

FIRES - BOOK I

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The Stone, and Other Tales

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FIRES
BOOK I
THE STONE, AND OTHER TALES

BY
WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET
M CM XII

BY THE SAME WRITER
DAILY BREAD (1910)
WOMENKIND (1912)

TO
GEORGE CLAUSEN
A TRIBUTE

*Snug in my easy chair,
I stirred the fire to flame.
Fantastically fair,
The flickering fancies came.
Born of hearts desire:
Amber woodland streaming;
Topaz islands dreaming;
Sunset-cities gleaming,
Spire on burning spire;
Ruddy-windowed taverns;
Sunshine-spilling wines;
Crystal-lighted caverns
Of Golconda's mines;
Summers, unreturning;
Passion's crater yearning;
Troy, the ever-burning;
Shelley's lustral pyre;
Dragon-eyes, unsleeping;
Witches' cauldrons leaping;*

*Golden galleys sweeping
Out from sea-walled Tyre:
Fancies, fugitive and fair,
Flashed with singing through the air;
Till, dazzled by the drowsy glare,
I shut my eyes to heat and light;
And saw, in sudden night,
Crouched in the dripping dark,
With steaming shoulders stark,
The man who hews the coal to feed my fire.*

CONTENTS

[The Stone](#)
[The Wife](#)
[The Machine](#)
[The Lodestar](#)
[The Shop](#)
[Flannan Isle](#)
[The Brothers](#)
[The Blind Rower](#)
[The Flute](#)

*Thanks are due to the editors of THE ENGLISH REVIEW, THE POETRY REVIEW
and THE SPECTATOR for leave to reprint some of these tales.*

FIRES

THE STONE

"And will you cut a stone for him,
To set above his head?
And will you cut a stone for him—
A stone for him?" she said.

Three days before, a splintered rock
Had struck her lover dead—
Had struck him in the quarry dead,
Where, careless of the warning call,
He loitered, while the shot was fired—
A lively stripling, brave and tall,
And sure of all his heart desired...
A flash, a shock,
A rumbling fall...
And, broken 'neath the broken rock,
A lifeless heap, with face of clay,
And still as any stone he lay,
With eyes that saw the end of all.

I went to break the news to her:
And I could hear my own heart beat
With dread of what my lips might say
But, some poor fool had sped before;
And, flinging wide her father's door,
Had blurted out the news to her,
Had struck her lover dead for her,
Had struck the girl's heart dead in her,
Had struck life, lifeless, at a word,
And dropped it at her feet:
Then hurried on his witless way,
Scarce knowing she had heard.

And when I came, she stood, alone
A woman, turned to stone:
And, though no word at all she said,
I knew that all was known.

Because her heart was dead,
 She did not sigh nor moan,
 His mother wept:
 She could not weep.
 Her lover slept:
 She could not sleep.
 Three days, three nights,
 She did not stir:
 Three days, three nights,
 Were one to her,
 Who never closed her eyes
 From sunset to sunrise,
 From dawn to evenfall:
 Her tearless, staring eyes,
 That, seeing naught, saw all.

The fourth night when I came from work,
 I found her at my door.
 "And will you cut a stone for him?"

She said: and spoke no more:
 But followed me, as I went in,
 And sank upon a chair;
 And fixed her grey eyes on my face,
 With still, unseeing stare.
 And, as she waited patiently,
 I could not bear to feel
 Those still, grey eyes that followed me,
 Those eyes that plucked the heart from me,
 Those eyes that sucked the breath from me
 And curdled the warm blood in me,
 Those eyes that cut me to the bone,
 And pierced my marrow like cold steel.

And so I rose, and sought a stone;
 And cut it, smooth and square:
 And, as I worked, she sat and watched,
 Beside me, in her chair.
 Night after night, by candlelight,
 I cut her lover's name:

Night after night, so still and white,
And like a ghost she came;
And sat beside me, in her chair;
And watched with eyes aflame.

She eyed each stroke;
And hardly stirred:
She never spoke
A single word:
And not a sound or murmur broke
The quiet, save the mallet-stroke.

With still eyes ever on my hands,
With eyes that seemed to burn my hands,
My wincing, overwearied hands,
She watched, with bloodless lips apart,
And silent, indrawn breath:
And every stroke my chisel cut,
Death cut still deeper in her heart:
The two of us were chiselling,
Together, I and death.

And when at length the job was done,
And I had laid the mallet by,
As if, at last, her peace were won,
She breathed his name; and, with a sigh,
Passed slowly through the open door:
And never crossed my threshold more.

Next night I laboured late, alone,
To cut her name upon the stone.

THE WIFE

That night, she dreamt that he had died,
As they were sleeping, side by side:

And she awakened in affright,
 To think of him, so cold and white:
 And, when she turned her eyes to him,
 The tears of dream had made them dim;
 And, for a while, she could not see
 That he was sleeping quietly.
 But, as she saw him lying there,
 The moonlight on his curly hair,
 With happy face and even breath,
 Although she thought no more of death;
 And it was very good to rest
 Her trembling hand on his calm breast,
 And feel the warm and breathing life;
 And know that she was still his wife;
 Yet, in his bosom's easy stir,
 She felt a something trouble her;
 And wept again, she knew not why;
 And thought it would be good to die—
 To sink into the deep, sweet rest,
 Her hand upon his quiet breast.

She slept: and when she woke again,
 A bird was at the window-pane,
 A wild-eyed bird, with wings of white
 That fluttered in the cold moonlight,
 As though for very fear of night;
 And flapped the pane, as if afraid:
 Yet, not a sound the white wings made.
 Her eyes met those beseeching eyes;
 And then she felt she needs must rise,
 To let the poor, wild creature in
 To find the rest it sought to win.
 She rose; and set the casement wide;
 And caught the murmur of the tide;
 And saw, afar, the mounded graves
 About the church beside the waves:
 The huddled headstones gleaming white
 And ghostly in the cold moonlight.

The bird flew straightway to the bed;

And hovered o'er the husband's head,
And circled thrice above his head,
Three times above his dreaming head:
And, as she watched it, flying round
She wondered that it made no sound;
And, while she wondered, it was gone:
And cold and white, the moonlight shone
Upon her husband, sleeping there;
And turned to silver his gold hair;
And paled like death his ruddy face.
Then, creeping back into her place,
She lay beside him in the bed:
But, if she closed her eyes, with dread
She saw that wild bird's eyes that burned
Through her shut eyelids, though she turned
Her blessings over in her heart,
That peace might come: and with a start,
If she but drowsed, or dreamt of rest,
She felt that wild beak in her breast.
So, wearying for the time to rise,
She watched, till dawn was in the skies.

Her husband woke: but not a word
She told him of the strange, white bird:
But, as at breakfast-time, she took
The pan of porridge from the crook;
And all was ready to begin;
A neighbour gossip hurried in;
And told the news, that Phoebe Wright
Had died in childbirth in the night.
The husband neither spoke, nor stirred,
But sat as one who, having heard,
May never hearken to a word
From any living lips again;
And, heedless of the tongues of men,
Hears, in a silence, dread and deep,
The dead folk talking in their sleep.
His porridge stood till it was cold:
And as he sat, his face grew old;
And all his yellow hair turned white,

As it had looked to her last night,
 When it was drenched with cold moonlight.
 And she knew all: yet never said
 A word to him about the dead;
 Or pestered him to take his meat:
 But, sitting silent in her seat,
 She left him quiet with his heart
 To thoughts in which she had no part;
 Until he rose to go about
 His daily work; and staggered out.
 And all that day, her eyes were dim
 That she had borne no child to him.

