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FAIRIES AND FUSILIERS

BY

ROBERT GRAVES

1918

TO
THE ROYAL WELCH FUSILIERS

I have to thank Mr. Harold Monro, of The Poetry Book Shop, for permission to include in this volume certain poems of which he possesses the copyright; also the editor of the "Nation" for a similar courtesy.

R.G.

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TO AN UNGENTLE CRITIC

*The great sun sinks behind the town
Through a red mist of Volnay wine....*
But what's the use of setting down
That glorious blaze behind the town?
You'll only skip the page, you'll look
For newer pictures in this book;
You've read of sunsets rich as mine.

*A fresh wind fills the evening air
With horrid crying of night birds....*
But what reads new or curious there
When cold winds fly across the air?
You'll only frown; you'll turn the page,
But find no glimpse of your "New Age
Of Poetry" in my worn-out words.

Must winds that cut like blades of steel
And sunsets swimming in Volnay,
The holiest, cruellest pains I feel,
Die stillborn, because old men squeal
For something new: "Write something new:
We've read this poem—that one too,
And twelve more like 'em yesterday"?

No, no! my chicken, I shall scrawl
Just what I fancy as I strike it,
Fairies and Fusiliers, and all
Old broken knock-kneed thought will crawl
Across my verse in the classic way.
And, sir, be careful what you say;
There are old-fashioned folk still like it.

AN OLD TWENTY-THIRD MAN

"Is that the Three-and-Twentieth, Strabo mine,
Marching below, and we still gulping wine?"
From the sad magic of his fragrant cup
The red-faced old centurion started up,
Cursed, battered on the table. "No," he said,
"Not that! The Three-and-Twentieth Legion's
dead,
Dead in the first year of this damned campaign—
The Legion's dead, dead, and won't rise again.
Pity? Rome pities her brave lads that die,
But we need pity also, you and I,
Whom Gallic spear and Belgian arrow miss,
Who live to see the Legion come to this,
Unsoldierlike, slovenly, bent on loot,
Grumblers, diseased, unskilled to thrust or shoot.
O, brown cheek, muscled shoulder, sturdy
thigh!
Where are they now? God! watch it struggle
by,
The sullen pack of ragged ugly swine.
Is that the Legion, Gracchus? Quick, the
wine!"
"Strabo," said Gracchus, "you are strange tonight.
The Legion is the Legion; it's all right.
If these new men are slovenly, in your thinking,
God damn it! you'll not better them by drinking.
They all try, Strabo; trust their hearts and hands.
The Legion is the Legion while Rome stands,
And these same men before the autumn's fall

Shall bang old Vercingetorix out of Gaul."

TO LUCASTA ON GOING TO THE WAR—FOR THE FOURTH TIME

It doesn't matter what's the cause,
What wrong they say we're righting,
A curse for treaties, bonds and laws,
When we're to do the fighting!
And since we lads are proud and true,
What else remains to do?
Lucasta, when to France your man
Returns his fourth time, hating war,
Yet laughs as calmly as he can
And flings an oath, but says no more,
That is not courage, that's not fear—
Lucasta he's a Fusilier,
And his pride sends him here.

Let statesmen bluster, bark and bray,
And so decide who started
This bloody war, and who's to pay,
But he must be stout-hearted,
Must sit and stake with quiet breath,
Playing at cards with Death.
Don't plume yourself he fights for you;
It is no courage, love, or hate,
But let us do the things we do;
It's pride that makes the heart be great;
It is not anger, no, nor fear—
Lucasta he's a Fusilier,
And his pride keeps him here.

TWO FUSILIERS

And have we done with War at last?
Well, we've been lucky devils both,
And there's no need of pledge or oath
To bind our lovely friendship fast,
By firmer stuff
Close bound enough.

By wire and wood and stake we're bound,
By Fricourt and by Festubert,
By whipping rain, by the sun's glare,
By all the misery and loud sound,
By a Spring day,
By Picard clay.

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the red bond of blood,
By friendship, blossoming from mud,
By Death: we faced him, and we found
Beauty in Death,
In dead men breath.

TO ROBERT NICHOLS

(From Frise on the Somme in February, 1917, in answer to a letter saying: "I am just finishing my 'Faun's Holiday.' I wish you were here to feed him with cherries.")

Here by a snowbound river
In scrapen holes we shiver,
And like old bitterns we
Boom to you plaintively:
Robert how can I rhyme
Verses for your desire—
Sleek fauns and cherry-time,

Vague music and green trees,
Hot sun and gentle breeze,
England in June attire,
And life born young again,
For your gay goatish brute
Drunk with warm melody
Singing on beds of thyme
With red and rolling eye,
All the Devonian plain,
Lips dark with juicy stain,
Ears hung with bobbing fruit?
Why should I keep him time?
Why in this cold and rime,
Where even to dream is pain?
No, Robert, there's no reason:
Cherries are out of season,
Ice grips at branch and root,
And singing birds are mute.

DEAD COW FARM

An ancient saga tells us how
In the beginning the First Cow
(For nothing living yet had birth
But Elemental Cow on earth)
Began to lick cold stones and mud:
Under her warm tongue flesh and blood
Blossomed, a miracle to believe:
And so was Adam born, and Eve.
Here now is chaos once again,
Primeval mud, cold stones and rain.
Here flesh decays and blood drips red,
And the Cow's dead, the old Cow's dead.

