wider, with black yews,  
Then firs, then oaks and alders, by degrees  
Passing through greens more fadey—till, at length,  
Birch, almond-willow, and silver-osier close  
A nebulous visto that appears to end  
Remotely.

PITT:

(*Enthusiastically*) Most ingenious! You combine  
The hues of Nature as Zuccarelli blends  
His pigments!

SHENSTONE:

By the sad necessity  
Of my *angusta res*. Had I the scope  
Of Hagley's ampler acres, such devices  
Of Art would not constrain me . . .

(*He pauses, the flow of his period disturbed by a burst of  
philistine laughter from behind him.*)

Captain Smith,  
May we not share your merriment?

SMITH:

*(Still chuckling)* Egad, Sir,  
It was this young limb of Satan who suggested  
That jealous folk might show your avenue  
From the wrong end.

SHENSTONE:

I fear he is not the first  
To have discerned my weaknesses and made them  
The butt of malice.

*(With a significant glance at LYTTTELTON.)*

Some have even shown  
My walks in Winter, when ruffian Boreas  
Denudes their Fauns and Dryads.

PITT:

*(With corrective courtesy)* Pray proceed.  
I am all attention. Your Philosophy  
Of Gardening enchants me.

SHENSTONE:

*(Encouraged by the compliment)* As a Poet  
Rather than as a Painter, I regard  
My landscape as an Epick, where the sublime  
And pleasing are commingled, or succeed  
With gradual alternation. Yet, in my faith,  
There is one cardinal tenet: to respect  
The forms of Nature. Every Artifice  
That thwarts her is high treason; every trick  
That makes discovery of Art an outrage.  
*Ars est celare artem.* You observe  
This shaven sward we traverse? Ten years since  
It was a wilderness, thick with horrid thorns  
And brambles. Now, the unimpeded eye  
Has gained the liberty it loves to reach  
That belt of noble beeches, where the axe  
Has cleft a ruthless passage to disclose  
The shine of water. In a windless air  
You may hear the babbling of the rivulet  
That falls to feed it. Once my lazy rill  
Flowed mute; but I have coaxed it into song

With gifts of pebbles—and now it never stays  
An artificial prattle that enchants  
The ears of bashful Naiads. From this seat,  
Sacred to silvan Pan, Imagination  
Can watch their watery frolic.

SMITH:

*(Loudly)*            May we know  
What hour they bathe, Sir?

SHENSTONE:

*(Archly)*            *Procul, Captain Smith,*  
*Este profani!*

LYTTELTON:

*(With a smile)* Mr. Shenstone means  
He wants no Peeping Toms. You, as a sailor,  
Might ask with equal aptness: *Festo quid potius*  
*Die Neptuni faciam?*

THOMSON:

*(His fat paunch shaken with chuckles)* Verra neat, George:  
Prettily capped. *(To SHENSTONE)* There's only one ingredient  
Mars this delightful landscape. Yonder cot  
Should be made habitable or pulled down.  
If it were mine I'd raze it.

SHENSTONE:

*(Even more hurt than indignant)* That, Mr. Thomson,  
Is a Romantick Ruin, only built  
Last Autumn! I have pointed it with care  
To variegate the visto where it seemed  
To want diversity. I have always held  
That rural scenes are lifeless and imperfect  
Lacking the mark of Man, and that the charms  
Of a ruinated structure woo the mind  
To pensive sadness.

THOMSON:

Think no more of it:  
I'm a mere townsman with no claims to Taste

In Rural Elegance.

SHENSTONE:

*(Still rather hurt)* Had I the advantages  
Of my friend Lyttelton, I might have planned  
A more ambitious edifice, and begged  
Some arches from his Abbey; but my means  
May not presume to vie with Stowe or Hagley.  
My ruin fits my purse. *(To LYTTELTON)* Sir, it is whispered  
You contemplate a Temple in your park?

LYTTELTON:

We think to build a Rotund, in the style  
Of the Temple of Vesta. It's a dainty foible  
Of Mr. Pitt's, to memorize our friendship  
And family alliances. He himself  
Has marked the chosen site—but you must see  
The drawings, Mr. Shenstone.

PITT:

Yes, indeed.

We should be most gratified.

SHENSTONE:

And I most honoured.

But let's proceed . . . This gentle glade I call  
The Lovers' Walk. My assignation-seats  
And mottoes mark its nature, as do the urns  
To faithful lovers. A certain Noble Lady  
Considers it my masterpiece . . .

SMITH:

*(In an amused whisper)* Who's that, George?

LYTTELTON:

That black-maned gorgon Henrietta Luxborough  
Bolingbroke's sister.

SMITH:

Is *she* his 'Delia'?

LYTTELTON:

No.

I've seen his Delia—and what a Delia!  
I'll tell you later . . .

SHENSTONE:

For myself, I'd choose  
These more funereal shades, through which my brook  
Steals voiceless under pendent tapestries  
Of beech: a spot conducive to sweet sessions  
Of meditative thought and soft regret.  
I call it Virgil's Grove: and yonder urn  
Of marble, in its alcove of dark yews,  
Commemorates the Mantuan's lordly name.

HOOD:

*(In an awed whisper)* Sir, are his bones inside it?

SHENSTONE:

*(Disregarding the general laughter)* No, my young friend,  
It is a cenotaph, planned to suggest  
The melancholy aspects of mortality  
Rather than its horrors. Here the mind may brood  
On elegiac themes. The very paths  
Are pledged to silence; for the strewn beech-mast  
Muffles our footfalls. Here, when I am gone,  
Another urn shall bear a humbler name  
Than Maro's, and the sentimental eye  
Grudge not the tribute of a casual tear:  
I sometimes think my urns and obelisks  
May well outlast my verses . . .

PITT:

Why, my friend,  
Pursue this dreary subject? You and I  
Are somewhat of an age—and neither of us  
Need think of urns as yet.

SHENSTONE:

*(Shaking his head)* Ah, Mr. Pitt,  
Your fame may light the future, and your voice  
Direct the destinies of nations: mine

Dies with my fading laurels . . .

SMITH:

*(Impatiently)* What's all this talk  
Of death and burial? The man's a hypochondriack  
Who'll never hear a shot fired, and will die  
Of ripe old age, in bed. All that he needs  
Is a blue pill once a week. He's much too fat—  
And so is Jamie Thomson. What's the time, George?  
I'm famished.

LYTTELTON:

So am I. I'll do my best  
To rescue Billy from his tentacles—  
But give me time: the fellow's most fastidious,  
And prone to take offence.  
Dear Mr. Shenstone,  
I fear we have deranged you . . .

SHENSTONE:

On the contrary,  
I find the converse of such company  
As yours exhilarating. Had I but known  
This honour was in store, my frugal board  
Had been prepared to greet your guests.

LYTTELTON:

Alas!  
We are bespoke at Hagley—so I fear  
We must drag ourselves away from the delights  
Of your exquisite Arcadia. Can you tell me  
The hour, Tom?

SMITH:

*(Taking out his watch)* By my stomach it's past one.  
Egad! It's nearly two, George! We must scamper.  
Dinner's at three.

SHENSTONE:

*(Regretfully)* And I have hardly spoken  
A word with Mr. Thomson!



THOMSON:

Let's not repine.

We have communed in the spirit, Sir. Moreover  
I have seen your famous Leasowes—and the half  
Had not been told me! When you come to town  
We must forgather at Richmond: all our wits  
Will flock to meet a master in the realm  
Of Landscape as in Letters.

LYTTELTON:

(*Firmly*) By your leave then  
We will retrace our steps.

*(The whole company follow their host, who has attached himself to THOMSON. LYTTELTON and PITT walk arm in arm. CAPTAIN SMITH and the BOY bring up the rear. After a series of elaborate courtesies, the visitors depart—last of all MR. THOMSON, who turns to wave his farewells from his seat in the tandem. When SHENSTONE has watched them out of sight, he enters the house. His face is flushed, and he is still too much excited to consider the meal that awaits him. With an impatient gesture he sweeps back the dirty tablecloth and sits down to write. First a letter.)*

SHENSTONE:

*(Writing and speaking as he writes).*

'To the Right Hon. Lady Luxborough.

'Tis now somewhere about

September the Tenth, and I write from The Leasowes.

Madam, I believe I shall write very incoherently.

*Mens turbidum laetatur. . . .*

*(He stops, lays the sheet aside, and begins again: this time in verse.)*

Ev'n Pitt, whose fervent periods roll

Resistless thro' the kindling soul

Of Senates, Councils, Kings,

Though form'd for Courts, vouchsafed to rove

Inglorious through the shepherd's grove . . .

*(For a long time he hesitates; then adds, with evident satisfaction:)*

And ope his bashful springs.'

*(The reluctant blackbird has also suddenly burst into song . . .)*

### XXX

AUGUSTAN INTERLUDE

A.D. 1713-1743

Marlbrouk is gone and will not come again.  
His laurels wither. There's a subtle bane  
Mingled in victory's vintage, that betrays  
All but the wisest, when their rearward gaze  
Dwells with contentment on the dizzy slopes  
Their toil has conquered—and delusive hopes  
Bedazzle every eye that looks before,  
Bidding the victor pause, and toil no more.  
Oh, happy island! Never had our race  
Reaped in such measure the rewards of peace  
And sober industry; never had known  
More ample freedoms or a kindlier throne;  
Never, in all our story, since the flood,  
Of the fierce Roses drowned our fields in blood,  
Or Rupert's careless cavalry laid low  
The standing corn upon the trampled plough,  
Had simple folk so prospered, or the great  
Feared less the storms of faction or the hate  
Of envious neighbours! Now a paradise  
Of ungrudged plenty this green island lies  
Within her watery moat, whereon no sail  
Threatens her peace. Now, in each fertile vale  
Striped by the lynchets of her village-fields,  
Unravished earth a bounteous harvest yields:  
Green grows the bearded wheat; her barley pale  
Shall brim the vats with brown October ale  
To dull the edge of Winter; high above  
Her valleys, on the dappled downland, move  
Flocks of innumerable fleece; where furze  
And bramble shag the waste, her cottagers  
Pasture their heath-fed cattle without heed  
Or hindrance, and with wind-torn faggots feed  
The crackling hearths, where February's flich  
Smokes in the chimney till 'tis black as pitch.

Now from her noisy belfries clang no more  
The exultant peals or harsh alarms of war,  
But mellow tones that measure with their chime  
The tranquil flow of unregarded time,  
Which, like a quiet river, carries all  
From birth and love to death and burial;  
Or, wavering on drowsy sabbath airs,  
Summon plain folk to say their simple prayers,  
Unvexed by doubt, in humble certitude  
That life is bountiful and God is good:  
That, even when doctrinal schism rends  
His holy Church, His children may be friends:  
That—though legitimists are prone to mix  
A pinch of Popery in their politics—  
The greater part stand firm for Church and State,  
And martyrologies are out of date,  
Since Priest and Presbyterian alike may praise  
And worship the same God in different ways;  
For these are reasonable times, that need  
The licence of a more elastic creed.  
First, let's be tolerant, while the world's trade  
Sticks to our hands, and markets can be had  
Without contention. Let the foreign fool  
Prate about Glory: give us Wheat and Wool.  
Snug country-seats and comfortable farms  
Outweigh the most resounding feat of arms.  
Let us have ease with dignity—but pray note  
That he who gives us both will get our vote:  
And votes still count in England, though we're told  
A rotten borough costs a mint of gold.  
Yet what is gold to-day? A thing of naught,  
When power and patronage can both be bought,  
And twenty fortunes lost or won on nights  
When play runs high at Newmarket or White's.  
For tact, no less than charity, should abate  
Our judgement on the foibles of the great;  
Since Ministers who live in mortal sin  
Can still make Bishops or prefer a Dean;  
And why should dubious origins debase  
The coinage of a pension or a place,  
Or puritanic moralisms perplex

The generous instincts of the frailer sex?  
Let us be strict—but never over-nice  
In judging what is virtue and what's vice;  
Our weaker vessels ever have been brittle,  
And virtue's price has altered precious little  
Since Mother Eve discovered—and deplored—  
The fact that Virtue is its own reward!  
Let's be abstemious—and seldom take  
More than three bottles for the stomach's sake,  
And with the pleasures of a casual bout  
Forestall the pains and penalties of gout!  
Let us be Men of Taste—and exorcize  
The errors that bedimmed our forebears' eyes;  
Remould their uncouth Gothic, and replace  
Its wayward fancy with a formal grace;  
Unbuild the ancestral fortalice that bore  
A six-week siege in Cromwell's rebel war,  
And on Plantagenet foundations raise  
An edifice to suit more civil days,  
Whose chaste façade and generous glazing show  
Our taste for fighting left us long ago;  
Indulge in ampler space and loftier height;  
Let all within be graciousness and light;  
Roll up the moth-worn tapestries, and line  
The rough-cast walls with panels of smooth pine;  
Fill up the yawning ingles grimed with smoke,  
And change the massive board of British oak  
Neath which your grandsire sank in Charles's reign  
For choice mahogany from the Spanish Main;  
And, where their Spartan mothers sate austere  
Sewing their samplers in a high-backed chair,  
Let your sophisticated ladies lie  
On silken sofas—where they often sigh  
To think how fondly poor Clarissa strove  
Against the stratagems of unlawful love,  
And hope some Lovelace yet may cross their path  
While their good husbands cure the gout at Bath!  
Let us be Men of Judgement, and maintain  
The classic maxim of the Golden Mean!  
Let us be learn'd—and since we have become  
Presumptive heirs of Athens and of Rome,

Affect an Attic diction undefiled  
By any strain of native woodnotes wild,  
And, soundly whipped at Eton, learn by rote  
Just so much Horace as a peer should quote!  
In short, let all be comely—as beseems  
The balanced mind that shrinks from rude extremes:  
So let Life's reasonable tenour flow,  
Too high for diffidence, for pride too low,  
Unruffled by despair, unswoll'n by hope:  
Smooth as a couplet penned by *Mr. Pope*.  
An Age of Matter, you may say—and yet  
It boasts some virtues Time will not forget.  
What though venality and vice abound  
In court and senate? England's heart is sound;  
And through her ardent pulses runs apace  
The vigour of a sane, full-blooded race:  
A race by proven strength and prowess steeled  
To hold its own and not an atom yield;  
A race by industry and shrewdness grown  
To wealth unmeasured, civilities unknown,  
Which, in one sovereign city, has combined  
God's greatest gifts of matter and of mind:  
The widening world's pantechicon and mart,  
The hub of Commerce and the goal of Art:  
London!—a murky microcosm, lit  
By *Johnson's* common sense and *Garrick's* wit;  
London, whose squalor *Hogarth's* pencil flayed,  
Where *Wesley* preached and saintly *Whitefield* prayed,  
Where *Purcell's* native tenderness was drowned  
By *Handel's* torrents of majestic sound;  
Where *Reynolds's* glowing canvasses portrayed  
The masters of an Empire newly-made—  
Faces of men not easily beguiled  
(With something of the look of a spoilt child)  
Whose confident lips and sanguine eyes protest  
That, of all worlds, their own small world's the best,  
And that the climax of Creation's plan  
Is, beyond doubt, an English Gentleman,  
Soothed by the present, pampered by the past,  
In days—if he but knew!—too good to last.  
Thus to a nation surfeited with wealth,

Comes Nature's reckoning—and it comes by stealth.  
There is a moment in the Northern year  
When the o'erburdened earth can hardly bear  
The wealth of her own bounties; when the wheel  
Of the slow-circling seasons seems to feel  
A drag upon its fellow—as though the sun,  
Impatient of long constancy, had grown  
Aweary of earth's wandering and loth  
To turn his jolly face on the frore South  
When he might stay and with warm fingers brush  
The velvet-winged vanessas that outblush  
Full Summer's brightest bloom. How can one sing  
Of this illusive hour, this mimic Spring  
That, like a strayed lamb, frisks her innocence  
On Autumn's drear and draughty threshold, whence  
There steals by night a waft of icier airs?  
And see—one bough in the dark woodland wears  
Tinges of leprous pallor that forecast  
The ravishment of all; and though at last  
The sun smiles forth undaunted, yet we know  
That glory is departed. It was so  
With England in this tranquil age bedecked  
With grace and opulence; but few men recked  
That melancholy stigma, since it shone  
Not in her native woods but in the lone  
Forests of savage Pennsylvania  
And Canada, four thousand miles away.

Four thousand miles away . . . But first observe  
 This young colonial, George Washington;  
 Born in Virginia, of a sound yeoman stock  
 Uprooted from the lias of Northamptonshire  
 Twixt Banbury and Towcester; sparely bred  
 On his father's farm above the tidal creeks  
 Of the Rappahannock: a lanky, likeable lad,  
 Six-foot-three in his stockinged feet; of a countenance  
 Ruddy and cheerful, with a masterful eye,  
 Long arms and monstrous hands—says Lafayette:  
 “The biggest ever I saw.” Small wonder the Governor,  
 That dour, shrewd Scot, Dinwiddie, fancied him  
 For a ticklish errand beyond the Alleghanies,  
 Where those damned Frenchmen, friendly Indians said,  
 Were trickling South from Canada to join hands  
 With their kinsmen in Louisiana. “Just go and see  
 What they're up to,” Dinwiddie said, “and what can be done  
 To scare them off the Ohio.”

Major George Washington

Rode West—the eyes of Virginians always looked West—  
 Over the rolling waves of foothills whitened  
 With dogwood-blossom and flushed with the Judas-bloom  
 Of April; over the great ribbed ranges shagged  
 With pine and hemlock; through break-neck ravines  
 Clogged with dense woods of hickory, oak and sassafras,  
 To a willowy vale where sluggish water seeped  
 Through squelching swamps to feed Monangahela  
 And Alleghenny, where their confluence swelled  
 The fierce Ohio. There he found the French  
 Housed snug as beavers within the charred stockade  
 Of Fort le Bœuf—but, having not their tongue,  
 Nor a liking for captivity, turned back  
 And told what he had seen, urging his chief  
 To hold that frontier firmly, and keep watch

Against further penetration.

So, next Spring,  
A force of forty tough Virginians, tanned  
Swart as sun-dried tobacco, hacked a clearing  
And laid Fort Trent's foundations; but the French,  
A thousand strong, fell on them as they worked  
And drove them to the East. Now, once again,  
The name of Washington, like a meteor, burns  
Momently on the horizon—to be quenched  
In the blackness of defeat, when Fort Necessity  
Capitulates, and its beaten garrison  
Trails back into Virginia. This war—  
For war it is, open or undeclared—  
Demands more competent handling than the shifts  
Of mere provincials. Therefore, let General Braddock,  
A veteran (of the barrack-square) newly-landed  
At Hampton Roads, instruct them in the elements  
Of Military Art, and teach John Frenchman  
The lesson he deserves! So Braddock marches  
West from Potomac, with twelve hundred redcoats,  
All spit and polish; crosses Monangahela  
With colours flying and regimental bands  
Blaring forth martial music, to deliver  
A copy-book assault on Fort Duquesne,  
Light-heartedly neglecting to secure  
His flanks. Result: incredible confusion,  
And a panic-stricken rout! George Washington,  
Unwounded, has four shot-holes in his coat,  
And of his three full companies of rangers  
Not more than thirty left. As for poor Braddock:  
“We shall know better how to deal with them  
Next time,” he gasps. There will be no ‘next time’  
For General Braddock . . . They buried him next day  
At the halt they called Great Meadows. Over his bones  
The transport of his beaten remnant rolled  
Waggons and limbers to conceal his grave  
From desecration; while the three Northern columns  
His clerkly pen had launched marched on Niagara,  
Crown Point and Nova Scotia—to be lost  
In the drip of endless forests; and the French  
Still hold their own.



Ten thousand miles away,  
In Hindustan, the prospect looks no better.  
Here, too, Dupleix is nibbling at the fringes  
Of a nabob-ridden Empire more corrupt  
Than Westminster itself; while, nearer home,  
Dunkirk, still undismantled since the peace,  
Threatens the narrow seas. Brest, Havre and Rochefort,  
Crammed with flat-bottomed barges, only wait  
For the signal of invasion to be broken  
When de la Clue shall bring his Toulon fleet  
To join Conflans at Brest. One is reminded  
Of the 'Forty-five,' when gentlemen at White's  
Laid wagers on the wind, and the Pretender  
Lay fretting at Dunkirk; but then, at least,  
Our coasts were stoutly guarded, and the veterans  
Of Marlborough's wars still lived—while now the Government,  
Floating on seas of claret, idly drifts  
Without a helm, lulled by the siren-songs  
Of vanished glory, deaf to the only voice  
That speaks unwelcome truth: "We have provoked  
Before we can defend; we have neglected  
The inevitable results of provocation;  
In every quarter of the globe we are found  
Inferior to the French, and forced to buy  
Defence and courage, when it is our duty  
To raise a strong militia!" But Pitt's words  
Fell on besotted ears, until the storm  
Breaks in a thunder-clap: Minorca lost—  
And with it the whole trade of the Levant;  
Ticonderoga and Oswego seized  
By the French Canadians; Calcutta sacked  
In scenes of unspeakable horror; at Versailles  
Habsburg and Bourbon in devilish compact bound  
To share the spoils of Europe and divide  
The loot of decadent England! There is one man,  
And one alone, of stature to surmount  
This human tempest, equally detested  
By Court and Council. "I am heart and hand  
For Mr. Pitt," poor Newcastle protests.  
"But Mr. Pitt won't come," the King maintains  
With evident satisfaction. Mr. Pitt

Does come . . . in his own time, on his own terms;  
“I know, my lord,” he says, “that I can save  
This country, and that nobody else can!”

(2)

He was forty-eight years old when he kissed hands,  
Austere and arrogant, outwardly little changed  
From the elegant figure who, thirteen years ago,  
Vouchsafed to rove (as Mr. Shenstone put it)  
Inglorious through his groves. Such men are born  
To spiritual loneliness: in their brains  
The flame of confident purpose burns too fiercely  
For casual human intimacies to survive  
Its heat. Yet when a universal danger  
Blackens the sky, it shines forth like a beacon  
To gladden all the land, and to enkindle  
Faith, Hope, and Courage in the anxious hearts  
Of unknown millions. Such a beacon flamed  
In the King’s Speech, revealing, without mercy  
The damnable drift of unpreparedness  
And bland futility that had abased  
This most distressful realm—at every turn  
Confronted by the insolent aggressions  
Of her ancient enemy. Then came a call to arms  
And self-defence: the standing army strengthened  
By fifteen new battalions; new formations  
Of gunners and marines; a new militia  
Thirty-two thousand strong, and two new regiments  
Raised in the Highlands by Montgomery  
And Fraser. The House gasped. It was but a breath  
Since Butcher Cumberland had won Culloden,  
And Lovat, Fraser’s father, lost his head  
On Tower Hill! Pitt brushed their doubts aside:  
“I have sought for merit wherever it could be found;  
I found it in the mountains of the North  
And called it forth, from an intrepid race  
Whose valour and hardihood well nigh overturned  
The State twelve years ago. To-day their loyalty  
Is no more questionable than the eagerness

Of our American brethren to maintain  
Their vast and vulnerable frontier  
Of fifteen hundred miles. I have one object,  
Plain and unalterable: to fight the French  
Wherever we may find them—in America,  
Africa, India, Corsica, on the Rhine,  
On every ocean of the globe—relying  
Upon this House's wisdom to prefer  
More vigorous efforts to a less effectual  
And so more frugal warfare, my heart being fixed  
First on the succour and the preservation  
Of our American colonies. That is a debt  
Of honour to our kinsmen.”

In this man  
So vehement by nature, action followed  
Fast on the heels of thought. “He will come in  
As a conqueror,” poor Newcastle complained.  
Pitt came in like a whirlwind, fluttering  
The dusty files and dossiers of Whitehall  
Into a paper snowstorm; rapping out  
Questions and orders in a *feu de joie*:  
“The American establishment? Eight thousand?  
Send them eight thousand more, backed by a fleet  
To keep the St. Lawrence open and attack  
First Louisburg, then Quebec! Loudoun reports  
The colonial levies are unreliable?  
This means they're badly handled. Let each province  
Know how we value them. Beg them not to clog  
The flow of men and money simply to salve  
Their tender feelings. Tell them we are all subjects  
Of the same Crown, and serve on equal terms  
Against a common enemy! India?  
There the mere distance baulks us: all we can do  
Is help the Company to hold their stations  
By tardy reinforcements. What of Mauritius?  
A swift stroke on his bases there might cut  
Dupleix's communications! The West Indies?  
Bring up the island garrisons to full strength,  
Beginning with Jamaica! Home Defence?  
That rests on my Militia, seconded  
By one strong squadron stationed at Spithead

To watch the French in Rochefort, and another  
Shadowing the coast of Flanders. Hanover?  
Send back His Majesty's Hessians: that will please  
The Militiamen, and put them on their mettle;  
Pay Prussia a fat subsidy, and bribe  
The Danes into neutrality with a treaty  
Of trade to their advantage!" Now the moment  
Grows ripe for action: it grew even riper  
For vengeance. How could comfortable placemen  
Who had batted on corruption and intrigue  
Abide this cleansing tempest? How could a King,  
Bred in an air of flattery, tolerate  
This exigent upstart commoner who perplexes  
His wits with such long speeches? At one blow  
Pitt, with his kinsman Temple, is dismissed—  
And the Court breathes once more—but in the City  
The stocks fall with a crash, and from the boroughs  
It rains gold boxes. Even the most obtuse  
Of monarchs now can read the nation's will,  
Plain-writ on civic parchment. With reluctance  
He summons Pitt.

Eleven weeks have passed,  
Eleven precious weeks ineptly squandered  
In idleness: the urgent expeditions  
To Senegal and India countermanded;  
The force that sailed for Canada still anchored  
At Halifax, two months late—while at Calcutta  
The Black Hole claims its hideous toll of thirst  
And suffocation, and through the Caribbean  
The French sails pass unhindered. Worst of all,  
The King of Prussia's beaten at Kolin  
With crushing loss, and Hanover uncovered  
By Cumberland's retreat. To this scene, darkened  
By new threats of invasion—how that nightmare  
Hag-rides our island's slumbers!—Pitt returns  
With energies unabated, nay, refreshed  
By forced inaction. First of all, America—  
America always first! He reinforces  
Holburne, delayed at Halifax, with drafts  
Of Highlanders and Artillery; calls Boscawen  
From his watchdog's duty at Brest to intercept

The French fleet, homeward-bound from the St. Lawrence  
To cover the invaders—ten thousand strong,  
And strung out from St. Valéry to Bordeaux.  
Defence is not enough. Far better strike  
A sudden blow at Lorient or Rochefort  
And throw them off their balance. This demands  
Strong naval escort. Admiral Anson pleads  
A dearth of ships. “Why, then, you’ll have to find them:  
Otherwise I’ll impeach you, Sir.” Such language  
To a senior officer! But Anson finds enough  
To make a swoop on Rochefort. Sir John Mordaunt  
Commands the raid: his Quartermaster General  
A young officer of promise with red hair  
And a receding chin—by name, James Wolfe;  
And though the raiders fail to land in force,  
The French are rattled, and the immediate menace  
Of an invasion lifted . . . Meanwhile, at Halifax,  
Loudoun does nothing but squabble with the colonies  
Over their levies, building a few sham forts  
And planting a few cabbages—while Montcalm  
Attacks Ticonderoga. Admiral Holburne,  
Finding the French have one more ship than he,  
Sheers off from Louisburg—and when he sails,  
On Pitt’s implicit orders, to waylay them  
Upon their homeward course, is blown to pieces  
To windward of Cape Breton. So the year ends  
In mere frustration. “I fear we do not stand,”  
Pitt warns the Commons, “in the smile of Heaven.  
May a degenerate nation take some profit  
From these misfortunes: its present state is fitter  
For meditation than discourse . . .”

Suddenly

The picture changes. First, the King of Prussia  
Shatters Soubise at Rossbach. Clive, at Plassy,  
Regains Calcutta. Keppel takes Goree,  
And Hobson Guadeloupe—all the West Indies  
Falling like rotten mangoes, one by one!  
Even in America the disgruntled colonists  
Forget their grievances, swiftly retaking  
Niagara, Ticonderoga, Fort Duquesne.  
Boscawen, Marlborough’s nephew, now redeems

The shame of Louisburg; then, sweeping Eastward,  
Falls on the Toulon fleet in Lagos Bay  
And cuts them off from Brest, while Rodney's cannon  
Splinter the invasion-barges in the roads  
Of Havre to matchwood, and the British infantry,  
Unblooded since their stubborn squares were broken  
At Fontenoy, on the field of Minden wither  
The flower of France's cavalry. Such was this year  
Of wonders! Now naught but unconquered Canada  
And the immutable threat of a hostile Flanders  
Envenomed Victory's cup.

(3)

It was after Rochefort  
That, combing the welter of reputations wrecked  
In that lamentable fiasco for any fragment  
Of martial merit, Pitt had singled out  
The name of Wolfe. Now, with that lively instinct  
Which leavens his cool reason, he invites  
This young officer to meet him. There is a tale  
Told at third-hand, a generation later,  
How Pitt was staggered by the gasconades  
Of this fragile fire-eater; but even so  
He must have liked him—for within a month  
Wolfe sails for Halifax, under his personal orders  
To take Quebec: a formidable task  
For an ailing, nervous man of thirty-two,  
Inferior in age and social standing  
To his own Brigadiers, and handicapped  
By an unfriendly staff! One friend he had:  
The new admiral, Charles Saunders, a sound sailor,  
Who groped his deft way through the changeable channels  
Of the St. Lawrence—a stream more treacherous  
Than its own Indians. It was sheer devilry,  
Canadian pilots said, that any foreigner  
Could have brought ships of the line so far upstream  
Without a scratch. There, for three idle months,  
James Wolfe lay gazing at Quebec, a citadel  
By nature made impregnable: his ranks

Thinned by desertion and disease, himself  
Coughing his lungs out in a hectic fever,  
The butt of his subordinates, the scorn  
Of his own baffled mind. Landings were made  
And landed troops withdrawn with heavy casualties  
From the fire of floating batteries and snipers  
Hidden in the forest. Rations were running short.  
The days, too, shortened: in the maple-woods  
That bordered the St. Lawrence soon would flare  
A crimson flag of warning—soon the ice  
Would clamp his transports in its iron fetters,  
Cutting off reinforcement or relief.  
It was surely now or never . . . but Wolfe's sick mind,  
Sapped by his wasting body, momentarily  
Lost faith in its own powers; and in an agony  
Of doubt, and fear of imminent death, he begged  
His jealous Brigadiers to frame a plan  
That might bring Montcalm to action. It is strange  
How often genius finds an inspiration  
In violent disagreement. As Wolfe read  
This laboured product of pedestrian minds,  
His own caught fire—and instantly he saw,  
By the fierce light of scorn made crystal-clear,  
The master-plan, the inevitable design,  
Which, under clouds of sickness, had been woven  
Deep in his anxious thoughts—and, from that moment,  
Doubt vanished. "I know well you cannot cure me,"  
He told his surgeon, "but if you can patch me up  
To do my duty for the next few days,  
I shall be quite content." With a sad prescience  
He makes his will (it is witnessed by Barré  
And Bell, his aides-de-camp): a few small legacies  
To friends and servants, and the pitiful residue  
"To my dear mother." Then, a last dispatch  
To Pitt in England. It is a sober document,  
Void of the old *panache*, and gives no details  
Of the new 'desperate plan.' Secrecy, secrecy . . .  
That is its mainspring. Not even to his generals  
Will he breathe a word of it; but on the morrow  
The watchmen in the citadel are perplexed,  
No less than they, to see the English ships

Moved upstream through the narrows, towing boats  
And barges. Beyond doubt the Frenchmen judged it  
A prelude to new landings north of the city,  
Or an attempt to cut their waterline  
With Montreal. Not till the very eve  
Of battle were his jealous Brigadiers  
Made privy to his secret. Junior officers  
And rank and file knew nothing till they found themselves  
Afloat . . .

