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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KING LEAR'S WIFE; THE CRIER BY NIGHT; THE RIDING TO LITHEND; MIDSUMMER-EVE; LAODICE AND DANAË ***

KING · LEAR'S · WIFE THE · CRIER · BY · NIGHT THE · RIDING · TO · LITHEND MIDSUMMER-EVE LAODICE · AND · DANAË PLAYS · BY · GORDON BOTTOMLEY

[iii]

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[iv]

CONTENTS

[v]

	PAGE
KING LEAR'S WIFE	1
THE CRIER BY NIGHT	49
THE RIDING TO LITHEND	81
MIDSUMMER EVE	131
LAODICE AND DANAË	169
APPENDIX A (KING LEAR'S WIFE)	207
APPENDIX B (THE CRIER BY NIGHT)	211

NOTE.—*Throughout the stage-directions in the following pages the words "right" and "left" are used with reference to the actor's right and left, not the spectator's.*

JOHN MARSTON: 1606.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

[vii]

THE plays here collected were originally published separately at various dates during the past eighteen years, and are now brought together for the first time. The details of the previous issues, now for the most part out of print, are appended.

- I. THE CRIER BY NIGHT. (1900.) Published by the Unicorn Press, London, 1902. 32 pp. Quarto, boards. 500 copies.
 - II. MIDSUMMER EVE. (1901-2.) Printed and published at the Pear Tree Press, South Harting, near Petersfield, 1905, with decorations by James Guthrie. iv+ 36 pp. Large post 8vo, boards. 120 copies.
 - III. LAODICE AND DANAË. (1906.) Printed for private circulation, 1909. iv + 26 pp. Royal 8vo, wrappers. 150 copies.
 - IV. THE RIDING TO LITHEND. (1907.) Printed and published at the Pear Tree Press, Flansham near Bognor, 1909, with decorations by James Guthrie. vi + 40pp. Foolscap 4to, boards. 120 copies (20 of which had an extra plate and were hand-coloured.)
 - V. KING LEAR'S WIFE. (1911-13.) Published in "Georgian Poetry, 1913-1915," pp. 1 to 47. The Poetry Bookshop, London, 1915.
- THE CRIER BY NIGHT, THE RIDING TO LITHEND, and LAODICE AND DANAË have been reprinted in the United States of America, the first in 1909, the second in two separate forms in 1910, the third in 1916.

NOTE

[viii]

APPLICATIONS for permission to perform these plays in Great Britain and the Colonies should be addressed to the author, care of Messrs. Constable and Co. Ltd., 10-12 Orange Street, Leicester Square, London, W.C.2; and in the United States of America to Mr. Paul R. Reynolds, 70 Fifth Avenue, New York.

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KING LEAR'S WIFE

[2]

TO T. STURGE MOORE

*THE years come on, the years go by,
And in my Northern valley I,
Withdrawn from life, watch life go by.
But I have formed within my heart
A state that does not thus depart,
Richer than life, greater than being,
Truer in feeling and in seeing
Than outward turbulence can know;
Where time is still, like a large, slow
And lofty bird that moves her wings
In far, invisible flutterings
To gaze on every part of space
Yet poise for ever in one place;
Where line and sound, colour and phrase
Rebuild in clear, essential ways
The powers behind the veil of sense;
While tragic things are made intense
By passion brooding on old dread,
Till a faint light of beauty shed*

*From night-enfolded agony
Shews in the ways men fail and die
The deeps whose knowledge never cloy
But, striking inward without voice,
Stirs me to tremble and rejoice.*

*For twenty years and more than twenty
I have found my riches and my plenty
In poets dead and poets living,
Painters and music-men, all giving,
By life shut in creative deeds,
Live force and insight to my needs;
And long before I came to stand
And hear your voice and touch your hand
In that great treasure-house new-known,
Where in their tower above the Town
The masters of The Dial sit,
I loved in every word of it
Your finely tempered verse that told me
Of patient power, and still can hold me
By its authentic divination
Of the right knowledge of creation,
Its grave, still beauty brought to day
Tissue by tissue in nature's way,
Petal by petal sure to shew
Imagination's quiet glow
That burns intenseliest at the core.
And through that twenty years and more
I have been envious of your reach
In speaking form and plastic speech,
Your double energy of hand
That puts two arts at your command
While I must be content with one
And feel true life but half begun;
So that by graver as by pen
You can create earth, stars, and men,
And prove yourself by more than rime
A prince of poets in our time.*

*For these delights, and the delight
Of converse in a Surrey night
After the deep sound had lapsed by
Of ocean-haunted poetry,
For counsel and another zest
Added to beauty's life-long quest
I, in acknowledgment, would bring
The homage of an offering;
And, being too poor to reach the height
Of my conception or requite
Your greater giving equally,
I search in my capacity
And, by my self-appointed trade,
Find something I myself have made,
That here I offer. Let it be
A token betwixt you and me
Of admiration and loyalty.*

February 29th, 1916.

PERSONS:

LEAR, King of Britain.
HYGD, his Queen.
GONERIL, daughter to Lear and Hygd.
CORDEIL, daughter to Lear and Hygd.
GORMFLAITH, waiting-woman to Hygd.
MERRY, waiting-woman to Hygd.
A PHYSICIAN.
TWO ELDERLY WOMEN.

[3]

[4]

The scene is a bedchamber in a one-storied house. The walls consist of a few courses of huge irregular boulders roughly squared and fitted together; a thatched roof rises steeply from the back wall. In the centre of the back wall is a doorway opening on a garden and covered by two leather curtains; the chamber is partially hung with similar hangings stitched with bright wools. There is a small window on each side of this door.

Toward the front a bed stands with its head against the right wall; it has thin leather curtains hung by thongs and drawn back. Farther forward a rich robe and a crown hang on a peg in the same wall. There is a second door beyond the bed, and between this and the bed's head stands a small table with a bronze lamp and a bronze cup on it. Queen HYGD, an emaciated woman, is asleep in the bed; her plenteous black hair, veined with silver, spreads over the pillow. Her waiting-woman, MERRYNN, middle-aged and hard-featured, sits watching her in a chair on the farther side of the bed. The light of early morning fills the room.

MERRYNN.

MANY, many must die who long to live,
 Yet this one cannot die who longs to die:
 Even her sleep, come now at last, thwarts death,
 Although sleep lures us all half way to death....
 I could not sit beside her every night
 If I believed that I might suffer so:
 I am sure I am not made to be diseased,
 I feel there is no malady can touch me—
 Save the red cancer, growing where it will.

[6]

*Taking her beads from her girdle, she kneels at
 the foot of the bed.*

O sweet Saint Cleer, and sweet Saint Elid too,
 Shield me from rooting cancers and from madness:
 Shield me from sudden death, worse than two death-beds;
 Let me not lie like this unwanted queen,
 Yet let my time come not ere I am ready—
 Grant space enow to relish the watchers' tears
 And give my clothes away and calm my features
 And streak my limbs according to my will,
 Not the hard will of fumbling corpse-washers.

She prays silently.

*KING LEAR, a great, golden-bearded man in the
 full maturity of life, enters abruptly by the
 door beyond the bed, followed by the*

PHYSICIAN.

LEAR.

Why are you here? Are you here for ever?
 Where is the young Scotswoman? Where is she?

MERRYNN.

O, Sire, move softly; the Queen sleeps at last.

LEAR, *continuing in an undertone.*

Where is the young Scotswoman? Where is Gormflaith?
 It is her watch.... I know; I have marked your hours.
 Did the Queen send her away? Did the Queen
 Bid you stay near her in her hate of Gormflaith?
 You work upon her yeasting brain to think
 That she's not safe except when you crouch near her
 To spy with your dropt eyes and soundless presence.

[7]

MERRYNN.

Sire, midnight should have ended Gormflaith's watch,
 But Gormflaith had another kind of will
 And ended at a godlier hour by slumber,
 A letter in her hand, the night-lamp out.
 She loitered in the hall when she should sleep.
 My duty has two hours ere she returns.

LEAR.

The Queen should have young women about her bed,
 Fresh cool-breathed women to lie down at her side
 And plenish her with vigour; for sick or wasted women
 Can draw a virtue from such abounding presence,
 When night makes life unwary and looses the strings of being,
 Even by the breath, and most of all by sleep.
 Her slumber was then no fault: go you and find her.

PHYSICIAN.

It is not strange that a bought watcher drowns;
What is most strange is that the Queen sleeps
Who would not sleep for all my draughts of sleep
In the last days. When did this change appear?

[8]

MERRYNN.

We shall not know—it came while Gormflaith nodded.
When I awoke her and she saw the Queen
She could not speak for fear:
When the rekindling lamp showed certainly
The bed-clothes stirring about our lady's neck,
She knew there was no death, she breathed, she said
She had not slept until her mistress slept
And lulled her; but I asked her how her mistress
Slept, and her utterance faded.
She should be blamed with rods, as I was blamed
For slumber, after a day and a night of watching,
By the Queen's child-bed, twenty years ago.

LEAR.

She does what she must do: let her alone.
I know her watch is now: get gone and send her.

MERRYNN *goes out by the door beyond the bed.*

Is it a portent now to sleep at night?
What change is here? What see you in the Queen?
Can you discern how this disease will end?

PHYSICIAN.

Surmise might spring and healing follow yet,
If I could find a trouble that could heal;
But these strong inward pains that keep her ebbing
Have not their source in perishing flesh.
I have seen women creep into their beds
And sink with this blind pain because they nursed
Some bitterness or burden in the mind
That drew the life, sucklings too long at breast.
Do you know such a cause in this poor lady?

[9]

LEAR.

There is no cause. How should there be a cause?

PHYSICIAN.

We cannot die wholly against our wills;
And in the texture of women I have found
Harder determination than in men:
The body grows impatient of enduring,
The harried mind is from the body estranged,
And we consent to go: by the Queen's touch,
The way she moves—or does not move—in bed,
The eyes so cold and keen in her white mask,
I know she has consented.
The snarling look of a mute wounded hawk,
That would be let alone, is always hers—
Yet she was sorely tender: it may be
Some wound in her affection will not heal.
We should be careful—the mind can so be hurt
That nought can make it be unhurt again.
Where, then, did her affection most persist?

LEAR.

Old bone-patcher, old digger in men's flesh,
Doctors are ever itching to be priests,
Meddling in conduct, natures, life's privacies.
We have been coupled now for twenty years,
And she has never turned from me an hour—
She knows a woman's duty and a queen's:
Whose, then, can her affection be but mine?
How can I hurt her—she is still my queen?
If her strong inward pain is a real pain
Find me some certain drug to medicine it:
When common beings have decayed past help,
There must be still some drug for a king to use;
For nothing ought to be denied to kings.

[10]

PHYSICIAN.
For the mere anguish there is such a potion.
The gum of warpy juniper shoots is seethed
With the torn marrow of an adder's spine;
An unflawed emerald is pashed to dust
And mingled there; that broth must cool in moonlight.
I have indeed attempted this already,
But the poor emeralds I could extort
From wry-mouthed earls' women had no force.
In two more dawns it will be late for potions....
There are not many emeralds in Britain,
And there is none for vividness and strength
Like the great stone that hangs upon your breast:
If you will waste it for her she shall be holpen.

LEAR, *with rising voice.*
Shatter my emerald? My emerald? My emerald?
A High King of Eire gave it to his daughter
Who mothered generations of us, the kings of Britain;
It has a spiritual influence; its heart
Burns when it sees the sun.... Shatter my emerald!
Only the fungused brain and carious mouth
Of senile things could shape such thought....
My emerald!

HYGD stirs uneasily in her sleep.

PHYSICIAN.
Speak lower, low; for your good fame, speak low—
If she should waken thus....

[11]

LEAR. There is no wise man
Believes that medicine is in a jewel.
It is enough that you have failed with one.
Seek you a common stone. I'll not do it.
Let her eat heartily: she is spent with fasting.
Let her stand up and walk: she is so still
Her blood can never nourish her. Come away.

PHYSICIAN.
I must not leave her ere the woman comes—
Or will some other woman....

LEAR. No, no, no, no;
The Queen is not herself; she speaks without sense;
Only Merryn and Gormflaith understand.
She is better quiet. Come....

*He urges the PHYSICIAN roughly away by the
shoulder.*

My emerald!

*He follows the PHYSICIAN out by the door at the
back.*

*Queen HYGD awakes at his last noisy words as he
disappears.*

HYGD.
I have not slept; I did but close mine eyes
A little while—a little while forgetting....
Where are you, Merryn?... Ah, it is not Merryn....
Bring me the cup of whey, woman; I thirst....
Will you speak to me if I say your name?
Will you not listen, Gormflaith? ... Can you hear?
I am very thirsty—let me drink....
Ah, wicked woman, why did I speak to you?
I will not be your suppliant again....
Where are you? O, where are you?... Where are you?

[12]

*She tries to raise herself to look about the room,
but sinks back helplessly.*

*The curtains of the door at the back are parted,
and GONERIL appears in hunting dress,—
her kirtle caught up in her girdle, a light
spear over her shoulder—stands there a
moment, then enters noiselessly and
approaches the bed. She is a girl just
turning to womanhood, proud in her poise,
swift and cold, an almost gleaming
presence, a virgin huntress.*

GONERIL.

Does Regan worship anywhere at dawn?
The sweaty half-clad cook-maids render lard
Out in the scullery, after pig-killing,
And Regan sidles among their greasy skirts,
Smearly and hot as they, for craps to suck.
I lost my thoughts before the giant Stones...
And when anew the earth assembled round me
I swung out on the heath and woke a hare
And speared it at a cast and shouldered it,
Startled another drinking at a tarn
And speared it ere it leapt; so steady and clear
Had the god in his fastness made my mind.
Then, as I took those dead things in my hands,
I felt shame light my face from deep within,
And loathing and contempt shake in my bowels,
That such unclean coarse blows from me had issued
To crush delicate things to bloody mash
And blemish their fur when I would only kill.
My gladness left me; I careered no more
Upon the morning; I went down from there
With empty hands:
But under the first trees and without thought
I stole on conies at play and stooped at one;
I hunted it, I caught it up to me
As I outsprang it, and with this thin knife
Pierced it from eye to eye; and it was dead,
Untorn, unsullied, and with flawless fur.
Then my untroubled mind came back to me.

[15]

HYGD.

Leap down the glades with a fawn's ignorance;
Live you your fill of a harsh purity;
Be wild and calm and lonely while you may.
These are your nature's joys, and it is human
Only to recognize our natures' joys
When we are losing them for ever.

GONERIL.

But why

Do you say this to me with a sore heart?
You are a queen, and speak from the top of life,
And when you choose to wish for others' joys
Those others must have woe.

[16]

HYGD.

The hour comes for you to turn to a man
And give yourself with the high heart of youth
More lavishly than a queen gives anything.
But when a woman gives herself
She must give herself for ever and have faith;
For woman is a thing of a season of years,
She is an early fruit that will not keep,
She can be drained and as a husk survive
To hope for reverence for what has been;
While man renews himself into old age,
And gives himself according to his need,
And women more unborn than his next child
May take him yet with youth
And lose him with their potence.

GONERIL.

But women need not wed these men.

HYGD.

We are good human currency, like gold,
For men to pass among them when they choose.

*A child's hands beat on the outside of the door
beyond the bed.*

CORDEIL'S VOICE, *a child's voice, outside.*

Father.... Father.... Father.... Are you here?
Merryn, ugly Merryn, let me in....
I know my father is here.... I want him.... Now....
Mother, chide Merryn, she is old and slow....

[17]

HYGD, *softly*.
My little curse. Send her away—away....

CORDEIL'S VOICE.
Father.... O, father, father.... I want my father.

GONERIL, *opening the door a little way*.
Hush; hush—you hurt your mother with your voice.
You cannot come in, Cordeil; you must go away:
Your father is not here....

CORDEIL'S VOICE. He must be here:
He is not in his chamber or the hall,
He is not in the stable or with Gormflaith:
He promised I should ride with him at dawn
And sit before his saddle and hold his hawk,
And ride with him and ride to the heron-marsh;
He said that he would give me the first heron,
And hang the longest feathers in my hair.

GONERIL.
Then you must haste to find him;
He may be riding now....

CORDEIL'S VOICE.
But Gerda said she saw him enter here.

GONERIL.
Indeed, he is not here....

CORDEIL'S VOICE. Let me look....

GONERIL.
You are too noisy. Must I make you go? [18]

CORDEIL'S VOICE.
Mother, Goneril is unkind to me.

HYGD, *raising herself in bed excitedly, and speaking so vehemently that her utterance strangles itself*.
Go, go, thou evil child, thou ill-comer.

GONERIL, *with a sudden strong movement, shuts the resisting door and holds it rigidly. The little hands beat on it madly for a moment, then the child's voice is heard in a retreating wail*.

GONERIL.
Though she is wilful, obeying only the King,
She is a very little child, mother,
To be so bitterly thought of.

HYGD.
Because a woman gives herself for ever
Cordeil the useless had to be conceived
(Like an after-thought that deceives nobody)
To keep her father from another woman.
And I lie here.

GONERIL, *after a silence*.
Hard and unjust my father has been to me;
Yet that has knitted up within my mind
A love of coldness and a love of him
Who makes me firm, wary, swift and secret,
Until I feel if I become a mother
I shall at need be cruel to my children,
And ever cold, to string their natures harder
And make them able to endure men's deeds;
But now I wonder if injustice [19]
Keeps house with baseness, taught by kinship—
I never thought a king could be untrue,
I never thought my father was unclean....
O mother, mother, what is it? Is this dying?

HYGD.
I think I am only faint....

Give me the cup of whey....

GONERIL takes the cup and, supporting HYGD, lets her drink.

GONERIL.

There is too little here. When was it made?

HYGD.

Yester-eve.... Yester-morn....

GONERIL.

Unhappy mother,
You have no daughter to take thought for you—
No servant's love to shame a daughter with,
Though I am shamed—you must have other food,
Straightway I bring you meat....

HYGD. It is no use....

Plenish the cup for me.... Not now, not now,
But in a while; for I am heavy now....
Old Wynec's potions loiter in my veins,
And tides of heaviness pour over me
Each time I wake and think. I could sleep now.

GONERIL.

Then I shall lull you, as you once lulled me.

Seating herself on the bed, she sings.

The owlets in roof-holes
Can sing for themselves;
The smallest brown squirrel
Both scampers and delves;
But a baby does nothing—
She never knows how—
She must hark to her mother
Who sings to her now.
Sleep then, ladykin, peeping so;
Hide your handies and ley lei lo.

[20]

She bends over HYGD and kisses her; they laugh softly together.

LEAR parts the curtains of the door at the back, stands there a moment, then goes away noiselessly.

The lish baby otter
Is sleeky and streaming,
With catching bright fishes,
Ere babies learn dreaming;
But no wet little otter
Is ever so warm
As the fleecy-wrapt baby
'Twixt me and my arm.
Sleep big mousie....

HYGD, *suddenly irritable.*

Be quiet.... I cannot bear it.

She turns her head away from GONERIL and closes her eyes.

As GONERIL watches her in silence, GORMFLAITH enters by the door beyond the bed. She is young and tall and fresh-coloured; her red hair coils and crisps close to her little head, showing its shape. Her movements are soft and unhurried; her manner is quiet and ingratiating and a little too agreeable; she speaks a little too gently.

GONERIL, *meeting her near the door and speaking in a low voice.*

Why did you leave the Queen? Where have you been?
Why have you so neglected this grave duty?

[21]

GORMFLAITH.

This is the instant of my duty, Princess:
From midnight until now was Merryn's watch.
I thought to find her here: is she not here?

HYGD turns to look at the speakers; then, turning back, closes her eyes again and lies as if asleep.

GONERIL.

I found the Queen alone. I heard her cry your name.

GORMFLAITH.

Your anger is not too great, Madam; I grieve
That one so old as Merryn should act thus—
So old and trusted and favoured, and so callous.

GONERIL.

The Queen has had no food since yester-night.

GORMFLAITH.

Madam, that is too monstrous to conceive:
I will seek food—I will prepare it now.

GONERIL.

Stay here: and know, if the Queen is left again,
You shall be beaten with two rods at once.

*She picks up the cup and goes out by the door
beyond the bed.*

GORMFLAITH *turns the chair a little away from the
bed so that she can watch the far door,
and, seating herself, draws a letter from
her bosom.*

[22]

GORMFLAITH, *to herself, reading.*

"Open your window when the moon is dead,
And I will come again.
The men say everywhere that you are faithless,
The women say your face is a false face
And your eyes shifty eyes. Ah, but I love you, Gormflaith.
Do not forget your window-latch to-night,
For when the moon is dead the house is still."

LEAR *again parts the door-curtains at the back,
and, seeing GORMFLAITH, enters. At the first
slight rustle of the curtains GORMFLAITH
stealthily slips the letter back into her
bosom before turning gradually, a finger
to her lips, to see who approaches her.*

LEAR, *leaning over the side of her chair.*

Lady, what do you read?

GORMFLAITH. I read a letter, Sire.

LEAR.

A letter—a letter—what read you in a letter?

GORMFLAITH, *taking another letter from her girdle.*

Your words to me—my lonely joy your words....
"If you are steady and true as your gaze"—

[23]

LEAR, *tearing the letter from her, crumpling it, and flinging it to the back
of the room.*

Pest!

You should not carry a king's letters about,
Nor hoard a king's letters.

GORMFLAITH. No, Sire.

LEAR.

Must the King also stand in the presence now?

GORMFLAITH, *rising.*

Pardon my troubled mind; you have taken my letter from me.

LEAR *seats himself and takes GORMFLAITH'S hand.*

GORMFLAITH.

Wait, wait—I might be seen. The Queen may waken yet.

*Stepping lightly to the bed, she noiselessly slips
the curtain on that side as far forward as
it will come. Then she returns to LEAR, who
draws her to him and seats her on his
knee.*

LEAR.

You have been long in coming:
Was Merryn long in finding you?

GORMFLAITH, *playing with LEAR's emerald.*

Did Merryn....

Has Merryn been.... She loitered long before she came,
For I was at the women's bathing-place ere dawn....
No jewel in all the land excites me and enthalls
Like this strong source of light that lives upon your breast.

[24]

LEAR, *taking the jewel-chain from his neck and slipping it over GORMFLAITH's head while she still holds the emerald.*

Wear it within your breast to fill the gentle place
That cherished the poor letter lately torn from you.

GORMFLAITH.

Did Merryn at your bidding, then, forsake her Queen?

LEAR *nods.*

You must not, ah, you must not do these masterful things,
Even to grasp a precious meeting for us two;
For the reproach and chiding are so hard to me,
And even you can never fight the silent women
In hidden league against me, all this house of women.
Merryn has left her Queen in unwatched loneliness,
And yet your daughter Princess Goneril has said
(With lips that scarce held back the spittle for my face)
That if the Queen is left again I shall be whipt.

LEAR.

Children speak of the punishments they know.
Her back is now not half so white as yours,
And you shall write your will upon it yet.

GORMFLAITH.

Ah, no, my King, my faithful... Ah, no... no...
The Princess Goneril is right; she judges me:
A sinful woman cannot steadily gaze reply
To the cool, baffling looks of virgin untried force.
She stands beside that crumbling mother in her hate,
And, though we know so well—she and I, O we know—
That she could love no mother nor partake in anguish,
Yet she is flouted when the King forsakes her dam,
She must protect her very flesh, her tenderer flesh,
Although she cannot wince; she's wild in her cold brain,
And soon I must be made to pay a cruel price
For this one gloomy joy in my uncherished life.
Envy and greed are watching me aloof
(Yes, now none of the women will walk with me),
Longing to see me ruined, but she'll do it....
It is a lonely thing to love a king....

[25]

She puts her cheek gradually closer and closer to LEAR's cheek as she speaks: at length he kisses her suddenly and vehemently, as if he would grasp her lips with his: she receives it passively, her head thrown back, her eyes closed.

LEAR.

Goldilocks, when the crown is couching in your hair
And those two mingled golds brighten each other's wonder,
You shall produce a son from flesh unused—
Virgin I chose you for that, first crops are strongest—
A tawny fox with your high-stepping action,
With your untiring power and glittering eyes,
To hold my lands together when I am done,
To keep my lands from crumbling into mouthfuls
For the short jaws of my three mewling vixens.
Hatch for me such a youngster from my seed,
And I and he shall rein my hot-breathed wenches
To let you grind the edges off their teeth.

[26]

GORMFLAITH, *shaking her head sadly.*

Life holds no more than this for me; this is my hour.
When she is dead I know you'll buy another Queen—
Giving a county for her, gaining a duchy with her—
And put me to wet nursing, leashing me with the thralls.
It will not be unbearable—I've had your love.
Master and friend, grant then this hour to me:
Never again, maybe, can we two sit

At love together, unwatched, unknown of all,
In the Queen's chamber, near the Queen's crown
And with no conscious Queen to hold it from us:
Now let me wear the Queen's true crown on me
And snatch a breathless knowledge of the feeling
Of what it would have been to sit by you
Always and closely, equal and exalted,
To be my light when life is dark again.

LEAR.

Girl, by the black stone god, I did not think
You had the nature of a chambermaid,
Who pries and fumbles in her lady's clothes
With her red hands, or on her soily neck
Stealthily hangs her lady's jewels or pearls.
You shall be tiring-maid to the next queen
And try her crown on every day o' your life
In secrecy, if that is your desire:
If you would be a queen, cleanse yourself quickly
Of menial fingering and servile thought.

[27]

GORMFLAITH.

You need not crown me. Let me put it on
As briefly as a gleam of Winter sun.
I will not even warm it with my hair.

LEAR.

You cannot have the nature of a queen
If you believe that there are things above you:
Crowns make no queens, queens are the cause of crowns.

Gormflaith, *slipping from his knee.*

Then I will take one. Look.

*She tip-toes lightly round the front of the bed to
where the crown hangs on the wall.*

LEAR.

Come here, mad thing—come back!
Your shadow will wake the Queen.

GORMFLAITH.

Hush, hush! That angry voice
Will surely wake the Queen.

*She lifts the crown from the peg, and returns
with it.*

LEAR.

Go back; bear back the crown:
Hang up the crown again.
We are not helpless serfs
To think things are forbidden
And steal them for our joy.

[28]

GORMFLAITH.

