

New Numbers

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NEW NUMBERS

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(To E. M.)

He was a man with wide and patient eyes,
Gray, like the drift of twitch-fires blown in June,
That, without fearing, searched if any wrong
Might threaten from your heart. Gray eyes he had
Under a brow was drawn because he knew
So many seasons to so many pass
Of upright service, loyal, unabased
Before the world seducing, and so, barren
Of good words praising and thought that mated his.
He carved in stone. Out of his quiet life
He watched as any faithful seaman charged
With tidings of the myriad faring sea,
And thoughts and premonitions through his mind
Sailing as ships from strange and storied lands
His hungry spirit held, till all they were
Found living witness in the chiselled stone.
Slowly out of the dark confusion, spread
By life's innumerable venturings
Over his brain, he would triumph into the light
Of one clear mood, unblemished of the blind
Legions of errant thought that cried about
His rapt seclusion : as a pearl unsoiled,
Nay, rather washed to lonelier chastity,
In gritty mud. And then would come a bird,
A flower, or the wind moving upon a flower,
A beast at pasture, or a clustered fruit,
A peasant face as were the saints of old,
The leer of custom, or the bow of the moon
Swung in miraculous poise—some stray from the world
Of things created by the eternal mind

In joy articulate. And his perfect mood
Would dwell about the token of God's mood,
Until in bird or flower or moving wind
Or flock or shepherd or the troops of heaven
It sprang in one fierce moment of desire
To visible form.
Then would his chisel work among the stone,
Persuading it of petal or of limb
Or starry curve, till risen anew there sang
Shape out of chaos, and again the vision
Of one mind single from the world was pressed
Upon the daily custom of the sky
Or field or the body of man.

His people
Had many gods for worship. The tiger-god,
The owl, the dewlapped bull, the running pard,
The camel and the lizard of the slime,
The ram with quivering fleece and fluted horn,
The crested eagle and the doming bat
Were sacred. And the king and his high priests
Decreed a temple, wide on columns huge,
Should top the cornlands to the sky's far line.
They bade the carvers carve along the walls
Images of their gods, each one to carve
As he desired, his choice to name his god. . . .
And many came ; and he among them, glad
Of three leagues' travel through the singing air
Of dawn among the boughs yet bare of green,
The eager flight of the spring leading his blood
Into swift lofty channels of the air,

Proud as an eagle riding to the sun. . . .
An eagle, clean of pinion—there's his choice.

Daylong they worked under the growing roof,
One at his leopard, one the staring ram,
And he winning his eagle from the stone,
Until each man had carved one image out,
Arow beyond the portal of the house.
They stood arow, the company of gods,
Camel and bat, lizard and bull and ram,
The pard and owl, dead figures on the wall,
Figures of habit driven on the stone
By chisels governed by no heat of the brain
But drudges of hands that moved by easy rule.
Proudly recorded mood was none, no thought
Plucked from the dark battalions of the mind
And throned in everlasting sight. But one
God of them all was witness of belief
And large adventure dared. His eagle spread
Wide pinions on a cloudless ground of heaven,
Glad with the heart's high courage of that dawn
Moving upon the ploughlands newly sown,
Dead stone the rest. He looked, and knew it so.

Then came the king with priests and counsellors
And many chosen of the people, wise
With words weary of custom, and eyes askew
That watched their neighbour face for any news
Of the best way of judgment, till, each sure
None would determine with authority,
All spoke in prudent praise. One liked the owl

Because an owl blinked on the beam of his barn.
One, hoarse with crying gospels in the street,
Praised most the ram, because the common folk
Wore breeches made of ram's wool. One declared
The tiger pleased him best,—the man who carved
The tiger-god was halt out of the womb—
A man to praise, being so pitiful.
And one, whose eyes dwelt in a distant void,
With spell and omen pat upon his lips,
And a purse for any crystal prophet ripe,
A zealot of the mist, gazed at the bull—
A lean ill-shapen bull of meagre lines
That scarce the steel had graved upon the stone—
Saying that here was very mystery
And truth, did men but know. And one there was
Who praised his eagle, but remembering
The lither pinion of the swift, the curve
That liked him better of the mirrored swan.
And they who carved the tiger-god and ram,
The camel and the pard, the owl and bull,
And lizard, listened greedily, and made
Humble denial of their worthiness,
And when the king his royal judgment gave
That all had fashioned well, and bade that each
Re-shape his chosen god along the walls
Till all the temple boasted of their skill,
They bowed themselves in token that as this
Never had carvers been so fortunate.

Only the man with wide and patient eyes
Made no denial, neither bowed his head.

Already while they spoke his thought had gone
Far from his eagle, leaving it for a sign
Loyally wrought of one deep breath of life,
And played about the image of a toad
That crawled among his ivy leaves. A queer
Puff-bellied toad, with eyes that always stared
Sidelong at heaven and saw no heaven there,
Weak-hammed, and with a throttle somehow twisted
Beyond full wholesome draughts of air, and skin
Of wrinkled lips, the only zest or will
The little flashing tongue searching the leaves.
And king and priest, chosen and counsellor,
Babbling out of their thin and jealous brains,
Seemed strangely one; a queer enormous toad
Panting under giant leaves of dark,
Sunk in the loins, peering into the day.
Their judgment wry he counted not for wrong
More than the fabled poison of the toad
Striking at simple wits; how should their thought
Or word in praise or blame come near the peace
That shone in seasonable hours above
The patience of his spirit's husbandry?
They foolish and not seeing, how should he
Spend anger there or fear—great ceremonies
Equal for none save great antagonists?
The grave indifference of his heart before them
Was moved by laughter innocent of hate,
Chastising clean of spite, that moulded them
Into the antic likeness of his toad
Bidding for laughter underneath the leaves.

