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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OVER THE BRAZIER ***

OVER THE BRAZIER

BY ROBERT GRAVES

LONDON — THE POETRY
BOOKSHOP, 35 DEVONSHIRE
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Poetry by the Same Author

FAIRIES AND FUSILIERS
(William Heinemann 1917)

COUNTRY SENTIMENT
(Martin Secker: 1920)

First Printed 1916
Second Impression 1917
Reprinted 1920

FOREWORD TO NEW EDITION

When these poems, written between the ages of fourteen and twenty, first appeared, I was serving in France and had no leisure for getting the final proofs altogether as I wanted them. The same year, but too late, I decided on several alterations in the text, including the suppression of two small poems inexcusable even as early work. These amendments appear in this new edition, but I have left the bulk of the book as it stood.

ROBERT GRAVES.

Harlech,
North Wales.

THE POET IN THE NURSERY

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

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

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

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

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

**PART I.—Poems Mostly Written at Charterhouse—1910-
1914**

STAR-TALK

"Are you awake, Gemelli,
This frosty night?"
"We'll be awake till reveillé,
Which is Sunrise," say the Gemelli,
"It's no good trying to go to sleep:
If there's wine to be got we'll drink it deep,
But sleep is gone to to-night,
But sleep is gone for to-night."

"Are you cold too, poor Pleiads,
This frosty night?"
"Yes, and so are the Hyads:
See us cuddle and hug," say the Pleiads,
"All six in a ring: it keeps us warm:
We huddle together like birds in a storm:
It's bitter weather to-night,
It's bitter weather to-night."

"What do you hunt, Orion,
This starry night?"
"The Ram, the Bull and the Lion,
And the Great Bear," says Orion,
"With my starry quiver and beautiful belt
I am trying to find a good thick pelt
To warm my shoulders to-night,
To warm my shoulders to-night."

"Did you hear that, Great She-bear,
This frosty night?"
"Yes, he's talking of stripping *me* bare
Of my own big fur," says the She-bear,
"I'm afraid of the man and his terrible arrow:
The thought of it chills my bones to the marrow,
And the frost so cruel to-night!
And the frost so cruel to-night!"

"How is your trade, Aquarius,
This frosty night?"
"Complaints is many and various
And my feet are cold," says Aquarius,
"There's Venus objects to Dolphin-scales,
And Mars to Crab-spawn found in my pails,
And the pump has frozen to-night,
And the pump has frozen to-night."

THE DYING KNIGHT AND THE FAUNS

Through the dreams of yesternight
My blood brother great in fight
I saw lying, slowly dying
Where the weary woods were sighing
With the rustle of the birches,
With the quiver of the larches....
Woodland fauns with hairy haunches
Grin in wonder through the branches
Woodland fauns that know no fear.
Wondering, they wander near
Munching mushrooms red as coral,
Bunches, too, of rue and sorrel;
Wonder at his radiant fairness,
At his dented, shattered harness,
With uncouth and bestial sounds,
Knowing nought of war or wounds:
But the crimson life-blood oozes
And make roses of the daisies,
Persian carpets of the mosses—
Softly now his spirit passes
As the bee forsakes the lily,
As the berry leaves the holly;
But the fauns still think him living,
And with bay leaves they are weaving
Crowns to deck him. Well they may!
He was worthy of the Bay.

WILLAREE

On the rough mountain wind
That blows so free
Rides a little storm-sprite
Whose name is Willaree.

The fleecy cloudlets are not his,
No shepherd is he,
For he drives the shaggy thunderclouds
Over land and sea.

His home is on the mountain-top
Where I love to be,
Amid grey rocks and brambles
And the red rowan-tree.

He whistles down the chimney,
He whistles to me,
And I send greeting back to him
Whistling cheerily.

The great elms are battling,
Waves are on the sea,
Loud roars the mountain-wind—
God rest you, Willaree!

THE FACE OF THE HEAVENS

Little winds in a hurry,
Great winds over the sky,
Clouds sleek or furry,
Storms that rage and die,

The whole cycle of weather
From calm to hurricane
Of four gales wroth together,
Thunder, lightning, rain,

The burning sun, snowing,
Hailstones pattering down,
Blue skies and red skies showing,
Skies with a black frown,

By these signs and wonders
You may tell God's mood:
He shines, rains, thunders,
But all His works are good.

