

# FIRES - BOOK II

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Author: Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

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FIRES  
BOOK II  
THE OVENS, AND OTHER TALES

BY  
WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON  
ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET  
M CM XII

*BY THE SAME WRITER*  
WOMENKIND (1912)  
DAILY BREAD (1910)  
THE STONEFOLDS (1907)  
ON THE THRESHOLD (1907)

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*Thanks are due to the editors of THE ENGLISH REVIEW, RHYTHM and THE NATION for leave to reprint some of these tales.*

## FIRES

## THE CRANE

The biggest crane on earth, it lifts  
 Two hundred ton more easily  
 Than I can lift my heavy head:  
 And when it swings, the whole world shifts,  
 Or so, at least, it seems to me,  
 As, day and night, adream I lie  
 Upon my crippled back in bed,  
 And watch it up against the sky.

My mother, hunching in her chair,  
 Day-long, and stitching trousers there—  
 At three-and-three the dozen pair...  
 She'd sit all night, and stitch for me,  
 Her son, if I could only wear...  
 She never lifts her eyes to see  
 The big crane swinging through the air.

But, though she has no time to talk,  
 She always cleans the window-pane,  
 That I may see it, clear and plain:  
 And, as I watch it move, I walk  
 Who never walked in all my days...  
 And, often, as I dream agaze,  
 I'm up and out: and it is I  
 Who swing the crane across the sky.  
 Right up above the wharf I stand,  
 And touch a lever with my hand,  
 To lift a bunch of girders high,  
 A truck of coal, a field of grain  
 In sacks, a bundle of big trees,  
 Or beasts, too frightened in my grip  
 To wonder at their skiey trip:  
 And then I let the long arm dip  
 Without a hitch, without a slip,  
 To set them safely in the ship  
 That waits to take them overseas.

My mother little dreams it's I,

Up there, as tiny as a fly,  
 Who stand above the biggest crane,  
 And swing the ship-loads through the sky;  
 While she sits, hunching in her chair,  
 Day-long, and stitching trousers there—  
 At three-and-three the dozen pair.

And sometimes when it turns me dizzy,  
 I lie and watch her, ever busy;  
 And wonder at a lot of things  
 I never speak to her about:  
 I wonder why she never sings  
 Like other people on the stair...  
 And why, whenever she goes out  
 Upon a windy day, the air  
 Makes her sad eyes so strangely bright...  
 And if the colour of her hair  
 Was brown like mine, or always white...  
 And why, when through the noise of feet  
 Of people passing in the street,  
 She hears a dog yelp or sheep bleat,  
 She always starts up in her chair,  
 And looks before her with strange stare,  
 Yet, seeing nothing anywhere:  
 Though, right before her, through the sky,  
 The biggest crane goes swinging by.

But, it's a lucky day and rare  
 When she's the time to talk with me...  
 Though, only yesterday, when night  
 Shut out, at last, the crane from sight...  
 She, in her bed, and thinking I  
 Was sleeping—though I watch the sky,  
 At times, till it is morning-light,  
 And ships are waiting to unload—  
 I heard her murmur drowsily:  
 "The pit-pat-pattering of feet,  
 All night, along the moonlit road...  
 A yelp, a whistle, and a bleat...  
 The bracken's deep and soft and dry..."

And safe and snug, and no one near...  
 The little burn sings low and sweet,  
 The little burn sings shrill and clear...  
 And loud all night the cock-grouse talks...  
 There's naught in heaven or earth to fear...  
 The pit-pat-pattering of feet...  
 A yelp, a whistle, and a bleat..."  
 And then, she started up in bed:  
 I felt her staring, as she said:  
 "I wonder if he ever hears  
 The pit-pat-pattering of sheep,  
 Or smells the broken bracken stalks...  
 While she is lying sound-asleep  
 Beside him ... after all these years—  
 Just nineteen years, this very night—  
 Remembering? ... and now, his son,  
 A man ... and never stood upright!"