GOLIATH AND DAVID

(FOR D.C.T., KILLED AT FRICOURT, MARCH,
1916)

Yet once an earlier David took
Smooth pebbles from the brook:
Out between the lines he went
To that one-sided tournament,
A shepherd boy who stood out fine
And young to fight a Philistine
Clad all in brazen mail. He swears
That he's killed lions, he's killed bears,
And those that scorn the God of Zion
Shall perish so like bear or lion.
But ... the historian of that fight
Had not the heart to tell it right.

Striding within javelin range,
Goliath marvels at this strange
Goodly-faced boy so proud of strength.
David's clear eye measures the length;
With hand thrust back, he cramps one knee,
Poises a moment thoughtfully,
And hurls with a long vengeful swing.
The pebble, humming from the sling
Like a wild bee, flies a sure line
For the forehead of the Philistine;
Then ... but there comes a brazen clink,
And quicker than a man can think
Goliath's shield parries each cast.
Clang! clang! and clang! was David's last.
Scorn blazes in the Giant's eye,
Towering unhurt six cubits high.
Says foolish David, "Damn your shield!
And damn my sling! but I'll not yield."
He takes his staff of Mamre oak,
A knotted shepherd-staff that's broke

The skull of many a wolf and fox
Come filching lambs from Jesse's flocks.
Loud laughs Goliath, and that laugh
Can scatter chariots like blown chaff
To rout; but David, calm and brave,
Holds his ground, for God will save.
Steel crosses wood, a flash, and oh!
Shame for beauty's overthrow!
(God's eyes are dim, His ears are shut.)
One cruel backhand sabre-cut
"I'm hit! I'm killed!" young David cries,
Throws blindly forward, chokes ... and dies.
And look, spike-helmeted, grey, grim,
Goliath straddles over him.

BABYLON

The child alone a poet is:
Spring and Fairyland are his.
Truth and Reason show but dim,
And all's poetry with him.
Rhyme and music flow in plenty
For the lad of one-and-twenty,
But Spring for him is no more now
Than daisies to a munching cow;
Just a cheery pleasant season,
Daisy buds to live at ease on.
He's forgotten how he smiled
And shrieked at snowdrops when a child,
Or wept one evening secretly
For April's glorious misery.
Wisdom made him old and wary
Banishing the Lords of Faery.
Wisdom made a breach and battered
Babylon to bits: she scattered
To the hedges and ditches
All our nursery gnomes and witches.
Lob and Puck, poor frantic elves,
Drag their treasures from the shelves.
Jack the Giant-killer's gone,
Mother Goose and Oberon,
Bluebeard and King Solomon.
Robin, and Red Riding Hood
Take together to the wood,
And Sir Galahad lies hid
In a cave with Captain Kidd.
None of all the magic hosts,
None remain but a few ghosts
Of timorous heart, to linger on
Weeping for lost Babylon.

MR. PHILOSOPHER

Old Mr. Philosopher
Comes for Ben and Claire,
An ugly man, a tall man,
With bright-red hair.

The books that he's written
No one can read.
"In fifty years they'll understand:
Now there's no need.

"All that matters now
Is getting the fun.
Come along, Ben and Claire;
Plenty to be done."

Then old Philosopher,
Wisest man alive,
Plays at Lions and Tigers
Down along the drive—

Gambolling fiercely
Through bushes and grass,
Making monstrous mouths,
Braying like an ass,

Twisting buttercups
In his orange hair,
Hopping like a kangaroo,
Growling like a bear.

Right up to tea-time
They frolic there.
"My legs *are* wingle,"
Says Ben to Claire.

THE CRUEL MOON

The cruel Moon hangs out of reach
Up above the shadowy beech.
Her face is stupid, but her eye
Is small and sharp and very sly.
Nurse says the Moon can drive you mad?
No, that's a silly story, lad!
Though she be angry, though she would
Destroy all England if she could,
Yet think, what damage can she do
Hanging there so far from you?
Don't heed what frightened nurses say:
Moons hang much too far away.

FINLAND

Feet and faces tingle
In that frore land:
Legs wobble and go wingle,
You scarce can stand.

The skies are jewelled all around,
The ploughshare snaps in the iron ground,
The Finn with face like paper
And eyes like a lighted taper
Hurls his rough rune
At the wintry moon
And stamps to mark the tune.

A PINCH OF SALT

When a dream is born in you
With a sudden clamorous pain,
When you know the dream is true
And lovely, with no flaw nor stain,
O then, be careful, or with sudden clutch
You'll hurt the delicate thing you prize so much.

Dreams are like a bird that mocks,
Flirting the feathers of his tail.
When you seize at the salt-box
Over the hedge you'll see him sail.
Old birds are neither caught with salt nor chaff:
They watch you from the apple bough and laugh.

Poet, never chase the dream.
Laugh yourself and turn away.
Mask your hunger, let it seem
Small matter if he come or stay;
But when he nestles in your hand at last,
Close up your fingers tight and hold him fast.

THE CATERPILLAR

Under this loop of honeysuckle,
A creeping, coloured caterpillar,
I gnaw the fresh green hawthorn spray,
I nibble it leaf by leaf away.

Down beneath grow dandelions,
Daisies, old-man's-looking-glasses;
Rooks flap croaking across the lane.
I eat and swallow and eat again.

Here come raindrops helter-skelter;
I munch and nibble unregarding:
Hawthorn leaves are juicy and firm.
I'll mind my business: I'm a good worm.

When I'm old, tired, melancholy,
I'll build a leaf-green mausoleum
Close by, here on this lovely spray,
And die and dream the ages away.