JOLLY YELLOW MOON

Oh, now has faded from the West
A sunset red as wine,
And beast and bird are hushed to rest
When the jolly yellow moon doth shine.

Come comrades, roam we round the mead
Where couch the sleeping kine;
The breath of night blows soft indeed,
And the jolly yellow moon doth shine.

And step we slowly, friend with friend,
Let arm with arm entwine.
And voice with voice together blend,
For the jolly yellow moon doth shine.

Whether we loudly sing or soft,
The tune goes wondrous fine;
Our chorus sure will float aloft
Where the jolly yellow moon doth shine.

YOUTH AND FOLLY

("Life is a very awful thing! You young fellows are too busy being jolly to realize the folly of your lives.")

—A Charterhouse Sermon)

In Chapel often when I bawl
The hymns, to show I'm musical,
With bright eye and cheery voice
Bidding Christian folk rejoice,
Shame be it said, I've not a thought
Of the One Being whom I ought
To worship: with unwitting roar
Other godheads I adore.
I celebrate the Gods of Mirth
And Love and Youth and Springing Earth,
Bacchus, beautiful, divine,
Gulping down his heady wine,
Dear Pan piping in his hollow,
Fiery-headed King Apollo
And rugged Atlas all aloof
Holding up the purple roof.
I have often felt and sung,
"It's a good thing to be young:
Though the preacher says it's folly,
Is it foolish to be jolly?"
I have often prayed in fear,
"Let me never grow austere;
Let me never think, I pray,
Too much about Judgment Day;
Never, never feel in Spring,
'Life's a very awful thing!'"
Then I realize and start
And curse my arrogant young heart,
Bind it over to confess
Its horrible ungodliness,
Set myself penances, and sigh
That I was born in sin, and try
To find the whole world vanity.

GHOST MUSIC

Gloomy and bare the organ-loft,
Bent-backed and blind the organist.
From rafters looming shadowy,
From the pipes' tuneful company,
Drifted together drowsily,
Innumerable, formless, dim,
The ghosts of long-dead melodies,
Of anthems, stately, thunderous,
Of Kyries shrill and tremulous:
In melancholy drowsy-sweet
They huddled there in harmony,
Like bats at noontide rafter-hung.

FREE VERSE

I now delight,
In spite
Of the might
And the right
Of classic tradition,
In writing
And reciting
Straight ahead,
Without let or omission,
Just any little rhyme
In any little time
That runs in my head:
Because, I've said,
My rhymes no longer shall stand arrayed
Like Prussian soldiers on parade
That march,
Stiff as starch,
Foot to foot,
Boot to boot,
Blade to blade,
Button to button,
Cheeks and chops and chins like mutton.
No! No!
My rhymes must go
Turn 'ee, twist 'ee,
Twinkling, frosty,
Will-o'-the-wisp-like, misty,
Rhymes I will make
Like Keats and Blake
And Christina Rossetti,
With run and ripple and shake.
How petty
To take
A merry little rhyme
In a jolly little time
And poke it,
And choke it,
Change it, arrange it,
Straight-lace it, deface it,
Pleat it with pleats,
Sheet it with sheets
Of empty conceits,
And chop and chew,
And hack and hew,
And weld it into a uniform stanza,
And evolve a neat,
Complacent, complete,
Academic extravaganza!

IN THE WILDERNESS

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

OH, AND OH!

Oh, and oh!
The world's a muddle,
The clouds are untidy,
Moon lopsided,
Shining in a puddle.
Down dirty streets in stench and smoke
The pale townsfolk
Crawl and kiss and cuddle,
In doorways hug and huddle;
Loutish he
And sluttish she
In loathsome love together press
And unbelievable ugliness.
These spiders spin a loathly woof!
I walk aloof,
Head burning and heart snarling,
Tread feverish quick;
My love is sick;
Far away lives my darling.

CHERRY-TIME

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

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

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

PART II.—Poems Written Before La Bassée—1915

THE SHADOW OF DEATH

Here's an end to my art!
I must die and I know it,
With battle murder at my heart—
Sad death for a poet!

Oh my songs never sung,
And my plays to darkness blown!
I am still so young, so young,
And life was my own.

Some bad fairy stole
The baby I nursed:
Was this my pretty little soul,
This changeling accursed?