And then, I heard a sound of tears;  
 But dared not speak, or let her know  
 I'd caught a single whisper, though  
 I wondered long what she had done  
 That she should fear the pattering feet:  
 And when those queer words in the night  
 Had fretted me half-dead with fright,  
 And set my throbbing head abeat...  
 Out of the darkness, suddenly,  
 The crane's long arm swung over me,  
 Among the stars, high overhead...  
 And then it dipped, and clutched my bed  
 And I had not a breath to cry,  
 Before it swung me through the sky,  
 Above the sleeping city high,  
 Where blinding stars went blazing by...

My mother, hunching in her chair,  
 Day-long, and stitching trousers there,  
 At three-and-three the dozen pair,  
 With quiet eyes and smooth white hair...  
 You'd little think a yelp or bleat

Could start her; or that she was weeping  
 So sorely, when she thought me sleeping.  
 She never tells me why she fears  
 The pit-pat-pattering of feet  
 All night along the moonlit road...  
 Or what's the wrong that she has done...  
 I wonder if 'twould bring her tears,  
 If she could know that I, her son—  
 A man, who never stood upright,  
 But all the livelong day must lie,  
 And watch, beyond the window-pane  
 The swaying of the biggest crane—  
 That I, within its clutch, last night,  
 Went whirling through the starry sky.

## THE LIGHTHOUSE

Just as my watch was done, the fog had lifted;  
 And we could see the flashing of our light;  
 And see, once more, the reef beyond the Head,  
 O'er which, six days and nights, the mist had drifted—  
 Six days and nights in thick white mist had drifted,  
 Until it seemed all time to mist had drifted,  
 And day and night were but one blind white night.

But on the seventh midnight the wind shifted:  
 And I was glad to tumble into bed,  
 Thankful to hear no more the blaring horn,  
 That ceaselessly had sounded, night and morn,  
 With moaning echoes through the mist, to warn  
 The blind, bewildered ships at sea:  
 Yet, though as tired as any dog,  
 I lay awhile, and seemed to feel  
 Fog lying on my eyes still heavily;  
 And still, the horn unceasingly  
 Sang through my head, till gradually

Through night's strange stillness, over me  
 Sweet sleep began to steal,  
 Sleep, blind and thick and fleecy as the fog.

For all I knew, I might have slept  
 A moment, or eternity;  
 When, startled by a crash,  
 I waked to find I'd leapt  
 Upright on the floor:  
 And stood there, listening to the smash  
 Of falling glass ... and then a thud  
 Of something heavy tumbling  
 Into the next room...  
 A pad of naked feet...  
 A moan ... a sound of stumbling ...  
 A heavier thud ... and then no more.  
 And I stood shivering in the gloom,  
 With creeping flesh, and tingling blood,  
 Until I gave myself a shake  
 To bring my wits more wide awake;  
 And lit a lantern, and flung wide the door.  
 Half-dazed, and dazzled by the light,  
 At first it seemed I'd only find  
 A broken pane, a flapping blind:  
 But when I raised the lantern o'er my head,  
 I saw a naked boy upon the bed,  
 Who crouched and shuddered on the folded sheet;  
 And, on his face, before my feet,  
 A naked man, who lay as if quite dead,  
 Though on his broken knuckles blood was red:  
 And all my wits awakened at the sight.

I set the lantern down; and took the child,  
 Who looked at me, with piteous eyes and wild;  
 And chafed his chill, wet body, till it glowed;  
 And forcing spirit 'twixt his chattering teeth,  
 I tucked him snugly in beneath  
 The blankets, and soon left him warmly stowed:  
 And stooped to tend the man, who lay  
 Still senseless on the floor.



I turned him off his face;  
And laid him on the other bed;  
And washed and stanch'd his wound.  
And yet for all that I could do,  
I could not bring him to,  
Or see a trace  
Of life returning to that heavy head.

It seem'd he'd swoon'd,  
When through the window he'd made way,  
Just having strength to lay  
The boy in safety. Still as death,  
He lay, without a breath:  
And seeing I could do no more  
To help him in the fight for life;  
I turned again to tend the lad;  
And, as I look'd on him, was glad  
To find him sleeping quietly.