It was a cool September night,  
Moonless and overcast. At half-past one  
A lantern blinked from the main-topmast shrouds  
Of Saunders' ship, the *Sutherland*. Then the boats  
Cast off in absolute silence, and lay hidden  
Between her and the shore. At half-past two  
A second light appeared. The *Sutherland's* long-boat,  
With Wolfe aboard her, swung into the stream  
That washed the southern bank. It was a passage  
Tranquil and soundless, with no splash of oars,  
For a three-knot current and a following breeze  
Assured their course. There is another story—  
Such names breed legends—that, as the leading boat  
Drifted downstream, a voice, no man knows whose,  
Murmured Gray's *Elegy*; and, when it fell to silence,  
Wolfe whispered: "I would rather have written that poem  
Than take Quebec to-morrow." All we can say  
For sure is this: that, when his brother-officers  
Divided his belongings, there was found  
A volume of Gray's *Poems*, much bethumbed  
And underscored—one line prophetically:  
*The paths of Glory lead but to the Grave.*  
Perhaps he guessed . . . One thing at least is certain:  
That, as they floated past, a British sloop,  
Forewarned by two deserters of a French convoy  
Likely to pass that night, levelled her guns  
And would have opened fire and given the alarm  
But that they rowed alongside, thus averting  
Disaster by a hairsbreadth. A little later,  
A French post on Point Sillery snapped out  
Its challenge: *Qui va là?*

*France!*



*A quel regiment?*

*A la Reine!* (It was a lucky guess!)

*Pourquoi*

*Est-ce que vous ne parlez pas plus haut?*

*Tais-toi*

*Pour l'amour de Dieu! Nous serions entendus!*

And the sentry let them pass . . .

At half-past four

They ran aground in Foulon Cove. The general  
Himself leapt first ashore. There was less need  
For silence now: the nervous batteries  
Of the fort on *Pointe des Pères* were thundering  
An aimless cannonade. Above the landing-place,  
Mysterious in the grey of dawn, arose  
Tremendous cliffs, shagged with dense undergrowth,  
Through which one winding gully gave faint promise  
Of a precarious foothold. Wolfe himself  
Probed this forbidding track. "I doubt," he said,  
"If we can possibly get up; but we must try."  
And up they scrambled: first a forlorn hope  
Of two dozen volunteers, and then two hundred  
Light infantry. Luckily they found the crest  
Fringed with a wood that gave the climbers cover  
While they regained their breath, re-formed their ranks.  
Another challenge from a sentry, answered  
Again in muttered French, gave them a moment  
To fix their bayonets. Then on they went  
With a hoarse cheer which told their friends below  
That the heights were firmly held. Within an hour  
Five hundred men had scaled them; in another  
A thousand more; and, as the ships dropped down  
St. Lawrence one by one, the cove of Foulon  
Was crammed with landing barges, hurriedly  
Off-loading shot and cannon to be hauled  
Over the wheel-churned beach, and then man-handled  
Up the sheer precipices to the open plain  
West of Quebec, while from the southern shore,  
Under the covering fire of Saunders' guns,  
Twelve hundred infantry were ferried over  
From Goreham's Point to Foulon Cove. By sunrise  
The whole force had been landed: six battalions

Of British regulars, and in reserve  
Two more of Royal Americans: in all  
Forty-eight hundred men . . . Too few, indeed,  
To hold both front and flanks—so Wolfe was forced  
To spin them out two-deep (a flagrant breach  
Of martial usage!) trusting to atone  
For lack of numbers by superior discipline  
And accuracy of aim.

These were his orders:

“Stand firm at all costs. Let the enemy  
Do all the attacking. Not a single shot  
To be fired until they come within forty paces:  
Then let them have it!” It was pretty hard  
To make no reply when snipers and skirmishers  
Enfiladed the British line from a wood on their left:  
Yet no shot was fired. When men in the front line fell,  
The gaps were instantly filled from the second rank.  
Wolfe himself was hit in the wrist: he merely smiled  
And bound up the gash with a handkerchief—more concerned,  
As it seemed, for his brand-new uniform. (One is reminded  
Of Nelson insisting on wearing his orders) Once more  
He was wounded—this time in the groin—and limped away  
To the point he had chosen, in front of the Twenty-eighth  
And the Louisburg Grenadiers. It was ten o’clock  
When Montcalm, on his great black stallion, splendidly sheathed  
In a shining cuirass of steel, gave his order: Advance!  
And the French, with a shout, moved forward. Observers say  
That Wolfe’s face, as he saw them, glowed with a joy and radiance  
Beyond description. They made an imposing sight  
The white uniforms of their line-regiments mingled  
With the blue of the Royal Roussillon and iron-grey  
Of the local levies. On they came, at a double;  
Then slowed down—as though puzzled to see the British standing  
Stock-still, with shouldered arms. At three hundred paces  
Some few Canadians nervously opened fire,  
Then threw themselves down on the ground to reload, thus upsetting  
The general alignment; while others, with little stomach  
For a frontal attack, slunk off to the flanks to fall in  
With the skirmishers, leaving a ragged gap to be filled.  
The well-trained whitecoats closed it; but now the attack  
Had lost cohesion. A desultory crackle of musketry

Broke out from their foremost rank. Again and again  
They halted and fired without orders, straggling on  
A few score yards at a time—until they had come  
Within forty paces . . . Then, from the British ranks,  
Came a shattering double volley—so nicely timed  
That the sounds of two thousand musket-shots merged in one  
Tremendous detonation. Then two more volleys  
At point-blank range . . . The Languedoc Regiment wavered:  
They broke—as the Forty-Seventh went in with the bayonet,  
The Highlanders with the claymore. Only the Blues  
Of the Royal Roussillon stood up to that torrent of steel.  
Then they, too, cracked and fled. It was only ten minutes  
Since the British first opened fire . . . and the battle was won!  
But Wolfe fell, mortally wounded. They carried him through  
To the rear, where he lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily,  
With a musket-shot in the lung. When they told him the French  
Were running, he gasped one order: “Tell Colonel Burton  
To cut them off from the bridge over Charles’s River.”  
Then he turned on his side and said: “Now I die content.”  
He was thirty-two years old . . . Let us not forget  
How this ailing Englishman, with British arms  
And British lives, once saved America  
For the Americans . . .

(4)

The news of Quebec reached London  
In mid-October. Within a month her belfries  
Clanged for a great sea-victory that dispelled  
The last threat of invasion—when Admiral Hawke  
Stooped like a peregrine on the Breton coast;  
When, in a nightlong hurricane that drowned  
The din of battle, the engrappled fleets  
Of France and England poured through the narrow throat  
Of Quiberon, and stormy daylight saw  
The French burnt-out or broken. Little wonder  
The Bourbons longed for peace, and lesser Englishmen  
Were eager to placate them! Pitt, like a rock,  
Stood in appeasement’s path, the more determined  
To keep soft, mischievous hands from bartering

His hard-won conquests. "Some are for keeping Canada,"  
He taunted them, "some Guadeloupe. Who will tell me  
Which I shall be hanged for ceding? The West Indies  
Nourish us with their produce? Ay, but America  
Buys what we manufacture. I affirm  
The importance of America—not merely  
As a market of consumption and supply,  
But as fountain of our fealty, nerve of our strength,  
Nursery and basis of our naval power.  
Some time ago I should have been content  
To bring France to her knees: now I'll not rest  
Till I've put her on her back! We are confronted  
By a second enemy. These defeats have driven her  
Into the arms of Spain, who brazenly  
Supports her wounded sister, covers her trade,  
Aids and abets her in the worst kind of war—  
War undeclared. It is time this country realized  
That France is Spain, Spain France: we are at odds  
With the whole House of Bourbon—but remember:  
For open war with Spain we are prepared,  
And she is not. If, Sir, this House prefers  
An untimely, a humiliating peace,  
I will lay down the vast and dangerous load  
That bows my shoulders: I will go on no longer.  
But, being responsible, I will direct;  
And for whatever I do not direct  
I will not be responsible."

His challenge

Fell on a hostile House. The pampered placemen  
Were sick of his heroics and of a war  
That touched their purses. Pitt was no easy bedfellow  
For time-servers or sluggards. His very virtues  
Stuck in the throats of meaner men. The Court—  
His 'good old King' was dead—detested him  
As an unbearable upstart, an embodiment  
Of all they feared and hated most: Democracy.  
*Single, imperious, proud, enthusiastick,*  
*Impetuous . . .* Ay, and arrogant, too. His arrogance  
Was unforgiveable. It had made enemies  
Of his old friends and kinsmen. Grenville, Lyttelton—  
The famous 'cousinhood' who, in the prime

Of his cometary magnificence had soared  
Like a fiery tail behind him—were now shed  
And sunk in jealous darkness, while his star  
Blazed at the zenith. It was mortifying  
For statesmen who had ruled the realm to brook  
His fierce impatience: “Fewer words, my lord;  
Your words have long lost weight with me!”—for officers  
Nursed in routine’s procedure to keep pace  
With his swift decisions: “Impossible? Impossible?  
I walk on impossibilities!” as he brandished  
The crutch that eased his gout—for humbler men  
Who questioned his least whim to bear the sting  
Of withering irony, or the fire that flashed  
From those commanding eyes. Now, when he threw  
This haughty gage, coupling a war with Spain  
And a personal ultimatum, in their faces,  
They picked it up with glee, knowing full well  
With what sweet persuasiveness the word of Peace  
Flatters war-wearied ears. The King, no less,  
Snatched at this heaven-sent chance to rid himself  
Of this overbearing commoner . . . and Pitt fell,  
Gloriously as Lucifer!

They offered him—

Perhaps to salve his pride, perhaps to wound it—  
The Governorship of Canada: odd employment  
For one whose lightest words were gravely pondered  
In the chanceries of all Europe! He declined it  
With ironical humility. (Courtiers said  
He bowed so low to the King that his bony nose  
Could be seen between his breeches). Then they tempted him,  
The incorruptible commoner, with the bait  
Of a pension, and a peerage for his wife.  
Surprisingly, he took it—he who had thrown  
Such baubles to his comrades with the contempt  
Their vanity deserved. It showed a strain  
Of inexplicable weakness, and his enemies  
Were quick to find his principles dishonoured  
By such vain honours—his bewildered friends  
To see their idol fallen. One suspects  
That the bearing of that ‘vast and dangerous load’  
Had over-reached his powers, already sapped

By paroxysms of pain; that, when the tension  
Was once relaxed, his weary mind and body  
Demanded instant rest. So Mr. Pitt  
And the Lady Chatham gracefully retire  
To their country seat in Somerset.

(5)

Burton Pynsent

Was a sheer gift of fortune: the legacy  
Of an obscure Somersetshire baronet  
To the Saviour of his Country. No distraction  
Could have been more opportune. It carried back  
Pitt's mind to those rich days of youthful promise,  
Far sweeter than fulfilment, when George Lyttelton  
And he had planned their classical rotunda  
In Hagley Park, and solemnly discussed  
The Philosophy of Landscape at the Leasowes  
With Mr. Shenstone. Burton Pynsent stood  
On a high, semicircular plateau, looking North  
Over the Sedgemoor flats, where Alfred's Athelny  
Rose from a sea of land, to the dim firth  
Of Severn and the cloudy hills of Wales:  
A soft and somnolent prospect, more conducive  
To dreams of past achievement than to action.  
Yet, even here, the inveterate energy  
That had shaped an Empire calls Pitt to remould  
His miniature kingdom. He must needs demolish  
His benefactor's mansion, and rebuild  
The left wing for a library. Lady Chatham  
Must have her bird-room; Capability Brown,  
Shenstone's successor in the hierarchy  
Of Landscape, plant new avenues and devise  
New vistas—such as would fill poor Lyttelton  
(His friend, alas, no longer) with despair.  
Cypress and Cedar of Lebanon by the thousand  
Must mark or shade his walks; deep-sunken roads,  
Delved at incalculable cost, insure  
A lordly privacy; stables and cowsheds,  
Graced with Corinthian pilasters, house

Horses and herds of pedigree. The expense  
Might beggar Cræsus—but what does money mean  
To one who in the exigences of war  
Has thought in millions? The Georgian Cincinnatus  
Enjoys this pastoral holiday, engrossed  
In a more luxurious rusticity  
Than his rude exemplar, savouring the delights  
Of haymaking and coursing in the midst  
Of an adoring family, immersed  
In Somerset's Lethe. . . .

(6)

Through those quiet airs  
There runs a disquieting whisper: America—  
His beloved America! Things are going wrong:  
George Grenville grubbing up every root of commerce  
And planting taxes. His latest imposition  
Is a Stamp Tax, burdening every legal document  
With a petty charge. The moment is ill-timed;  
For America is touchy, and embarrassed  
By an Indian revolt. George Grenville's officers  
Are seized, and their stamps burnt. Next, the Assemblies  
Of Massachusetts and New York submit  
A reasoned protest to the Privy Council,  
Which is duly pigeon-holed. Then a General Congress,  
While acknowledging allegiance and submission  
To the British Crown and Parliament, asserts,  
With admirable propriety, its right  
To levy its own taxes. In the meantime  
American barristers refuse to plead  
In cases that involve stamped instruments,  
And American merchants solemnly engage  
To buy no goods from England. At a glance  
Pitt sees the fatal drift. Wincing with pain  
And swathed in flannels, he drags himself to town  
To urge the Act's repeal in a debate  
On the King's Speech:

“Sir, I cannot be silent

On a question that may mortally wound three millions

Of brave and virtuous subjects. In my opinion  
This kingdom has no power to lay a tax  
On men as much entitled as ourselves  
To human rights and the particular privileges  
Of Englishmen. These men are England's sons,  
Not England's bastards! As subjects, they can claim  
The common right of being represented  
In Parliament. Not being represented,  
They are not bound to pay a single farthing  
Without consent. The Commons of America,  
By their Assemblies, have enjoyed the right  
Of granting their own money: they had been slaves  
If they had not enjoyed it. But all taxes  
Granted to the Crown are voluntary gifts:  
We give what is our own; we cannot give  
The property of others. If the House  
Suffer this Stamp Act to remain in force,  
France will gain more of us by our own colonies  
Than if, by force of arms, she had been triumphant  
In the late war."

A querulous Grenville makes  
The lamest of apologies, taking cover  
Behind the Crown's prerogative, and recounting  
His own innumerable generousities  
To the ungrateful colonies. He deploras  
America's obstinacy, and charges Pitt  
With fostering sedition.

Instantly  
Pitt's on his gouty feet again ("Order! Order!"  
No member may speak twice in one debate.)  
But, as he hesitates, St. Stephen's Chapel  
Rings with another cry: "Go on! Go on!"  
And he goes on . . . so hotly that he forgets  
Even to address the Chair! "Gentlemen . . . Sir,  
The House has heard me charged with giving birth  
To sedition in America. I regret to hear  
Liberty of speech imputed as a crime  
In this tribunal. It is a liberty  
I mean to exercise. Next we are told  
That America is obstinate—nay, that America  
Is almost in open rebellion. I rejoice



That America has resisted. I come not here  
Armed at all points with precedents—the statute-book  
Doubled down in dog’s-ears—to defend the cause  
Of Liberty! For the defence of Liberty  
Upon a general principle, I stand firm,  
And dare meet any man! The gentleman boasts  
Of his bounties to America. Are not his bounties  
Intended for the benefit of this kingdom?  
(If he can’t understand the difference  
Between internal and external taxes,  
I cannot help him.) He asks: “When were the colonies  
Emancipated?” I desire to know  
When they were slaves. Our profits by their commerce  
Are two million pounds a year. This is the fund  
That carried us to victory: this is the price  
They have paid for our protection. Yet he boasts  
He has brought a peppercorn to the exchequer  
Against the loss of millions! Much has been said  
About American strength. In a good cause,  
On a sound bottom, I doubt not we could crush  
America to atoms—but in this cause  
Success is hazardous. If America fell,  
She would fall like a strong man—she would embrace  
The pillars of the state and, falling, wreck  
The constitution. Is this your boasted peace:  
To sheathe the sword of victory not in its scabbard  
But in the bowels of your American brethren?  
Will you quarrel with yourselves, when the whole House  
Of Bourbon stands against you? It is true  
That, in all things, the Americans have not acted  
With prudence and temper. But they have been wronged;  
They have been driven to madness by injustice.  
Rather let prudence and temper be displayed  
On our side first! It is my firm opinion  
That this lamentable tax should be repealed  
Totally, absolutely, and immediately.”  
Twice more, with dwindling bodily strength, he fought  
The selfsame battle—and within a month  
The Stamp Act is repealed. America,  
More generous than her enemies, celebrates  
Her victory without rancour. In the South

Charleston flares up in fireworks; at New York  
An ox is roasted in the street, and banners  
Bearing the legend “Pitt, George and Liberty!”  
Carried in triumph.

(7)

Pitt would have been shocked  
At his arbitrary precedence; but by now  
He had shot his bolt: the cumulative strains  
Of unremitting war had overtaxed  
Even that titanic spirit; and though the King  
Recalls him—since no lesser reputation  
Can prop his selfish purpose—the Earl of Chatham  
Is but a shadow cast by the setting sun  
Of the Great Commoner’s fame. That shadow soon  
A darker cloud obscures. It is a changeling  
Who dreams at Burton Pynsent: the falcon eyes  
No longer bright; the brooding mind oppressed  
By months of utter nescience; the ancient pride  
Humbled by mountainous debts. And while his name  
Shelters their mischiefs, Chatham’s Ministry—  
“That tessellated pavement,” as Burke calls it,  
“Of Patriots and Courtiers, treacherous Friends  
And open Enemies.”—undermine the fabric  
Pitt’s wisdom built. George Grenville and the King  
Burn for revenge—and in the featherpate  
Of Townshend find an instrument to bring  
America to heel, with a sly series  
Of irritating pin-pricks: customs-duties  
To take the place of taxes; the forced billeting  
Of British soldiers—and not only British  
But Hanoverian. (“Why should a foreign garrison  
Be needed, now that Canada is ours?  
Why, above all, in Boston? Do they think  
We should be intimidated?”) Jeering crowds  
Pester the innocent redcoats; shots are fired,  
Civilians wounded. The Assembly of Massachusetts  
Refuses to find billets for any garrison  
Within the town: the British Government

Rakes up an obsolete statute that compels  
The deportation of political prisoners  
For trial in England. Townshend's custom-duties  
Prove useless and are dropped—save only one,  
A trivial duty on tea. This is retained  
As a matter of principle. Americans, too,  
Are interested in principles: so three cargoes  
Of the East India Company's choice Bohea  
Are soused in Boston harbour. As a penalty  
The port is closed; the charter of Massachusetts  
Suspended—and then remodelled in such a manner  
As gives the Crown control. This is the end  
Of bickering: now these obstinate colonials  
Shall taste coercion . . .

As the ominous sky  
Blackened above New England, that other cloud  
Of nescience which had lowered on Chatham's mind  
Suddenly lifted, and his eyes beheld  
The gathering human tempest. Within a week  
He is jolted up to London to consult  
That wise American, Franklin. His liveried servants  
And crested chariot are observed outside  
The Doctor's lodgings in Craven Street. Franklin listens  
To four hours of magnificent monologue. Each of these men,  
So great in their several ways, is quick to see  
The other's greatness: Chatham recognizes  
The protest of the Continental Congress  
As 'decent, manly, and properly expressed':  
Franklin, with no less courtesy, affirms  
Its intrinsic loyalty. Both are conciliatory;  
Yet neither (and this is strange) appears to realize  
That a wider breach than the Atlantic separates  
America and England; so Chatham presents  
A Provisional Act for the Immediate Settlement  
Of the Troubles in America. Their lordships  
Refuse it a first reading, and Sandwich suggests  
That Franklin has had a hand in it. Chatham rises  
In a blaze of anger:

“I am not much astonished  
That men who scoff at Liberty should detest  
Others who prize it. The conduct of this Government

Is one long tale of weakness, despotism,  
Temerity, ignorance, negligence, futility,  
Servility, incapacity and corruption!”

The flame burns out . . . Now, thickened by the smoke  
Of that conflagration, the old cloud descends  
On its exhausted embers. Two years must pass  
Before that cloud be lifted: two tragic years  
Of needless civil warfare. Lexington,  
Bunker’s Hill, Trenton and Ticonderoga—  
These are the names that mark the decadence  
Of British arms, the utter bankruptcy  
Of British statecraft! When he wakes again,  
He knows it is too late. He sees himself,  
A frail and aged man, amid the ruins  
Of the proud Empire he alone had built:  
America, darling of his hopes, allied  
With France, the inveterate enemy, from whose toils  
His will had saved her. With prophetic words  
And faltering voice he pleads for peace;

“My lords,

If this struggle be not ended before France  
Confirms this treaty, then England will be ended.  
You talk of forces gathering to disperse  
The rebels: I might as easily talk myself  
Of driving them before me with this crutch!  
If you conquer them—what then? You cannot make them  
Respect you. You have said: “Lay down your arms!”  
America returns the Spartan answer:  
“Come, take!” You cannot take. We are the aggressors:  
We have invaded them, even as the Great Armada  
Invaded England. If I were an American,  
As I am English, while a foreign troop  
Was landed in my country, I would never  
Lay down my arms! No . . . Never—never—*never!*”  
Five times he crawled to Westminster to plead  
For that lost cause of peace with the Americans,  
Of war with France and Spain. When last he rose  
Within the Painted Chamber, he stood propped  
On either side, by William Pitt, his son,  
And Mahon, his son-in-law: an antic shape  
Swathed in black flannel; his great aquiline nose

And flashing eyes were all that could be seen  
Beneath his bushy wig. He raised himself  
Painfully to his feet. The whole House rose  
In tribute to his majesty. Then he lifted  
The hand from off his crutch, and spoke so feebly  
As hardly to be heard:

“I thank God,” he said,  
“I have been enabled to come here this day  
To perform my duty. I am old, infirm;  
I have one foot—more than one foot—in the grave,  
And have risen from my bed but to stand up  
In the cause of my country. My lords, His Majesty  
Succeeded to an Empire in extent  
As great as in its reputation  
Unsullied. Shall we sully that repute  
By an ignominious surrender of our rights  
And fairest provinces? Shall this great kingdom,  
That has survived the Danish depredations,  
The Scottish inroads, and the Norman conquest,  
Fall prostrate now before the House of Bourbon?  
Shall a people that only fifteen years ago  
Was the terror of the world, now stoop so low  
As to tell its ancient and inveterate enemy:  
“Take all we have—but give us peace!”? I say  
That any state is better than despair.  
If we must fall, then let us fall like men.”  
He ceased—and with the last inaudible word  
Sank backward, helplessly, into the arms  
Of Mahon and William. A more terrible silence  
Fell as they carried his insensate frame  
Forth from that august chamber which had echoed  
So often with the impassioned eloquence  
Of that tremendous voice which never more  
Would sway the will and steel the wavering faith  
Of his beloved land. His living eyes  
Saw not the loss of all his pride had won,  
Nor that far prouder England that would rise  
To greater glories builded by his son.

## XXXII

### Interlude

BIRTH OF A MONSTER      A.D. 1776

Over this moonstruck world the tidal flow  
Of warring dynasties swirls to and fro,  
While underneath the fury and the sound  
Of tumult stirs a portent more profound  
Than causes lost or won: a monstrous birth  
Risen from Time's teeming womb to rack the earth  
In throes more fateful than the rise or fall  
Of envious empires—destined to enthrall  
Victor no less than vanquished, and to bind  
In equal servitude all humankind!  
In Matthew Boulton's foundry at Soho,  
Where sweltering puddlers tend the lava-flow  
Of molten ores, and clanging hammers beat  
On airs that faint and quaver with fierce heat,  
The new-born monster stands: an uncouth mass  
Of cold insensate metal—iron and brass  
Shaped by the cunning of Man's eager brain  
And shrewd inventive fingers to contain  
The marriage of discordant elements,  
Water and Fire, and from unthrottled vents  
Unloose their mightier offspring: the supreme  
Slave of Man's will, his new-tamed genie, Steam.  
Master or slave? The question well might flout  
Less confident minds! Its makers have no doubt  
That, in one leap, the feet of patient Man  
Have scaled a summit whence his eyes may scan  
Realms of unbounded conquest fading far  
Beyond imagination. A new star  
Burns over England to proclaim the hour  
Of a new dispensation. Power . . . Power!  
The plunging piston sinks, and the vast beam  
Tilts to its task as in the hiss of steam

The wheel turns on its axis. We behold  
A calculable energy, controlled  
To the last ounce of pressure. Motive force  
Is measured with precision. (A draught horse  
Exerts a strength—so Mr. Watt has reckoned—  
Can raise five hundredweight in every second  
Twelve inches from the ground; therefore we call  
Our unit Horse-power.) Gone, for good and all,  
Are those hard days when industry was bound  
To seek the hills where water could be found  
And turn machinery from the running leat!  
That source of power's completely out of date,  
Now there's no inch of England that need lack  
The heartening vista of a chimney-stack  
Whose pillared smoke or flame shall lead a band  
Of trustful pilgrims to a promised land  
Where energy no longer need be rated  
In terms of toil. It has been calculated  
That Mr. Watt's steam-engine supersedes  
The bulk of manual labour: all it needs  
Is fuel, lubrication, and an eye  
To keep a watch when pressure runs too high  
Or bearings stiffen. For the rest, it works  
Untended; and your engine neither shirks  
(Like indolent mankind) the weightier task,  
Nor tires with toil. None but a fool could ask  
What other crafts shall claim the idle hands  
Steam-power displaces, when in countless lands,  
Famished by warfare, naked multitudes  
Stand yearning for the innumerable goods  
Our frames and spindles furnish. There's no room  
In this economy for the cottage loom  
Where homespun fleece is woven on the fells  
By rustic fingers. Now the factory-bells  
With harsh, impatient clamour summon all—  
Man, wife and child—to swell the carnival  
Of dumb, inhuman labour that shall turn  
Green fields into foul cities. All can earn  
Some kind of pittance from the spilth of gold  
That crams our bursting pockets. None's too old,  
Too weak, too young: mere children in their teens

And shaky crones can tend our new machines.  
The spinning-jenny and the patent mule  
Make better scholars than the village school.  
Since Man (the Scriptures tell) is born to toil  
And trouble, it were sacrilege to spoil  
Creation's plan. So surely God will bless  
Child-labour. Incidentally, it costs less,  
And spares our manufacturers the means  
To build new factories—and still more machines!  
There's no skilled craft plied by a human hand  
But steel and steam can mimic and expand  
A hundredfold. Our engines gape for food  
To stoke their fires: here, also, God is good.  
Was it not Providence that underspread  
The living green of England with the dead  
Bones of primeval forests, and compressed  
Their ooze to coal? Was it mere chance that laced  
Those buried coal-beds with the limey silt  
Of vanished seas, and on their margins spilt  
Grains of volcanic iron-ore to blend  
In the red furnace? There shall be no end  
To these God-given benefits until  
The coal-seams dwindle. Then—go deeper still!  
Engines shall sink new shafts, and engines lift  
From sunken galleries the blear-eyed shift;  
Engines shall pump the oozy bilge that seeps  
Through fissured rock to swamp those sunless deeps  
No glimpse of day has lighted since the time  
When giant lizards foundered in black slime.  
What matter that a free and forthright race  
Toil sixteen hours a day at the coal-face  
For fourteen pence? The modern troglodyte,  
Damned, for our profit, to perpetual night,  
Must learn that mills and factories overhead  
Need engines—and those engines must be fed;  
That life, in mill and factory, will be found  
No sweeter than the miner's underground;  
For unskilled labour's even more poorly paid,  
And competition is the salt of trade.  
How can we flood the world with English ware,  
If ignorant factory-hands and miners dare



To calculate, to argue, or to think?  
Time presses. Give the working-classes drink  
To stive their empty stomachs. Gin will keep  
Reason benumbed—and gin, thank God, is cheap!  
We've other problems knocking at our door:  
To house—and where to house—the Labouring Poor.  
But these are easy; any hutch will do  
For folk whose hours of leisure should be few—  
(Just long enough to booze and breed and sleep,  
Then limp back to the mill like foot-rot sheep)  
And any building-site will suit us well  
So long as they can hear the Factory Bell  
Clang through their dreams. Build walls of noggin-brick—  
(But take good care that these be not too thick,  
For bricks cost money!) and to cure the lack  
Of warmth in Winter, build them back to back:  
Warped doors and broken windows will admit  
Sufficient air at night to keep men fit  
For labour on the morrow. Water-mains  
Are needless luxuries, no less than drains:  
So, in each noisome courtyard, sink a pump—  
And if the cesspit leaks into the sump  
Of surface water that their children drink,  
So much the worse for them! We cannot think  
Of everything. Enough that we can give  
Wages to hungry millions. How they live  
Or how they die is no concern of ours—  
Provided they put in sufficient hours  
To keep the fly-wheels spinning, and the flow  
Of steam-power so profuse that we can show  
In our shop-windows wares to tempt the eyes  
Of needier nations: piece-work merchandise  
From Manchester and Bolton; coals from Shields;  
Woollens from Bradford; silks from Spitalfields;  
Steel from our Sheffield forges to lay low  
Primeval forests, and to arm the plough;  
Cannon and coulter, mattock and grenade;  
Brummagem pinchbeck for the trinket-trade—  
The beads we cast for rosaries serve as well  
For barter with the naked infidel,  
And any glittering metal that we mix

Will make an idol—or a crucifix!  
Thus, from our workshops, we supply the need  
Of every culture, climate, race or creed—  
Except, of course, our own: for everywhere  
In Britain meat is scarce and bread grows dear.  
But that's their fault. How can the common field,  
That barely fed a backward hamlet, yield  
Grist for our teeming cities? Times have changed:  
Those heath-fed geese and cattle, that once ranged  
The village waste, have been the basic source  
Of rural idleness, and—what's far worse—  
Of stiff-necked independence. The new State  
Decrees that grazing-rights are out of date,  
Nay, even immoral! Nothing will avail  
But well-planned husbandry on a larger scale.  
Therefore enclose the commons, and proclaim  
The landlord's right to shoot or snare all game;  
Pull down the squatter's hovels, and condemn  
The idle cottager to work or clem!  
Such is the Law of Nature. Large estates  
May need less labour. But our factory-gates  
Stand open. The unwanted overplus  
Should lay the blame on Adam—not on us!  
So, from the windy hills and quiet vales  
Of this green isle, a sad procession trails  
Like waters of the desert that are spent  
In thirsty sands: uprooted, ill-content,  
Hungry, bewildered—never more to hear  
The lark at dawn, or sniff the morning air  
Fragrant with meadow-sweet or mountain thyme,  
Or honeyed wafts of hawthorn in the prime  
Of June, when cuckoos call and landrails creak  
Lost in lush mowing-grass; no more to slake  
Midsummer's drought in limpid brooks that run  
Ambered with peat and sparkle in the sun!  
The sun shines rarely now, with sickly beams  
Halo'd in soot and sulphur; the clear streams  
Of Mersey, Aire and Irwell, now run thick  
With ordure through straight culverts of slimed brick:  
Waters of Babylon . . . but no willows lean  
Beside those banks forlorn; no blade of green

Unwithered can survive the searing breath  
Blown from the furnace, or the silt of death  
Fallen from the mournful sky that with a pall  
Of acrid dust and carbon smothers all.  
No more through magic meadows shall the feet  
Of children stray: their playground is the street,  
And idleness breeds vice. A child of five  
Can earn enough at least to keep alive.  
No more shall aged men whose days of toil  
Seemed ended pore on the sweet-smelling soil  
Of homely garden-plots, or watch their seed  
Break into leaf: wage-earners have no need  
Of gardens when the tommy-shops supply  
Far more stale produce than their wage can buy.  
Seed-time and harvest? Each is but a name  
In streets where every season smells the same,  
And flowers are useless. You should know, my friend,  
The rose has never paid a dividend.  
So, in soft Midland vales, where surface coal  
Lies thick, and on the shelving plains that roll  
Seaward from Pennine sheepwalks, there arose  
Prisons of hope abandoned: rows on rows  
Of courts and houses, crowding street on street,  
Whose cobbled causeways echoed with clog'd feet;  
Cities whose only gods were steel and steam,  
The nightmare terrors of a drunkard's dream,  
By Greed begotten in the womb of Haste,  
That, like slow cancers, gnawed into a waste  
Of slag and cinder—cities that were doomed  
To suffocate in denser smoke than plumed  
The falling towers of Sodom when the rain  
Of fire consumed the Cities of the Plain.  
And where their phallic smokestacks fouled the sky  
Burned those unholy fires that never die:  
Fierce furnace-throats—not only fed with coals,  
But with the agonies of bewildered souls  
And aching limbs, damped with the tears and sweat  
Of those who, even in sleep, could not forget  
The bondage of the foundry, mine or mill,  
And woke to hear the pitiless siren shrill  
As monster Moloch from his iron throne

Howled for his toll of human blood and bone,  
And skinflint Mammon, with a leery grin,  
Rubb'd his thin hands and checked the stragglers in:  
Workers of England, mistress of the earth:  
A merry England that has lost her mirth.  
Ah, would that the Almighty had seen fit  
To grant mankind the sense to match their wit!