He bowed not, nor disputed, but he saw
Those ill-created joyless gods, and loathed,
And saw them creeping, creeping round the walls,
Death breeding death, wile witnessing to wile,
And sickened at the dull iniquity
Should be rewarded, and for ever breathe
Contagion on the folk gathered in prayer.
His truth should not be doomed to march among
This falsehood to the ages. He was called,
And he must labour there ; if so the king
Would grant it, where the pillars bore the roof
A galleried way of meditation nursed
Secluded time, with wall of ready stone
In panels for the carver set between
The windows—there his chisel should be set,—
It was his plea. And the king spoke of him,
Scorning, as one lack-fettle, among all these
Eager to take the riches of renown ;
One fearful of the light or knowing nothing
Of light's dimension, a witling who would throw
Honour aside and praise spoken aloud
All men of heart should covet. Let him go
Grubbing out of the sight of these who knew
The worth of substance ; there was his proper trade.

A squat and curious toad indeed. . . . The eyes,
Patient and grey, were dumb as were the lips,
That, fixed and governed, hoarded from them all
The larger laughter lifting in his heart.
Straightway about his gallery he moved,
Measured the windows and the virgin stone,

Till all was weighed and patterned in his brain.
Then first where most the shadow struck the wall,
Under the sills, and centre of the base,
From floor to sill out of the stone was wooed
Memorial folly, as from the chisel leapt
His chastening laughter searching priest and king—
A huge and wrinkled toad, with legs asplay,
And belly loaded, leering with great eyes
Busily fixed upon the void.

All days

His chisel was the first to ring across
The temple's quiet; and at fall of dusk
Passing among the carvers homeward, they
Would speak of him as mad, or weak against
The challenge of the world, and let him go
Lonely, as was his will, under the night
Of stars or cloud or summer's folded sun,
Through crop and wood and pastureland to sleep.
None took the narrow stair as wondering
How did his chisel prosper in the stone,
Unvisited his labour and forgot.
And times when he would lean out of his height
And watch the gods growing along the walls,
The row of carvers in their linen coats
Took in his vision a virtue that alone
Carving they had not nor the thing they carved.
Knowing the health that flowed about his close
Imagining, the daily quiet won
From process of his clean and supple craft,
Those carvers there, far on the floor below,

Would haply be transfigured in his thought
Into a gallant company of men
Glad of the strict and loyal reckoning
That proved in the just presence of the brain
Each chisel-stroke. How surely would he prosper
In pleasant talk at easy hours with men
So fashioned if it might be—and his eyes
Would pass again to those dead gods that grew
In spreading evil round the temple walls ;
And, one dead pressure made, the carvers moved
Along the wall to mould and mould again
The self-same god, their chisels on the stone
Tapping in dull precision as before,
And he would turn, back to his lonely truth.

He carved apace. And first his people's gods,
About the toad, out of their sterile time,
Under his hand thrilled and were recreate.
The bull, the pard, the camel and the ram,
Tiger and owl and bat—all were the signs
Visibly made body on the stone
Of sightless thought adventuring the host
That is mere spirit ; these the bloom achieved
By secret labour in the flowing wood
Of rain and air and wind and continent sun. . . .
His tiger, lithe, immobile in the stone,
A swift destruction for a moment leashed,
Sprang crying from the jealous stealth of men
Opposed in cunning watch, with engines hid
Of torment and calamitous desire.
His leopard, swift on lean and paltry limbs,

Was fear in flight before accusing faith.
His bull, with eyes that often in the dusk
Would lift from the sweet meadow grass to watch
Him homeward passing, bore on massy beam
The burden of the patient of the earth.
His camel bore the burden of the damned,
Being gaunt, with eyes aslant along the nose.
He had a friend, who hammered bronze and iron
And cupped the moonstone on a silver ring,
One constant like himself, would come at night
Or bid him as a guest, when they would make
Their poets touch a starrier height, or search
Together with unparsimonious mind
The crowded harbours of mortality.
And there were jests, wholesome as harvest ale,
Of homely habit, bred of hearts that dared
Judgment of laughter under the eternal eye :
This frolic wisdom was his carven owl.
His ram was lordship on the lonely hills,
Alert and fleet, content only to know
The wind mightily pouring on his fleece,
With yesterday and all unrisen suns
Poorer than disinherited ghosts. His bat
Was ancient envy made a mockery,
Cowering below the newer eagle carved
Above the arches with wide pinion spread,
His faith's dominion of that happy dawn.

And so he wrought the gods upon the wall,
Living and crying out of his desire,
Out of his patient incorruptible thought,

Wrought them in joy was wages to his faith.
And other than the gods he made. The stalks
Of bluebells heavy with the news of spring,
The vine loaded with plenty of the year,
And swallows, merely tenderness of thought
Bidding the stone to small and fragile flight ;
Leaves, the thin relics of autumnal boughs,
Or massed in June. . . .
All from their native pressure bloomed and sprang
Under his shaping hand into a proud
And governed image of the central man,—
Their moulding, charts of all his travelling.
And all were deftly ordered, duly set
Between the windows, underneath the sills,
And roofward, as a motion rightly planned,
Till on the wall, out of the sullen stone,
A glory blazed, his vision manifest,
His wonder captive. And he was content.