So, fetching fuel, I lit a fire:  
And quickly had as big a blaze  
As any housewife could desire:  
Then, 'twixt the beds, I set a chair,  
That I might watch until they stirr'd:  
And as I saw them lying there—  
The sleeping boy, and him who lay  
In that strange stiller sleep, 'twas plain  
That they were son and father, now  
I'd time to look, and wonder how,  
In such a desperate plight,  
Without a stitch or rag,  
They'd taken refuge from the night.  
And, as I wonder'd drowsily,  
It seem'd yet queerer and more queer;  
For round the Head the rocks are sheer,  
With scarce a foothold for a bird;  
And it seem'd quite beyond belief  
That any wreck'd upon the reef,  
Could swim ashore, and scale the crag,  
By daylight, let alone by night

But, they who live beside the sea  
 Know naught's too wonderful to be:  
 And, as I sat, and heard  
 The quiet breathing of the child,  
 Great weariness came over me;  
 And, in a kind of daze,  
 I watched the blaze,  
 With nodding head:  
 And must have slept, for, presently,  
 I found the man was sitting up in bed:  
 And talking to himself, with wide, unseeing eyes.  
 At first, I hardly made out what he said:  
 But soon his voice, so hoarse and wild,  
 Grew calm: and, straining, I could hear  
 The broken words, that came with many sighs.

"Yes, lad: she's going: but, there's naught to fear:  
 For I can swim: and tow you in the belt.  
 Come, let's join hands together; and leap clear...  
 Aye, son: it's dark and cold ... but you have felt  
 The cold and dark before...  
 And you should scorn...  
 And we must be near shore...  
 For, hark the horn!  
 Think of your mother, and your home, and leap...  
 She thinks of us, lad, waking or asleep...  
 You would not leave her lonely?  
 Nay! ... then ... go! ...  
 Well done, lad! ... Nay! I'm here...  
 Aye, son, it's cold: but you're too big to fear.  
 Now then, you're snug: I've got you safe in tow:  
 The worst is over: and we've only  
 To make for land ... we've naught ... to do ... but steer...  
 But steer ... but steer..."

He paused; and sank down in the bed, quite done:  
 And lay a moment silent, while his son  
 Still slumbered in the other bed,  
 And on his quiet face the firelight shone.  
 Then, once again, the father raised his head,

And rambled on...  
 "Say, lad, what cheer?  
 I thought you'd dropped asleep: but you're all right.  
 We'll rest a moment ... I'm quite out of breath...  
 It's further than ... Nay, son! there's naught to fear...  
 The land must be quite near...  
 The horn is loud enough!  
 Aye, lad, it's cold:  
 But, you're too old  
 To cry for cold.  
 Now ... keep ... tight hold:  
 And we'll be off again.  
 I've got my breath..."

He sank, once more, as still as death,  
 With hands that clutched the counterpane:  
 But still the boy was sleeping quietly.  
 And then, the father sat up suddenly:  
 And cried: "See! See!  
 The land! the land!  
 It's near ... I touch it with my hand."  
 And now, "Oh God!" he moaned.  
 Small wonder, when he saw what lay before—  
 The black, unbroken crags, so grim and high,  
 That must have seemed to him to soar  
 Sheer from the sea's edge to the sky.  
 But, soon, he plucked up heart, once more:  
 "We're safe, lad—safe ashore!  
 A narrow ledge, but land, firm land.  
 We'll soon be high and dry.  
 Nay, son: we can't stay here:  
 The waves would have us back;  
 Or we should perish of the cold.  
 Come, lad: there's naught to fear...  
 You must be brave and bold.  
 Perhaps, we'll strike a track.  
 Aye, son: it's steep, and black,  
 And slimy to the hold:  
 But we must climb, and see! the mist is gone.  
 The stars are shining clear...

Think, son, your mother's at the top;  
 And you'll be up in no time. See, that star,  
 The brightest star that ever shone,  
 Just think it's she who watches you;  
 And knows that you'll be brave and true.  
 Come, lad: we may not stop...  
 Or, else, the cold...  
 Give me your hand...  
 Your foot there, now ... just room to stand.  
 It cannot be so far...  
 We'll soon be up ... this work should make us warm.  
 Thank God, it's not a storm,  
 Or we should scarce ... your foot, here, firm...  
 Nay, lad! you must not squirm.  
 Come, be a man: you shall not fall:  
 I'll hold you tight.  
 There: now, you are my own son, after all!  
 Your mother, lad,  
 Her star burns bright...  
 And we're already half-way up the height...  
 Your mother will be glad,  
 Aye, she'll be glad to hear  
 Of her brave boy who had no fear.