Some say worms win resurrection,
With white wings beating flitter-flutter,
But wings or a sound sleep, why should I care?
Either way I'll miss my share.

Under this loop of honeysuckle,
A hungry, hairy caterpillar,
I crawl on my high and swinging seat,
And eat, eat, eat—as one ought to eat.

SORLEY'S WEATHER

When outside the icy rain
Comes leaping helter-skelter,
Shall I tie my restive brain
Snugly under shelter?

Shall I make a gentle song
Here in my firelit study,
When outside the winds blow strong
And the lanes are muddy?

With old wine and drowsy meats
Am I to fill my belly?
Shall I glutton here with Keats?
Shall I drink with Shelley?

Tobacco's pleasant, firelight's good:
Poetry makes both better.
Clay is wet and so is mud,
Winter rains are wetter.

Yet rest there, Shelley, on the sill,
For though the winds come frorely,
I'm away to the rain-blown hill
And the ghost of Sorley.

THE COTTAGE

Here in turn succeed and rule
Carter, smith, and village fool,
Then again the place is known
As tavern, shop, and Sunday-school;
Now somehow it's come to me
To light the fire and hold the key,
Here in Heaven to reign alone.

All the walls are white with lime,
Big blue periwinkles climb
And kiss the crumbling window-sill;
Snug inside I sit and rhyme,
Planning, poem, book, or fable,
At my darling beech-wood table

Fresh with bluebells from the hill.

Through the window I can see
Rooks above the cherry-tree,
Sparrows in the violet bed,
Bramble-bush and bumble-bee,
And old red bracken smoulders still
Among boulders on the hill,
Far too bright to seem quite dead.

But old Death, who can't forget,
Waits his time and watches yet,
Waits and watches by the door.
Look, he's got a great new net,
And when my fighting starts afresh
Stouter cord and smaller mesh
Won't be cheated as before.

Nor can kindness of Spring,
Flowers that smile nor birds that sing.
Bumble-bee nor butterfly,
Nor grassy hill nor anything
Of magic keep me safe to rhyme
In this Heaven beyond my time.
No! for Death is waiting by.

THE LAST POST

The bugler sent a call of high romance—
"Lights out! Lights out!" to the deserted square.
On the thin brazen notes he threw a prayer,
"God, if it's *this* for me next time in France ...
O spare the phantom bugle as I lie
Dead in the gas and smoke and roar of guns,
Dead in a row with the other broken ones
Lying so stiff and still under the sky,
Jolly young Fusiliers too good to die."

WHEN I'M KILLED

When I'm killed, don't think of me
Buried there in Cambrin Wood,
Nor as in Zion think of me
With the Intolerable Good.
And there's one thing that I know well,
I'm damned if I'll be damned to Hell!

So when I'm killed, don't wait for me,
Walking the dim corridor;
In Heaven or Hell, don't wait for me,
Or you must wait for evermore.
You'll find me buried, living-dead
In these verses that you've read.

So when I'm killed, don't mourn for me,
Shot, poor lad, so bold and young,
Killed and gone—don't mourn for me.
On your lips my life is hung:
O friends and lovers, you can save
Your playfellow from the grave.

LETTER TO S.S. FROM MAMETZ WOOD

I never dreamed we'd meet that day
In our old haunts down Fricourt way,
Plotting such marvellous journeys there
For jolly old "Après-la-guerre."

Well, when it's over, first we'll meet
At Gweithdy Bach, my country seat
In Wales, a curious little shop

With two rooms and a roof on top,
A sort of Morlancourt-ish billet
That never needs a crowd to fill it.
But oh, the country round about!
The sort of view that makes you shout
For want of any better way
Of praising God: there's a blue bay
Shining in front, and on the right
Snowden and Hebog capped with white,
And lots of other jolly peaks
That you could wonder at for weeks,
With jag and spur and hump and cleft.
There's a grey castle on the left,
And back in the high Hinterland
You'll see the grave of Shawn Knarlbrand,
Who slew the savage Buffaloon
By the Nant-col one night in June,
And won his surname from the horn
Of this prodigious unicorn.
Beyond, where the two Rhinogs tower,
Rhinog Fach and Rhinog Fawr,
Close there after a four years' chase
From Thessaly and the woods of Thrace,
The beaten Dog-cat stood at bay
And growled and fought and passed away.
You'll see where mountain conies grapple
With prayer and creed in their rock chapel
Which Ben and Claire once built for them;
They call it Söar Bethlehem.
You'll see where in old Roman days,
Before Revivals changed our ways,
The Virgin 'scaped the Devil's grab,
Printing her foot on a stone slab
With five clear toe-marks; and you'll find
The fiendish thumbprint close behind.
You'll see where Math, Mathonwy's son,
Spoke with the wizard Gwydion
And bad him from South Wales set out
To steal that creature with the snout,
That new-discovered grunting beast
Divinely flavoured for the feast.
No traveller yet has hit upon
A wilder land than Meirion,
For desolate hills and tumbling stones,
Bogland and melody and old bones.
Fairies and ghosts are here galore,
And poetry most splendid, more
Than can be written with the pen
Or understood by common men.

In Gweithdy Bach we'll rest awhile,
We'll dress our wounds and learn to smile
With easier lips; we'll stretch our legs,
And live on bilberry tart and eggs,
And store up solar energy,
Basking in sunshine by the sea,
Until we feel a match once more
For *anything* but another war.