### XXXIII

ON WINDMILL DOWN      A.D. 1789

*The scene is open downland in South Hampshire. Neither the Enclosures, which have already alienated a good deal of common land in this county, nor Mr Watt's steam-engine have made much difference to the landscape of the pleasant countryside which lies between the chalk of the South Downs and the marls of the Forest of Bere. It is a morning of late August in the year 1789, a day of blue and white, with a warm breeze stirring the heads of cumulus cloud that drift in from sea. On Windmill Hill a cricket match is in progress—the last of the season, and a large crowd of rustic folk, clad in smock-frocks or gaberdines, encircles the field of play on which the local side are bringing their visitors' first innings to an untimely close. On the dry turf, immediately behind the wickets, a middle-aged labourer, evidently crippled with rheumatism, leans on a blackthorn stick and watches every ball that is bowled with an expert intentness. A younger man, wearing his hair in a pigtail and carrying a bundle of dunnage over his shoulder, comes panting up the slope and accosts him.*

SAILOR:

Can you tell me the name of yon village, master?

LABOURER:

Surelye:

I'd ought to, for 'tis my native. Only to think

There be anyone don't know Hambledon! Mayhap you're a foreigner?

SAILOR:

A foreigner? *Me?*

LABOURER:

Nay, 'tis only our Hampshire fashion

Of speaking of upalong folk. Bi'st come from the sea?

SAILOR:

Ay, landed last night from the frigate *Boreas*,

Captain Nelson, at Portsmouth. Now I'm homeward-bound

On a No'therly course. The navy has no more use for me:  
They're paying men off at Spithead a hundred a day  
And laying-up ships by the score.

LABOURER:

There can't be no call  
For you chaps now we're all at peace.

SAILOR:

*(Indignantly)* Ay, that's what they said  
Before the last war broke out—and they'll say it again  
When the next war's ended. But what is a man to do  
Who's been bred to the sea? Go sweat in a factory? Not me!  
Turn back to the land, like my dad? You can't learn a new trade  
At my time of life. I'm an able-bodied seaman,  
And good for naught else. You'll see a sight more like me  
Set adrift before they've finished.

LABOURER:

If you aim to go North  
You'd ought to be making for Alton. How come you to stray  
So far from the turnpike?

SAILOR:

I'll tell thee straight: when I sighted  
All you folk on the hills, I reckoned it must be a prize-fight,  
Or a fairing or some such frolic, and come about  
On a reach to starboard. You South-country chaps  
Must have brass to spare to waste good harvest weather  
Watching men play ball like lads!

LABOURER:

This bean't no child's-play.  
Were you Hampshire-born you'd know better nor talk so foolish.  
I do 'low there's no schooling like cricket for making a man  
Stand up and sharpen his wits. Hast ever played?

SAILOR:

Not me! I come from Yorkshire. Up in the North  
We reckon to work for a living. The only game  
They learnt us at sea was long bowls with twenty-four pounders,

And we plays that one hot enough to give the Johnnies  
A bellyful, I can tell thee!

LABOURER:

*(Not impressed)* Just look at that, now!  
T'were a beautiful ball. Didst mark how she turned in the air  
And broke off the bent? That happens this time of the year,  
After sokey nights, when the wicket be starked-up on top  
And brick-hard underneath. I reckon old Mr Nyren  
Must 'a counted on that when he chose the pitch and ardained  
To put them in first. By the time the sun's full overhead  
'Twill play sweet and easy. Ay, he be foxy-headed,  
Be old Mr Nyren! Many's the time I've a'see'd en  
Traipse up to Broad Halfpenny at six o'clock of a marnin'  
For to choose a pitch to his likin'!

SAILOR:

*(Indulgently)* Who's old Mr Nyren?

LABOURER:

Who's Mr Nyren?

SAILOR:

Was that him bowling?

LABOURER:

Nay, nay  
That's Tom Brett—as steady a bowler as ever us had,  
But he be getting past of it now. You'd ought to 'a see'd en  
Twelve years ago, when Hambledon larruped All England  
By a hundred and sixty-eight and an innings to spare.  
*That* was bowling! Five wickets he took: the Duke of Darset,  
Lumpy Stevens, Jack Wood, Stock White and Gamekeeper Miller—  
And 'a caught out two more! There was nothing fancy about en:  
Just length and straightness. Tom Brett, mind, was never so furious,  
Not even in his pride, as Dave Harris.

SAILOR:

And who was *he*?

LABOURER:

An Odiham chap, a potter by trade. At the start  
He was apt to give tosses; but Nyren soon took 'en in hand  
And made him keep down. When once he had gotten the knack  
He skittled 'em out like ninepins. Dave loosed the ball  
From up here—right under the armpit—and liked to pitch it  
On rising ground. It used to come up like a cannon-shot,  
With a nasty curl on it too, as would grind a chap's fingers  
On the haft of the bat. 'Twas as good as a picture to see  
Where Dave had scrazed 'em. I've heard Lord Frederick say  
Dave's bowling was one of the grandest things he'd a' seen  
In his natural life.

SAILOR:

*(With affected interest)* Could he bat as well as he bowled?

LABOURER:

Nay, Dave were no batter. *(Severely)* You can't have everything,  
And Hambledon never wanted for runs in them days.  
There was Aylward—another farmer from Farnham way:  
Him that notched a hundred and sixty-seven not out  
In the match I was telling you on—the Hambledon Club  
Agen All England, five hundred pounds a side.  
Arter that, Sir Horace, he tooked 'en up into Sussex  
And made 'en his bailey; but Jim never done no good  
When he played agen we. Mr Nyren knew all his faults  
And foxed 'en out in no time. Then there was Beldham,  
William Beldham—Silver Billy us always called 'en,  
For his hair was so white as a wheatfield, come October.  
Harry Hall, the gingerbread-maker, learnt 'en the game:  
Hall were no great player himself, but he made young Beldham  
Keep his left elbow up and hold his bat plumb-straight  
In the line of the ball when he swung. 'Twere a gallant sight  
To see Silver Billy smack 'em all over the field,  
And never lift one. That lad, he danced on his toes  
Like Jack Broughton, the boxer. And run! He could lance like a deer  
To pick up the ball full-pelt, so neat as a swallow  
Nips gnats in the air! You'd ought to a'see'd 'en cut  
Off the point of the bat, with a crack like a pistol-shot,  
The ball shaving daisies all way to the boundary,  
And shepherds a'lepping like lambs of an April evenin'  
To save their old shins—not one of 'em could a'stopped it



Howsomever he tried. But I 'low the best of all  
Was when him and Lord Frederick Beauclerk was in together:  
Lord Frederick had royal blood in'en, so 'twere said,  
For his grammer were Nelly Gwynn, King Charles's fancy,  
But when Billy and him walked out to the pitch, side by side,  
You couldn't tell which were the farmer and which the gentleman,  
The pair on 'em looked that majestic. And when they got set  
You'd a'thought they was brothers born, the way they gloried  
In basting the bowling between 'em. There wasn't a ball,  
Long or short, high or low, but Lord Frederick went into it  
Wrist and shoulder. And Billy the same. They looked something  
grander  
Than human mortals, them two—so light on their feet  
As hobby-hawks skimmin' a hedge, or pewits a'runnin'  
Afore they do light on the down. I can see them now:  
Billy Beldham's silvery head and his lordship's white hat  
Thridding to and thro like shuttles: the crowd on their feet  
Hollerin' out: "Go hard . . . go hard! Tich and turn, tich and turn!  
Try another! One more!"—and the fielders runnin' like hares  
On every side of the wicket. Ay, that was music!  
Afore now I've a'see'd Silver Billy notch ten runs  
Off one snick past slip and an overthrow. Them was the days!  
The Duke was a good'un too—as jolly a sportsman  
As ever stripped for cricket—and so was Sir Horace:  
He be gettin' upalong now, but you'll likely see him  
This marnin'. Ay . . . there he be! Look over your shoulder—  
Short and black as a gipsy, a' swipin' off daisy-heads  
With the tip of his cane.

SAILOR:

I reckon the company  
You cricketers keep is too high for me! In the *Boreas*  
The officers' cuddy was one thing, the fo'c's'le another:  
We knew our place and kept it.

LABOURER:

I do know mine  
So well as thee, lad. But that be the beauty of cricket:  
A batsman's a batsman, be he a lord or a labourer,  
And the flick of the ball, her do come as hard to white hands  
As to horny ones. I do 'low 'tis the same as the graveyard,

Where one honest corpse be as good as the next, trick and tie.  
And after the stumps were drawn, it were just the same  
Round a casty of beer at the *Bat and Ball*, when you told  
What you'd ought to 'a done and didn't when you got out.  
Talk? It used to run on by the hour; and then, maybe,  
George Lear—Little George we called 'en—would strike up a song  
And John Small start scrapin' his fiddle. But that's not all:  
There's no end to cricket: for when you be done with play,  
The last ball bowled and the sheep drove back for to graze  
On the lattermath, your mind do still smell so sweet  
As an apple-loft in November; and Winter nights,  
When the snow-blossom's fell and ice-candles hang from the thack,  
You can set by the fire, like a dog, with your eyes a'blink  
And go over the Summer again—match by match, ball by ball,  
Stroke by stroke. . . . (*He suddenly throws his hat in the air.*)  
I'll be drattled! He's caught! That's the last man out;  
And I'll wager your throat be adry same as mine. Come your ways,  
And we'll give 'em both a wet with a pint of fresh.

*The SAILOR accompanies him willingly. As they stroll towards the bough-house, which has been set up on the edge of the field, a smart yellow chariot comes lurching over the down like a ship on a choppy sea. The driver throws the reins to his groom and dismounts. JOHN SACKVILLE, Third Duke of DORSET, his Majesty's Ambassador at the court of Versailles, is a tall, dark man in the late forties, with the short arms which may so often be remarked in the anatomy of a great hitter. He is fashionably dressed in a full-skirted coat, knee-breeches, and a white beaver hat. As the players trip off the field he waves cheerily, greeting several of them by name. Then he sees SIR HORATIO MANN, still busy with the daisies, and advances rapidly towards him, with hand out-stretched.*

DORSET:

Good morning, Horace. I half expected to see you.

MANN:

Jack Dorset? Well, I'll be damned! What are you doing here?  
I thought you were still in Paris. To tell you the truth,  
We were rather anxious.

DORSET:

I made up my mind that discretion  
Was the better part of valour, and made myself scarce.  
Things were getting too hot for my liking. The French have gone mad.  
'Twas like living in Bedlam, after they'd sacked the Bastille.

MANN:

The Bastille? What's that?

DORSET:

An old castle, half prison, half fortress,  
In the middle of Paris. I happened to know the governor,  
A pleasant old man named de Launay. The mob swept in,  
Hauled him out and hacked off his head. The unfortunate Swiss  
Were trampled and torn piecemeal—their *disjecta membra*  
Thrown into the gutter like garbage.

MANN:

But how the devil  
Did these fellows get arms?

DORSET:

They broke into the *Invalides*  
And took all they wanted.

MANN:

But this is a regular revolt!

DORSET:

That's just what the poor King called it. My friend Liancourt  
Put it better. "No, sir," says he, "it's a Revolution."  
And by God you'd have thought so yourself if you'd seen that rabble  
From my Embassy window! They poured through the narrow street  
Like a river in flood—torn limbs and heads on pikes  
Bobbing up and down like driftwood. All that night  
You could hear Paris throb and hum like an angry beehive.  
Sometimes, when the bells broke out, it rose to a roar  
Of hoarse cries, with sabots pattering over the *pavé*  
Like a cavalry charge. I never slept a damned wink.  
Next morning 'twas still as death: they'd had their fling  
And were sleeping it off, I suppose; but the cobbles were crimson

With blood and wine—you couldn't tell which—and the city  
Smelt like a burnt-out shambles.

MANN:

What are they after?

DORSET:

I doubt if they know. Their obvious taste, at the moment,  
Is blood—and the bluer the better. France has flared up  
Of itself, like a damp-hot hayrick. Paris was bad enough;  
But the country, I'm told, is far worse. All the way to Calais  
My road was lit by the flames of burning *châteaux*;  
And when I got to the coast, I found the quays crammed  
With hundreds of fugitives, people like you and me,  
Who'd run from their homes in wild panic—all scrambling  
For a passage to England. Terror's an ugly thing.  
Every man for himself! 'Twas a picture of human nature  
Old Voltaire would have relished. For myself, I confess  
It revolted my stomach.

MANN:

But had you any idea  
That such troubles were brewing?

DORSET:

I wasn't precisely happy.  
Day by day, as I drove to and fro between Versailles  
And Paris, the contrast leapt to the eye: on one hand  
The most brilliant court in Europe—a glittering surface  
Stiffened by protocols that made poor old St. James's  
Look dowdy—yet all as flimsy and artificial  
As a piece of puff-pastry: nothing whatever beneath it  
But empty frivolity. One felt that France was bankrupt  
In body and spirit. And then, on the other side,  
That grim city, *terre à terre*, if you will, but simmering  
With frothy ideas like a brewer's vat. You could feel  
The perpetual ferment. I used to stroll through the streets  
(French noblemen never walk anywhere, but you know  
I can't do without exercise)—and the coffee-houses  
Of the *Palais Royal* were clamorous, night and day,  
With excited talk—political orators

Jumping up on chairs and tables, haranguing the customers,  
And a crowd, outside on the pavement, straining to listen  
*A gorge déployée*. How any business gets done  
In Paris is quite beyond me. And then, the deluge  
Of printed pamphlets—more than a dozen a day!  
The booksellers can't keep count of them. Stockdale's shop  
Or Debrett's may seem crowded to you: they're the merest deserts  
Compared with Desein's. Every literate person in Paris  
Reads and talks incessantly. Sometimes I used to go down  
To the poorer quarters, in spite of the stench, to ease  
My bewildered ears. They don't talk in the *Faubourg St. Antoine*:  
But they look at you—God, how they look at you—and their eyes  
Make you think of rats in a corner. You have the feeling  
That they're measuring you up and wondering what you'd look like  
With your clean clothes stripped from your back and your well-fed  
carcase  
Swung from a lantern-bracket. You know, my dear Horace,  
I've always liked the French—but there's 'summat about 'em',  
As Nyren would say, 'that frougts me', something cruel and cold,  
Clear and brittle as ice, combined with a temper of tinder:  
One spark, and they're all on fire! Their very humour  
Is whetted so razor-keen that the edge draws blood  
Before you've felt it. On my honour, it gave me the shivers  
To walk through those grudging streets, so utterly different  
From England, where every soul you meet by the way  
Will touch his cap and give you good-day with a smile.  
These people just stared. It took me a goodish time  
To realize that they were starving—not merely hungry,  
But starving, Horace! France has had two bad years  
Of harvest; and then, to make matters worse, the crops  
Were bought up by speculators. Fortunes were made  
By a small group of greedy men, and the millions of peasants  
Who'd tilled the soil left to starve. Their best arable  
Is nibbled as close as a Winter sheepwalk. Of course  
These poor devils flocked to the towns, because they imagined  
'Twas there that the grain had gone—and found them as bare  
As the countryside. Half of the mob that stormed the Bastille  
Was made up of homeless peasants: rag-draped skeletons  
With straw tied round their bleeding feet.

I know very well  
That you can't trust townsmen, Jack. But I don't understand  
Country folk behaving like that. They've too much horse-sense  
And balance and natural decency. Only imagine  
Men like Lumpy or Small or the Walkers losing their heads  
And brandishing ours on pikestaves—or leading a mob  
To storm Farnham Castle! If ever I found myself  
On a nasty wicket, there's no-one I'd sooner have  
On my side than our Hambleton lads—and every man jack of them  
Save Nyren is peasant-born.

DORSET:

In France, my dear Horace,  
The peasantry don't play cricket—and as for the gentry,  
Their tenants rarely set eyes on them: they're too busy  
Playing parlour-games at Versailles. The labourer's lot  
Is that of a mere beast of burden, bowed to the ground  
By feudal dues and taxes that haven't been dreamt of  
In England since Magna Carta. The money that paid  
For their wars against us, the fabulous wealth that's squandered  
On empty pomp at Versailles, has been drained drop by drop  
From a wasting countryside. Now they have nothing left—  
Not even bread for their brats; and you can't draw blood  
From a stone.

MANN:

Then surely it's time for the Government  
To wake up and do something about it?

DORSET:

I've told you already:  
The country is bankrupt. What is their Government?  
A weak, well-meaning King; a frivolous Queen,  
Who happens to wear the breeches; a handful of ministers  
Each jockeying his next-door neighbour to grab what he can  
Of the crumbs of patronage—or so much as is left  
By a gluttonous, decadent nobility  
Battening like maggots on the living flesh  
Of France.

MANN:

Have they no Parliament?

DORSET:

The King  
Has summoned the Estates: they're now in session,  
Like our long Parliament, at Versailles, and wrangling  
Over their several rights. But that won't save  
Their country from starvation. Nothing less  
Than a miracle can save her.

MANN:

So much the better!  
I'm no great hand at history, but I reckon  
She's given us more trouble than all the rest  
Of Europe put together!

DORSET:

Ay, there speaks  
The true-blue Englishman! But there are others  
Who might profit by her downfall. Nature, alas,  
Abhors a vacuum; and, should France fall,  
We might find ourselves with enemies as formidable  
Uncomfortably near.

MANN:

I say: "Thank God  
For the English Channel!"

DORSET:

There are deadlier things  
Than arms can cross salt water. Revolutions  
Are like the plague: they travel on the air  
And sow their spores unseen. If this contagion  
Of discontent and violence should take wing  
Across your channel, you and I might find ourselves  
Running from Knole and Linton like the poor devils  
I saw at Calais.

MANN:

No, no. . . . I won't believe it.  
England's too sound at heart and too well fed

To stomach all these windy theories  
Frothed-up by foreigners. God in heaven knows  
Where their damned nonsense comes from.

DORSET:

I can tell you.

It comes from England.

MANN:

England?

DORSET:

The seed was sown  
At Runnymede; flowered in the Bill of Rights,  
Watered with blood by Oliver, and transplanted  
To Massachusetts—where we've lately tasted  
Its bitter fruits at Yorktown. The 'liberation'—  
As the French call it—of America  
Fires them to emulate it. Lafayette  
Is a popular hero.

MANN:

Surely you don't think . . .

DORSET:

I make no prophecies, Horace, but rely  
On the known principles of inoculation:  
We've had the small-pox once, and if we take it  
Again, the new infection may be mild  
And not disfiguring. My Whig friends at Brooks's  
Welcome this revolution. Charley Fox  
Is rapturously excited; and even Pitt,  
In his dry way, condones it with a sort  
Of shy benevolence. We must wait and see  
How the cat jumps. For my part, I'm content  
To watch a game of cricket and thank God  
England's still England. Nothing is more delicious  
Than these last days of Summer, when the elms  
Have just begun to turn. This blessed landscape,  
So gentle and so moderate, always brings  
A lump into my throat when I come home



From foreign service, and hear the friendly clack  
Of leather on willow. . . .

MANN:

*(Anxiously surveying the field)* I shall have to leave you.  
My chaps are coming out. We've a new bowler,  
A garden-boy from Linton—devilish fast,  
But Nyren says he throws. I wish you'd watch him  
And tell me what you think.

DORSET:

I'll keep an eye on him.

*(SIR HORACE MANN strips off his coat, sets his hat at a rakish angle, and walks determinedly to the centre of the field. The DUKE waves his hand and smiles, throws back his coat-tails, and sprawls on the grass. The SAILOR and his new friend return from the bough-house. Farnham hops and barley-malt have done their work, and both are 'concerned' in liquor. Even the discharged seaman's face has lost its morosity, and the other appears to be glad of the support of his blackthorn stick. They are indeed so deeply engrossed in some private joke that he almost stumbles over the Duke's outstretched legs.)*

LABOURER:

Beg pardon, Sir. . . . I should say Your Grace!

DORSET:

No matter. . . . Don't I know your face?

LABOURER:

You ought to, Sir,  
Seeing as I bowled you out twice, near twenty year ago.

DORSET:

By God, you've a long memory!

LABOURER:

I shan't forget  
That there match to my dying day, Sir.

DORSET:

What's your name?

LABOURER:

Hogsflesh, Your Grace.

DORSET:

Of course I remember you.

I remember the match as well. It was up on Broad Halfpenny.  
I was off my game that day.

LABOURER:

Howsomever that be,  
I bowled Your Grace out twice.

DORSET:

You did indeed.

But that's an old story now. Tell me, what do you think  
Of Sir Horace's new bowler?

LABOURER:

I think he do throw.

DORSET:

I'm inclined to agree with you. He comes off the pitch  
Devilish fast.

LABOURER:

Ay, Your Grace; but he bean't so fast as Dave Harris,  
Nor nobody ever will be. Those were the days!

DORSET:

Yes, those were the days! No doubt of it. Good luck to you.

LABOURER:

The same to you, Sir.

*(He doffs his cap. He and the SAILOR move off uncertainly. As soon as they are out of earshot he seizes his companion by the arm and declares emphatically):*

Now that's what I call a gentleman!

## XXXIV

RED INTERLUDE.      A.D. 1789-1803

Now, like spores launched on the mysterious flow  
Of ocean-currents, the seeds of Revolution,  
Ripened in Massachusetts, then dispersed  
By civil war's rash winnowing, are upcast  
On Europe's tidemarks; and in the fiercer soil  
Of France, hotbed of hunger, germinate  
With more prodigious zest—until her wastes  
Are reddened like a fallow poppy-sown  
In August. Now behold the fettered French  
Shake loose their feudal chains, and stagger forth  
Drunk with new freedom. Naught but blood can quench  
Their orgiastic thirst; and by that draught  
Purged and exalted, a gigantic shape  
Looms through the smoke of carnage and the mirk  
Of conflagration: France—the cynosure  
Of all who toil in servitude; France, the bane  
Of privilege, the incubus that mars  
The sleep of Kings and Prelates.

On her marches

A vulture-flock of dynasts wait the hour  
When famine shall prevail, and the wild ardour  
Fade from her haggard eyes. First Brunswick fends  
The cause of injured Royalty, his anger  
Fed by the fury of the dispossessed,  
Yet dares not strike alone, lest failure open  
His frontiers to infection. Austria  
And Russia pay lip-service. At Coblenz  
French emigrants plead for a coalition  
Of all monarchic Europe. Only Britain,  
Safe in her salty moat, dares contemplate  
The havoc with complacence—a weak France  
Being somewhat to her liking! Why, indeed,  
Should a free, full-grown folk, that has enjoyed  
The fruits of Revolution, be concerned

With the teething-troubles of Democracy  
Beyond the sea? Who but a hypocrite  
Could ape dissatisfaction at the downfall  
Of her Bourbon enemies? Who but a fool  
Would plunge into a needless war, his wounds  
Being still unhealed? Let the French have their fling  
And bleed themselves to death; or, if they live,  
Learn wisdom in exhaustion. They who fear  
This feverish infection would be wise  
To put their house in order. As for us:  
Paris is worth a Mass; and, red or white,  
France is a valued customer.

The French,  
Sullen and sobered now, with wary eyes  
Survey the gathering legions of reaction  
Camped on their frontiers. This is a matter  
Of pride no less than safety—and France is proud  
For all her rags and vermin. Better grasp  
The Sword of Damocles! Brissot demands  
Disbandment of the horde of Royalists  
Camped at Coblenz in Treves; Danton will show  
How much France cares for kings! Two royal heads  
Roll in the basket of the guillotine,  
And the world shudders. Even England feels  
That things have gone too fast and far—forgetting  
Charles Stuart's blood-stained scaffold in Whitehall.  
So vengeful Brunswick marches. . . . At Jemappes  
And Valmy, the undisciplined rabble of France,  
Ill-armed, ill-fed, yet desperately inspired  
By the passion for survival, overwhelms  
The Prussian Guard; then, dazzled by the glory  
Of such an incredible victory, surges on  
Through Flanders to the Scheldt, where Holland hails  
The banners of Revolution. This is no longer  
An army of defence, but a whole nation  
Risen in arms, quixotically pledged  
To liberate its neighbours and establish  
The Rights of Man. Britain's benevolence  
Is coloured with disquiet: this infant Demos  
Has not merely cut his teeth, but seems disposed  
To flesh them greedily. Our ancient grudge

Of every militant might that may command  
The coast of Flanders—fount and origin  
Of all her foreign wars—is reawakened;  
And when France, flushed with confidence, proclaims  
The Freedom of the Scheldt (thus challenging  
London's preeminence) that long-smouldering grudge,  
Fanned by new tales of terror, suddenly  
Flares into righteous anger. These damned Jacobins  
Have overstepped all bounds of decency,  
And must be brought to heel—or British trade  
Will surely suffer. Even the sacred rights  
Of property are endangered. None need fear  
A long-drawn war; for France, thank God, is starved  
And bankrupt: her immediate success  
A mere flash in the pan, or the last flicker  
Of a guttering candle. So this war began.  
It raged for twenty years, to change the shape  
And mind of Europe and the world. . . .