Your foot ... your hand ... 'twas but a bird  
 You startled out of bed:  
 'Twould think it queer  
 To wake up, suddenly, and see your head!  
 And, when you stirred...  
 Nay! steady, lad!  
 Or you will send your dad...  
 Your hand ... your foot ... we'll rest upon this ledge...  
 Why, son, we're at the top! I feel the edge,  
 And grass, soft, dewy grass!  
 Let go, one moment; and I'll draw you up...  
 Now, lad! ... Thank God! that's past...  
 And you are safe, at last:  
 You're safe, you're safe ... and now, my precious lass  
 Will see her son, her little son, again.

I never thought to reach the top, to-night.  
 God! What a height!  
 Nay! but you must not look: 'twould turn your head  
 And we must not stand shivering here...  
 And see ... a flashing light...  
 It's sweeping towards us: and now you stand bright.  
 Ah, your poor, bleeding hands and feet!  
 My little son, my sweet!  
 There's nothing more to fear.  
 A lighthouse, lad! And we must make for it.  
 You're tired; I'll carry you a bit.  
 Nay, son: 'twill warm me up...  
 And there will be a fire and bed;  
 And ev'n perhaps a cup  
 Of something hot to drink,  
 And something good to eat.  
 And think, son, only think,  
 Your home ... and mother ... once again."

Once more, the weary head  
 Sank back upon the bed:  
 And, for a while, he hardly stirred;  
 But only muttered, now and then,  
 A broken word,  
 As though to cheer  
 His son, who still slept quietly,  
 Upon the other side of me.

And then, my blood ran cold to hear  
 A sudden cry of fear:  
 "My son! My son!  
 Ah, God, he's done!  
 I thought I'd laid him on the bed...  
 I've laid him on white mist, instead:  
 He's fallen sheer..."

Then, I sprang up; and cried: "Your son is here!"  
 And, taking up the sleeping boy,  
 I bore him to his father's arms:  
 And, as he nestled to his breast,

Kind life came back to those wild eyes;  
 And filled them with deep joy:  
 And, free of all alarms,  
 The son and father lay,  
 Together, in sweet rest,  
 While through the window stole the strange, clear light of day.

## THE MONEY

They found her cold upon the bed.  
 The cause of death, the doctor said,  
 Was nothing save the lack of bread.

Her clothes were but a sorry rag  
 That barely hid the nakedness  
 Of her poor body's piteous wreck:  
 Yet, when they stripped her of her dress,  
 They found she was not penniless;  
 For, in a little silken bag,  
 Tied with red ribbon round her neck,  
 Was four-pound-seventeen-and-five.

"It seems a strange and shameful thing  
 That she should starve herself to death,  
 While she'd the means to keep alive.  
 Why, such a sum would keep the breath  
 Within her body till she'd found  
 A livelihood; and it would bring...  
 But, there is very little doubt  
 She'd set her heart upon a grand  
 And foolish funeral—for the pride  
 Of poor folk, who can understand!—  
 And so, because she was too proud  
 To meet death penniless, she died."

And talking, talking, they trooped out:

And, as they went, I turned about  
 To look upon her in her shroud;  
 And saw again the quiet face  
 That filled with light that shameful place,  
 Touched with the tender, youthful grace  
 Death brings the broken and outworn  
 To comfort kind hearts left to mourn.

And as I stood, the sum they'd found  
 Rang with a queer, familiar ring  
 Of some uncouth, uncanny sound  
 Heard in dark ages underground;  
 And "four-pound-seventeen-and-five"  
 Through all my body seemed to sing,  
 Without recalling anything  
 To help me, strive as I might strive.