Hush! Hush! It is too late;
I dare not go again.

LEAR.

Put down the crown: your hands are base hands yet.
Give it to me: it issues from my hands.

*GORMFLAITH, seating herself on his knee again,
and crowning herself.*

Let anger keep your eyes steady and bright
To be my guiding mirror: do not move.
You have received two queens within your eyes.

She laughs clearly, like a bird's sudden song.

*HYGD awakes and, after an instant's
bewilderment, turns her head toward the
sound; finding the bed-curtain dropt, she
moves it aside a little with her fingers; she
watches LEAR and GORMFLAITH for a short
time, then the curtain slips from her weak
grasp and she lies motionless.*

LEAR, *continuing meanwhile.*

Doff it. (GORMFLAITH *kisses him.*) Enough. (*Kiss*)

Unless you do (*Kiss*) my will (*Kiss*)

I shall (*Kiss*) I shall (*Kiss*) I'll have you (*Kiss*)

sent (*Kiss*) to (*Kiss*)—

GORMFLAITH. Hush.

LEAR.

Come to the garden: you shall hear me there.

[29]

GORMFLAITH.

I dare not leave the Queen.... Yes, yes, I come.

LEAR.

No, you are better here: the guard would see you.

GORMFLAITH.

Not when we reach the pathway near the apple-yard.

They rise.

LEAR.

Girl, you are changed: you yield more beauty so.

They go out hand in hand by the doorway at the back. As they pass the crumpled letter

GORMFLAITH drops her handkerchief on it,

then picks up handkerchief and letter

together and thrusts them into her bosom

as she passes out.

HYGD, *fingering back the bed-curtain again.*

How have they vanished? What are they doing now?

GORMFLAITH, *outside, singing to a quick, chattering tune.*

If you have a mind to kiss me

You shall kiss me in the dark:

Yet rehearse, or you might miss me—

Make my mouth your noontide mark....

GORMFLAITH'S voice grows fainter as the song progresses, until all sound is lost.

HYGD.

Does he remember love-ways used with me?

[30]

Shall I never know? Is it too near?

I'll watch him at his wooing once again,

Though I peer up at him across my grave-sill.

She gets out of bed and takes several steps

toward the garden doorway; she totters

and sways, then, turning, stumbles back to

the bed for support.

Limbs, will you die? It is not yet the time.

I know more discipline: I'll make you go.

She fumbles along the bed to the head, then,

clinging against the wall, drags herself

toward the back of the room.

It is too far. I cannot see the wall.

I will go ten more steps: only ten more.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten.

Sundown is soon to-day: it is cold and dark.

Now ten steps more, and much will have been done.

One. Two. Three. Four. Ten.

Eleven. Twelve. Sixteen. Nineteen. Twenty.

Twenty-one. Twenty-three. Twenty-eight. Thirty. Thirty-one.

At last the turn. Thirty-six. Thirty-nine. Forty.

Now only once again. Two. Three.

What do the voices say? I hear too many.

The door: but here there is no garden.... Ah!

She holds herself up an instant by the door-

curtains; then she reels and falls, her body

in the room, her head and shoulders

beyond the curtains.

GONERIL enters by the door beyond the bed,

carrying the filled cup carefully in both

hands.

GONERIL.

[31]

Where are you? What have you done? Speak to me.

Turning and seeing HYGD, she lets the cup fall

and leaps to the open door by the bed.

Merryn, hither, hither.... Mother, O mother!

GONERIL.
Gormflaith has left you lonely:
'Tis Gormflaith who shall pay.

HYGD.
No, Gormflaith; Gormflaith.... Not my loneliness....
Everything.... Pay Gormflaith....

*Her head falls back over GONERIL's shoulder and
she dies.*

GONERIL, *laying HYGD down in bed again.*
Send horsemen to the marshes for the leech,
And let them bind him on a horse's back
And bring him swiffler than an old man rides.

[34]

MERRYN.
This is no leech's work: she 's a dead woman.
I'd best be finding if the wisdom-women
Have come from Brita's child-bed to their drinking
By the cook's fire, for soon she'll be past handling.

GONERIL.
This is not death: death could not be like this.
She is quite warm—though nothing moves in her.
I did not know death could come all at once:
If life is so ill-seated no one is safe.
Cannot we leave her like herself awhile?
Wait awhile, Merryn.... No, no, no; not yet!

MERRYN.
Child, she is gone and will not come again
However we cover our faces and pretend
She will be there if we uncover them.
I must be hasty, or she'll be as stiff
As a straw mattress is.
She hurries out by the door near the bed.

*GONERIL, throwing the whole length of her body
along HYGD's body, and embracing it.*

Come back, come back; the things I have not done
Beat in upon my brain from every side:
I know not where to put myself to bear them:
If I could have you now I could act well.
My inward life, deeds that you have not known,
I burn to tell you in a sudden dread
That now your ghost discovers them in me.
Hearken, mother; between us there 's a bond
Of flesh and essence closer than love can cause:
It cannot be unknit so soon as this,
And you must know my touch,
And you shall yield a sign.
Feel, feel this urging throb: I call to you. Come back.

[35]

*GORMFLAITH, still crowned, enters by the garden
doorway.*

GORMFLAITH.
Come back! Help me and shield me!
She disappears through the curtains.

*GONERIL has sprung to her feet at the first sound
of GORMFLAITH's voice.*

*LEAR enters by the garden doorway, leading
GORMFLAITH by the hand.*

LEAR. What is to do?

GONERIL, *advancing to meet them with a deep obeisance.*
O, Sir, the Queen is dead: long live the Queen.
You have been ready with the coronation.

LEAR.
What do you mean? Young madam, will you mock?

GONERIL.
But is not she your choice?
The old Queen thought so, for I found her here,
Lipping the prints of her supplanter's feet,
Prostrate in homage, on her face, silent.
I tremble within to have seen her fallen down.
I must be pardoned if I scorn your ways:

[36]

You cannot know this feeling that I know,
You are not of her kin or house; but I
Share blood with her, and, though she grew too worn
To be your Queen, she was my mother, Sir.

GORMFLAITH.
The Queen has seen me.

LEAR.
She is safe in bed.

GONERIL.
Do not speak low: your voice sounds guilty so;
And there is no more need—she will not wake.

LEAR.
She cannot sleep for ever. When she wakes
I will announce my purpose in the need
Of Britain for a prince to follow me,
And tell her that she is to be deposed....
What have you done? She is not breathing now.
She breathed here lately. Is she truly dead?

GONERIL.
Your graceful consort steals from us too soon:
Will you not tell her that she should remain—
If she can trust the faith you keep with a queen?

*She steps to GORMFLAITH, who is sidling toward
the garden doorway, and, taking her hand,
leads her to the foot of the bed.*

Lady, why will you go? The King intends
That you shall soon be royal, and thereby
Admitted to our breed: then stay with us
In this domestic privacy to mourn
The grief here fallen on our family.
Kneel now; I yield the eldest daughter's place.
Why do you fumble in your bosom so?
Put your cold hands together; close your eyes,
In inward isolation to assemble
Your memories of the dead, your prayers for her.

*She turns to LEAR, who has approached the bed
and drawn back the curtain.*

What utterance of doom would the king use
Upon a watchman in the castle garth
Who left his gate and let an enemy in?
The watcher by the Queen thus left her station:
The sick bruised Queen is dead of that neglect.
And what should be the doom on a seducer
Who drew that sentinel from his fixt watch?

LEAR.
She had long been dying, and she would have died
Had all her dutiful daughters tended her bed.

GONERIL.
Yes, she had long been dying in her heart.
She lived to see you give her crown away;
She died to see you fondle a menial:
These blows you dealt now, but what elder wounds
Received them to such purpose suddenly?
What had you caused her to remember most?
What things would she be like to babble over
In the wild helpless hour when fitful life
No more can choose what thoughts it shall encourage
In the tost mind? She has suffered you twice over,
Your animal thoughts and hungry powers, this day,
Until I knew you unkingly and untrue.

LEAR.
Punishment once taught you daughterly silence;
It shall be tried again.... What has she said?

GONERIL.
You cannot touch me now I know your nature:
Your force upon my mind was only terrible

[37]

[38]

When I believed you a cruel flawless man.
Ruler of lands and dreaded judge of men,
Now you have done a murder with your mind
Can you see any murderer put to death?
Can you—

LEAR. What has she said?

GONERIL.
Continue in your joy of punishing evil,
Your passion of just revenge upon wrong-doers,
Unkingly and untrue?

LEAR. Enough: what do you know?

GONERIL.
That which could add a further agony
To the last agony, the daily poison
Of her late, withering life; but never word
Of fairer hours or any lost delight.
Have you no memory, either, of her youth,
While she was still to use, spoil, forsake,
That maims your new contentment with a longing
For what is gone and will not come again?

LEAR.
I did not know that she could die to-day.
She had a bloodless beauty that cheated me:
She was not born for wedlock. She shut me out. [39]
She is no colder now.... I'll hear no more.
You shall be answered afterward for this.
Put something over her: get her buried:
I will not look on her again.

*He breaks from GONERIL and flings abruptly out
by the door near the bed.*

GORMFLAITH.
My King, you leave me!

GONERIL. Soon we follow him:
But, ah, poor fragile beauty, you cannot rise
While this grave burden weights your drooping head.
*Laying her hand caressingly on GORMFLAITH'S
neck, she gradually forces her head
farther and farther down.*

You were not nurtured to sustain a crown,
Your unanointed parents could not breed
The spirit that ten hundred years must ripen.
Lo, how you sink and fail.

GORMFLAITH. You had best take care,
For where my neck has bruises yours shall have wounds.
The King knows of your wolfish snapping at me:
He will protect me.

GONERIL. Ay, if he is in time.
*GORMFLAITH, taking off the crown and holding it
up blindly toward GONERIL with one hand.*

Take it and let me go!

GONERIL. Nay, not to me:
You are the Queen's, to serve her even in death. [40]
Yield her her own. Approach her: do not fear;
She will not chide you or forgive you now.
Go on your knees; the crown still holds you down.

*GORMFLAITH stumbles forward on her knees and
lays the crown on the bed, then crouches
motionlessly against the bedside.*

*GONERIL, taking the crown and putting it on the
dead Queen's head.*

Mother and Queen, to you this holiest circlet
Returns, by you renews its purpose and pride;
Though it is sullied with a menial warmth,
Your august coldness shall rehallow it,
And when the young lewd blood that lent it heat
Is also cooler we can well forget.

She steps to GORMFLAITH.

Rise. Come, for here there is no more to do,
And let us seek your chamber, if you will,
There to confer in greater privacy;
For we have now interment to prepare.

She leads GORMFLAITH to the door near the bed.

You must walk first, you are still the Queen elect.

*When GORMFLAITH has passed before her GONERIL
unsheathes her hunting knife.*

GORMFLAITH, *turning in the doorway.*
What will you do?

GONERIL, *thrusting her forward with the haft of the knife.*

On. On. On. Go in.

She follows GORMFLAITH out.

*After a moments interval two elderly women, [41]
one a little younger than the other, enter
by the same door: they wear black hoods
and shapeless black gowns with large
sleeves that flap like the wings of ungainly
birds: between them they carry a heavy
cauldron of hot water.*

THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

We were listening. We were listening.

THE ELDER WOMAN.

We were both listening.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

Did she struggle?

THE ELDER WOMAN.

She could not struggle long.

*They set down the cauldron at the foot of the
bed.*

THE ELDER WOMAN, *curtseying to the Queen's body.*

Saving your presence, Madam, we are come
To make you sweeter than you'll be hereafter,
And then be done with you.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN, *curtseying in turn.*

Three days together, my Lady, y'have had me ducked
For easing a foolish maid at the wrong time;
But now your breath is stopped and you are colder,
And you shall be as wet as a drowned cat
Ere I have done with you. [42]

THE ELDER WOMAN, *fumbling in the folds of the robe that hangs on the
wall.*

Her pocket is empty; Merryn has been here first.

Hearken, and then begin:

You have not touched a royal corpse before,
But I have stretched a king and an old queen,
A king's aunt and a king's brother too,
Without much boasting of a still-born princess;
So that I know, as a priest knows his prayers,
All that is written in the chamberlain's book
About the handling of exalted corpses,
Stripping them and trussing them for the grave:
And there it says that the chief corpse-washer
Shall take for her own use by sacred right
The coverlid, the upper sheet, the mattress
Of any bed in which a queen has died,
And the last robe of state the body wore;
While humbler helpers may divide among them
The under sheet, the pillow, and the bed-gown
Stript from the cooling queen.
Be thankful, then, and praise me every day
That I have brought no other women with me
To spoil you of your share.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

Ah, you have always been a friend to me:
Many's the time I have said I did not know
How I could even have lived but for your kindness.

The ELDER WOMAN draws down the bedclothes

from the Queen's body, loosens them from the bed, and throws them on the floor.

THE ELDER WOMAN.

Pull her feet straight: is your mind wandering?

She commences to fold the bedclothes, singing as she moves about.

[43]

A louse crept out of my lady's shift—
Ahumm, Ahumm, Ahee—
Crying "Oi! Oi! We are turned adrift;
The lady's bosom is cold and stiffed,
And her arm-pit's cold for me."

While the ELDER WOMAN sings, the YOUNGER WOMAN straightens the Queen's feet and ties them together, draws the pillow from under her head, gathers her hair in one hand and knots it roughly; then she loosens her nightgown, revealing a jewel hung on a cord round the Queen's neck.

THE ELDER WOMAN, *running to the vacant side of the bed.*

What have you there? Give it to me.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

It is mine:

I found it.

THE ELDER WOMAN, *seizing the jewel.*

Leave it.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN. Let go.

THE ELDER WOMAN.

Leave it, I say.

Will you not? Will you not? An eye for a jewel, then!

She attacks the face of the YOUNGER WOMAN with her disengaged hand.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN, *starting back.*

Oh!

The ELDER WOMAN breaks the cord and thrusts the jewel into her pocket.

[44]

THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

Aie! Aie! Aie! Old thief! You are always thieving!

You stole a necklace on your wedding-day:

You could not bear a child, you stole your daughter:

You stole a shroud the morn your husband died:

Last week you stole the Princess Regan's comb....

She stumbles into the chair by the bed, and, throwing her loose sleeves over her head, rocks herself and moans.

THE ELDER WOMAN, *resuming her clothes-folding and her song.*

"The lady's linen's no longer neat;"—

Ahumm, Ahumm, Ahee—

"Her savour is neither warm nor sweet;

It's close for two in a winding-sheet,

And lice are too good for worms to eat;

So here's no place for me."

GONERIL enters by the door near the bed: her knife and the hand that holds it are bloody. She pauses a moment irresolutely.

THE ELDER WOMAN.

Still work for old Hrogneda, little Princess?

GONERIL goes straight to the cauldron, passing the women as if they were not there: she kneels and washes her knife and her hand in it. The women retire to the back of the chamber.

GONERIL, *speaking to herself.*

[45]

The way is easy: and it is to be used.

How could this need have been conceived slowly?

In a keen mind it should have leapt and burnt:

What I have done would have been better done

When my sad mother lived and could feel joy.

This striking without thought is better than hunting;

She showed more terror than an animal,

She was more shiftless....

A little blood is lightly washed away,

A common stain that need not be remembered;
And a hot spasm of rightness quickly born
Can guide me to kill justly and shall guide.
LEAR *enters by the door near the bed.*

LEAR.
Goneril, Gormflaith, Gormflaith.... Have you seen Gormflaith?

GONERIL.
I led her to her chamber lately, Sir.

LEAR.
Ay, she is in her chamber. She is there.

GONERIL.
Have you been there already? Could you not wait?

LEAR.
Daughter, she is bleeding: she is slain.

GONERIL, *rising from the cauldron with dripping hands.*
Yes, she is slain: I did it with a knife: [46]
And in this water is dissolved her blood,
*(Raising her arms and sprinkling the Queen's
body)*

That now I scatter on the Queen of death
For signal to her spirit that I can slake
Her long corrosion of misery with such balm—
Blood for weeping, terror for death, death for death,
A broken body for a broken heart.
What will you say against me and my deed?

LEAR.
That now you cannot save yourself from me.
While your blind virgin power still stood apart
In an unused, unviolated life,
You judged me in my weakness, and because
I felt you unflawed I could not answer you;
But you have mingled in mortality
And violently begun the common life
By fault against your fellows; and the state,
The state of Britain that inheres in me
Not touched by my humanity or sin,
Passions or privy acts, shall be as hard
And savage to you as to a murderess.

GONERIL, *taking a letter from her girdle.*
I found a warrant in her favoured bosom, King:
She wore this on her heart when you were crowning her.

LEAR, *opening the letter.*
But this is not my hand:
(Looking about him on the floor)
Where is the other letter?

GONERIL.
Is there another letter? What should it say? [47]

LEAR.
There is no other letter if you have none.
(Reading)
"Open your window when the moon is dead,
And I will come again.
The men say everywhere that you are faithless...
And your eyes shifty eyes. Ah, but I love you, Gormflaith...."
This is not hers: she'd not receive such words.

GONERIL.
Her name stands twice therein: her perfume fills it:
My knife went through it ere I found it on her.

LEAR.
The filth is suitably dead. You are my true daughter.

GONERIL.
I do not understand how men can govern,

Use craft and exercise the duty of cunning,
Anticipate treason, treachery meet with treachery,
And yet believe a woman because she looks
Straight in their eyes with mournful, trustful gaze,
And lips like innocence, all gentleness.
Your Gormflaith could not answer a woman's eyes.
I did not need to read her in a letter;
I am not woman yet, but I can feel
What untruths are instinctive in my kind,
And how some men desire deceit from us.
Come; let these washers do what they must do:
Or shall your Queen be wrapped and coffined awry?
She goes out by the garden doorway.

LEAR.

I thought she had been broken long ago:
She must be wedded and broken, I cannot do it.

He follows GONERIL out.

The two women return to the bedside.

THE ELDER WOMAN.

Poor, masterful King, he is no easier,
Although his tearful wife is gone at last:
A wilful girl shall prick and thwart him now.
Old gossip, we must hasten; the Queen is setting.
Lend me a pair of pennies to weight her eyes.

THE YOUNGER WOMAN.

Find your own pennies: then you can steal them safely.

THE ELDER WOMAN.

Praise you the gods of Britain, as I do praise them,
That I have been sweet-natured from my birth,
And that I lack your unforgiving mind.
Friend of the worms, help me to lift her clear
And draw away the under sheet for you;
Then go and spread the shroud by the hall fire—
I never could put damp linen on a corpse.

She sings.

The louse made off unhappy and wet;—
Ahum, Ahumm, Ahee—
He's looking for us, the little pet;
So haste, for her chin's to tie up yet,
And let us be gone with what we can get—
Her ring for thee, her gown for Bet,
Her pocket turned out for me.

CURTAIN.

THE CRIER BY NIGHT

[49]

TO
MY DEAR SCRIBE

[51]

PERSONS:

HIALT, a Northman.

THORGERD, His Wife.

BLANID, an Irish Bondmaid.

AN OLD STRANGE MAN.

[52]

THE CRIER BY NIGHT

[53]

The scene is the interior of a cottage near a misty mere and among unseen mountains on a wild night of late Autumn. In the back wall area door to the left and a long low window in the

middle; the latter is shuttered on the outside, and on door and window the wind-driven rain rattles. In the middle of the left-hand wall a door leads into an outhouse; near it is a loom: toward the front of the right-hand wall another door leads to a sleeping-chamber; a settle extends along this wall and in front of it a long table is set. Two rushlights burn on the table. A round hearth is in the middle of the house; its smoke rises into a luffer which hangs from the thatched roof between two beams. The floor is thickly strewn with rushes. There are several wooden stools about the hearth, on one of which HIALTI is sitting mending harness. THORGERD is standing near the loom, spinning with a distaff.

HIALTI.

THE lass is late about; where is she now?

THORGERD.

Let the lass be. What is the lass to you?
She is my lass to handle as I will—
My father gave her to me for my own,
And so I use her as I use my gear....
"She will not last" say you? Well, what of that?
I know gear must wear out, being well used;
Shoes must be trodden under-foot all day,
Though in the mire they go and to the mire;
The hearth-fire wastes the irons used to tend it:
I am the huswife—leave the house to me
And buy me new gear when the old is rotten.

[54]

HIALTI.

You drive her over hard. In the cold dark,
Hours ere the thin late dawn, she was afoot,
And she has been afoot each moment since:
The butter will not come now without fire,
But I was wakened in the frosty night
By the slow moaning of her weary churn,
And when I rose she stood here without shoes—
She said you took them from her; so I sought,
And gave her them again, and lit the fire.
She dare not sleep with half your tasks undone,
But you slept and your sleep was all her rest;
Yet in her land 'tis you would be the thrall.
You shut the hens in from the storm all day,
But she must trudge with peat-mull in a swill
Up from the water-side and down all day....

THORGERD

Spare her and have my firing spoilt? Not I.
Had it been sodden, how could you light her fires?

HIALTI.

You drive her over hard.

[55]

THORGERD.

What is it to you?
Fodder and yoke your neats, see to your swine,
Put them to breed, and leave my stock to me.
If this is over hard, what will it be—
Last week she still could smile sometimes, so yet
She smiles too often for my happiness.
What money did the calves fetch at the fair?

HIALTI.

Where is she now?

THORGERD.

What money did the calves
Fetch at the fair last week?

HIALTI.

Where is she now?

THORGERD.

I spilt the water; she must needs draw more.

HIALTI.

The roof-drip at the door would fill her pails.

THORGERD.

What money did the calves fetch at the fair?

HIALTI.

You need not ask; you had it all to hoard.

THORGERD.

You kept some back; who bought them?

HIALTI. He who paid.

The outside door opens and, as the rain drives in, BLANID enters carrying two pails of water by a yoke. Her short-sleeved, frayed, hempen smock is dripping-wet; an old cart-strap is buckled about her middle; her ankles are bare, but her feet are covered by shapeless brogues; her matted hair is cut short, and she has an iron collar about her neck. She sets down her pails, and with difficulty shuts and bolts the door against the wind. Then she carries her pails into the outhouse; as she moves about within she is heard to sing to a tired, monotonous tune. [56]

BLANID.

The bird in my heart's a-calling through a far-fled, tear-grey sea
To the soft slow hills that cherish dim waters weary for me,
Where the folk of rath and dun trail homeward silently
In the mist of the early night-fall that drips from their hair like rain.

The bird in my heart's a-flutter, for the bitter wind of the sea
Shivers with thyme and woodbine as my body with memory;
I feel their perfumes ooze in my ears like melody—
The scent of the mead at the harping I shall not hear again.

The bird in my heart's a-sinking to a hushed vale hid in the sea,
Where the moonlit dew o'er dead fighters is stirred by the feet of the Shee, [57]

Who are lovely and old as the earth but younger than I can be
Who have known the forgetting of dying to a life one lonely pain ...
She returns from the outhouse.

THORGERD.

Come here; give me your shoes; quickly, I say.

Why must you go shod softly? Give me your shoes.

She takes them and puts them on the fire.

Is there some joy so deep within you still
That I have missed it though 'tis bright for singing?
It shall not be so long; sing while you can.

BLANID.

No joy ever sank deep enough for singing;
Trouble and all the sorrowful ways of men
Must stir the sad unrest that ends in song.
Joy seeks but peace and silence and still thought;
But those who cannot weep must sing for ease,
And in the sound forget the thought that smote it.

THORGERD.

I am made glad, hearing your misery;
Yet all the shapeless, creeping, shivering sounds
You wail about the house will make me share it.
Your songs of faëry and nameless kings
And things that never happened long ago
And an unknown, impossible, shadowy land
Are useless as the starlight after moonset
That will not light men homeward from the fair—
Nay, useless as its melting down thin water:
If you must sing, sing truth to gut-strong tunes
Of Gunnar or of Freya or Andvari, [58]
Vineland the Good and the old Western sea.

BLANID.

Things need not happen that they may be true;
Although impossible, they may be true—
The things that matter happen in the heart.
All earthly truth is true but for a time,
Whilst ages may be altered by one dream—
The things that matter happen in the heart ...

THORGERD.
Useless as starlight or the aimless wind.

BLANID.
The wind is all the souls of those sad dead
Who will not stay in Heaven for love of earth;
Hither and thither they surge to find the gate
They see and know not on its new, strange side,
For they have learned too much to be let back.
Ah, some have learned too much before they die.

*As she crosses the house at the back HIALTI turns
and, catching her hands in his, draws her
toward him.*

HIALTI.
Is it too hard, the thought of that lost vale?

BLANID.
It is too hard, because I must so love it
That were I free I should go there no more,
Lest I should hate it. I must always suffer,
I only suffer this way rather than that—
'Tis the eternal suffering of love
Must search me somehow with love's pitilessness
To make me know all souls; what matter how?
O, I am but a troubled dream of God's,
And even His will can alter not His dreams;
Yea, He is dreaming me a little while—
I must be dreamed out to the hardest end,
Returning then to be unknown in Him;
I shall be Him again when He awakes.
Ah, God, awake, and so forget me soon.

*THORGERD, swinging her aside by the collar on
her neck.*

Set on the water for the porridge; go.

*BLANID goes into the outhouse; THORGERD
continues to HIALTI.*

Why must you hold her hands and hold her eyes?

HIALTI.
Under each dark grey lash a long tear slid,
Like rain in a wild rose's shadowy curve
Bowed in the wind about the morning twilight.

THORGERD.
Have done; I know; you left the fair at noon
To reach the copse just at the young moon's setting—
I could not find her till i' the night-hid copse
A woman's voice sobbed "If he would but come..."

HIALTI.
It is not true; you know it is not true.
Let her alone; you know that I must love you,
And if she loves me she will know it too
And hurt herself far more than you can hurt her.

THORGERD.
I hear you say it: and afterward?... Perhaps
My little shears are sharp as any knife.

HIALTI.
You would not kill her?

THORGERD. When have I grown kind-hearted?

*She lays her hand on his shoulder and, leaning
her mouth to his ear, speaks in a low,
distinct voice.*

Slit nose and lip and where's her beauty then?

He starts from his stool.

Nay, are my kinsfolk as far off as hers?

*He turns away as BLANID enters with an iron pot
which she hangs from a hook over the fire,
and a pitcher of milk which she sets on the
table.*

THORGERD takes the pot from the fire.