Days passed: and then, one evening late,
 As she came by the churchyard-gate,
 She saw him, near the new-made grave:
 And, with a lifted head and brave,
 She hurried home, lest he should know
 That she had looked upon his woe.
 And when they sat beside the fire,
 Although it seemed he could not tire
 Of gazing on the glowing coal,
 And though a fire was in her soul;
 She sat beside him with a smile,
 Lest he should look on her, the while,
 And wonder what could make her sad
 When all the world but him was glad.
 But, not a word to her he said:
 And silently they went to bed.

She never closed her eyes that night:
 And she was stirring, ere the light;
 And while her husband lay at rest,
 She left his side, and quickly dressed;
 And stole downstairs, as though in fear
 That he should chance to wake, and hear.
 And still the stars were burning bright,
 As she passed out into the night;
 And all the dewy air was sweet
 With flowers that grew about her feet,

Where he, for her, when they were wed,
Had digged and sown a wallflower-bed:
And on the rich, deep, mellow scent
A gust of memories came and went,
As, dreaming of those old glad hours,
She stooped to pluck a bunch of flowers,
To lay upon the flowerless grave
That held his heart beside the wave.
Though, like a troop of ghosts in white,
The headstones watched in cold starlight,
As, by the dead girl's grave she knelt,
No fear in her full heart she felt:
But hurried home, when she had laid
Her offering on the turf, afraid
That he should wake, and find her gone:
And still the stars in heaven shone,
When into bed again she crept,
And lay beside him, while he slept
And when day came, upon his hair,
The warm light fell: and young and fair,
He looked again to her kind eyes
That watched him till 'twas time to rise.

And, every day, as he went by
The churchyard-gate with downcast eye,
He saw fresh blooms upon the grave
That held his heart beside the wave:
And, wondering, he was glad to find
That any living soul was kind
To that dead girl who died the death
Of shame for his sake: and the breath
Of those fresh flowers to him was sweet,
As he trudged home with laggard feet,
Still wondering who could be her friend.

He never knew, until the end,
When, in the churchyard by the wave,
He stood beside another grave:
And, as the priest's last words were said,
He turned, and lifting up his head,

He saw the bunch of flowers was dead
 Upon the dead girl's grave; and felt
 The truth shoot through his heart, and melt
 The frost of icy bitterness,
 And flood his heart with warm distress:
 And, kneeling by his dead wife's grave,
 To her, at last, her hour he gave.

That night, she dreamt he, too, had died,
 And they were sleeping, side by side.

THE MACHINE

Since Thursday he'd been working overtime,
 With only three short hours for food and sleep,
 When no sleep came, because of the dull beat
 Of his fagged brain; and he could scarcely eat.
 And now, on Saturday, when he was free,
 And all his fellows hurried home to tea,
 He was so dazed that he could hardly keep
 His hands from going through the pantomime
 Of keeping-even sheets in his machine—
 The sleek machine that, day and night,
 Fed with paper, virgin white,
 Through those glaring, flaring hours
 In the incandescent light,
 Printed children's picture-books—
 Red and yellow, blue and green,
 With sunny fields and running brooks,
 Ships at sea, and golden sands,
 Queer white towns in Eastern lands,
 Tossing palms on coral strands—
 Until at times the clank and whirr and click,
 And shimmer of white paper turned him sick;
 And though at first the colours made him glad,
 They soon were dancing in his brain like mad;

And kept on flaring through his burning head:
 Now, in a flash, the workshop, flaming red;
 Now blazing green; now staring blue;
 And then the yellow glow too well he knew:
 Until the sleek machine, with roar and glare,
 Began to take him in a dazzling snare;
 When, fascinated, with a senseless stare,
 It drew him slowly towards it, till his hair
 Was caught betwixt the rollers; but his hand,
 Almost before his brain could understand,
 Had clutched the lever; and the wheels were stopped
 Just in the nick of time; though now he dropped,
 Half-senseless on the littered workshop floor:
 And he'd lain dazed a minute there or more,
 When his machine-girl helped him to a seat.
 But soon again he was upon his feet,
 And tending that unsatisfied machine;
 And printing pictures, red and blue and green,
 Until again the green and blue and red
 Went jigging in a riot through his head;
 And, wildest of the raging rout,
 The blinding, screeching, racking yellow—
 A crazy devil of a fellow—
 O'er all the others seemed to shout.
 For hands must not be idle when the year
 Is getting through, and Christmas drawing near,
 With piles on piles of picture-books to print
 For people who spend money without stint:
 And, while they're paying down their liberal gold,
 Guess little what is bought, and what is sold.

But he, at last, was free till Monday, free
 To sleep, to eat, to dream, to sulk, to walk,
 To laugh, to sing, to whistle, or to talk ...
 If only, through his brain, unceasingly,
 The wheels would not keep whirring, while the smell—
 The oily smell of thick and sticky glaze
 Clung to his nostrils, till 'twas hard to tell
 If he were really out in the fresh air;
 And still before his eyes, the blind, white glare,

And then the colours dancing in his head,
 A maddening maze of yellow, blue and red.
 So, on he wandered in a kind of daze,
 Too racked with sleeplessness to think of bed
 Save as a hell, where you must toss and toss,
 With colours shooting in insane criss-cross
 Before wide, prickling, gritty, sleepless eyes.

But, as he walked along the darkening street,
 Too tired to rest, and far too spent to eat,
 The swish and patter of the passing feet,
 The living, human murmur, and keen cries,
 The deep, cool shadows of the coming night,
 About quick-kindling jets of clustered light;
 And the fresh breathing of the rain-washed air,
 Brought something of sweet healing to his mind;
 And, though he trailed along as if half-blind,
 Yet often on the pavement he would stop
 To gaze at goods displayed within a shop;
 And wonder, in a dull and lifeless way,
 What they had cost, and who'd the price to pay.
 But those two kinds of shop which, as a boy,
 Had been to him a never-failing joy,
 The bookshop and the fruitshop, he passed by,
 As if their colours seared his wincing eye;
 For still he feared the yellow, blue and red
 Would start that devils' dancing in his head.
 And soon, through throngs of people, almost gay
 To be let loose from work, he pushed his way;
 And ripples of their careless laughter stole
 Like waves of cooling waters through his soul,
 While sometimes he would lift his aching eyes,
 And see a child's face, flushed with proud surprise,
 As, gripping both its parents' hands quite tight,
 It found itself in fairylands of light,
 Walking with grown-up people through the night:
 Then, turning, with a shudder he would see
 Poor painted faces, leering frightfully,
 And so drop back from heaven again to hell.