To fight and kill is wrong—
To stay at home wronger:
Oh soul, little play and song,
I may father no longer!

Here's an end to my art!
I must die and I know it,
With battle murder at my heart—
Sad death for a poet!

THE MORNING BEFORE THE BATTLE

To-day, the fight: my end is very soon,
And sealed the warrant limiting my hours:
I knew it walking yesterday at noon
Down a deserted garden full of flowers.
... Carelessly sang, pinned roses on my breast,
Reached for a cherry-bunch—and then, then, Death
Blew through the garden from the North and East
And blighted every beauty with chill breath.

I looked, and ah, my wraith before me stood,
His head all battered in by violent blows:
The fruit between my lips to clotted blood
Was transubstantiate, and the pale rose
Smelt sickly, till it seemed through a swift tear-flood
That dead men blossomed in the garden-close.

LIMBO

After a week spent under raining skies,
In horror, mud and sleeplessness, a week
Of bursting shells, of blood and hideous cries
And the ever-watchful sniper: where the reek
Of death offends the living ... but poor dead
Can't sleep, must lie awake with the horrid sound
That roars and whirs and rattles overhead
All day, all night, and jars and tears the ground;
When rats run, big as kittens: to and fro
They dart, and scuffle with their horrid fare,
And then one night relief comes, and we go
Miles back into the sunny cornland where
Babies like tickling, and where tall white horses
Draw the plough leisurely in quiet courses.

THE TRENCHES (*Heard in the Ranks*)

Scratches in the dirt?
No, that sounds much too nice.
Oh, far too nice.
Seams, rather, of a Greyback Shirt,
And we're the little lice
Wriggling about in them a week or two,
Till one day, suddenly, from the blue
Something bloody and big will come
Like—watch this fingernail and thumb!—
Squash! and he needs no twice.

(NURSERY MEMORIES) I.—THE FIRST FUNERAL

*(The first corpse I saw was on the German
wires, and couldn't be buried)*

The whole field was so smelly;
We smelt the poor dog first:
His horrid swollen belly
Looked just like going burst.

His fur was most untidy;
He hadn't any eyes.
It happened on Good Friday
And there was lots of flies.

And then I felt the coldest
I'd ever felt, and sick,
But Rose, 'cause she's the oldest,
Dared poke him with her stick.

He felt quite soft and horrid:
The flies buzzed round his head
And settled on his forehead:
Rose whispered: "That dog's dead.

"You bury all dead people,
When they're quite really dead,
Round churches with a steeple:
Let's bury this," Rose said.

"And let's put mint all round it
To hide the nasty smell."
I went to look and found it—
Lots, growing near the well.

We poked him through the clover
Into a hole, and then
We threw brown earth right over
And said: "Poor dog, Amen!"

(NURSERY MEMORIES) II.—THE ADVENTURE

*(Suggested by the claim of a machine-gun
team to have annihilated an enemy wire
party: no bodies were found however)*

To-day I killed a tiger near my shack
Among the trees: at least, it must have been,
Because his hide was yellow, striped with black,
And his eyes were green.

I crept up close and slung a pointed stone
With all my might: I must have hit his head,
For there he died without a twitch or groan,
And he lay there dead.

I expect that he'd escaped from a Wild Beast Show
By pulling down his cage with an angry tear;
He'd killed and wounded all the people—so
He was hiding there.

I brought my brother up as quick's I could
But there was nothing left when he did come:
The tiger's mate was watching in the wood
And she'd dragged him home.

But, anyhow, I killed him by the shack,
'Cause—listen!—when we hunted in the wood
My brother found my pointed stone all black
With the clotted blood.

III.—I HATE THE MOON

(After a moonlight patrol near the Brickstacks)

I hate the Moon, though it makes most people glad,
And they giggle and talk of silvery beams—you know!
But *she* says the look of the Moon drives people mad,
And that's the thing that always frightens me so.

I hate it worst when it's cruel and round and bright,
And you can't make out the marks on its stupid face,
Except when you shut your eyelashes, and all night
The sky looks green, and the world's a horrible place.

I like the stars, and especially the Big Bear
And the W star, and one like a diamond ring,
But I *hate* the Moon and its horrible stony stare,
And I know one day it'll do me some dreadful thing.