Here's too much water; it will never boil,

[59]

[60]

And if it did the mess would be too thin.

*She pours water from the pot upon the floor,
then hangs the pot over the fire again.*

Set out the bowls, and finger not their lips.

*BLANID goes again to the outhouse, and,
returning, sets three bowls with spoons on
the table, and a jar of meal by the hearth.*

Though porridge needs meal you shall not think for me;

Do nought until I bid you—once. The grain.

*BLANID goes yet again to the outhouse and
returns with a bag of grain.*

You know what grain is for; why do you stand?

[61]

Your feet are mine. Down to the quern. Get down.

BLANID.

There's meal in plenty for to-morrow.

THORGERD, *laying down her distaff to make porridge.*

Ay,

But is there meal in plenty for next month?

You may be dead then; therefore you must toil,

That I may need to do no aching tasks

Until my man can buy another drudge

From the next herd; for so we shall forget you.

*BLANID, kneeling by the quern between the window and the door, and
commencing to grind grain.*

You hate me far too subtly to forget me;

There is not enough kindness in your heart

To let you thus forego your joy of hate.

Then, too, despite the accident of death,

I cannot go from here against my will.

THORGERD.

You shall not die ere I have done with you;

And death shall only come by suffering

Until you are too feeble even to suffer.

BLANID.

The sound of death is ever in mine ears,

Monotonous as the night's infinity

Wherein I was once born where salt winds sweep

The wailing of the waters of the West.

I die, but you can ne'er have done with me.

THORGERD, *the porridge being made.*

Come, drudge, lift off the pot and fill the bowls.

[62]

BLANID, having filled two bowls.

The pot is empty.

THORGERD. But the bowls are full.

HIALTI.

Now give the lass some supper; fill her bowl.

THORGERD, *pouring milk over the porridge.*

There's but enough for two; I'll make no more.

Here, take the pot and scrape it at the quern.

*HIALTI and THORGERD draw stools to the table;
BLANID carries the pot to the outhouse and
returns to the quern; supper proceeds in
silence for a few moments, then HIALTI
rises and offers his bowl to BLANID.*

HIALTI.

Share with me, lass; I need no more to-night.

*Before BLANID can taste the porridge THORGERD
strikes the bowl from her hand.*

HIALTI, *indignantly, as he reaches to THORGERD's bowl.*

She shall have yours; go you and make us more ...

*He is interrupted by a distant wailing which is
heard through the storm.*

THE VOICE.

Ohey! Ohey! Ohohey!

BLANID.
Master, I hear one calling in the night.

[63]

HIALTI, *in a subdued voice*.
It is the wind across the chimney-slates.

THE VOICE.
Ohey! Ohohey!

BLANID.
Master, a man is calling in the night.

HIALTI.
An owl, storm-beaten, drowns down the long mere.

THE VOICE, *sounding nearer on a gust of wind*.
Ohohey! Ohohey!

BLANID.
Master, one lost is helpless in the night.

THORGERD, *gently and with an eager smile*.
Ay, lass, good lass; go, lass, and seek for him—
Maybe he sinks amid the marshy reeds;
Bring him to warmth and supper and a bed.
I'll shut the door; the light will only daze you.

HIALTI, *leaping to the door in front of BLANID, and setting his back to it*.
No, no; back, girl, get back. (*To THORGERD.*)

You murderess,
You know it is the Crier of the Ford,
Who wakens when the clashing waters rise
And the thick night is choked with level rain.
He is not seen; he was not born; he gathers
His bodiless being from the treacherous tarn.
His aged crying gropes about the storm
To snare the spent wayfarer to the ford,
Or draw some pitiful helper to the ford,
And drown them where the unknown water swirls
And strangle them with long brown water-weed:
He seeks their souls for his old soul to feed on,
Because it has no body to nourish it.

[64]

THORGERD, *hastily yet sullenly*.
How should I know?

*She grips BLANID'S shoulder and hurries her to
the outhouse.*

Get in with you to your straw.

*She thrusts her into the outhouse and shuts the
door upon her; then she turns to HIALTI.*

Fool, now I know you love her behind your heart.

HIALTI.
I have no mind to waste a half-spent thrall
To prove I love you; and to buy another
Would need more money than eight red-poll'd stirks.

THORGERD.
Choose between her and me; if you take her,
I take the land.

HIALTI. I love you overmuch
To set you equally against a thrall.

THORGERD.
What, do I touch you when I touch your fields?

HIALTI.
To-morrow I must drive the sold ewes home
And lead more bedding from the bracken-fell
If the storm clears—it is well stacked and dry;
So we must be a-stirring by lantern-light,
Since now you will not have the lass go with me
To milk, but go yourself although three cows

[65]

Will not let down their milk to you at all,
You drag their teats so: waking-time comes soon—
Best get to bed.

THORGERD.

And leave you to go to your straw's wench?

HIALTI, *taking a rushlight in his hand.*
Here are enough of your unfaithful words;
I'll alter this to-morrow.

THORGERD. Ay, to-morrow.

HIALTI *enters the sleeping-chamber; after watching the door close upon him, THORGERD, her hands clenched and her arms rigid, swiftly steps half way toward the outhouse; then, suddenly relaxing into a pause and smiling with tight lips as she shakes her head slightly and sharply, she turns to the table again, doffs her coif and draws her hair down, blows out the remaining rushlight, and follows HIALTI into the sleeping-chamber.*

Henceforth the cottage is only lit by the ever-dying fire. A long, empty silence ensues, broken only by the tumult of the storm and the tinkle of the sinking embers.

Then the outhouse door opens slowly and from it BLANID steps listeningly across the house, in front of the hearth, to the door of the sleeping-chamber, remaining there for a little time with her ear against the door-boards; then she returns noiselessly across the house, behind the hearth, pausing near the house door. [66]

BLANID, *in a hushed voice.*

If day were only darkness melting down
From darkness into darkness like this rain,
Lost ere 'tis known, then I might always sleep
And sleep and dream I was a queen once more—
She does not know I was a jewelled queen,
For so I spoil her of new heights of joy
In which she might for haughtiness fondle me.
O, I would sleep in that old Crier's arms,
Enduring silence harder than all else,
A mote shut into one cold, kneaded eyelid
Of the dead mere; and dream into the wind,
And cling to stars lest I should slip through space;
And dream I am the body of him I love,
Who yields me only kindness, never love—
O me, that misery of hopeless kindness.
But I'll not die and leave him to her lips;
Though I can never have him she shall not;
For I can use this body worn to a soul
To barter with that Crier of hidden things
That, if he tangles him in his chill hair,
Then I will follow and follow and follow,
Past where the imaged stars ebb past their light
And turn to water under the dark world.

She goes out into the storm, leaving the door open behind her. Presently she is heard singing to a chant-like, ever-falling melody. [67]

I stand in the sick night, whose hid shape is my own shape,
As dazed life in the flickering hearts of old men;
I think like a lean heron with bald head and frayed nape
Motionlessly moulting in a flat pool of a grey fen,
Whose sleep-blinked horny eyes know it can ne'er moult again.

My age-long cry droops in the hoar unseen stars that shake
Until their discordant rays make darkness inside the sky;
My bare cry shivers along the slimy rushes of the drowned lake—
Weariful waters, do you hear a soul's hair tingling your veiled feet nigh?

I stand outside my keen body, yearning into you as I cry.

HIALTI, *within*.

Is that the lass sobbing a song in sleep?

THORGERD, *within*.

The wind, the wind, and so as much as she.

BLANID, *still out of doors, singing*.

Old father of many waters, can you feel my soul touching yours?

I know that to greet your calling leaves me no more any yea or nay;

Yet I too am of kin with lost woods and sedgy shores,

So come secret as your black wind and take the dark core of my heart away,

Ere you beget me on death to be still-born to an unlit day.

Ohey! Ohey! Ohohey!

THE VOICE. Ohohey! Ohey!

HIALTI, *within*.

Is there a woman's voice inside the wind?

THORGERD, *within*.

... the unclean Crier croaking ... cover your ears ...

BLANID *re-enters the house hurriedly; she shuts and bolts the door, hardly knowing what she does; she falls on her knees with her back to the door, breathing quickly and hard, and swaying backward and forward, her face hid in her hands.*

Again and again a terrible blast of wind strains at the unyielding door.

THE VOICE, *close at hand*.

Open, open; I cannot open; open.

I cannot come to you unless you open.

BLANID, *muttering behind her hands*.

I will not go ... I can do nothing else ...

It shall not enter ... O, it is in my heart ...

She totters fearfully to the door, after many hesitant backward glances, and opens it slowly and as if she had never known how to open it. She reels against the wall and stands there motionlessly, clutching it with flat hands and outspread arms, as a stooping figure swathed in a rain-coloured, rain-soaked cloak and deep hood enters. Wisps of white hair flutter in the mouth of the hood, and one flicker of the fire-light shows in its depths a soft, shrunken, beardless face with an almost lipless, sunken mouth.

THIS OLD STRANGE MAN, *speaking always in a low, even, mournful voice*.

A spirit calling in an old, old tongue

Forgotten in lost graves in lonesome places;

A spirit huddled in an old, old heart

Like a blind crone crouched o'er a long-dead fire;

A spirit shrinking in the old, old hills,

Dreading to step down water or hollow night:

Some seek me dreaming one last hope of joy;

Some have been made too wise by too much joy

And seek me longing for deeper misery,

Knowing that joy is weary in unending,

Changeless and one and easy in low perfection,

While misery has as many shapes as evil

That all must learn, and is made new for ever

By fear of pain desired for love of passion;

But feel, O you who call me through the night,

I bring you neither joy nor misery

But only rest so slow and sad and sodden

You will not know of it—you shall only rest

And lose your soul in my soul evermore.

Sounds of heavy breathing are heard from the sleeping-chamber during his speaking. He

[68]

[70]

is continually reaching to BLANID with his muffled, unseen hands, but she holds them from her as continually.

BLANID, *always in an eager, suppressed voice.*
I have known joy—I know not what it was,
Mead-fumes that filled me cooling to one drop;
I have known misery—a self-numbered sting
That showed me but another joy to lose;
These were too small, I will have only rest,
And lose my soul in your soul evermore.
But if I die into your drooping limbs
I must be mingled there with him I love;
You may not reach him by your hoary crying,
But raise some human wail for help and light
And he will come and I must follow him
Past where the imaged moon shakes like a soul
Pausing in death between two unknown worlds.

THE OLD MAN.
A sign, a plighting, and I do your will.

BLANID, *winding her arms about his arms from one side, so that he cannot touch her, and burying her face in his hood.*
Kisses. 'Hast drained my soul's blood in each kiss.

THE OLD MAN.
I go, I go; make me not come again,
For I am in you, you must melt to me
Past where the imaged dark shuts bending lovers'
Close, unseen-imaged faces within life....

*Keeping his face turned toward BLANID, he
recedes to the door, where he ceases to be
seen in the wind that scurries past.*

[71]

THE VOICE, *immediately and far away.*
Help; help; the marsh-lights 'wilder us! A light!

BLANID *shuts the door. The fire has now sunk so low that as she crosses the house she is only visible in the half-dark as a dim shape. She pauses by the hearth.*

BLANID.
Nay, but I touch toward my joy at last,
And Christ and all His Saints go out like candles
When mass is said and the priest's cup is wiped....

THE VOICE.
The water laps our waists! Help, help! A light!

BLANID, *running to the sleeping-chamber door.*
Master, I hear a calling....

After an interval she strikes the door, crying loudly.

Master! Master!

HIALTI, *within.*
Has the flood washed into the shippon?

BLANID. Nay;
There is a pitiful shrieking in the dark.

HIALTI, *within.*
It is the Crier; break sleep no more for that.

[72]

THORGERD, *within.*
The ox-goad shall reward you when dawn comes ...
Wake us once more and you shall waken often,
Ay, very often, until you dread to sleep ...

BLANID.
I heard that trailing cry like maddened fir-boughs;
Now I hear words—is there a woman's wail?

THORGERD, *within.*
A woman? Let her drown.

HIALTI, *within*. I come. I come.

Reach down the lantern and light it, light it, light it.

Standing on a stool, BLANID lifts a lantern from a nail in one of the beams and, carrying it to the hearth, kneels there and seeks to light it with an ember.

THORGERD, *within*.

You shall not go; it is a lie of hers;

You shall not go ...

A brief struggle in the sleeping-chamber is heard.

HIALTI, *within*. So; stand you from the door.

Get donned; make up the fire; have water boiling;

And send the wench to lie in your warm form

Ready to cherish what stiffening thing I bring.

BLANID, *to herself, lighting the lantern and smiling mischievously.*

Yea, I shall cherish a stiffening thing for her.

Lantern, you are as dim as a little soul,

Yet the least soul can light a man to Heaven,

And you might lead him home; but I am like God,

Who makes souls from His aches—I will not ache,

You shall not have a soul, I suck it back.

She extinguishes the light. HIALTI hurries in half-dressed.

HIALTI.

Canst find a rope?

BLANID, *pointing*. Behind the settle there.

To herself.

'Tis a good rope and has two rotten strands;

'Twas meant to make good tinder on the morrow.

THE VOICE.

Help; help! A light! Come for the woman's sake!

HIALTI, *holding out his hand for the lantern.*

Hearken and haste; give me the lantern—now!

BLANID.

Master, it will not light....

HIALTI.

Will the storm pause?

THE VOICE.

Ohohey! Ohohey!

HIALTI.

Will that dark Crier linger? I must go.

She catches his outstretched hand and kisses it ere, snatching it away, he flings the house door wide open and dashes outside. Soon the sound of his footsteps is lost in the storm.

[74]

BLANID, *relighting the lantern and starting up.*

Master, Master, the light!

Pausing and sending the lantern crashing on the hearth with both hands.

He shall not have it!

She stands with her hands gripping her breasts, leaning forward toward the open door; her breathlessness is all that is heard; she stretches her arms to the night.

BLANID.

I feel as if my long, long hands could reach

Down to the water's heart to pluck him from it.

THE VOICE.

Will no one ever come?

HIALTI, *out of doors*. I come; I am nigh.

BLANID.

Ay, he is nigh; but soon he will be far.

I dare not thus fall through the world for him.
O, I shall hear him ... do not let me hear him ...

She throws herself on her face on the floor and, covering her head with the strewn rushes and clasping her hands over them, lies there moaning.

HIALTI, *far off, shouting ever more madly.*

[75]

Thorgerd, Thorgerd ... your hands ... the world slips past me ...
Save ... under ... under ... under ...

Aa-h ...

The shouting ceases suddenly at its height.

BLANID, *muffled and choking.*

Her name ... her name ... why did he not think my name? ...
But she has lost him, and I kissed his hand ...

THORGERD, *rushing from the sleeping-chamber in her night-gear.*

Where is the wench?... Make haste—another light:
I heard him dying. O, this prater's breath
Will blow his life out ... Kindle a light and come ...

THE VOICE.

Ohey! Ohohey! Ohey!

BLANID.

Nay! Nay! Nay! I dare not, I dare not ...
That Crier will drown me too ...

THORGERD.

That is nought to me;

Get to your feet ... What, shall I seek a way
To supple you?

BLANID.

O, do not hurt me again ...

He dies ... it is my deed ... I dare not come ...

THORGERD.

You are too mean to stir his life one thought;
It was the Crafty Crier—I heard that wail ...

The fire is now wholly out, so that the cottage is absolutely dark and nothing is visible.

[76]

THE VOICE, *near at hand.*

Ohohey! Ohey!

THORGERD, *fiercely.*

Where are you?... O, the Crier is heaving o'er ...

A gust of wind and rain is heard to sweep into the cottage through the open doorway, shifting the rustling floor-rushes as though feet touched them. THE OLD STRANGE MAN has entered.

BLANID, *being heard to start to her feet.*

There is another breathing in the house ...
He is here ... this darkness is not black enough,
The darkness at light's core alone could hide me ...
Grope for my hand—hold fast and take me home ...

She is heard to sink to the floor again.

THE OLD STRANGE MAN.

Sister of that old race dead in the hills,
Why will you make me come to you once more?
You know you must go down a long withdrawing
To reach the unlit places of your heart,
Which are the night within my unknown eyes
Beyond all stars; so let me touch you once.

BLANID is heard to drag her prostrate body through the rushes toward THORGERD.

BLANID.

Mistress, I am your thrall; you will keep your own ...
I clasp your feet, I kiss your clutching feet,
I lick your feet all over with my tongue,
I will tell you somewhat that will yield a vengeance
For you to work; so do not let me go....

[77]

THE OLD MAN.

I see you, you white terror with shaking flanks,

Straining to feel me with your hard-shut eyes,
But now I need you not; not yet; not yet.
Your man is drowned and this is it who bargained
Its death for his; will you not give it to me?

THORGERD, *laughing*.

I am glad he is dead; now I may only love him,
And know no more that last distress of stooping
So far from me as this at my feet must be.
No vengeancing could pay for thoughts of her:
I will not know that such can be in life,
So I will neither yield nor succour her.

She speaks no more, nor moves.

THE OLD MAN.

Give it to me; it is mine, give it to me;
I cannot take it while it touches you.

A silence.

BLANID.

I have slain him and I fear to go to him ...
Put out my eyes, and rope me with the dogs—
Nay, strangle me to-morrow; but save me now.

THE OLD MAN, *his voice growing fainter and fainter*.

Ah, come, you daughter of an ancient earth,
Come down among the folk your heart can know,
You darling of the past, you long-dead queen.
Your aged soul is strange among these men,
As strange as it would be in Paradise;
But once I knew you ere you were begot,
And in the unchanging silence of my heart
There waits a star for you to finish it.

A silence.

You little trembler of a dew-drop dawn,
You are as old as water that makes new dew;
And when the dew falls it runs down to peace.
The end of sorrow is in sorrow's heart
With those who loved and knew the unknown end
Of mothering you a thousand years ago.
Come, then, from her who shapes new pangs for you,
And rest and rest and rest for evermore.

A silence.

One day you will awake and call to me;
And I shall listen for the doubting cry
Until the stars have worn the sky too thin,
And I am drowned within the light beyond....

*His voice is lost in the gradual wail of a gust of
wind; then it is heard outside and afar.*

Ohey!

BLANID, *speaking at longer and longer intervals*.

O, you have saved me from such evil things
As writhed like tangled tree-roots outside space
Ere God made Himself from them; and for this
My Virgin shall reach down from God's two knees
Whereon She sits, and kiss you for Her own.
My body was yours; now you have saved my soul
My soul is utterly yours to serve in living,
To clothe your soul and be your very heart
In love and soft, unconscious giving of life.
Mother, I have done evil—punish me;
Because we loved him, love me and punish me:
I have sinned, I have parted lovers—be cruel to me
And cleanse me that I may keep near you two...
Think in how many ways you can torture me;
Let me rake up the fire and heat an iron
For you to have your will upon my body—
One thigh is yet unseared ... Will you not speak? ...
I love him, I tell you ... I love him, I love him, I love him ...
I kissed his hand; do you hear? I kissed his hand—
Our Hialti's hand ... I'll make you hurt me yet,
Cold anger is shuddering down your tense thighs;
Feel, this is your foot upon my upturned face,
I lift it across my eyes, wide-open eyes—
Bear down and crush them full of eternal night ...

[78]

[79]

Speak to me now ... O, will you never speak?
You thrust me down into that Crier's bosom;
For in your heart you make me be unborn
Within a lonely place you never heard of,
Yet if I loose your feet he will return
And I must follow and follow and follow and follow
Past where my imaged thoughts repeat the world,
Till shattered waters break the imaged dream ...
You saved me once; will you undo that greatness?...
We are the tears that God wipes from His eyes:
Lone thoughts will thrust me forth—save me from them ...
Ah, but my lonely love can succour me:
Think, if I drown, 'tis to my Hialti's arms,
To cast you from his heart for ever more;
He will not even know you are forgotten ...
Sister ... Thorgerd....

[80]

THORGERD *draws in a long breath so sharply that
it sounds to stab her repeatedly.*

Ay, you will hate me as you used to do—
Will you not hate me as you used to do?
I was so happy when you still could hate me....
I fear it, but you make me go.... Speak once....

After a long silence BLANID *is heard to rise and
go slowly to the door.*

BLANID
Ohey! Ohey!

THE VOICE, *outside.* Ohohey!

With a laugh of abandonment BLANID *is heard to
run into the night; there is a brief silence;
then one far-off, long shriek is heard from
her.*

THE VOICE.
Ohey! Ohohey!

In the cottage THORGERD *is heard to fall heavily to
the floor.
The curtain descends on silence and darkness.*

THE RIDING TO LITHEND

[82]

TO EDWARD THOMAS

*HERE in the North we speak of you,
And dream (and wish the dream were true)
That when the evening has grown late
You will appear outside our gate—
As though some Gipsy-Scholar yet
Sought this far place that men forget;
Or some tall hero still unknown,
Out of the Mabinogion,
Were seen at nightfall looking in,
Passing mysteriously to win
His earlier earth, his ancient mind,
Where man was true and life more kind
Lived with the mountains and the trees
And other steadfast presences,
Where large and simple passions gave
The insight and the peace we crave,
And he no more had nigh forgot
The old high battles he had fought.*

*Ah, pause to-night outside our gate
And enter ere it is too late
To see the garden's deep on deep
And talk a little ere we sleep.*

*When you were here a year ago
I told you of a glorious woe,
The ancient woe of Gunnar dead*

*And its proud train of men long sped,
Fit brothers to your noble thoughts;
Then, as their shouts and Gunnar's shouts
Went down once more undyingly
And the fierce saga was put by,
I told you of my old desire
To light again that bygone fire,
To body Hallgerd's ruinous
Great hair and wrangling mouth for us,
And hear her voice deny again
That hair to Gunnar in his pain.*

[83]

*Because your heart could understand
The hopes of their primeval land,
The hearts of dim heroic forms
Made clear by tenderness and storms,
You caught my glow and urged me on;
So now the tale is once more done
I turn to you, I bring my play,
Longing, O friend, to hear you say
I have not dwarfed those olden things
Nor tarnisht by my furbishings.*

*I bring my play, I turn to you
And wish it might to-night be true
That you would seek this old small house
Twixt laurel boughs and apple boughs;
Then I would give it, bravely manned,
To you, and with my play my hand.*

30 JUNE 1908.

I. M.

2ND LIEUT. PHILIP EDWARD THOMAS

244th Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery;
killed at a forward observation post in the
battle of Arras, on Easter Monday,
April 9th, 1917.

PERSONS:

[84]

GUNNAR HAMUNDSSON.

HALLGERD LONGCOAT, his wife.

RANNVEIG, his mother.

ODDNY, ASTRID, and STEINVOR, Hallgerd's house-women.

ORMILD, a woman thrall.

BIARTEY, JOFRID, and GUDFINN, beggar-women.

GIZUR THE WHITE, MORD VALGARDSSON, THORGRIM THE EASTERLING, THORBRAND THORLEIKSSON and ASBRAND
his brother, AUNUND, THORGEIR and HROALD, riders.

Many other Riders and voices of Riders

In Iceland, A.D. 990.

THE RIDING TO LITHEND

[85]

The scene is the hall of Gunnar's house at Lithend in South Iceland. The portion shewn is set on the stage diagonally, so that to the right one end is seen while, from the rear corner of this, one side runs down almost to the left front.

The side wall is low and wainscotted with carved panelling on which hang weapons, shields, and coats of mail. In one place a panel slid aside shews a shut bed.

In front of the panelling are two long benches with a carved high-seat between them. Across the end of the hall are similar panellings and the seats, with corresponding tables, of the women's daís; behind these and in the gable wall is a high narrow door with a rounded top.

A timber roof slopes down to the side wall and is upheld by cross-beams and two rows of tall pillars which make a rather narrow nave of the centre of the hall. One of these rows runs parallel to the side wall, the pair of pillars before the high-seat being carved and ended with images; of the other row only two pillars are visible at the extreme right.

Within this nave is the space for the hearths; but the only hearth visible is the one near the women's daïs. In the roof above it there is a louvre: the fire glows and no smoke rises. The hall is lit everywhere by the firelight.

The rafters over the women's daïs carry a floor at the level of the side walls, forming an open loft which is reached by a wide ladder fixed against the wall: a bed is seen in this loft. Low in the roof at intervals are shuttered casements, one being above the loft: all the shutters are closed.

[86]

Near the fire a large shaggy hound is sleeping; and ORMILD, in the undyed woollen dress of a thrall, is combing wool.

ODDNY stands spinning at the far side; near her ASTRID and STEINVOR sit stitching a robe which hangs between them.

ASTRID.

NIGHT is a Winter long: and evening falls.
Night, night and Winter and the heavy snow
Burden our eyes, intrude upon our dreams,
And make of loneliness an earthly place.

ORMILD.

This bragging land of freedom that entralls me
Is still the fastness of a secret king
Who treads the dark like snow, of old king Sleep.
He works with night, he has stolen death's tool frost
That makes the breaking wave forget to fall.

ASTRID.

Best mind thy comb-pot and forget our king
Before the Longcoat helps at thy awaking....
I like not this forsaken quiet house.
The house-men out at harvest in the Isles
Never return. Perhaps they went but now,
Yet I am sore with fearing and expecting
Because they do not come. They will not come.
I like not this forsaken quiet house,
This late last harvest, and night creeping in.

[87]

ODDNY.

I like not dwelling in an outlaw's house.
Snow shall be heavier upon some eyes
Than you can tell of—ay, and unseen earth
Shall keep that snow from filling those poor eyes.
This void house is more void by brooding things
That do not happen than by absent men.
Sometimes when I awaken in the night
My throbbing ears are mocking me with rumours
Of crackling beams, beams falling, and loud flames.

ASTRID, *pointing to the weapons by the high-seat.*

The bill that Gunnar won in a far sea-fight
Sings inwardly when battle impends; as a harp
Replies to the wind thus answers it to fierceness,
So tense its nature is and the spell of its welding;
Then trust ye well that while the bill is silent
No danger thickens, for Gunnar dies not singly.

STEINVOR.

But women are let forth free when men go burning?

ODDNY.

Fire is a hurrying thing, and fire by night
Can see its way better than men see theirs.

ASTRID.

