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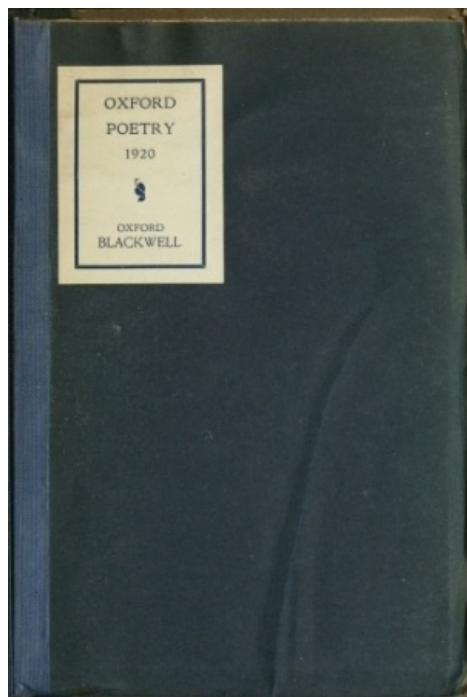
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OXFORD POETRY, 1920 ***



**OXFORD POETRY
1920**

Uniform with this Volume

OXFORD POETRY, 1914
(Out of Print)

OXFORD POETRY, 1915

OXFORD POETRY, 1916

OXFORD POETRY, 1917

OXFORD POETRY, 1918

OXFORD POETRY, 1919

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OXFORD POETRY, 1917-1919,

OXFORD POETRY 1920

EDITED BY
V. M. B., C. H. B. K., A. P.

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BASIL BLACKWELL
1920

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SHEET LIGHTNING

WHEN on the green the rag-tag game had stopt,
And red the lights through alehouse curtains glowed,
The clambering brake drove out and took the road.
Then on the stern moors all the babble dropt
Among those merry men, who felt the dew
Sweet to the soul and saw the southern blue
Thronged with heat lightning leagues and leagues abroad,
Working and whickering; snake-like; winged and clawed;
Or like old carp lazily rising and shouldering,
Long the slate cloud flank shook with the death-white smouldering;
Yet not a voice.

The night drooped oven-hot;
Then where the turnpike pierced the black wood plot,
Tongues wagged again and each man felt the grim
Destiny of the hour speaking through him:
And then tales came of dwarfs on Starling Hill,
And those young swimmers drowned at the roller mill,
Where on the drowsiest noon the undertow
Famishing for life boiled like a pot below:
And how two higglers at the "Walnut Tree"
Had curst the Lord in thunderstorm and He
Had struck them into soot with lightning then—
It left the pitchers whole, it killed the men.
Many a lad and many a lass was named
Who once stept bold and proud—but death had tamed
Their revel on the eve of May: cut short
The primrosing and promise of good sport,
Shut up the score book, laid the ribbands by.

Such bodings mustered from the fevered sky;
But now the spring well through the honeycomb
Of scored stone rumbling tokened them near home,
The whip lash clacked, the jog-trot sharpened, all
Sang "Farmer's Boy" as loud as they could bawl,
Till at the "Walnut Tree" the homeward brake
Stopt for hoarse ribaldry to brag and slake.

The weary wildfire faded from the dark
While this one damned the parson, that the clerk;
And anger's balefire forked from the unbarred blade
At word of notches missed or stakes not paid:
While Joe the driver stooped with oath to find
A young jack rabbit in the roadway, blind
Or dazzled by the lamps, as stiff as steel
With fear. Joe beat its brain out on the wheel.

FOREFATHERS

HERE they went with smock and crook,
Toiled in the sun, lolled in the shade,
Here they mudded out the brook
And here their hatchet cleared the glade:
Harvest-supper woke their wit,
Huntsman's moon their wooings lit.

From this church they led their brides;
From this church themselves were led
Shoulder-high; on these waysides
Sat to take their beer and bread:
Names are gone—what men they were
These their cottages declare.

Names are vanished, save the few
In the old brown Bible scrawled,
These were men of pith and thew,
Whom the city never called;
Scarce could read or hold a quill:
Built the barn, the forge, the mill.

On the green they watched their sons
Playing till too dark to see,
As their fathers watched them once,
As my father once watched me;
While the bat and beetle flew
On the warm air webbed with dew.

Unrecorded, unrenowned,
Men from whom my ways begin,
Here I know you by your ground,
But I know you not within—
All is mist, and there survives
Not one moment of your lives.

Like the bee that now is blown
Honey-heavy on my hand
From the toppling tansy-throne
In the green tempestuous land,—
I'm a-Maying now, nor know
Who made honey long ago.

SONNET

QUIETLY the old men die, in carven chairs
Nodding to silence by the extinguished hearth;
Their days are as a treasure nothing worth,
For all their joy is stolen by the years.
The striving and the fierce delights and fears
Of youth trouble them not; for them the earth
Is dead; in their cold hearts naught comes to birth
Save ghosts: they are too old even for tears.

As to the breast of some slow moving stream,
Close girt with sentinel trees on either side,
The sear leaves flutter down and silently
Glide onward on its dark November dream,
So peacefully upon the quiet tide
They steal out to the still moon-silvered sea.

BOAR'S HILL, OCTOBER, 1919

TALL slender beech-trees, whispering, touched with fire,
Swaying at even beneath a desolate sky;
Smouldering embers aflame where the clouds hurry by
To the wind's desire.

Dark sombre woodlands, rain-drenched by the scattering shower,
Spindle that quivers and drops its dim berries to earth—
Mourning, perhaps, as I mourn here alone for the dearth
Of a happier hour.

Can you still see them, who always delighted to roam
Over the Hill where so often together we trod
When winds of wild autumn strewed summer's dead leaves on the sod,
Ere your steps turned home?

THE LAMENT OF THE DEMOBILIZED

"FOUR years," some say consolingly. "Oh well,
What's that? You're young. And then it must have been
A very fine experience for you!"
And they forget
How others stayed behind, and just got on—
Got on the better since we were away.
And we came home and found
They had achieved, and men revered their names,
But never mentioned ours;
And no one talked heroics now, and we
Must just go back, and start again once more.
"You threw four years into the melting-pot—
Did you indeed!" these others cry. "Oh well,
The more fool you!"
And we're beginning to agree with them.