So then we'll kiss our families,
And sail across the seas
(The God of Song protecting us)
To the great hills of Caucasus.
Robert will learn the local *bat*
For billeting and things like that,
If Siegfried learns the piccolo
To charm the people as we go.

The jolly peasants clad in furs
Will greet the Welch-ski officers
With open arms, and ere we pass
Will make us vocal with Kavasse.
In old Bagdad we'll call a halt
At the Sâshuns' ancestral vault;
We'll catch the Persian rose-flowers' scent,

And understand what Omar meant.
Bitlis and Mush will know our faces,
Tiflis and Tomsk, and all such places.
Perhaps eventually we'll get
Among the Tartars of Thibet.
Hobnobbing with the Chungs and Mings,
And doing wild, tremendous things
In free adventure, quest and fight,
And God! what poetry we'll write!

A DEAD BOCHE

To you who'd read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
"War's Hell!" and if you doubt the same,
Today I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

FAUN

Here down this very way,
Here only yesterday
King Faun went leaping.
He sang, with careless shout
Hurling his name about;
He sang, with oaken stock
His steps from rock to rock
In safety keeping,
"Here Faun is free,
Here Faun is free!"

Today against yon pine,
Forlorn yet still divine,
King Faun leant weeping.
"They drank my holy brook,
My strawberries they took,
My private path they trod."
Loud wept the desolate God,
Scorn on scorn heaping,
"Faun, what is he,
Faun, what is he?"

THE SPOILSPORT

My familiar ghost again
Comes to see what he can see,
Critic, son of Conscious Brain,
Spying on our privacy.

Slam the window, bolt the door,
Yet he'll enter in and stay;
In tomorrow's book he'll score
Indiscretions of today.

Whispered love and muttered fears,
How their echoes fly about!
None escape his watchful ears,
Every sigh might be a shout.

No kind words nor angry cries
Turn away this grim spoilsport;
No fine lady's pleading eyes,
Neither love, nor hate, nor ... port.

Critics wears no smile of fun,
Speaks no word of blame nor praise,
Counts our kisses one by one,
Notes each gesture, every phrase.

My familiar ghost again
Stands or squats where suits him best;
Critic, son of Conscious Brain,
Listens, watches, takes no rest.

THE SHIVERING BEGGAR

Near Clapham village, where fields began,
Saint Edward met a beggar man.
It was Christmas morning, the church bells tolled,
The old man trembled for the fierce cold.

Saint Edward cried, "It is monstrous sin
A beggar to lie in rags so thin!
An old grey-beard and the frost so keen:
I shall give him my fur-lined gaberdine."

He stripped off his gaberdine of scarlet
And wrapped it round the aged varlet,
Who clutched at the folds with a muttered curse,
Quaking and chattering seven times worse.

Said Edward, "Sir, it would seem you freeze
Most bitter at your extremities.
Here are gloves and shoes and stockings also,
That warm upon your way you may go."

The man took stocking and shoe and glove,
Blaspheming Christ our Saviour's love,
Yet seemed to find but little relief,
Shaking and shivering like a leaf.

Said the saint again, "I have no great riches,
Yet take this tunic, take these breeches,
My shirt and my vest, take everything,
And give due thanks to Jesus the King."

The saint stood naked upon the snow
Long miles from where he was lodged at Bowe,
Praying, "O God! my faith, it grows faint!
This would try the temper of any saint.

"Make clean my heart, Almighty, I pray,
And drive these sinful thoughts away.
Make clean my heart if it be Thy will,
This damned old rascal's shivering still!"

He stooped, he touched the beggar man's shoulder;
He asked him did the frost nip colder?
"Frost!" said the beggar, "no, stupid lad!
'Tis the palsy makes me shiver so bad."

JONAH

A purple whale
Proudly sweeps his tail
Towards Nineveh;
Glassy green
Surges between
A mile of roaring sea.

"O town of gold,
Of splendour multifold,
Lucre and lust,
Leviathan's eye
Can surely spy
Thy doom of death and dust."

On curving sands
Vengeful Jonah stands.
"Yet forty days,
Then down, down,
Tumbles the town
In flaming ruin ablaze."

With swift lament
Those Ninevites repent.
They cry in tears,
"Our hearts fail!
The whale, the whale!
Our sins prick us like spears."

Jonah is vexed;
He cries, "What next? what next?"
And shakes his fist.
"Stupid city,
The shame, the pity,
The glorious crash I've missed."

Away goes Jonah grumbling,
Murmuring and mumbling;
Off ploughs the purple whale,
With disappointed tail.

JOHN SKELTON

What could be dafter
Than John Skelton's laughter?
What sound more tenderly
Than his pretty poetry?
So where to rank old Skelton?
He was no monstrous Milton,
Nor wrote no "Paradise Lost,"
So wondered at by most,
Phrased so disdainfully,
Composed so painfully.
He struck what Milton missed,
Milling an English grist
With homely turn and twist.
He was English through and through,
Not Greek, nor French, nor Jew,
Though well their tongues he knew,
The living and the dead:
Learned Erasmus said,
*Hic 'unum Britannicarum
Lumen et decus literarum.*
But oh, Colin Clout!
How his pen flies about,
Twiddling and turning,
Scorching and burning,
Thrusting and thrumming!
How it hurries with humming,
Leaping and running,
At the tipsy-topsy Tunning
Of Mistress Eleanor Ruming!
How for poor Philip Sparrow
Was murdered at Carow,
How our hearts he does harrow
Jest and grief mingle
In this jangle-jingle,
For he will not stop
To sweep nor mop,
To prune nor prop,
To cut each phrase up
Like beef when we sup,
Nor sip at each line
As at brandy-wine,
Or port when we dine.
But angrily, wittily,
Tenderly, prettily,
Laughingly, learnedly,

Sadly, madly,
Helter-skelter John
Rhymes serenely on,
As English poets should.
Old John, you do me good!