BIG WORDS

"I've whined of coming death, but now, no more!
It's weak and most ungracious. For, say I,
Though still a boy if years are counted, why!
I've lived those years from roof to cellar-floor,
And feel, like grey-beards touching their fourscore,
Ready, so soon as the need comes, to die:
And I'm satisfied.

For winning confidence in those quiet days
Of peace, poised sickly on the precipice side
Of Lliwedd crag by Snowdon, and in war
Finding it firmlier with me than before;
Winning a faith in the wisdom of God's ways
That once I lost, finding it justified
Even in this chaos; winning love that stays
And warms the heart like wine at Easter-tide;
Having earlier tried
False loves in plenty; oh! my cup of praise
Brims over, and I know I'll feel small sorrow,
Confess no sins and make no weak delays
If death ends all and I must die to-morrow."

But on the firestep, waiting to attack,
He cursed, prayed, sweated, wished the proud words back.

THE DEAD FOX HUNTER

We found the little captain at the head;
His men lay well aligned.
We touched his hand—stone-cold—and he was dead,
And they, all dead behind,
Had never reached their goal, but they died well;
They charged in line, and in the same line fell.

The well-known rosy colours of his face
Were almost lost in grey.
We saw that, dying and in hopeless case,
For others' sake that day
He'd smothered all rebellious groans: in death
His fingers were tight clenched between his teeth.

For those who live uprightly and die true
Heaven has no bars or locks,
And serves all taste.... Or what's for him to do
Up there, but hunt the fox?
Angelic choirs? No, Justice must provide
For one who rode straight and at hunting died.

So if Heaven had no Hunt before he came,
Why, it must find one now:
If any shirk and doubt they know the game,
There's one to teach them how:
And the whole host of Seraphim complete
Must jog in scarlet to his opening Meet.

IT'S A QUEER TIME

It's hard to know if you're alive or dead
When steel and fire go roaring through your head.

One moment you'll be crouching at your gun
Traversing, mowing heaps down half in fun:
The next, you choke and clutch at your right breast
No time to think—leave all—and off you go ...
To Treasure Island where the Spice winds blow,
To lovely groves of mango, quince and lime—
Breathe no goodbye, but ho, for the Red West!
It's a queer time.

You're charging madly at them yelling "Fag!"
When somehow something gives and your feet drag.
You fall and strike your head; yet feel no pain
And find ... you're digging tunnels through the hay
In the Big Barn, 'cause it's a rainy day.
Oh springy hay, and lovely beams to climb!
You're back in the old sailor suit again.
It's a queer time.

Or you'll be dozing safe in your dug-out—
A great roar—the trench shakes and falls about—
You're struggling, gasping, struggling, then ... hullo!
Elsie comes tripping gaily down the trench,
Hanky to nose—that lyddite makes a stench—
Getting her pinafore all over grime.
Funny! because she died ten years ago!
It's a queer time.

The trouble is, things happen much too quick;
Up jump the Bosches, rifles thump and click,
You stagger, and the whole scene fades away:
Even good Christians don't like passing straight
From Tipperary or their Hymn of Hate
To Alleluiah-chanting, and the chime
Of golden harps ... and ... I'm not well to-day ...
It's a queer time.

1915

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

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

OVER THE BRAZIER

What life to lead and where to go
After the War, after the War?
We'd often talked this way before
But I still see the brazier glow
That April night, still feel the smoke
And stifling pungency of burning coke.

I'd thought: "A cottage in the hills,
North Wales, a cottage full of books,
Pictures and brass and cosy nooks
And comfortable broad window-sills,
Flowers in the garden, walls all white,
I'd live there peacefully, and dream and write."

But Willy said "No, Home's no good
Old England's quite a hopeless place
I've lost all feeling for my race:
But France has given me heart and blood
Enough to last me all my life
I'm off to Canada with my wee wife.

"Come with us, Mac, old thing," but Mac
Drawled: "No, a Coral Isle for me,
A warm green jewel in the South Sea.
There's merit in a lumber shack
And labour is a grand thing ... but
Give me my hot beach and my cocoanut."

So then we built and stocked for Willy
A log-hut, and for Mac a calm
Rockabye cradle on a palm—
Idyllic dwellings—but this silly
Mad War has now wrecked both, and what
Better hopes has my little cottage got?

July, 1915.

Transcriber's Notes

Minor punctuation and printer errors repaired.

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

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