DAPHNE

SUNRISE and spring, and the river a gleam in the morning,
Life at its freshest, like flowers in the dawn-dew of May,
Hope, and Love's dreams the dim hills of the future adorning,
Youth of the world, just awake to the glory of day—

Is she not part of them, golden and fair and undaunted,
Glad with the triumph of runners ahead in the race,
Free as a child by no shadows or memories haunted,
Challenging Death to his solemn and pitiful face?

Sunset and dusk, and the stars of a mellow September,
Sombre grey shadows, like Sleep stealing over the grass,
Autumn leaves blown through the chill empty lanes of November,
Sorrow enduring, though Youth with its rhapsodies pass—

Are they not part of her, sweet with unconscious compassion,
Ready to shoulder our burden of life with a jest,
Will she not make them her own in her light-hearted fashion,
Sadder than we in her song, in her laughter more blest?

UNTO DUST

NOT with a crown of thorns about his head
But with a single rose in his white hand,
Fairer than Death herself, he joins the dead,
He that could laugh at life, yet understand.
No veils are rent in twain, or unknown fears
Fall on the crowd who crucify my lord;
Lay him to rest, while poetry and tears
Be the last gifts his mourning friends accord.
Cast not white flowers on one who loved but red,
Leave him the dust who found in dust the praise
Only of life, and, now that he is dead
Surely in death is fair a thousand ways.
Leave him in peace, a poem to the end—
He was the man I loved: I was his friend.

THE PORPOISE

THE ocean-cleaving porpoise goes
Thrashing the waves with fins of gold,
Butting the waves with brows of steel,
From palm-fringed archipelagos
To coasts of coral, where the bold
Cannibal drives a pointed keel.

And round and round the world he runs,
A golden rocket trailing fire,
Out-distancing the moon and stars,
Leaving the pale abortive suns
To paint their dreams of dead desire
On faint horizons. Nothing mars

His constant course, though storms may rend
The charging waves from strand to strand,
Though Love may wait with fingers curled
To clutch him at the current's bend,
Though Death may dart an eager hand
To drag him underneath the world!

Still threading depths of pearl and rose,
Derisive, gay, and overbold,
Who will not hear, who will not feel,
The ocean-cleaving porpoise goes,
Thrashing the waves with fins of gold,
Butting the waves with brows of steel!

BONGWI'S THEOLOGY

THIS is the wisdom of the ape
Who yelps beneath the moon—
'Tis God who made me in his shape;
He is a great baboon.
'Tis he who tilts the moon askew
And fans the forest trees:
The Heavens, which are broad and blue,
Provide him his trapeze.
He swings with tail divinely bent
Around those azure bars,
And munches, to his soul's content,
The kernels of the stars.
And when I die, his loving care
Shall raise me from the sod,
To learn the perfect Mischief there,
The Nimbleness of God!

THREE SONNETS

FOR RANDOLPH HUGHES

I

SUCH beauty is the magic of old kings
Who webbed enchantments on the bowls of night,
Who stole the ocean-coral for their rings,
And samite-curls of mermaids for their light;
Who sent their envoys from the courts of Kand,
To find the blue-flowered crown of ecstasy
That grows beneath a Titan's quiet hand.
The beauty that is yours is grown to me
More fine than furthest snows in golden Ind,
More fair indeed than doves, who draw the cars
Of purpurate belief in monarch's mind,
With benediction of the ultimate stars.
 Because of all this knowledge born of you,
 Raise up my faith in stone, and keep men true.

II

Always your eyes, your hair, your cheek, your voice,
Impel the wish I had a magic art;
Your beauty's kind can perfectly rejoice
With delicate music all a poet's heart,
As voice of summer over hills of joy.
Oh, you are utterly of beauty's dance,
Such kind of rhythmic beauty they employ,
Where Pheidias shakes the Parthenon with prance
Of his proud steeds, and prouder youths show us
The glory of a fair Athenian day.
Your beauty lived before tumultuous
Chattering knaves sped time and faith away,
 Before the chime for Babylon was rung,
 Or from the cross men found the stars were hung!

III

My love of most complete and dearest worth,
Has ever breath of years, one day all spent,
Mingled with thought of present smiling earth?
Have you bethought you how so soon is sent
To this poor passionate heart the Worm of Death
With twined and intimate corrupt caress?
Have you bethought you, how that your dear breath,
Bathing the rose upon your mouth, shall press
One day no more betwixt its petalled home?
How all exceeding beauties exquisite
Of limbs, of eyes, of hair, of cheek, shall come
One day perhaps within that open night,
 Where sheep go plaintive on a lone highway,
 And ecstasy of love is far away?

THE MOON-CLOCK

TICK-TOCK! the moon, that pale round clock,
Her big face peering, goes tick-tock!

Metallic as a grasshopper
The far faint tickings start and stir.

All night tinily you can hear
Tick-tock tinkling down the sheer

Steep falls of space. Minute, aloof,
Here is no praise, here no reproof.

Remote in voids star-purged of sense,
Tick-tock in stark indifference!

From ice-black lands of lack and rock,
The two swords shake and clank tick-tock.

In the dark din of the day's vault
Demand thy headlong soul shall halt

One moment. Hearken, taut and tense,
In the vast Silence beyond sense,

The moon! From the hushed heart of her,
Metallic as a grasshopper,

Patient though earth may writhe and rock,
Imperturbably, tock, tick-tock!

Till, boastful earth, your forests wilt
In grotesque death. Till death shall silt,

Loud-blooded man, her unchecked sands
From feet and warped expiring hands

Through fatuous channels of the thinned
Brain. Till all the clangours which have dinned

Through your arched ears are only this,
Tick-tock down blank eternities,

Where still the sallow death's-head ticks
As stars burn down like candle-wicks.

COLD BRANCH IN THE BLACK AIR

WHO taps? You are not the wind tapping?
No! Not the wind!

You straining and moaning there,
Are you a cold branch in the black air
Which the storm has skinned?

*No! Not a cold branch!
Not the wind!*

Who are you? Who are you?

*But you loved me once,
You drank me like wine.
The dead wood simmers in my skull. I am rotten.
And your blood is red still and you have forgotten,
And my blood was yours once and yours mine!*

Are you there still? O fainter, O further ... nothing!
Nothing taps!

Surely you straining and moaning there,
You were only a cold branch in the black air?
... Or a door perhaps?