I WONDER WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE DROWNED?

Look at my knees,
That island rising from the steamy seas!
The candles a tall lightship; my two hands
Are boats and barges anchored to the sands,
With mighty cliffs all round;
They're full of wine and riches from far lands....
I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?

I can make caves,
By lifting up the island and huge waves
And storms, and then with head and ears well under
Blow bubbles with a monstrous roar like thunder,
A bull-of-Bashan sound.
The seas run high and the boats split asunder....
I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?

The thin soap slips
And slithers like a shark under the ships.
My toes are on the soap-dish—that's the effect
Of my huge storms; an iron steamer's wrecked.
The soap slides round and round;
He's biting the old sailors, I expect....
I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?

DOUBLE RED DAISIES

Double red daisies, they're my flowers,
Which nobody else may grow.
In a big quarrelsome house like ours
They try it sometimes—but no,
I root them up because they're my flowers,
Which nobody else may grow.

*Claire has a tea-rose, but she didn't plant it;
Ben has an iris, but I don't want it.
Daisies, double red daisies for me,
The beautifullest flowers in the garden.*

Double red daisy, that's my mark:
I paint it in all my books!
It's carved high up on the beech-tree bark,
How neat and lovely it looks!
So don't forget that it's my trade mark;
Don't copy it in your books.

*Claire has a tea-rose, but she didn't plant it;
Ben has an iris, but I don't want it.
Daisies, double red daisies for me,
The beautifullest flowers in the garden.*

CAREERS

Father is quite the greatest poet
That ever lived anywhere.
You say you're going to write great music—
I chose that first: it's unfair.
Besides, now I can't be the greatest painter and
do Christ and angels, or lovely pears
and apples and grapes on a green dish,
or storms at sea, or anything lovely,
Because that's been taken by Claire.

It's stupid to be an engine-driver,

And soldiers are horrible men.
I won't be a tailor, I won't be a sailor,
And gardener's taken by Ben.
It's unfair if you say that you'll write great
music, you horrid, you unkind (I simply
loathe you, though you are my
sister), you beast, cad, coward, cheat,
bully, liar!
Well? Say what's left for me then!
But *we* won't go to your ugly music.
(Listen!) Ben will garden and dig,
And Claire will finish her wondrous pictures
All flaming and splendid and big.

And I'll be a perfectly marvellous carpenter,
and I'll make cupboards and benches
and tables and ... and baths, and
nice wooden boxes for studs and
money,
And you'll be jealous, you pig!

I'D LOVE TO BE A FAIRY'S CHILD

Children born of fairy stock
Never need for shirt or frock,
Never want for food or fire,
Always get their heart's desire:
Jingle pockets full of gold,
Marry when they're seven years old.
Every fairy child may keep
Two strong ponies and ten sheep;
All have houses, each his own,
Built of brick or granite stone;
They live on cherries, they run wild—
I'd love to be a Fairy's child.

THE NEXT WAR

You young friskies who today
Jump and fight in Father's hay
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers,
Happy though these hours you spend,
Have they warned you how games end?
Boys, from the first time you prod
And thrust with spears of curtain-rod,
From the first time you tear and slash
Your long-bows from the garden ash,
Or fit your shaft with a blue jay feather,
Binding the split tops together,
From that same hour by fate you're bound
As champions of this stony ground,
Loyal and true in everything,
To serve your Army and your King,
Prepared to starve and sweat and die
Under some fierce foreign sky,
If only to keep safe those joys
That belong to British boys,
To keep young Prussians from the soft
Scented hay of father's loft,
And stop young Slavs from cutting bows
And bendy spears from Welsh hedgerows.
Another War soon gets begun,
A dirtier, a more glorious one;
Then, boys, you'll have to play, all in;
It's the cruellest team will win.
So hold your nose against the stink
And never stop too long to think.
Wars don't change except in name;
The next one must go just the same,
And new foul tricks unguessed before
Will win and justify this War.

Kaisers and Czars will strut the stage
Once more with pomp and greed and rage;
Courtly ministers will stop
At home and fight to the last drop;
By the million men will die
In some new horrible agony;
And children here will thrust and poke,
Shoot and die, and laugh at the joke,
With bows and arrows and wooden spears,
Playing at Royal Welch Fusiliers.

STRONG BEER

"What do you think
The bravest drink
Under the sky?"
"Strong beer," said I.

"There's a place for everything,
Everything, anything,
There's a place for everything
Where it ought to be:
For a chicken, the hen's wing;
For poison, the bee's sting;
For almond-blossom, Spring;
A beerhouse for me."

"There's a prize for every one
Every one, any one,
There's a prize for every one,
Whoever he may be:
Craggs for the mountaineer,
Flags for the Fusilier,
For English poets, beer!
Strong beer for me!"

"Tell us, now, how and when
We may find the bravest men?"
"A sure test, an easy test:
Those that drink beer are the best,
Brown beer strongly brewed,
English drink and English food."