At first

Reaction prospers, and the ragged French  
Are flurried out of Flanders: British gold,  
Broadcast in lavish subsidies, providing  
Mouthfuls of mercenary cannon-food  
To choke the guns of Valmy. England's fleet  
Tautens the noose that grips the throat of France—  
Though English dead, victims of greed, may rot  
In the French sugar-islands. Holland, tempted  
By lust of booty, joins the vulture-flocks  
Of Austria and Prussia to pick bare  
The bones of France—till her accomplices,  
Sniffing the taint of richer carrion, wing  
Eastward to where the Russian eagle gloats  
On a dismembered Poland. Thus the French,  
Stricken and reeling, gain a moment's respite  
To gauge the forces of a hateful world  
Arrayed against them. Now no more they cry  
"The Revolution is in danger!" Now  
'Tis France, proud France herself, that is beset  
And persecuted: her beloved soil,  
Birthright of glorious generations, threatened  
With alien dominance. Faction and Terror

Alike must be forsworn. The guillotine  
Rusts with disuse; while France's crumbling fabric,  
Cemented by external pressure, sets  
In a new, adamantine nationhood  
Such as the Sun King's self had never seen  
In his noonday radiance. Lazare Carnot  
Shall organize the incoherent strength  
Of twenty million Frenchmen. None may shirk  
His civic duties: and all France becomes  
One arsenal of deadly weapons forged,  
Not for the hands of hirelings, but to arm  
A militant nation. What mercenary might  
Can stem this human torrent? Now it flows  
Over reconquered Flanders; soon the dykes  
Of Holland crack and crumble. The Duke of York,  
Mangled at Hondschoete, falls back from Dunkirk  
Leaving his guns behind him. At Wattignies  
The Austrians are routed, and recoil  
In panic to the Rhine, abandoning  
Alsace and the Palatinate. In the South,  
Last foothold of reaction, the massed cannon  
Of an obscure Corsican captain, Bonaparte,  
In awful unison blast the British fleet  
Out of the roads of Toulon. A new name,  
Written in blood and lit by flame, imbues  
The chronicles of War. Such master-men,  
Monstrous alike in their capacity  
For good or evil, have ever ridden on tides  
Of Revolution, the gigantic jetsam  
Of human tempest, finding in the flux  
Of molten nations malleable stuff  
To give their dreams an iron shape, and weld  
The weapons of ambition. Such a man  
Was this visionary Corsican, in whose mind  
Nations and men were but the instruments  
Of a personal predominance, and continents  
Mere fields of battle whereon his mastery  
Of arms, unmatched since Marlborough's, might achieve  
Conquests that made the fame of Macedon  
Turn pale. Nerved by his will, impetuous France,  
Flaunting the cap of Liberty, imposes

New tyrannies on Europe: he, in return,  
Sates her with glory. First he overruns  
The Lombard plain: Lodi and Rivoli  
Proclaim its liberation; and Milan,  
Freed from her Austrian servitude, accepts  
New chains for old. A crop of small Republics  
Spring up like mushrooms—but the loot of Italy  
Flows steadily to France, and even the Pope  
Disgorges gold for peace—while Bonaparte,  
Bored in his palace at Mombello, sees  
Mirages of new conquest. Asia waits  
Her second Alexander, offering  
More fabulous empire lightly to be snatched  
From the decadent British. The Army of Italy,  
Launched by this land-bred arrogance, takes the sea  
And grounds on Egypt, where its legionaries  
Sharpen their bayonets on the prostrate stones  
Of a forgotten empire. Never was given  
To Fate a pledge more reckless! As their fleet  
Lies snugly hidden in the channeled roads  
Of Aboukir, an English midshipman,  
Tree'd on *Goliath's* dizzy masthead, spies  
That cluster of bare spars: sixteen great ships,  
The navel-cord of Bonaparte's invasion,  
Anchored at ease. A signal flutters forth:  
"Enemy in sight!"—and with supreme contempt  
Of shoal or sounding, five British seventy-fours,  
*Goliath, Orion, Theseus, Audacious, Zealous,*  
Together brave the island guns that guard  
The anchorage to Westward, sweeping in  
Betwixt them and the shore. Now Nelson's squadron,  
With all sails set, streams from the blood-red West  
To pound their seaward flank. Egyptian night,  
Made awful by the guns' incessant thunder  
And flames of burnt-out ships, obscures the issue  
Of this tremendous conflict. Morning shows  
Unequaled desolation, and the dreams  
Of an Eastern Empire ended. Bonaparte,  
Thwarted—but, in the manner of his kind,  
Callous beyond belief and undismayed,—  
Leaves the abandoned flower of France to rot

In the deadly dust of Acre, and sails home,  
An unrepentant prodigal, to resume  
The paths of destiny. . . .

That season smiles  
On the conqueror's ambitions, though dismay  
Beclouds the skies of France: in Italy  
Her vassal-states are crumbling like sand-castles  
Sapped by the tide returning from the East  
To lash her Alpine frontier; Naples yields  
To the patriots of Calabria, who prefer  
A home-made brand of Liberty; Nelson sweeps  
The Middle Sea, denying her the means  
Of passage or offence; about her throat  
An iron torque, forged by the coalition  
Of England, Austria and Russia, chokes  
Her breath to suffocation. 'Tis no time  
For faint hearts or half-measures. France demands  
A sterner discipline: better any tyranny  
Than national extinction. Bonaparte,  
First Consul now, grasps at the absolute power  
For which he long has lusted; and the French,  
Rejuvenate in spirit and re-armed,  
Follow this heaven-sent saviour, overbrimming  
The Piemontese Alps to decimate  
The Austrians at Marengo—while Moreau  
Carries the tattered flag of Revolution  
To Hohenlinden, and romantic Russia,  
Bedazzled by these glittering feats of arms,  
Forsakes her allies.

Only Britain stands  
Seagirt and unsubdued upon the flank  
Of the European fortress; only Britain  
Flouts that imperious will. What is this blind,  
Unreasoning insular folly that can persuade  
A nation of sixteen millions to resist  
A power four times more numerous? Pitt should know  
How hopeless is her case. One master-weapon  
Rests in the conqueror's armoury—for our isle  
Lives but by sea-borne commerce. A blockade  
Of continental Europe from the Baltic  
To Portugal and the Sicilies shall obstruct



The flow that feeds her sinews till she starve  
And squeal for mercy! But Bonaparte forgets  
The lesson ill-learned in Egypt, and his weapon  
Proves double-edged, when Nelson of the Nile  
Bursts through the Cattegat, and at Elsinore  
Shatters the Danish fleet, to make an end  
Of this League of Armed Neutrality. Once again  
Sea-power prevails; and the shrewd Corsican  
Is fain to cut his losses and accept  
An honourable truce. . . .

They call it Peace;  
And two war-wearied nations celebrate  
This triumph of illusion in an orgy  
Of mutual flatteries. But neither Pitt  
Nor Bonaparte relaxes; for the despot  
Knows well his dreams of Empire must be vain  
While England lives; and Pitt, who longs for peace,  
Can see no end until those arrogant dreams  
Are broken. This uneasy interlude  
Of eighteen months finds each antagonist  
Mustering his forces for the final round:  
Pitt building ships, while Bonaparte rearms  
His wasted levies and constrains his friends  
To keep the ring. There is no more pretence  
Of a mission of liberation; no more talk  
Of the Rights of Man. Imperial France discards  
The rags of her outworn democracy,  
And stands forth unashamed, pranked in the spoils  
Of her predatory aggressions to proclaim  
Man's only Right is Might, and her prime purpose  
Dominion of the earth. All that she asks  
Of Britain is connivance: a free hand  
In continental Europe—but, meanwhile,  
What about Malta? This island has been ceded  
By the Treaty of Amiens, but still remains  
In the Knights' hands. The mood of England stiffens;  
For Malta, worthless in a world at peace,  
Becomes, in war, a crucial point, commanding  
The road to Egypt and the East, the basis  
Of Bonaparte's vain dream. Malta must stand—  
Or all be lost. If this should mean renewal

Of war, so be it! A disunited England,  
Startled and disillusioned, stands to arms.  
Now, from the Forelands and the slopes that shelve  
To meet Reculver's sandbanks; from the crest  
Of Dover's moon-pale scarp and Beachy Head  
To Portsdown; from Wight's crumbling undercliff  
To Purbeck and the flinty fields that lour  
On Portland's roaring chesils; from the pale downs  
Of Dorset to the blood-red rocks that fringe  
The tawny marls of Devon; from the Start  
To the unyielding serpentine that sheathes  
The Lizard's fangs in adamant, arise  
From their forgotten ash the phoenix-fires  
That once foretold the Armada; while far inland,  
Moloch the monster feeds his sleepless hearths  
To forge war's armament. Now quiet cities,  
Drownsed in the deeps of peace, suddenly ring  
With eager tocsins and the tramping feet  
Of shopkeepers turned soldiers; now the greens  
Where country-folk played cricket lie bemired  
By marching hobnails, and village goodwives scare  
Their disobedient brats with a new bugbear:  
The Corsican ogre, Boney, who, 'tis said,  
Gloats on the flesh of children. Now in mart,  
Club, cloister, palace, hovel, the old fear  
Shadows the minds of men; the ancient question  
Dwells on their lips: "Folk say the French are coming.  
When will they come?"—and the inveterate,  
Unreasoning confidence answers: "Come when they will,  
They will get more than they give us. Let them come!"

*At this hour of the September afternoon, when the Manager Mr Martindale's House-Dinner is still being served downstairs, the Card Room at White's appears gloomy and deserted. Its only occupant at the moment is an elderly member in a military uniform that seems hardly in keeping with his years or his figure, which is that of a sedentary townsman. The candles have not yet been lit, and in the yellowish autumnal light of the nearest window, he is perusing the latest entries in the Betting-Book. The trivial character of most of the wagers inscribed in it appeals oddly incongruous with the stirring and perilous times through which the country is passing at this moment. Mr A., for instance, has bet Mr B. that the Marquess of C. will not propose to Miss D. Ten pounds have been wagered that Lord Rockingham's filly will not finish in the St. Leger, and twenty that Mr Pitt will not outlive Mr Fox. On the surface it would appear that the Tory Ruling Class, which the membership of White's more or less represents, is more deeply interested in domestic affairs than in the fate of England or the future of Europe. As the military gentleman closes the Betting-Book and returns it to its table, the door swings open to admit a remarkably handsome old man. From the cut of his clothes (he wears breeches instead of the now fashionable pantaloons), his powdered hair (in a mode which has been discontinued as a protest against Mr Pitt's powder-tax) and from his weather-beaten complexion, one might judge him a country gentleman only lately come to town. As he turns away, apparently disappointed to find no play in progress, the first member advances rapidly and touches him on the shoulder.*

TOWN MEMBER:

I think you have forgotten me. We last met  
At Croome, if you remember. I rode over  
From Madresfield with Lygon. . . .

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Pray forgive me:

This fading light and your resplendent scarlet  
Quite blinded me.

TOWN MEMBER:

You behold a corporal  
In the St. James's Volunteers, commanded  
By that old firebrand Colonel Sheridan.  
We are all soldiers now, Sir: neither station  
Nor age exempts us. The Prime Minister  
Drills his own troop at Walmer, and instructs  
Grey-bearded veterans in the elements  
Of Modern Warfare. Poor old Charley Fox  
Has turned a true-blue patriot, and commands  
The volunteers at Chertsey; and all our ladies  
Affect a military mode, arrayed  
In jackets of green velvet and short skirts  
That show their ankles. Their new Rifle Hats  
Are most becoming: Boney's *vivandières*  
Are quite eclipsed in smartness. But pray tell me  
The news from Worcestershire.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

A shocking harvest,  
And partridges damned scarce. Our last excitement  
Was a visit from Lord Nelson, who came through  
On his way from Wales to London in the company  
Of old Hamilton and his Lady. Worcester went mad;  
Took out his horses at the bridge, and dragged  
His carriage to the Guildhall, where they gave him  
The Freedom of the City. I must confess  
I was disappointed.

TOWN MEMBER:

Why?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

The Admiral  
Is the merest wisp of a man; poor Hamilton  
A doddering dotard, and her ladyship  
A monstrous creature, mountainously fat,  
With the manners of a fishwife. You can't imagine  
A less romantic trio.

TOWN MEMBER:

You should have seen her  
When she was Charley Greville's mistress: then  
Her form was almost sylphlike, and her face  
Angelically lovely. In her 'Attitudes'  
She was incomparable, and every movement  
Ravished the heart like music. You make me glad  
I have not seen her since. There is no spectacle  
More melancholy than the decadence  
Of a beauty that has moved us. That will live  
For ever in Romney's pictures. But, to be serious,  
How's your Militia shaping?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Well enough.  
We have reached our quota. The Loyal Volunteers  
Parade on Pitchcroft under my boy George  
On Sundays, and our patriotic ladies  
Meet once a week to gossip and embroider  
Colours for ensigns. If our Worcester lads  
Were armed and taught to shoot, they'd take some beating;  
But brooms and mopsticks are a poor substitute  
For rifles, and all this martial ardour seems  
To me a thought unreal. You, no doubt,  
Stand at the heart of things, and can assess  
Our problematic dangers. For myself,  
I won't be scared. Whatever else he may be,  
Boney's no fool; and if he planned invasion,  
He wouldn't rant about it. I regard  
These tales as a chimaera, purposely  
Magnified by the Government to distract  
Small minds from graver matters.

TOWN MEMBER:

What could be graver?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Consols at fifty-seven, sir, rising prices,  
And now this new confounded Income-Tax  
Of a shilling in the pound!

TOWN MEMBER:

Well, my dear Sir,  
I wish to God you were right. Unluckily,  
The known facts are against you. I agree  
That Bonaparte's no fool. This very circumstance  
Confirms our fears. None but a fool would muster  
So huge a force at such a vast expense  
Unless he meant to use it.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

So you swallow  
These old wives' tales?

TOWN MEMBER:

No: my beliefs are based  
On grounds more solid. If Bonaparte's no fool,  
No more is Pitt. Our two protagonists  
Face one another, on either side the channel,  
Like wary gamblers; but, with much good fortune,  
Backed by more skill and daring, we have learnt  
What cards the Frenchman holds. Our information  
Is copious and precise: there's not a movement  
Of troops or barges, not a casual word  
Dropped from Napoleon's lips, but finds its way  
Into our records to be docketed,  
Conned, sifted, pondered and interpreted  
By practised wits. This weight of evidence  
Is overwhelming. You can take my word for it:  
They will invade us.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

How the deuce do we manage  
To find out all these secrets?

TOWN MEMBER:

You must remember,  
No more than twenty miles of misty sea  
Divides us from the French. In peace or war  
This no-man's-land-or-water has been haunted  
By smugglers of both nations. Should you desire  
To visit France and see things for yourself,  
I have no doubt our Sussex fishermen

Would see you safely landed.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Landed, yes—  
And then shot as a spy! Your invitation  
Doesn't attract me.

TOWN MEMBER:

The danger is much less  
Than you imagine. Thousands of French loyalists  
Detest the Revolution—and even more  
This Corsican upstart. Many who have sought  
Sanctuary in England from the Terror, burn  
To stake their principles against their necks  
And overthrow him. Nor should you forget  
That, by its very nature, Tyranny  
Is always rotten at the core, consumed,  
Even when it seems to thrive, by inward jealousies,  
Envy, ambitions; that base men who have climbed  
To mastery on the ruin of their rivals  
Command no loyalty; that in a state  
Where all men are deemed equal, discipline  
Depends on force, and underneath the shows  
Of unity 'tis each man for himself,  
And the devil take the hindmost. Thus it is  
That in the very midst of those who share  
The Corsican's confidence, we have our friends  
(Or he has enemies) who would not be loth  
To profit by his downfall.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

I'll be damned  
If I'd have truck with traitors!

TOWN MEMBER:

Our trust is tempered  
By the wisdom of the serpent. Their reports  
Are checked and counterchecked by the intelligence  
Of our own agents. You may be shocked to hear  
That the best spies are Englishmen.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Well, well,  
'Tis a dirty business—though I'd trust them sooner  
Than any Frenchman! So Pitt really thinks  
That Bonaparte's not bluffing?

TOWN MEMBER:

I can give you  
Boney's *ipsissima verba*: "Cæsar's fling  
Was the merest child's-play; mine is an enterprise  
Of Titans. They want to make me jump the ditch,"  
Says he, "and we will jump it."

COUNTRY MEMBER:

The damned braggart!

TOWN MEMBER:

His words may seem flamboyant, but reports  
Give substance to his boasts. Since early Spring  
We have spied flotillas of flat-bottomed craft  
Concealed in every inlet from Dunkirk  
To Cherbourg. The remotest inland communes  
Have furnished funds for these, their hopes inflamed  
By an exhibition of the Bayeux tapestry  
Sent round on tour, expressly to recall  
The Norman Conquest. Now this scattered force  
Is gathering at Boulogne: a huge armada  
Of various design, yet all contrived  
For the purpose of invasion. First there are *prames*,  
Poor seaboats fitted with three keels and rigged  
Like a corvette. Each *prame* is built to carry,  
Besides her crew, a double company  
Of infantry and twelve twenty-four-pounders.  
Next, the *chaloupes*, of greater complement  
But ordnance far less numerous—though they carry  
A six-inch howitzer. These craft are rigged  
Like brigantines, and draw, when fully laden  
Less than six feet of water. Add to these  
Their *Bâteaux Cannoniers*, three-masted wherries,  
Lug-sailed, like Cornish fishing-smacks, equipped  
With stables, stalls and sheds for the conveyance



Of cavalry. Lastly, a multitude  
Of smaller lug-sailed pinnaces, each designed  
To carry fifty men, a Prussian howitzer,  
And an eight-inch mortar.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

How many of these ships  
Has Bonaparte assembled?

TOWN MEMBER:

They must number  
At least three thousand sail, their admiral  
Being Eustache Bruix.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

That name means nothing to me.

TOWN MEMBER:

Our sailors know it well. In the Rebellion  
He served in the American frigate *Fox*  
As a junior ensign. But the master-mind  
Of the whole enterprise is Denis Decrès,  
A veteran of the Nile, who in the *Diane*  
Escaped us, and later, in the *Guillaume Tell*,  
Fought, single-handed, the *Lion*, the *Foudroyant*  
And the *Penelope*: a most gallant seaman  
Of infinite resource. 'Tis he who has made  
Napoleon's project feasible by the building  
Of wharves, pontoons and causeways to assure  
Smooth embarkation for three hundred transports—  
This from Boulogne alone—on every tide.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

What forces will he venture?

TOWN MEMBER:

We cannot fathom  
The Corsican's deep mind. But this we know:  
He has never been deterred from any sacrifice  
Of blood when his ambitions were at stake.  
This Army of England, as it's called, comprises

At least fifteen divisions, every man of them  
A seasoned veteran, under the command  
Of youthful marshals who have proved their metal:  
Ney, Soult, Davoust and Victor. For six months  
This formidable weapon has been forged  
And tempered by manœuvres that reflect  
The conditions of invasion—embarcations,  
Landings and tactics of assault—each movement  
Rehearsed in detail, and every man equipped  
To the last button. A month ago they left  
Their training quarters, and are now assembled  
In coastal camps and billets, to await  
Their sailing-orders.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

When do you expect  
Such orders to be given?

TOWN MEMBER:

If we knew that,  
We should be happier. Early in July  
We thought the hour had come—but Bonaparte,  
Incalculable as ever, changed his plans  
And left us guessing. But since this fateful Summer  
Is drawing to a close, and no sane seaman  
Dares risk the equinoctial gales, we reckon  
It must be now or never. By God's grace  
The Emperor (to give him his new title)  
Is neither sane nor sailor. Yet every sign  
Points to a swift decision. Only yesterday  
A trusted agent sent us his report  
On a great review, designed to celebrate  
Napoleon's birthday. . . . No doubt you know Boulogne?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

No Sir, I don't. In fact I'm proud to say  
I've never set foot outside the King's dominions,  
Nor don't intend to. England's good enough  
For me!

TOWN MEMBER:



On this resplendent vision, he could espy  
Far sails of British frigates quartering  
The sultry sea!) Next, when the cheers and salvoes  
And fanfares had died down, the Emperor  
Administered an oath: “Commanders, Officers,  
Citizens, Soldiers: swear, upon your honour,  
To serve the Empire; to devote yourselves  
To your Fatherland’s integrity; to defend  
Your Emperor and the laws of the Republic!”

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Republic? Emperor? That don’t make sense.

TOWN MEMBER:

The French have their own logic. He went on:  
“Swear to contest, by all means in accord  
With Justice, Law and Reason, all attempts  
To re-establish feudal rights! In short,  
Swear to maintain, with your whole might, the principles  
Of Liberty and Equality, the basis  
Of all our institutions!” A deep rumble  
Rolled through their ranks, as eighty thousand men  
Muttered “We swear!” At this climactic moment  
Of the solemn celebration, a flotilla,  
More than a thousand strong, should have been entering  
The roadstead of Boulogne. Unluckily,  
Ironical Fate willed otherwise: a black squall  
And clumsy seamanship alike conspiring  
To throw them in confusion. A high wind  
Roared through the Straits of Dover, scattering  
The ill-found fleet of transports. Then the rain  
Came down in bucketfuls. Napoleon,  
Soaked to the skin, turned nasty, bickering  
With Berthier, his new marshal, biting his nails  
With irritation at the irreverent trick  
The elements had played him. The parade  
Dismissed in silence, and the drenched legionaries  
Trudged back to billets.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

A very proper curtain

For such a farce!

TOWN MEMBER:

I grant you, the French taste  
For the theatrical is apt to offend  
Our native modesty. Yet this performance,  
Shorn of its false heroics, does suggest  
That all their plans are laid, and any moment  
May launch the invasion.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

If a puff of wind  
Could scatter their flotillas, how would they fare  
With our frigates on their heels and the great guns  
Of our battle-fleet before them? That would test  
Their seamanship more shrewdly.

TOWN MEMBER:

I admit  
That Bonaparte's no sailor, and despises  
The judgment of his admirals. He awaits  
One of those tranquil intervals that follow  
Gales which have forced our frigates to stand off  
Or run for shelter. In such a breathing-space  
He may seize his chance. He only needs to master  
The channel for twelve hours—and don't forget  
His transports are well-armed.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

If Bill Cornwallis  
Gets in among them, I'll wager all their guns  
Will soon be on the bottom.

TOWN MEMBER:

There's a factor  
(I speak in confidence) which might upset  
Your sanguine calculations. They have perfected  
A secret weapon.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Ah, we're sick to death

Of these fantastic rumours of Balloons,  
Bridges of Boats and Tunnels! Only simpletons  
Credit such fairy-tales.

TOWN MEMBER:

So you've not heard  
Of the warship that can travel under water?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

No . . . nor I don't believe it!

TOWN MEMBER:

None the less,  
The thing exists. A young American  
Named Fulton's the inventor. He submitted  
His plans to Pitt a year ago, and claims  
That his craft, the *Nautilus*, which he built at Havre,  
Can move submerged, and so invisible,  
For several hours. She carries a vast charge  
Of powder sealed within a tapered cylinder  
Called a torpedo, which can be attached  
To her doomed prey with grapples, and exploded  
By clockwork.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Well, what did Pitt do about it?

TOWN MEMBER:

Referred it to the admirals. Old St. Vincent  
Pooh-poohed the whole idea. Its use, he said,  
Would do away with the whole British Navy,  
On which depends our strength and our prestige,  
Encouraging, in short, a mode of warfare  
Which we, who now command the seas, don't want,  
And which, if it succeeded, would deprive us  
Of our predominance.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

What happened next?

TOWN MEMBER:

Why, Citizen Fulton offered it to Bonaparte  
For forty thousand francs. . . .

COUNTRY MEMBER:

The treacherous dog!

TOWN MEMBER:

And Bonaparte, with more imagination  
And sense than Lord St. Vincent, jumped at it.  
He has built a number of them, and declares  
They may change the course of History. Imagine  
A score of these infernal craft escorting  
His army of invasion, and our great ships  
Blown sky-high, one by one!

COUNTRY MEMBER:

I'd rather back  
The judgment of St. Vincent than the fancies  
Of a damned Frenchman, Sir!

TOWN MEMBER:

But if they land?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Why then, by God, we'll fight them—on the beaches,  
The Weald, the Downs, from every ditch and hedgerow  
In Kent and Sussex! And if they come to London  
We'll fight 'em street by street! You under-reckon  
Our spirit, Sir. In fact, this kind of talk  
Borders on treason. Admiral Cornwallis  
Is a member of this club!

TOWN MEMBER:

Pray understand  
I merely state the chances. If you should care  
To venture on a wager, I'd be ready  
To back my own opinion.

COUNTRY MEMBER:

I'm your man, Sir.

*(He picks up the Betting-Book and mutters as he writes in a shaky and somewhat unformed hand):*

Lord C. betts Mr B. a hundred pound  
That Bonaparte won't land on British soil  
Before next Christmas Day. Does that content you?

TOWN MEMBER:

Completely. If you have not dined, perhaps  
You will honour me with your company?

COUNTRY MEMBER:

Not I.

London's no place for me at such a time  
As this. I'm going back to Worcestershire,  
Where people don't talk nonsense, but behave  
Like Englishmen. Good day, Sir. . . .

*(He goes out in a fluster. The TOWN MEMBER shrugs his shoulders, and methodically blots the entry in the Betting-Book.)*



## XXXVI

A BALLAD OF THE VICTORY      OCTOBER 21ST, 1805

'Twas at daybreak on a sober-mantled morning of October  
 When our nimble frigate, *Sirius*, a'quartering the deep  
 Like a questing hound that feathers on the fringes of a cover,  
 In a haze of thickening weather saw the Frenchman's vanguard creep  
 One by one, in open order,  
 Past the guns of Matagorda,  
 Through the throat of Guadalete to the jaws of Cadiz Bay;  
 And she sped the news to *Mars*:  
 "We can see their canvas shine  
 And the glitter of their spars:  
 There are twelve ships of the line  
 And a squadron of five frigates that have cleared the river bars,  
 And they're standing out to Westward. *Gone away. . . .*

*Gone away!"*

Then a livelier current raced through our pulses, for we guessed  
 That our stern and fruitless quest from the Straits to Martinique  
 And homeward from the main  
 Of Trinidad to Spain——  
 The long pursuit was over, and the foe no more to seek:  
 For we'd drawn him from his berth  
 Like a badger gone to earth;  
 We had flushed him from his cover and caught him face to face  
 Where no Admiral of mettle could refuse the gage of battle:  
 And aloft the signal fluttered: *General Chase!*  
 But whither they were bound lay more deep than wit could sound:  
 Were they heading to the West to join Ganteaume in Brest?  
 Could they dare to run the gauntlet of our fleet and seek Toulon?  
 Would they face us? Would they falter? None could tell. . . .  
 Then Lord Nelson took his station in the fairway of the Straits  
 Well to Westward of Gibraltar—as a wary huntsman waits  
 With an eye on either quarter; but no welcome signal shone,  
 So all day we lay there heaving on the huge Atlantic swell  
 Till the breeze died with the daylight, and night fell.  
 But at dawn the South wind woke on a wide and empty sea,

And the frigate *Phoebe* spoke:

“They have put their remnant forth;

They are bearing to the North, and they number thirty-three!”

Then we knew the Straits were free; so we clapped on every sail

And stood out on the larboard tack with Spain upon the lee—

Till the South wind veered and failed, and a second night we lay

Becalmed and sick with waiting, Sou’ West of Cadiz Bay.

And now the frigate-captains came on board to tell their tale:

How they’d watched five columns clear, with Alava in the van;

How Villeneuve led their centre and Dumanoir the rear.

And the heart of every man was uplifted by their story:

Thirty-three to twenty-seven—and so much the greater glory!

And on high the signal ran with new orders for the fleet:

“Clear your quarters. Set your steering-sails and royals, and shake out

The reefs of all your topsails”! They were running—not a doubt!—

Forming line upon the larboard tack to shield the Cadiz bar,

To find refuge in retreat

If they knew that they were beat.

So they laid their heads to Nor’ard, and we followed from afar

Where on our leeward quarter shone the shoals of Trafalgar.

And the British fleet bore on in two columns line-ahead—

’Twas Nelson led the windward and Collingwood the lee—

And a sight more winged with beauty and majesty and dread

Eyes of man will never see

As in battle-order came all those ships of deathless name:

*Bellerophon, Defiance, Revenge and Victory,*

*Agamemnon and Leviathan, Colossus, Temeraire,*

*Ajax, Neptune and Achilles*—all were there!

For the wind had veered due West, and its waft now blew so light

That our vast three-deckers, crowned with their towers of dazzling  
white,

Moved like stately clouds that sail on the far horizon’s bound

Without stay, without sound,

In a silence naught could break

But the craking of their timbers and the ripple of the wake

As their fo’c’s’les rose and fell on the green and glassy swell

That swept them toward the shore,

Until they seemed no more

Insensate monsters moving at the mercy of the wind,

But sentient things endowed with the gifts of will and mind:

Mind and will together vowed to one purpose stern and plain,

To sweep the French from off the seas and crush the might of Spain.  
Yet the will that urged them on drew from one man's mind alone,  
And the master mind was Nelson's, that had brewed our battle-plan:  
How one column, line-ahead, should pierce the Frenchman's van,  
Doubling on his foremost ships, while the other held his rear  
Locked in a deadly grip, ship to ship and man to man,  
On a larboard line of bearing—two blows to fall as one.  
So the endless moments passed, as he bade the *Victory* steer  
For the gap that lay between the French flagship, *Bucentaure*  
And the Spaniards' *Trinidad*, the mightiest afloat;  
And our hearts leapt to our throats when we heard the sudden roar  
Of Collingwood's first broadside, as the *Royal Sovereign* smote  
On Alava's *Santa Ana*—and a cloud of curdled smoke  
Blurred the leeward column's battle as it broke.