But, as I stumbled down the stairs  
 Into the alley's gloom and stench—  
 A whiff of burning oil  
 That took me unawares—  
 And I knew all there was to tell.  
 And, though the rain in torrents fell,  
 I walked on, heedless, through the drench  
 And, all the while, I seemed to sit  
 Upon a tub in Lancel pit;  
 And in the candle-light to see  
 John Askerton, a "deputy,"  
 Who paused awhile to talk with me,  
 His kind face glistening black with toil.

"'Twas here I found him dead, beside  
 His engine. All the other men  
 Were up—for things were slack just then—  
 And I'd one foot upon the cage;  
 When, all at once, I caught the smell  
 Of burning. Even as I turned  
 To see what it could be that burned,  
 The seam behind was choked with stife.  
 And so I dropped on hands and knees,

And crawled along the gallery,  
 Beneath the smoke, that I might see  
 What ailed: and as I crept, half-blind,  
 With smarting eyes, and breath awheeze,  
 I scarcely knew what I should find.  
 At times, I thought I'd never know...  
 And 'twas already quite an age  
 Since I set out ... I felt as though  
 I had been crawling all my life  
 Beneath the stifling cloud of smoke  
 That clung about me fit to choke:  
 And when, at last, I'd struggled here,  
 'Twas long ere I could see things clear...  
 That he was lying here ... and he  
 Was dead ... and burning like a tree...  
 A tree-trunk soaked in oil ... No doubt,  
 The engine had caught fire, somehow;  
 And when he tried to put it out,  
 His greasy clothes had caught ... and now  
 As fine a lad as you could see...  
 And such a lad for singing ... I  
 Had heard him when I worked hard by;  
 And often quiet I would sit  
 To hear him, singing in the pit,  
 As though his heart knew naught of it,  
 And life was nothing but a song.

"He'd not been working with us long:  
 And little of his ways I knew:  
 But, when I'd got him up, at last;  
 And he was lying in the shed,  
 The sweet song silent in his breast;  
 And there was nothing more to do:  
 The notion came into my head  
 That he had always been well-dressed;  
 And seemed a neat and thrifty lad...  
 And lived in lodgings ... so, maybe,  
 Would carry on him all he had.  
 So, back into the cage I stepped:  
 And, when it reached the bottom, crept



Along the gallery again  
 And, in the dust where he had lain,  
 I rummaged, until I found all  
 That from his burning pockets fell.  
 And when it seemed there was no more,  
 I thought how, happy and alive,  
 And recking naught what might befall,  
 He, too, for all that I could tell,  
 Just where I stood, had reckoned o'er  
 That four-pound-seventeen-and-five.

"Aye, like enough ... for soon we heard  
 That in a week he'd looked to wed.  
 He'd meant to give the girl that night  
 The money to buy furniture.  
 She came, and watched till morning-light  
 Beside the body in the shed:  
 Then rose: and took, without a word,  
 The money he had left for her."

\* \* \* \* \*

Then, as I wandered through the rain,  
 I seemed to stand in awe again  
 Beside that lonely garret-bed.  
 And it was good to think the dead  
 Had known the wealth she would not spend  
 To keep a little while alive—  
 His four-pound-seventeen-and-five—  
 Would buy her houserom in the end.

## THE SNOW

Just as the school came out,  
 The first white flakes were drifting round about:  
 And all the children shouted with delight

To see such flakes, so big, so white,  
 Tumbling from a cloud so black,  
 And whirling helter-skelter  
 Across the windy moor:  
 And as they saw the light flakes race,  
 Started off in headlong chase,  
 Swooping on them with a shout,  
 When they seemed to drop for shelter  
 Underneath the dry-stone wall.

And then the master, at the schoolhouse door,  
 Called out to them to hurry home, before  
 The storm should come on worse: and watched till all  
 Had started off by road or moorland track:  
 When, turning to his wife, he said:  
 It looked like dirty weather overhead:  
 He thought 'twould be a heavy fall,  
 And threatened for a roughish night;  
 But they would all reach home in broad daylight.  
 'Twas early, yet; he'd let the school out soon;  
 As it had looked so lowering since forenoon;  
 And many had a goodish step to go:  
 And it was but ill-travelling in the snow.  
 Then by the fire he settled down to read;  
 And to the weather paid no further heed.