Oh, never choose as Gideon chose
By the cold well, but rather those
Who look on beer when it is brown,
Smack their lips and gulp it down.
Leave the lads who tamely drink
With Gideon by the water brink,
But search the benches of the Plough,
The Tun, the Sun, the Spotted Cow,
For jolly rascal lads who pray,
Pewter in hand, at close of day,
"Teach me to live that I may fear
The grave as little as my beer."

MARIGOLDS

With a fork drive Nature out,
She will ever yet return;
Hedge the flowerbed all about,
Pull or stab or cut or burn,
She will ever yet return.

Look: the constant marigold
Springs again from hidden roots.
Baffled gardener, you behold
New beginnings and new shoots
Spring again from hidden roots.
Pull or stab or cut or burn,
They will ever yet return.

Gardener, cursing at the weed,
Ere you curse it further, say:
Who but you planted the seed
In my fertile heart, one day?
Ere you curse me further, say!
New beginnings and new shoots
String again from hidden roots
Pull or stab or cut or burn,
Love must ever yet return.

THE LADY VISITOR IN THE PAUPER WARD

Why do you break upon this old, cool peace,
This painted peace of ours,
With harsh dress hissing like a flock of geese,
With garish flowers?
Why do you churn smooth waters rough again,
Selfish old skin-and-bone?
Leave us to quiet dreaming and slow pain,
Leave us alone.

LOVE AND BLACK MAGIC

To the woods, to the woods is the wizard gone;
In his grotto the maiden sits alone.
She gazes up with a weary smile
At the rafter-hanging crocodile,
The slowly swinging crocodile.
Scorn has she of her master's gear,
Cauldron, alembic, crystal sphere,
Phial, philtre—"Fiddlededee
For all such trumpery trash!" quo' she.
"A soldier is the lad for me;
Hey and hither, my lad!

"Oh, here have I ever lain forlorn:
My father died ere I was born,
Mother was by a wizard wed,
And oft I wish I had died instead—
Often I wish I were long time dead.
But, delving deep in my master's lore,
I have won of magic power such store
I can turn a skull—oh, fiddlededee
For all this curious craft!" quo' she.
"A soldier is the lad for me;
Hey and hither, my lad!

"To bring my brave boy unto my arms,
What need have I of magic charms—
'Abracadabra!' and 'Prestopuff'?
I have but to wish, and that is enough.
The charms are vain, one wish is enough.
My master pledged my hand to a wizard;
Transformed would I be to toad or lizard
If e'er he guessed—but fiddlededee
For a black-browed sorcerer, now," quo' she.
"Let Cupid smile and the fiend must flee;
Hey and hither, my lad."

SMOKE-RINGS

BOY
Most venerable and learned sir,
Tall and true Philosopher,
These rings of smoke you blow all day
With such deep thought, what sense have they?

PHILOSOPHER
Small friend, with prayer and meditation
I make an image of Creation.

And if your mind is working nimble
Straightway you'll recognize a symbol
Of the endless and eternal ring
Of God, who girdles everything—
God, who in His own form and plan
Moulds the fugitive life of man.
These vaporous toys you watch me make,
That shoot ahead, pause, turn and break—
Some glide far out like sailing ships,
Some weak ones fail me at my lips.
He who ringed His awe in smoke,
When He led forth His captive folk,
In like manner, East, West, North, and South,
Blows us ring-wise from His mouth.

A CHILD'S NIGHTMARE

Through long nursery nights he stood
By my bed unwearying,
Loomed gigantic, formless, queer,
Purring in my haunted ear
That same hideous nightmare thing,
Talking, as he lapped my blood,
In a voice cruel and flat,
Saying for ever, "Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat! ..."

That one word was all he said,
That one word through all my sleep,
In monotonous mock despair.
Nonsense may be light as air,
But there's Nonsense that can keep
Horror bristling round the head,
When a voice cruel and flat
Says for ever, "Cat! ... Cat! ... Cat!..."

He had faded, he was gone
Years ago with Nursery Land
When he leapt on me again
From the clank of a night train,
Overpowered me foot and head,
Lapped my blood, while on and on
The old voice cruel and flat
Says for ever, "Cat!... Cat!... Cat!..."

Morphia drowsed, again I lay
In a crater by High Wood:
He was there with straddling legs,
Staring eyes as big as eggs,
Purring as he lapped my blood,
His black bulk darkening the day,
With a voice cruel and flat,
"Cat!... Cat!... Cat!..." he said,
"Cat!... Cat!..."

When I'm shot through heart and head,
And there's no choice but to die,
The last word I'll hear, no doubt,
Won't be "Charge!" or "Bomb them out!"
Nor the stretcher-bearer's cry,
"Let that body be, he's dead!"
But a voice cruel and flat
Saying for ever, "Cat!... Cat!... Cat!"

ESCAPE

(August 6, 1916.—Officer previously reported died of wounds, now reported wounded: Graves, Captain R., Royal Welch Fusiliers.)

... But I *was* dead, an hour or more.
I woke when I'd already passed the door
That Cerberus guards, and half-way down the road
To Lethe, as an old Greek signpost showed.