\* \* \* \* \*

But as *Victory* bore down upon the gap, with *Temeraire*  
Crowding close upon her quarter—not a cable-length to spare—  
Nelson hauled us out to larboard, and we felt her check and swerve  
Like a hunter when he shies at a fence for lack of nerve;  
And we wondered what he meant, and whither we were making  
With our starboard sails still bent and our studding-sails a'shaking,  
Till we guessed 'twas but a feint—to put their van in fear  
Of doubling to give cover to their sorely troubled rear  
And free the ships that Collingwood had ta'en;  
But his purpose soon showed clear—for he gybed and swung her over,  
Hauled to starboard and turned in upon their centre once again  
With *Temeraire* and *Neptune* and *Britannia* in his train.  
And as on we slowly crept—every moment losing way,  
Since the wind was but a breath—our crowded decks were swept  
By a hurricane of death:  
For they raked us, one by one, gun by gun, as we passed—  
Twenty killed and thirty wounded, the mizzen-topmast gone  
And the steering-wheel in splinters, was the price we had to pay  
For a fight too warm to last!  
But still *Victory* bore on;  
And her bloodier counterstroke was not long to be delayed,  
As the French were now to learn—  
For as we passed the stern  
Of Villeneuve's flagship, *Bucentaure*, our fo'c's'le carronade

Crashed through her cabin windows, cleared her deck from stern to stem,  
With five hundred dead or mangled—and so much the worse for them!  
While our double-shotted broadside, fifty cannon fired point-blank,  
Broached the bulwarks of her flank; and the vomit of her smoke  
Blew back into our portholes in a suffocating cloud,  
And our quarterdeck was strewed with black dust and crumbled wood  
From the crippled *Bucentaure*, which would trouble us no more.  
So we left her with her dead. . . .  
And as *Victory* came hard round on two Frenchmen full ahead,  
Their *Neptune* and the *Redoutable*, our captain cried: “My Lord,  
Which of these shall we board?”  
And he answered: “Take your choice!”  
But new thunders drowned his voice  
As the *Neptune* raked our fo’c’s’le, sweeping guns and crews away;  
So we ran on board the *Redoutable*—and there those monsters lay  
With their yards and ropes entangled; but neither we nor they  
Could hope to board the other—for our main-deck guns were dead,  
And the boarding-party mangled by a rain from overhead  
Of langrage-shot and musketry, while they, no less, were stayed  
By the *Temeraire*’s full broadside and our starboard carronade  
Which sprayed their deck with roundshot, while our lower guns  
replied  
Pouring salvo after salvo through the Frenchman’s gaping side.  
And it chanced, as we lay grappled in that desperate embrace,  
That a marksman in their mizzen-top saw Nelson as he passed  
With his stars and ribbons blazing; and he laid his gun in rest,  
Aimed, and shot him through the shoulder; and he fell upon his face.  
And he murmured, as they raised him: “They have done for me at last:  
My backbone is shot through.” And as he spoke, he drew  
A kerchief o’er his features to hide them from the crew.  
Thus they carried him unseen to the sultry cockpit strewed  
With the dead and wounded lying in the reek of fire and blood;  
And there they left him dying—for he would not have them stay,  
Till he knew the fight was won. So they let him have his way,  
While the *Victory* fought on. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

And the battle of the van waxed more fierce as *Temeraire*  
Past our starboard quarter ran, and her seamen leapt aboard

The thronged deck of the *Redoutable* and cleared it with the sword;  
And a ringing cheer went up as her ensign from the truck  
Of the mainmast fluttered down—and the gallant Frenchmen struck!  
But the *Temeraire* herself was scarce in better fettle;  
For the guns of the *Fougueux* had shot her through and through  
With a mort of deadly metal, and her decks were choked with slain;  
But her gunners gave the *Fougueux* back as good as they had got,  
Returning shot for shot, while her daring crew had lashed  
The rigging of the Frenchman to their for'ard anchor-chain,  
When the mainyard of the *Redoutable* fell from the mast and crashed  
Athwart their poop and smothered it in twenty tangled tons  
Of spars and sails and cordage; yet still the foremost guns  
Of the fighting *Temeraire* kept up a ceaseless cannonade  
On the Spaniards' mighty flagship, the *Santisima Trinidad*.  
Now our *Neptune* followed fast through the smoke and flame that  
poured  
From the carcase of the *Bucentaure*, and raked her as she passed;  
Then she shot the *Trinidad's* main and mizzen by the board;  
Next her foremast cracked and fell—and the Spanish admiral lowered  
His flag, while on their quarter they waved an English Jack  
As *Britannia* and *Leviathan* bore in to the attack;  
And when these two had passed her by, the *Conqueror* took their place  
Hauling up to give the dying *Bucentaure* her *coup-de-grâce*  
As the tricolor still flying from her topmast fluttered down,  
And the *Conqueror* reaped the glory that the *Victory* had sown.  
But by now we knew for sure that this bitter day was won:  
For their centre had been broke, and their vanguard's counterstroke  
Held or parried. And South Westward the wan October sun,  
That like a red-hot cannon-ball sank through the battle-smoke,  
Showed the remnant of their sorry rear which Collingwood had  
shattered:  
Every ship—save only nine—of their splendid battle-line  
Dismasted, sunk or taken! Yet we felt it hardly mattered,  
When our Admiral lay dead with a bullet in his spine. . . .  
And as the sun went down, we heard no more the roll  
Of sullen drumfire thundering from ships that spoke as one,  
But single shots which echoed like the mournful minute-gun  
That speeds a passing soul.  
And at last these too ceased firing, and a solemn silence fell  
On the scattered fleets that rode above the dark and glassy swell:  
Fifty giants of the line—each with her awful load

Of carnage and of doom;  
And as the deepening gloom  
Of that Autumn eve descended on the battle that was ended,  
Those mighty phantoms veiled in their shrouds of tattered sail  
Seemed to stand about the *Victory* like mourners round a tomb.  
And though our hearts were sore for the hero that was gone,  
We knew that never more could the fleets of France and Spain  
Threaten our native shore or flout us on the main:  
That mid all deeds of fame in the chronicles of war  
No name would brighter flame than the name of Trafalgar.

## XXXVII

LONG YEARS OF HAVOC      A.D. 1805-1815

Saved is our Island! . . . The victorious fleet  
Homeward in heavy-hearted triumph bears  
Her saviour's body, while the mournful roll  
Of muffled drums summons his soul to meet  
Those rare immortal dead that were his peers;  
Yet ten more bitter years  
Shall pass before the havoc that has laid  
To waste this generation shall be stayed.  
For, foiled on the indomitable seas,  
The Corsican thrusts landward, from Boulogne  
Striking at Europe's heart where, one by one,  
More tangible foes are worsted. Ulm decrees  
The doom of Austria—and even Pitt's  
Proud heart is broke at last when Austerlitz  
Joins Russia to the rout. Now Jena deals  
A blow as deadly, and French cannon-wheels  
Thunder upon the cobbles of Berlin  
As the Imperial Guard comes marching in;  
Now the vain Russian, tamed by flatteries,  
Forswears his plighted trust—and Europe lies  
Palsied and cowed, fondling the upstart's throne,  
Too sorely-spent to master  
That torrent of disaster,  
And England stands alone.  
Alone. . . . And yet how often in the dust  
Of universal conflict, when the bands  
Of Law were loosed, has dying Freedom thrust  
Her broken sword in these unwarlike hands!  
How oft has England stood,  
Grim as her native granite, brow bedewed  
With blood and sweat, to fend the victim's part!  
How oft has her great heart  
Drawn from the wrongs of others a strong flood  
Of resolution, veiled in a strange calm!

How often have the promptings of alarm  
Bred not despair but courage in her blood,  
That, when the cause of Liberty seemed lost,  
Strove to regain it, counting not the cost!  
What is this purblind folly that offends  
The Teuton's laboured reasoning? What is it  
That flouts the law of numbers, and transcends  
The logic of the Gaul's dry-pointed wit?  
A courage that begins where reason ends,  
Drawn from those mystic sources where the dreams  
Of poets have their birth:  
Blind valour that beseems  
A race impatient of the bonds of earth,  
That recks not present suffering nor dearth,  
But in imagined heavens seeks a prize  
Unsought, unseen by more material eyes;  
A breed of tongue-tied poets, who pursue  
Unreasoning hopes in regions where the view  
Of more far-sighted folk begins to fade:  
Such must we ever be, for so we are made!  
Thus, while the landlocked conflict Eastward sways.  
And the doomed victor sows the seeds of hate  
On Europe's ravaged soil, the broad sea-ways  
Waft to our Isle the wealth of happier lands,  
Fostering the strength of Britain while she stands,  
Staunch and inviolate,  
Against that day when arrogance overflown  
Shall reap what it has sown.  
Thus, screened by an impenetrable cloud  
Of sail, that strength finds foothold where the loud  
Atlantic beats upon the Iberian shore,  
Where, from that hope forlorn, there springs once more  
Promise of hope firm-founded—as the chain  
Falls from the neck of Portugal and Spain,  
And Europe, that seemed dying, breathes again!  
Now Russia, wakened from her wintry trance,  
Bestirs her monstrous limbs, as when the green  
Banners of Spring o'er the sere steppes advance,  
And in the teeth of France  
A ruder challenge flings;  
Now Bonaparte, still smarting from the stings



Of Talavera and Victoria, turns  
Eastward in wrath; now royal Moscow burns;  
Now, wilting in the keen  
Blast of the arctic tundras, the rank flower  
Of his Grand Army withers, and the flood  
Of icy Beresina drinks the blood  
Of its poor, tattered remnant, straggling back,  
Hungry and disillusioned, on the track  
Of ruin, undisguised and undenied;  
Now, one by one, the bulkheads that divide  
The prison-cells of Europe crack and cave,  
Falling to dust as the resistless wave  
Of rightful retribution overflows  
Their arrogant gaolers, dizzied by the blows  
Of unforeseen defeat. Leipzig redeems  
The routs of Ulm and Jena, while from Spain  
Unloosed, the patient might of Britain streams  
Through the rent bastions of the Pyrenees  
To flood the Gascon plain;  
While trembling Paris opens wide her gates  
To let the victors in—and Europe waits  
To see the tyrant beaten to his knees.  
At last the narrow shores of Elba chain  
One who had found the world too little room  
For his ambitions: yet that brooding brain  
Chafes at restraint, defiant of the doom  
By Fate decreed, and breaking forth again,  
Summons his scattered eagles to redeem  
The glory they have lost—but France has paid  
Too stern a price to prop the wanton dream  
That squandered her rich youth  
And manhood without ruth,  
And sowed the fields of Europe with her dead;  
And they that pinned their faith upon this last  
Most desperate cast  
Of the great gambler's greed had cause to rue  
Their fruitless valour, when the battle-scarred  
Columns of the invincible Old Guard  
Broke on the British line at Waterloo,  
And, callous to the end, their leader fled.  
Now they that strove on land may take their wage

In lust or loot: for them the tragic stage  
Is empty, and the proud protagonists  
Departed. 'Twas for those who kept the sea  
In patience, searching the Atlantic mists  
Unthanked and half-forgotten, now to see  
The play's ironical peripety!

## XXXVIII

TALE OF THE NAVAL OFFICER      A.D. 1815

Nine days since Waterloo . . . but not one word  
 Of credible news had reached us where we lay  
 Tossed in a loose-linked cordon from Dunkirk  
 To Finisterre, though frightened fishing-craft  
 Brought rumours by the score of a great battle  
 Lost, won—who knows?—in Flanders. The *Superb*,  
 Lame duck of Nelson's famous wild-goose-chase  
 To Trinidad, hovered off Quiberon Bay,  
 While *Myrmidon* watched Bordeaux and *Pactolus*  
 The Tête d'Arcachon. We, in *Bellerophon*—  
 'Old Bully Ruffian', as our sailors called her—  
 Cruised within sight of Rochefort, staggering  
 On the huge swell of Biscay. There, one evening,  
 The frigate *Slaney* spoke us with dispatches  
 And orders from *Superb*: "Napoleon,  
 Hammered at Quatre Bras, has slipped through Paris  
 And is heading for the coast. Keep a sharp eye  
 On all American shipping—in particular  
 The *Susquehannah*, Captain Caleb Cushing,  
 Of Philadelphia. The Emperor may embark  
 In one of the French frigates sheltering  
 To landward of Ile d'Aix. It is imperative  
 Not to let him escape." Within an hour  
 A second message followed: "It is known  
 That the *Epervier* is taking in  
 Powder and fresh provisions. The French Government  
 May ask for a safe-conduct—which, of course,  
 Will not be granted. Numerous civilians—  
 Query: the Emperor's suite?—have been observed  
 Landing on the Ile d'Aix." Then came a third:  
 "If Bonaparte puts out, *Bellerophon*  
 Must stop him at all costs: she and the *Slaney*  
 Will deal with the French frigates; then proceed  
 Directly to Torbay."

But not a sail  
Stirred in the roads of Rochefort till, next day,  
The schooner *Mouche*, wearing a flag of truce,  
Came bobbing up alongside with a letter  
From General Bertrand: "The Emperor  
Has abdicated—not, be it understood,  
Compelled by force of arms or by the will  
Of the French nation, but solely actuated  
By Motives of Humanity. Now he craves  
Safe-conduct to America, as the due  
Of an honourable foe, whose one desire  
Is to withdraw into obscurity  
And end his days in peace." That was the word:  
Peace, from those perjured lips! But Bertrand got  
His answer: No safe-conduct, and no terms  
Save unconditional surrender. Thus  
The *Mouche* returned to Rochefort, while we lay  
With slip-buoys on our cables, and the yards  
Of topsails and topgallants swayed to the mast,  
Their canvas stopped with rope-yarns—as alert  
As a greyhound on the leash; and all that night,  
Our guardboats, with soft splash of muffled oars,  
Rowed round their frigates; for the air was thick,  
With rumours: first that Bonaparte was lodged  
In the Grand' Place at Rochefort and acclaimed  
By cheering crowds; next, that he had been stowed  
In a huge wine-butt hidden in the ballast  
Of a neutral brig, a Dane, being determined  
To run the gauntlet—though, in truth our zeal  
Was wasted, for the Corsican knew better  
Than we that he was cornered; and that same night,  
A row-barge, under flag of truce, put out  
To warn us he would come on board *Bellerophon*  
With the ebb-tide next morning. But the wind  
At daybreak blew dead in; so we were forced  
To send a barge for him.

As four bells clanged  
She swayed alongside, and with leisured steps  
Mounting the leeward gangway, Bonaparte  
Boarded us, in a silence only broken  
By a feeble cheer which the *Epervier's* crew

Sent up to speed his parting. None who lived  
That moment will forget it; for this man,  
Whose vast malignant will had cursed our lives  
For twenty years, seemed far less formidable  
Than fancy painted him: a paunchy figure  
In an olive-coloured greatcoat lined with scarlet  
And a small cockaded tricorne, which he doffed  
With a dramatic sweep as he saluted  
Captain and quarterdeck, uncovering  
A head of thinning dark-brown hair untouched  
With grey. But when he spoke the bitterest words  
That ever had passed his lips, that voice, whose tones  
Had thundered in the ears of kings pronouncing  
The doom of devastated nations, sounded  
Mild and melodious: "I am come to throw myself  
On the chivalrous protection of your Prince  
And of your laws." Yet such was the assurance  
Of speech and look, he made surrender seem  
A condescension, and *Bellerophon*  
No prison, but a prize; and though he winced  
To hear himself styled 'General Bonaparte',  
His confident bearing gave that scene the air  
Of an admiral's inspection—his grey eyes  
Keenly appraising the line of officers  
Drawn up to greet him, with a smile for each,  
And a patter of questions in such rapid French  
That few could understand. So he passed on  
To his allotted quarters, there to lounge  
The livelong day in a strange lethargy,  
Reading on his camp-bed—the green silk curtains  
Drawn to denote his mood—or bickering  
With his unhappy suite: dapper Las Cases,  
His Chamberlain; Bertrand, his Chief of Staff,  
Tall, slender, melancholy; the swarthy Lallemand,  
Strong, thick, morose, abstracted—every one  
Slave of his arrogant whims. And there he dozed  
Like a sick lion, till, at five o'clock,  
Food and a glass of claret loosed a flood  
Of table-talk, such as a courteous host  
Might use to charm his guests: shrewd questions veiled  
In subtlest flatteries—the born quartermaster

Probing the causes of the French defeats  
At sea; the skilled artilleryman discussing  
Problems of gunnery, laced with compliments  
On our sailors' cleanliness, and a special tribute  
To the Marines: "Had I a hundred thousand  
Men of this calibre, there's no enterprise  
I would not venture." Sometimes came a spurt  
Of humour, on the unconscionable bulk  
Of the English breakfast; then a wry reflection:  
"Since I must spend the remainder of my days  
In England, I may as well get used to it!"  
He laughs his gay Italian peasant laugh;  
Then, suddenly, swift as a tropic sunset,  
The bright mood fades; black thunderclouds descend  
On his imperious brow—and once again  
He is the sullen Titan, dispossessed  
Of a world's dominion. By half-past seven  
He has stalked off to bed. To brood? To sleep?  
To dream? Who knows . . . ?

So the *Bellerophon*

Weighed anchor and set sail, the Biscay swell  
Lifting her larboard quarter, and old *Superb*  
Envious of her rich burden, wallowing  
Two cable-lengths astern. By the eighth day  
We had sighted Ushant's crags of granite, ringed  
With foam and wreathed in mist, the most forbidding  
Of landfalls. Here, in the clammy dusk of dawn,  
When drowsy seamen of the middle watch  
Swabbed the salt-sodden deck, a midshipman  
Spied a squat figure, muffled to the ears  
In an olive-coloured greatcoat, staggering  
Along the slippery planks, and armed him safely  
To the poop-ladder. There this lonely man  
Stood motionless till noon, a pocket-glass  
Held to his eye, in passionate absorption  
Scanning the coast of France, till Ushant sank  
Beneath the horizon. 'Twas a sight to melt  
A heart of stone, and no indelicate stranger  
Intruded on that vigil. We are a race  
Cloyed with soft sentiment. Why should we pity  
This ruthless ruffian who had scrawled his name

In blood all over Europe? What did he care  
For France, save as the willing instrument  
Of his self-centred passion? What did he reck  
Of France's sacrifice? Time and again—  
At Acre, on the brink of Beresina—  
He had cut his losses, and the greater loss  
Of his devoted dupes, to save his skin:  
I think he gazed on France, not as a lover  
In desolate farewell, but as a gamester  
Who sees his last, his most ambitious stake  
Swept from the board—yet still cannot believe  
That Fortune has disowned him. . . .

And, for proof,  
See him next morning, those rebellious dreams  
Exorcized or forgotten, as *Bellerophon*  
Steals round the snout of Berry Head to anchor  
In Brixham Roads. Behold him now, attired  
With scrupulous elegance: silver buckled shoes,  
Silk stockings, buckskin breeches, a green tunic  
With scarlet cape and cuffs: the full-dress uniform  
Of a Chasseur of the Imperial Guard,  
Slashed with the Legion's cordon, and ablaze  
With orders of chivalry. This garb reflects  
The spirit's buoyancy. He has never seen  
England so near before; and now the loveliness  
Of that green bay, backed by the girdling tors  
Of Dartmoor, takes his breath: "I never knew  
Your country was so beautiful: it reminds me  
Of Porto Ferrajo in Elba." The mere strangeness  
Of the new scene inspires him with a presage  
Of undivined adventure. Fate has turned  
A virgin page unsullied by the errors  
Of the too turbulent past, on which—who knows?  
New exploits of more temperate complexion  
May yet be written! No inkling of despair  
Shadows his thoughts. There is a code of honour  
Among kings no less than thieves; so fallen kingship  
Can count on generosity. Though the Emperor  
May have forfeited his throne, no power on earth  
Can rob the Man of grandeur. Only see  
How these crowds of fisherfolk and townsmen, drawn

Over the surface of the crinkling sea  
Like particles of iron to the magnet  
Of royalty, flock out in rowboats crammed  
With craning faces! The familiar  
Incense of notoriety, by now  
Breath of his life, sustains him as he struts  
On the *Bellerophon's* quarterdeck, or poses  
At her gangways and stern-windows, drinking in  
Awe if not adulation. Let them take  
Their fill of gazing at this spectacle  
Unique in history! Now he singles out  
A pretty, well-dressed woman, sweeping off  
His hat with Latin gallantry, and laughing  
To see her blush. It seems this wintry exile  
May have charming compensations!

That same evening

The rainbow bubble bursts, pricked in mid-air.  
Orders from London thus: "*Bellerophon*  
Will sail forthwith to Plymouth and re-embark  
Her captive in *Northumberland*. Captain Maitland  
Will break the news to General Bonaparte"  
In two words . . . Saint Helena. The stunned man  
Confronts his doom in silence—then erupts  
Like a live volcano in gusts of wounded pride,  
Rage and self-pity. "Is this your English honour—  
This, England's vaunted liberty? I come hither  
As a guest, not as a prisoner, to invoke  
The protection of her laws. All that I ask  
Is air and water: in return she gives me  
Sentence of death! Better had I been thrown  
On the mercy of the Bourbons, or cooped up  
In your Tower of London! This is a barbarity  
Worse than the iron cage of Tamerlane;  
But even that Mongol savage would have spared me  
Gratuitous insults. Sir, you call me 'General':  
Why not 'Archbishop?' Why not, at least, 'First Consul?'  
Such was the title under which your King,  
Who named me 'his brother', once accredited  
Ambassadors to my court. But let that be . . .  
It is enough that England, by this deed  
Of rank duplicity, has smirched her flag



And forfeited her honour. History  
Shall have the final word.”

It is recorded

That he slept ill that night, waking to hear  
The ship's bell clanging forth each hateful hour,  
And, through the dark, the watchman's windblown cry:  
“All's well!”—All's well with whom?—while the *Bellerophon*  
Bore Westward for the Start. The last scene closes  
Off Cawsand, where *Northumberland* appears  
To claim her prisoner. A Captain's Guard  
Turns out, draws up in silence. (The quarterdeck  
Looks like a scaffold!) Suddenly we hear  
Three ruffles of drums: the muskets of the guard  
Snap up to the ‘Present!’—and here he comes  
With firm, unhurried steps; his sallow face  
Unshaven, haggard, overcast; his eyes  
Sullen, expressionless. At the gangway-top  
He halts and ceremoniously bows  
Three times to the ship's company assembled  
In the waist and on the fo'c'sle. Then he turns,  
Clutches the gangway man-ropes, and goes down  
To the barge that waits beneath. Above, the guard  
Grounds arms, dismisses—and the play is done.

## XXXIX

### INTERLUDE: MANY-COLOURED ISLE

Ours is a many-coloured isle, whose face  
Scored by the furrows of the plough betrays  
The tincture of earth's ancient alchemies  
In tones so various that unwonted eyes,  
Wearied by tropic suns or arctic snow,  
May scarce believe so small a plot can show  
Such rare diversity. There is no heart  
Exiled from England but must feel a start  
Of pride and pleasure when her moon-pale cliffs  
Loom through the reek of channel-spray, or rifts  
Of earth-born vapour; not a soul but yields  
Its paean of thanksgiving when pale fields  
Of flint-bloomed arable or smooth downlands show  
The veiled effulgence of the chalk below;  
Nor feels less rapture when the oaken shades  
Of Wealden woodlands open on broad glades  
Of meadow-land, where roofs of tile or thatch,  
Mellowed by moss and lichen, warm to match  
The amber glow of sunset, and the vanes  
Of village steeples twinkle o'er the plains  
Like too-precocious stars—or suddenly  
The blossomed orchard boughs of Medway vie  
With moonshine yet unrisen, as they throw  
On twilit vales their coverlet of snow.  
Yet move a space to Westward—and the land  
Changes its hues, as though a bolder hand  
Mingled the pigments. Here the shallow sand  
Of hungry heaths defies the valiant plough  
To tame a waste where no tall tree may grow  
Save the black-visaged pine, whose greed disputes  
Scant moisture with tenacious heather-roots  
And tangles of tough brake—yet when July  
Loosens their papery bloom, these deserts lie  
Drowned in a spate of purple, and the stark

Trunks of those gloomy pine-trees shed their bark  
To glow like blood-red pillars. Once again  
Step Westward. Here the dry dun-coloured plain  
Of Salisbury, crowned with hoary cromlechs, seems  
Rapt in remote and other-worldly dreams  
Beneath lark-haunted skies, while in her sleep,  
Like shadows cast by cloud, slow-moving sheep  
Dapple her face—yet, from those plains forlorn,  
Five freshets of unfailing water—Bourne,  
Nadder and Wylie, Ebbles and Avon, spill  
Their limpid moisture on the meads and fill  
The tributary valleys with a light  
So crystal-clear that unaccustomed sight  
Blinks at their lucid richness, every hue  
Brilliant as green blades seen through drops of dew.  
Yet dwell not by these voiceless waters, lest  
A nympholepsy seize you ere the crest  
Of Egdon, famed in tragic story, frowns  
On Dorset's sodden marls and those sheer downs  
From whose scored flanks the shameless giant heaves  
His antic phallus skyward—where the leaves  
Of haunted woodlands whisper in your ears  
Forgotten incantations, darkling fears,  
Ageless forebodings: for there is no shire  
Of England deeper foundered in the mire  
Of earth-fast magic—so wise men beware  
That gentle, innocent-seeming, milkmaid air,  
And flee her witching accents as they pass  
Westward to lowland Devon, whose lush grass,  
Unseared by blenching frost, finds winter keep  
For herds of silken kine that browse knee-deep,  
Bright as the cloven chestnut when it spills,  
Ruddy as fallen beech-leaves, or clear rills  
Ambered with moorland peat; and ruddier yet  
Gleams her rich tilth that, when the sun is set,  
Gives back the glow that warmed it, and in days  
Of midmost Winter, when her inland ways  
Lie glazed with ice, or choked with vagrant snows  
Down-drifted from her tors of granite, shows  
A mimicry of April warmth, which frees  
Untimely primrose-buds, and tempts the bees

To fruitless roving. Here unsullied seas  
Shine with the azure of a halcyon's wings,  
And from the sun-warmed cliff the furze-bush flings  
A waft of almond-scented air that mingles  
With saltier odours rising from her shingles,  
Or whispering sands that pave some sheltered cove  
With tawny gold. Yet some there be who love  
More tenderly those Cornish capes, where Spring  
First lights on England with the blossoming  
Of naked blackthorn-twigs that gleam as white  
As a gull's pinions. Here the seaward light  
Is more subdued; for every rasping gale  
That roars from mid-Atlantic sheds a veil  
Of thin-spun gauze upon each craggy clift  
Where creeping thyme, sea-campion and thrift  
Weave their pale patterns in the headland turf,  
And venturous rock-samphires drink the surf  
That rimes their glaucous fingers; where the hues  
Woven in that flowery carpet—tenderest blues  
Of vernal squill and milkwort, amethyst  
Of thyme and thrift, are mingled in a mist  
So delicately shaded and so dimmed  
By evanescent vapours, they seem limned  
In pastel, not in pigment, and to share  
An element that's neither earth nor air,  
But born of drifting sea-reek as it laves  
Those far Bellerian headlands, where huge waves  
Break on the granite Longships in wild spray  
That shrouds the Scillies, thirty miles away.  
And some there be who love more dearly yet  
The kindlier, homelier hues of Somerset,  
Where Quantock's rufous fields and leafy chase  
Rise from a sullied sea, whose changeful face,  
Silken in calm or ruffled in unrest,  
Wears the bloomed nacre of the ring-dove's breast;  
Where, one wide arm dipped in the turbid waves,  
Grey Mendip broods above her dripping caves  
And subterraneous waters—while between  
Those girdling hills outspread the levels green  
Of Sedgemoor, laid on Severn's tidal silt,  
Where angry blood in Britain last was spilt.

Yet, though the mine-dry wastes of Mendip hold  
More ghosts than living souls, and lie a-cold  
When the plain burgeons, earliest April fills  
Her valleys with a dance of daffodils,  
And her grim face never more lovely is  
Than when her brows are wreathed in clematis  
Whose awns of wintry silver fling their foam  
On the stark thorns that cling to batch and combe;  
And never doth a light more tender dwell  
On English earth than when the passing-bell  
Of Summer stills; when rime-white gossamer  
Blanches the bent at dawn—yet the bland air  
Of noontide, moisture-laden, seems to hold  
Those turf-moors cradled in a weft of gold;  
When the scarred walls of lime-washed farmsteads shine  
Like ivory, mirrored in the peaty rhine;  
When apples clustered on their orchard-trees  
Gleam like rare fruits of the Hesperides,  
Or dappling the lush lattermath in heaps  
Of fallen gold, diffuse a warmth which steepes  
Their garths in drunken fragrance. Slowly steals  
The homeward herd to milking, and the wheels  
Of distant farm-carts rumble—but no creak  
Of rusty hinge or axle here may break  
The slumberous stillness of a land that lies  
Drownd in fulfilment. . . . Now to ampler skies  
And airier upland fields we take our flight,  
Where over coloured Cotswold leaps the light,  
And, like a wind-flawed sea, her bearded wheat  
And barley bend their tasseled heads to meet  
Wafts of a shrewder air, as cool and sweet  
As mountain water. Once these naked wolds  
Whitened with myriad flocks, and from their folds  
Gave forth at shearing-tide a wealthier fleece  
Than Jason from his fabled Chersonese  
Oared home to Hellas. Now the ploughman pares  
Their russet substance, and his armoured shares  
Turn the sheep-nibbled sward to chequered fields  
Of crumbling tilth, and stone-walled Cotswold yields  
Less wealth if no less beauty. Miles on miles,  
Far out of sight, her sunlit cornland smiles,

Splashed with fierce sainfoin and the cooler green  
Of purpled trefoils, or the pallid sheen  
Of beanfields that on windless nights pervade  
With vagrant scents the roads the Roman made.  
But deem not that this vacant upland fails  
Of human fellowship—for the narrow vales  
Deep-sunken in its rolling contours hide  
Shy hamlets, whose remembrance is the pride  
Of many a homesick heart; whose dimpling streams,  
Colne, Evenlode and Windrush, lull the dreams  
Of thirsty exiles with a song that seems  
Sweetest on earth, as through the tremulous haze  
Of fever, wandering minds recall the ways  
Of Burford, Bibury, Lower Swell and Slaughter,  
Stanton and Stanway, Bourton-on-the-Water,  
Farmcote and Snowhill—blest epitomes  
Of all remembered England; since in these  
The inventive eagerness of man's device  
Has joined with nature in the artifice  
Of Court and Manor, cottage, church and farm,  
All wrought with equal graces from the warm  
Fine-textured oolite which is the heart  
Of Cotswold—and each village makes a part  
Of the sweet earth that mothered it, resumed  
Into her quarried matrix, and illumed  
By the same inward radiance. Nor alone  
Doth Cotswold profit by this peerless stone;  
For wheresoe'er Jurassic seas have spilt  
Their shelly slimes, the hands of men have built  
Dwellings and shrines of mellow ashlar hewed  
From the same stuff, with various aptitude  
Of art or handcraft. Ever to the North  
That core of freestone stretches and gives forth  
Its tawny riches: from the clover-leys  
Of green Northampton to the Rutland clays;  
From Leicester's foxy coverts, on the bleak  
Grasslands that feed the springs of Soar and Wreak,  
To Welland's clammy vale, where Stamford lours  
In lonely splendour, and her steeped towers  
Brood on the dreariness of the Deeping Fen,  
Black-soiled and sodden—rising once again

Seaward of Market Rasen to enfold  
The thirsty hamlets of the Lincoln wold,  
Where, straddling Humber's sandbanks, it invades  
The boulder-clays of Holderness, and fades  
In iron-hearted Cleveland. It were vain  
To hope for livelier hues in the sad plain  
That skirts the Pennine sheepwalks, or to seek  
Light in that sombre soil—save where the Peak  
With pinnacles of dazzling limestone cards  
The smoke of Sheffield, and in deep gorges guards  
Pellucid Dove and Derwent. Rather turn  
Westward anew, where blood-red sunsets burn  
On wastes of blackened ling, or flawless snow  
Sweeps from untrodden moors to swell the flow  
Of more impetuous streams; where Wharfe and Swale  
Roar through their dripping woods, where Wensleydale  
Outspreads her wealthier pasturage, and Ure  
Flows full past Jervaulx. There's no air more pure  
Than the thin dome of crystal that enskies  
Those Pennine fells with blue faint as the eyes  
Of wan forget-me-nots. Even in Summer's heat,  
Their shallow rain-fed puddles floored with peat,  
And marshy plats where drifts of cotton-grass  
Whiten the brink of many a black crevass,  
Reflect a wintry gleam. Yet, where the crest  
Of Ingleborough scowls upon the West,  
Where cloud-capt Whernside bares his stony flank  
Or the cold fells of Calder spread their rank  
Acres of ashen sour-grass, that no sheep  
Will graze, see how lime-laden waters seep  
Fanwise in arrowy flushes of fresh green,  
Tender beyond belief; and on the lean  
Ledges of earth that flaw the naked lime  
Spring creeping cushions of insurgent thyme  
That streak their scarps with purple. But beneath  
Spreads a wide prospect that no rival hath  
In wealth or squalor—where the skyward smoke  
Or settling fumes of mill and factory cloak  
Mersey's drear mosses, and a phantom sun  
Fades like a death-sick comet on the dun  
Wastes of a God-forgotten earth, where man

Has murdered beauty, and set an iron ban  
On all that's comely; where the heart of night  
Throbs with a red apocalyptic light,  
And day shows naught unsullied but fierce plumes  
Of hissing steam. Yet from these savage glooms  
Raise but an instant your dejected eyes,  
And they shall view a virgin paradise,  
A green immaculate Eden, undefiled  
By fallen man's devices—where the wild  
Valleys and fells of Cumberland condense  
In compass small more beauties than the sense  
Or mind may measure: stark magnificence  
Of untamed mountain, thunderous cascades  
And singing streams that thread the narrow glades  
Of birch and oak with silver, or dispersed  
In pastures where a living green is nursed  
By their unbridled floods, serenely sink  
To deathlike stillness on the shelving brink  
Of meres that in clear crystal circumscribe  
Their ambient mountains with the changeful hues  
Of earth and sky, and in translucent deeps  
Lock the drowned image of a world that sleeps  
In timeless trance—till some faint waft bestirs  
Their limpid water, and the surface blurs,  
And all that mirrored wonder vanishes.  
Such visions you may mark where the sharp screens  
Of Wasdale plunge into the inky womb  
Of her dark water, or profounder gloom  
Leadens the waves of Crummock; yet I think  
A tenderer beauty girds the grassy brink  
Of gentle Rydal, through whose fringing reeds  
The lapsing current of clear Rothay feeds  
Green-islanded Winander, where dark woods  
Shadow her shores. Yet all the fitful moods  
Of these sweet-smelling lakelands have their birth  
In moist Atlantic airs that cleanse both earth  
And sky, within whose pure transparency,  
By glancing showers freshened, crag and tree,  
Fell, fold and cottage, tarn and torrent, wear  
A heavenly radiance—only to compare  
With that which sparkles from night-fallen snows,



Gleams through the dewdrop's crystal lens, or glows  
In the soft rainbow's arc of splintered light,  
Or frosty starshine on a cloudless night.  
And where, from the black throat of Borrowdale,  
Cold Derwent pours to chill the widening vale,  
Some remnant of that magic light persists  
To smile on Solway, shrouded in the mists  
That ebb from Esk and Liddel, as she wends  
Seaward through her sad firth—and England ends!