And, on their road home, full three miles away,  
 John, and his little sister, Janey, started;  
 And, at the setting out, were happy-hearted  
 To be let loose into a world so gay,  
 With jolly winds and frisking flakes at play  
 That flicked your cheek, and whistled in your teeth:  
 And now hard on each other's heels they darted  
 To catch a flake that floated like a feather,  
 Then dropt to nestle in a clump of heather;  
 And often tumbled both together  
 Into a deep delicious bed  
 Of brown and springy heath.  
 But, when the sky grew blacker overhead,  
 As if it were the coming on of night,

And every little hill, well-known to sight,  
 Looked big and strange in its new fleece of white;  
 And as yet faster and more thickly  
 The big flakes fell,  
 To John the thought came that it might be well  
 To hurry home; so, striding on before,  
 He set a steady face across the moor;  
 And called to Janey she must come more quickly.

The wind soon dropped: and fine and dry the snow  
 Came whispering down about them, as they trudged  
 And, when they'd travelled for a mile or so,  
 They found it ankle-deep: for here the storm  
 Had started long before it reached the school:  
 And, as he felt the dry flakes tingling warm  
 Upon his cheek, and set him all aglow,  
 John in his manly pride, a little grudged  
 That now and then he had to wait awhile  
 For Janey, lagging like a little fool:  
 But, when they'd covered near another mile  
 Through that bewildering white without a sound,  
 Save rustling, rustling, rustling all around;  
 And all his well-known world, so queer and dim,  
 He waited until she caught up to him;  
 And felt quite glad that he was not alone.

And when they reached the low, half-buried stone  
 That marked where some old shepherd had been found,  
 Lost in the snow in seeking his lost sheep,  
 One wild March night, full forty years ago,  
 He wished, and wished, that they were safe and sound  
 In their own house: and as the snow got deeper,  
 And every little bank seemed strangely steeper,  
 He thought, and thought of that lost sleeper;  
 And saw him lying in the snow,  
 Till every fleecy clump of heath  
 Seemed to shroud a man beneath;  
 And now his blood went hot and cold  
 Through very fear of that dread sight;  
 And then he felt that, in sheer fright,

He must take to his heels in flight,  
 He cared not whither, so that it might be  
 Where there were no more bundles, cold and white,  
 Like sheeted bodies, plain to see.  
 And, all on edge, he turned to chide  
 His sister, dragging at his side:  
 But, when he found that she was crying,  
 Because her feet and hands were cold,  
 He quite forgot to scold:  
 And spoke kind words of cheer to her:  
 And saw no more dead shepherds lying  
 In any snowy clump of heather.  
 So, hand in hand, they trudged together,  
 Through that strange world of drifting gloam,  
 Sharp-set and longing sore for home.

And John remembered how that morning,  
 When they set out the sky was blue—  
 Clean, cloudless blue; and gave no warning;  
 And how through air as clear as glass,  
 The far-off hills he knew  
 Looked strangely near; and glittered brightly;  
 Each sprig of heath and blade of grass  
 In the cold wind blowing lightly,  
 Each clump of green and crimson moss  
 Sparkling in the wintry sun.

But now, as they toiled home, across  
 These unfamiliar fells, nigh done,  
 The wind again began to blow;  
 And thicker, thicker fell the snow:  
 Till Janey sank, too numb to stir:  
 When John stooped down, and lifted her,  
 To carry her upon his back.  
 And then his head began to tire:  
 And soon he seemed to lose the track...  
 And now the world was all afire...  
 Now dazzling white, now dazzling black...  
 And then, through some strange land of light,  
 Where clouds of butterflies all white,

Fluttered and flickered all about,  
 Dancing ever in and out,  
 He wandered, blinded by white wings,  
 That rustled, rustled in his ears  
 With cold, uncanny whisperings...  
 And then it seemed his bones must crack  
 With that dead weight upon his back...  
 When, on his cheek, he felt warm tears,  
 And a cold tangle of wet hair;  
 And knew 'twas Janey weeping there:  
 And, taking heart, he stumbled on,  
 While in his breast the hearthlight shone:  
 And it was all of his desire  
 To sit once more before the fire;  
 And feel the friendly glowing heat.  
 But, as he strove with fumbling feet,  
 It seemed that he would never find  
 Again that cheery hearth and kind;  
 But wander ever, bent and blind,  
 Beneath his burden through the night  
 Of dreadful, spangly, whispering white.