The land will not be nobler or more holpen
If Gunnar burns and we go forth unsinged.
Why will he break the atonement that was set?
That wise old Njal who has the second sight
Foretold his death if he should slay twice over

[88]

In the same kin or break the atonement set:
Yet has he done these things and will not care.
Kolskegg, who kept his back in famous fights,
Sailed long ago and far away from us
Because that doom is on him for the slayings;
Yet Gunnar bides although that doom is on him
And he is outlawed by defiance of doom.

STEINVOR.

Gunnar has seen his death: he is spoken for.
He would not sail because, when he rode down
Unto the ship, his horse stumbled and threw him,
His face toward the Lithe and his own fields.
Olaf the Peacock bade him be with him
In his new mighty house so carven and bright,
And leave this house to Rannveig and his sons:
He said that would be well, yet never goes.
Is he not thinking death would ride with him?
Did not Njal offer to send his sons,
Skarphedin ugly and brave and Hauskuld with him,
To hold this house with Gunnar, who refused them
Saying he would not lead young men to death?
I tell you Gunnar is done.... His fetch is out.

ODDNY.

Nay, he's been topmost in so many fights
That he believes he shall fight on untouched.

STEINVOR.

He rides to motes and Things before his foes.
He has sent his sons harvesting in the Isles.
He takes deliberate heed of death—to meet it,
Like those whom Odin needs. He is fey, I tell you—
And if we are past the foolish ardour of girls
For heroisms and profitless loftiness
We shall get gone when bedtime clears the house.
'Tis much to have to be a hero's wife,
And I shall wonder if Hallgerd cares about it:
Yet she may kindle to it ere my heart quickens.
I tell you, women, we have no duty here:
Let us get gone to-night while there is time,
And find new harbouring ere the laggard dawn,
For death is making narrowing passages
About this hushed and terrifying house.

RANNVEIG, *an old wimpled woman, enters as if
from a door at the unseen end of the hall.*

ASTRID.

He is so great and manly, our master Gunnar,
There are not many ready to meet his weapons:
And so there may not be much need of weapons.
He is so noble and clear, so swift and tender,
So much of Iceland's fame in foreign places,
That too many love him, too many honour him
To let him die, lest the most gleaming glory
Of our grey country should be there put out.

RANNVEIG.

My son has enemies, girl, enemies,
Who will not lose the joy of hurting him.
This little land is no more than a lair
That holds too many fiercenesses too straitly,
And no man will refuse the rapture of killing
When outlawry has made it cheap and righteous.
So long as any one perceives he knows
A bare place for a weapon on my son
His hand shall twitch to fit a weapon in.
Indeed he shall lose nothing but his life
Because a woman is made so evil fair,
Wasteful and white and proud in harmful acts.
I lose two sons when Gunnar's eyes are still,
For then will Kolskegg never more turn home....
If Gunnar would but sail three years would pass;
Only three years of banishment said the doom—
So few, so few, for I can last ten years
With this unshrunk body and steady heart.

[89]

[90]

(To ORMILD)

Have I sat down in comfort by the fire
And waited to be told the thing I knew?
Have any men come home to the young women,
Thinking old women do not need to hear,
That you can play at being a bower-maid
In a long gown although no beasts are foddered?
Up, lass, and get thy coats about thy knees,
For we must cleanse the byre and heap the midden
Before the master knows—or he will go,
And there is peril for him in every darkness.

ORMILD, *tucking up her skirts.*

Then are we out of peril in the darkness?
We should do better to nail up the doors
Each night and all night long and sleep through it,
Giving the cattle meat and straw by day.

ODDNY.

Ay, and the hungry cattle should sing us to sleep.

*The others laugh. ORMILD goes out to the left;
RANNVEIG is following her, but pauses at the
sound of a voice.*

HALLGERD, *beyond the door of the women's daïs.*

[91]

Dead men have told me I was better than fair,
And for my face welcomed the danger of me:
Then am I spent?

*She enters angrily, looking backward through
the doorway.*

Must I shut fast my doors
And hide myself? Must I wear up the rags
Of mortal perished beauty and be old?
Or is there power left upon my mouth
Like colour, and liting of ruin in my eyes?
Am I still rare enough to be your mate?
Then why must I shame at feasts and bear myself
In shy ungainly ways, made flushed and conscious
By squat numb gestures of my shapeless head—
Ay, and its wagging shadow—clouted up,
Twice tangled with a bundle of hot hair,
Like a thick cot-wife's in the settling time?
There are few women in the Quarter now
Who do not wear a shapely fine-webbed coif
Stitched by dark Irish girls in Athcliath
With golden flies and pearls and glinting things:
Even my daughter lets her big locks show,
Show and half show, from a hood gentle and close
That spans her little head like her husband's hand.

GUNNAR, *entering by the same door.*

I like you when you bear your head so high;
Lift but your heart as high, you could get crowned
And rule a kingdom of impossible things.
You would have moon and sun to shine together,
Snow-flakes to knit for apples on bare boughs,
Yea, love to thrive upon the terms of hate.
If I had fared abroad I should have found
In many countries many marvels for you
Though not more comeliness in peopled Romeborg
And not more haughtiness in Mickligarth
Nor craftiness in all the isles of the world,
And only golden coifs in Athcliath:
Yet you were ardent that I should not sail,
And when I could not sail you laughed out loud
And kissed me home....

[92]

HALLGERD, *who has been biting her nails.*

And then ... and doubtless ... and strangely ...
And not more thriftiness in Bergthorsknoll
Where Njal saves old soft sackcloth for his wife.
O, I must sit with peasants and aged women,
And keep my head wrapped modestly and seemly;

She turns to RANNVEIG.

I must be humble—as one who lives on others.

*She snatches off her wimple, slipping her gold
cirlet as she does so, and loosens her
hair.*

Unless I may be hooded delicately
And use the adornment noble women use
I'll mock you with my flown young widowhood,
Letting my hair go loose past either cheek
In two bright clouds and drop beyond my bosom,
Turning the waving ends under my girdle
As young glad widows do, and as I did
Ere ever you saw me—ay, and when you found me
And met me as a king meets a queen
In the undying light of a summer night
With burning robes and glances—stirring the
heart with scarlet.

*She tucks the long ends of her hair under her
girdle.*

RANNVEIG.

[93]

You have cast the head-ring of the nobly nurtured,
Being eager for a bold uncovered head.
You are conversant with a widow's fancies....
Ay, you are ready with your widowhood:
Two men have had you, chilled their bosoms with you,
And trusted that they held a precious thing—
Yet your mean passionate wastefulness poured out
Their lives for joy of seeing something done with.
Cannot you wait this time? 'Twill not be long.

HALLGERD.

I am a hazardous desirable thing,
A warm unsounded peril, a flashing mischief,
A divine malice, a disquieting voice:
Thus I was shapen, and it is my pride
To nourish all the fires that mingled me.
I am not long moved, I do not mar my face,
Though men have sunk in me as in a quicksand.
Well, death is terrible. Was I not worth it?
Does not the light change on me as I breathe?
Could I not take the hearts of generations,
Walking among their dreams? O, I have might,
Although it drives me too and is not my own deed....
And Gunnar is great, or he had died long since.
It is my joy that Gunnar stays with me:
Indeed the offence is theirs who hunted him,
His banishment is not just; his wrongs increase,
His honour and his following shall increase
If he is steadfast for his blamelessness.

RANNVEIG.

[94]

Law is not justice, but the sacrifice
Of singular virtues to the dull world's ease of mind;
It measures men by the most vicious men;
It is a bargaining with vanities,
Lest too much right should make men hate each other
And hasten the last battle of all the nations.
Gunnar should have kept the atonement set,
For then those men would turn to other quarrels.

GUNNAR.

I know not why it is I must be fighting,
For ever fighting, when the slaying of men
Is a more weary and aimless thing to me
Than most men think it ... and most women too.
There is a woman here who grieves she loves me,
And she too must be fighting me for ever
With her dim ravenous unsated mind....
Ay, Hallgerd, there's that in her which desires
Men to fight on forever because she lives:
When she took form she did it like a hunger
To nibble earth's lip away until the sea
Poured down the darkness. Why then should I sail
Upon a voyage that can end but here?
She means that I shall fight until I die:
Why must she be put off by whittled years,

When none can die until his time has come?

He turns to the hound by the fire.

Samm, drowsy friend, dost scent a prey in dreams?

Shake off thy shag of sleep and get to thy watch:

'Tis time to be our eyes till the next light.

Out, out to the yard, good Samm.

He goes to the left, followed by the hound. In the meantime HALLGERD has seated herself^[95] in the high-seat near the sewing-women, turning herself away and tugging at a strand of her hair, the end of which she bites.

RANNVEIG, *intercepting him.*

Nay, let me take him.

It is not safe—there may be men who hide....

Hallgerd, look up; call Gunnar to you there:

HALLGERD is motionless.

Lad, she beckons. I say you shall not come.

GUNNAR, *laughing.*

Fierce woman, teach me to be brave in age,

And let us see if it is safe for you.

He leads RANNVEIG out, his hand on her shoulder; the hound goes with them.

STEINVOR.

Mistress, my heart is big with mutinies

For your proud sake: does not your heart mount up?

He is an outlaw now and could not hold you

If you should choose to leave him. Is it not law?

Is it not law that you could loose this marriage—

Nay, that he loosed it shamefully years ago

By a hard blow that bruised your innocent cheek,

Dishonouring you to lesser women and chiefs?

See, it burns up again at the stroke of thought.

Come, leave him, mistress; we will go with you.

There is no woman in the country now

Whose name can kindle men as yours can do—

Ay, many would pile for you the silks he grudges;

And if you did withdraw your potent presence

Fire would not spare this house so reverently.

[96]

HALLGERD.

Am I a wandering flame that sears and passes?

We must bide here, good Steinvor, and be quiet.

Without a man a woman cannot rule,

Nor kill without a knife; and where's the man

That I shall put before this goodly Gunnar?

I will not be made less by a less man.

There is no man so great as my man Gunnar:

I have set men at him to show forth his might;

I have planned thefts and breakings of his word

When my pent heart grew sore with fermentation

Of malice too long undone, yet could not stir him.

O, I will make a battle of the Thing,

Where men vow holy peace, to magnify him.

Is it not rare to sit and wait o' nights,

Knowing that murderousness may even now

Be coming down outside like second darkness

Because my man is greater?

STEINVOR, *shuddering.* Is it not rare.

HALLGERD.

That blow upon the face

So long ago is best not spoken of.

I drave a thrall to steal and burn at Otkell's

Who would not sell to us in famine time

But denied Gunnar as if he were suppliant:

Then at our feast when men rode from the Thing

I spread the stolen food and Gunnar knew.

He smote me upon the face ... indeed he smote me....

O, Gunnar smote me and had shame of me

And said he'd not partake with any thief;

Although I stole to injure his despiser....

But if he had abandoned me as well

[97]

'Tis I who should have been unmated now;
For many men would soon have judged me thief
And shut me from this land until I died—
And then I should have lost him.... Yet he smote me....

ASTRID.

He kept you his—yes, and maybe saved you
From a debasement that could madden or kill,
For women thieves ere now have felt a knife
Severing ear or nose. And yet the feud
You sowed with Otkell's house shall murder Gunnar.
Otkell was slain: then Gunnar's enviers,
Who could not crush him under his own horse
At the big horse-fight, stirred up Otkell's son
To avenge his father; for should he be slain
Two in one stock would prove old Njal's fore-telling,
And Gunnar's place be emptied either way
For those high helpless men who cannot fill it.
O, mistress, you have hurt us all in this:
You have cut off your strength, you have maimed yourself,
You are losing power and worship and men's trust.
When Gunnar dies no other man dare take you.

HALLGERD.

You gather poison in your mouth for me.
A high-born woman may handle what she fancies
Without being ear-pruned like a pilfering beggar.
Look to your ears if you touch ought of mine:
Ay, you shall join the mumping sisterhood
And tramp and learn your difference from me.

She turns from ASTRID.

Steinvor, I have remembered the great veil,
The woven cloud, the tissue of gold and garlands,
That Gunnar took from some outlandish ship
And deemed a thing from Greekland or from Hind:
Fetch it from the ambry in the bower.

[98]

STEINVOR goes out by the daís door.

ASTRID.

Mistress, indeed you are a cherished woman.
That veil is worth a lifetime's weight of coifs:
I have heard a queen offered her daughter for it,
But Gunnar said it should come home and wait—
And then gave it to you. The half of Iceland
Tells fabulous legends of a fabulous thing,
Yet never saw it: I know they never saw it,
For ere it reached the ambry I came on it
Tumbled in the loft with ragged kirtles.

HALLGERD.

What, are you there again? Let Gunnar alone.

*STEINVOR enters with the veil folded. HALLGERD
takes it with one hand and shakes it into a
heap.*

This is the cloth. He brought it out at night,
In the first hour that we were left together,
And begged of me to wear it at high feasts
And more outshine all women of my time:
He shaped it to my head with my gold circlet,
Saying my hair smouldered like Rhine-fire through,
He let it fall about my neck and fall
About my shoulders, mingle with my skirts
And billow in the draught along the floor.

She rises and holds the veil behind her head.

I know I dazzled as if I entered in
And walked upon a windy sunset and drank it,
Yet must I stammer at such strange uncouthness
And tear it from me, tangling my arms in it—
I could not so befool myself and seem
A laughable bundle in each woman's eyes,
Wearing such things as no one ever wore,
Useless ... no head-cloth ... too unlike my fellows.
Yet he turns miser for a tiny coif.
It would cut into many golden coifs
And dim some women in their Irish clouts—
But no; I'll shape and stitch it into shifts,

[99]

BIARTEY.

Not West, not North: we slept upon the East,
Arising in the East where no men dwell.
We have abided in the mountain places,
Chanted our woes among the black rocks crouching;

GUDFINN joins her in a sing-song utterance.

From the East, from the East we drove and the wind waved us,
Over the heaths, over the barren ashes.
We are old, our eyes are old, and the light hurts us,
We have skins on our eyes that part alone to the star-light.
We stumble about the night, the rocks tremble
Beneath our trembling feet; black sky thickens,
Breaks into clots, and lets the moon upon us.

*JOFRID joins her voice to the voices of the other
two.*

Far from the men who fear us, men who stone us,
Hiding, hiding, flying whene'er they slumber,
High on the crags we pause, over the moon-gulfs;
Black clouds fall and leave us up in the moon-depths
Where wind flaps our hair and cloaks like fin-webs,
Ay, and our sleeves that toss with our arms and the cadence
Of quavering crying among the threatening echoes.
Then we spread our cloaks and leap down the rock-stairs,
Sweeping the heaths with our skirts, greying the dew-bloom,
Until we feel a pool on the wide dew stretches
Stilled by the moon or ruffling like breast-feathers,
And, with grey sleeves cheating the sleepy herons,
Squat among them, pillow us there and sleep.
But in the harder wastes we stand upright,
Like splintered rain-worn boulders set to the wind
In old confederacy, and rest and sleep.

*HALLGERD'S women are huddled together and
clasping each other.*

ODDNY.

What can these women be who sleep like horses,
Standing up in the darkness.... What will they do....

GUNNAR.

Ye wail like ravens and have no human thoughts.
What do ye seek? What will ye here with us?

BIARTEY, *as all three cower suddenly.*

Succour upon this terrible journeying.
We have a message for a man in the West,
Sent by an old man sitting in the East.
We are spent, our feet are moving wounds, our bodies
Dream of themselves and seem to trail behind us
Because we went unfed down in the mountains.
Feed us and shelter us beneath your roof,
And put us over the Markfleet, over the channels.
We are weak old women: we are beseeching you.

GUNNAR.

You may bide here this night, but on the morrow
You shall go over, for tramping shameless women
Carry too many tales from stead to stead—
And sometimes heavier gear than breath and lies.
These women will tell the mistress all I grant you;
Get to the fire until she shall return.

BIARTEY.

Thou art a merciful man and we shall thank thee.

*GUNNAR goes out again to the left.
The old women approach the young ones
gradually.*

Little ones, do not doubt us. Could we hurt you?
Because we are ugly must we be bewitched?

STEINVOR.

Nay, but bewitch us.

BIARTEY.

Not in a litten house:

[102]

[103]

[104]

Not ere the hour when night turns on itself
And shakes the silence: not while ye wake together.
Sweet voice, tell us, was that verily Gunnar?

STEINVOR.

Arrh—do not touch me, unclean flyer-by-night:
Have ye birds' feet to match such bat-webbed fingers?

BIARTEY.

I am only a cowed curst woman who walks with death;
I will crouch here. Tell us, was it Gunnar?

ODDNY.

Yea, Gunnar surely. Is he not big enough
To fit the songs about him?

BIARTEY.

He is a man.
Why will his manhood urge him to be dead?
We walk about the whole old land at night,
We enter many dales and many halls:
And everywhere is talk of Gunnar's greatness,
His slayings and his fate outside the law.
The last ship has not gone: why will he tarry?

ODDNY.

He chose a ship, but men who rode with him
Say that his horse threw him upon the shore,
His face toward the Lithe and his own fields;
As he arose he trembled at what he gazed on
(Although those men saw nothing pass or meet them)
And said.... What said he, girls?

[105]

ASTRID. "Fair is the Lithe:

So fair I never thought it was so fair.
Its corn is white, its meadows green after mowing.
I will ride home again and never leave it."

ODDNY.

'Tis an unlikely tale: he never said it.
No one could mind such things in such an hour.
Plainly he saw his fetch come down the sands,
And knew he need not seek another country
And take that with him to walk upon the deck
In night and storm.

GUDFINN.

He he he! No man speaks thus.

JOFRID.

No man, no man: he must be doomed somewhere.

BIARTEY.

Doomed and fey, my sisters.... We are too old,
Yet I'd not marvel if we outlasted him.
Sisters, that is a fair fierce girl who spins....
My fair fierce girl, you could fight—but can you ride?
Would you not shout to be riding in a storm?
Ah ... h, girls learnt riding well when I was a girl,
And foam rides on the breakers as I was taught....
My fair fierce girl, tell me your noble name.

[106]

ODDNY.

My name is Oddny.

BIARTEY. Oddny, when you are old
Would you not be proud to be no man's purse-string,
But wild and wandering and friends with the earth?
Wander with us and learn to be old yet living.
We'd win fine food with you to beg for us.

STEINVOR.

Despised, cast out, unclean, and loose men's night-bird.

ODDNY.

When I am old I shall be some man's friend,
And hold him when the darkness comes....

BIARTEY.
And mumble by the fire and blink....
Good Oddny, let me spin for you awhile,
That Gunnar's house may profit by his guesting:
Come, trust me with your distaff....

ODDNY. Are there spells
Wrought on a distaff?

STEINVOR. Only by the Norns,
And they'll not sit with human folk to-night.

ODDNY.
Then you may spin all night for what I care;
But let the yarn run clean from knots and snarls,
Or I shall have the blame when you are gone.

BIARTEY, *taking the distaff.*
Trust well the aged knowledge of my hands;
Thin and thin do I spin, and the thread draws finer.

[107]

She sings as she spins.

They go by three,
And the moon shivers;
The tired waves flee,
The hidden rivers
Also flee.

I take three strands;
There is one for her,
One for my hands,
And one to stir
For another's hands.

I twine them thinner,
The dead wool doubts;
The outer is inner,
The core slips out....

HALLGERD *re-enters by the daís door, holding a
pair of shears.*

HALLGERD.
What are these women, Oddny? Who let them in?

BIARTEY, *who spins through all that follows.*
Lady, the man of fame who is your man
Gave us his peace to-night, and that of his house.
We are blown beggars tramping about the land,
Denied a home for our evil and vagrant hearts;
We sought this shelter when the first dew soaked us,
And should have perished by the giant hound
But Gunnar fought it with his eyes and saved us.
That is a strange hound, with a man's mind in it.

[108]

HALLGERD, *seating herself in the high-seat.*
It is an Irish hound, from that strange soil
Where men by day walk with unearthly eyes
And cross the veils of the air, and are not men
But fierce abstractions eating their own hearts
Impatiently and seeing too much to be joyful....
If Gunnar welcomed ye, ye may remain.

BIARTEY.
She is a fair free lady, is she not?
But that was to be looked for in a high one
Who counts among her fathers the bright Sigurd,
The bane of Fafnir the Worm, the end of the god-kings;
Among her mothers Brynhild, the lass of Odin,
The maddener of swords, the night-clouds' rider.
She has kept sweet that father's lore of bird-speech,
She wears that mother's power to cheat a god.
Sisters, she does well to be proud....

JOFRID AND GUDFINN. Ay, Well....

HALLGERD, *shaping the tissue with her shears.*

I need no witch to tell I am of rare seed,
Nor measure my pride nor praise it. Do I not know?
Old women, ye are welcomed: sit with us,
And while we stitch tell us what gossip runs—
But if strife might be warmed by spreading it.

BIARTEY.

Lady, we are hungered; we were lost
All night among the mountains of the East;
Clouds of the cliffs come down my eyes again....
I pray you let some thrall bring us to food.

[109]

HALLGERD.

Ye get nought here. The supper is long over;
The women shall not let ye know the food-house,
Or ye'll be thieving in the night. Ye are idle,
Ye suck a man's house bare and seek another.
'Tis bed-time; get to sleep—that stills much hunger.

BIARTEY.

Now it is easy to be seeing what spoils you.
You were not grasping or ought but over warm
When Sigmund, Gunnar's kinsman, guested here.
You followed him, you were too kind with him,
You lavished Gunnar's treasure and gear on him
To draw him on, and did not call that thieving.
Ay, Sigmund took your feuds on him and died
As Gunnar shall. Men have much harm by you.

HALLGERD.

Now have I gashed the golden cloth awry:
'Tis ended—a ruin of clouts—the worth of the gift—
Bridal dish-clouts—nay, a bundle of flame.
I'll burn it to a breath of its old queen's ashes:
Fire, O fire, drink up....

*She throws the shreds of the veil on the glowing
embers: they waft to ashes with a brief
high flare. She goes to* JOFRID.

There's one of you

That holds her head in a bird's sideways fashion:
I know that reach o' the chin.... What's under thy hair?—

She fixes JOFRID *with her knee, and lifts her hair.*

Pfui, 'tis not hair, but sopped and rotting moss—
A thief, a thief indeed.... And twice a thief....
She has no ears. Keep thy hooked fingers still
While thou art here, for if I miss a mouthful
Thou shalt miss all thy nose. Get up, get up;
I'll lodge ye with the mares....

[110]

JOFRID, *starting up*. Three men, three men,
Three men have wived you, and for all you gave them
Paid with three blows upon a cheek once kissed—
To every man a blow—and the last blow
All the land knows was won by thieving food....
Yea, Gunnar is ended by the theft and the thief.
Is it not told that when you first grew tall,
A false rare girl, Hrut your own kinsman said
"I know not whence thief's eyes entered our blood."
You have more ears, yet are you not my sister?
Our evil vagrant heart is deeper in you.

HALLGERD, *snatching the distaff from Biartey*.

Out and be gone, be gone. Lie with the mountains,
Smother among the thunder; stale dew mould you.
Outstrip the hound, or he shall so embrace you....

BIARTEY.

Now is all done ... all done ... and all your deed!
She broke the thread, and it shall not join again.
Spindle, spindle, the coiling weft shall dwindle;
Leap on the fire and burn, for all is done....

*She casts the spindle upon the fire, and
stretches her hands toward it.*

HALLGERD, *attacking them with the distaff.*
 Into the night.... Dissolve....

BIARTEY, *as the three rush toward the door.*

Sisters, away:

Leave the woman to her smouldering beauty,
 Leave the fire that's kinder than the woman,
 Leave the roof-tree ere it falls. It falls.

GUDFINN *joins her. Each time Hallgerd flags they
 turn as they chant, and point at her.*

We shall cry no more in the high rock-places,
 We are gone from the night, the winds and the clouds are empty:
 Soon the man in the West shall receive our message.

JOFRID'S *voice joins the other voices.*

Men reject us, yet their house is unstable....
 The slayers' hands are warm—the sound of their riding
 Reached us down the ages, ever approaching.

HALLGERD, *at the same time, her voice high over theirs.*
 Pack, ye rag-heaps—or I'll unravel you.

THE THREE, *continuously.*

House that spurns us, woe shall come upon you:
 Death shall hollow you. Now we curse the woman—
 May all the woes smite her till she can feel them.
 Shall we not roost in her bower yet? Woe! Woe!

*The distaff breaks, and Hallgerd drives them out
 with her hands. Their voices continue for a
 moment outside, dying away.*

Call to the owl-friends.... Woe! Woe! Woe!

[112]

ASTRID.

Whence came these mounds of dread to haunt the night?
 It doubles this disquiet to have them near us.

ODDNY.

They must be witches—and it was my distaff—
 Will fire eat through me....

STEINVOR.

Or the Norns themselves.

HALLGERD.

Or bad old women used to govern by fear.
 To bed, to bed—we are all up too late.

STEINVOR, *as she turns with ASTRID and ODDNY
 to the daïs.*

If beds are made for sleep we might sit long.
They go out by the daïs door.

GUNNAR, *as he enters hastily from the left.*

Where are those women? There's some secret in them:
 I have heard such others crying down to them.

HALLGERD.

They turned foul-mouthed, they beckoned evil toward us—
 I drove them forth a breath ago.

GUNNAR.

Forth? Whence?

HALLGERD.

By the great door: they cried about the night.

RANNVEIG *follows GUNNAR in.*

GUNNAR.

Nay but I entered there and passed them not.
 Mother, where are the women?

[113]

RANNVEIG.

I saw none come.

GUNNAR.

They have not come, they have gone.

RANNVEIG.

I crossed the yard,

Hearing a noise, but a big bird dropped past,
Beating my eyes; and then the yard was clear.
The deep baying of the hound is heard again.

GUNNAR.
They must be spies: yonder is news of them.
The wise hound knew them, and knew them again.
The baying is succeeded by one wild howl.
Nay, nay!

Men treat thee sorely, Samm my fosterling:
Even by death thou warnest—but it is meant
That our two deaths will not be far apart.

RANNVEIG.
Think you that men are yonder?

GUNNAR. Men are yonder.

RANNVEIG.
My son, my son, get on the rattling war-woof,
The old grey shift of Odin, the hide of steel.
Handle the snake with edges, the fang of the rings.