I SEEK A WILD STAR

WHAT seek you in this hoarse hard sand
That shuffles from your futile hand?
Your limbs are wry. With salt despair
All day the scant winds freeze your hair.
What mystery in the barren sand
Seek you to understand?

*All day the acute winds' finger-tips
Flay my skin and cleave my lips.
But though like fame about my skull
Leap the gibes of the cynic gull,
I shall not go from this place. I
Seek through all curved vacancy
Though the sea taunt me and frost scar,
I seek a star, a star!*

Why seek you this, why seek you this
Of all distraught futilities?
The tide slides closer. The tide's teeth
Shall bite your body with keen death!
Of all unspaced things that are
Vain, vain, most hideously far,
Why seek you then a star?

*I seek a wild star, I that am
Eaten by earth and all her shame;
To whom fields, towns are a close clot
Of mud whence the worm dieth not;
To whom all running water is
Besnagged with timeless treacheries,
Who in a babe's heart see designed
Mine own distortion and the blind
Lusts of all my kind!
Hence of all things that are
Vain, most hideously far,
A star, I seek, a star!*

MORNING PHOENIX

IN my body lives a flame,
Flame that burns me all the day,
When a fierce sun does the same,
I am charred away.

Who could keep a smiling wit,
Roasted so in heart and hide,
Turning on the sun's red spit,
Scorched by love inside?

Caves I long for and cold rocks,
Minnow-peopled country brooks,
Blundering gales of Equinox,
Sunless valley-nooks.

Daily so I might restore
Calcined heart and shrivelled skin,
A morning phoenix with proud roar
Kindled new within.

CANDLEMAS

THE conversation waned and waxed,
I was there: *you* were there:
Doubtless a few were overtaxed,
Talking was more than they could bear.

The aura of each candle-flame
Excited me, excited you;
I felt you in each diadem,
Now in the yellow, now the blue.

The conversation waxed and waned:
Question, reply; question, reply:
We, for our intercourse, disdained
Such palpable machinery.

Columnar in transparent gloom,
Symbolical, inviolate,
Those candles held the spell of some
Campanile or minaret,

Which still takes in, as it exhales,
The mood of joy or orison;
With hoarded ceremonials
Enfranchising communion—

Till every spoken word or thought,
However alien and profane,
Becomes the medium and resort
Where spirits spirits entertain;

So, idle talk's quintessences
Gleamed in the candles' radiance
With gathered stores of unproved bliss:
The multiplied inheritance

Of each succeeding moment.... More
Perfect in form the flames appeared;
Their arduous strivings overbore
Slight wayward wisps that swayed and veered.

They changed their contours, one and all,
Carefully, persistently,
With efforts economical
That had their will of you and me,—

For we somehow were party to
The issue of their enterprise;
Confounded in their overthrow,
Triumphant in their victories.

The alternation of each flame
—Thinning here—swelling there—
Compell'd our souls into the same
Compass,—ampler or narrower.

We knew that when those luminous spires
Hung upwards, pacified, and tranc'd,
Pois'd betwixt all and no desires,
Beyond their accidents advanc'd,—

We, their adepts, might acquiesce:
The promised consummation
Would drown our wills in its excess,
And mingle both our souls in one.

When suddenly a permanence,
—A flutter of wings before rest—
Drew down to those flame-forms: our sense
Was steeped in it, folded, caress'd....

A casual devastating gust
(The jolt, the sickening recoil!)
Our universe in chaos thrust;
And, not content to spoil

Our husbanded endeavour, threw
A mocking, flickering light,
Devour'd by shadows, on us two:
The talk became more bright

the talk became more bright.

We entered into it with zest;
Question, reply; question, reply:
And lookers-on were much impressed
By our inane garrulity.

ONE SOLDIER

To GEORGE WRIGHT

HEAP the earth upon this head.
Nature, like a wistful child,
Clings unto the clay she fed,
Shatters it—unreconciled
Moans the ashes of her dead.
Heap the earth upon this head.

Chanter of the lonely tombs,
Lift him to thy harmony—
Moulded in the million wombs
That breed the soul's nobility!...
Such the man that perished?
Heap the earth upon this head.

Our masters brood and preach and plot,
And mourn in monuments, not tears,
The man the centuries forgot
Who builded up the mighty years!
Faded are the fights they led,
Piteous the blood they shed.
Heap the earth upon this head.

Heap, heap the earth upon this head,
Brother he was to you, to me—
Lived, lusted, joyed and wept.... *They* spent
Their verbal earnings, and he went
And fought for human liberty,
And died. And politics were free.

Raise, raise memorials to our Dead....
But heap the earth upon this head.
Oh! heap the earth upon this head.

THE DEAD MAN

I SEE men walk wild ways with love,
Along the wind their laughter blown
Strikes up against the singing stars;
But I lie all alone.
When love has stricken laughter dead
And tears their silly hearts in twain,
They long for easeful death, but I
Am hungry for their pain.

THE ROLLING SAINT

UNDER the crags of Teiriwch,
The door-sills of the Sun,
Where God has left the bony earth
Just as it was begun;
Where clouds sail past like argosies
Breasting the crested hills,
With mainsail and foretop-sail
That the thin breeze fills;
With ballast of round thunder,
And anchored with the rain;
With a long shadow sounding
The deep, far plain:
Where rocks are broken playthings
By petulant gods hurled,
And Heaven sits a-straddle
On the roof-ridge of the World.
—Under the crags of Teiriwch
Is a round pile of stones:
Large stones, small stones,
—White as old bones;
Some from high places,
Or from the lake's shore;
And every man that passes
Adds one more:
The years it has been growing
Verge on a hundred score.

For in the cave of Teiriwch
That scarce holds a sheep,
Where plovers and rock-conies
And wild things sleep,
A woman lived for ninety years
On bilberries and moss
And lizards, and small creeping things,
And carved herself a cross:
But wild hill robbers
Found the ancient saint
And dragged her to the sunlight,
Making no complaint:
Too old was she for weeping,
Too shrivelled, and too dry:
She crouched and mumle-mumled
And mumled to the sky.
No breath had she for wailing,
Her cheeks were paper-thin:
She was, for all her holiness
As ugly as sin.
They cramped her in a barrel
—All but her bobbing head.
—And rolled her down from Teiriwch
Until she was dead:
They took her out, and buried her
—Just broken bits of bone
And rags and skin: and over her
Set one small stone:
But if you pass her sepulchre
And add not one thereto
The ghost of that old murdered Saint
Will roll in front of you
The whole night through.