And when the builders and the carvers knew
Their labour done, and high the temple stood
Over the cornlands, king and counsellor
And priest and chosen of the people came
Among a ceremonial multitude
To dedication. And, below the thrones
Where king and archpriest ruled above the throng,
Highest among the ranked artificers
The carvers stood. And when, the temple vowed
To holy use, tribute and choral praise
Given as was ordained, the king looked down
Upon the gathered folk, and bade them see

The comely gods fashioned about the walls,
And keep in honour men whose precious skill
Could so adorn the sessions of their worship,
Gravely the carvers bowed them to the ground.

Only the man with wide and patient eyes
Stood not among them ; nor did any come
To count his labour, where he watched alone
Above the coloured throng. He heard, and looked
Again upon his work, and knew it good,
Smiled on his toad, passed down the stair unseen,
And sang across the teeming meadows home.

When colour goes home into the eyes,
And lights that shine are shut again
With dancing girls and sweet birds' cries
Behind the gateways of the brain ;
And that no-place which gave them birth, shall close
The rainbow and the rose :—

Still may Time hold some golden space
Where I'll unpack that scented store
Of song and flower and sky and face,
And count, and touch, and turn them o'er,
Musing upon them ; as a mother, who
Has watched her children all the rich day through,
Sits, quiet-handed, in the fading light,
When children sleep, ere night.

I

PEACE

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,
Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,
And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,
And all the little emptiness of love !

Oh ! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath ;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending ;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

II

SAFETY

Dear! of all happy in the hour, most blest
He who has found our hid security,
Assured in the dark tides of the world that rest,
And heard our word, "Who is so safe as we?"
We have found safety with all things undying,
The winds, and morning, tears of men and mirth,
The deep night, and birds singing, and clouds flying,
And sleep, and freedom, and the autumnal earth.
We have built a house that is not for Time's throwing.
We have gained a peace unshaken by pain for ever.
War knows no power. Safe shall be my going,
Secretly armed against all death's endeavour;
Safe though all safety's lost; safe where men fall;
And if these poor limbs die, safest of all.

III

THE DEAD.

Blow out, you bugles, over the rich Dead !
 There's none of these so lonely and poor of old,
 But, dying, has made us rarer gifts than gold.
These laid the world away ; poured out the red
Sweet wine of youth ; gave up the years to be
 Of work and joy, and that unhopèd serene,
 That men call age ; and those who would have been,
Their sons, they gave, their immortality.

Blow, bugles, blow ! They brought us, for our dearth,
 Holiness, lacked so long, and Love, and Pain.
Honour has come back, as a king, to earth,
 And paid his subjects with a royal wage ;
And Nobleness walks in our ways again ;
 And we have come into our heritage.

IV

THE DEAD

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
 Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
 And sunset, and the colours of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
 Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
 Touched flowers and furs, and cheeks. All this is ended.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
 Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
 Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

V

THE SOLDIER

If I should die, think only this of me :

That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed ;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given ;
Her sights and sounds ; dreams happy as her day ;
And laughter, learnt of friends ; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

A small room in an empty cottage, without furniture. Stone floor ; dirty ragged paper on walls. The room is littered with bits of sawn wood, shavings, tools ; a joiner's frail lies on the floor. Door to the open air on right ; in the back wall an old kitchen range, with a good fire burning. A young joiner is alone in the room ; he has been putting in a new staircase, which is all but finished ; the new wood, clean and white, shows up amid the dingy room.

The Joiner (looking at his work : in a sort of chant)

Hammer and nails, gimlet and screws,
 Bradawl, chisel, mallet and plane,
 A will to work, and health in my thews,
 And season'd wood of a good clean grain
 Shaping under my hands and skill,
 And obeying my master-will

(Speaking)

And I alone : that's the best of it here.—
 These book-read folks won't beat that song of mine,
 I warrant. I'll have a right tune for it some day :
 Hammer and nails, gimlet and screws,
 Bradawl, chisel, mallet and plane,
 A will to work

The outer door is pusht open, and a woman comes in, tired and worn, wet through, with a long shabby cloak on her. She stands a moment gazing round the room.

Woman : Alone ?

Was it you buzzing to yourself I heard ?
 Grumbling for company ?

The young man stares at her and answers mechanically

Joiner : For company ? I'd liever keep to myself.

Woman : Dreaming aloud, then ?— Ay, cleverest thing

THE STAIRCASE

Lascelles Abercrombie

To do against the world, for sure, is dreaming.
But it needs shelter.— Well, go on dreaming.
I'll borrow your warmth awhile ; the drench of the rain
Is dribbling down my skin inside my clothes
Cold as worms.

*She sits by the fire, opens her cloak, and shows she
is holding a baby. She begins to suckle it.*

Joiner : You've got a baby !

Woman : Well done, young man !
You know a thing or two : a baby it is.—
Finish your job, and I'll keep on at mine.

Joiner : I'm all but done here now.

Woman : What were you at ?

Joiner : Framing the new stairs. Are you travelling ?

Woman : Travelling and travelling ; still walking.

Joiner : A strange place for you to be walking, here.

Woman : I'll swear to that : strange and miserable.
Not such another road in Christendom
For wind that's carrying a cruel rain
To get the better of your heart.

Joiner : I mean,
The road goes nowhere, but to these few huts
That stick against the hillside.

Woman : I know that—
Now I am here I know it.— But at least
The road has brought me to your fire. Young man,
Why do you stare so ? Do you know my face ?
You don't belong here ?

Joiner : Five miles off I live.