## XL

RURAL RIDE      A.D. 1830

When Cobbett rode from Salisbury town  
September dews bespread the down  
With weft of silvery gossamer;  
On Salisbury's sunlit spire the vane  
Sparkled in the morning air.  
He rode toward the open Plain,  
A well-fed man without a care,  
Whose lively, smiling face belies  
The smoulder of pugnacious eyes;  
Abundant health and conscious power  
Race through his pulses as they beat  
In rhythm with his horse's feet;  
The radiant hopes of youth revive:  
On such a day, in such an hour,  
How sweet it is to be alive—  
To leave the stifling street behind,  
To climb the downland's shelving sides  
And greet the morning with a mind  
Unclouded!

*Mr Cobbett rides. . . .*

He rode uphill with a loose rein—  
The springy turf that clad the Plain  
So soft, he seemed to ride on air;  
And sweet and clear as April rain  
Larks were singing everywhere.  
Alas, for him the fluttering lark  
Shed his crystal notes in vain;  
For Mr Cobbett's brow grew dark  
With anger, and his buoyant mood  
Sank like a plummet, when he viewed  
The hateful hill of Sarum, crowned  
With barren scarps—that lifeless mound  
Whose loathly name bespoke the worst  
Of rotten boroughs: the accurst

Outmoded system that decreed  
Wealth to an idle few, and need  
To toiling millions; the dead hand  
That throttled his beloved land  
With ice-cold grip; the avatar  
Of feudal greed and wasteful war;  
The fount of paper money poured  
To glut the insatiable horde  
Of smug tax-eaters, lawyers, bankers  
And city squires; the worm that cankers  
The rose of England, overblown  
With ostentation pomp and pride;  
The *Thing* which bloats the swollen town  
And starves the lank-ribbed countryside:  
The *Thing* that fouls the fly-blown Wen  
With a hatch of tinselled ‘gentlemen’  
Spawned in the midden-heap of war—  
While those who held the shattered farms  
Of Hougomont and Quatre Bras  
Limp the roads and beg for alms!  
And through his bitter blood there ran  
The anger of an honest man  
Who sees the rights he loves the most  
Scorned or irrevocably lost.  
So he drove the spur in his horse’s flank  
To leap the roadway’s chalky bank  
And leave that devilish sight behind  
As he galloped into a freshening wind  
That cleansed his brain of much besides  
Its anger.

*Mr Cobbett rides . . .*

He rode as lonely and as free  
As a ship that sails an empty sea,  
Blithe as the roving honey-bee  
That on wind-lifted wings boomed over  
The sunlit verges white with clover;  
And through his spirit, as he went,  
Stole a miraculous content,  
As the healing calm of unconfined  
Wind-swept spaces soothed his mind  
With memories of a happier day

When, long since, as he rode that way  
To Netheravon, unawares  
He came upon a field of hares  
And paused to watch their gentle play:  
Half a hundred hares as one  
Nibbling the blades of dewy grass  
And frisking in the morning sun—  
Till the wind shifted, and, alas,  
They smelt as one the charnel breath  
Of Man, and crouched as still as death  
Each within his grassy form!  
And Mr Cobbett's heart grew warm  
With the remembered tenderness  
Of that rare sight—till new distress  
Poisoned its sweetness; for he saw  
Another he could not forget,  
A vision of vindictive law  
That chilled his new-warmed heart with hate:  
Two village lads at Winchester  
Hanged for the taking of one hare.  
Two hapless lads, whose only crimes  
Were hunger and the hardihood  
Bred of these disjointed times;  
Who, maddened by the reckless mood  
That heartens men without a hope,  
Preferred the scaffold and the rope  
To starving on the parish dole!  
And harrowed by that piteous scene—  
The victims, mute and woebegone,  
The black cap and the scarlet gown—  
Mr Cobbett's kindly soul  
Sickened with profound despair  
To think what England once had been,  
When such poor folk, by right of birth,  
Claimed an inalienable share  
And tenure of their native earth;  
When even the least enjoyed the yield  
Of labour in the common field,  
And kept his pig, and grazed his cow,  
And gathered firewood on the waste  
To warm his bones in Winter. Now

The hirelings of a heartless caste,  
Owners of factories and mills,  
Puffed with undigested pride,  
And flushed by the tax-eater's greed,  
Have stolen half the countryside  
With their accursed Enclosure Bills;  
While humble folk who've earned the meed  
Of painful husbandry, despoiled  
Of their scant share of paradise,  
See high park-walls and palings rise  
About the land where once they toiled.  
Now the mantrap's iron teeth  
Lurk in the woods and on the heath,  
And never a rabbit or a hare  
Sweetens the labourer's skimpy fare—  
Though men with hunger-hollowed eyes  
Hear the grain-fed pheasant's cries  
Taunting their stomachs as they gaze  
Disheartened on the dwindling blaze  
That lights their cheerless chimney-sides,  
And shiver.

*Mr Cobbett rides . . .*

He rode where the bare downlands sink  
Like a falling wave to the green brink  
Of Wylie, gentlest and most clear  
Of the welling rivers of the Plain;  
Where, tangled in the silvery skein  
That nets their shining water-meads,  
Neighbouring hamlets lie as near  
As loosely-threaded necklace beads  
Or daisy-heads in a daisy-chain:  
Wyshford and Fisherton de la Mere,  
Sherrington, Beyton, Codford, Wylie,  
And Upton Lovell, nestling shyly  
Under the fleece of the Great Ridge Wood,  
Rapt in the blessed quietude  
Of a child that sleeps and sleeping smiles:  
Each village in itself complete  
With Farmstead, Manor, Tower or Steeple—  
(Five churches in as many miles!)—  
A Vicarage and a winding street

Of cottages, where simple people  
Had lived and loved and aged and died  
Unwitting of the world outside  
Their sanctuary. And as he rode  
The heart of Mr Cobbett glowed  
With joy to think that here at least  
The Eden he had loved and lost  
Still throve unseen. But when he crossed  
The crumbling bridge and leaky hatch,  
He saw the signet of the Beast  
Stamped on every mouldering thatch  
And rafter sagged with age; he saw  
Dank bedrooms, gaping at the skies;  
Broken windows, stuffed with straw;  
Smokeless chimneys, empty sties;  
Gardens, abandoned and unsown,  
With squitch and bindweed overgrown;  
Manor and manse with windows blear  
And blank as are a dead man's eyes;  
And in the midst a monstrous church,  
Cold as an empty sepulchre.  
In such a void 'twere vain to search  
For hope—and yet that shrine was built  
In the firm faith of happier days  
By prosperous folk who thronged the choir  
And filled the nave with songs of praise.  
Whose was the blame? Who bore the guilt?  
Perchance some wastrel of a Squire  
Who scorns his forbears' settled ways  
Of frugal husbandry to seek  
More pungent pleasures in the reek  
Of London, where the squandered rent  
Wrung from neglected farms is spent  
On sluts and panders, drink and dice:  
Perchance some Priest, whose darling vice  
Is indolence or avarice;  
A smooth, plump, tithe-fed absentee  
With four fat livings in his fee;  
An unrepentant pluralist  
Who thinks the pittance that he doles  
To one starved curate amply pays

The plighted debt he owes to Christ  
His Master, and the immortal souls  
Of an abandoned flock that strays  
In pastures waterless and drear:  
Perhaps some tight-lipped Overseer  
Who culls that sorry flock to feed  
His friends the farmers' wolfish greed;  
Who recks not if the labourer thrive  
Or starve, so he be kept alive  
To work. What matter that the wage  
Of long-drawn toil fails to assuage  
The pangs of emptiness, or fill  
The stomachs of his hungry brats?  
The Poor Box, and the Parish Rates,  
Will bury them and foot the bill;  
And, at the worst, the workhouse waits  
To spare a pauper's nameless tomb!  
Thus, as he rode, a deepening gloom  
Shadowed Mr Cobbett's thought;  
To see long centuries of toil  
And patient virtue turned to naught;  
To see these folk, who lately fought,  
Not solely for their native soil  
But others' freedoms, more enslaved  
Then those whose liberties they saved;  
To see them left to starve and die  
Unfriended, by their cold firesides.  
Were these the fruits of victory  
And valour?

*Mr Cobbett rides . . .*

He rode by Wylie's banks to where  
The comely town of Warminster  
Simmered in the noonday heat—  
The pavements and the spacious street  
Between its white-stone houses loud  
With the chatter of a lively crowd  
Driven in for Market Day:  
A crowd so debonair and gay  
That Mr Corbett half forgot  
The squalors of the labourer's lot,  
Seeing this show of country riches:

For here were portly farmers, dressed  
In their Sunday-go-to-meeting best  
Of Wilton broadcloth coat and breeches;  
Pretty daughters and thrifty wives  
With buxom shapes and beaming faces  
Swarming round the pedlars' pitches  
Like honey-bees about their hives,  
Cheapening ribbons threads and laces;  
Grooms that showed a stallion's paces;  
Buyers, fingering horses' legs  
For windgalls; gipsies hawking pegs  
And frails and flaskets wove from withies;  
Farriers in their cave-like stithies,  
Tinkling anvils, blowing bellows;  
Wheelwrights whittling spokes and felloes  
For gaily-painted gigs and floats;  
Fat horses, nuzzling chaff and oats;  
Butchers' shops, beyond belief  
Hung with primest pork and beef;  
Chandlers cluttered hugger-mugger  
With chests of tea and loaves of sugar,  
Kegs of vinegar, jars of spice,  
Tubs of treacle and sacks of rice;  
Drapers' shelves, heaped bale on bale  
With Lyons silk and Suffolk kersey,  
Woollens from the Taunton Vale,  
Cottons from the mills of Mersey—  
And from that bustling street there swells  
A medley of provoking smells:  
The pungent scent of horseflesh wet  
With lathery foam or runnelled sweat;  
Warm fumes of stable and of byre;  
The reek of singeing hooves and fire;  
The tang of pomace, balm of malt,  
Uprising from the tavern's vault  
To quicken thirst, and overhead,  
The bakehouse smell of new-made bread,  
That, clearer than the noonday chime  
Wafted from St Denys' tower,  
Told him it was dinner time.  
So he hitched his horse by the tavern door,



And his thoughts forsook the hungry poor  
To seek the joys he relished most:  
A country inn, a smiling host,  
A market-ordinary filled  
With farmer-folk, a trencher piled  
With juicy cuts from a smoking roast,  
And a tankard topped with creamy foam;  
For never was Cobbett more at home  
Than in the jovial company  
Of men who lived by husbandry:  
Small squires and graziers, met together  
To talk of prices, crops and weather,  
To pass the steaming jorum round  
And stuff their stomachs with good fare;  
And he smiled to think how staunch and sound  
At heart these Wessex yeomen were:  
Wiltshire's very blood and bone,  
Tough as leather, strong as stone,  
Yet full of kindly cranks and quips,  
And English to their fingertips.  
But while they gorged, the whisper ran  
That this prodigious trencherman  
Who shared their feast none other was  
Than Mr Cobbett . . . and the sweet  
Incense of deference and applause  
Brought Mr Cobbett to his feet  
And launched him on a hot harangue.  
He told how half their trouble sprang  
From War's illusive wealth: those days  
When wheat was five-pound-ten a quarter  
And easy money flowed like water:  
'Twas then that farmers first began  
To scorn their fathers' thrifty ways  
And ape the landed gentleman,  
With hunters housed in every stable,  
And port wine on the dinner table.  
But then came days of Peace, that set  
A swingeing burden on their backs:  
Nine hundred million pounds of debt  
And twenty million pounds of tax  
Sucked from their blood to feed a crew

Of war-contractors, bankers, brewers,  
And holders of fat sinecures,  
Who battened on the nation's purse  
Like maggots on a fly-struck ewe.  
Next, paper money—the prime curse  
Of palsied, spendthrift governments—  
Downed their prices, raised their rents,  
And drove the feckless to the shame  
Of debt and bankruptcy, or worse—  
Since many a farmer soon became  
No more than a day-labourer  
On land that once he called his own.  
But what the remedy? There was none  
Of worth that did not first abate  
The crushing loads that Church and State  
Thrust upon their aching backs.  
Therefore: Away with Tithe and Tax!  
Give every full-grown man his vote:  
Rub all their rotten boroughs out,  
And teach the tax-devouring swarm  
Their lesson! In a word: Reform!  
He ceased; and one and all agreed  
They liked a man who never minced  
His words—though some disliked his creed,  
And many of the wealthier winced.  
So Mr Cobbett left them there  
To cool their tempers, as he rode  
Northward, where Avon's waters flowed  
Through meadows ambered by evening air  
That ebbed from out the Pewsey Vale:  
A land of milk and honey, pale  
With shaven stubbles and the green  
Of new-fledged aftermath between;  
And, riding there, his heart was moved  
By an unwilling, unreasoning bliss  
To think that of all lands men loved  
None was more loveable than this.  
So, as the westering sun declined  
And sank beneath the fiery hem  
Of eve's new-risen clouds, his mind  
Dreamed of a New Jerusalem

Builed on this dear soil, where none  
Should profit by his kinsmen's dearth,  
But without grudge or lust of gain  
Partake the matchless benison  
That God had given to English earth  
In kindness and brotherhood. . . .  
Yet, as he muses thus, the Plain  
Grows dim with dusk; that magic light  
Fades from the shapes of field and wood,  
Leaving him visionless—as night  
Falls on the darkling solitude  
Of an unfeatured land, and hides  
Its promise. . . .

*Mr Cobbett rides . . . .*

## XLI

PASSAGE TO AUSTRALIA

A.D. 1834

I was a Ploughman. . . . Proud,  
My trampling team behind,  
I whistled as I ploughed  
And strode into the wind;  
Keen upland breezes tanned  
My temples as I drove  
My coulter through the land  
My faultless furrow clove,  
Till wrongs and hunger cramped  
My brooding mind . . . and now,  
In chains of iron clamped,  
These barren waves we plough.  
I was a Shepherd. . . . High  
On the bare downland's breast  
My gentle flock and I  
Like clouds would stray or rest;  
Often, at lambing-tide,  
Late-homing folk would mark  
How on the lone hillside,  
My lantern's moving spark  
Glimmered through flakes of snow,  
Then seek their beds and sleep  
Blessing my vigil. . . . Now  
A stranger folds my sheep.  
I (so my comrades tell)  
Was naught but a bad penny:  
A poaching ne'er-do-well  
Who ne'er did ill to any;  
A gay, high-tempered lad  
Who fancied sport and liquor,  
Not wholly good nor bad,  
But that my wits were quicker.  
I chanced my luck and failed—  
'Twas my wits against theirs;

Squire's keepers had me jailed,  
And here I lie. . . . Who cares?  
Mine was a comely trade:  
Few labouring men could match  
The hedge my billhook laid,  
The neatness of my thatch;  
I smoothed the pikel's hafts  
And shaped the ladder-stale;  
Mine were the ancient crafts  
Of sickle, scythe and flail—  
Till men found cheaper means  
To thresh their corn than me;  
I wrecked the damned machines  
That robbed us. . . . Here I be.  
I was a soldier. . . . Few  
Envied the trade I plied:  
I fought at Waterloo  
And lost a leg beside.  
I joined the wreckers' gang:  
'Twas better to be thrown  
In Salisbury jail or hang  
Than beg and starve alone.  
Now to the utmost ends  
Of earth I fare to die.  
These felons are my friends:  
Who asks for more? Not I!  
No felons we—but folk  
Of hardihood and worth;  
Sound as our native oak;  
Salt of the English earth;  
From our strong loins shall spring,  
For all these shameful gyves,  
A race whose name shall ring  
As long as freedom lives:  
Anzac shall know their deeds  
And flaming Sari Bair:  
Wherever England bleeds  
Our children will be there!

## (1)

Thus England, rich in honour—in all else  
 Impoverished . . . Her old unhappy King  
 Mutters and weeps at Windsor; soon the Regent,  
 Sot, glutton, libertine, unlamented sinks  
 To an inglorious grave, and a buffoon—  
 The bluff, thick-witted sailor, William—makes  
 The throne a laughing-stock. Who shall succeed  
 This oafish brotherhood? Clarence and Cumberland—  
 Thank Heaven!—are childless; the well-meaning Kent,  
 Harried by exigent creditors, retired  
 To his wife's home at Amorbach. It seems  
 England will soon have done with Kings—and few  
 Bewail their loss; for never has the star  
 Of Kingship sunk so low. The word 'Republic',  
 Now muttered by innumerable lips,  
 Suggests a panacea. Suddenly,  
 The bankrupt Kents, flushed by their proud performance  
 Of a dynastic duty, beg their way  
 From Amorbach to London. An Heir-Presumptive  
 Is duly born at Kensington, and christened  
 Alexandrina Victoria: a new name,  
 Foreign in savour, yet destined to adorn  
 A reign unmatched in greatness, dignity,  
 And length of days.

Here in the Spartan air  
 Of that half-dismantled palace, unaware  
 Of her exalted destiny, unshaken  
 By the earth-quaking quarrels and intrigues  
 Which heave about the innocent epicentre  
 Of her calm, moveless life, the Princess Drina—  
 'Our little Mayflower', her father calls her—  
 Thrives on her native soil: a sturdy child,

High-spirited, not uncomely, fiercely guarded  
By two possessive dragons: first, her mother—  
Disliked, despised, but fretfully resolved  
To profit by her daughter's station; next  
Her governess, Fräulein Lehzen, paragon  
Of middle-class propriety, yet steeped  
In the strict observances and protocols  
Of a petty German court. It is their duty  
And privilege to shield the precious heiress  
From the scandalous contagions that pollute  
Her wicked uncles' lives. Princess Victoria—  
(‘Drina’ sounds too familiar now) must learn  
The good old German virtues: Modesty,  
Courage and Thrift, in implicit reproach  
To British laxity, never forgetting,  
When Queenship gives her wealth, the debt she owes  
Her childhood's mentors. Her very dress is chosen  
To emphasize a flawless innocence:  
A white lace frock, a swansdown bonnet trimmed  
With small white rosebuds. Was she so innocent  
As they believed? There is a wary strain  
Of Tudor shrewdness in our royal blood.  
Did not those prominent blue eyes observe  
The Stuart emerald flashing in the hair  
Of Lady Conyngham, and the bastard brood  
Of her FitzClarence cousins? Were there not hints  
Of a liberty dear Lehzen would deplore  
In the conduct of her mother with Captain Conroy,  
Her Irish major-domo? Did she not grasp  
The meaning of that shocking scene at Windsor  
When Uncle William, flushed with wine, laid bare  
The family feud, and brutally berated  
Her dearest mother? In old age she mourned  
A ‘sad, unhappy childhood’ . . . Childish memories  
Are long, and royal memories even longer;  
Yet she had cause for happiness in the love  
Of her strictly-chosen playmates: her half-sister  
The Princess Feodora, and her own namesake,  
John Conroy's little daughter, in cloudless days  
Refreshed by simple pleasures: breathless canters  
On her ‘sweet little Rosy’; dancing-lessons

From La Taglioni; (how she loved to dance!)  
State balls at Windsor; as a special treat  
The Opera; then, even more exciting,  
Visits from her German cousins that like the breath  
Of a Spring breeze dispelled the cloistral airs  
Of frowsty femininity which stifled  
Her life at Kensington: Ernst and Alexander  
Of Wurtemberg—the very first young men  
She had ever known! Small wonder this Miranda  
Was ravished by their masculine graces! Next,  
Ferdinand and Augustus, even taller  
And more distinguished. Last in this crescendo  
Of fascination, the Saxe-Coburg brothers  
Ernest and Albert. Ernest, she admitted,  
Was no Adonis; but his brother Albert,  
Perfect in manly beauty, no less rare  
In his native sweetness, made all others seem  
Dull and ill-favoured. What a rich delight  
To sit beside him on the sofa, turning  
The pages of an album, or to listen  
Enraptured while he plays! The three short weeks  
Of this angelic visitation fled  
Like a glimpse of Paradise. She was seventeen,  
And he but three months younger . . .

Meanwhile, at Windsor,

The King pursues his blundering way, or snores  
Amid a yawning court. Within a year  
The few small wits he ever boasted dwindle  
To dotardry, and, as he lived, he dies—  
With a platitude on his lips. In the soft hush  
Of a June dawn, a post-chaise rattles up  
To the palace-doors of Kensington, discharging  
Two dusty figures: the Lord Chamberlain  
And the Archbishop. A bedraggled Lehzen,  
Smelling of sleep and caraway-seeds, protests  
That the Princess is abed—and keeps them waiting  
For a whole hour! Then, hurriedly descending  
In slippers and dressing-gown, her hair undone,  
Victoria receives them on their knees,  
And learns that she is Queen . . .



*What of our Island?*

*Perchance she broods or sleeps? Where are the great  
 Prophetic voices now? The hooves of War  
 Have trampled out those spiritual fires  
 That, kindled by the sparks of the Bastille,  
 Illumined a new earth with the false dawn  
 Of universal liberty: the torch  
 Of Byron spent in Greece; the white-hot flame  
 Of Shelley quenched untimely in the deeps  
 Of the Tyrrhenian; Wordsworth's beacon tamed  
 To the quiet shine of a domestic lamp  
 Amid his native hills. An age of Titans,  
 Elizabethan in its majesty,  
 Has flowered and faded. Yet the Spirit of Man  
 Like an impeded torrent ever seeks  
 New channels for its flood . . . nay, even gains  
 Strength from obstruction. Now, at last, Reform  
 Has whirled away the rotten boroughs; now  
 An ampler franchise loosens the dumb lips  
 Of Industry: now Mr. Cobbett sits  
 In Parliament for Oldham: Manchester  
 Shall speak as loud as Sarum, and release  
 The rural labourer from the degradations  
 Of the old Poor Law. At a single stroke  
 Black slavery is abolished, and the dreams  
 Of Wilberforce fulfilled. This is the century  
 Of the Machine. If the hard-headed North  
 Has little use for poets, it has much  
 For thrifty mechanisms that shall whirl  
 Its thrumming spindles. Stephenson has given  
 Watt's Monster wheels: his locomotives race—  
 At fifteen miles an hour!—from Liverpool  
 To Manchester, with no more casualties  
 Than one wool-gathering Cabinet Minister  
 Dazed by their speed! Thus the steel network spreads  
 To our Island's most remote recesses, bringing  
 The seeds of ancient wisdom to young minds  
 Newly awakened. In rude laboratories*

*These humble seekers patiently pursue  
Their proud and selfless task. Thus Humphry Davy,  
Bred on an obscure Cornish farm, reveals  
Flashes of intuition swift and wayward  
As summer lightning; a Cumbrian weaver's lad,  
John Dalton, born in poverty, propounds  
The Atomic Theory, and Michael Faraday,  
Reared in a village blacksmith's shop, displays  
The falcon sweep of an imagination  
Unmatched since Newton's, bending to his will  
That force which Franklin, with his flying-kite,  
Snatched from the lightning flash, and thus contriving  
The rudimentary Dynamo—new source  
Of powers invisible which shall change the fate  
Of humankind. So Science, in rebirth,  
Outsoars the poet's dream. But let none think  
That Poetry is dead. Deep in the wolds  
Of Lincolnshire young Alfred Tennyson,  
Uncouth and swarthy, strides the wind-swept hills;  
Hears, from afar, the solemn undertone  
Of spent seas pounding on untrodden sands,  
And mutters as he goes. The Pennine fells  
Nurse the thin flame, precocious and foredoomed,  
Of three strange sisters; and in London's grime  
Charles Dickens kindles from the cinder-heap  
Of a neglected youth a generous glow  
Of kindness and humour that shall warm  
The hearts of generations. . . .*

(3)

The young Queen  
Sees nothing of these marvels, her blue eyes  
Dazzled by sudden fortune—while her mentors  
Meet, with dismay, an unexpected streak  
Of adamant in their charge. Affairs of State,  
Money, and Patronage are the sole concern  
Of the Sovereign and her Ministers. Neither ties  
Of blood nor debts of gratitude can impinge  
On these prerogatives: even Uncle Leopold

Is snubbed for his advice! The child will queen it  
In deed no less than name—discreetly guided  
By Melbourne, fine (if somewhat faded) flower  
Of the Regency's rank hotbed, who recaptures  
Long-lost illusions in the fatherly care  
Of this gay, impulsive creature. Innocence  
And Charm, alas! are not enough: the realm  
Desires more serious basis for its loyalty  
Than Sentiment—and its unresponsive mood  
Finds voice at Westminster, where a petition  
Of thirteen hundred thousand signatures  
Is rolled into the House. Democracy  
Demands new measures of Reform, rehearsed  
In the People's Charter. Ominous rioting  
Breaks out in Birmingham: all the smoky North  
Is in a ferment. Any stick will do  
To beat old Melbourne with—and if the Queen  
Gets in the way and shares the punishment,  
So much the worse for her! An ugly scandal  
Arms them anew. This bread-and-butter court  
Is not so virtuous after all! The Queen  
Is hissed—at Ascot! Something must be done  
To stay the rot, or her worm-eaten throne  
May crumble into powder. The shrewd wits  
Of Uncle Leopold provide the remedy:  
Marriage . . . These British are a romantic folk,  
Prudish yet sentimental. All the world  
Smiles on young lovers. Love's the talisman  
That brings the unimaginable lives  
Of Royalty to earth; the common touch  
Of mere humanity which transforms a Queen  
Into a woman. Let her subjects share  
Raptures of lawful love, the anxious pride  
Of a well-filled nursery!

His homesick heart  
Steeled by the call of duty, Albert of Coburg  
Stalks to the altar. No unruly flame  
Warms his dispassionate mind; but the young Queen  
Has fire enough for both. It is a marriage  
Of complementary natures: on one side  
Ardent idolatry strong to assuage

The loneliness of Queenship: on the other  
Much native kindness and affection, mingled  
With admiration. He will even bring  
Some glimmerings of culture to enlighten  
That dingy palace life, with its dull round  
Of table-games and small-talk—for his brain  
Is curious and acquisitive, his ear  
Attuned to verse and music. Bach and Mendelssohn  
Are given the *entrée*; Constitutional Law  
Replaces gossip as a common theme  
Of conversation. Then, a growing family—  
Six children in ten years! affirms the legend  
Of royal domesticity. Above all,  
The Consort is a Man—in this the antidote  
To a woman-ridden youth. Her nature craves  
The stimulus of male company, first supplied  
By poor old Melbourne. What wonder that she finds  
More than enough in her dear Albert? Thus,  
Strong in each other's comfort, they rebuild  
The crumbling Georgian throne on sure foundations  
Of unassailable virtue. Revolution  
May rock the realms of Europe; civil strife,  
Fruit of the Hungry Forties, may embitter  
The life of Britain; ill-conducted war  
In the Crimea bleed her; mutiny  
Ravage her Eastern Empire: yet her crown  
Abides, unchallenged and revered: the symbol  
Of an innate stability, unchanged  
Amid a changeful world. The impulsive princess,  
Tamed by her Consort's wisdom, has become  
A constitutional Monarch, the new pattern  
Of British Royalty! Fashion's fools may scoff  
At the unimaginative domesticity  
Of Osborne and Balmoral. Character  
Was the heart of this Queen's greatness. Character  
Is what we ask of Kings.