The clouds sail past in argosies
And cold drips the rain:
The whole world is far and high
Above the tilted plain.
The silent mist floats eerily,
And I am here alone:
*Dare I pass the place by,
And cast not a stone?*

THE SONG OF PROUD JAMES

(FROM "THE ENGLISHMAN.")

“**I**F kith and kin disowned you,
And all your friends were dead?”
—I’d buy a spotted handkerchief
To flaunt upon my head:
I’d resurrect my maddest clothes,
And gaily would I laugh,
And climb the proud hills scornfully
With swinging cherry staff.

“But when you’d crossed the sky-line,
And knew you were alone?”
—I’d cast away the hollow sham,
I’d kick the ground, and groan,
And tear my coloured handkerchief
And snap my staff; and then
I’d curse the God that built me up
To break me down again.

HERE'S A DAFFODIL

HERE'S a daffodil
Nodding to the hill,
Topsy in the sunlight
Drinking his fill.

Here's a violet
Pearled in dew as yet,
Smiling in the wood shade,
Sweet coquette!

NURSERY RHYMES

I

QUEEN Anne is dead
 'Tis often said,
For my part I agree.
But she lived full ten score years ago
 And so
She ought to be.

II

There was a scholar
Of Oxford Town.
He read till his wits were blunt.
He put his gown
On upside down,
And his cap
On back to front.

SUMMER

FULL of unearthly peace lies river-water,
Glaucous and here and there with irised circles:
Now subdued melody rises from the wreaths
Of whirling flies, their mazy conflict driving
To melancholy lamp-images in the pool:
An unseen fish greyly breeds lubric rounds
Up-reaching to the thrill of populous air:
O hour supreme for poised and halting thought!
Down colonnade on colonnade of rose
The immense Symbols move augustly on;
Mystery, her stony eyes revealed a little,
Not cumbered longer by the veils of noise:
Evening, a lithe and virginal dream-figure,
Wavering between a green cloak and a blue,
And, robed at length, turning with exquisite
And old despair towards the gate of Dawn:
And Fate, bemused awhile and half withdrawn,
Charmed to short rest between grim Day and Night.

“IPSE EGO ...”

MARSILIO sighed: and drew a rough discord
From his guitar, and sang so to us listeners:
“I too have mounted every step of ice
And dragged my bleeding ankles, hope-enthralled,
To Heaven’s blessed door; when instantly
From side-nooks rising tripped the outer angels,
In thin, light-hammered armour, giggling boys,
But muscular, and with concerted charge
Seized my poor feet, and flung me laughing, laughing,
Laughing, down, down among the insect men
Who look up never, antwise busy—crawling:
Alas! the burden of their feathery laughter,
More bitter than my fall, has pried a passage
Into my luckless head, and ‘Ha-ha, ha-ha!’
Maddens its walls and frets them ruinously:
Beware my flitting pestilence: I’ll not gage
That certain easier outlets may not bring
The noise out and about and thick among you:
O bitter, bitter days for those it visits!”
And murmuring “bitter” with a fading sadness
Marsilio went: the assembly all were silent.

OPENING SCENE FROM "AMPHITRYON"

ALCMENA. THREE ASTROLOGERS

ALCMENA

I HAVE commanded you as often of old
To ply the doctor's trade with my disease,
To cure me or to kill; for in whose veins
Courses the age-long poison of despair,
Seeks for himself no gentle surgery,
Nor wishes for the touch of tender hands
Upon his body.

FIRST ASTROLOGER

Something of your need
Has been revealed us. Yet should there remain
No secret hid from the physician's eye.

ALCMENA

It has been said that from the lips of queens
Should come no word more bitter than sweet honey.
If you adjudge me queen, let this too pass
That I must act unqueenly. In my soul
Drips wine more bitter than the taste of gall.

FIRST ASTROLOGER

When roses bloom most fully, death is near.

ALCMENA

You too know this?

SECOND ASTROLOGER

We know that life glides slowly
But death is quicker than a lightning stroke.

ALCMENA

Is it of me that you have gained this wisdom?

THIRD ASTROLOGER

The grand revolving spheres of heaven teach
The mind that hears their music. We have learned
To listen through the clamour of all noons
With evening in the heart.

ALCMENA

He does not live
Who hears no noon-day clamour about his ears.

FIRST ASTROLOGER

And you, Queen, that have lived and now confront
Death or his shadow deep within your soul,
Have you in life such wisdom garnered up
As may disarm the heart's rebellion?
Wherefore then are we summoned?

SECOND ASTROLOGER

The garden of life
Is barren for you, bearing little fruit,
And yields no store for hungry days ahead.

THIRD ASTROLOGER

To me you seem as one that has in thought
A hidden sin, and seeks an easy priest
Who shall with smooth and flowing words of grace
Persuade it from the heart.

ALCMENA

Nay, I am sinless.

FIRST ASTROLOGER

You are still young to be thus weary of life.

ALCMENA

There comes to every man a sudden time
When he undoes the bolts that bar his heart
Displaying hidden shame and scars concealed.
Such season is the present. Hear me now;
For I am sick and pale with lingering
Over a mystery that has no clue
Created idly by an idle brain.
Astrologers, thrice mighty in yourselves,
Say whence crept into me this discontent,
This fretfulness of mine. Say whence arose
My malady, so cunning in its ways,
That I tormented have no skill to guide
My doctors to the secret. Day by day
I feel the heavy burden of the flesh
Grow heavier. Your words rang true indeed.
Though I am young, I am grown weary of life.
The tedious cycle of each passing day
Like streams of dripping tears from blinded eyes
Falls in the cup of my calamity;
While thoughts, such as you guess, are often here,
Bringing a sweet temptation.

I have tried

All means of remedy. This perfumed air,
This gold and ivory, these purple robes
Have caused no change. The mute insistent hours
Wait for me still, interminably slow.
And, as in mental pain a man will crave
For any fierce sensation of the flesh
To rid his agony, so I have craved
The frenzied lashing of tempestuous rain,
The heat of flame, the sharpened fang of frost.
I have gone forth at midnight with no robe,
And walked bare-footed over stony ground
While wind and rain have done their worst on me.