And then, somehow, though how he scarce could tell,
He found that he was walking through the throng,
Quite happy, with a young girl at his side—
A young girl apple-cheeked and eager-eyed;
And her frank, friendly chatter seemed a song
To him, who ne'er till now had heard life sing.
And youth within him kindled quick and strong,
As he drank in that careless chattering.
And now she told to him how she had come
From some far Northern Isle to earn her bread;
And in a stuffy office all day long,
In shiny ledgers, with a splitting head,
She added dazzling figures till they danced,
And tied themselves in wriggling knots, and pranced,
And scrambled helter-skelter o'er the page:
And, though it seemed already quite an age
Since she had left her home, from end to end
Of this big town she had not any friend:
At times she almost dreaded she'd go dumb,
With not a soul to speak to; for, at home
In her own Island, she knew everyone...
No strangers there! save when the tinkers came,
With pots and pans aglinting in the sun—
You saw the tin far off, like glancing flame,
As all about the Island they would roam....
Then, of themselves at home, there were six brothers,
Five sisters, with herself, besides the others—
Two homeless babes, whom, having lost their mothers,
Her mother'd taken in among her own...
And she in all her life had hardly known
Her mother with no baby at her breast...
She'd always sing to hush them all to sleep;
And sang, too, for the dancing, sang to keep
The feet in time and tune; and still sang best,
Clean best of all the singers of the Isle.
And as she talked of home, he saw her smile,
With happy, far-off gaze; and then as though
In wonder how she'd come to chatter so
To this pale, grave-eyed boy, she paused, half shy;
And then she laughed, with laughter clear and true;

And looked into his eyes; and he laughed too,
And they were happy, hardly knowing why.

And now he told her of his life, and how
He too had been nigh friendless, until now.
And soon he talked to her about his work;
But, when he spoke of it, as with a jerk,
The light dropped from his eyes. He seemed to slip
Once more in the machine's relentless grip;
And hear again the clank and whirr and click;
And see the dancing colours and the glare;
Until his dizzy brain again turned sick:
And seeing him look round with vacant air,
Fierce pity cut her to the very quick;
And as her eyes with keen distress were filled,
She touched his hand; and soon her kind touch stilled
The agony: and so, to bring him ease,
She told more of that Isle in Northern seas,
Where she was born, and of the folks at home:
And how, all night, you heard the wash of foam...
Sometimes, on stormy nights, against the pane
The sousing spray would rattle just like rain;
And oft the high-tides scoured the threshold clean...

And, as she talked, he saw the sea-light glint
In her dark eyes: and then the sleek machine
Lost hold on him at last; and ceased to print:
And in his eyes there sprang a kindred light,
As, hand in hand, they wandered through the night.

THE LODESTAR

From hag to hag, o'er miles of quaking moss,
Benighted, in an unknown countryside,
Among gaunt hills, the stars my only guide;
Bewildered by peat-waters, black and deep,

Wherein the mocking stars swam; spent for sleep;
 O'er-wearied by long trudging; at a loss
 Which way to turn for shelter from the night;
 I struggled on, until, my head grown light
 From utter weariness, I almost sank
 To rest among the tussocks, soft and dank,
 Drowsing, half-dazed, and murmuring: it were best
 To stray no further: but, to lie at rest,
 Beneath the cold, white stars, for evermore:
 When, suddenly, I came across
 A runnel oozing from the moss;
 And knew that, if I followed where it led,
 'Twould bring me to a valley, in the end,
 Where there'd be houses, and, perhaps, a bed.

And so, the little runnel was my friend;
 And as I walked beside its path, at first
 It kept a friendly silence; then it burst
 Into a friendly singing, as it rambled,
 Among big boulders, down a craggy steep,
 'Mid bracken, nigh breast-deep,
 Through which I scrambled,
 Half-blind and numb for sleep,
 Until it seemed that I could strive no more:
 When, startled by a startled sheep,
 Looking down, I saw a track—
 A stony trackway, dimly white,
 Disappearing in the night,
 Across a waste of heather, burnt and black.
 And so, I took it, mumbling o'er and o'er,
 In witlessness of weariness,
 And featherheaded foolishness:
 A track must lead, at sometime, to a door.

And, trudging to this senseless tune,
 That kept on drumming in my head,
 I followed where the pathway led;
 But, all too soon,
 It left the ling, and nigh was lost
 Among the bent that glimmered grey

About my sore-bewildered way:
 But when, at length, it crossed
 A brawling burn, I saw, afar,
 A cottage window light—
 A star, but no cold, heavenly star—
 A warm red star of welcome in the night.

Far off, it burned upon the black hillside,
 Sole star of earth in all that waste so wide:
 A little human lantern in the night,
 Yet, more to me than all the bright
 Unfriendly stars of heaven, so cold and white.

And, as it dimly shone,
 Though towards it I could only go
 With stumbling step and slow,
 It quickened in my heart a kindred glow;
 And seemed to draw me on
 That last rough mile or so,
 Now seen, now hidden, when the track
 Dipped down into a slack,
 And all the earth again was black:
 And from the unseen fern,
 Grey ghost of all bewildered things,
 An owl brushed by me on unrustling wings,
 And gave me quite a turn,
 And sent a shiver through my hair.

Then, again, more fair
 Flashed the friendly light,
 Beckoning through the night,
 A golden, glowing square,
 Growing big and clearer,
 As I drew slowly nearer,
 With eager, stumbling feet;
 And snuffed the homely reek of peat:
 And saw, above me, lone and high,
 A cottage, dark against the sky—
 A candle shining on the window-sill.

With thankful heart, I climbed the hill;
 And stood, at last, before
 The dark and unknown door,
 Wondering if food and shelter lay behind,
 And what the welcome I should find,
 Whether kindly, or unkind:
 But I had scarcely knocked, to learn my fate,
 When the latch lifted, and the door swung wide
 On creaking hinges; and I saw, inside,
 A frail old woman, very worn and white,
 Her body all atremble in the light,
 Who gazed with strange, still eyes into the night,
 As though she did not see me, but looked straight
 Beyond me, to some unforgotten past:
 And I was startled when she said at last,
 With strange, still voice: "You're welcome, though you're late."

And then, an old man, nodding in a chair,
 Beside the fire, awoke with sleepy stare;
 And rose in haste; and led her to a seat,
 Beside the cosy hearth of glowing peat;
 And muttered to me, as he took her hand:
 "It's queer, it's queer, that she, to-night, should stand,
 Who has not stood alone for fifteen year.
 Though I heard nothing, she was quick to hear.
 I must have dozed; but she has been awake,
 And listening for your footstep since daybreak:
 For she was certain you would come to-day;
 Aye, she was sure, for all that I could say:
 Talk as I might, she would not go to bed,
 Till you should come. Your supper has been spread
 This long while: you'll be ready for your meat."
 With that he beckoned me to take a seat
 Before the table, lifting from the crook
 The singing kettle; while, with far-off look,
 As though she neither saw nor heard,
 His wife sat gazing at the glowing peat.