GUNNAR, *going to the weapons by the high-seat.*
There are not enough moments to get under
That heavy fleece: an iron hat must serve...

[114]

HALLGERD.
O brave! O brave!—he'll dare them with no shield.

GUNNAR, *lifting down the great bill from the wall.*
Let me but reach this haft, I shall get hold
Of steel enough to fence me all about.

*He shakes the bill above his head: a deep
resonant humming follows. The daïs door
is thrown open, and ODDNY, ASTRID, and
STEINVOR stream through in their night-
clothes.*

STEINVOR. The bill!

ODDNY. The bill is singing!

ASTRID. The bill sings!

GUNNAR, *shaking the bill again.*
Ay, brain-biter, waken ... Awake and whisper
Out of the throat of dread thy one brief burden.
Blind art thou, and thy kiss will do no choosing:
Worn art thou to a hair's grey edge, a nothing
That slips through all it finds, seeking more nothing.
There is a time, brain-biter, a time that comes
When there shall be much quietness for thee:
Men will be still about thee. I shall know.
It is not yet: the wind shall hiss at thee first.
Ahui! Leap up, brain-biter; sing again.
Sing! Sing thy verse of anger and feel my hands.

RANNVEIG.
Stand thou, my Gunnar, in the porch to meet them,
And the great door shall keep thy back for thee.

[115]

GUNNAR.
I had a brother there. Brother, where are you....

HALLGERD.
Nay nay. Get thou, my Gunnar, to the loft,
Stand at the casement, watch them how they come.
Arrows maybe could drop on them from there.

RANNVEIG.
'Tis good: the woman's cunning for once is faithful.

GUNNAR, *turning again to the weapons.*
'Tis good, for now I hear a foot that stumbles
Along the stable-roof against the hall.

My bow—where is my bow? Here with its arrows....
Go in again, you women on the daïs,
And listen at the casement of the bower
For men who cross the yard, and for their words.

ASTRID.

O, Gunnar, we shall serve you.

ASTRID, ODDNY, and STEINVOR *go out by the daïs door.*

RANNVEIG. Hallgerd, come;
We must shut fast the door, bar the great door,
Or they'll be in on us and murder him.

HALLGERD.

Not I: I'd rather set the door wide open
And watch my Gunnar kindling at the peril,
Keeping them back—shaming men for ever
Who could not enter at a gaping door.

[116]

RANNVEIG.

Bar the great door, I say, or I will bar it—
Door of the house you rule.... Son, son, command it.

GUNNAR, *as he ascends to the loft.*

O, spendthrift fire, do you waft up again?
Hallgerd, what riot of ruinous chance will sate you?...
Let the door stand, my mother: it is her way.

He looks out of the casement.

Here's a red kirtle on the lower roof.

He thrusts with the bill through the casement.

A MAN'S VOICE, *far off.* Is Gunnar within?

THORGRIM THE EASTERLING'S VOICE, *near the casement.*

Find that out for yourselves:

I am only sure his bill is yet within.

A noise of falling is heard.

GUNNAR.

The Easterling from Sandgil might be dying—
He has gone down the roof, yet no feet helped him.

A shouting of many men is heard: GUNNAR starts back from the casement as several arrows fly in.

Now there are black flies biting before a storm.
I see men gathering beneath the cart-shed:
Gizur the White and Geir the priest are there,
And a lean whispering shape that should be Mord.
I have a sting for some one—

He looses an arrow: a distant cry follows.

Valgard's voice....

A shaft of theirs is lying on the roof:
I'll send it back, for if it should take root
A hurt from their own spent and worthless weapon
Would put a scorn upon their tale for ever.

He leans out for the arrow.

[117]

RANNVEIG.

Do not, my son: rouse them not up again
When they are slackening in their attack.

HALLGERD.

Shoot, shoot it out, and I'll come up to mock them.

GUNNAR, *loosing the arrow.*

Hoia! Swerve down upon them, little hawk.

A shout follows.

Now they run all together round one man:
Now they murmur....

A VOICE.

Close in, lift bows again:

He has no shafts, for this is one of ours.

Arrows fly in at the casement.

GUNNAR.

Wife, here is something in my arm at last:
The head is twisted—I must cut it clear.

STEINVOR *throws open the daïs door and rushes through with a high shriek.*

STEINVOR.

Woman, let us out—help us out—
The burning comes—they are calling out for fire.

She shrieks again. ODDNY and ASTRID, who have come behind her, muffle her head in a kirtle and lift her.

ASTRID, *turning as they bear her out.*

[118]

Fire suffuses only her cloudy brain:
The flare she walks in is on the other side
Of her shot eyes. We heard a passionate voice,
A shrill unwomanish voice that must be Mord,
With "Let us burn him—burn him house and all."
And then a grave and trembling voice replied
"Although my life hung on it, it shall not be."
Again the cunning fanatic voice went on
"I say the house must burn above his head."
And the unlifted voice "Why wilt thou speak
Of what none wishes: it shall never be."

ASTRID and ODDNY disappear with STEINVOR.

GUNNAR.

To fight with honest men is worth much friendship:
I'll strive with them again.

He lifts his bow and loosens arrows at intervals while HALLGERD and RANNVEIG speak.

HALLGERD, in an undertone to RANNVEIG, looking out meanwhile to the left.

Mother, come here—

Come here and hearken. Is there not a foot,
A stealthy step, a fumbling on the latch
Of the great door? They come, they come, old mother:
Are you not blithe and thirsty, knowing they come
And cannot be held back? Watch and be secret,
To feel things pass that cannot be undone.

[119]

RANNVEIG.

It is the latch. Cry out, cry out for Gunnar,
And bring him from the loft.

HALLGERD.

O, never:

For then they'd swarm upon him from the roof.
Leave him up there and he can bay both armies,
While the whole dance goes merrily before us
And we can warm our hearts at such a flare.

RANNVEIG, turning both ways, while HALLGERD watches her gleefully.

Gunnar, my son, my son! What shall I do....

ORMILD enters from the left, white and with her hand to her side, and walking as if she is sick.

HALLGERD.

Bah—here's a bleached assault....

RANNVEIG.

O, lonesome thing,

To be forgot and left in such a night.
What is there now—are terrors surging still?

ORMILD.

I know not what has gone: when the men came
I hid in the far cowhouse. I think I swooned....
And then I followed the shadow. Who is dead?

RANNVEIG.

Go to the bower: the women will care for you.

ORMILD totters up the hall from pillar to pillar.

ASTRID, *entering by the daïs door.*

Now they have found the weather-ropes and lashed them
Over the carven ends of the beams outside:
They bear on them, they tighten them with levers,
And soon they'll tear the high roof off the hall.

[120]

GUNNAR.

Get back and bolt the women into the bower.

ASTRID *takes ORMILD, who has just reached her,
and goes out with her by the dais door,
which closes after them.*

Hallgerd, go in: I shall be here thereafter.

HALLGERD.

I will not stir. Your mother had best go in.

RANNVEIG.

How shall I stir?

VOICES, *outside and gathering volume.*

Ai ... Ai ... Reach harder ... Ai ...

GUNNAR.

Stand clear, stand clear—it moves.

THE VOICES.

It moves ... Ai, ai ...

*The whole roof slides down rumbly,
disappearing with a crash behind the wall
of the house. All is dark above. Fine snow
sifts down now and then to the end of the
play.*

GUNNAR, *handling his bow.*

The wind has changed: 'tis coming on to snow.

The harvesters will hurry in to-morrow.

THORBRAND THORLEIKSSON *appears above the wall-
top a little past GUNNAR, and, reaching
noiselessly with a sword, cuts GUNNAR'S
bowstring.*

GUNNAR, *dropping the bow and seizing his bill.*

[121]

Ay, Thorbrand, is it thou? That 's a rare blade,

To shear through hemp and gut.... Let your wife have it

For snipping needle-yarn; or try it again.

THORBRAND, *raising his sword.*

I must be getting back ere the snow thickens:

So here's my message to the end—or farther.

Gunnar, this night it is time to start your journey

And get you out of Iceland....

GUNNAR, *thrusting at THORBRAND with the bill.*

I think it is:

So you shall go before me in the dark.

Wait for me when you find a quiet shelter.

THORBRAND *sinks backward from the wall and is
heard to fall farther. Immediately ASBRAND*

THORLEIKSSON starts up in his place.

ASBRAND, *striking repeatedly with a sword.*

O, down, down, down!

GUNNAR, *parrying the blows with the bill.*

Ay, Asbrand, thou as well?

Thy brother Thorbrand was up here but now:

He has gone back the other way, maybe—

Be hasty, or you'll not come up with him.

*He thrusts with the bill: ASBRAND lifts a shield
before the blow.*

Here's the first shield that I have seen to-night.

*The bill pierces the shield: ASBRAND disappears
and is heard to fall. GUNNAR turns from the
casement.*

Hallgerd, my harp that had but one long string,

[122]

But one low song, but one brief wingy flight,

Is voiceless, for my bowstring is cut off.

Sever two locks of hair for my sake now,

Spoil those bright coils of power, give me your hair,

And with my mother twist those locks together

Into a bowstring for me. Fierce small head,

Thy stinging tresses shall scourge men forth by me.

HALLGERD.
Does ought lie on it?

GUNNAR. Nought but my life lies on it;
For they will never dare to close on me
If I can keep my bow bended and singing.

HALLGERD, *tossing back her hair.*
Then now I call to your mind that bygone blow
You gave my face; and never a whit do I care
If you hold out a long time or a short.

GUNNAR.
Every man who has trod a war-ship's deck,
And borne a weapon of pride, has a proud heart
And asks not twice for any little thing.
Hallgerd, I'll ask no more from you, no more.

RANNVEIG, *tearing off her wimple.*
She will not mar her honour of widowhood.
O, widows' manes are priceless.... Off, mean wimple—
I am a finished widow, why do you hide me?
Son, son who knew my bosom before hers, [123]
Look down and curse for an unreverend thing
An old bald woman who is no use at last.
These bleachy threads, these tufts of death's first combing,
And loosening heart-strings twisted up together
Would not make half a bowstring. Son, forgive me....

GUNNAR.
A grasping woman's gold upon her head
Is made for hoarding, like all other gold:
A spendthrift woman's gold upon her head
Is made for spending on herself. Let be—
She goes her heart's way, and I go to earth.
AUNUND'S *head rises above the wall near GUNNAR.*
What, are you there?

AUNUND. Yes, Gunnar, we are here.

GUNNAR, *thrusting with the bill.*
Then bide you there.
AUNUND'S *head sinks: THORGEIR'S rises in the same place.*
How many heads have you?

THORGEIR.
But half as many as the feet we grow on.

GUNNAR.
And I've not yet used up (*thrusting again*) all my hands.
As he thrusts another man rises a little farther
back, and leaps past him into the loft.
Others follow, and GUNNAR is soon [124]
surrounded by many armed men, so that
only the rising and falling of his bill is
seen.

The threshing-floor is full.... Up, up, brain-biter!
We work too late to-night—up, open the husks.

O, smite and pulse
On their anvil heads:
The smithy is full,
There are shoes to be made
For the hoofs of the steeds
Of the Valkyr girls....

FIRST MAN.
Hack through the shaft....

SECOND MAN.
Receive the blade
In the breast of a shield,
And wrench it round....

GUNNAR.

For the hoofs of the steeds
Of the Valkyr girls
Who race up the night
To be first at our feast,
First in the play
With immortal spears
In deadly holes....

THIRD MAN.

Try at his back....

MANY VOICES, *shouting in confusion.*

Have him down.... Heels on the bill.... Ahui, ahui....
The bill does not rise.

HROALD, *with the breaking voice of a young man,*
high over all.

Father.... It is my blow.... It is I who kill him....

The crowd parts, suddenly silent, showing
GUNNAR fallen.

RANNVEIG *covers her face with her hands.*

HALLGERD, *laughing as she leans forward and holds her breasts in her*
hands.

O, clear sweet laughter of my heart, flow out!
It is so mighty and beautiful and blithe
To watch a man dying—to hover and watch.

RANNVEIG.

Cease: are you not immortal in shame already?

HALLGERD.

Heroes, what deeds ye compass, what great deeds—
One man has held ye from an open door:
Heroes, heroes, are ye undefeated?

GIZUR, *an old white-bearded man, to the other riders.*

We have laid low to earth a mighty chief:
We have laboured harder than on greater deeds,
And maybe won remembrance by the deeds
Of Gunnar when no deed of ours should live;
For this defence of his shall outlast kingdoms
And gather him fame till there are no more men.

MORD.

Come down and splinter those old birds his gods
That perch upon the carven high-seat pillars;
Wreck every place his shadow fell upon,
Rive out his gear, drive off his forfeit beasts.

[126]

SECOND MAN.

It shall not be.

MANY MEN. Never.

GIZUR.

We'll never do it:

Let no man lift a blade or finger a clout—
Is not this Gunnar, Gunnar, whom we have slain?
Home, home, before the dawn shows all our deed.

The riders go down quickly over the wall-top,
and disappear.

HALLGERD.

Now I shall close his nostrils and his eyes,
And thereby take his blood-feud into my hands.

RANNVEIG.

If you do stir I'll choke you with your hair.
I will not let your murderous mind be near him
When he no more can choose and does not know.

HALLGERD.

His wife I was, and yet he never judged me:
He did not set your motherhood between us.
Let me alone—I stand here for my sons.

RANNVEIG.
The wolf, the carrion bird, and the fair woman
Hurry upon a corpse, as if they think
That all is left for them the grey gods need not.

*She twines her hands in HALLGERD's hair and
draws her down to the floor.*

O, I will comb your hair with bones and thumbs,
Array these locks in my right widow's way,
And deck you like the bed-mate of the dead.
Lie down upon the earth as Gunnar lies,
Or I can never match him in your looks
And whiten you and make your heart as cold.

[127]

HALLGERD.
Mother, what will you do? Unloose me now—
Your eyes would not look so at me alone.

RANNVEIG.
Be still, my daughter....

HALLGERD. And then?

RANNVEIG. Ah, do not fear—
I see a peril nigh and all its blitheness.
Order your limbs—stretch out your length of beauty,
Let down your hands and close those deepening eyes,
Or you can never stiffen as you should.
A murdered man should have a murdered wife
When all his fate is treasured in her mouth.
This wifely hair-pin will be sharp enough.

*HALLGERD, starting up as RANNVEIG half loosens
her to take a hair-pin from her own head.*

She is mad, mad.... O, the bower is barred—
Hallgerd, come out, let mountains cover you....
She rushes out to the left.

RANNVEIG, *following her.*
The night take you indeed....

GIZUR enters from the left.

[128]

GIZUR. Ay, drive her out;
For no man's house was ever better by her.

RANNVEIG.
Is an old woman's life desired as well?

GIZUR.
We ask that you will grant us earth hereby
Of Gunnar's earth, for two men dead to-night
To lie beneath a cairn that we shall raise.

RANNVEIG.
Only for two? Take it: ask more of me.
I wish the measure were for all of you.

GIZUR.
Your words must be forgiven you, old mother,
For none has had a greater loss than yours.
Why would he set himself against us all....
He goes out.

RANNVEIG.
Gunnar, my son, we are alone again.
*She goes up the hall, mounts to the loft and
stoops beside him.*

O, they have hurt you ... but that is forgot.
Boy, it is bedtime; though I am too changed,
And cannot lift you up and lay you in,
You shall go warm to bed—I'll put you there.
There is no comfort in my breast to-night:
But close your eyes beneath my fingers' touch,
Slip your feet down, and let me smooth your hands;
Then sleep and sleep. Ay, all the world 's asleep;
But some will waken. *She rises.*
You had a rare toy when you were awake—

[129]

I'll wipe it with my hair ... Nay, keep it so,
The colour on it now has gladdened you.
It shall lie near you.

She raises the bill: the deep hum follows.

No; it remembers him,

And other men shall fall by it through Gunnar:
The bill, the bill is singing.... The bill sings!

She kisses the weapon, then shakes it on high.

CURTAIN.

MIDSUMMER EVE

[131]

TO CLINTON BALMER
AND THE DEAR MEMORY OF
JAMES HAMILTON HAY
FOR THE SUMMER OF 1900
AT CARTMEL

[132]

IN the lost Valley all is still
To-day: upon the stony hill
The heat of the late afternoon
Settles in coppery haze: and soon
A voice not known to me will call
Silent obedient cows to stall,
In the same immemorial cry
From century to century
Changing but by the uttering voice.
And in a while a little noise
(Hou! Hou!) far off near Newton Head
Will tell that at another stead
The browsing cattle pause and turn
Unwilling heads to seem to learn
That which they know, and move in train
Now milking-time has come again.

In Well Knowe garden now, I know,
Where the pale larkspur used to grow
In the far nook, a sound is heard
(If any is there to hear save bird
And field-mouse in the strawberries
Stirring like a local breeze—
Here, there—the low leaves soundlessly);
A glistening slender wasp-like fly
Is using will and wing to stand
Upon the air as though it spanned
A chasm with trembling outstretched arms,
And in the silence of heat-stilled farms
And heat-veiled wood that seems to shake
Dim clotted leaves yet does not break
By sigh or rustle the hush so dear
Its tiny sting of sound sings clear.

[133]

Oft have I heard that elfin horn
Sound suddenly, as cobweb torn
Must sound in startled elfin ears
Pricked and on edge with elfin fears;
And as I upward watched those spare
Twin shreds of silver like slit air,
Beating and shining, straight and tense,
Simulating impotence
Of motion, enviously I thought
"Had my half useless flesh been caught,
Upborn, and for all limit bound
Between such gossamers of sound,
Not thus, not thus would I deny
My spirit's reach and endlessly
Use all conception and all force

*To limit my short vital course.
Had I such wings of urgent light
Insistent not alone on height
But stretched for sweep and latitude
I would not evade flight, I would
Employ my heat and power and sense
In realising difference,
And see my world's variety,
Restricted but by energy."*

*But Well Knowe garden only shines
In memory now, and its dear signs
Only persist and gleam again
In a shut chamber of my brain:
While in a distant place I brood
Upon lost things, and in a mood
Of longing and remembrance feel
The wisdom of that immobile
And senseless mote, and think "Were I
Carnate in a slim glistening fly,
I would flash back upon that fair
Laurel-walled rood, then drop in air
Till no translucent nerve should stir
From strained precision, nor wing should whirl
But to maintain one changeless height,
Nor move nor waver from that sight;
And think the years have not gone by
When James and Clinton harboured nigh
And, working in another art
Than mine, yet peopled for my heart
The Valley with the very core
Of vital beauty for evermore—
So that when the air is still
I hear below the meadow-rill
Clinton singing softer still
Entranced by his own moving brush
Among the stream-side bracken and rush—
Or James repeats with his long hand
The distant line of hills that stand
Between the Valley and the lake
And yet seem lovelier for his sake."*

[134]

*How many generations past
Should I be dead had I been cast
In that small rapid shape of light?
Though wings may stand, years move in flight;
And, while I dream, I know, I know
That it is useless I should go
To Well Knowe garden again to see
Things that cannot return to me—
James dead and Clinton gone away,
And one whose name I cannot say
Who built in Cyclopean sound
Other magic heights around
That little place, then turned apart,
Untrue to friendship and to art,
A man of nothing—vanished things,
Dead friends, dead hopes, that must remain
In a shut chamber of my brain;
While only Clinton far away
Will in these verses and this play
See that country of our youth
And our dead friend and our old troth
Of friendship fixed in amber light,
A timeless hour that holds no night.*

[135]

Summer 1921—Spring 1922.

PERSONS:

NAN }
BET }
URSEL } Kitchen and Dairy Girls.

[136]

MAUDLIN }
LIB }
ROGER, a Carter.
MEASE, a Cowherd.

MIDSUMMER EVE

[137]

The scene is the interior of an old barn on a knoll, a long time ago. At the back the barn's doors are opened widely; outside, a road rises slightly from left to right in front of the barn; beyond this the knoll sinks softly yet swiftly to a great meadow, and thence to a wide rich valley of more meadows and ever more meadows with ancient large cherry and crab and sloe and bullace and damson trees in their hedges whence the white and pink thorn-blossom clots are not quite gone, and of pastures shaded by tall clustering trees. Afar the valley ceases in low, densely wooded hills.

A late June twilight is deepening; a faint moist heat-haze hides nothing, only distinguishing the planes of the distant trees with a cloudy delicacy. There is no wind, nor any movement; one blackbird sings somewhere for a little while, then it ceases and there is no sound in the fields.

The whole prospect is of a solitary, fruitfully overgrown valley shut in from everywhere.

Within the barn, to the left, is a high hay-mow with a ladder leaning against it; much hay has been tumbled at its foot in forking from the carts. To the right is a space of floor where the corn is to be heaped in the ending of summer: as yet, however, it is empty, save for a wooden plough, a homely rough wooden roller, wooden harrows, an uptilted, pleasantly shaped cart whence the hay-shelvings have not yet been removed. In the far corner of the bare walls of undressed stone at this side is an open door leading into a mistal. Presently a cow is heard moaning sickly beyond this door.

[138]

The barn is still more dim than the land, so that a stretch of soft brown darkness is all that is known of the far-off roof. Nearing footfalls are heard in the road, and a woman's singing grows clearer.

"**H**OU, Hou," went the neatherd moaning
Down along by the pasture's side;
He turned the cows at the midden-yard loaning,
The loitering cows in the brown owl-tide:
Pale rose the last one, munching, droning,
With wet grass stains on her udder and hide.

My lantern's rings to the low balks floated
As Whitey's tail shook the mistal-sneck;
When I laid my cheek to her belly spotted
I felt her honey-strong breath i' my neck,
For she turns her head does the curd-dark throated
To watch my mouth start her teats with a peck.

NAN, BET *and* URSEL *ascend the road to the left
and enter the barn as NAN ceases singing.
They are white-hooded, clumsily shod, gownless;
in the right hand NAN carries a willow
frail, the others stoneware greybeards;
each holds several hay-rakes on her left
shoulder.*

URSEL.
September, O, September's in the song—
I will not have September in my heart,
The ending of so much deliciousness,
The year's sad luscious over-ripening.
Yet here's the haysel done with: how it hurt
To rake behind the last dim cart; and now
My soul creeps in me like the low pale night-mist
To know that in a moment past this moment
We shall not hear it slowly any more
Down in the lane where, wisping the close trees,
It follows us like a mournful sound of change.
Although the Summer is but newly kindled,
Tiptoe I over-reach the joy of it
(Ah, little perfect weeks of fruitfulness)
Because I tremble lest it be slipping past me
Before my eagerness will let me feel it.
Must joy for me be ever in things gone?...

[139]

NAN, *as they set down their burdens to lean the rakes against the wall,
where four flails are hung, on the left of the door.*

Nay, there is comfort in the rainy nights,
The long moist twilights of the cider time
When girls hold fitful talk sat in the press-spot
Among the hid sweet apple heaps that gleam
In firelight to a humming out of doors
Of soddening water oozing down the soil;
And there is comfort too at Candlemas
From looking through the casement in the dark,
The last thing ere you chafe your toes in bed,
On the crisp quiet of the woods and fields,
Wondering if 'tis snow or all the moonlight,
Peering so anxiously along the wall
That shades still ewes and whiter first-dropped lambs....
Ay, but I'm tired, lasses, tired now
Because the haysel's over and 'twas fair
And the land's savour wears me with delight.
I'm for indoors and resting—and, beside,
I'm faintest of my supper o' baking days.

[140]

BET.
Let all times slip to haste the barley week,
For then our nearest dancing-time will ripen ...
But I'm for bed to get me doffed and stripped
To pick much grass seed from my smock and coats.

URSEL.
Listen, Bet; no cool sheets are yours to-night.
The milk-eyed goodies with grey loose-skinned throats,
Who maunder of rarer girlhoods none can prove,
Tell that at midnight on Midsummer-Eves
They waked in some lone shade far from all sleepers
To feel which should be wedded within the year;
For the year's unknown husbands' images
Come then like swoons from some where ... ay, from some where....
Thoughts shaping for their women's heedless souls,
And if a maid will watch she sees her own
And knows her own, seeing her own alone,
Peering unseen as breath is in June nights.
Surely such dainties rilled no cow-slow eyes;
But Nan and I mean watching and have bid
Maudlin at Grassgarth, Lib at Appletoft
Under our breath, and hither they steal this eve.
We knew we must not tell you ere the hour,
Or ... or ... too many hinds might creep to be
Their own drowsed leering loutish prophecies.

[141]

BET.
Am I so old or wistful to be ringed
That I must feign to be content with one?
Where is this moon-swayed peeping, then, to be,
This blest eavesdropping on a mood of fate?

NAN.
Here in the barn, where we may crouch un-thought-of
By moon-estranged eyes in gradual darkness.
And lest we startle at o'er-expected footfalls
Or with night-carried voices rouse the farm,
Maudlin and Lib will warn us by dove-cooings—
Sometimes I hear a cooing up warm nights
From dove pairs far too wise to be asleep,
But mistress bides awake for no such music.

BET.
Dove-cooing Lib will be a thing to brood on—
I'll miss nought here, although you count me least.

NAN.
All works with us; for at the forenoon drinking
I heard dame Stir-Wench mutter "These kesh-pithed lasses
Shall sleep no longer three-a-bed beneath
The dark damp closeness of the garret thatch,
That nigh their heads leans low upon the floor,

flapping hats, knee-breeches and ribbed stockings, accompany it, ROGER leading the horse, MEASE holding to the shelvings behind with one hand and with the other slanting several hay-forks and a scythe against his shoulder.

URSEL, *continuing*. What, Roger, Mease....
Why bring you not the cart and top the mow,
To feel in each limb's ebb hay harvest's spent?

ROGER, *halting*.
As we trailed up from Pear-tree Dale past Sheep-mires
Under a thick dew-breath we seemed to steal
As 'tween chill bed-clothes in December nights;
Into the load it soaked two fingers' length,
So now we needs must throw it off and spread it
To wait to-morrow's sun out in the yard
Ere it is ripe to top the sweating stack.

MEASE.
Moreover, we are wetter than the crop;
Wherefore be homing, russet-apple-faces,
To take our smocks and dry them off while we
Drink the mulled cider you are going to make.

ROGER *and* MEASE *go forward with the horse and* [145]
cart up the road to the right.