I have kissed flame and held these hands in fire;
These hands have taken the scourge, that is for slaves,
To beat my body. Hear then all my curse.
Neither the blade of sharp-projecting flint
Nor wind nor rain nor burning tongue of flame
Nor knotted scourge can leave a mark on me.
These lips are no less red since they were kissed
By glowing coal; these hands are yet untorn.
Such is my fate, with flesh insensible
To suffer from a mind which has no love
And no distraction. Have it as you will,
I am a shipwreck far on lonely seas
With neither oars aboard, nor land in sight,
Nor mast, nor mast for fluttering rags of sail.

FIRST ASTROLOGER

When you have seen the solemn moon in tears
With long green tresses dipped in a purple sea,
And noted in each tear a breaking heart,
A lump of salty crystal, then your dreams
Will give you counsel which we cannot give.

SECOND ASTROLOGER

We are empowered to tell you what has been
And what shall be, but this created image
Of your own thought eludes our groping hand.

THIRD ASTROLOGER

Soon he shall come to you!
That stung your heart?

ALCMENA

O wailing winds, scatter these words away
As chaff unfruitful to unfruitful soil.

FIRST ASTROLOGER

As glints the jewel in the toad's brown head—

SECOND ASTROLOGER

As lurks a bitter sting in honeyed words—

THIRD ASTROLOGER

As a foul plague lies hid beneath the skin—

ALCMENA

You wrong me.

THIRD ASTROLOGER

Nay, your heart has uttered it.
When the strong arms of young Amphitryon—

FIRST ASTROLOGER

I hear a voice.

ALCMENA

O God! the dream returns.

THIRD ASTROLOGER

The dream was not, then, of Amphitryon?

ALCMENA

May the royal hand of Zeus deliver me.

[ZEUS enters in the form of Amphitryon.]

ZEUS

Your task is ended. Go, astrologers,
Taking your admonition to such ears
As are in need of it. Go silently.

[The ASTROLOGERS go out.]

ZEUS

Still you pursue their empty sorceries?

ALCMENA

Will you now weary me again? You drive
My friends away like dogs. I follow them.

ZEUS

A sullen greeting to the traveller.

ALCMENA

Have I not told you often how it is
With me and you? Or must you ask again
And hear me through unreasoned reasonings
To the last drop of bitterness? And yet——

ZEUS

Why gaze so strangely on me?

ALCMENA

I had thought
Your journey would be longer.

ZEUS

No, alas!

ALCMENA

What brings you here to probe the core of my heart
With your unspoken question?

ZEUS

We have need
No longer of these lamps. Quench them. The dawn
Arises in the East.

ALCMENA

Since when am I
Become your slave?

ZEUS

Since you obeyed my word.

ALCMENA

I was no friend to such obedience
In the dead days that were my life's design.

ZEUS

You tremble. Speak your fear.

ALCMENA

Heart's utterance
Were mockery, if spoken by the tongue.

ZEUS

Yet, be assured, nothing is hid from me.

ALCMENA

Unmoving figure of Amphitryon
I knew and hated, when you crossed the threshold,
Hope seemed to step beside you.

ZEUS

Hope is mine.

ALCMENA

Then say, where have you found the keys of life,
That you unlock its portals suddenly?

ZEUS

At my command all doors are set ajar.

ALCMENA

The miserable forebodings of the night
Have fallen from me like the gossamer
Which spiders weave until a master-hand
Sweeps clean their tracery. Mark you a change
In me, as I in you?

ZEUS

I am unchanging,
But, till this moment, me you have not known.

ALCMENA

Or known myself save as a falling leaf,
The toy of winds, uncherished and unloved,
Gliding to earth and slow decay in earth
Of what was green and young.

ZEUS

When you were younger
And guarded still the pitiable illusion
That life is good and destiny exalted,
Did you not dream perhaps of sacrifice
In which yourself as immolated victim
Should satisfy delirious desire,
Wedded at last in death with strength,—which marriage
Humanly shaped has never learned to yield?

ALCMENA

Your voice has in it the power of new command
To pierce my secret.

ZEUS

Naught is hid from me.

ALCMENA

My soul is weak with longing for your counsel.

ZEUS

When Semele, with lightning-darted flame
Engirdled, woke with knowledge she must die,
Having aspired to touch the majesty
Of the omnipotent, in no wise dismayed
Was she consumed with that unquenchable fire
Which burns all veils that overspread the flesh.

ALCMENA

Whence came the thought of Semele to you?
And why this chain of words now coiled on me
As a predestined victim?

ZEUS

I myself

Blaze with the fire of Semele. This hand
Shall rend the veil once more. Myself am hope,
Sole arbiter of germinating life,
The driver of the lusty winds of morning,
The cloud-compeller, dancer of the dance
Wherein the sea is festive and the hills
Nod musical assent, the charioteer
That drags the world behind his flashing wheels,
Bringer of life and change that is called death
And vibrant longing, setter of an end
To fear and doubt, a darting two-edged sword
That heals the wounds created of itself,
The crystal-veined one, in whose blood there flows
The flame of life—in such wise apprehend
Me standing here, and in such wise remark
The honour I have done you.

ALCMENA

Open-eyed

At last, I see a spirit stands beside me.
For this cause I grew pale and bent my head
In sweet confusion. Bringer of release,
Even if it should be my worship falls
Before a devil from hell, behold I kneel
To kiss the fragrance of your garment's hem.

ART

FATE from an unimaginable throne
Scatters a million roses on the world;
They fall like shooting stars across the sky
Glittering:

 Under a dark clump of trees
Man, a gaunt creature, squats upon the ground
Ape-like, and grins to see those brilliant flowers
Raining through the dark foliage:

 He tries
Sometimes to clutch at them, but in his hands
They melt like snow.

 Then in despair he turns
Back to his wigwam, stirs the embers, pats
His bleary-eyed dog, and smokes a pipe, and soon,
Wrapped in his blankets, drowns off to sleep.

But all his dreams are full of flying flowers.