Woman : Ah [*Her talk seems meant to cover some feeling.*

They are pretty work, your stairs :
They look too white in this curst filthy room ;
Like a mind where the dirty world has lived and slept,
But still remembering in midst of the soil
Some childish morning spent in games and laughter
Under a blowing orchard.— [*As he is still silent.*
Ay, queer to find fresh work in such a place.
Is the house set then to a new-comer ?
Who will first climb your stairs ? A girl, maybe,
Upon her wedding night. She'll slip away
From off her husband's knees, and dance up swift,
Giggling shy and happily afraid,
And the house falls quiet of their talk ; and then
The old joists creak as she moves in her undressing ;
Then the lad slinks up after, like a robber.

Joiner : It's strange ! A little while before you came,
It was with just that fancy I was idling.

Woman : I warrant, you yourself were the lad, then.

Joiner (simply) : Yes.

Woman : And the girl ?

Joiner : I don't know—rightly—

Woman : Which to choose ?

Joiner : O long ago I made my choice : and yet—
I have not seen her.

Woman (after a little pause) : I could dream once myself.—

[*Then amused at his simplicity* :

But will you know her — What would you say if I
Went up those stairs of yours ?

Joiner : He would have known what
If I'd had chance to bring his wicked blood
Blushing about his ears.

Woman : There's a bold fellow ;
To wish he could have boxt an old man's ears !

Joiner : No ; but I would have had such words for him,
His wizened heart had been ashamed.

Woman : Why, then,
Happen the old man might have boxt your ears !

Joiner : Ay, have your game with me : but if he'd been
A giant with a rage like a burning demon's,
I would have faced his wildness.

Woman : Well, he's dead,
And talk's an easy thing. But I've heard tell—
For on the road, young man, your ears find out
Noises from every corner in the land—
I've heard he was a terrible fierce old fellow.

Joiner : Likely enough.
You'd hear, too, of the scoundrel thing he did
Upon his daughter : you could scarce miss that ;
The villainous sound of it must be ranging still.

Woman : But what seems loud to you among these hills,
And a rough splash in a quiet creek of life,
Will hardly push a little shaking whisper
Into the air of the broad troubled world.—
Was it a pretty wench ?

Joiner : Why, you'd be bound,
If she were here, to think there's none in all
The room of the land could show their beauty off,
But only as lighting matches in the sun.

Joiner (amazed) : Why did I play—?

Woman (standing up) : Lies! Lies! What were all your lies for?

Joiner (catching her anger) : How will a roadster know the lies
[from truth,

Who has to lie for her eating, lie for her lodging,
And the whole gear of her life is lies?

Woman : It's true :
We lie for needs : you for a fleering scoff.

Joiner : You've had no harm from me ; and let your tongue
Make sure of this, so long as we're in talk :
This girl, and the way the thought of her has grown
Within my brain— O, like rivers pouring
Full from the flooded hills,—

Woman : You'll lose yourself
Bragging her up so handsome ; I'll help you out :
This is the thing you mean?—
It would be like a hand with grimy fingers
Meddling in the fine make of a clock, to let
Talk common as mine touch your fancying
That goes so smooth and chimes to you so dainty.
Well, I'll believe 'tis fancies, and not lies :
But I must have my laugh at them.

Joiner : Yes, laugh, laugh ;
It's pretty joking.—There's a girl grows up
Beautiful and sweet hearted : and there comes
A rogue sneaking into her innocence,
Wheedling and living there ; and she, dear fool,
Comforting him ; and he blabbing abroad
The simple way her love had askt him in.

Woman : Did he do that ?

Joiner : Yes, such a blackguard he was.
But how would a girl so happy know his mind
Was just a muddy puddle ?—She'd only see
The face of her own love there, looking back.—

Woman : The pitiful fool. Ah, but it's fools you like.

Joiner : You'd like the folk who went about to stir
That wild brute of anger in her father,
And pitcht their buzzing jeers just loud enough
To startle it, and make it savage her.
They quickly had him crazed. Soon as he hears
The village sniggering its dirty gossip,
And knows his daughter's come to trouble and danger—

Woman : Through being a pitiful fool—

Joiner : He thrashes her,
Thrashes her, and rails her out of the house,
Childing as she was : and heavily
To trudge after the slinking runagate
Who fouled her, the poor lass must go alone.—
Five years ago it would be. O, if I'd heard,
She need not have gone crying into hiding !
And lightly I learnt the tale of it all at first :
But it slipt over my mind like a noosed wire
That snares a rabbit's neck, and the peg fails,
And puss goes free : the gin has not left go,
But tightens still and cankers into her life.
Just so the story of how they shamed the girl
Clung like a loop of wire and gnawed its hold
Upon my mind : whenever I work alone,

I'm thinking of the world breaking her spirit,
And turning into misery the heart
That was so blithe and singing.
Well, here's for you to laugh at. Why don't you laugh?

Woman : I'm thinking of that old man, left alone
With shame upon his age, and dying alone.

Joiner : And she has none to think of her but me!
Even the thought of kindness keeps itself
Safe from a life like hers, as rats will jump
In harbour from a boat fierce weather has strained.

Woman : Somebody told you that too?—
You have the brave life, always among notions!
But you're not fair to rats. What have they done
That you should liken them to charity?
This would be better: Vermin crawling out
From the clothes of a beggar's corpse, soon as they feel
The warmth of their lodging chill. I have not lived
In notions, but in seeing things; that's one:
Cold morning, a white road, and at the side
A tramp lies dead of starving, and all round him
Ugh! [*Her voice begins to accuse him.*]
And I've a mind to stop you cockering
Your halving blood. What right have you to be
So brave and comfortable with your dreams
Of that lost fool—you always in a house—
While she, the truth of them, goes broad awake
In agony?

Joiner : Wouldn't I do her all
The good a man can think of? Why must you gibe?
It's only that she's gone, she's never heard of.