So, wondering sorely, I sat down to eat;
 And yet she neither spoke, nor stirred;

But in her high-backed chair sat bolt-upright,
 With still grey eyes; and tumbled hair, as white
 As fairy-cotton, straggling o'er her brow,
 And hung in wisps about her wasted cheek.
 But, when I'd finished, and drew near the fire,
 She suddenly turned round to speak,
 Her old eyes kindling with a tense desire.
 Her words came tremblingly: "You'll tell me now
 What news you bring of him, my son?" Amazed,
 I met that searching and love-famished look:
 And then the old man, seeing I was dazed,
 Made shift to swing aside the kettle crook;
 And muttered in my ear:
 "John Netherton, his name:" and as I gazed
 Into the peat that broke in clear blue flame,
 Remembrance flashed upon me with the name;
 And I slipped back in memory twenty year—
 Back to the fo'c'sle of a villainous boat;
 And once again in that hot hell I lay,
 Watching the smoky lantern duck and sway,
 As though in steamy stench it kept afloat...
 The fiery fangs of fever at my throat;
 And my poor broken arm, ill-set,
 A bar of white-hot iron at my side:
 And, as I lay, with staring eyes pricked wide,
 Throughout eternities of agony,
 I saw a big, black shadow stoop o'er me;
 And felt a cool hand touch my brow, and wet
 My cracking lips: and sank in healing sleep:
 And when I rose from that unfathomed deep,
 I saw the youngest of that rascal crew
 Beside my bunk; and heard his name; and knew
 'Twas he who'd brought me ease: but, soon, ashore,
 We parted; and I never saw him more;
 Though, some while after, in another place,
 I heard he'd perished in a drunken brawl...

And now the old man touched me, to recall
 My wandering thoughts; and breathed again the name
 And I looked up into the mother's face

That burned before me with grey eyes aflame.
 And so I told her how I'd met her son;
 And of the kindly things that he had done.
 And as I spoke her quivering spirit drank
 The news that it had thirsted for so long;
 And for a flashing moment gay and strong
 Life flamed in her old eyes, then slowly sank.
 "And he was happy when you saw him last?"
 She asked: and I was glad to answer, "Yes."
 Then all sat dreaming without stir or sound,
 As gradually she sank into the past,
 With eyes that looked beyond all happiness,
 Beyond all earthly trouble and distress,
 Into some other world than ours. The thread
 That long had held the straining life earthbound
 Was loosed at last: her eyes grew dark: her head
 Drooped slowly on her breast; and she was dead.

The old man at her side spoke not a word,
 As we arose, and bore her to the bed;
 And laid her on the clean, white quilt at rest
 With calm hands folded on her quiet breast.
 And, hour by hour, he hardly even stirred,
 Crouching beside me in the ingle-seat;
 And staring, staring at the still red glow:
 But, only when the fire was burning low,
 He rose to bring fresh peat;
 And muttered with dull voice and slow:
 "This fire has ne'er burned out through all these years—
 Not since the hearthstone first was set—
 And that is nigh two hundred year ago.
 My father's father built this house; and I...
 I thought my son..." and then he gave a sigh;
 And as he stooped, his wizened cheek was wet
 With slowly-trickling tears.
 And now he hearkened, while an owl's keen cry
 Sang through the silence, as it fluttered nigh
 The cottage-window, dazzled by the light,
 Then back, with fainter hootings, into night.

But, when the fresh peats broke into a blaze,
 He watched it with a steady, dry-eyed gaze;
 And spoke once more: "And he, dead, too!
 You did not tell her; but I knew ... I knew!"

And now came all the tale of their distress:
 Their only son, in wanton waywardness,
 Had left them, nearly thirty year ago;
 And they had never had a word from him
 In all that time... the reckless blow
 Of his unkindness struck his mother low...
 Her hair, as ruddy as the fern
 In late September by a moorland burn,
 Had shrivelled rimey-white
 In one short summer's night:
 And they had looked, and looked for his return...
 His mother set for him at every meal,
 And kept his bed well-aired ... the knife and fork
 I'd used were John's ... but, as all hope grew dim,
 She sickened, dwindling feebler every day:
 Though, when it seemed that she must pass away,
 She grew more confident that, ere she passed,
 A stranger would bring news to her, at last,
 Of her lost son. "And when I woke in bed
 Beside her, as the dawn was burning red,
 She turned to me, with sleepless eyes, and said:
 'The news will come, to-day.'"

He spoke no more: and silent in my seat,
 With burning eyes upon the burning peat,
 I pondered on this strangest of strange things
 That had befallen in my vagrant life:
 And how, at last, my idle wanderings
 Had brought me to this old man and his wife.
 And as I brooded o'er the blaze,
 I thought with awe of that steadfast desire
 Which, unto me unknown,
 Had drawn me through long years, by such strange ways,
 From that dark fo'c'sle to this cottage-fire.

And now, at last, quite spent, I dropped asleep:
 And slumbered long and deep:
 And when I waked, the peats were smouldering white
 Upon the white hearthstone:
 And over heath and bent dawn kindled bright
 Beyond dark ridges in a rosy fleece:
 While from the little window morning light
 Fell on her face, made holy with the peace
 That passeth understanding; and was shed
 In tender beams upon the low-bowed head
 Of that old man, forlorn beside the bed.

THE SHOP

Tin-tinkle-tinkle-tinkle, went the bell,
 As I pushed in; and, once again, the smell
 Of groceries, and news-sheets freshly-printed,
 That always greeted me when I looked in
 To buy my evening-paper: but, to-night,
 I wondered not to see the well-known face,
 With kind, brown eyes, and ever-friendly smile,
 Behind the counter; and to find the place
 Deserted at this hour, and not a light
 In either window. Waiting there, a while,
 Though wondering at what change these changes hinted,
 I yet was grateful for the quiet gloom—
 Lit only by a gleam from the back-room,
 And, here and there, a glint of glass and tin—
 So pleasant, after all the flare and din
 And hubbub of the foundry: and my eyes,
 Still tingling from the smoke, were glad to rest
 Upon the ordered shelves, so neatly dressed
 That, even in the dusk, they seemed to tell
 No little of the hand that kept them clean,
 And of the head that sorted things so well
 That naught of waste or worry could be seen,

And kept all sweet with ever-fresh supplies.

And, as I thought upon her quiet way,
 Wondering what could have got her, that she'd left
 The shop, unlit, untended, and bereft
 Of her kind presence, overhead I heard
 A tiptoe creak, as though somebody stirred,
 With careful step, across the upper floor:
 Then all was silent, till the back-room door
 Swung open; and her husband hurried in.
 He feared he'd kept me, waiting in the dark;
 And he was sorry: but his wife who served
 The customers at night-time usually—
 While he made up the ledger after tea,
 Was busy, when I ... Well, to tell the truth,
 They were in trouble, for their little son
 Had come in ill from school ... the doctor said
 Pneumonia ... they'd been putting him to bed:
 Perhaps, I'd heard them, moving overhead,
 For boards would creak, and creak, for all your care.
 They hoped the best; for he was young; and youth
 Could come through much; and all that could be done
 Would be ... then he stood, listening, quite unnerved,
 As though he heard a footstep on the stair,
 Though I heard nothing: but at my remark
 About the fog and sleet, he turned,
 And answered quickly, as there burned
 In his brown eyes an eager flame:
 The raw and damp were much to blame:
 If but his son might breathe West-country air!
 A certain Cornish village he could name
 Was just the place; if they could send him there,
 And only for a week, he'd come back stronger...
 And then, again, he listened: and I took
 My paper, and went, afraid to keep him longer;
 And left him standing with that haggard look.