The wind rose; and the dry snow drifted  
 In little eddies round the track:  
 And when, at last, the dark cloud rifted,  
 He saw a strange lough, lying cold and black,  
 'Mid unknown, ghostly hills; and knew  
 That they were lost: and once again,  
 The snow closed in: and swept from view  
 The dead black water and strange fells.

But still he struggled on: and then,  
 When he seemed climbing up an endless steep  
 And ever slipping, sliding back,  
 With ankles aching like to crack,  
 And only longed for sleep;  
 He heard a tinkling sound of bells,  
 That kept on ringing, ringing, ringing,  
 Until his dizzy head was singing;  
 And he could think of nothing else:

And then it seemed the weight was lifted  
 From off his back; and on the ground  
 His sister stood, while, all around  
 Were giants clad in coats of wool,  
 With big, curled horns, and queer black faces,  
 Who bobbed and curtsied in their places,  
 With blazing eyes and strange grimaces;  
 But never made a sound;  
 Then nearly shook themselves to pieces,  
 Shedding round a smell of warm, wet fleeces:  
 Then one it seemed as if he knew,  
 Looking like the old lame ewe,  
 Began to bite his coat, and pull  
 Till he could hardly stand: its eyes  
 Glowing to a monstrous size,  
 Till they were like a lantern light  
 Burning brightly through the night...  
 When someone stooped from out the sky,  
 To rescue him; and set him high:  
 And he was riding, snug and warm,  
 In some king's chariot through the storm,  
 Without a sound of wheel or hoof—  
 In some king's chariot, filled with straw,  
 And he would nevermore be cold...

And then with wondering eyes he saw  
 Deep caverns of pure burning gold;  
 And knew himself in fairyland:  
 But when he stretched an eager hand  
 To touch the glowing walls, he felt  
 A queer warm puff, as though of fire...  
 And suddenly he smelt  
 The reek of peat; and looking higher,  
 He saw the old, black porridge-kettle,  
 Hanging from the cavern roof,  
 Hanging on its own black crook:  
 And he was lying on the settle,  
 While by his side,  
 With tender look,  
 His mother knelt;

And he had only one desire  
 In all the world; and 'twas to fling  
 His arms about her neck, and hide  
 His happy tears upon her breast.  
 And as to her he closely pressed,  
 He heard his merry father sing:  
 "There was a silly sleepyhead,  
 Who thought he'd like to go to bed:  
 So in a stell he went to sleep,  
 And snored among the other sheep."

And then his mother gently said:  
 "Nay, father: do not tease him now:  
 He's quite worn out: and needs a deal  
 Of quiet sleep: and, after all,  
 He brought his sister safe from school."  
 And now he felt her warm tears fall  
 Upon his cheek: and thrilled to feel  
 His father's hand on his hot brow,  
 And hear him say: "The lad's no fool."

## RED FOX

I hated him ... his beard was red...  
 Red fox, red thief! ... Ah, God, that she—  
 She with the proud and lifted head  
 That never stooped to glance at me—  
 So fair and fancy-free, should wed  
 A slinking dog-fox such as he!

Was it last night I hated him?  
 Last night? It seems an age ago...  
 At whiles, my mind comes over dim  
 As if God's breath ... yet, ever slow  
 And dull, too dull she ... limb from limb  
 Last night I could have torn him, so!

My lonely bed was fire and ice.  
 I could not sleep. I could not lie.  
 I shut my hot eyes once or twice...  
 And saw a red fox slinking by...  
 A red dog-fox that turned back thrice  
 To mock me with a merry eye.

And so I rose to pace the floor...  
 And, ere I knew, my clothes were on...  
 And as I stood outside the door,  
 Cold in the Summer moonlight shone  
 The gleaming barrel ... and no more  
 I feared the fox, for fear was one.