THE STAIRCASE

Lascelles Abercrombie

Woman : She might come back.

Joiner : Be sure I'll know of it.

Woman : Yes, I believe you will.
Then what will you do with her ?

Joiner : What's that to you ?

Woman : Why, I should know what you will do with me.
Come now ; you must have thought it out.

Joiner : With you ?
You mean . . . ? Are you for fooling me again ?

Woman : And bitter fooling now. I am the girl.

Joiner : You're not. You can't be. Often I've heard tell—

Woman : Of pretty looks and laughing ways. Five years
Of following a tramping labourer
Will alter that. This baby's not the first,
The other two are dead. And I've been chapt,
And I've been tired out, and clemm'd and burnt
With walking through the winds and the hot days ;
It's just a frame I am beneath my clothes.
You made your fancy of my spirit breaking ;
The fancy would have been too wise to live
If it had heeded how my body fared
Out there on the road, ageing and grieving.—
Wonderful, isn't it, how dreams come true ?

Joiner : You're clever with your wiles. You've tript me up
Once already ; but I'm not caught this time.

Woman : Ay, but you are ; you're trapt and floundering.
Listen : I'll prove myself. What would bring me here ?
The road ends in the nowhere of the hills ;

A blind man's feet could tell that from the ruts
And the sward that's all across it. Why should I come
Such an unlikely way, with hunger on me
No longer anguish, but a load, a load ?
I came to find my father.— O my pride
I've eaten long since ; and poor meat it was,
No stay in it for me or for my bairn.—
I thought my dad might pay a shilling or two
For the sight of me still in my misery ;
Or maybe only a morsel ; that would do—
Stop me starving my baby. Nowhere else
Dare we be asking, or chance showing ourselves ;
For we go cunning as stoats, my man and I :
Anyone looking at us may be the law.

Joiner : You're escaping the law ?— It was not you,
I'll vow, that did the wrong.

Woman : I did my share.
You mind these rick-fires, kept the nights aglow
For near a week, until the rain set in ?—
It might have been the nights they have in the north
Among the foundries, where they smelt the iron,
And furnaces keep glaring at the clouds
Till it's like red hot weather above the darkness.—
I reckon we had you watching the sky ! Each night
A blazing rick, ten or twelve miles from the last !—
He swore he'd rouse the land. No one at all
Would give us jobs—a tramp and his homeless doxy.
And a queer time I had with him and his fists ;
Till the rage seemed to addle in his brain,
And he could think of naught but stacks to fire.

But he'll be tried for blood as well as burning,
If it's the truth we heard. A shippen caught
And sent the blaze along its thatch to the house ;
And in the scare there was a child forgot
That slept alone in the attic.— Well, my boy
Is like to be clemm'd for his death : it's all one,
Hunger and cold, or fire.— I hope the lad
Was stifled first, though ; I've been praying that.

Joiner : And it's you telling me this, as calm as news
Of prices at the market !

Woman : Now do you see ?
I've put myself clean into your mercy.
Would I have riskt your mind, without I were
Your own fine dream rousing you into daylight ?—
This takes you down from your fool'd life, I think !
So will you give us up, my man and I ?
He's known for his talk : there'll be a cry abroad
After us, I'll be bound.— You'll not, I know ;
Because I am your lovely dream come true.—
Surely 'tis time you were pleased.

Joiner : O let me be !
Give me a little while to breathe myself.

Woman : Indeed
It goes up hill, out of a dream to truth.
But I've come down a little ; I thought to find
My old angry father ; and I find you !—
Now, are we right yet ? Or shall I tell you where
The stairs were rotted worst ?— Third from top :
Half of it flimsy and soft as blanket, half
Gaping open.

Joiner : Ay, there the old brute tript.

Woman : And with him died our last poor chance of food.
We'd best be off now, baby. [*But she makes no attempt to go. A
short pause; then she laughs.*]

Joiner : Will you forgive me ?

Woman : What, for making me
Your fancy game ?— I've had worse things to carry.

Joiner : O make an end of that talk !—It's the truth
I have at last, after all my dreaming.

Woman : I'll lay, it seems like when they scorch a pig
After a killing !—Rubbish of straw and waste
Flares high and bold in a wind of golden flame
And streaking sparks—a young man's mind of fancies.
Then 'tis a mound of smoulder, crumbling in
To show parcht awkward trotters sticking up,
Flap ears and senseless snouted head, and all
The poor pig's blacken'd hulk : and there's the truth
Was hid inside a young man's burning dreams !—
Well, I am not the sop I was ; there is
A dry side to me now. So I'll be kind
And take the truth I am out of your sight.

Joiner : I let you go ? You think that's likely yet ?

Woman (uneasy) : Are you for doing like the fool shown up
Who braves his folly out by staying in it ?

Joiner : You shall stay in it, too !— It goes up hill,
You said, the way out of my dream ; uphill
And the sun behind the hill ! And now I've climbed
Where nothing stops the light, not even dreams.
We'll not get higher than this, either of us.

If we can't hold now to our meeting here,
Here on the top of life, where every side
Is a slope falling, 'tis for both of us
From this on going downward into shadows,
Never again to be in sight or hail.

Woman : If I'm not gone quickly, we're both in danger.

Joiner : Will you not dare believe my meaning ?

Woman : No.——

I'll only think, "Suppose, suppose he meant it!"—

Joiner : Why, we're awake, and the dream still crying aloud !

Woman : You close your mind to it. No hurt in dreams ;
But this that sounds so drawing—safer would be
A viper hissing. 'Tis the truth of the world
Persuading you to come into its reach.

Joiner : And the sound's drawing you !