Next night, as I pushed in, there was no tinkle:
 And, glancing up, I saw the bell was gone;
 Although, in either window, the gas shone;

And I was greeted by a cheery twinkle
 Of burnished tins and bottles from the shelves:
 And now, I saw the father busy there
 Behind the counter, cutting with a string
 A bar of soap up for a customer,
 With weary eyes, and jerky, harassed air,
 As if his mind were hardly on the task:
 And when 'twas done, and parcelled up for her,
 And she had gone; he turned to me, and said:
 He thought that folks might cut their soap themselves.
 'Twas nothing much ... but any little thing,
 At such a time ... And, having little doubt
 The boy was worse, I did not like to ask;
 So picked my paper up, and hurried out.

And, all next day, amid the glare and clang
 And clatter of the workshop, his words rang;
 And kept on ringing, in my head a-ring;
 But any little thing ... at such a time...
 And kept on chiming to the anvils' chime:
 But any little thing ... at such a time...
 And they were hissed and sputtered in the sizzle
 Of water on hot iron: little thing...
 At such a time: and, when I left, at last,
 The smoke and steam; and walked through the cold drizzle,
 The lumbering of the 'buses as they passed
 Seemed full of it; and to the passing feet,
 The words kept patter, patter, with dull beat.

I almost feared to turn into their street,
 Lest I should find the blinds down in the shop:
 And, more than once, I'd half-a-mind to stop,
 And buy my paper from the yelling boys,
 Who darted all about with such a noise
 That I half-wondered, in a foolish way,
 How they could shriek so, knowing that the sound
 Must worry children, lying ill in bed...
 Then, thinking even they must earn their bread,
 As I earned mine, and scarce as noisily!
 I wandered on; and very soon I found

I'd followed where my thoughts had been all day.
 And stood before the shop, relieved to see
 The gases burning, and no window-blind
 Of blank foreboding. With an easier mind,
 I entered slowly; and was glad to find
 The father by the counter, 'waiting me,
 With paper ready and a cheery face.
 Yes! yes! the boy was better ... took the turn,
 Last night, just after I had left the place.
 He feared that he'd been short and cross last night.
 But, when a little child was suffering,
 It worried you ... and any little thing,
 At such a moment, made you cut up rough:
 Though, now that he was going on all right...
 Well, he'd have patience, now, to be polite!
 And, soon as ever he was well enough,
 The boy should go to Cornwall for a change—
 Should go to his own home; for he, himself,
 Was Cornish, born and bred, his wife as well:
 And still his parents lived in the old place—
 A little place, as snug as snug could be...
 Where apple-blossom dipped into the sea...
 Perhaps, to strangers' ears, that sounded strange—
 But not to any Cornishman who knew
 How sea and land ran up into each other;
 And how, all round each wide, blue estuary,
 The flowers were blooming to the waters' edge:
 You'd come on blue-bells like a sea of blue...
 But they would not be out for some while yet...
 'Twould be primroses, blowing everywhere,
 Primroses, and primroses, and primroses...
 You'd never half-know what primroses were,
 Unless you'd seen them growing in the West;
 But, having seen, would never more forget.
 Why, every bank, and every lane and hedge
 Was just one blaze of yellow; and the smell,
 When the sun shone upon them, after wet...
 And his eyes sparkled, as he turned to sell
 A penny loaf and half-an-ounce of tea
 To a poor child, who waited patiently,

With hacking cough that tore her hollow chest:
 And, as she went out, clutching tight the change,
 He muttered to himself: It's strange, it's strange
 That little ones should suffer so.... The light
 Had left his eyes: but, when he turned to me,
 I saw a flame leap in them, hot and bright.
 I'd like to take them all, he said, to-night!

And, in the workshop, all through the next day,
 The anvils had another tune to play...
 Primroses, and primroses, and primroses:
 The bellows puffing out: It's strange, it's strange
 That little ones should suffer so...
 And now, my hammer, at a blow:
 I'd like to take them all, to-night!
 And, in the clouds of steam, and white-hot glow,
 I seemed to see primroses everywhere,
 Primroses, and primroses, and primroses.

And, each night after that, I heard the boy
 Was mending quickly; and would soon be well:
 Till one night I was startled by the bell:
 Tin-tinkle-tinkle-tinkle, loud and clear;
 And tried to hush it, lest the lad should hear.
 But, when the father saw me clutch the thing,
 He said, the boy had missed it yesterday;
 And wondered why he could not hear it ring;
 And wanted it; and had to have his way.
 And then, with brown eyes burning with deep joy,
 He told me, that his son was going West—
 Was going home ... the doctor thought, next week,
 He'd be quite well enough: the way was long;
 But trains were quick; and he would soon be there
 And on the journey he'd have every care,
 His mother being with him ... it was best,
 That she should go: for he would find it strange,
 The little chap, at first ... she needed change...
 And, when they'd had a whiff of Western air!
 'Twould cost a deal; and there was naught to spare
 But, what was money, if you hadn't health:

And, what more could you buy, if you'd the wealth...
 Yes! 'twould be lonely for himself, and rough;
 Though, on the whole, he'd manage well enough:
 He'd have a lot to do: and there was naught
 Like work to keep folk cheerful: when the hand
 Was busy, you had little time for thought;
 And thinking was the mischief ... and 'twas grand
 To know that they'd be happy. Then the bell
 Went tinkle-tinkle; and he turned to sell.

One night he greeted me with face that shone,
 Although the eyes were wistful; they were gone—
 Had gone this morning, he was glad to say:
 And, though 'twas sore work, setting them away,
 Still, 'twas the best for them ... and they would be
 Already in the cottage by the sea...
 He spoke no more of them; but turned his head;
 And said he wondered if the price of bread...
 And, as I went again into the night,
 I saw his eyes were glistening in the light.

And, two nights after that, he'd got a letter:
 And all was well: the boy was keeping better;
 And was as happy as a child could be,
 All day with the primroses and the sea,
 And pigs! Of all the wonders of the West,
 His mother wrote, he liked the pigs the best.
 And now the father laughed until the tears
 Were in his eyes, and chuckled: Aye! he knew!
 Had he not been a boy there once, himself?
 He'd liked pigs, too, when he was his son's years.
 And then, he reached a half-loaf from the shelf;
 And twisted up a farthing's worth of tea,
 And farthing's worth of sugar, for the child,
 The same poor child who waited patiently,
 Still shaken by a hacking, racking cough.

And, all next day, the anvils rang with jigs:
 The bellows roared and rumbled with loud laughter,
 Until it seemed the workshop had gone wild,

And it would echo, echo, ever after
 The tune the hammers tinkled on and off,
 A silly tune of primroses and pigs...
 Of all the wonders of the West
 He liked the pigs, he liked the pigs the best!