Above me, on my stretcher swinging by,
 I saw new stars in the subterrene sky:
 A Cross, a Rose in bloom, a Cage with bars,
 And a barbed Arrow feathered in fine stars.
 I felt the vapours of forgetfulness
 Float in my nostrils. Oh, may Heaven bless
 Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake,
 And, stooping over me, for Henna's sake
 Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back
 Breathless, with leaping heart along the track.
 After me roared and clattered angry hosts
 Of demons, heroes, and policeman-ghosts.
 "Life! life! I can't be dead! I won't be dead!
 Damned if I'll die for any one!" I said....
 Cerberus stands and grins above me now,
 Wearing three heads—lion, and lynx, and sow.
 "Quick, a revolver! But my Webley's gone,
 Stolen!... No bombs ... no knife....
 The crowd swarms on,
 Bellows, hurls stones.... Not even a honeyed sop ...
 Nothing.... Good Cerberus!... Good dog!... but stop!
 Stay!... A great luminous thought ... I do believe
 There's still some morphia that I bought on leave."
 Then swiftly Cerberus' wide mouths I cram
 With army biscuit smeared with ration jam;

 And sleep lurks in the luscious plum and apple.
 He crunches, swallows, stiffens, seems to grapple
 With the all-powerful poppy ... then a snore,
 A crash; the beast blocks up the corridor
 With monstrous hairy carcase, red and dun—
 Too late! for I've sped through.
 O Life! O Sun!

THE BOUGH OF NONSENSE

An Idyll

Back from the Somme two Fusiliers
 Limped painfully home; the elder said,
 S. "Robert, I've lived three thousand years
 This Summer, and I'm nine parts dead."
 R. "But if that's truly so," I cried, "quick, now,
 Through these great oaks and see the famous bough

"Where once a nonsense built her nest
 With skulls and flowers and all things queer,
 In an old boot, with patient breast
 Hatching three eggs; and the next year ..."
 S. "Foaled thirteen squamous young beneath, and rid
 Wales of drink, melancholy, and psalms, she did."

Said he, "Before this quaint mood fails,
 We'll sit and weave a nonsense hymn,"
 R. "Hanging it up with monkey tails
 In a deep grove all hushed and dim...."
 S. "To glorious yellow-bunched banana-trees,"
 R. "Planted in dreams by pious Portuguese,"

S. "Which men are wise beyond their time,
 And worship nonsense, no one more."
 R. "Hard by, among old quince and lime,
 They've built a temple with no floor,"
 S. "And whosoever worships in that place,
 He disappears from sight and leaves no trace."

R. "Once the Galatians built a fane
 To Sense: what duller God than that?"
 S. "But the first day of autumn rain
 The roof fell in and crushed them flat."
 R. "Ay, for a roof of subtlest logic falls
 When nonsense is foundation for the walls."

I tell him old Galatian tales;
He caps them in quick Portuguese,
While phantom creatures with green scales
Scramble and roll among the trees.
The hymn swells; on a bough above us sings
A row of bright pink birds, flapping their wings.

NOT DEAD

Walking through trees to cool my heat and pain,
I know that David's with me here again.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Caressingly I stroke
Rough bark of the friendly oak.
A brook goes bubbling by: the voice is his.
Turf burns with pleasant smoke;
I laugh at chaffinch and at primroses.
All that is simple, happy, strong, he is.
Over the whole wood in a little while
Breaks his slow smile.

A BOY IN CHURCH

"Gabble-gabble,... brethren,... gabble-gabble!"
My window frames forest and heather.
I hardly hear the tuneful babble,
Not knowing nor much caring whether
The text is praise or exhortation,
Prayer or thanksgiving, or damnation.

Outside it blows wetter and wetter,
The tossing trees never stay still.
I shift my elbows to catch better
The full round sweep of heathered hill.
The tortured copse bends to and fro
In silence like a shadow-show.

The parson's voice runs like a river
Over smooth rocks. I like this church:
The pews are staid, they never shiver,
They never bend or sway or lurch.
"Prayer," says the kind voice, "is a chain
That draws down Grace from Heaven again."

I add the hymns up, over and over,
Until there's not the least mistake.
Seven-seventy-one. (Look! there's a plover!
It's gone!) Who's that Saint by the lake?
The red light from his mantle passes
Across the broad memorial brasses.

It's pleasant here for dreams and thinking,
Lolling and letting reason nod,
With ugly serious people linking
Sad prayers to a forgiving God....
But a dumb blast sets the trees swaying
With furious zeal like madmen praying.

CORPORAL STARE

Back from the line one night in June,
I gave a dinner at Bethune—
Seven courses, the most gorgeous meal
Money could buy or batman steal.
Five hungry lads welcomed the fish
With shouts that nearly cracked the dish;
Asparagus came with tender tops,
Strawberries in cream, and mutton chops.
Said Jenkins, as my hand he shook,
"They'll put this in the history book."

We bawled Church anthems *in choro*
Of Bethlehem and Hermon snow,
With drinking songs, a jolly sound
To help the good red Pommard round.
Stories and laughter interspersed,
We drowned a long La Bassée thirst—
Trenches in June make throats damned dry.
Then through the window suddenly,
Badge, stripes and medals all complete,
We saw him swagger up the street,
Just like a live man—Corporal Stare!
Stare! Killed last May at Festubert.
Caught on patrol near the Boche wire,
Tom horribly by machine-gun fire!
He paused, saluted smartly, grinned,
Then passed away like a puff of wind,
Leaving us blank astonishment.
The song broke, up we started, leant
Out of the window—nothing there,
Not the least shadow of Corporal Stare,
Only a quiver of smoke that showed
A fag-end dropped on the silent road.