Woman : O, I must hear

Everything I have lost—everything
That is not the old cunning torturer,
The world's merciless truth !—You'd never keep me
Safe from the world in hiding of your dreams ;
The world would come for me, and strike you there.—
I to be looking for a dream again,
And you for truth to please you like your dreams——
It would be a wild-hearted game to play !

Joiner : I did not mean it for a game, the while
I've been as good to my mind as to the steel
I work with, all for the sake of finding you :
Rusted metal, you know, may be wrought clean
As glass, but the rust lies within, for ever
Spoiling the finest temper.

Woman : Can you not see
The rust of the world has eaten to my heart ?

Joiner : Can you not see that my main life has been
Knowing of you held by the handling world
All as it likes, and I the one to wring
The vile grasp off from you ? Don't make my life
Break its promise to me, so nearly kept !—
I have gone hungry for this hour.

Woman : And I,
Have I not hunger'd ? Thank your God you kept
Your hunger empty. I famisht, and was fed
On filthy poison, worse than being starved.
— I never thought to have a mind again
That need not be ashamed of being alive !—
You do not mean I should—love you ?

Joiner : No, no ;
We are not bargaining.

Woman : I doubt I could not,
Even if I were wishing to.—
Listen to me. Think God is eyeing you,
And tell me fairly, 'tis a man's set mind
You have to—help me.

Joiner : I'll make you another life !
'Tis your say now.

Woman : Sometimes it might be,
In the hot dusty drouth of afternoon,
We'd pass a byre, and hear the milkers chat,—
Girls laughing,—and spirted milk ring in the cans.
Or plodding stupidly on in windy dark,

Our steps would sound against a cottage wall
Sleeping beside the lane : I'd lean on it ;
Warmth would be in it ; I'd think of a drowzy fire
Inside the house, and hear the crickets chime.—
Young man, I'll risk you ! Let us be off, quick,
Else he'll be coming in on us.

Joiner : He ? Who ?

Woman : The man that was my man.

Joiner : He's nothing now.

Woman : He was my man.

Joiner : No need to think of him.—
I've naught to say but—thank you.

Woman : Thank me ?

Joiner : Yes !

Now I've a thing to do at last.

Woman : But you,
Never you look to have me thanking you ;
For that might set me telling what I've been,
The shame I have been, the dirt !— You must not know it.
(*With a gesture*) O but if there is something in the world
That can do good, and listens when 'tis called,
I shall be asking it to stay with you ;
You have made room for me where never again
I thought to live.— It goes beyond my thanks.

Joiner : There's stumbling outside, coming up the path.

Woman : We should have gone before this !—'Tis my man.

The Tramp comes in.

Tramp : Now where's the food ?

Woman : My father's dead, they tell me.

Tramp : I don't want your father ; I'm for eating.
You said there'd be food here.

Woman : 'Tis not my fault ;
How could I know if he were gone or living ?

Tramp : O, you keep on like a parrot. Food's the thing.

Woman : A thing you'll have to walk some further for.

Tramp : Why did you turn us here ? To play hot-cockles
Safe with a lad ?

Joiner (to the Woman) : You're not to talk with him.

Tramp : Not talk ?—She'll have to talk about the food
She made out we'd be having here. Where is it ?

Woman : Are you fuddled ? There's none here.

Tramp : None, by God !
Not a bite ?

Woman : Not a bite.

Tramp (going towards her) : Then take your lesson !
You'll feel my ten commandments now : you'll learn
The way of them by heart. [*The woman, standing up, instinctively
picks up the baby and holds it as her
protection.*]

Lay the brat down !

Put down that bastard, or he'll grow up lame
As you'll be when I've done you.

[*She lays the baby down and faces him.*]

Ay, that's wiser :

You mind what came of that trick once ?—And now
I'll twinge your arm till it crackles.

Woman : No, not that !

Joiner : I've payed out rope enough. I'll fasten it now
Taut, and you've hung yourself.—Round on your heels
And out of doors!

Tramp : This isn't your ado ;
Keep out.

Joiner : You march now : I'll not bid you again.

Tramp : Have I to down you first before I tan
My woman ? Do you call that fair ? It's low.
I'm hunger-starved and done—just enough heart
Left in me for lathering her ; and you
Push in, you with your belly crammed and good :
It's low ! Stand off and be an Englishman.

Joiner : You're too long standing. Will you have your teeth
So quaked in your head, you'll never chew again
Happily ? Off out of this !

Tramp (half whimpering with weakness and anger) : Mate, fair play.
Too bad it is. She cheats me of a meal
And should be taught right. Ay, and you'd have seen,
If she had kept her word and found me meat,
I am a man when I'm fed could do for you
And lick her finely as well out of her lies :
A job for each hand that. But now—
There's nothing fair in the world, after this !

Joiner : You'll have it then ?

Tramp (in a rage) : And empty as I be
I'll match you : win or lose, she'll pay me for it
When we're alone.

Woman (looking out through the open door) : Have you been showing
[yourself ?

Tramp (*apprehensive at once*) : What is it now ?

Woman : Three men, mighty cautious,
And almost here.

Tramp : They'll not find me. [*Making for the door.*]

Woman : You fool,
They're right in front.

Tramp : You bitch, you have me trapt !
O I will need to go into hard training
If I'm to pay you the fair price for this !

Woman : Ay, shout to them " Here's your man ! "

Tramp : What will I do ?—
Up the stairs and out of a window and off,
That's my road. [*He goes upstairs.*]

Woman : There's the first to take your stairs

Joiner : And a good use for them ; it quits us of him.

Three Men come in (1, 2, & 3.)