Next night, as I went in, I caught
 A strange, fresh smell. The postman had just brought
 A precious box from Cornwall, and the shop
 Was lit with primroses, that lay atop
 A Cornish pasty, and a pot of cream:
 And, as, with gentle hands, the father lifted
 The flowers his little son had plucked for him,
 He stood a moment in a far-off dream,
 As though in glad remembrances he drifted
 On Western seas: and, as his eyes grew dim,
 He stooped, and buried them in deep, sweet bloom
 Till, hearing, once again, the poor child's cough,
 He served her hurriedly, and sent her off,
 Quite happily, with thin hands filled with flowers.
 And, as I followed to the street, the gloom
 Was starred with primroses; and many hours
 The strange, shy flickering surprise
 Of that child's keen, enchanted eyes
 Lit up my heart, and brightened my dull room.

Then, many nights the foundry kept me late
 With overtime; and I was much too tired
 To go round by the shop; but made for bed
 As straight as I could go: until one night
 We'd left off earlier, though 'twas after eight,
 I thought I'd like some news about the boy.
 I found the shop untended; and the bell
 Tin-tinkle-tinkle-tinkled all in vain.
 And then I saw, through the half-curtained pane,
 The back-room was a very blaze of joy:
 And knew the mother and son had come safe back.
 And, as I slipped away, now all was well,
 I heard the boy shriek out, in shrill delight:

"And, father, all the little pigs were black!"

FLANNAN ISLE

"Though three men dwell on Flannan Isle
To keep the lamp alight,
As we steered under the lee, we caught
No glimmer through the night."

A passing ship at dawn had brought
The news; and quickly we set sail,
To find out what strange thing might ail
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The Winter day broke blue and bright,
With glancing sun and glancing spray,
As o'er the swell our boat made way,
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But, as we neared the lonely Isle;
And looked up at the naked height;
And saw the lighthouse towering white,
With blinded lantern, that all night
Had never shot a spark
Of comfort through the dark,
So ghostly in the cold sunlight
It seemed, that we were struck the while
With wonder all too dread for words.

And, as into the tiny creek
We stole beneath the hanging crag,
We saw three queer, black, ugly birds—
Too big, by far, in my belief,
For guillemot or shag—
Like seamen sitting bolt-upright
Upon a half-tide reef:

But, as we neared, they plunged from sight,
Without a sound, or spurt of white.

And still too mazed to speak,
We landed; and made fast the boat;
And climbed the track in single file,
Each wishing he was safe afloat,
On any sea, however far,
So it be far from Flannan Isle:
And still we seemed to climb, and climb,
As though we'd lost all count of time,
And so must climb for evermore.
Yet, all too soon, we reached the door—
The black, sun-blistered lighthouse-door,
That gaped for us ajar.

As, on the threshold, for a spell,
We paused, we seemed to breathe the smell
Of limewash and of tar,
Familiar as our daily breath,
As though 'twere some strange scent of death
And so, yet wondering, side by side,
We stood a moment, still tongue-tied:
And each with black foreboding eyed
The door, ere we should fling it wide,
To leave the sunlight for the gloom:
Till, plucking courage up, at last,
Hard on each other's heels we passed,
Into the living-room.

Yet, as we crowded through the door,
We only saw a table, spread
For dinner, meat and cheese and bread;
But, all untouched; and no one there:
As though, when they sat down to eat,
Ere they could even taste,
Alarm had come; and they in haste
Had risen and left the bread and meat:
For at the table-head a chair
Lay tumbled on the floor.

We listened; but we only heard
 The feeble cheeping of a bird
 That starved upon its perch:
 And, listening still, without a word,
 We set about our hopeless search.

We hunted high, we hunted low;
 And soon ransacked the empty house;
 Then o'er the Island, to and fro,
 We ranged, to listen and to look
 In every cranny, cleft or nook
 That might have hid a bird or mouse:
 But, though we searched from shore to shore,
 We found no sign in any place:
 And soon again stood face to face
 Before the gaping door:
 And stole into the room once more
 As frightened children steal.

Aye: though we hunted high and low,
 And hunted everywhere,
 Of the three men's fate we found no trace
 Of any kind in any place,
 But a door ajar, and an untouched meal,
 And an overtoppled chair.

And, as we listened in the gloom
 Of that forsaken living-room—
 A chill clutch on our breath—
 We thought how ill-chance came to all
 Who kept the Flannan Light:
 And how the rock had been the death
 Of many a likely lad:
 How six had come to a sudden end,
 And three had gone stark mad:
 And one whom we'd all known as friend
 Had leapt from the lantern one still night,
 And fallen dead by the lighthouse wall:
 And long we thought
 On the three we sought,

And of what might yet befall.

Like curs, a glance has brought to heel,
 We listened, flinching there:
 And looked, and looked, on the untouched meal,
 And the overtoppled chair.

We seemed to stand for an endless while,
 Though still no word was said,
 Three men alive on Flannan Isle,
 Who thought, on three men dead.

THE BROTHERS

All morning they had quarrelled, as they worked,
 A little off their fellows, in the pit:
 Dick growled at Robert; Robert said Dick shirked:
 And when the roof, dropt more than they had reckoned,
 Began to crack and split,
 Though both rushed like a shot to set
 The pit-props in their places,
 Each said the other was to blame,
 When, all secure, with flushed and grimy faces,
 They faced each other for a second.
 All morning they had quarrelled: yet,
 Neither had breathed her name.

Again they turned to work:
 And in the dusty murk
 Of that black gallery
 Which ran out three miles underneath the sea,
 There was no sound at all,
 Save whispering creak of roof and wall.
 And crack of coal, and tap of pick,
 And now and then a rattling fall:
 While Robert worked on steadily, but Dick

In fits and starts, with teeth clenched tight,
And dark eyes flashing in his lamp's dull light.

And when he paused, nigh spent, to wipe the sweat
From off his dripping brow: and Robert turned
To fling some idle jibe at him, the spark
Of anger, smouldering in him, flared and burned—
Though all his body quivered, wringing-wet—
Till that black hole
To him blazed red,
As if the very coal
Had kindled underfoot and overhead:
Then, gripping tight his pick,
He rushed upon his brother:
But Robert, turning quick,
Leapt up, and now they faced each other.

They faced each other: Dick with arm upraised,
In act to strike, and murder in his eyes....
When, suddenly, with noise of thunder,
The earth shook round them, rumbling o'er and under;
And Dick saw Robert, lying at his feet:
As, close behind, the gallery crashed in:
And almost at his heel, earth gaped asunder.
By black disaster dazed,
His wrath died; and he dropped the pick;
And staggered, dizzily and terror-sick.
But, when the dust and din
Had settled to a stillness, dread as death:
And he once more could draw his breath;
He gave a little joyful shout
To find the lamps had not gone out.

And on his knees he fell
Beside his brother, buried in black dust:
And, full of tense misgiving,
He lifted him, and thrust
A knee beneath his head; and cleared
The dust from mouth and nose: but could not tell
Awhile if he were dead or living.

Too fearful to know what he feared,
 He fumbled at the open shirt,
 And felt till he could feel the heart,
 Still beating with a feeble beat:
 And then he saw the closed lids part,
 And saw the nostrils quiver;
 And knew his brother lived, though sorely hurt.