(4)

*In spiritual travail has brought forth  
Portents of Power and Beauty. Let none doubt  
Great spirits are abroad! Though Poetry  
May slumber still—perchance may nevermore  
Renew the ringing chorus of the dawn  
Which hailed her second Spring—great novelists,  
Rejecting formal fetters, and foregoing  
The loftier exaltations, have perfected  
A more demotic Art. These are the poets  
Of the new age! They speak a common tongue  
Which brings to myriads of ingenuous ears  
And minds unlearn'd the ancient intimations  
Of ecstasy and terror, which shall be  
No more the mystery and perquisite  
Of an instructed few, but the delight  
Of an uncultured many. Let men laugh  
Or weep their fill as DICKENS wrings their hearts  
With humour and compassion; let them savour  
The salt of pungent irony that seasons  
The lucid prose of THACKERAY; shiver with dread  
When the snow-laden North scourges the stones  
Of WUTHERING HEIGHTS; smile at the teacup storms  
Which rock the towers of BARCHESTER, perpend  
The ethical doubts of MIDDLEMARCH, and suffer  
The heart-pangs of JANE EYRE: or, if they crave  
More formal measures, seek the nobler moods  
Of IN MEMORIAM, and from SORDELLO's matrix  
Of uncouth granite quarry forth the gold  
Of sterner truths! So shines the visible blossom  
Of this Hellenistic Spring, while, deep in earth,  
Through unseen rootlets wells the rising sap  
Of the creative spirit. Other eyes,  
In patient vigil, probe dim vistas lit  
By DAVY's wayward gleams and the clear shine  
Of FARADAY and DALTON. Electricity,  
The century's new toy, becomes an attribute  
Of universal Matter. DALTON's atoms  
Are linked in molecules: CLARK MAXWELL numbers  
These jostling particles, caught in the mesh  
Of his mathematical hieroglyphs—nay, proves  
That Light itself, first portent of creation,*

*Is a swift electromagnetic wave  
Surging through seas of æther. DALTON's pupil  
JOULE, the serene recluse, proclaims that Heat  
And Energy are interchangeable  
And so conserved. Not only on these summits  
Of physical abstraction do the seekers  
Pursue their task. A lad of seventeen  
In the Royal College of Science, WILLIAM PERKIN,  
Shuffling the coal-tar molecules in his search  
For a man-made quinine, shall synthesize  
An aniline dye, faint-flushed and delicate  
As mallow-flowers, and therefore call it 'mauve'.  
Thus shall the unimaginable blossoms  
Of the long-buried coal-swamps give us back  
Their vanished scents and hues! Now tangible earth  
Displays her palimpsest, etched by the claws  
Of creeping glaciers, crumpled in convulsions  
Of her volcanic birth-pangs, yet embedding  
Tokens of primal life. Geologists  
May pore on these; but even earth's visible face  
Hides marvels yet unknown. The new explorers  
Sail not in search of treasure nor mere lust  
Of hazardous adventure. They go forth  
In the high name of Science, and their quest  
Is Knowledge, nothing more. Thus LIVINGSTONE,  
Lured by a deepening mystery, oversteps  
The province of his labours, struggling on  
Through the black night of Africa; thus FRANKLIN,  
Piercing the North-West passage in the 'Erebus',  
And caught in the cold Palæochristic Sea,  
Shall perish; thus CHARLES DARWIN, in the 'Beagle',  
Searching the Patagonian waste, perceives  
In the clear pools of his reflective mind  
Strange adumbrations of the unity  
Pervading sentient life. MALTHUS instils  
The catalyst that turns these cloudy shapes  
To crystal—and the ORIGIN OF SPECIES  
Shocks a too-credulous world; thus, in Soho,  
At London's callous heart, that shaggy exile  
KARL MARX, of ponderous brow and glittering eye,  
Watches his children starve, and from the depths*

(5)

Why should our Island heed  
Voices of sage or prophet? She is cloyed  
With ease and liberty: the People's Charter  
Granted, the Corn Laws gone. New railroads feed  
The thews of industry; steam-powered paddles thrash  
Her seas—and the Atlantic passage shrinks  
To a mere fortnight; Wheatstone's telegraph  
Flashes her will abroad; autonomous cities  
Pave, cleanse and drain their quagmire streets, and build  
Huge monuments of civic pride: new Schools,  
Hospitals, Libraries. It is only fitting  
The world should view our greatness and respect  
Our culture. Thus, above the living elms  
That spring from London's sooty soil, arises  
A vault of glittering glass, fit to enshrine  
The products of our genius, and proclaim  
The confident dawn of a millennium  
Of universal peace. Such was the dream  
Of the ingenuous Albert. Fate appends  
An acid commentary: within a twelvemonth  
One War in the Crimea; three years later  
Another in Italy. Birmingham and Sheffield  
May profit by this carnage in the forging  
Of arms, while Bradford clothes both combatants  
In wool—or fustian. Parliament, unconcerned  
With aught but its imperial greatness, rears  
Palatial towers at Westminster that dwarf  
The Abbey's airy vault, and a new voice  
Booms o'er the roofs of London as Big Ben  
First strikes the hour. Within another year  
Albert the Good is dead . . .

His widowed Queen,  
Crushed and distraught, imperiously resenting  
Death's outrage on her majesty, abandons  
All shows of public state. London no more

Beholds her face: a loveless ghost, she haunts  
The scenes of vanished happiness. When her Ministers  
Duly entreat her counsel, she takes refuge  
Behind her widow's weeds. But let not Palmerston  
Nor any other dream he can dictate to her!  
This lone recluse is yet their Queen—nay, more,  
Heiress and instrument of the will and wisdom  
Of her beloved Consort! Humbler subjects  
Wonder why royal mourning should last longer  
Than that of common folk—and even ask  
Impatiently, how an invisible Queen  
Can earn the sixty thousand pounds a year  
Her people pay her. This hard-headed nation  
Of shopkeepers wants value for its money,  
And the bargain seems one-sided. The “poor Queen,  
On her sad pinnacle of lonely grandeur”,  
Grows more and more unpopular, though she racks  
Her conscientious brain from dawn to dusk  
In mastering problems which, when Albert lived,  
Had seemed so easy, now so hard. Meanwhile  
Dread forces are unloosed. “Dear little Germany”,  
Child of pacific culture, has been gripped  
In Bismarck's fist, and moulded to the shape  
Of an aggressive monster. Denmark bows  
To the new Teutonic Fury, Schleswig-Holstein  
Snatched from her feeble hands. Then Austria,  
Accomplice in her rape, is brought to heel  
In seven weeks, at Königgrätz. One by one,  
The lesser states of Germany, bedazzled  
And awed by the new planet's magnitude,  
Are swept into its orbit. Only France,  
Impulsive, decadent France, now stands between  
Prussia's iron-hearted Reich and the dominion  
Of continental Europe. France's vanity,  
Flushed by old tales of glory, leaps to meet  
The Machiavellian challenge; and Sedan  
Seals her abasement. Why should England care  
For these remote convulsions? Is not France  
The inveterate enemy? Are not these Germans  
A friendly folk, linked with her by the bonds  
Of interest, blood and culture? It is enough



That France, being humbled, can no longer threaten  
Her guardian moat; that, in this blessed moment,  
The sea-ways of the world are hers, the trade  
Of the whole globe her perquisite. Thus begins  
An age of unexampled energy  
And wealth unmeasured. Mere prosperity  
Mellows the fiercest passions; Time abates  
The deepest woes. The Queen is doubly blest  
In her Ministers—though the great Gladstone bores her  
With his heavy-footed deference, delivering  
Harangues more fitted to a public meeting  
Then the royal presence; (Will he never learn  
The Queen’s a woman, and therefore to be won  
By discreet gallantries?) but Lord Beaconsfield—  
Though Albert found in him ‘no element  
Of the gentleman’—shows such an exquisite lightness  
Of touch, such fine perceptions, such a wealth  
Of human sympathy, that her prejudice  
Soon yields to admiration. None but he  
Has fully understood the depth and beauty  
Of Albert’s character; and if his letters,  
Wreathed in rococo compliment, distil  
The perfumes of the Orient, why not?  
Is she not Empress? Does not the Koh-i-noor,  
That peerless gem of old Golconda, pride  
Of Aurungzebe and Nadir Shah, now blaze  
In the Confessor’s diadem, attesting  
England’s imperial destiny? Thus an age  
Of mounting strength, more fabulous prosperity,  
Rolls by, unvexed by threats of foreign war  
Or civil conflict, till the Crown—no longer  
The sport of jealous faction or the scapegoat  
Of popular discontent, becomes a symbol  
Of unity and greatness. Sixty years  
Of dignity and decency have earned  
A willing reverence, when the aged Queen  
Puts by her weeds of mourning and drives forth  
In state to Westminster amid the roar  
Of many-throated London, moved by tears  
Of gratitude, not sorrow. “From my heart,”  
The message runs, “I thank my beloved people.”

Beloved—and loving too. Benignant heavens  
Smile on her Jubilee. Through the Summer night,  
Red beacon-flames, leaping from hill to hill,  
Roof her dear land with light. . . .

(6)

*Was ever realm*

*So changed within a single reign? The clime  
Of civility is Peace: beneath no skies  
Gloomed by the dark uncertainties of war  
Had common life so thriven, or the seed  
Of abstract spiritual search attained  
So swift a fruiting. Now no year but brings  
Tales of new marvels, as more material minds,  
Sifting the spoil-heaps of pure science, turn  
Its theories to practice. Electricity  
Becomes Steam's master: and Watt's Monster serves  
The silken dynamo, whose transmuted power  
Flows, swift and silent as the waves of light,  
Through tentacles of copper—or conserved,  
A captive genie, in frail cells of glass,  
Freed by the contact of a switch, performs  
Gigantic tasks. This is the force that speeds  
The thunderous shuttles of the 'Underground'  
Beneath the bones of Roman London; this  
The spark that spans the sputtering arc, or whitens  
Coiled incandescent filaments, transforming  
Darkness to blinding daylight; this the source  
Of those minute pulsations which transmit  
Through mute æolian wires the authentic accents  
And tones of living voices. Nor are these  
Astounding miracles enough: for soon  
The inductive impulse leaps from wire to wire  
Through voids of æther. PREECE and HEAVISIDE  
Exchange faint signals between Lavernock Point  
And the Flat Holm—while that shrewd Latin realist  
MARCONI, pledged to Science, but none the less  
Greedy of Fame and Fortune, taking profit  
From the vast lodes of payable ore unwon*

*In Maxwell's boundless Ophir, quick to seize  
The salient hints of CROOKES and LODGE, contrives  
More sensitive detectors—and from the cliffs  
Of iron-bound Poldhu to Newfoundland  
Launches those waves which shall engirdle earth  
More swift than Ariel, on viewless wings  
Carrying the words of man. Nor is man's frail,  
Long-suffering flesh forgotten. Scotland claims  
New mastery over Pain; for JAMES YOUNG SIMPSON,  
Treading in FARADAY'S footsteps, has compounded  
Sweet fumes of chloroform, that shall assuage  
The primal curse of Eve; while in the wards  
Of his Glasgow hospital, where maimed men sickened  
Like Winter flies, bathed in a charnel air  
Foul with the stink of gangrene, JOSEPH LISTER,  
Irrked by the tragic impotence of his conflict  
With the dark angel, in one lightning flash  
Of heaven-sent insight, suddenly remembers  
Pasteur's description of those living spores  
That turn sick wine to vinegar. Could there not be  
Analogies between such fermentation  
And the process of corruption? Patiently,  
Unbalked by sneering pedants, he prepares  
Smears from the purulent debris, and perceives  
Through the dim lens's crystal a minute,  
Sinister, unimaginable world,  
Teeming with lowliest lives—blind instruments  
Of death and pestilence, whose invisible spores  
Pervade earth air and water, and disperse  
Their venom in man's blood. But how to master  
This secret foe? Such the forbidding task  
Of this unhonoured prophet, vainly preaching  
To deaf or scornful ears—until at last,  
Out of the chemist's armoury, he discovers  
The weapon of his choice: Carbolic Acid,  
The first, crude, Antiseptic, at whose touch  
The microbe's myriads perish. Time has known  
No greater victory . . .*

*Now, from the pitchy dregs  
Of tar distilled, shimmers the radiant iris  
Of Aniline. Now the madder-fields of France*

*Lie fallow; leaves of Indigo, unreaped,  
No more are sodden, nor the Tyrian snail  
Crushed for its murex; the bright carapace  
Of the Mexican cochineal no longer tinges  
The robes of cardinals, superbly dyed  
With Azo-scarlets. Now the rose's attar,  
Essence of orange-blossom, and the musk  
Of the Tibetan deer shall be compounded  
And blended in a test-tube. Now the twin sense  
Of Taste, no less than Smell, perceives the savour  
Of a synthetized Vanillin—while the lees  
Of this molecular alchemy shall bring forth  
Potent medicaments planned to extirpate  
The microbes of disease, to dull the edge  
Of Pain, and through the weary brain diffuse  
The balm of Sleep.*

*Such are the dizzier flights  
Of Man's poetic fancy. Humbler hands  
Shall pen the prose of Science. Engineers,  
In Sheffield's thunderous forges lend their minds  
To the chemist's admonitions. HENRY BESSEMER,  
Seething his molten ingots in a blast  
Fed by their own impurities, contrives  
Steel harder, yet more malleable; ROBERT HADFIELD  
blends that fierce flux with Manganese—and the Age  
Of Iron yields its ancient dominance  
To a new Age of Alloys. PARSONS' turbines  
Rejuvenate Watt's Monster, harnessing  
Low-pressure steam. Now, too, pedestrian man,  
Freed from his leaden-footed plodding, skims  
The roads on flashing wheels: town-deadened nostrils  
Inhale sweet hedgerow gusts and limpid airs  
Blown from far hills. Thus in man's heart is born  
The accursed lust of Speed! Forces more sinister—  
Did he but know it!—searching to contain  
Vast energy in small compass, adumbrate  
The Petrol-engine. BUTLER'S motor-tricycle  
Appears—and vanishes; but the baleful seed  
Is sown. Soon Daimler's mightier Juggernaut,  
In clouds of dust and reek of burning oil,  
Roars through the lanes of England; while above,*

PILCHER and LILIENTHAL on flimsy vanes  
Glide to their doom, yet in that watery death  
Foreshadow the dread day when Wings and Power  
Shall be united, and their native land  
No more an Island. . . .

(7)

What should Victoria  
Know of these miracles? She has outlived  
The greatness of her era. One by one  
The rough-hewn, bearded giants of that age  
Go down to death before her. Though her hands  
Still grasp the sceptre firmly, though her spirit,  
Obstinately imperious, and fortified  
By an Empire's veneration, still imposes  
Its will upon her servants, she is old  
And pitifully weary. Never more  
Will she behold the billows of mimosa  
Sweeping the slopes of Cimiez; even Balmoral  
Seems all too distant now. Alone she sits  
In her wheeled chair at Osborne, where the waves  
Of the ruffled Solent sparkle through dark groves  
Of arbutus and ilex long since planted  
By her dear Albert. To this peaceful haven  
Comes news of war in Africa. She doubts not  
The justice of that quarrel: England's wars  
Must needs be righteous—for is not she herself  
England incarnate? Yet the bitterness  
Of inexplicable failure, long frustration,  
Lies heavily on a heart that has grown gentle  
And vulnerable with age. Her faithful servants  
Mark in her pendulous jowl and dimming eyes  
A mortal decadence; even her memory  
Loses its wonted clearness, and her mind  
Gropes for plain words in vain. Thus, quietly  
As a still Summer moonset, this proud soul  
Sinks into painless nescience. Victoria,  
Greatest of Queens, is dead. . . .

The minute-guns



## XLIII

THE TRENCH-DIGGERS: SALISBURY PLAIN

A.D. 1915

Where the dead Stoneman's barrow crowns  
    These lonely downs  
We digged our trenches; and the wet  
White chalk we shovelled from below,  
It lay like drifts of trampled snow  
    On parados and parapet;  
Till spade and pick with rhythmic dint  
    Neither struck flint  
Nor cleft the yielding chalky soil,  
But splintered shard and calcined bone,  
Poor relics of that Age of Stone  
    Whose ossuary was our spoil.  
Home we trudged, singing in the rain  
    That threshed the Plain;  
But all the while, beneath our song,  
I mused how many a year should pass  
And still our trench-cuts scar the grass  
    With stigmas of an ancient wrong;  
Yet soon, I thought, the same green sod  
    Those dead men trod  
Will creep above our chalky stain,  
And soften, as it clothes the face  
Of trench and barrow, every trace  
    Of violence to the patient Plain;  
And curious folk who chance to stray  
    The downland way  
Will talk of both in casual tone,  
Saying: "You see the toil they made;  
The Age of Iron, pick and spade,  
    Here jostles with the Age of Stone."  
Yet either, from that happier race,  
    By Heaven's grace,  
Shall merit but a careless glance;  
And they will leave us both alone:

Poor savages who wrought with stone,  
Poor savages who fought in France.



## XLIV

ELEGY IN WHITEHALL      NOVEMBER 11, 1920

Where the tall cenotaph like a shrouded ghost  
Uprose, with rigid lips and downcast eyes  
We stood in deathly silence, while the wail  
Of plaintive bugles, sounding the Last Post,  
Faded on wintry skies.  
Two measured minutes borrowed from the tale  
Of Time's unhurrying pulse-beats slowly shed:  
And now it seems almost  
That, roused by this rare stillness, England's dead  
Hold converse with her mourners, and approve  
With a wry smile their ritual of love.  
But I, their living comrade, neither smile  
Nor weep, too void of heart to spend a tear;  
Slow through my mind a spectral column wends:  
A million dead men, marching mile on mile—  
So close, I seem to hear  
The voices of those few that were my friends,  
And some, scarce-known, that, ere their doomsday broke,  
Bode with me for a while,  
Who suddenly unlocked their hearts and spoke  
Of little, piteous things that were their pride,  
Then shyly laughed, and went their ways, and died.  
Others I saw who long with me had shared  
War's common torments and vicissitudes:  
Thirst, hunger, mud, the unconscionable ache  
Of leaden limbs forespent which no man dared  
Move, lest the hostile woods  
Crackle with fire, when, yearning for daybreak,  
We lay, red eyelids gummed with dust and sleep,  
As, hour by hour, we stared,  
Tense fingers on the trigger, into deep  
Impenetrable darkness—till there shone  
One chink of dawn, and we went limping on.  
There was an age when feckless poets sought

Vicarious raptures in the clash of swords;  
Nay, even in war's hideous features traced  
A baleful splendour. Tell not us who fought  
With Prussia's brutish hordes  
That war breeds aught but butchery and waste!  
Spare us your threadbare cant of chivalry:  
War is no princely sport  
But a fool's game in which Death loads the die:  
So speak the truth for our dead comrades' sakes—  
War maims and kills more heroes than it makes!  
Whence flow the mystic sources that compel  
Acceptance of such monstrous sufferings?  
These were no heroes born, but simple folk  
Who knew life's common joys and loved them well,  
Yet yielded the sweet things  
They cherished most to stifle in the smoke  
And stench of death, to brave the thrashing sleet  
Of lead, the hurtling shell,  
The thrust of icy steel, the ominous beat  
Of drumfire shaking earth and livid sky:  
Why, holding life so dear, did these men die?  
Ah, fruitless question! Let each mouldering heart  
In that vile charnel housed, its secret bear!  
Brave men boast not when they go forth to die,  
Steeling rebellious nerves to play their part.  
Yet some, there surely were,  
Found exultation in mere mastery  
Of their grim calling, their especial skill  
In war's infernal art;  
Schooled from their youth to suffer and to kill,  
Who matched their wits with other men's, who plied  
The same sad trade, and uncomplaining died.  
Some were too young, alas, too young to hold  
Aught but the moment's cares, so richly brimmed  
With youth's bright ardours that death seemed no more  
Than a vain scarecrow set to fright the old.  
How should clear eyes undimmed  
By dusty apprehensions look before?  
Rather let life's enchanting tapestry  
Its patterned weft unfold  
As a fair landscape to the falcon's eye

Reveals each new swift miracle of light,  
Till, of a sudden, all be lost in night.  
Some, without will or reasoning of their own,  
Swept to their doom like floating driftwood plucked  
From copse and hedgerow by a Lammas flood,  
Or fragments on a city pavement strown  
Through swirling culverts sucked:  
Mute myriads, who cared not nor understood,  
But like beasts herded in a stockyard-pen  
Followed their leaders down  
The blood-slimed ramp and fought as other men,  
Yet in mere human friendship found the seeds  
Of matchless courage and immortal deeds.  
Others there were in conflict found release  
From spiritual torment or the fret  
Of thwarted aspiration: the dull round  
And grey monotonies of laborious peace;  
Some who would fain forget  
Domestic misery, and rejoicing found  
Oblivion in war's numb anodyne;  
Some hardier than these  
Whose wanton natures craved a headier wine,  
Who, drunk with their own frenzied daring, flew  
Full at the throat of death—and paid their due.  
But those there were, fashioned of finer clay,  
Knew war's vile worst, yet, counting well the cost,  
Took up the unwelcome gage with open eyes,  
Deeming far more staked in this hateful fray  
Than empire gained or lost:  
Nay, Freedom's self, and those high sanctities—  
Truth, Mercy, Justice, that divide mankind  
From apes and beasts of prey  
And fiends in human shape that slay the mind,  
Stamp out the flame of Reason, and befoul  
The springs of Beauty that make sweet the soul.  
Some for the comfort of strict conscience wrought  
A visionary England all their own:  
Green hills and vales transfigured by the dreams  
Of childhood. 'Twas for her dear sake they fought  
And bled on fields unknown,  
Wearing the patient spirit that beseems

A people slow to wrath—yet, in that cause,  
With sterner courage fraught  
Than the dumb slaves that wage a tyrant's wars.  
Gladly they fell—and we, who live, complain  
Not that they died but that they died in vain.  
In vain? Ah, let no bitterness disprize  
Their shining valour, nor with doubt becloud  
Their vision of the peace they dreamed they won  
For us, the heirs of sovereign sacrifice. . . .  
But see. . . . The impatient crowd  
Stirs: its brief rite of reverence is done.  
Hark! The shrill silver of reveille shakes  
The stillness of grey skies,  
And with a mightier shudder, London wakes!  
In her huge heart the quickening pulses swell  
Their rhythmic beat. Dear dead, we wish you well.

XLV

FANTASTIC SYMPHONY

A.D. 1918-1939

(1)

*Allegro moderato*

*Clio, if e'er my name with thine were linked,  
(And haply all the Muses aren't extinct)  
Abate my natural virulence, lest all  
I tell of this mad age be writ in gall;  
Melt thou mine iron mood—for though I think  
That gall and iron mingled make good ink,  
That righteous ire should have no truck with ruth,  
And satire's vain unless 'tis barbed with truth,  
'Twere well to temper the corrosive rage  
That spills its venom on this candid page!*  
Now, in the gilded chambers of Versailles,  
Another Congress of Vienna hails,  
Mid bickering and discord without cease,  
Another prospect of Perpetual Peace,  
While still the jungle echoes with the snores  
And snarls of satiated carnivores,  
And greedy lambkins thrust their muzzles in,  
Bleating for scraps from each dead lion's skin.  
An edifying scene . . . But let's be just:  
Though lordlier beasts let go but what they must,  
And meaner creatures clung to what they could,  
Self is the natural curse of Nationhood;  
And elemental passions, ill suppressed,  
May rage within the most high-purposed breast.  
Thus the Big Four in patient council sit,  
Rebuilding jig-saw Europe bit by bit;  
And what a Europe!—trembling with Hysteria,  
Hatred and Fear, from Ushant to Siberia!  
Russia's ablaze: the famished and the slain  
Litter her steppes—and yet the starved Ukraine

Finds dregs of strength to fly at Poland's throat  
And clutch Galicia; Serb and Rouman gloat  
And scramble on the pitiful remains  
Of Austria, rotting on Danubian plains,  
And neither dearth nor death have power to lessen  
The lusts of Czech and Pole alike for Teschen,  
While the froze sky of Lithuania rings  
With rabid cries and thresh of vulture wings  
Claiming new carrion, as in slow debate  
Her arbiters determine Europe's fate.  
Let those who now blame their arbitrament  
(Being rich in wisdom after the event)  
Know that the peace they fashioned mirrored then  
The common sense of most well-meaning men.  
Austria must suffer: she unleashed the war;  
The landlocked Poles must have their corridor,  
France her lost provinces; Italy re-enter  
The Tyrol and Trieste Irredenta;  
The Czechs and Jugo-Slavs assert their right  
To separate existence—while the plight  
Of prostrate Turkey yields a whacking piece  
Of Lesser Asia to a Greater Greece;  
Roumania must recover the green shaws  
Of Transylvania from the Magyar's claws;  
Minorities accept with resignation  
The shibboleth of Self-determination;  
Or, if determination spells a fight,  
Bow to the verdict of a plebiscite;  
Reason must rule the world—and if they squirm,  
The hand that pays the piper can be firm.  
And Germany? Heaven forfend that we should show  
The tigerish greed of Foch and Clemenceau!  
'Live and let live!' is the mild-mannered law  
Of this too-happy breed, that never saw  
Their fields and cities trampled underfoot—  
Twice in one lifetime!—by the Prussian boot,  
That ne'er beheld the pickelhaube's shape  
Foreshadowing torture, butchery and rape,  
That never watched their homes go up in flames,  
Bowed to an alien will, nor knew the shames  
Of impotent surrender and defeat!

So tell the French that vengeance is not sweet  
To us—who've never learnt (or so it seems)  
To judge men by their deeds, not by their dreams.  
Some Germans may have misbehaved—but then,  
Think of Mozart and Bach and Beethoven,  
Goethe and Heine—Heine, it is true,  
Hated the Prussian beast as much as you—  
Still, that's the real Germany: a nation  
Misled into this monstrous divagation  
By wicked rulers—though it may be wiser,  
On ripe reflection, not to hang the Kaiser,  
Or run the risk of being sold a pup  
If Holland should refuse to give him up.  
So, let's behave like sportsmen and befriend  
The beaten side: 'twere churlish to offend  
A backward race that has no Public Schools  
To teach them cricket and the Queensberry Rules.  
And let not hate, vindictiveness, or greed  
Poison their minds: abate their desperate need  
And lend them money—there can be no harm  
In that, they're too exhausted to re-arm  
Within *our* time—and if they should prefer  
Cannons to butter, that's their own affair:  
Russia's a wolfish neighbour; France, at least,  
Fears not the cloud that reddens in the East,  
But, swoln with reparations, now has grown  
Well-armed, and strong enough to hold her own;  
And if again the Germans threaten war,  
Why, what on earth's the League of Nations for?  
Thus, at Versailles, each conscientious shaper  
Of Peace propounds his brave new world—on paper:  
The Tiger, pledged to make the Boche disgorge  
His gains; the subtler wisdom of Lloyd-George  
Sweetening with Celtic honey the black bile  
Of Clemenceau, eager to reconcile  
French fears with safety, and Orlando's claims  
With Italy's just earnings. Let their names  
Be not dishonoured. Give these three their due;  
Perhaps they builded better than we knew.  
Yet every compromise sweet reason planned  
Drooped at the touch of Wilson's icy hand:

Wilson, who from his shell-proof pulpit sheds  
Prim-lipped reproof on the astonished Heads  
Of unregenerate Europe—those who bore  
Through four long years the burden of a war  
Which, he explained, *he* was too proud to fight!—  
Teaching that Right was godlier than Might,  
Justice than Force, in platitudinous sermons  
More properly directed at the Germans,  
Or planned to win the uncritical applause  
Of Women's Clubs, or Princeton sophomores.  
A Daniel come to Judgement once again?  
Say rather: Daniel in the Lions' Den:  
A major prophet in a minor key  
Bewailing Europe's immorality,  
Sent from on high to scourge the ignorance  
Of darkest England, Italy, and France.  
Let them repent and raise their earthbound eyes  
To more ideal regions: otherwise,  
Though slow to wrath and chary to condemn,  
America must wash her hands of them.  
(Alas, in twelve short months, with humour grim,  
That thankless country washed her hands of him!)  
Why did he fail—this innocent abroad?  
Was he too slight to bear the Titan's load  
Of a distracted globe? He was a creature  
Of contradictions: in his secret nature  
A student, of the strict New England school,  
Painfully anxious not to seem a fool  
In such sharp company, yet resolved to prove  
A Man of Iron; one that few could love,  
Yet none could scorn; magnanimous, serene  
In higher things: in trifles small and mean;  
Calm as a judge, impulsive as a woman;  
Kindly but cold; humane, yet not quite human;  
Naïve, but suspicious; bitter in complaint;  
Thin-skinned, but hard; half-bigot and half-saint;  
A man who failed through being what he was,  
Not what he meant or felt. . . . But now, alas,  
Spilt in the gutter, trampled underfoot,  
Lies half deliberation's hard-won fruit.  
What's to be done? A reasonable man



Will cut his loss and pick up what he can,  
Though from that remnant rise no lasting Peace,  
But an uneasy, endless Armistice:  
A Europe sick with fear and racked with fever;  
A palsied League of Nations at Geneva,  
Shorn of real powers of Sanction or Defence,  
The laughing-stock of brazen prepotence;  
A sullen Germany; a nervous France,  
Driven by fear to reckless arrogance;  
An Italy convinced she has been cheated;  
An England weary of the overheated  
Frenzies of war, now sluggishly content  
To drowse, and damn the fretful continent  
Whose feuds dragged forth her dearest sons to die.  
The dogs of war are sleeping. . . .

Let them lie!