URSEL.
Come, maids, we'd best get in ere mistress seeks us—
Beside, the longer we do loiter here
The longer shall we hold the house from sleep;
There's bowl and bucket rinsing to be done,
And supper to set out if we would eat it.
Be neither meek nor eager in your toil,
Or Mother Dish-Clout in our gust will read
Some deed afoot; we'll wrangle sluggishly
Until she drives us off to bed unwashed.
Then, though we hear the lock shoot and her steps
Sink down the out-stair as she dips the key
Down the long pocket of her petticoat,
Do nought but cast your shoes—there's but one wall
Between her chamber and the granary—
Lie dim along the bed, and never whisper;
But, when we hear her bed-stocks creak and know
Her ears are well tied up beneath her night-cap,
Out slip Bet's staple and ourselves as well.
Seek the pale hollyhocks across the garden
(They glimmer a little in all Summer darkness),
And touch behind the hive-house shadow-hung....

NAN.
And in the barn make happiness till dawn.

BET.
Dare we lie still, inside the dark, and wait
In such suppression for such unknown things?

As BET *speaks they leave the barn to the right;* [146]
NAN *resumes her song faintly and more*
faintly.

NAN.
Dusked seemed the eve as the cows trod in
Under the roof-drip each to her stalling;
Full udders crusht shagged thighs between
Were warm to my hands in the chill air's palling;
And through the wind's drifting of leaves yet green
"Hou, hou," neared the neatherd's calling....

The song ceases in the distance.

ROGER *turns into the barn with MEASE's bundle of*
hay-forks, and lays them in the empty cart
as he sings.

I get no sleep in lambing nights,
My woman gets no sleep;
We fold the ewes if we sniff a thaw,
And when they yeane as we crouch i' their straw

She takes the lambs by our horn-fogged lights
While I do handle the sheep.
Footsteps are heard within the neat-house.

ROGER, *calling through the neat-house door.*
Is the sick beast grown easier by now?

MEASE, *entering from the neat-house.*
Poor Dapple-Back, milk fever's bad on her.
'Twas her first calf and though 'twas smoothly dropped
She could not gather, but heaped a shapeless flank
Like a maid swooning; when the farrier came
"She'll die, she'll die," he said. "She'll not," said I:
But nothing served at first—her slackened fell
Dried hard and never any sweat would stir,
The udder turned a dull and shivering white;
Yet now her ears twitch up to greet my voice,
The hide-hair moistens and the udder shrinks.
There'll be no need to wake with her to-night—
I'll not unwrap her till an hour ere dawn.
Come through and look at her as we wend in....
When you got up the cider for the meadows
Was there a butt still left?

[147]

ROGER, *as they go into the mistal together.*
Surely there was;
But the girls say she'll make it wait till harvest.
I never hired to any stead before
Where last year's cider trickled into June....

*All is soundless again save for the cow's
moaning. The twilight deepens no farther,
and presently its dead gold brownness
becomes cooler in tone; the mist, which
had been merged in the nightfall's
dimness, imperceptibly becomes apparent
again, being suffused by an oozing of
silveriness through the pervading
brownness; moon-rise is evident, although
the moon is hidden by the permeating mist
which it fills. Perhaps a crying of bats is
heard, but this is not certain. An owl cries
somewhere—probably from one of the
gable-holes, for it sounds both inside and
outside at once; after many tentative Tu-
whits it launches a full Tu-whoop and
swings out far and low across the valley: a
chirping of frogs begins in the nearest
ditches.*

*A closer sound stills all these, being evidently
that of a woman's voice feigning dove-
notes; it ceases, light cautious hurried
steps are heard; it sounds again, Maudlin
slips round the door corner to the left and
enters the barn. She is white-capped, her
gown skirt is bunched about her waist, her
bodice sleeves are turned back beyond her
elbows.*

[148]

MAUDLIN.
Nan ... Ursel ... Nan ... Lib ... Appletoft Lib, hast come?
There 's no one here—I wish they might forget
And sleep, and let me feel a little lonely.
I need much loneliness wherein to suckle
The sadness that alone can bring content:
I am too burdened by long laughing days,
And as I wavered through this solemn vapour
Of the worn earth, the comfort-smelling earth,
Where unexpected trees rose wearily
And sank again like ashen-bosomed sighs,
I felt a new, delighting mournfulness
That made me know where I am sensitive
To the deep things of life; even the late Maybloom,
That stays the tiring Spring in this strange valley,
Loses its too self-conscious hope to-night—
The pink would fain be white, and the spent white

Still fog and sink to the moon and make an end.
I must be much alone in sorrowful nights.
I should have ease if Summer would but go,
Its green-lit glory fail; I am so eager
For overgrown too-mellowness loth to pass,
For dripping trees o'er soft decaying grass,
Bare orchards and shorn meadows and stripped gardens,
Brown cloudy woods that drooping mists make taller
About washed fields and muffled hills, subduing
All to a low remote romance and charm....
Yet soon with other maids I may behold
A change that comes to snirp these buds in me....

[149]

*She lays herself on her back among the tumbled
hay; soon she sings in a low voice.*

Fetch the porridge pot hither to me,
The porridge pot and the dairy key,
And bring me a clout to wind my hair
Or the swarming bees will tangle there:
They drip from the hive in the orchard long,
And coil the green-cherried boughs among
As they follow the tanking tune I ring
Under the cherry leaves' shivering....
They settle, they knit—come Ailce with the skep—
Step along, Mistyhead—Smearycap, step—
Steady it while I draw the bough
Warily down and shake it.... Now....

After a little silence she resumes.

The maids went down to dip in the pool
When the mirrored moon had cooled the water;
But they never told the farmer's daughter,
For they knew she would tell her mother, the fool,
That the girls were out
And awaking the water,
With never a clout
Though the night was cool.

She hums the latter melody a little while.

*Without premonition URSEL, NAN and BET enter
singly and noiselessly from the right, each
holding a hand of the one before her. They
are hoodless, white-capped, and
barelegged now.*

[150]

URSEL, *in a low voice.*

I bade them hide until we came.... Lib ... Maudlin....

MAUDLIN, *sitting up.*

Lib is not here: there's no one nigh at all;
And in the lanes nought moves but squirrel whifts,
Save that long gazing into the green darkness
Seems to show boles half stirred by creeping light
Amid the darker dark of trees impending.

BET.

Was it not Lib who was dew-drenched last harvest,
Hid in a wheat stook till she fell asleep?

NAN, *as they all seat themselves by MAUDLIN.*

Could any watch you as you slipped away?

MAUDLIN.

Our lambs and three fat beasts must take the road
Ere dawn to reach the morrow's far-off fair;
So I said I would sleep along the settle
And set the hinds their drinking ere they trudge.
None smelt me, but I must start home by three....
What is the moaning through that little door?

URSEL, *in alarm.*

I had forgot the beast; will Mease sleep with her?

[151]

NAN.

When I came in to milk soon after seven
He said the deathly loosening was pinched
And we should keep her without more sitting up....
Yet—the other cows pushed in and nosed her

As cows will do to helpless dying things....

To MAUDLIN.

A heifer has milk fever.

MAUDLIN, *rising eagerly*. Let me look—
I have not touched milk fever once, nor seen it;
I want to know what sense it can be like,
I am made to know with what sick thought it takes them,
To watch it wane and learn to handle it.
Ah, let me feel her, Nan, dear Nannie....

NAN. Nay.
The neat-house door is open on her stall
And hints the pool out in the yard beyond
Dreaming a dew-dull wash of unborn moonlight
In darkness sinkingly close as a bat's coat,
And the large stillness of her weary eyes
Might image that ... although we should not see her....

MAUDLIN.
I know, I know.... But we can shut our eyes—
Nay, fear would lift them—let us enter blindfold;
My fingers know just what they ought to do.

BET.
Nay, she might die ... I saw a cow die once:
She tried to turn her head across her shoulder
And looked at me as if 'twas all my doing,
Then laid it down again with a straight throat ...
I fear for that old wrong I never did....

A deep-voiced woman is heard making low dove-sounds.

Comes Lib....

They rise to meet the newcomer, but draw back half in laughter, half in uneasy amazement as she appears to the left. She is stockinged and shod, but her topmost apparel is nightgown and nightcap.

BET, *continuing*.

Lib ... Lib ... is she asleep or dead?

LIB, *entering the barn*.

Do I not seem the shadow of a husband?
Am I too late? I could not choose my coming:
'Tis churning day to-morrow, and nought would serve
The old one but that we must scald the churn
And wipe the cream-pots' lips and set them nigh
Before we slept—she was so cross because
One cow had broken, one cast before its time,
Some hens had laid away, farmer had blamed her
For standing over us to make us strip
The cows too hard; so she was queer with us.
That kept us late from bed, and when at last
Our fallen skirts were cooling on the floor
I had to lay me down beside Ruth
Until she slept; for Candle-Face tells tales—
'Twas she who lost us the low garden-chamber
Where hang the dry sweet herbs, and earned instead
One with a lattice up against the stars,
By peaching of my clambering through the casement
'Mid dropping plums that night I went somewhere;
But when I heard her wet mouth on the pillow
I left her, stuffed my coats within my arm
And out along the landing. As I neared
The old one's chamber-door a warped board chirped,
My limbs went loose and motionless with fear;
On I slid again and down the stairs,
And in the kitchen found I had no raiment.
I dared not grope for it nor make a light;
So two unmended stockings on the settle,
My shoes upon the hearth, were all I had:
But in the warm night it was comforting
To feel myself half indistinguishable
From the grey, stirless oats I stood among,
Or the evasive gleams and thinner places

[152]

[153]

Of mist-lit woodlands, or from slim birch boles;
And when a woman met me by the brook
I was so pale and slow she ran from me.

*The others laugh as they lead her to crouch with
them in the hay.*

Why is there moaning through that little door?

NAN.

A heifer has milk fever. *There is a silence.*

LIB, *in a low voice.* Women have that....

Why are we thankful for a deal of trouble?...

My sister Jen was pleased and proud with herself;

And when her second obedience came to her

She was well eased—but goody Slippy-Stockings,

Who went for wisdom-dame, bore the hot jug

Too brimmed when it was time to draw the milk....

They had to dry the milk, and it, being eager,

Went the wrong way and oozed into her head:

The little one died so soon. She lay there

Sooing the oldest milking-croon of all—

"Baby calf-lips nuzzle not nigh you,

'Tis my fingers firm that try you Knowingly;

Patch-Eye, Teaty, I'll not wry you,

Let your warm milk down to me...."

Then she would wear her wedding gown all night,

And in the orchard we could hear her sing

Mall, go, gather a Posy—Lasses turn Grey—

Wander, Wonder—and, Peg was clouting her Nightcaps;

She sank heavily to uneasy stillness,

Then moored a baby-noise; till, the fourth dawn,

She hollowed her arms gently across her body,

"Cold, cold," she said, and then "Cover us up"....

And she grew colder....

MAUDLIN. Much strangeness comes in it:

I've wondered what there is in me to gather

So secretly, why life can leak such whiteness,

And if we feel it change, and how in it

We sow hid things that never were in us—

Can it be that our thoughts go into it,

And all we feel and see must alter it

From white to white that seems but white to us?

I knew a woman and her daughter once

Who went together.... The young one's died; she cried,

O she did cry, until the mother said

"Here, lass, have mine; I know, and you shall know."

Girls, she did that quite calmly: ere he would take,

Mab had to cover his eyes with a warm cloth,

And even o' nights to wear her mother's clothes.

'Tis grave to suckle across the brood like that—

It threads the mind....

BET. Mothering, mothering, mothering—

Cannot we find our lives except that way?

*The moon seems to be high over the mist now,
for there is light everywhere outside; so
that, on peering into the night, it is with
surprise all is found obscure and not easily
definable or detachable amid the faint
daze of light that feigns to illumine the
valley. The women have become only
black shapes upon the square litten patch
which is the doorway surrounded by the
blackness of the barn. A dog howls
somewhere far away.*

LIB.

That dog sounds from some low-set roadside farm;

What does it hear? *There is a short silence.*

MAUDLIN. Women, what does it see?

They say dogs howl when someone's fetch goes by.

LIB.

Mayhap it is the husband-shapes a-coming.

[154]

[155]

[156]

NAN.

We shall see nought but what is in our thoughts.
Yet I'd be very fain to see my man....
When Gib at Hornbeam-Shallows lost his wife
He had to hire a wench for the first time
And at next Martimas hiring came to me
And offered me four pounds for the half year,
Saying he'd give me his wife's milking coats
To make it up, ay, and her two best shawls,
One darned across the neck-place, one loom-new;
I told him I would liefer have her shoes—
That frightened him so well he stammered off.
But Sib had heard; she drew him with her eyes,
And said she'd go for three pounds and the shawls
If he would let her use a gown sometimes.
Then at each hiring she stayed on for less,
Till in the third year's end he wedded her;
And so she's gotten shawls and shoes as well.
I missed a savoury chance, for he is old
And childless; both stock and land are his:
Ay, if I had gone quietly to him
Ere now I might have had him for myself.

BET.

I should not wait three years for any man....
When Sib would hire a lass Gib said his other
Had done without for seven and thirty years,
And he had ringed her but to save her wage:
At first he sent the hind to milk for her,
But stopped him soon, saying that men's hands
Made cow-teats horny; then at Whitsun hiring
He let him go, grutching it was waste
With such a goodly woman in the yard;
So now she has to herd and fork and winnow,
To drive the cart and take a side of thatch.... [157]
Gib says young wives are better worth their fodder
Than worn ones. Truly she has a gown sometimes,
For she goes ever in an old woman's wear—
He says the other's gear will last her days.
Nan must surely see more than that to-night.

LIB.

Ah, but Sib knows him: he does so fondle her;
He lets her hair down every eve to spread it
And feel the pleasure of the comb's sleek goings,
Bidding her "Stand over" as when a cow
Rubs up against the boust at milking-time;
While, when they gleaned their harvest fields by moonlight
To stint the widows, he would bend down as she
Bobbed up a mouth all blackberry-stains to kiss ...
Before she is fit for kitchen toil again
He will so wonder how she has grown the mistress....
BET laughs.

URSEL, *shivering.*

Hush, do not laugh; it creeps up in the roof,
And drips on us again like the thick water
Through the black pulpy thatch-leak in November....
That laugh sounded as lonely as one flail....
There is a silence.

MAUDLIN.

The heifer ceased to moan a moment past—
It seems as if it holds its breath to listen....
There is a long silence.

BET.

I need to speak, but what I have forgotten.... [158]

URSEL.

Lass, do not make us speak, or we may miss it....

MAUDLIN.

O, do not speak to us, or we may miss it....

LIB.
We could not hear you for this listening....

NAN.
I look so deeply that I cannot see...
I cannot listen for it for listening....

*There is a long silence which pulses slowly with
half-caught heavy breaths and slight
restless rustlings of the hay in which the
women seem motionless.*

BET.
Do I feel something? Do we feel something growing?...

*Quiet steps are heard to shift the lane's pebbles.
The women look sharply at each other,
start soundlessly to their feet and lean
toward the door; they move forward half
eagerly, yet each seeks to put the others
before her, so that as they near the door
> NAN poises unwillingly foremost; when the
light catches their faces they seem about
to laugh.*

NAN.
Nay, I'll not meet it—perhaps it is not mine ...
I will not know aforetime to despoil
The gradual joy of waking to a man—
I will not lose one feeling of dear change,
Or slur it by being conscious of the next....
Yet even then love should be marvellous
As the surprise of secret lights expected ...
O, if I meet some one I do not want....
Come, maids, join hands and let us go together—
Still, we might make too sure....

*When NAN is across the threshold the others
huddle back. The steps come nearer. In
the road beyond NAN a woman appears
quietly from the left; so far as it is possible
to see, her features and array are the
counterpart of NAN's.*

NAN, *continuing*. Hey, here 's a woman ...
Lib, did you tell the slatterns at Cherry-Close mill?
Nay, 'tis some rag-bag sleeper under hedges....

BET, *in an undertone of wonder*.
Why are their coats alike?

NAN, *turning her head and calling*.

Ursel, Ursel,
She's from the farm—our granary has been searched;
For see, she wears my old plum petticoat—
Come, let us strip her and pen her in a sty ...
But ... I have on my old plum petticoat ...
And how can she come from the farm when she goes to the farm?...

LIB, *hastily and below her breath*.
Fetches and wraiths ... fetches and wraiths ... fetches and wraiths ...
Peering about her.
Is there no way from here?

MAUDLIN, *under her breath*.

My mother's grandmam
Saw her own fetch a week before she died....

BET, *in a low tone*.
Come through the neat-house ere we too see ours—
Ursel, come ... come....

URSEL, *in a hushed voice*.

If all your days are used
Your fetch can meet you at the neat-house door—
Ah, stay, for Nan will need us when ... that goes....

BET, LIB, and MAUDLIN *hurry and crowd into the
mistal unheedingly. Meanwhile the woman
has passed from left to right along the
road, turning always to NAN and holding*

[159]

[160]

out her arms to her.
NAN, *leaning out toward her with her hands pressed over her heart.*
Her unapparent features make me feel
How others must feel my face.... The droop of her skirt
Is creeping on my hips.... I have watched my feet
Draw sideways so.... Her shadow is long like mine
About the bosom ... I wish I could touch her hair—
I know so well the tingle and smell of my hair ...
Is this a fetch?

*She reaches forward as if she would follow, until*¹⁶¹
she is in the middle of the road; the
woman passes from, sight to the right.
NAN's body loosens; she turns confusedly
to the barn and sees URSEL's face pale in
the shade.

NAN, *continuing.* O, Ursly, where have I gone?
I have lost myself, for I was here but now....

She remembers and shakes.

Dear soul, what did you see?

URSEL, *taking her in her arms.*

I saw what you saw.

NAN.
Was it my fetch?

URSEL. I think it was a fetch.

NAN, *numbly.*
I must be going to die.... I cannot feel so ...
There's nought I want to do when I am dead ...

She is silent a moment, then seems startled into
sobbing.

O, Ursel, Ursel, I cannot let me die....

URSEL.
Folk say a fetch is seen at its departing
From a cold house whence it shall lead a soul;
But this comes like a child-birth closing in,
And so perchance it does but signify
The consciousness of death that breaks in all.
We stand outside the process of the earth
And watch it as immortals; and consider
Death, which we think a deeply moving thing
(Observing eagerly its fine emotions,
The impressive strangeness of its mean romance,
Its strong-tanged character and accidents,
And all the keen new chances it affords
For sympathy and for imagination),
But think not to connect it with ourselves—
So sure we are all's possible to us.
Then a near comprehension that is love
Of trees or sheep, songs or some man or woman,
Shakes us one day and nothing is the same,
Because we grow aware that we must leave
The very joy that lights ourselves for us
And shows where we may greatness for its sake.
'Tis life's beginning; we perceive the earth
And go down into it and nestle to it
Defeatedly before its larger thought:
Numbly we measure ourselves by all we see,
We feel uneasily yet willingly
Each thing that happens may happen to us too,
And we are cheated by each grief unsuffered—
Yea, ever we interrogate decay
To know our own duration; we must touch
Each lovesome thing lest it or we should fade,
Until the searching quiver of contact reaches
And makes us conscious where we can be lovesome;
We find ourselves in others and thus learn
How others are in us, and so we creep
To large experiences we could not think—
Effectual perfection of ripe life;
The earth and all the darling ways of it
Are ours by love, for all that we must leave

Comes into us and makes us live it swiftly
Lest we should miss some thing. So that one love
Insists that every love in earth shall feed it,
To keep it from the unsafety of ignorance
And let our brief days yield their sweetness up.
Such is the consciousness of death—ah, such
Must be made yours; mayhap this is the way.

[163]

NAN.

The consciousness of death.... Though that be all,
It is too much: even if this fetch abides
Unnumbered years ere I see it depart,
Yet all is made unsure and I may sink
Before I have felt half I need to feel.
I must make every passion in myself,
Have each emotion of my wilful sowing—
The pain of sap, the pain of bud and bloom,
Of hard green fruit sun-bruised to thick gold juice,
The pain of the sharp kernel in the pulp
(Transmuter of sweet to inmost bitterness),
The pain of orderly corruption too—
Of the withdrawing sap, of the sick falling
Into long grass beneath the rain-soaked boughs,
Of gentle decomposing for small roots;
So that if death's the end, the true completion,
I could believe myself fulfilled and ripe,
A sufferer of the topmost joy and grief,
And past the need of any eternity ...
O, I desire old age, because old age
Has more capacity, more ways of joy....

*Her sobs hide her words. URSEL leads her to the
hay and seats her among it again and
herself by her, putting her arms about her
and drawing her head down upon her
bosom.*

URSEL.

Old age must sit and wait as we must wait ...
We can grow old so quickly in our souls....
One utters a love-call and no answer comes,
One suffers motherhood within one's heart
Of cold unconscious children who can render
A tolerance of affection more remote
Than strait denial; and such maternity
Waits not for any bearing through the body—
When love has come maternity must follow,
And if the body may not be made fruitful
The spirit chooses its own fruitfulness:
All that we miss is happening in others,
Others are feeling all we yearn to feel,
And if we will not let ourselves forget
How love has wrung us we pass through it with them....
Ah, wonder, joy, of contact that enlarges
Our bodies' possibilities and times,
And gathers life for us to nourish....

*A stifled cry from BET is heard from the neat-
house.*

BET. Aa—h....

NAN, *sinking back faintly in URSEL's arms.*
Does ... it return and ... call?...

URSEL. Hush, 'tis Bet's voice....

*After a brief interval filled with slight sounds,
BET appears in the neat-house doorway;
she peeps before her until she sees the
two women in the hay.*

BET, *in a low eager tone.*

Ursel, Ursel....

URSEL *rises and goes toward her.*

The cow has died ... in the dark....
When I returned but now by the yard door
I missed the boust and groped into her stall—
And did not know until I heaved and spread
Up a flat softness that went sick beneath me
With long stiff shakings, while her unearned wind

[165]

Broke far within, then slid against my cheek ...
I could have borne it if she had been cold;
But she was nearly cold, so that I felt
A thread-thin warmth I could not stay nor make ...

NAN, *approaching* BET *swiftly from behind and grasping her shoulder.*
Is the cow dead?

BET, *shrinking from her touch.*
Nannie, the cow is dead.

NAN.
I milked her last of all, and now my fetch
Has milked her too; will ... it ... take all from me
I own through love?
(*To* BET.) Why did you shrink from me?

BET.
I did not shrink from you; what need is there?
NAN *holds out her arms to her; again she draws away from* NAN.

Nannie, I cannot help it ... I cannot help it...
There 's more than this world in you, and I know not
What you might do to me past your own will:
You have seen your fetch and are not one of us,
For we know not your being's dim half-conditions ...
And maybe if you touch ought that has life [166]
You make it that your fetch can take it too—
So died the heifer.... Or maybe your least touch
Draws life from others to win you a few hours;
Or you are of the dead, and call folk to them
Through sympathy of the senses' understanding....
Poor Nannie ... O, poor Nannie ... O, poor Nannie....
She sobs loudly, stooping to wipe her eyes with her petticoat-hem.

URSEL, *while seeking to still her.*
Let us turn home to bed: we shall not sleep;
But once we're stripped we can relax our bodies,
Lying past thought for misery till insight
Returns again and brings us the proportion
Of all ... and us...

NAN. I shall bide here till dawn
To see if ... I return and go out ... out....
(*To* BET.)
Have you left Lib and Maudlin hiding somewhere;
Or do they home by now?

BET, *overcoming her tears gradually.*
We fled from here
When ... when ... and reached the neat-yard ere we knew;
We climbed the knoll and passed behind the barn;
Then through the corn land, dew-wet to our hearts,
We beat the thick rye down that choked our feet
Amid its shaggy sighing stilly weight,
Until the cottages at Damson-Closes [167]
Hung o'er us like a dark broody-winged hen
We shunned the watcher's light where the old woman
Waits for her death, and dripped into the lane
Soft as cast shadows.... Ever all feared to speak:
Yet I went with the others through lost fields,
Straining to see the thing we prayed to miss,
Because I knew I dared not near the homestead;
Until I felt that neither should I dare
A more remote returning by myself—
When, loitering unnoticed by those trances,
I sought even you rather than be alone.

NAN, *rigidly, her head having been long averted to the barn's doorway.*
I hear my feet.

URSEL, *in alarm.* Nan, do not go....

NAN. I must.

BET, *wildly*.

Again.... Wherever shall I go alone?...

She tugs her cap-strings loose and her cap over her eyes; she breathes so deeply that her trembling is heard by her breath as she fumbles her way into the mistal. The quiet steps are heard again; as NAN approaches the threshold the woman reappears to the right and passes down the lane to the left, always holding out her arms to NAN, whose arms hang tensely at her sides while her fingers twitch at her petticoat as she holds back and back from meeting the embrace. URSEL tries to go to NAN, but she cannot trail her feet after her nor draw [168] down her hands that cover her face.

NAN.

How have I parted?... Where am I in deed?...

What of me is unseen?... Go....

The woman having disappeared to the left, still opening her arms to NAN, NAN turns and totters to the door's edge on that side; thence she feels her way supportedly along the door, but when she comes to its end she slides to her knees; after moving a little farther so, she sinks forward on her face and crawls blindly toward URSEL'S feet. At the fall URSEL'S hands drop; she reaches to NAN, kneels by her, feels her heart and hands, holds her own hand before NAN'S mouth and nostrils; then with one swift movement she loosens her own raiment nearly to her waist, and, lying against NAN, clasps her in her arms and gathers her into her bosom.

URSEL. Nan.... O, Nan....

The two lie quite still; the stirred dust settles on them slowly and greyly in the moonlight.

CURTAIN.

LAODICE AND DANAË

[169]

*"And, O, perchance it is the fairest lot
At once to be a queen and be forgot;
For queens are oft remembered by the weighed
Wild dusky peacock-flashing sins they played,
But queens clean-hearted leave us and grow less,
Lost in the common light of righteousness."*

[170]

From KING RENÉ'S HONEYMOON: A MASQUE, Scene vii.