1. Ay, there he is !
2. The man !
3. The very man !

I markt him well, nosing the taproom whiff
Beside the door, and fearing to go in.

1. You see his cunning ?
2. Why, he's washt his face !
3. 'Tis that ! I thought he lookt another man !
1. But not this way you'll put off eyes like ours.

Woman : O will they take him ?— I'd not plotted that !

Joiner : Ay, the thing plans itself, once we can hold
Their crazy pother.

At five o'clock one April morn
I met them making tracks,
Young Benjamin and Abel Horn,
With bundles on their backs.

Young Benjamin is seventy-five,
Young Abel, seventy-seven—
The oldest innocents alive
Beneath that April heaven.

I asked them why they trudged about
With crabby looks and sour—
“ And does your mother know you're out
At this unearthly hour ? ”

They stopped : and scowling up at me
Each shook a grizzled head,
And swore ; and then spat bitterly,
As with one voice they said :

“ Homeless, about the country-side
We never thought to roam ;
But mother, she has gone and died,
And broken up the home.”

His body bulged with puppies—little eyes
Peeped out of every pocket, black and bright ;
And with as innocent, round-eyed surprise
He watched the glittering traffic of the night.

“ What this world’s coming to I cannot tell,”
He muttered, as I passed him, with a whine—
“ Things surely must be making slap for hell,
When no one wants these little dogs of mine.”

I saw three black pigs riding
In a blue and yellow cart—
Three black pigs riding to the fair
Behind the old grey dappled mare—
But it wasn't black pigs riding
In a gay and gaudy cart
That sent me into hiding
With a flutter in my heart.

I heard the cart returning,
The jolting jingling cart—
Returning empty from the fair
Behind the old jog-trotting mare—
But it wasn't the returning
Of a clattering, empty cart
That sent the hot blood burning
And throbbing through my heart.

I dreamt of wings,—and waked to hear
Through the low sloping ceiling clear
The nesting starlings flutter and scratch
Among the rafters of the thatch,
Not twenty inches from my head ;
And lay, half-dreaming, in my bed,
Watching the far elms, bolt-upright
Black towers of silence in a night
Of stars, square-framed between the sill
Of the casement and the eaves, until
I drowsed, and must have slept a wink . . .
And wakened to a ceaseless clink
Of hammers ringing on the air . . .
And, somehow, only half-aware,
I'd risen, and crept down the stair,
Bewildered by strange, smoky gloom,
Until I'd reached the living-room
That once had been a nailshop-shed.
And where my hearth had blazed, instead
I saw the nail-forge glowing red ;
And, through the stife and smoky glare,
Three dreaming women standing there
With hammers beating red-hot wire
On tinkling anvils, by the fire,
To ten-a-penny nails ; and heard—
Though none looked up or breathed a word—
The song each heart sang to the tune
Of hammers, through a Summer's noon,
When they had wrought in that red glow,
Alive, a hundred years ago—

The song of girl and wife and crone,
Sung in the heart of each alone . . .

The dim-eyed crone with nodding head—
“ He’s dead ; and I’ll, too, soon be dead.”

The grave-eyed mother, gaunt with need—
“ Another little mouth to feed ! ”

The black-haired girl, with eyes alight—
“ I’ll wear the yellow beads to-night.”

THE SHAFT

He must have lost his way, somehow. 'Twould seem
He'd taken the wrong turning, back a bit,
After his lamp . . . Or was it all a dream
That he'd nigh reached the cage—his new lamp lit
And swinging in his hand, and whistling, glad
To think the shift was over—when he'd tripped
And stumbled, like the daft, club-footed lad
His mother called him ; and his lamp had slipped
And smashed to smithereens ; and left him there
In pitchy dark, half-stunned, and with barked shins ?
He'd cursed his luck ; although he didn't care,
Not overmuch ; you suffered for your sins ;
And, anyway, he must be nigh the shaft ;
And he could fumble his way out somehow,
If he were last, and none came by. 'Twas daft
To do a trick like thon.

And even now

His mother would be waiting. How she'd laugh
To hear about it ! She was always game
For fun, she was, and such a one for chaff.
A fellow had no chance. But 'twas the same
With women always ; you could never tell
What they'd be at, or after saying next ;
They'd such queer, tricky tongues ; and it was well
For men to let them talk when they were vext—
Although, his mother, she was seldom cross.
But she'd be wondering now, ay, that she would—
Hands folded in her apron, at a loss
To know what kept him, even now she stood,
Biting her lips, he'd warrant. She aye bit

Her lips till they were white when things went wrong.
She'd never liked his taking to the pit,
After his father'd . . . Ay, and what a song
She'd make . . . and supper cold! It must be late.
The last on the last shift! After to-day
The pit was being laid idle. Jack, his mate,
Had left him tidying, hurrying away,
To back . . . And no night-shift . . .

If that cursed lamp

Had not gone out . . . But that was hours ago—
How many hours he couldn't tell. The cramp
Was in his thighs. And what could a lad know
Who'd crawled for hours upon his hands and knees
Through miles on miles of hot, black, dripping night
Of low-roofed, unfamiliar galleries?
He'd give a hundred pound to stand upright
And stretch his legs a moment: but, somehow,
He'd never reached a refuge, though he'd felt
The walls on either hand. He'd bumped his brow
Till he was dizzy. And the heat would melt
The marrow in his bones. And yet he'd gone
A dozen miles at least, and hadn't found
Even a crossway. On and on and on
He'd crawled, and crawled; and never caught a sound
Save water dripping, dripping, or the creak
Of settling coal. If he could only hear
His own voice even; but he dared not speak
Above a whisper . . .