LIFE AND LUXURY

I HELD imagination's candle high
To thread the pitchy cavern, life. A whisper
Dazed all the dark with sweetness oversweet,
A lithe body languished around my neck.
"Do out this unavailing light;" she pleaded.
"Soother is darkness. How may candle strive
With topless, bleak, obdurate blanks of space?
It can but cold the darkness else were warm.
Leave, leave to search so bitter-toilfully
Unthroughgone silence, leave and follow me;
For I will lead where many riches lie,
Where rippling silks and snow-soft cushions, rare
Cool wines, and delicacies unearthly sweet,
And all the comfort flesh of man craves more.
We two shall dallying uncurl the long
And fragrant hours." She reached a slender arm
Slowly along mine to the light. I flung her
Off, down. My candle showed her cheeks raddled,
Her hindweed pressure made me sick and mad;
I flung her back to the gloom. Her further hand
Clanked; hidden gyves fell ringing to the rock.
Peering behind her barely I could discern
Outstretching bodies clamped along the floor,
Unmoving most and silent, some uneasy,
Stirring and moaning. Smothery clutches came
Of slothful scents and fingered at my throat;
But, brushing by them, unaccompanied
I held aloft my rushlight in the cave
And searched for beauty through the cleaner air.
Thus far in parable. Laugh loud, O world,
Laugh loud and hollow. There are those would spurn
Your joys unjoyous and your acid fruits.
They would not tread the corpsy paths of commerce
Nor juggle with men's bones; they would not chaffer
Their souls for strumpet pleasure. Cast them out,
Deny what little they would ask of life,
Assail, starve, torture, murder them, and laugh.
Shall it be war between us? Better war
Than faint submission—better death. And yet
I would not, no, nor shall not die. How weaponed
Shall I go passionate against your host?
How, cautelous, elude your calm blockade?

Of older days heart-free the poet roved
Along the furrowed lanes, and watched the robin
Squat in a puddle, whirl his stumpy wings,
And tweet amid the tempest he aroused;
A hare would hirple on ahead (keep back,
Let her get out of sight; quick, cross yourself),
Or taper weasel slink past over the road;
And, seeing native blossoms, breathing air
From English hills, what recked the wanderer
That barons threw no penny to his song?
Should he be hungered, he would seek some rill
And, scrambling down the hazel scarp, would walk
Wet-ankled up the stream until he found
A larger pool of cold, colourless water,
Full two-foot deep, scooped out of solid stone
By a chuckling trickle spated after rains.
There he would rest upon the bank, while slowly
His fingers crept along the crannied rock.
Poor starveling belly!—No, that lower fissure,
Straight, lipless grin like an unholy god's,
Reach out for that. The water stings to his armpit,
He hangs above the pool from head to waist,
His legs push tautly back for body's poise,
And careful, careful creep the sensitive fingers.

—Sudden touch of cold, wet silk.
Now flesh be one with brain! He lightly strokes
The slippery smoothness upward to the gills
And throws a twirling trout upon the grass.
Or where the rattle of the water slacks
To low leaf-whisper, there he gropes beneath
Root-knots that hug black, unctuous mould from toppling
To slutch the daylight stream. His wary nerves
Tell blunt teeth biting at his thumb. Stems swift

Ten blunt teeth biting at his thumb. Stormswill
 He snatches a heavy hand over his head.
 A floundering eel flops wildly to the floor,
 And glides for the water. Quick the hungry poet
 Spins round, whips out his knife, and shears the neck
 How firm soever gripped, the limber body
 Long after wriggles headless out of hand.
 But if he roam across foot-tangling heath
 And bracken, where no burble glads the root
 Of juicy grasses? If along his way
 Never a kingcup lifted bowls of light,
 Nor burly watermint with bludgeon scent,
 Beat down the fair, mild, slumbering meadowsweet?
 If no nearby forgetmenot looks up
 With frank and modest eye, no yellow flag
 Plays Harold crowned and girt by fearless pikes?
 No more he fails of ample fare; nor famine
 Drains out his blood and piecemeal drags his flesh
 From outward-leaping bones, till wrathful death,
 Grudging to lose a pebble from his cairn,
 Bears off the pitiful orts. For, stepping soft,
 He finds a rabbit gazing at the world
 With eyes in which not many moons have gleamed;
 And, raising a bawl of more expended breath
 Than fritter your burghers in a year of gabbling,
 He runs and hurls himself headlong on to it.
 Stunned at the cry, the rabbit waits and dithers;
 His muscles melt beneath him; "Pluck up strength,"
 He calls to his legs; "oh, stiffen, stiffen!" and still
 He waits and dithers. Now the trembling scale
 Of timeless pain crashes suddenly down,
 And life's a puffed-out flame.

Thus the poet
 Of bygone England (as an alchemist
 After ill magics and long labours wrought
 Seals in the flask his magisterium,
 Lest volatile it waste among the winds,
 And all men breathe a never-ageing youth)
 Found way to pend within his body life
 And what of pain or interwoven joy
 Life brings to poets. Friend, I do not gulp
 And weep with maudlin, sentimental tears,
 Lacking a late lamented golden age.
 The more of life was ever misery's,
 And Socrates won hemlock. Yet before
 Was man so constant enemy to man?
 Did earth grow bleak at all these purposeless,
 Rotting and blotting, roaking, smoking chimneys?
 Look, men are dying, women dying, children dying.
 They sell their souls for bread, and poison-filths
 Whiten their flesh, bow their bodies. Crippled,
 Consumption-spotted, feeble-minded, sullen,
 They seek, bewildered, out of black despair,
 The star of life; so, dying a Christian death,
 Lie seven a grave unheedful. "Bad as that?
 Put down five hundred on the Lord Mayor's list.
 After the cost of organizing's paid
 There'll still be something left. Besides, it looks well,
 And charity brings the firm new customers.
 Not that I hold with all this nonsense really.
 When I was young I'd nothing more than they,
 But I climbed, and trampled other people down.
 Why shouldn't they?" O murderers, look, look, look.
 No man but tramples, tramples on his neighbour,
 And these the lowest wretch and writhe and kick
 And crush the desperate lives of whom they can.
 I will not tread the corpsy path of commerce
 Nor juggle with men's bones. The world shall wend
 Those murderous ways. Not I, no, never I.
 You shall not gaol me round with city walls;
 I will not waste among your houses; roads
 That indiscriminate feel a thousand footings
 Shall not for mine augment their insolence.
 But, as of old the poet, poet now
 Shall hold a near communion with earth,
 Free from all traffic or truck with worldlihood:
 As poet one time lived of natural bounty,
 So now shall I. Yet differs even this.
 Me no man wronging still the world shall hound
 With interdict of food. Gamekeepers, bailiffs,
 And all the manlings vail and bob to lords
 Shall sturdy stand on decent English Law
 And threat my famine with a worse fate,
 The ceaseless monetaries of walls

the seasonless monotones of wains
That straitlier cabin than the closest town.
So let them threat. War stands between us. I
Take peril comrade, knowing a hazel scarp
That breaks down ragged to a scampering brook;
Knowing a hill whose deep-slit, slanting sides
Brave out the wind and shoulder the rough clouds through.