(2)

*Alla tarantella*

Haul down the flags and let the laurels fade:  
The warrior's day is done, the last parade  
Dismissed; and now the heroes' homing feet  
Trudge the unfriendly stones of 'Civvy Street'  
In hopeful search for all life has to give in  
An England fit for paladins to live in;  
And find, instead, an England that's forgotten  
Their faces, names and deeds: an England rotten  
With cynic selfishness and heartless greed,  
That scorns their valour and decries their need,  
Where the New Rich, stuffed with war's loot, deplore  
The thriftless ways of the Perpetual Poor:  
A disillusioned land that's lost its soul;  
A fretful changeling—— England on the dole,  
Blind with class-hatred, jealousy and doubt,  
Where heroes, as it seems, are odd-men-out  
And military virtue's on the shelf.  
Till the next war, 'tis each man for himself:  
So scramble with the rest, take what you can,

Tear down the ancient civilties of man  
And build a brave new world for Caliban!  
The old, men say, is too far gone to mend;  
So let's deride the past and make an end  
Of all it prized, seeking but that which serves  
To stifle thought, or drug war-jangled nerves.  
Culture's betrayed us; Decency's a bore;  
And what did Beauty do to win the war?  
Duty and Discipline? We've had enough—  
And some to spare!—of that old-fashioned stuff.  
Let us be gay and ruthless: war has taught  
One lesson—one alone—that life is short:  
So let long-thwarted instincts have their due;  
Kill Time—for Time will certainly kill you:  
Let Lust and Liquor numb the uneasy fret  
Of memory, and help us to forget  
The horrors of the hell through which we've passed  
And blue our blood-won earnings while they last!  
Let garish light and pandemoniac noise  
Blind our unhappy eyes, and drown the voice  
Of Reason, lest some qualm of conscience chill  
Our minds and bid our twitching limbs be still.  
Dance then, like victims frenzied by the bite  
Of black tarantulas, void of sense or sight—  
Not to the sentimental violins  
Your fathers loved, but to the devilish dins  
Of thudding tom-toms and the wailful tones  
Dripped from the mouths of sickly saxophones,  
To music—save the mark!—spawned in the damp  
Mephitic airs of a malodorous swamp,  
Dredged up by Tin Pan Alley from the ooze  
To vamp its Charlestons, Bunny-hugs and Blues;  
Pray that the barbarous beat may never stop;  
Dance till you're dizzy, dance until you drop;  
Dance without joy: let your blank features wear  
A mask of bitter boredom and despair!  
Gone are the days when lightsome feet expressed  
The buoyancy of Youth: for now the best  
Of Youth has perished; now indecorous Age  
Sweats like a satyr on the night-club stage:  
When lusty partners are in short supply,

There's little that a lengthy purse can't buy,  
And raddled hags renew their girlhood's glow  
In the cold arms of the hired gigolo.  
Vain to misprise their rapture, or his pay:  
Money's the only thing that counts today,  
And in the flush of war's foolhardihood  
Money has flowed like water—or like blood.  
Though millions still are homeless, the West End  
Teems with a Gadarene herd with gold to spend  
On tasteless luxury and ignoble pleasure:  
An ignorant rabble that can only measure  
Value by cost, exulting to revere  
The champagne standards of the profiteer.  
And who can blame them—when the ruling caste,  
Once arbiters of manners and of taste,  
Shares the same sty and gluttonously digs  
For the same scraps: when Dukes turn guinea-pigs,  
When high-born ladies lend historic names  
And smirking faces to attest the claims  
Of cheap cosmetics, and with harlots vie  
To catch the seedy gossip-writer's eye;  
When gangs of feather-pated mountebanks,  
The Bright Young People, play their dull old pranks  
When, in that social no-man's-land which merges  
The Half-world with the World on Mayfair's verges,  
The lion-huntress tames her chequered crew:  
Political climber, gilded parvenu,  
Monarch in exile, self-made businessman,  
Princeling and mummer, priest and courtesan,  
Painter or poet of the moment's vogue,  
Professional wit and well-connected rogue,  
With naught in common save that all are 'smart'  
And none, except their hostess, has a heart?  
What can earth offer to abate the need  
Of bankrupt souls but Pleasure, Change and Speed?  
Pleasure, however base, to fill the void  
Of desperate boredom; Speed to be enjoyed,  
Not as the means to Pleasure, but its end;  
Change, as occasion and excuse to spend  
Money on Speed and Pleasure, and pursue  
The old indulgence in surroundings new?

Thus, like a locust-swarm on pillage bent,  
The idle British range the Continent,  
Battening on low exchanges: the Blue Trains  
Packed with a greedy rabble that profanes  
Traditions, taste and manners, yet demands  
Respect and deference—till the southern sands  
Of modest France and Italy are strewed  
With grotesque samples of the British nude,  
And the crammed Lido earns at last (Heaven save it!)  
The epithet ‘*affreux*’ which Musset gave it,  
While British morals make Italians blench,  
And shock the scruples of the tolerant French.  
Is this the sane, phlegmatic race that freed  
A decadent Europe: this barbaric breed  
Of vulgar drones and spineless epicenes  
Whose frivolous sensuality demeans  
The dignities of man, and, dead to shame,  
Makes the Satyricon itself seem tame,  
Dimming the orgies of Imperial Rome?  
Or do all decent Britons stay at home?  
The stricken oak, long ere its branches drop,  
Starts dying slowly downward—from the top.  
So spreads the rot down England’s social scale:  
A ‘noble’ shipping-magnate’s clapped in jail;  
A night-club queen, protected by the police  
Gets off her daughters with a peer apiece;  
‘Ex-public-schoolmen’, frenzied with cocaine,  
Grab jewels through a shattered window-pane;  
No virtuous man dares venture after dark  
For dread of blackmail in St James’s Park;  
While stranger vices flaunt in many a den  
Of dim Soho, and ordinary men  
Who hurry forth from Oxford dare not halt  
Or gaze—for fear of being turned to salt.  
“Yet surely,” you may say, “what you deplore  
Is but the jetsam of the storms of war?  
Your tempest-writhen oak may strew the ground  
With rotten boughs even when its heart is sound:  
What of the sane, the sober Middle Class,  
Backbone of British probity?” Alas!  
Here, too, that subtle poison finds its way:

Clapham, like Mayfair, lives but for the day:  
Province and suburb itch to emulate  
The modes and morals of the idler 'great',  
Mimic their speech, adopt their fashions stale,  
And ape their vices on a lowlier scale,  
Till the same stigmas their dim lives besmirch:  
The crowded dance-hall, the deserted church,  
The empty cradle and the vacant mind.  
Small wonder that their starved emotions find  
Vicarious Romance to fill the void  
In visionary heavens of celluloid,  
Where all life's 'glamorous' all passion 'stark',  
And every slut's a Helen . . . in the dark;  
Envy the lot of any lip-sticked miss  
Who simpers from the pages of the press,  
And trace with eagerness to its dull source  
Each tortuous 'Society Divorce'  
Or 'Scandal in High Places'. "Ah, but then,  
You quite forget our British working-men,  
The horny hands that make the world go round:  
All else may rot, but surely these are sound?"  
Ay, sound enough at heart: a patient folk,  
Slow-paced, slow-witted (save to see a joke  
Or scent a wrong) who little ask of life  
But elementary dues: a home, a wife,  
Children, the right to work and earn the meed  
Of honest toil sufficient to their need,  
To speak their minds, and go their sober ways  
In peace, unvexed by scorn, unmoved by praise;  
A tolerant folk, with no ambitious itch  
To share the senseless pleasures of the rich:  
Such is their nature—but when life denies  
These just demands, what wonder that their eyes  
Grow hard and grim, what wonder, when they see  
Wealth flaunting in the midst of misery,  
Prodigal plenty mixed with helpless dearth  
And sloth more prosperous than plodding worth,  
They choose the easier path, and join the dance  
Of those who live by subsidy or chance?  
"Something for nothing!" is the common cry:  
"My neighbour loafs and thrives, why should not I?"

Something for nothing! So let's take our toll  
Of *panem et circenses*—dogs and dole—  
And sink our pittance in the Football Pool!"

For now, alas, the lusts of Mammon rule  
Our very pastimes: Mammon wakes the loud  
Tumultuous howl of the dog-racing crowd  
That sees the favourite beaten; Mammon fees  
The football crooks and boos the referees  
Who spoil his bets; Mammon, not love of sport,  
Sways the curled darlings of the Centre Court,  
Fickle as film-stars, pitiable things  
With nerves as thin and taut as racquet-strings.

Now even the conduct of the cricket-field,  
Home of prescriptive chivalry, must yield  
To the base manners of a crew that gauges  
Worth not by sportsmanship, but averages;  
Who, scornful of the game's unselfish pride,  
Play for themselves alone, not for their side,  
Pose for the groundlings, court the crowd's applause,  
And measure merit by the 'gate' it draws.

"But these are trivial evils?" Rather say,  
The subtler symptoms of a gross decay,  
The taint of gangrene that corrupts the whole.  
"Are there no doctors, then, for the sick soul?"

Only too many: sedulous to trace  
The springs of decadence in a dying race:  
Sly charlatans, whose prurient fingers probe  
Beneath the veil of consciousness, disrobe  
The vestal spirit's nakedness, and pry  
In holier regions, where great Poetry  
Is born, yet, fumbling in that magic dust,  
Find naught but Fear and Hatred, Shame and Lust.

"Who then shall heal our sickness? Poets, Priests,  
Prophets, Philosophers and Dramatists?"

A hope forlorn! Shut in her ivory tower,  
Philosophy heeds not the passing hour;  
Prophets preach not to them that neither stay  
Nor hearken; the poor Priest has had his say  
And can no more—while little's to be said  
For Poets now, since all the best are dead,  
And the shrill, tuneless singers that remain,

Consumed by rancour, jealousy and pain,  
With mutual admiration roll along  
Each others' logs as beetles roll their dung  
Those lily-handed revolutionists  
Who think that true modernity consists  
In sloven prose laboriously spun  
In metres sired by Hopkins out of Donne;  
Who, when their images refuse to flow,  
Drag in the tractor or the dynamo  
To mechanize their Muse; too proud to pander  
To Beauty: Poetry being Propaganda,  
Far better written on a Five Year Plan,  
(What were the politics of Kubla Khan?  
But pray, proceed . . .) and communally writ  
With spite for satire, vitriol for wit.  
No help from these! For prose, you take your choice:  
The aphasiac stutterings of Stein and Joyce;  
The sullied spate of poor, tormented Lawrence,  
That frail, hag-ridden Titan, whose abhorrence  
Of Reason, frothed with ineffectual rage,  
Flaws the pure crystal of a lyric page  
Unmatched in power or beauty since he died,  
Launching his Ship of Death on the dark tide  
Of dear oblivion. He, at least, can give  
More solace than the frigid, half-alive  
Highbrows of Bloomsbury, who with eyes of stone  
Stiffly disdain all talents but their own;  
Strict snobs of letters, chary to admit  
There's such a thing as wisdom, style or wit  
Beyond the boundaries their pundits keep.  
*(Dear God, the very houses seem asleep!)*  
Cold comfort here. . . . Nor can the stage purvey  
More genial fare; for, though some critics say  
The Comedy of Manners is reborn,  
The rapier's blunted, and the wig's outworn;  
The bawdry's dull, the salt has lost its taste,  
The gold's mere tinsel and the diamond paste;  
The modish cracks sound sillier and sadder  
Than dried peas rattling in a jester's bladder;  
Yet frivolous fashion still prefers this raw  
Slick stuff to the cathartic wit of Shaw,

Dreads his keen glance, rejects his wisdom mellow,  
And butters up the tricks of Pirandello,  
A nimble casuist who can prove by sleight  
That black (especially in shirts) is white,  
And with a deal of complicated trouble  
Sees life unsteadily—and sees it double.  
Such are our seers and prophets! Can you wonder,  
Led by such guides, our race is going under,  
Sinking in treacherous quicksands none can sound?  
“Dig deeper, then! Surely there can be found  
Some granite core?” However deep one delves  
'Tis vain—unless we strive to save ourselves.  
Britain must steel her sinews, and forswear  
The false gods of indifference and despair,  
Refine her spirit's gold, reject the dross,  
Or fall to dust like Hecatompylos.

(3)

*Finale: alla marcia*

Time will not wait. On every hand one sees  
Monstrous rebirths of dead theocracies:  
A new Olympus and a new Valhalla  
Shall salve the wounds of unrequited valour,  
And promise those who lost (or won) the war  
Post-dated credits, well worth starving for,  
Making but one condition to the deal:  
Their creditors shall neither speak nor feel  
Nor think, save as the sovereign will commands.  
Thus idlers basking on Italian sands,  
With no desire to think or feel or speak,  
Acclaim the fat Dictator as unique;  
Sleep in their own (or in each other's) beds  
Unvexed by fears of the atrocious 'reds',  
And murmur: “Mussolini's too sublime!  
Would you believe it? The trains run on time.  
Black shirts are so becoming, don't you think?”  
Yes Ma'am: and castor-oil's the proper drink  
To purge obstructors. If they still protest,



The blackshirt, with his bludgeon, does the rest.  
Thus, from the underworld that seethes within  
The festering stews of Munich and Berlin,  
Haunted by pimps and perverts, the last lees  
Of infamous depravity, one sees  
The dreams of desperate, disillusioned men,  
Debased, and yet resolved to rise again,  
Take hideous shape: an iron monster, meet,  
Like Frankenstein's, to serve, but, once complete,  
Its makers' master: whose accustomed food  
Is flesh and bone, whose drink is tears and blood;  
Greedier than Syrian Moloch to devour,  
Fiercer than Crete's bronze-bellied Minotaur,  
Whose dark dominion summons from the foul  
Hyrceanian forest of the Teuton soul  
An atavistic longing to destroy  
All human civilities, a sadic joy  
In cruelty that would debase the beast,  
The exaltations of a mind diseased:  
A maniac cult—a madman its high-priest.  
Hitler. . . . No darker angel ever fell  
With Lucifer to rule the hordes of hell  
Than he, nor yet with more infernal skill  
Bent a strong race to his perversive will:  
The selfless saint—whose venal deeds profaned  
All sanctities; the ascetic, who maintained  
The loftiest of ideals—yet inspired  
The basest minds to win what he desired;  
The upright man, who prated to his herd  
Of Honour—and who never kept his word;  
God-guided mystic, speaking in a trance—  
Yet always with an eye on the main chance;  
The cool brain—tortured by neurotic fears;  
The man of ice—who melts in shameless tears;  
The rigid moralist—who merely laughed  
When half his henchmen lived by loot and graft;  
The father of his folk, supremely human—  
Who ne'er begat a child nor loved a woman;  
True comrade, loyal to protect and keep  
His friends—until he shot them in their sleep;  
The steadfast mind—that's swayed by chance and change;

Magnanimous spirit—brooding on revenge;  
Bold Siegfried, with high chivalry aglow,  
Whose *heilige Nothung* is the Gestapo;  
All, these and more. . . . What matter? 'Tis enough  
That Germans love this stale Wagnerian stuff,  
Hail their new master as a tribal god,  
Fondle the blood-stained fist, and kiss the rod.  
And England—God forgive her—half admires  
Their cult! What restless Germany desires  
Is equilibrium. Arson, loot, and murder,  
Seem an odd price to pay for Law and Order;  
But that's their way. To persecute the Jew  
Is vile; but lots of us are Aryans too,  
And understand. Meanwhile the storm grows nearer:  
Hitler *Reichskanzler*—Hitler *Unser Führer*,  
Champion of meek Germanity oppressed!  
He strikes—and mangled Austria goes West.  
Next the Sudetenland. . . . Why should we vex  
Our consciences about these tiresome Czechs—  
A tiny race, whose fate no man bewails,  
Mere misbegotten offspring of Versailles?  
We've far too many noisy cranks at home  
To hear the braggart of bombastic Rome  
Howl, like a dervish, from his gimcrack rostrum  
“Eight million bayonets” or “Mare Nostrum”:  
Let him howl on! Our Nordic nerves are proof  
Against such Bobadils of Opéra Bouffe  
Or neo-Roman empires in Utopia.  
What's this he wants? A slice of Ethiopia?  
“Give him his head: perhaps 'twill keep him quiet,”  
Says foul Laval. But England's in a riot,  
When, figure-skating upon ice too thin,  
The unlucky exhibitionist falls in.  
Did the splash wake her? No, 'twas but a gleam  
Of consciousness that broke her waking dream.  
Within a year she's lulled to sleep again  
By the naïve platitudes of Chamberlain,  
Assuring her that nine times out of ten  
The common sense of cautious business-men  
Drives better bargains than the devious wiles  
Of diplomats. Let threats give way to smiles,

Hard words to soft. Let's all get round the table,  
Turn up our cards, and prove that we are able  
To face hard facts with realistic eyes,  
And close the meeting with a compromise  
That leaves the lion sleeping with the lamb:  
That's how we manage things in Birmingham!  
Vain innocent, condemned to learn too soon  
Who sups with Hitler needs a good long spoon,  
He flounders into depths beyond the ken  
Of even the most enlightened business-men,  
Returning from his missionary caper  
To Munich with . . . another scrap of paper!  
*Peace in our time, my friends! Sleep in your beds!*  
And, as he speaks, down many a spine there spreads  
An ominous thrill of fear—not of relief.  
Though, by the narrow lights of his belief,  
He did his best, his was a craven creed:  
No smaller man e'er failed a greater need.  
*Sleep in your beds!* The Germans did not sleep:  
The beast lay crouching for another leap:  
In mine and foundry, factory and mill,  
The hammers beat, the wheels are never still,  
As from red furnace-throat and clangorous forge  
Pale gangs of slavish Nibelungs disgorge  
A weight of metal such as ne'er before  
Armed a mad nation for aggressive war;  
The crushed earth thunders 'neath their tracks; on high  
The throb of engines shakes the crowded sky.  
Though still that harsh, neurotic voice demands  
Mere tutelage of German-speaking lands,  
Men smile no more at Hitler's bluff or blague:  
Danzig, they guess, will share the fate of Prague.  
And then? "Ah then, in terrible rebirth  
Our Reich shall claim dominion of the earth.  
Who can withstand us? Can the Poles rely  
On France or Britain? Let them only try!  
Britain's too soft, too decadent to fight  
We're told—and Ribbentrop is always right,  
While France, corrupt and venal to the core,  
Will bargain for her body like a whore.  
And Russia? Who can fathom the Slav soul?

But one's thing sure: no Russian loves the Pole,  
And Stalin's gang, whatever they may feel,  
Are crooks, like us, and open to a deal."

Now the mask's off—if ever mask there were  
To eyes unprejudiced by *laissez-faire*:  
The Panzer wolfpack strips the Polish plain  
As Danzig falls—and Warsaw burns in vain.  
Unready Britain and reluctant France,  
Helpless to implement their word, advance  
To fend the March of Flanders and the Rhine,  
While Hitler, safe behind his Siegfried Line,  
Taunting their impotence with derisive mirth,  
Wipes the proud name of Poland off the earth—  
And calls for Peace! No peace shall e'er be given  
To that damned soul this side of hell or heaven!  
Eight weary months, stretched on the Flanders plain,  
We held our front, from Bailleul to Lapaigne;  
Eight dreary months, four hundred thousand men  
Kept guard, till Spring awoke the sodden fen,  
And fierce as snow-fed torrents of the North,  
Drunken with Polish blood, the beast broke forth.  
The dykes of Holland crack; the grey-green flood  
Drowns Ardennes' valleys once again in blood;  
Westward it flows: the bridges of the Meuse,  
Betrayed by guile or treachery, let loose  
A more resistless spate than suffering man  
Has known, and through the gateway of Sedan  
Pours to the South beyond Scheldt's crumbling bank,  
Spins like a whirlpool round the British flank,  
And laps their rear. . . . But why should I repeat  
This oft-told tale of undeserved retreat  
And unavailing valour—save to claim  
That those were days of splendour, not of shame,  
When, through the moving battle's dust and murk,  
Shone the bright names of Calais and Dunkirk?  
Proud Calais—where the Rifles held their van  
Four days and nights, and perished to a man:  
Dunkirk, that nine days wonder, where the ghost  
Of a great army, number'd with the lost,  
Clung to that strip of sand whereon their sires  
Once drove the Spaniard—caught betwixt the fires

Of the burnt city and the cruel sea,  
Sodden, unsheltered, dazed, incessantly  
Pounded by shell-fire hurled from far inland,  
That plunged to soar in fountains of grey sand  
And red-hot steel, dive-bombed from overhead  
By waspish Stukas spitting sleet of lead,  
Bleeding, forlorn and famished—yet sustained  
By the unreasoning hope that lies ingrained  
Deep in the soul of their mysterious race  
That oft has looked disaster in the face  
Yet seldom known despair, or harboured doubt  
Of ultimate victory. This was no rout,  
No lawless rabble, frantic in defeat,  
But a calm multitude, resigned to meet  
The worst unmoved, and patiently to wait  
Doom or salvation at the hands of fate.  
And lo . . . a wonder! The high seas subside,  
And thin-spun veils of seaborne vapour hide  
The glassy straits. A miracle no less  
Of ready wits: from each remote recess  
Of England's shores, from every uttermost  
Cranny and creek of her indented coast,  
Ports, sands and shingles, coves and estuaries,  
The rescuing flotillas take the seas:  
Sloops and destroyers, tiny rowing-boats,  
Tugs, drifters, colliers—everything that floats—  
Dutch skoots and trawlers, paddled pleasure-craft,  
Wherries and lighters (and the less the draught  
The handier for the shallows) they put forth,  
Manned by brave souls that recked not of the wrath  
Shed from the skies upon the bomb-froth'd sea:  
Unmedalled sponsors of strange victory  
Sprung from the fiery embers of defeat:  
A full-fledged phoenix, fluttering to cheat  
The fowler's springe: three hundred thousand men  
Plucked from the toils of death to fight again!  
While from the emptied beaches the foiled foe  
Snarls to the world: "There are no islands now!"  
What? No more islands? Let him tempt his fate  
On our untameable seas, and learn too late  
The landsman's lesson! Let the embattled skies

Answer his boasts and flout his prophecies!  
Let him beware: his brutish legions face  
The united will of an unvanquished race  
Led by their chosen chieftain, whose grave voice  
Offers no guerdon, promises no choice  
In all their toil but blood and tears and sweat.  
In Europe's ears that voice is ringing yet,  
And like a trumpet warns the tingling air  
That, once again, *Malbrouk s'en va-t-en guerre*.

## XLVI

THE WINGED VICTORY.      A.D. 1940

Two thousand years have passed  
All but a lustrum since great Cæsar massed  
His leathern-sailed flotillas in the loom  
Of Griznez's hoary dome,  
Where once the Norman and the Corsican  
Mustered their might to span  
The treacherous channel's narrow rift of foam:  
Here now, in even more vindictive mood  
Than theirs, a more malignant conqueror  
Than ever was suckled by the wolf of Rome,  
Spawned in fierce Corsica or crowned in Caen,  
Gazes with lust upon the Kentish shore:  
Last citadel of Freedom unsubdued,  
Last refuge of the sanctities of Man.  
Here, seaward staring,  
Drunk with the zest of unresisted daring,  
He stands—and sees, a cannon-shot apart,  
England, the first antagonist to thwart  
The illimitable greed of his black heart:  
England, at last forsaken and unmanned!  
This is his moment: now  
Let the old score be settled, once for all,  
And from the shaken bough  
Let this, the ripest fruit of victory, fall  
Of its own weight into his outstretched hand!  
Others before had planned  
Such dooms as these; yet none but he could boast  
The overweening might his malice flings  
High in the air above the British coast.  
A fury of innumerable wings  
Shall sink our furtive convoys, bomb to dust  
Their sheltering havens; then a shrewder thrust  
Strike at our seaward aerodromes and pound  
Our fighter-planes to splinters on the ground,

Slaughtering the fledgeling squadrons where they nest;  
Or, should vain valour dare  
To put the hopeless issue to the test,  
Challenge the irresistible and rise,  
Then shall the power of swarming myriads wrest  
From their weak wings the mastery of the air  
And brush them from the skies;  
While mustered in the dark,  
And stealing through the sea-reek that enshrouds  
The summer straits, his panzers disembark  
And roll inland; while, headlong from the clouds,  
Vast air-borne legions fill the secret ways  
Of every southern shire  
With havoc and confusion, to embrace  
Imperial London in a ring of fire.  
Such was his fell desire:  
Yet, even as his wings were launched in flight,  
Far beyond sound or sight,  
Viewless antennae of sky-probing rays  
Gave back their reflex: *Aircraft coming over  
A convoy off the Wight! . . .*  
*Two hundred bandits heading straight for Dover:  
Eleven waves in all! . . . Three hundred more  
Nor' East by East, twixt Harwich and the Nore! . . .  
Portsmouth, Southampton, Weymouth, Portland Bill! . .*  
Wave upon wave they come,  
Fanned out from Flemish airfields; yet before  
They sight their targets, every fighter-drome  
Eastward from Gosport—Tangmere, Biggin Hill,  
Lympe, Hawkinge, Manston—rumbles with the roar  
Of revved-up Merlins, as our Hurricanes  
And Spitfires take the air,  
Upleaping to the flawless zenith where  
Heinkels and Dorniers, wedged wing to wing,  
Hang staggered heavenward in a golden stair,  
Step above step, to the meridian sun:  
And, higher still than these,  
Their guardian Messerschmitts in mazy flight,  
Like swarms of angry bees,  
Stipple the vault with silvery specks of light,  
Poised for the deadly stoop, outnumbering



Our scanty fighter-squadrons five to one.  
Nine weeks, in icy realms beyond our ken,  
That cold vindictive combat filled the skies,  
While unadventurous men  
Who sweated in their harvest-fields beneath  
The August sun, or sweltered in the streets,  
Recked little of its daily toll of death  
Nor counted the incomparable feats  
Of daring wrought above their heads—save when,  
Raising sun-dazzled eyes,  
They saw, perchance, mysterious vapour-trails,  
Those evanescent scriptures that betrayed  
The swirling vortex of invisible battle;  
Or, resting in the shade,  
Ears strained to catch the throbbing undertone  
Of unseen engines, heard the vicious rattle  
Of gunfire drowned by agonizing wails  
Of helpless aircraft falling like a stone;  
Saw the void heavens scattered near and far  
With the charred shreds of Heinkels blown to bits  
Or flaming carcasses of Messerschmitts  
Plunge with the fury of a shooting-star,  
Black smoke and wildfire streaming from their tails;  
Gazed in bewilderment, yet never knew  
That in the waning of that harvest moon  
The deadlier reapers of the skies had won  
A victory as immense as Waterloo,  
A mastery unmatched since Trafalgar.  
It had come at last: the proud climactic hour  
Of the Winged Victory! How shall images  
Mirrored by earthfast eyes aspire to reach  
The dizzy patch of these  
Remote, unvisioned conflicts that outsoar  
Imagination? How shall halting speech  
Snare in its weft of words such flashing speed  
As theirs? the splendour of the breathless deed  
Too swift for pen or tongue  
To capture—poems that were lived, not sung,  
In brief ecstatic moments that defied  
Death in the air, by lads who lived—or died—  
Fending the deadliest fate that could befall

The souls of mortal men? How shall we call  
These heroes of our skies,  
How symbolize  
Their terrible swiftness—when the fiercest wind  
That strips the sea seems but a breath behind  
Their furious slipstream? How shall we compare  
With theirs the fleetest wings that cleave the air,  
Kestrel and Peregrine—when their Hurricanes  
Revelled in regions where the gasping lung  
Of any feathered thing would burst its breast  
In spurts of crimson foam—or earthward flung  
Outspeed the diving gannet; when the vanes  
Of whirling Spitfires scornfully outsoar  
The untrodden peaks of icy Everest  
Five thousand feet and more;  
Gliding through glacial deeps of purest light  
Above the utmost bound  
Of human sense or sight;  
Snarling through silences that ne'er before  
Knew any other sound  
Than the death-roar of the spent meteorite?  
Who were these paladins,  
Anonymous and immortal? Whence this breed  
Of heroes born to fend the direst pass  
Our Island ever knew? They were the seed  
Of the mild, unadventurous Middle Class:  
Plain-sailing folk, who neither knew the need  
That stunts the body nor the wealth that cankers  
The spirit, moderate in dream and deed:  
The sons of parsons, lawyers, doctors, bankers,  
Shopkeepers, merchants, chemists, engineers,  
Whose loftiest endeavour was to live  
Within their calculable means, and give  
These lads at least as good a life as theirs,  
A better schooling, and the chance to rise  
Above their native station: such were they  
Who, in this desperate day,  
Won for our wings dominion of the skies:  
Theirs the resourceful brains  
That launched into the air the warning ray  
That saved our cities; shaped the fighter's vanes,

Tail, fuselage, and with inventive skill  
Powered these dread implements to soar and kill.  
Yet neither science, craft nor sacrifice  
Had aught availed  
Unserved by an inexorable will:  
Were there not mingled in their moderate blood  
The fierce ancestral strains  
Of Caradoc's charioteers, who never quailed  
Before Rome's armoured legions; those who stood  
Round the thravn crab at Hastings, when the mailed  
Might of the Norman broke on the locked shields  
Of Harold's housecarls; mariners who sailed  
With Drake and Hawkins, when the Spaniard sought  
To sweep our seas, and failed.  
Theirs was the valour of the few that fought  
Immeasurable odds at Agincourt,  
And on the harvest-fields  
Of Hougomont made good the shot-thinned squares.  
Yet something more was theirs  
Than heedless daring, stubborn fortitude:  
A fervour of the spirit, which imbued  
Their inmost being, uncontrolled, unknown  
By conscious will or thought, that swept them on  
To pinnacles of grandeur more sublime  
Than ever yet were won  
In all the annals of recorded time.  
My lingering task is done;  
My tale is told; the parting moment nears.  
Much have I pondered through four slow-paced years  
Upon our Island's storied palimpsest,  
And read therein  
Some chronicles of cruelty and shame,  
Folly and stupid arrogance unconfessed;  
Yet many a nobler page have I perused  
Lit by bright flashes of the spirit's flame  
And by a radiant gentleness transfused:  
Records of selfless virtue that attest  
The quenchless love of Liberty and Truth  
In an old race that has not lost the zest  
And buoyancy of youth:  
And this I know full well:

Our anguished world would show a sorrier scene  
If Britain had not been,  
Or if, perchance, she fell.  
And this again I claim:  
In all my story there has been no page  
Brighter than this: we have lived in a great age;  
The ancient glory fades not from our name,  
And goodly is our Island heritage.

*Craycombe—Talland.*  
1940-1944.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Island* by Francis Brett Young]