There was naught to fear;
And he was not afraid of aught, not he!
He would come on a shaft, before he knew.

He couldn't miss. The longest gallery
Must end somewhere or other; though 'twas true
He hadn't guessed the drift could be so long.

If he had not come straight . . . If he had turned,
Unknowing, in the dark . . . If he'd gone wrong
Once, then why not a dozen times! It burned
His very heart to tinder, just to think
That he, maybe, was crawling round and round
And round and round, and hadn't caught a blink
Of light at all, or hadn't heard a sound . . .
'Twas queer, gey queer . . .

Or was he going daft,
And only dreaming he was underground
In some black pit of hell, without a shaft—
Just one long gallery that wound and wound,
Where he must crawl for ever with the drip
Of lukewarm water drumming on his back . . .
'Twas nightmare, surely, had him in its grip.
His head was like to split, his spine to crack . . .
If he could only call, his mother'd come
And shake him; and he'd find himself in bed . . .
She'd joke his fright away . . . But he was dumb,
And couldn't shout to save himself . . . His head
Seemed full of water, dripping, dripping, dripping . . .
And he, somehow, inside it—huge and dark
His own skull soared above him . . . He kept slipping,
And clutching at the crumbling walls . . . A spark
Flared suddenly; and to a blood-red blaze
His head was bursting; and the pain would break . . .
'Twas solid coal he'd run against, adaze—

Coal, sure enough. And he was broad awake,
And crawling still through that unending drift
Of some old working, long disused. He'd known
That there were such. If he could only lift
His head a moment ; but the roof of stone
Crushed low upon him. A gey narrow seam
He must be in,—and bad to work : no doubt
That's why 'twas given up. He'd like to scream,
His cut knees hurt so sorely ; but a shout
Might bring the crumbling roof down on his head,
And squash him flat.

If he could only creep
Between the cool white sheets of his own bed,
And turn towards the wall, and sleep, and sleep—
And dream, maybe, of pigeons soaring high,
Turning and tumbling in the morning light,
With wings ashimmer in a cloudless sky.
He'd give the world to see a bonnie flight
Of his own pigeons rise with flapping wings,
Soaring and sweeping almost out of sight,
Till he was dizzy, watching the mad things
Tossing and tumbling at that dazzling height.
Ay, and his homers, too—if they'd come in,
He hoped his mother'd fed them. They would be
Fair famished after such a flight, and thin.

But she would feed them, sure enough ; for she
Liked pigeons, too—would stand there at the door
With arms akimbo, staring at the blue,
Her black eyes shining as she watched them soar,
Without a word, till they were out of view.

And how she laughed to hear them scold and pout,
Ruffle and fuss—like menfolk, she would say,
Nobody knowing what 'twas all about,
And least of all themselves. That was her way,
To joke and laugh the tantrums out of him.
He'd tie his neckerchief before the glass ;
And she'd call him her pigeon, Peter Prim,
Preening himself, she'd say, to meet his lass—
Though he'd no lass, not he ! A scarf well tied,
No gaudy colours, just a red or yellow,
Was what he fancied. What harm if he tried
To keep himself respectable ! A fellow—
Though womenfolk might laugh and laugh . . .

And now

He wondered if he'd hear her laugh again
With hands on hips and sparkling eyes. His brow
Seemed clamped with red-hot iron bands ; and pain
Shot red-hot needles through his legs—his back,
A raw and aching spine that bore the strain
Of all the earth above him : the dead black
Unending clammy night blinding his brain
To a black blankness shot with scarlet streaks
Of searing lightning ; and he scarcely knew
If he'd been crawling hours, or days, or weeks . . .
And now the lightning glimmered faintly blue,
And gradually the blackness paled to grey :
And somewhere, far ahead, he caught the gleam
Of light, daylight, the very light of day,
Day, dazzling day !

Thank God, it was no dream.

He felt a cooler air upon his face ;

And scrambling madly for some moments more
Though centuries it seemed, he reached the place
Where through the chinks of the old crumbling door
Of a disused upcast-shaft, grey ghostly light
Strained feebly, though it seemed the sun's own blaze
To eyes so long accustomed to the night
And peering blindly through that pitchy maze.

The door dropped from its hinges—and upright
He stood, at last, bewildered and adaze,
In a strange dazzling world of flowering white.
Plumed snowy fronds and delicate downy sprays,
Fantastic as the feathery work of frost,
Drooped round him from the wet walls of the shaft—
A monstrous growth of mould, huge mould. And lost
In wonder he stood gaping; and then laughed
To see that living beauty—quietly
He laughed to see it: and awhile forgot
All danger. He would tell his mother: she
Would scarce know whether to believe or not,—
But laugh to hear how, when he came on it,
It dazzled him. If she could only see
That fluffy white—come on it from the pit,
Snow-white as fantails' feathers, suddenly
As he had, she'd laugh too: she . . .

Icy cold

Shot shuddering through him, as he stept beneath
A trickle. He looked up. That monstrous mould
Frightened him; and he stood with chattering teeth,
Seeming to feel it growing over him
Already, shutting out the fleck of sky

That up the slimy shaft gleamed far and dim.
'Twould flourish on his bones when he should lie
Forgotten in the shaft. Its clammy breath
Was choking him already. He would die,
And no one know how he'd come by his death. . .
Dank, cold mould growing slowly. By and by
'Twould cover him ; and not a soul to tell . . .

With a wild cry he tried to scramble out,
Clutching the wall . . . Mould covered him . . . He fell,
As, close at hand, there came an answering shout.

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Lascelles Abercrombie
Rupert Brooke
John Drinkwater
Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

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