TO B. J. FLETCHER

[171]

***O**RARE Ben Fletcher, oft I bless
Your rotund Jacobean name;
If the great crew could still express
Their hearts in their dim place of Fame,
As once at Globe or Mermaid-ales,
With love your liking they would greet
For country things and queens' mad tales
And lines with sounding feet.*

*But in this troublous newer time
Such fellows have not filled your days,*

*So it is left for me to chime
These quieter verses of your praise:
For a fair theme I need not strive
While manhood knows as boyhood knew
The joys of art, the joys of life,
I have received from you.*

*What days could ever be so long
As those our pristine Summers poised
O'er a charmed valley isled among
Their bright slow-breaking tides unnoised?
Then Dials were new and came to stir
A passionate thirst within the eyes;
Each dawn was a discoverer
Of poets unearthly wise.*

*First-comer of my friends, the years
Behold much friendship fade and set;
The shrunken world imparts its fears,
Most men their early power forget.
But art stays true for us, and we
In it are steadfast: for a sign
Its wonder joins us changelessly
Your name stands here with mine.*

March 8th, 1909.

ARGUMENT

[172]

Antiochus Theos, one of the Hellenic Kings of the East of the line of Seleucus, reigned in Antioch. He had espoused Laodice his kinswoman, according to the usage of his race; but after many years he put her from him, and took to wife Berenice, daughter and sister of Ptolemys of Egypt, for reasons of state.

Laodice withdrew to Ephesus and kept court there: long affection, resurgent, sent Antiochus thither to join her. Shortly afterward he died at Ephesus in Laodice's care.

Berenice and Laodice then warred, each to gain the kingdom for her child: the infant son of Berenice disappeared, and eventually Seleucus II., the son of Laodice, held the throne of Antiochus.

In the course of their wars Laodice retired from Ephesus on finding that Sophron, the governor of the city, secretly trafficked with the party of Berenice. While she sat in some adjacent city Sophron unsuspectingly rejoined her counsels; she immediately devised his death, but he, being warned by his old love Danaë, the queen's favourite, saved himself by flight.

PERSONS:

LAODICE, a Queen of the Seleucid House in Asia.

DANAË, MYSTA, RHODOGUNE, BARSINE, and other Waiting-Women.

Three Women-Musicians.

SOPHRON, Seleucid Governor of Ephesus.

In Smyrna. B.C. 246.

LAODICE AND DANAË

[173]

Behind the curtain a woman sings to the accompaniment of a harp and a bell.

I WILL sing of the women who have borne rule,
The severe, the swift, the beautiful;
I will praise their loftiness of mind
That made them too wise to be true or kind;
I will sing of their calm injustice loved
For the pride it fed and the power it proved.

Once in Egypt a girl was queen
Ashamed that her womanhood should be seen;
She wore a beard, she called herself king,
She was uneasy with governing;
She believed a king was greater than she,
So she found a king and his mastery.

In Smyrna sits a queen to-night
Who does not shine by another's light;
She has laid her husband on time's dust-heap,
But for that she holds not her title cheap;
New radiance comes on woman by her,
New force in woman is seen to stir.

She has taken the land and the sea from men;
She has shewn men the power of their source again....

The curtain rises.

A lofty chamber of mingled Hellenic and Asiatic architecture is seen. The walls are of black stone: on the right a portal toward the front of the stage is concealed by a curtain embroidered with parrots and Babylonian branch-work; high and toward the back is a double window, with open cedar lattices, of an inner room: high in the opposed wall is a short arcade with a projecting gallery. An open colonnade extends across the rear wall at two-thirds of its height; its pillars support the roof: the platform of this colonnade is accessible by an open stair recessed in the wall.

[174]

QUEEN LAODICE *reclines on a great divan set toward the left centre of the chamber. The musicians whose singing and playing have just ceased kneel on a Persian carpet before her: between them and the portal stands a tall brazier whence a wavering heat rises. A golden evening sky is visible through the colonnade, where DANAË leans against a pillar.*

LAODICE.

BE silent now; I let you sing too much.
I am awaiting now too many things
To bear this fret of waiting till you end
And I can think again. Be quietly gone.

The women go out.

DANAË.

You bade them sing to make one moment brief.

LAODICE.

What are you watching like a larger cat,
Sweetheart, little heart, noiseless and alert?
You shall not watch me like a prim wise cat.

[175]

DANAË.

I watch a girl sway slightly, near the tide,
As if rehearsing dance-steps in her heart;
She hangs lit snakes of sea-weed down her bosom;
She takes a letter from her bunchy hair....

She laughs and leans over, holding the pillar.

LAODICE.

Find me a ship, ships; dark ones, strange ones.
I must have ships, so find them, little heart;
And, more than all, a ship of Antioch.

DANAË.

How tiny a girl looks under these deep rocks....

LAODICE *yawns.*

Madam, I have searched well; yet until now
No deep-sea ship has passed the promontory;
Now a great ship with tawny sails comes on,
An ocean-threatening centaur for its prow.

LAODICE.
That is from Ephesus, not Antioch....
I purge one thought thereby and make repayment.
I am taken with an inward shivering:
Perhaps I am cold with night—come down and warm me.

DANAË descends and reclines by LAODICE.

Haughty and passive and obedient,
May not my queen's bosom receive your head?
When I worked empery in Ephesus
That Sophron, governor—did he not love you?

[176]

DANAË.
He said he did.

LAODICE. And you?

DANAË. I said he did.
Thereon he made too sure of me too soon:
It is unwise to let men be too sure,
And for that reason I hung up my silks
On a swart Nabatæan, having smeared her
With my rare private unguent, and concealed her
In his choice corner—where she bit his lip,
Then let her laughing teeth take light of moon.
There was no more of Sophron afterward....
Although I looked at him almost penitently....

LAODICE.
No more? Was there no more, my little one?

DANAË.
Ah, yes.... When he would never look at me
I felt I could not live outside his arms.
I went to him at night in a slave's skirt,
And by humiliating actions soothed
His wincing mind, until he stooped to me.
I had him soon. And then I tired of him.

LAODICE.
And then, indeed, there was no more at all?

DANAË.
I have not seen him since. We left that city.
You have my faith. You know I am all yours.

[177]

LAODICE.
That is quite well. He has no years for you;
He is found treasonous, and must be undone.
O, he goes out.... Dear, I am very cold.
Is it because my heart is cold? Men say it.

DANAË.
Your heart is warm to me.

LAODICE. What do men say?

DANAË.
They say you fled to Sardis and to Smyrna
Because you poisoned him at Ephesus
And heard his feet when a room echoed.

LAODICE. Him?

DANAË.
Antiochus the God, your king and spouse.

LAODICE.
Why do they so consider me the cause?

DANAË.
You hold the physician Smerdis in more favour.

LAODICE.
And did I poison him, my Danaë?

DANAË.
Dear lady, surely.

LAODICE. Surely.... It is sure.
Was I not made the Sister, natural wife?
Did he not change me for a daughter of Egypt
Robed with a satrapy, crowned by an isle?
She laved her body daily in Nile water,
Which can make fruitful even stones and virgins;
It soon brought forth the mud's accustomed spawn,
A valuable heir of all the lands.
How could she keep him? Needing me he turned:
Was it not best for him to die still needing me
And leave the amount of kingdoms to my boy,
The climbing vine of gold up Shushan's front,
The cedar palaces of Ecbatana,
Though Berenice sits in Antioch
Safe with her suckling, in her suckling's name?
Winds, bring to me a ship from Antioch.
Since that dread night when Mysteria stepped not down
With all you speechless ones to disarray me,
Have you not dreamed that I did poison her?
Her love is more than yours, for she had crept
To Antioch to sell herself in bondage
Where Berenice buys, that she may nurse
The child for Berenice—and for me,
While uncle Egypt plucks my crown for it.

[178]

DANAË.
Which fingers mixed the poison? See, I kiss them,
Trust them ever to do their will with me.
There is no poison in a poppy-seed;
The seedling draws its venom from the earth—
'Tis the earth's natural need for such event.

LAODICE.
Ay, but the disposition is in the seed;
I poison by a motion of the heart.

RHODOGUNE, *a Parthian waiting-woman, enters.*

[179]

RHODOGUNE.
Madam, the governor of Ephesus
Comes newly from the harbour to your will.

DANAË.
Sophron!

LAODICE. Lie still. *A silence.*

RHODOGUNE. Madam, must I go down?

LAODICE.
Bid this Ephesian governor to me.

RHODOGUNE *goes out.* LAODICE *lays a hand on*
DANAË'S *heart.*
It is now twilight. SOPHRON *enters.*

SOPHRON.
Queen, am I swift enough to your commanding?

LAODICE.
I am ever rich in your discerning service.
Why came you by the sea?

She sees that SOPHRON'S gaze is fixed on DANAË,
who does not look at him.

Girl, stand behind me.

DANAË *obeys.*

Why came you by the sea?

SOPHRON. Lady ... the sea?...

LAODICE.
Does not the way by land still fit mine urgency?

[180]

SOPHRON.
Your safety's urgency made it seem most good

To search the straits for masts of Ptolemy.

LAODICE.

Ha.... Yes.... And did you speak with any such?

DANAË *looks at SOPHRON and shakes her head.*

SOPHRON.

The seas were void of alien keels to-night.

LAODICE.

Are there Egyptians seen in Ephesus?

SOPHRON.

None since the aged men who mummied the king.

LAODICE.

Tell me the common talk of Egypt's plan;

And what device to handle Ptolemy

Is in your friendly mind.

SOPHRON.

There's but a common fear of Egypt's secret.

We cannot meet him yet unless the cities,

Yes, all these cities of men, take hands with us.

LAODICE.

Must I keep house in Smyrna still, my man?

Play queen in a corner harmlessly?

SOPHRON.

Madam,

The coast is safer here than at Ephesus,

Retreat on Sardis safer and more ready.

[181]

LAODICE.

I more withdrawn apart from my main kingdom,

Baffled from drainage of the unended East.

I have required you here because a word,

Perhaps a word malicious, has crept here:

It has been said that some Ephesian men

Have bartered for my town with Ptolemy—

Do you know any of these? Do they live?

SOPHRON.

There are none known: such could not sell past me.

LAODICE.

They use my palace: examine those about you.

SOPHRON.

There is no need: I know them to be clean.

DANAË *again shakes her head, but more eagerly.*

LAODICE, *turning her head and looking up at*

DANAË *suddenly.*

Why do you tremble, girl? There's nought to fear.

As she begins to speak DANAË'S hair is shaken loose; a rose falls from it and breaks on LAODICE'S shoulder. LAODICE laughs and plays with the petals, continuing without pause.

LAODICE.

Do you drop me a sleepy kiss, maiden, my rare one?

But, O, you have so tumbled your hair to cull it—

Come hither, kneel, and I will bind it up.

[182]

DANAË, *obeying.*

Lady, I coiled it carelessly.... Indeed

Such ministrations are my precious pardon.

LAODICE.

Silk, silky silk so delicious to finger....

Rose I held; ruby-glow; then dark hair in my hands....

Nay, I am hot; I burn; stay there and fan me....

Dear, do not cease at all.

To SOPHRON.

Well, my captain?

SOPHRON.
You shall have men's minds searched in Ephesus.

LAODICE.
I like your mind. Also, I have considered
You must shut up your port, let out no ship;
Then Ptolemy shall be more sure each night
That he has wiped the seas ... till you slip out.

SOPHRON, *in stupefaction*.
Slip ... out?

LAODICE.
Ay, Sophron, fall on him.

SOPHRON, *eagerly*. Yes, yes:
These things shall be, and you shall not complain.

LAODICE.
Nay, go not now; be my great guest this night.
The tide will take you not until more day,
And in the dawn, white hour of clearest thought,
I need more counsel from you for my deeds.

[183]

She claps her hands: BARSINE, a Persian, enters.

Let this strong captain be well feasted now
In winy webs of my embroidering—
Or—no—a purple suits his temper best;
And send a slave to him for him to rule.

SOPHRON.
Graciousness, yours: let me but stay my seamen.

LAODICE.
Haretas the Pisidian shall go down
Into the place of ships, but not my guest:
Entrust your ring to this, and she will bear it.

BARSINE and SOPHRON go out. LAODICE nods to herself.

I saw his ring: it was a new green scarab.

DANAË ceases fanning without LAODICE heeding.

RHODOGUNE, *outside*.

She-dog, come back and you shall have but whips.

A dirty woman runs in, bearing a bundle within her ragged robe; RHODOGUNE follows her.

LAODICE, *slowly*.
I have not need of rinds and lees to-night;
Come, take these out and burn them.

THE WOMAN. Ay, come.

LAODICE, *starting up*.
Mysta, Mysta, my joy! What have you there?
The thing a mother called Antiochus?

[184]

To RHODOGUNE.

Do you not know your fellow and my hand?

RHODOGUNE retires.

MYSTA.
I was the handmaid of a displaced queen;
I am dry nurse to the undoubted queen,
Come back merely to boast and make display
How lusty a baby grows in careful hands,
How noble I to carry a living king.

LAODICE, *leaping to her*.
Unwind, dishevel, give it up to me.

Clapping her hands.

Let there be lights above: I must see closely.
If I embrace you I shall touch it too.

A woman hangs a lamp from long chains over the gallery on the left, then withdraws. After a moment she passes along the colonnade from left to right and disappears. A moment later she leans from the latticed windows on the right to light two lamps suspended from the roof to a

point immediately below her. The lights are such that, when the twilight has gone, the figures of the persons are more definite than their features, and the upper part of the chamber is almost unlit. In the meantime Mysta has continued.

MYSTA.

Nay, we are but harbour-drift from Antioch:
Come, take us out and burn us.

[185]

LAODICE. Aha, Mysta.

MYSTA.

Touch not my hair; 'tis foul from many ships.

LAODICE.

I have ached by watching ships that were not yours.
Were you in Sophron's vessel? Did he know?

MYSTA.

She did not trust me soon to tend her child,
Returning oft like the uneasy cat:
When I had slipt these rags on it and me
I herded with night-women by the shore.
Ere there, I passed a rift in palaces,
Moment of empty street and Berenice
Marching with hunger in her bright fixed eyes,
Champing her golden chain—one hand on it
Tugged her mouth downward—one hand smote a spear
Upon the stones as she stepped on and on
Toward the house of Cæneus your known friend.
They spied the harbour; I must leave by land;
Then was some tale of fishers, trading sloops:
Sophron knows not the thief like a fierce mother
Whose hard feet last left ship at Ephesus—
Where Ptolemy is looked for eagerly.

*As she speaks LAODICE has drawn a scarf from
her shoulders, twisted it and strained it in
her hands; it tears and she throws it down.*

MYSTA holds out the child to her.

'Twas warm and quiet so long. Let it live.

[186]

LAODICE, *taking the child and scanning it.*

Let me read here:

This is the mould, wrongly retouched and spent—
It is his child and yet I have not known it....

Clasping it closely to her.

I am the changeless mother of this race,
And this a younger seed. By the opened womb
I have decided being: and I decide.
Much Asia has been spanned to leave it here,
More Asia will be narrowed by her searchers;
Mysta might die next time. It must die.
I reached my hand and took it to make sure
My order and number of children still were true.
I have looked on it—its purport is completed.

MYSTA.

It could be hid for ever: let it live.

LAODICE.

Mysta shall need my ritual bath and wardrobe;
Serve me by delicate sleep. Mysta must go.

She kisses MYSTA and leads her to the portal.

MYSTA goes out passively.

LAODICE.

Danaë, pile me cushions and hollow them—
There in the shadowed seat beyond the breeze.
No; larger cushions with no rough gold in stitchings.
One softer for his head—now hold it there
Till I can kneel and lay him in the dimmest,
For he may sleep a little yet. Ay, so....
I had well-nigh forgotten to appoint
Sophron a chamber.

[187]

DANAË. Madam, I will go.

LAODICE.

You speak too loudly. Madam, you will remain:
I need you to cast gums upon the censer
To make me drowsy—I must sleep some moments.

DANAË.

Storax alone, or juniper?

LAODICE.

O, storax.

DANAË goes to a recess in the wall near the portal, and takes out a painted bowl. She pours grains from it slowly upon the brazier; brief cloudy flames illumine her face.

Did the Silk-People shape that bowl?

DANAË.

Maybe....

I could burn up the world like this to-night,
To make an end of conflicts and of burdens.

As LAODICE claps her hands BARSINE hurries in breathlessly.

BARSINE.

Queen, Queen....

LAODICE, *watching* DANAË.

Make ready fragrantly and freshly
Chamber for Sophron next to that of Smerdis.
Then send Smerdis with knives and drugs to me.

DANAË opens her mouth as if to speak—the flames fall as she holds the bowl poised motionlessly.

BARSINE.

Sophron—none can find him; he has gone.

DANAË lets the contents of the bowl slide into the brazier; a shaft of flame flares high, she averts her face.

[188]

LAODICE.

Ho, are we dropping roses all the time?
Men; bring me men and torches and sharp spears—
A boat to cut the Centaur's rudder-ropes—
I will go down and take him back.... Hui....

She sweeps out followed by BARSINE.

DANAË.

O, Sophron, out by the land! Nay, he knows more—
And she, and she; watch-towers divide this earth,
Horses go here; and he may save a ship.

She draws aside the curtain to look beyond.

May women's skirts impede you, ravening queen.

She ascends swiftly to the colonnade: a starry night shows her form dimly.

Fishers' small lights, be drenched—you show too much
At height of settling gulls above the water....
Ah ... h, nothing, nothing. Something will not happen,
And let this life go on again. Nothing.
Yet ... yet ... the air is beating on my temples
As though a rabble murmured beyond hearing.

RHODOGUNE enters.

RHODOGUNE.

Danaë, are you here?

[189]

DANAË.

I am here.

RHODOGUNE.

Where is the Queen?

DANAË. Nearing the shore by now.

RHODOGUNE.

I have a drunken woman with nine snakes
That follow her as freshets a drowned body,
Then lift wise sibilant heads in guardian swaying;
Her lair could well be traced by emptied streets.

She is too drunk to speak, but sings the better
A praise of poisonous snakes and the fools of wine,
While in the night they circle and streak for answer
Like wine-cups' lines of light, black rubies' gleams.
Shall I not bring her for the Queen to use,
Who loves delights like dangers come too near?

DANAË.

Put her away in a safe place till morning—
The Queen is smouldering again to-night,
And, if she sees your epileptic mummer,
Will make us tie her up with her own serpents....
Babble no more to me—I must be watching.

RHODOGUNE.

You are not the Queen, although the Queen's plaything;
Deign not your high commandments unto us.

She goes out.

DANAË.

Sophron, your bare grand neck's a tawny pillar
To lean a cheek against in burning noons;
Your careless eyes look deeper than you know;
You must be kept in life.... Down there, down there
Is something darker, swifter than the sea....
An unseen smoky glare is mirrored now....
That was his boat: he is gone.... Sophron, Sophron!
The sea is suddenly empty—and all places.
I have given him to mine enemies. She'll not kill him.
Now I must waken and repent my dreams:
Ay, Sophron, get you gone—I am whole again;
I am the Queen's—and O, farewell, farewell.

She descends the stair slowly.

I am the Queen's indeed. Is she yet mine?
Ditizele—

A VOICE, *from within the cedar lattice.*

Who is it calls me?

DANAË.

Danaë.

THE VOICE. Yes?

DANAË.

The queen has spoilt my rose—throw me a young one.

A rosebud falls from the lattice: DANAË sets it in her hair.

Thanks, dear.... She has put up my hair awry—
It will remind her she put up my hair.

She shakes down her hair and knots it again, holding the rose-stalk in her mouth until she can replace it.

These Asiatic nights ruin the hair,
Their humid heat puts out its inner lights—
Mine waves with gleams no more than manes of Irân....
Now she has left the shore—now she will set
Her feet upon the stairs like setting-of teeth....

The child cries a little once: DANAË goes to it.

O, baby, the old silence of palaces
Is settling on you steadily. Your crying
Is shut within—and shall be farther enclosed.
One light small cry shows all so much too quiet.

LAODICE, *who has entered noiselessly and come close behind DANAË.*

Ay, do you consort with mine enemies?

DANAË, *wailing.*

Ah ... Ah ... I sickened with the secret thing,
The too faint sound that crept about my neck.

LAODICE, *slipping an arm about her.*

Nay, Rose-Locks, calm thy heart; I did but tease
Thy mothering this lost child, kings' waif and surplus.
Rare nurses his: the next will be the last:
Some treachery will ever draw toward him.
Rest you again upon the Persian couch,
And I will sit with you and comfort you.

[190]

[191]

Leading her to the divan.

Do not forget the cherishing of a queen:
I could not catch your Sophron for you, child.

DANAË.

I did not want him: he is better gone.

[192]

LAODICE.

Yet such delight to lead him to your arms:
You said you looked at him almost penitently.

DANAË.

Madam, you mock me; I have passed from him.

LAODICE.

Yes, yes; but rapture, for your mind severe,
Lies in the nearness of wise and powerful men—
As once for famous high Leontion,
That philosophic courtesan your mother.
Let be; but tell me of his quietest scheme.

DANAË.

I know him not: I never knew his mind.

*Several women appear dimly at the latticed
windows and the gallery.*

LAODICE.

Ah, well ... I am tired, and it is your dear turn
To open your arms. Hold me and I will nestle,
Will murmur for you to hear along your neck.
What shall we do to-morrow, Danaë?

DANAË.

Fair mistress, I can dance for you to-morrow.

LAODICE.

Yes, but my dainty cannot dance all day—
She must have long, long quiet for her thoughts.

DANAË.

Then shall I wing the bright and silken birds
About the border of your Persian mantle?

[193]

LAODICE.

How should I do without you so many hours?

DANAË.

Your Parthian has a witch of snakes for you—

LAODICE.

I can charm snakes and even pith their fangs.

DANAË.

This is a rare one and, if she is drunken,
Does uncouth things delicious to the senses.
Steep in her wine the herb that makes insane—

LAODICE.

The herb....?

DANAË.

The viscous plant that grows i' your chamber:
Strange longer serpents shall be swiftly snared
And mixt untamed with hers, for you to read
Her gaping and ridiculous tragedy
As the cold perils sober her to pallor.

LAODICE.

It is not novel: with a secret call
I have turned snakes upon such things before.
I am learned and I need some graver pang—
Something as unsuspected as to tell you
That I had poisoned you three hours ago,
And see you disbelieve—begin to believe.

DANAË.

But you did not.

[194]

LAODICE. There is the disbelief.

A pause.

If I had done so I should here avouch
I could not do it—then await a sign.

DANAË.

Ah, I am yours.... You have not doomed me yet.
Queen with the wells of night for human eyes,
Let us descend upon the sea to-morrow,
Rule your own kingdom by your cedarn barge:
We will recline together, hushed as here—
Save for the waters' converse just beneath,
Permeant as my pulse veiled by your cheek.

LAODICE.

I am uneasy now and should disturb you—
And thence your restlessness would chafe me more.
I must make sure that you will lie quite still:
May I so still you? Then you shall to sea.
We'll sail about the limit of the lands
Until you reach the river of Babylon.

DANAË.

So much in one rapt day?
The days of life can never compass that.

LAODICE.

Not in a day, but in a day and night:
Conceive the night, my Danaë, the night—
It is the natural state of being and space,
Briefly interrupted by casual suns.
Much unknown empires are attained in night—
Perhaps not Babylon, yet far enough.
One night can be a very proper length.

[195]

DANAË.

You mean that I am poisoned after all.

LAODICE.

Indeed, my Danaë, it is not so.
In this barbaric land, this bright harsh dye-pot,
Peopled by camels and cynocephali
And hairy men of soiled uncertain hue,
O, do you not remember nights of Athens
Built well about with marbles and clear skies,
Wherein your mother and such noble women
Conversed with poets and heroes in lit groves,
And life subtled? Have you not longed for them?
I am sending you to such a farther country,
Away from this shrunk mummy of live earth.

DANAË.

Madam, I know you not—when must I leave you?

LAODICE, *clapping her hands.*

It is the hour, and you shall launch to-night.
Women, women, come hither every woman.

*The faces disappear from the upper windows:
eleven women appear on the colonnade,
some from each side, and descend the
stair rapidly.*

Get to your knees about us—both knees.
Stand up, my Danaë, be overbearing.
Women, when any woman has a kingdom
And is a regnant being, does it not suit
That in the disposition of her state
Women should figure her and power afar?
This kingdom I control has thrones of cities,
So many that I, when I would sit therein,
Must cast my shadow there: and chief of these
Is Babylon the nest of bygone things.
'Tis to that Babylon I now appoint
My bosom's clasp, my Danaë, for satrap;

[196]

She shall oppress among dead queens and gods,
Keep house where sheer dominion walks, command
Enamelled palaces with copper roofs,
Pillars with gardens for their pediments—
Staircase for Anakim in Babylon:
And when ye are as dear to me as she
Ye shall advance upon such larger ways.

DANAË.

O, what is this you do? I am lost in it.

A WOMAN.

But how? The duplicate queen holds Babylon.

LAODICE.

It shall be mine again ere Danaë's advent....
Danaë, sister of pearls, do I displease you?

DANAË.

Tell out your purpose, though I wreck by it.

LAODICE.

Could higher estate persuade such disbelief?
Barsine, now disburden of its store
The old brass coffer in my inner house—
The gems, the flower-striped silks, the mousse-lines
Worn by such royal girls of Babylon;
So rare a satrap as we do devise
Must be as Babylonish as her earth.

BARSINE goes out.

Put out your hand, young princess, dip your hand
Among these herded common indiscretions,
And gratefully they'll mouth it. Nay, I'll lead you.

[197]

SECOND WOMAN.

Madam, remember me when you are mighty.

THIRD WOMAN.

And, O, forget not me.

LAODICE.

Arise, you humbled ones, jealous too long;
Take off her Greekish marks of my poor service,
Make ready her precious body to be tangled
In clotted skeins of her affiliate province.

The women strip DANAË of all but her under-robe.

O friend, I do reproach you, for your gay heart
Has surely turned from me too easily
When something in you fades and alters so....
I have done this—my cherished, still keep mine....

BARSINE enters, her arms heaped with robes:

LAODICE fingers them.

These are your pretties. Greeks know not how to use
Layers of denial—you Persian, can you say?

BARSINE, attiring DANAË in the new garments.

These silken trousers tied above the knees,
Yet falling to the feet, are first.

LAODICE.

Ay, so.

BARSINE.