Again he staggered to his feet,
 And fetched his water-can, and wet
 The ashy lips, and bathed the brow,
 Until his brother sat up with a shiver,
 And gazed before him with a senseless stare
 And dull eyes strangely set.
 Too well Dick knew that now
 They must not linger there,
 Cut off from all their mates, to be o'ertaken
 In less than no time by the deadly damp,
 So, picking up his lamp,
 He made his brother rise;
 Then took him by the arm,
 And shook him, till he'd shaken
 An inkling of the danger and alarm
 Into those dull, still eyes:
 Then dragged him, and half-carried him, in haste,
 To reach the airway, where 'twould still be sweet
 When all the gallery was foul with gas:
 But, soon as they had reached it, they were faced
 By a big fall of roof they could not pass;
 And found themselves cut off from all retreat,
 On every hand, by that black shining wall;
 With naught to do but sit and wait
 Till rescue came, if rescue came at all,
 And did not come too late.

And, in the fresher airway, light came back
 To Robert's eyes, although he never spoke:
 And not a sound the deathly quiet broke,
 As they sat staring at that wall of black—
 As, in the glimmer of the dusky lamp,

They sat and wondered, wondered if the damp–
 The stealthy after-damp that creeping, creeping,
 Takes strong lads by the throat, and drops them sleeping,
 To wake no more for any woman's weeping–
 Would steal upon them, ere the rescue came....
 And if the rescuers would find them sitting,
 Would find them sitting cold....
 Then, as they sat and wondered, like a flame
 One thought burned up both hearts:
 Still, neither breathed her name.

And now their thoughts dropped back into the pit,
 And through the league-long gallery went flitting
 With speed no fall could hold:
 They wondered how their mates had fared:
 If they'd been struck stone-dead,
 Or if they shared
 Like fate with them, or reached the shaft,
 Unhurt, and only scared,
 Before disaster overtook them:
 And then, although their courage ne'er forsook them,
 They wondered once again if they must sit
 Awaiting death ... but knowing well
 That even for a while to dwell
 On such like thoughts will drive a strong man daft:
 They shook themselves until their thoughts ran free
 Along the drift, and clambered in the cage;
 And in a trice were shooting up the shaft:
 But when their thoughts had come to the pithead,
 And found the fearful people gathered there,
 Beneath the noonday sun,
 Bright-eyed with terror, blinded by despair,
 Dick rose, and with his chalk wrote on the wall,
 This message for their folk:
 "We can't get any further, 12, noonday"–
 And signed both names; and, when he'd done,
 Though neither of them spoke,
 They both seemed easier in a way,
 Now that they'd left a word,
 Though nothing but a scrawl.

And silent still they sat,
 And never stirred:
 And Dick's thoughts dwelt on this and that:
 How, far above their heads, upon the sea
 The sun was shining merrily,
 And in its golden glancing
 The windy waves were dancing:
 And how he'd slept that morning on his way:
 And how on Friday, when he drew his pay,
 He'd buy a blanket for his whippet, Nell;
 He felt dead certain she would win the race,
 On Saturday ... though you could never tell,
 There were such odds against her ... but his face
 Lit up as though, even now, he saw her run,
 A little slip of lightning, in the sun:
 While Robert's thoughts were ever on the match
 His team was booked to play on Saturday;
 He placed the field, and settled who should play
 The centre-forward; for he had a doubt
 Will Burn was scarcely up to form, although...

Just then, the lamp went slowly out.

Still, neither stirred,
 Nor spoke a word;
 Though either's breath came quickly, with a catch.

And now again one thought
 Set both their hearts afire
 In one fierce flame
 Of quick desire:
 Though neither breathed her name.

Then Dick stretched out his hand; and caught
 His brother's arm; and whispered in his ear:
 "Bob, lad, there's naught to fear ...
 And, when we're out, lad, you and she shall wed."

Bob gripped Dick's hand; and then no more was said,
 As, slowly, all about them rose

The deadly after-damp; but close
 They sat together, hand in hand.
 Then their minds wandered; and Dick seemed to stand
 And shout till he was hoarse
 To speed his winning whippet down the course ...
 And Robert, with the ball
 Secure within his oxters charged ahead
 Straight for the goal, and none could hold,
 Though many tried a fall.

Then dreaming they were lucky boys in bed,
 Once more, and lying snugly by each other:
 Dick, with his arms clasped tight about his brother,
 Whispered with failing breath
 Into the ear of death:
 "Come, Robert, cuddle closer, lad, it's cold."

THE BLIND ROWER

And since he rowed his father home,
 His hand has never touched an oar.
 All day, he wanders on the shore,
 And hearkens to the swishing foam.
 Though blind from birth, he still could row
 As well as any lad with sight;
 And knew strange things that none may know
 Save those who live without the light.

When they put out that Summer eve
 To sink the lobster-pots at sea,
 The sun was crimson in the sky;
 And not a breath was in the sky,
 The brooding, thunder-laden sky,
 That, heavily and wearily,
 Weighed down upon the waveless sea
 That scarcely seemed to heave.

The pots were safely sunk; and then
The father gave the word for home:
He took the tiller in his hand,
And, in his heart already home,
He brought her nose round towards the land,
To steer her straight for home.

He never spoke,
Nor stirred again:
A sudden stroke,
And he lay dead,
With staring eyes, and lips of lead.

The son rowed on, and nothing feared:
And sometimes, merrily,
He lifted up his voice, and sang,
Both high and low,
And loud and sweet:
For he was ever gay at sea,
And ever glad to row,
And rowed as only blind men row:
And little did the blind lad know
That death was at his feet:
For still he thought his father steered;
Nor knew that he was all alone
With death upon the open sea.
So merrily, he rowed, and sang;
And, strangely on the silence rang
That lonely melody,
As, through the livid, brooding gloom,
By rock and reef, he rowed for home—
The blind man rowed the dead man home.

But, as they neared the shore,
He rested on his oar:
And, wondering that his father kept
So very quiet in the stern;
He laughed, and asked him if he slept;
And vowed he heard him snore just now.
Though, when his father spoke no word,

A sudden fear upon him came:
 And, crying on his father's name,
 With flinching heart, he heard
 The water lapping on the shore;
 And all his blood ran cold, to feel
 The shingle grate beneath the keel:
 And stretching over towards the stern,
 His knuckle touched the dead man's brow.

But, help was near at hand;
 And safe he came to land:
 Though none has ever known
 How he rowed in, alone,
 And never touched a reef.
 Some say they saw the dead man steer—
 The dead man steer the blind man home—
 Though, when they found him dead,
 His hand was cold as lead.

So, ever restless, to and fro,
 In every sort of weather,
 The blind lad wanders on the shore,
 And hearkens to the foam.
 His hand has never touched an oar,
 Since they came home together—
 The blind, who rowed his father home—
 The dead, who steered his blind son home.

THE FLUTE

"Good-night!" he sang out cheerily:
 "Good-night!" and yet again: "Good-night!"

And I was gay that night to be
 Once more in my clean countryside,
 Among the windy hills and wide.

Six days of city slush and mud,
Of hooting horn, and spattering wheel,
Made me rejoice again to feel
The tingling frost that fires the blood,
And sets life burning keen and bright;
And down the ringing road to stride
The eager swinging stride that braces
The straining thews from hip to heel:
To breathe again the wind that sweeps
Across the grassy, Northern steeps,
From crystal deeps and starry spaces.