A FAR COUNTRY

THIS wood is older born than other woods:
The trees are God's imagining of trees,
Anemones
So pale as these
Have never laughed like children in far solitudes,
Shaking and breaking worldforweary moods
To pure and childish glees.

The drizzle from the mossed and plashing beck
Has carven glassy walls of pallid stone,
Where ferns have thrown
Fine silks unsewn,
Faint clouds unskied, that, one enchanted moment, check
And chalice waterdrops. They, silver grown,
With moons the darkness fleck.

THE MAGNANIMITY OF BEASTS

MAN—you who think you really know
The beast you gaze on in the show,
Nor see with what consummate art
Each animal enacts its part—
How different do they all appear
The moment that you are not there!
Then, fawns with liquid eyes a-flame
Pursue the bear, their nightly game;
Wolves shiver as the rabbit roars
And stretches his terrific claws;
While trembling tigers dare not sleep
For passionate, relentless sheep,
And frantic eagles through the skies
Are chased by angry butterflies.
—But beasts would suffer all confusions
Before they shattered man's illusions.

INTIMACY

SINCE I have seen you do those intimate things
That other men but dream of; lull asleep
The sinister dark forest of your hair,
And tie the bows that stir on your calm breast
Faintly as leaves that shudder in their sleep.
Since I have seen your stocking swallow up,
A swift black wind, the pale flame of your foot,
And deemed your slender limbs so meshed in silk
Sweet mermaid sisters drowned in their dark hair;
I have not troubled overmuch with food,
And wine has seemed like water from a well;
Pavements are built of fire, grass of thin flames.
All other girls grow dull as painted flowers
Or flutter harmlessly like coloured flies
Whose wings are tangled in the net of leaves
Spread by frail trees that grow behind the eyes.

GRAVE JOYS

TO PEGGY

WHEN our sweet bodies moulder under-ground,
Shut off from these bright waters and clear skies,
When we hear nothing but the sullen sound
Of dead flesh dropping slowly from the bone
And muffled fall of tongue and ears and eyes;
Perhaps, as each disintegrates alone,
Frail broken vials once brimmed with curious sense,
Our souls will pitch old Grossness from his throne,
And on the beat of unsubstantial wings
Soar to new ecstasies still more intense.
There the thin voice of horny, black-legged things
Shall thrill me as girls' laughter thrills me here,
And the cold drops a passing storm-cloud flings
Be my strong wine, and crawling roots and clods
My trees and hills, and slugs swift fallow deer.
There I shall dote upon a sexless flower
By dream-ghosts planted in my dripping brain,
And suck from those cold petals subtler power
Than from your colder, whiter flesh could fall,
Most vile of girls and lovelier than all.
But in your tomb the deathless She will reign
And draw new lovers out of rotting sods
That your lithe body may for ever squirm
Beneath the strange embraces of the worm.

ADVICE TO A GIRL FROM THE WARS

WEEP for me but one day,
Dry then your eyes;
Think, is a heap of clay
Worth a maid's sighs?

Sigh nine days if you can
For my waste blood;
Think then, you love a man
Whose face is mud;

Whose flesh and hair thrill not
At your faint touch,
Dear! limbs and brain will rot,
Dream not of such.

YEGOR

"What shall I write?" said Yegor.—TCHERKOV.

“WHAT shall I write?” said Yegor;
“Of the bright-plumed bird that sings
Hovering on the fringes of the forest,
Where leafy dreams are grown,
And thoughts go with silent flutterings,
Like moths by a dark wind blown?”

“Oh, write of those quiet women,
Beautiful, slim and pale,
Whose bodies glimmer under cool green waters,
Whose hands like lilies float
Tangled in the heavy purple veil
Of hair on their breast and throat.”

“Or write of swans and princes
Carved out of marble clouds,
Of the flowers that wither upon distant mountains,
Grey-pencilled in the brain;
Of fiercely hurrying night-born crowds
By the first swift sun-ray slain.”

“Nay, I will sing,” said Yegor,
“Of stranger things than these,
Of a girl I met in the fresh of morning,
A laughing, slender flame;
Of the slow stream’s song and the chant of bees,
In a land without a name.”

STRANGE ELEMENTS

WHEN my girl swims with me I think
She is a Shark with hungry teeth,
Because her throat that dazzles me
Is white as sharks are underneath.

And when she drags me down with her
Under the wave, she clings so tight,
She seems a deadly Water-snake
Who smothers me in that dim light.

Yet when we lie on the hot sand,
I find she cannot bite or hiss,
But she swears I’m a Tiger fierce
Who kills her slowly with a kiss.

THE BURDEN OF BABYLON^[A]

"It is in the soul that things happen."

[A] The lyrics from "The Burden of Babylon" appeared in OXFORD POETRY, 1919. The present editors have decided to reprint them with their context.

SCENE: *An upper chamber in the Palace of the King of Babylon. Dusk on a hot summer's evening. The voice of one singing far off beyond the palace-gardens is heard vaguely from time to time. The King is sitting by an open window.*

THE KING OF BABYLON

SINCE I am Babylon, I am the world.
The windy heavens and the rainy skies
Attend the earth in humble servitude.
And I am Babylon, I am the world:
The heavens and their powers attend on me.

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE NIGHT

*Babylon, the glory of the Kingdoms,
And the Chaldee's excellency,
Is become as Sodom and Gomorrah,
Whom God overthrew by the Sea.*

THE KING

Who is that fellow crying by the river?
I think I heard him lift his voice in praise
Of Babylon: some minstrelle seeking hire:
I need him not to tell me who I am,
For I am Baladan of Babylon.
The splendours of my sceptre, throne, and crown,
And all the awe that fills my royal halls,
The pomp that heralds me, the shout that follows,
Are flying shadows and reflections only
From the wide dazzlings of myself, the King.
This I conceive: and yet, we kings have labour
To apprehend ourselves imperially,
And see the blaze and lightnings of our person;
The thought of their own sovereignty amazes
The princelings even, and the lesser kings:
But I am Baladan of Babylon.

THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

*Never again inhabited,
Babylon, O Babylon
Even the wandering Arabian
From thy weary waste is gone.
Neither shall the shepherd tend his fold there,
Nor any green herb be grown:
It cometh in the night-time suddenly,
And Babylon is overthrown.*

THE KING

Pale from the east, the stars arise, and climb,
 And then grow bright, beholding Babylon;
 They would delay, but may not; so they pass,
 And fade and fall, bereft of Babylon.
 Quick from the Midian line the sun comes up,
 For he expects to see my palaces;
 And the moon lingers, even on the wane....
 Mine ancient dynasty, as yon great river,
 Euphrates, with his fountains in far hills,
 Arose in the blue morning of the years;
 And as yon river flows on into time,
 Unalterable in majesty, my line
 Survives in domination down the years.
 I know, but am concerned not, that some peoples,
 At the pale limits of the world, abide
 As yet beyond the circle of my sway,
 The miserable sons of meagre soil
 That needs much tillage ere the yield be good.
 I only wait until they ripen more,
 And fatten toward my final harvesting:
 When I am ready, I will reap them in.
 For it is written in the stars, and read
 Of all my wise men and astrologers,
 That I, and my great line of Babylon,
 Shall rule the world, and only find a bound
 Where the horizon's bounds are set, an end
 When the world ends; so shall all other lands,
 All languages, all peoples, and all tongues,
 Become a fable told of olden times,
 Deemed of our sons a thing incredulous.

THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

*Woeful are thy desolate palaces,
 Where doleful creatures lie,
 And wild beasts out of the islands
 In thy fallen chambers cry.
 Where now are the viol and the tabret?—
 But owls hoot in moonlight,
 And over the ruins of Babylon
 The satyrs dance by night.*

THE KING

That voice, that seems to hum my kingdom's glory
 Fails in the vast immensity of night,
 As fails all earthly praise of Him who hears
 The ceaseless acclamation of the stars.
 What needs there more?—the apple of the world,
 Grown ripe and juicy, rolls into my lap,
 And all the gods of Babylon, well pleased
 With blood of bulls and fume of fragrant things,
 Even while I take mine ease, attend on me:
 The figs do mellow, the olive, and the vine,
 And in the plains climb the big sycamores;
 My camels and my laden dromedaries
 Move in from eastward bearing odorous gums,
 And the Zidonians hew me cedar beams,
 Even tall cedars out of Lebanon;
 Euphrates floats his treasured freightage down,
 And all great Babylon is filled with spoil.
 Wherefore, upon the summit of the world,
 The utmost apex of this thronèd realm,
 I stand, as stands the driving charioteer,
 And steer my course right onward toward the stars.
 Mean-fated men my horses trample under,
 And my wine-bins have drained the blood of mothers,
 And smoothly my wheels run upon the necks
 Of babes and sucklings,—while I hold my way,
 Serene, supreme, secure in destiny,
 Because the gods perceive mine excellence,
 And entertain for mine imperial Person
 Peculiar favours... I am Babylon:
 Exceeding precious in the High One's eyes.

THE VOICE IN THE NIGHT

*Babylon is fallen, fallen,
And never shall be known again!
Drunken with the blood of my beloved,
And trampling on the sons of men.
But God is awake and aware of thee,
And sharply shines His sword,
Where over the earth spring suddenly
The hidden hosts of the Lord;
Armies of right and of righteousness,
Huge hosts, unseen, unknown:
And thy pomp, and thy revellings, and glory,
Where the wind goes, they are gone.*

FROST

UNNATURAL foliage pales the trees,
Frost in compassion of their death
Has kissed them, and his icy breath
Proclaims and silvers their election.
Death, wert thou beautiful as these,
We scarce would pray for resurrection.

VERA VENUSTAS

CORPORIS

PROUD Eastern Queene,
Borne forth in splendour to thy buriall.
What need of gems
To deck thee? Bear the Tyrian gauds aside.
Thy own dead loveliness outshines the pride
Of diadems.

ANIMÆ

O splendid hearte,
Scorned and afflicted, still thou needest not
Comfort of me.
What matter though the body be uncouth
Wherein thou art? Fear not. He seeth truth
Who gave it thee.

[To be chaunted as in a solemn Dumpe by such as fear God.]

A BABY

TWO days with puckered face of pain
The accidental baby cried,
And on the morning of the third
Unclenched her tiny hands, and died.

FROM THE GREEK

BILL Jupp lies 'ere, aged sixty year:
From Tavistock 'e came.
Single 'e bided, and 'e wished
'Is father'd done the same.

A DEVON RHYME

GNARLY and bent and deaf 's a post
Pore ol' Ezekiel Purvis
Goeth creepin' slowly up the 'ill
To the Commoonion Survis.

Tap-tappy-tappy up the haisle
Goeth stick and brassy ferule;
And Parson 'ath to stoopy down
And 'olley in ees yerole.

THE BIRD MAN

TO ERIC DICKINSON

IDREAD the parrots of the summer sun,
The harsh and blazing screams of July noon,
A riot of jays and peacocks and macaws.
There is some presage of big ardours due
Even in the pale flamingoes of the dawn;
While golden pheasants and hoopoes of the West
Burn fierce and proudly still, when he has set.

Better the winter wagtails of pied skies,
Cold ospreys of the north, cormorants of squall,
Brown wrens of rain, white silent owls of snow,
And bitterns of great clouds that in October
Sweep from the west at evening. Lovelier still
The night's black swans, the daws of starless night
(Daw-like to hide what's shiny), plovers and gulls
Of winds that cry on autumn afternoons....

These every one I love: but above these
Rarest of all my birds, I dearly love
The blue and silver herons of the moon.

CHRISTOPHER MARLYE

CHRISTOPHER MARLYE damned his God
In many a blasphemous mighty line,
—Being given to words and wenches and wine.

He wrote his Faustus, and laughed to see
How everyone feared his devils but he.

Christopher Marlye passed the gate,
Eager to stalk on the floor of Heaven,
Outface his God, and affront the Seven:

But Peter genially let him in,
Making no mention of all his sin.

And he got no credit for all he had done,
Though he grabbed a hold on the coat of God,
And bellowed his infamies one by one,
Blasphemy, lechery, thought, and deed ...

But nobody paid him the slightest heed.

And the devils and torments he thought to brave
He left behind, on this side of the grave.

Heigh-ho! for Christopher Marlye.

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