THE ASSAULT HEROIC

Down in the mud I lay,
Tired out by my long day
Of five damned days and nights,
Five sleepless days and nights, ...
Dream-snatched, and set me where
The dungeon of Despair
Looms over Desolate Sea,
Frowning and threatening me
With aspect high and steep—
A most malignant keep.
My foes that lay within
Shouted and made a din,
Hooted and grinned and cried:
"Today we've killed your pride;
Today your ardour ends.
We've murdered all your friends;
We've undermined by stealth
Your happiness and your health.
We've taken away your hope;
Now you may droop and mope
To misery and to Death."
But with my spear of Faith,
Stout as an oaken rafter,
With my round shield of laughter,
With my sharp, tongue-like sword
That speaks a bitter word,
I stood beneath the wall
And there defied them all.
The stones they cast I caught
And alchemized with thought
Into such lumps of gold
As dreaming misers hold.
The boiling oil they threw
Fell in a shower of dew,
Refreshing me; the spears
Flew harmless by my ears,
Struck quivering in the sod;
There, like the prophet's rod,
Put leaves out, took firm root,
And bore me instant fruit.
My foes were all astounded,
Dumbstricken and confounded,
Gaping in a long row;
They dared not thrust nor throw.
Thus, then, I climbed a steep
Buttress and won the keep,
And laughed and proudly blew
My horn, "*Stand to! Stand to!*"

THE POET IN THE NURSERY

The youngest poet down the shelves was fumbling
In a dim library, just behind the chair
From which the ancient poet was mum-mumbling
A song about some Lovers at a Fair,
Pulling his long white beard and gently grumbling
That rhymes were beastly things and never there.

And as I groped, the whole time I was thinking
About the tragic poem I'd been writing,...
An old man's life of beer and whisky drinking,
His years of kidnapping and wicked fighting;
And how at last, into a fever sinking,
Remorsefully he died, his bedclothes biting.

But suddenly I saw the bright green cover
Of a thin pretty book right down below;
I snatched it up and turned the pages over,
To find it full of poetry, and so
Put it down my neck with quick hands like a lover,
And turned to watch if the old man saw it go.

The book was full of funny muddling mazes,
Each rounded off into a lovely song,
And most extraordinary and monstrous phrases
Knotted with rhymes like a slave-driver's thong.
And metre twisting like a chain of daisies
With great big splendid words a sentence long.

I took the book to bed with me and gloated,
Learning the lines that seemed to sound most grand;
So soon the pretty emerald green was coated
With jam and greasy marks from my hot hand,
While round the nursery for long months there floated
Wonderful words no one could understand.

IN THE WILDERNESS

Christ of His gentleness
Thirsting and hungering,
Walked in the wilderness;
Soft words of grace He spoke
Unto lost desert-folk
That listened wondering.
He heard the bitterns call
From ruined palace-wall,
Answered them brotherly.
He held communion
With the she-pelican
Of lonely piety.
Basilisk, cockatrice,
Flocked to his homilies,
With mail of dread device,
With monstrous barbéd slings,
With eager dragon-eyes;
Great rats on leather wings
And poor blind broken things,
Foul in their miseries.
And ever with Him went,
Of all His wanderings
Comrade, with ragged coat,
Gaunt ribs—poor innocent—
Bleeding foot, burning throat,
The guileless old scapegoat;
For forty nights and days
Followed in Jesus' ways,
Sure guard behind Him kept,
Tears like a lover wept.

CHERRY-TIME

Cherries of the night are riper
Than the cherries pluckt at noon
Gather to your fairy piper
When he pipes his magic tune:
Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder,
Mine are sweeter
For the eater
Under the moon.
And you'll be fairies soon.

In the cherry pluckt at night,
With the dew of summer swelling,
There's a juice of pure delight,
Cool, dark, sweet, divinely smelling.
Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder
Mine are sweeter
For the eater
In the moonlight.
And you'll be fairies quite.

When I sound the fairy call,
Gather here in silent meeting,
Chin to knee on the orchard wall,
Cooled with dew and cherries eating.
Merry, merry,
Take a cherry;
Mine are sounder,
Mine are rounder,
Mine are sweeter.
For the eater
When the dews fall.
And you'll be fairies all.

1915

I've watched the Seasons passing slow, so slow,
In the fields between La Bassée and Bethune;
Primroses and the first warm day of Spring,
Red poppy floods of June,
August, and yellowing Autumn, so
To Winter nights knee-deep in mud or snow,
And you've been everything.

Dear, you've been everything that I most lack
In these soul-deadening trenches—pictures, books,
Music, the quiet of an English wood,
Beautiful comrade-looks,
The narrow, bouldered mountain-track,
The broad, full-bosomed ocean, green and black,
And Peace, and all that's good.

FREE VERSE

I now delight
In spite
Of the might
And the right
Of classic tradition,
In writing
And reciting
Straight ahead,
Without let or omission,

Just any little rhyme
In any little time
That runs in my head;
Because, I've said,
My rhymes no longer shall stand arrayed
Like Prussian soldiers on parade
That march,
Stiff as starch,
Foot to foot,
Boot to boot,
Blade to blade,
Button to button
Cheeks and chops and chins like mutton.
No! No!
My rhymes must go
Turn 'ee, twist 'ee,
Twinkling, frosty,
Will-o'-the-wisp-like, misty;
Rhymes I will make
Like Keats and Blake
And Christina Rossetti,
With run and ripple and shake.
How pretty
To take
A merry little rhyme
In a jolly little time
And poke it,
And choke it,
Change it, arrange it,
Straight-lace it, deface it,
Pleat it with pleats,
Sheet it with sheets
Of empty conceits,
And chop and chew,
And hack and hew,
And weld it into a uniform stanza,
And evolve a neat,
Complacent, complete,
Academic extravaganza!

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