And I was glad again to hear
The old man's greeting of good cheer:
For every night for many a year
At that same corner we had met,
Summer and Winter, dry and wet:
And though I never once had heard
The old man speak another word,
His cheery greeting at the bend
Seemed like the welcome of a friend.

But, as we neared to-night, somehow,
I felt that he would stop and speak:
Though he went by: and when I turned,
I saw him standing in the road,
And looking back, with hand to brow,
As if to shade old eyes, grown weak
Awaiting the long sleep they'd earned:
Though, as again towards him I strode,
A friendly light within them burned.
And then, as I drew nigh, he spoke
With shaking head, and voice that broke:
"I've missed you these last nights," he said
"And I have not so many now
That I can miss friends easily...
Aye: friends grow scarce, as you grow old:
And roads are rough: and winds are cold:
And when you feel you're losing hold,
Life does not go too merrily."

And then he stood with nodding head,
And spoke no more. And so I told
How I had been, six days and nights,
Exiled from pleasant sounds and sights.
And now, as though my voice had stirred
His heart to speech, he told right out,
With quickening eye and quavering word,
The things I care to hear about,
The little things that make up life:
How he'd been lonesome, since his wife
Had died, some thirty year ago:
And how he trudged three mile or so
To reach the farmstead where he worked,
And three mile back to his own door...
For he dwelt outby on the moor:
And every day the distance irked
More sorely still his poor, old bones;
And all the road seemed strewn with stones
To trip you up, when you were old—
When you were old, and friends were few:
How, since the farmstead had been sold,
The master and the men were new,
All save himself; and they were young;
And Mistress had a raspy tongue:
So, often, he would hardly speak
A friendly word from week to week
With any soul. Old friends had died,
Or else had quit the countryside:
And, since his wife was taken, he
Had lived alone, this thirty year:
And there were few who cared to hear
An old man's jabber ... and too long
He'd kept me, standing in the cold,
With his long tongue, and such a song
About himself! And I would be...

I put my arm through his; and turned
To go upon his way with him:
And once again that warm light burned
In those old eyes, so weak and dim:

While, with thin, piping voice, he told
How much it meant to him each night
To change a kindly word with me:
To think that he'd at least one friend
Who'd maybe miss him, in the end.

Then, as we walked, he said no more:
And, silent, in the starry light,
Across the wide, sweet-smelling bent,
Between the grass and stars we went
In quiet, friendly company:
And, all the way, we only heard
A chirrup where some partridge stirred,
And ran before us through the grass,
To hide his head till we should pass.

At length, we reached the cottage-door:
But, when I stopped, and turned to go,
His words came falteringly and slow:
If I would step inside, and rest,
I'd be right welcome: not a guest
Had crossed his threshold, thirty year...
He'd naught but bread and cheese and beer
To offer me ... but, I'd know best...

He spoke with hand upon the latch;
And, when I answered, opened wide
The cottage-door; and stepped inside;
And, as I followed, struck a match,
And lit a tallow-dip: and stirred
The banked-up peats into a glow:
And then with shuffling step and slow
He moved about: and soon had set
Two mugs of beer, and bread and cheese:
And while we made a meal off these,
The old man never spoke a word;
But, brooding in the ingle-seat,
With eyes upon the kindling peat,
He seemed awhile to quite forget
He was not sitting by himself

To-night, like any other night;
 When, as, in the dim candle-light,
 I glanced around me, with surprise
 I saw, upon the rafter-shelf,
 A flute, nigh hidden in the shade.

And when I asked him if he played,
 The light came back into his eyes:
 Aye, aye, he sometimes piped a bit,
 But not so often since she died.
 And then, as though old memories lit
 His poor, old heart, and made it glad,
 He told how he, when quite a lad,
 Had taught himself: and they would play
 On penny whistles all the day—
 He and the miller's son, beside
 The millpool, chirping all they knew,
 Till they could whistle clean and true:
 And how, when old enough to earn,
 They both saved up to buy a flute;
 And they had played it, turn for turn:
 But, Jake was dead, this long while back...
 Ah! if I'd only heard him toot,
 I'd know what music meant. Aye, aye...
 He'd play me something, by-and-bye;
 Though he was naught to Jake ... and now
 His breath was scant, and fingering slack...
 He used to play to her at night
 The melodies that she liked best,
 While she worked on: she'd never rest
 By daylight, or by candle-light...
 And then, with hand upon his brow,
 He brooded, quiet in his chair,
 With eyes upon the red peat-glare;
 Until, at length, he roused himself,
 And reached the flute down from the shelf;
 And, carrying it outside the door,
 I saw him take a can, and pour
 Fresh water through the instrument,
 To make it sweet of tone, he said.

Then, in his seat, so old and bent,
With kindling eyes, and swaying head,
He played the airs he used to play
To please his wife, before she died:
And as I watched his body sway
In time and tune, from side to side,
So happy, playing, and to please
With old familiar melodies,
His eyes grew brighter and more bright,
As though they saw some well-loved sight:
And, following his happy gaze,
I turned, and saw, without amaze,
A woman standing, young and fair,
With hazel eyes, and thick brown hair
Brushed smoothly backward from the brow,
Beside the table that but now,
Save for the empty mugs, was bare.
Upon it she had spread a sheet:
And stood there, ironing a shirt,
Her husband's, as he played to her
Her favourite tunes, so old and sweet.
I watched her move with soundless stir;
Then stand with listening eyes, and hold
The iron near her glowing cheek,
Lest it, too hot, should do some hurt,
And she, so careful not to burn
The well-darned shirt, so worn and old.
Then, something seemed to make me turn
To look on the old man again:
And, as I looked, the playing stopped;
And now I saw that he had dropped
Into his brooding mood once more,
With eyes again grown dull and weak.
He seemed the oldest of old men
Who grope through life with sight worn dim
And, even as I looked at him,
Too full of tender awe to speak,
I knew once more the board was bare,
With no young woman standing there
With hazel eyes and thick, brown hair;

And I, in vain, for her should seek,
If I but sought this side death's door.

And so, at last, I rose, and took
His hand: and as he clasped mine tight,
I saw again that friendly look
Fill his old weary eyes with light,
And wish me, without words, good-night
And in my heart, that look glowed bright
Till I reached home across the moor.

And, at the corner of the lane,
Next night, I heard the old voice cry
In greeting, as I struggled by,
Head-down against the wind and rain.
And so each night, until one day,
His master chanced across my way:
But, when I spoke of him, he said:
Did I not know the man was dead,
And had been dead a week or so?
One morn he'd not turned up to work;
And never having known him shirk;
And hearing that he lived alone;
He thought it best himself to go
And see what ailed: and coming there,
He found the old man in his chair,
Stone-dead beside the cold hearthstone.
It must be full a week, or more...
Aye, just two weeks, come Saturday,
He'd found him; but he must have died
O'ernight—(the night I heard him play!)
And they had found, dropt by his side,
A broken flute upon the floor.

Yet, every night, his greeting still
At that same corner of the hill,
Summer and Winter, wet or dry,
'Neath cloud, or moon, or cold starlight,
Is waiting there to welcome me:
And ever as I hurry by,

The old voice sings out cheerily:
"Good-night!" and yet again, "Good-night!"

1910-1911.

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