And now this inner gown shrinks close.

[198]

LAODICE.

Ay, so.

BARSINE.

Then this brocady robe with fan-flung train
And widening muffling sleeves.

LAODICE, *holding up a sleeve.* Can it be so?
Pure Greeks conceive not slavery of sleeves.

BARSINE.

The pointed citron shoes.

LAODICE. Not even sandals?

BARSINE.
There needs a shawl like gardens for a girdle,
But none was hoarded.

LAODICE. Put your own on her.
Give me the jewels: I wish to play with the jewels.

BARSINE.
In the horn sphere: press on the metal hands.
The strings of golden tears and yellow stones
Hang hidy in the hair. I will unbind
Your lady's locks and shew you.

LAODICE. Keep off: I must unloose them,
It is my custom.

DANAË, *in a low voice*. O, what are you doing?

BARSINE.
Round to the temples, so: this drops upon the brow.... [199]
That breast of gold—pierced roses, diamond dew—
Curves on the head, no heavier than your hand....
Coils chime upon the ankles—the East walks slowly.

LAODICE.
We come to the necklace.

BARSINE. Yes, but it is lacking.

LAODICE, *to the* SECOND WOMAN.
You white-faced marvel, body of straight lines,
Give me your necklace dropt inside your chiton.

SECOND WOMAN.
O, do you see it? I cannot let it go—
It was my sister's, and she is dead since.... Ah ... h ...

LAODICE, *snatching the necklace roughly*.
'Tis well for you it did not strangle you
When caught: but ye are all so envious yet.
There, Danaë, my hands shall finish you.
A painted wonder this I have created—
I am no better than the rest before it,
And I will do my homage, knees and lips.

DANAË, *faintly*.
What is the end, ah me!

LAODICE. But in true Asia
Great ladies must live veiled; they are too choice
For foreign casual sight.

BARSINE, *veiling* DANAË. This is the veil. [200]

LAODICE, *peeping behind the veil*.
Bound so beneath the eyes? Show slipper-tips?
Indeed you are ended, Danaë, and shall part.
Farewell! Farewell! Fare delicately! Fare swiftly!
Will you go down by Ephesus, my rose;
Or all the sea?

FIRST WOMAN. Not Babylon by sea!

LAODICE.
If not to Babylon, yet far enough.
Tie up these arms and bind these feet together;
Bear to the columns and cast her forth to sea,
Where she shall be my satrap of the darkness.
She has been dying many moments now,
She shall have burial as one who ceases
In a strange ship, unfriended on the deeps.

The women laugh.

FIRST WOMAN.
Joy—but wherewith, O Light?

LAODICE. Your sandal-thongs:
You are good enough to obey me on bare feet.

Several of the women hastily untie their sandals.

FOURTH WOMAN, *kneeling to bind DANAË'S feet.*
Forget not me to heel, my mighty lady.

VARIOUS WOMEN, *clustering about DANAË and seizing her.*

Come on, come on to Babylon, dread Madam....

Up and down to Babylon, cold Highness....

I'll be her coiffing slave and tend her head....

[201]

I'll be her nurse and hold her in my breast....

More humbly I will take her feet in mine....

What honour to be trusted with such life—

priceless load.... Ah, do not let it fall....

DANAË, *to* LAODICE.
Yet I have served you well.

LAODICE. Yea, very well.
Whereto did Sophron flee?

DANAË. I do not know.

LAODICE.
Tell me why Sophron fled, and what he knew.

A pause.

Tell even where your thoughts are following him.

A pause.

Even at what point of my research in him

Your heart lifted, and I will keep you back.

A pause.

Then are you both completed and concluded.

Knot elbows too, and lift her to the columns.

DANAË.
Yet I have loved you.

LAODICE.
You are not mine: this earth shall not contain you.
I could unmake the stars to ensure darkness,
To cheat me of the places that have known you.

DANAË.
Must I go out?

[202]

Then pay me for my spent devotion first.
Let not these spittly weeds close in and choke me;
Undrape these silk and Asiatic jeers;
Let me go loose, and I will go indeed
As far as your desire—serving you yet.

LAODICE, *severing DANAË'S bonds with her dagger,
then rending away her veil and upper
garments.*

Your rigid mortal bonds, ...
Your isolating veil, ...
Your scarf of earthly flowers, ...
Your robe that once was royal, ...
Your chill, worn-out simarre,
Slide as the world slides....
Put off your useless shoes
To enter a holy place....
Get to your high estate.

DANAË, *standing in her under-garment.*
Gather your jewels.

LAODICE. You trifle to gain moments.

DANAË.
Give me one kiss.

LAODICE. You have not time. These wait.
Indicating the surrounding women.

DANAË.
Your house shall be the firmer by your sentence.
*She takes the sleeping child in her arms, and
mounts the stair quickly.*

SEVERAL WOMEN. [203]
The child; she has the child.

LAODICE. Yes. And then?

DANAË, *pausing by a column.*
The common run of men make small account
Of high religion; and they are very right.
I saved my lover, and I now receive
This recognition from the Powers who still
Dispose of us: Laodice killed hers,
And she is held deserving of all that honour.

LAODICE, *pointing at the* FOURTH WOMAN.
Thrust her down, you.

DANAË *disappears while the* FOURTH WOMAN
*stealthily mounts the stair. LAODICE has
thrown herself on the divan, with her back
to the colonnade.*

To-morrow will be soon.

To-morrow I will sit with men in council,
And muster men to leaguer Ephesus.
These fretting hens, these women, burden me—
I know their eyes too well; let them keep hid.
To-morrow I will walk upon the harbour,
And board my ships and see them manned and ready—
No, no, I will not step toward the sea...

SEVERAL WOMEN, *as* LAODICE *speaks.*
Ai! Ai! Is she down? Not yet....
I cannot see.... No one can see.

SECOND WOMAN, *sobbing in the corner near the stair.*
My necklace

Save my dear gems!

[204]

FOURTH WOMAN, *from the colonnade.*
She is not here. She falls.

LAODICE.
Is that hoarse dashing how the surge receives her?

FOURTH WOMAN.
It is the old recession of the waves;
The rocks are bare. No movement could be seen;
No pallor could emerge. There is no sound.

LAODICE, *in a dull voice.*
She was as false as all the rest of you;
But she was brave. Remember that she died;
Be cowards still, and so be false and safe.
She had a lulling hand.... Put me to sleep.
RHODOGUNE *goes toward her.*

CURTAIN.

APPENDICES

[205]

APPENDIX A

[207]

"KING LEAR'S WIFE" was performed for the first time on 25 September 1915 at the

Birmingham Repertory Theatre, with the following cast:

Lear	Mr. E. Ion Swinley.
Hygd	Miss Cathleen Orford.
Goneril	Miss Margaret Chatwin.
Cordeil	Miss Betty Pinchard.
Merryn	Miss Dorothy Taylor.
Gormflaith	Miss Mary Merrall.
Physician	Mr. Ivor Barnard.
	{Miss Betty Pinchard.
Two Elderly Women	{Miss Maud Gill.

Costumes and decoration designed by Mr. Barry V. Jackson.

Production by Mr. John Drinkwater.

In the course of the production the song of the Elder Woman, toward the close of the play, was fitted with so appropriate a melody, by a fortunate modification of a folk-tune, that it seems well to continue the connexion by printing the arrangement here.

[208]

Rather quickly.

The louse made off un - hap-py and wet —A -
 . . humm, A-humm, A - hee— He's look-ing for us, the
 A
 lit-tle pet ; So haste, for her chin's to tie up yet, And
 B C
 let us be gone with what we can get—Her ring for thee, her
 gown for Bet, Her pock - et turned out for
 * * CODA.
 me. . . me. . .

[Transcriber's Note: You can play this music (MIDI file) by clicking [here](#).]

The louse made off unhappy and wet—
 A-humm, A-humm, A-hee—
 He's looking for us, the little pet;
 So haste, for her chin's to tie up yet,
 And let us be gone with what we can get—
 Her ring for thee, her gown for Bet,
 Her pocket turned out for me ... me....

This represents the extension of the melody used for the final stanza of the song: it can be adapted to the forms of the first and second stanzas by the omission of the sections A-C and B-C respectively. The Coda is intended for use with the final stanza only.

[209]

First performed in London on 19 May 1916 at His Majesty's Theatre, under the direction of Miss Viola Tree.

Lear	Mr. Murray Carrington.
Hygd	Lady Tree.
Goneril	Miss Viola Tree.
Cordeil	Miss Odette Goimbault.
Gormflaith	Miss Julia James.
Merryn	Miss Beatrice Wilson.
Physician	Mr. H. A. Saintsbury.
	{Miss Ada King

Play produced by Mr. John Drinkwater, and mounted by Mr. Purcell Jones: music by Mr. Ivor Novello.

SONGS

For the London performance of "King Lear's Wife."

I (p. 43)

Mother, it is my wedding morn,
Come, bring the linen fine,
And wash my face with milk so warm
Drawn from the young white kine.
The blackbird in the apple-tree
Was waking ere the day;
But I was ready sooner than he,
For I watched the night away.

II (p. 44)

The Queen has gone to bed
In the middle of the day;
But what about her bedfellow?
No one dares to say.

She cannot sleep at night:
She does not care to try;
The darkness makes her restless,
And nobody knows why.

[210]

III (p. 48)

O, merry, merry will my heart be
When I can sit me down and rest:
If you would live to make old bones
Keep your knees off the kitchen-stones,
And go like a lady, warmly drest.

APPENDIX B

[211]

"THE CRIER BY NIGHT" was first performed by Mr. Stuart Walker's Portmanteau Theatre Company in Wyoming, U.S.A., in September 1916, and in New York at the Princess Theatre on 18 December 1916, with the following cast:

Hialti	Mr. McKay Morris.
Thorgerd	Miss Judith Lowry.
Blamid	Miss Florence Buckton.
An Old, Strange Man	Mr. Edgar Stehli.

Play produced by Mr. Stuart Walker and mounted by Mr. W. J. Zimmerer.

SOME PRESS OPINIONS OF

[213]

KING LEAR'S WIFE AND OTHER PLAYS. 1920. 4to. With binding design by Charles Ricketts. Pp. 209. 15s. net. (*Out of print.*)

A special edition of 50 copies signed by the author, in white and gold binding. 31s. 6d. net. (*Out of print.*)

Mr. Lascelles Abercrombie (Lecturer in Poetry at the University of Liverpool) in *The Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*.

This volume has been long overdue. It was the great good fortune of "Georgian Poetry" that it was permitted to give this remarkable tragedy of "King Lear's Wife" to the world, and thus to have the privilege of pioneering Mr. Bottomley's reputation among those who are unable to do much experimental reading. It was obviously not

only a dramatic poem but an actable play; so actable, indeed, that it had the extraordinary fortune of being acted; and what was perhaps even more remarkable of a poetic play nowadays, it showed itself capable of being acted precisely and entirely as it had been written, the technique of the poet contriving to be, with a completeness not to be paralleled anywhere to-day except in Italy, simultaneously the technique of the playwright.

The other plays contained in this volume are still to be staged. They would certainly be not less effective than "King Lear's Wife" ... the cunning elaboration of supernaturalism in "The Crier by Night" and "The Riding to Lithend," its combination in the former with the elemental humanities, in the latter with vivid character and strangely heroic passion; the deft lucidity of "Laodice and Danaë," which might serve as a type of dramatic suspense passing at the exact moment into inevitable catastrophe: these things, one would think, should be eminently practical politics for the theatre. If any manager wants plays in which exciting action is at the same time profound significance, here they are.

[214]

However, we are only able to speculate on this aspect of Mr. Bottomley's work. But we can console ourselves by simply reading the plays as poetry.... In the days when theurgy was still an honourable profession, Apollonius of Tyana said "Knowing what people say is nothing; I know what people don't say." That might be put as motto for such poetry as Mr. Bottomley writes. It is the art of exhibiting realities. What people don't say is what they really are; and they don't say it because they can't get hold of it. But he can, and he can make them say it ... they speak and act as unconstrainedly as the folk of the everyday world; yet every word and every gesture is a flashing revelation of spiritual destiny. And not only men and women, but nature also: tarns and mountains, winds and the night, trees and stars—of these, too, Mr. Bottomley "knows what they don't say."

To the technical beauty of Mr. Bottomley's poetry I have not alluded. It is extraordinary; but, as in all great poetry, it is no more than the sign that the reality of things is being successfully exhibited.

Mr. John Drinkwater in "The Nature of Drama" ("Prose Papers": London, Elkin Mathews, 1917, p. 220).

I do say that the capital power of the commercialised theatre in England to-day is so great that it has been able to impose its standard on nearly all the people who are habitually in contact with its merchandise ... so that one piece of catchpenny insincerity after another is extolled by what passes for expert opinion as a valuable contribution to the great art of the dramatist, while a piece of work like Mr. Gordon Bottomley's "King Lear's Wife," which ... is for vigour of imagination, poetic eagerness, and dramatic passion not to be excelled by anything that has been put on to the English stage since the Elizabethans, is met with a clamour of ignorance ... in most cases (1915-16) we find no standard whatever being brought to the judgment of an original work of art other than a spurious morality.

Solomon Eagle in *The Outlook*.

The various societies which desire to regenerate the theatre talk a good deal about the poetic drama of the future, but they do not seem to take much trouble to find it.... Of Mr. Gordon Bottomley's fine plays only one, to the best of my knowledge, has yet been produced in this country.... There is certainly the possibility of a great play in their author, and one at least of them is better than any play in verse which has been staged for many years, and is likely to live longer than most of the so-called masterpieces of our time. If "Midsummer Eve" had been by Claudel, or "The Riding to Lithend" by some German (a most unlikely supposition) all the coteries would have been talking about them years ago....

[215]

"Midsummer Eve" is original, and the work of a poet.... There is fine meditative poetry in it, poetry, moreover, not grafted or glued on to its main structure, but growing out of the dialogue naturally, in an inevitable manner.... "Laodice and Danaë" is equally good reading, and it is dramatic. But none of these plays is equal to the two latest, "The Riding to Lithend" and "King Lear's Wife."...

Enough has been written about the grimness of "King Lear's Wife," the fine bursts of poetry in it, and the remarkable character of Goneril.... "The Riding to Lithend" is, up to the present, the best of Mr. Bottomley's plays; and its superiority is a superiority which, I think, would be still more evident on the stage than it is in print.... It comes straight out of an old tale; the characters are recreated and enriched.... The diction is, as a rule, perfect in its propriety and often striking in its beauty. And, above all, Gunnar is a hero, his fight a heroic fight, his courage, his generosity, his humanity (a few sentences to wife and hound are wonderfully chosen), and even his weaknesses are such as to move the heart. His fall is like the fall of all noble and fighting things; the sense of defeat comes with it, but above that a feeling of exultation. On the stage the end, I fancy, would be profoundly moving, and the fight exciting to a degree, though there is no obvious rhodomontade about it.

Mr. John Freeman in *The Bookman*.

This comely volume at last makes public what has been too long a fugitive and cloistered pleasure.... These five plays show the author in the most powerful exercise of his faculties. Imagination here is free and moves with growing ease, music enlarges like a splendid wind through the verse; and the common reproach of mere "poetic plays" has been avoided in these, where character and action develop as surely as music itself. Gordon Bottomley has remembered that his plays can have no life except in the activity of his characters.... Fine careless raptures alone will not produce a play like "The Riding to Lithend" ... you may quote almost any lines from this fierce Icelandic play and find that what you are reading is vital and essential to the expression of character and action. And in this poetry, too ... the beautiful images flow in and out with the ease of light on water; the rhythms have the natural movement of thought, and the secret discipline of masculine habit. "King Lear's Wife" will be familiar to many readers, but to others it will come with the delicious shock of a new creation.... The new play is a beam of light crossing the darkness of the old. Few passages of modern verse reach the beauty of Goneril's hunting-narration; and it is no isolated beauty.

[216]

Mr. William Rose Benét in *The Literary Review of the New York Evening Post*.

"The Crier by Night" is one of the most powerful and eerie poetic dramas of the supernatural that have been written in the last two decades. To me the best-known translations of Maeterlinck pale beside it.... I hold "The Riding to Lithend" his greatest achievement. To me it is like a piece of gorgeous tapestry blurred by wood-smoke and sea-mist and hung on a granite wall. The dramatic structure is knit as compact as a rock. Across the shimmering imagery of the diction blows a chill and foreboding wind of the spirit.... The verse is nobly distinguished. "King Lear's Wife" is also a notable piece of work.... It possesses convincing reality.... Again the dramatic structure satisfies completely. "Midsummer Eve" is packed with fragrant beauty ... that creeps around the heart.... The atmosphere is the important thing about this play and is unforgettable. "Laodice and Danaë" is more usual (for Bottomley, for very few other writers), but it is the work of a sure dramatic craftsman with an enthralling tale to tell.... There is a splendid artistic austerity about his work ... yet mixed with this there is an entirely full-blooded love of the earth, a delight in intensely human detail.... He has indeed displayed many gifts imperishably bright. His name should stand high in the roster of modern English verse.

The Morning Post.

The rare beauty and distinction of these works have been ungrudgingly acclaimed by many critics, but they have hitherto lacked that wider recognition for which they are indubitably destined.... But now the bringing of them together in one volume permits us all to appraise the quality of what is the most significant accomplishment of our Georgians. It is impossible to be impervious to the strength and beauty, knit together, of these dramas.... Criticism may note with admiration the unerring skill of dramatic structure; with delight the mastery of language, which constrains the simplest words to the greatest needs; with wonder the reading of the human heart.... The man who can handle character and emotion with such mastery both of language and imagination is indeed a poet.... In Mr. Bottomley the Georgian era has found an

[217]

authentic voice—a veritable interpreter.

The Times Literary Supplement.

We must honour the devoted writers who keep alive the desire for the poetic drama, and none more than Mr. Gordon Bottomley.... He is a poet and justifies his use of poetic speech; he is eloquent, incisive, has a blank verse of his own which he writes with increasing mastery.... In "The Riding to Lithend" he rises with his story ... the death of Gunnar is well done; you read it breathlessly, for he makes it the death of Gunnar indeed; and even the slayers feel the greatness of it. Mr. Bottomley, in a more fortunate age, might, we think, have been a dramatic poet like Fletcher; he has Fletcher's eloquence though not his fun,... but not, of course, Fletcher's familiarity with the stage.... If he had been bred in the theatre, he might, we think, have had Fletcher's real and delightful success.

John O' London's Weekly.

The cumulative effect of a re-reading of Mr. Bottomley's work is to convince one that he is a real poet who can write real drama. In the matter of construction these plays approach perfection; the building up is masterly, and the verse is full of variety and imagination.... The finest as drama is "King Lear's Wife," though for sheer beauty and spiritual significance I should be inclined to place "Midsummer Eve" first. Only one of these plays has been acted in England. If we had a live stage they would all be acted.

The New Statesman.

Mr. Gordon Bottomley's plays are good art. There are moments in "King Lear's Wife" when he approaches greatness.... It contains passages of very rare force, and the dramatic power ... is of a very high quality. In this play and in "The Crier by Night" he recalls to us not the late Elizabethans so much as that strange uneasy genius Thomas Lovell Beddoes.... He is a purer poet, dramatically, than was Beddoes, and his song has a clearer richer quality, more imaginative, though not quite so fantastic; but he resembles Beddoes in his stern saddened preoccupations with the passing of mortals. Few plays have a greater unity of atmosphere or a more boding one than has "The Riding to Lithend." In all the plays, however, one finds a real poet who is also a real dramatist; there is little of decoration in any of the plays, and nothing of that windy seasonal rhetoric which is so common in some poetic plays.

[218]

I. B. in *The Manchester Guardian.*

It is an excellent thing that these plays, the earliest of which was published twenty years ago, should have been brought together and given a new lease of public life.... It is indeed quite extraordinary that, with so much publishing of poetry during the last few years, work of such high distinction should have remained under cover. Mr. Gordon Bottomley's art of tragedy, as well as his craftsmanship in verse, can be seen ripening through this series until it comes to a rich maturity in "King Lear's Wife." Here ... austerity and compassion are compounded, and so create the tragic atmosphere in which small words are big with infinite meaning and hints develop the power of hammer-blows.... It is the best of the group, and it is significant, as showing the inherent union between matter and form, that when the poet writes his best play he also writes his best verse.... He is admirably master of himself and of his medium.

The Spectator.

Neither in the setting of the scene of "King Lear's Wife," the conduct of the story, or its embellishment and illustration, is there a wasted word.... But amid the abundance of this most rich, most ample of little plays, there is surely nothing—nothing, we mean, that can be detached from its setting—that surpasses Goneril's two speeches to her mother.... Whether Mr. Gordon Bottomley—though calling his creations by their Shakespearean names in his heart—would not have done better to call his monarch Cole or Cadwallader in print is a question with which controversy will probably long be busy. It is a play which would not be spoiled if, in a pet, he had called the protagonists Smith, Jones, and Robinson. We recommend this test, by the way, to those who are called upon to pronounce judgment upon the poetic drama. There is more in it than meets the

It is some years since the public was surprised to learn that Mr. Gordon Bottomley had written a prelude to "King Lear," which not only offered some solution of the problems of that work, but was also in itself a play of considerable beauty, originality, and power. This piece now serves for the title of a volume of collected plays.... It was effective and moving on the stage, and it makes its effect, though perhaps a different one, when it is read in the study.... An extract will serve to illustrate the flexible, elastic, and individual versification. We should do wrong, however, if we were to give the impression that his plays are only for the study, valuable for such passages, and lacking in the harder bones of dramatic merit. The action is not an excuse for decorative poetry, but is the immediate and all-important thing.... These are the creations of a dramatist who has no need of descriptive decoration to conceal the weakness of his prime conceptions.

The Nation.

The wave of poetic drama has now ebbed, and this form is practised very little to-day, lyrical and experimental verse having almost entirely supplanted it. Mr. Bottomley's plays are the only ones which, with the going-out of the tide, have managed to escape its "long withdrawing roar" and retain a place on the shore.... Without any doubt they express a singular power of mysterious evocation.... They are not at all vague and inchoate—on the contrary, these towering shadows are remarkably and firmly differentiated.... We find "The Crier by Night" and "The Riding to Lithend"—especially the former—the most darkly and magically impressive of all the plays.... An image in the former positively makes you jump as Donne makes you jump with his imagery.... But perhaps his most striking achievement is the way he can make these shapes of an intensely brooding ... imagination speak out in taut, muscular, even gruffly vivid language. He has avoided, and very properly avoided, the tenuous chantings, effeminate imagery, and listless monochrome of the Celtic drama. Mr. Bottomley's plays, in fact, are peculiar and esoteric, but they undoubtedly achieve a strong success in their own character.

The Athenæum.

Mr. Gordon Bottomley is one of the few writers of poetical plays whom it is necessary to take very seriously: his blemishes are minor and few in number; his poetical qualities very much outweigh his defects. He is at his best in expressing subtle states of mind, and in formulating generalizations. His real distinction lies in his dramatic power. His characters have solidity and life ... they are not mere symbols, but human beings. His plays are marked by the economy of construction of stage plays. It is significant to note that Mr. Bottomley's pieces are excellent in proportion as they are actable.

The Saturday Westminster Gazette.

Of their kind, Mr. Bottomley's plays are remarkably good. They have atmosphere and action; they are exquisitely wrought; they are moving and dramatic. They will surely be among the most delightful discoveries of future generations; and if by the beginning of the twenty-first century our successors have contrived to establish a national or folk theatre, it is fairly safe to prophesy that three at least of them will find a place in its repertory.

The Observer.

Since the issue of "The Crier by Night" in 1902, Mr. Bottomley has worked with a sincerity and devotion which are more commendable than the more frequent essays of less conscientious artists. We remember one considerable and beautifully produced book of miscellaneous verse, "The Gate of Smaragdus," and there have been other plays issued semi-privately, until the publication of "King Lear's Wife" gave him a wider public, and reminded younger readers of his very definite and dignified talent.... If as a *tour de force*, the latter is the greatest, we still prefer, for sheer poetic beauty, for propriety of phrase and for directness of action, the earlier "Riding to Lithend." Hallgerd is an exceptionally fine creation, and she is given to speak passages of rare force and

beauty. This play, too, has a fierce dramatic quality.

Mr. R. Ellis Roberts in *The Daily News*.

Mr. Bottomley's plays have all one merit without which poetical drama is a thing indefensible. There is always in them a definite note of necessity.... Not only does Mr. Bottomley choose subjects which make his decision to write in verse seem natural and right, he writes blank verse of a dignity and worth which responds at once to the needs of natural, and the convention of poetic, speech. His poetry is in the full English tradition; he enjoys his vocabulary with that careful, inventive joy which is the privilege of all who are sensitive to the individual word. He can use rhetoric; but he rarely allows himself to be drawn away into mere hectic luxury of language. The best of his plays is, I think, "The Riding to Lithend," a rendering of the old life of Iceland, which really represents for us the passionate, hasty life of the old Sagas, while it is free from the pedantry which spoils so many efforts to reproduce Scandinavian heroics. Hallgerd is a genuine piece of dramatic creation. "Midsummer Eve," with its quiet, wind-blown pathos, is equally notable; and the quality of its verse shows Mr. Bottomley's talent at its highest and simplest.

[221]

The Actor.

In these plays, the public is reminded of Mr. Gordon Bottomley's almost unique power, as among his contemporaries, of presenting the sinister, the grim, the tragic, or the merely weird, in a poetic garment of power and beauty ... in dramatic force and verse charm.

The Journal of Commerce, Chicago, U.S.A.

These plays are put into a format and style of book that honour the contents, and when you know the contents of this remarkable dramatic poetry that is praise indeed. They hold you strangely.... The dialogue is skilfully modulated, it is a veritable song-speech, illuminated by luminous pauses, by the speaking silences that can invest, if rightly used, the static with so much more dramatic feeling than the more obviously emotional action. The plays are impressive even in the reading of them, then how much more effective they would be if acted and declaimed—but in a manner worthy of their high art.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

Varied hyphenation was retained. This includes things such as bed-clothes, bedclothes and bed-time, bedtime.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK KING LEAR'S WIFE; THE CRIER BY NIGHT;
THE RIDING TO LITHEND; MIDSUMMER-EVE; LAODICE AND DANAË ***

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