"The best of friends," I said, "must part..."  
 "The best of friends must part," I said:  
 And like the creaking of a cart  
 The words went wheeling through my head.  
 "The best of friends..." and, in my heart,  
 Red fox, already lying dead!

I took the trackway through the wood.  
 Red fox had sought a woodland den,  
 When she ... when she ... but, 'twas not good  
 To think too much on her just then...  
 The woman must beware, who stood  
 Between two stark and fearless men.

The pathway took a sudden turn...  
 And in a trice my steps were stayed.  
 Before me, in the moonlit fern,  
 A young dog-fox and vixen played  
 With their red cubs beside the burn...  
 And I stood trembling and afraid.

They frolicked in the warm moonlight—  
 A scuffling heap of heads and heels...  
 A rascal rush ... a playful bite...  
 A scuttling brush, and frightened squeals...  
 A flash of teeth ... a show of fight...



Then lively as a bunch of eels

Once more they gambolled in the brake,  
 And tumbled headlong in the stream,  
 Then scrambled gasping out to shake  
 Their sleek, wet, furry coats a gleam.  
 I watched them, fearful and awake...  
 I watched them, hateless and adream.

The dog-fox gave a bark, and then  
 All ran to him: and, full of pride,  
 He took the trackway up the glen,  
 His family trotting by his side:  
 The young cubs nosing for the den,  
 With trailing brushes, sleepy-eyed.

And then it seems I must have slept—  
 Dropt dead asleep ... dropt dead outworn.  
 I wakened, as the first gleam crept  
 Among the fern, and it was morn...  
 God's eye about their home had kept  
 Good watch, the night her son was born.

## THE OVENS

He trailed along the cinder-track  
 Beside the sleek canal, whose black  
 Cold, slinking waters shivered back  
 Each frosty spark of starry light;  
 And each star pricked, an icy pin,  
 Through his old jacket worn and thin:  
 The raw wind rasped his shrinking skin  
 As if stark naked to its bite;  
 Yet, cutting through him like a knife,  
 It would not cut the thread of life;  
 But only turned his feet to stones

With red-hot soles, that weighed like lead  
 In his old broken boots. His head,  
 Sunk low upon his sunken chest,  
 Was but a burning, icy ache  
 That strained a skull which would not break  
 To let him tumble down to rest.  
 He felt the cold stars in his bones:  
 And only wished that he were dead,  
 With no curst searching wind to shred  
 The very flesh from off his bones—  
 No wind to whistle through his bones,  
 His naked, icy, burning bones:  
 When, looking up, he saw, ahead,  
 The far coke-ovens' glowing light  
 That burnt a red hole in the night.  
 And but to snooze beside that fire  
 Was all the heaven of his desire...  
 To tread no more this cursed track  
 Of crunching cinders, through a black  
 And blasted world of cinder-heaps,  
 Beside a sleek canal that creeps  
 Like crawling ice through every bone,  
 Beneath the cruel stars, alone  
 With this hell-raking wind that sets  
 The cold teeth rattling castanets...  
 Yea, heaven, indeed, that core of red  
 In night's black heart that seemed quite dead.  
 Though still far off, the crimson glow  
 Through his chilled veins began to flow,  
 And fill his shrivelled heart with heat;  
 And, as he dragged his senseless feet,  
 That lagged as though to hold him back  
 In cold, eternal hell of black,  
 With heaven before him, blazing red,  
 The set eyes staring in his head  
 Were held by spell of fire quite blind  
 To that black world that fell behind,  
 A cindery wilderness of death;  
 As he drew slowly near and nearer,  
 And saw the ovens glowing clearer—

Low-domed and humming hives of heat—  
And felt the blast of burning breath  
That quivered from each white-hot brick:  
Till, blinded by the blaze, and sick  
He dropped into a welcome seat  
Of warm white ashes, sinking low  
To soak his body in the glow  
That shot him through with prickling pain,  
An eager agony of fire,  
Delicious after the cold ache,  
And scorched his tingling, frosted skin.  
Then gradually the anguish passed;  
And blissfully he lay, at last,  
Without an unfulfilled desire,  
His grateful body drinking in  
Warm, blessed, snug forgetfulness.  
And yet, with staring eyes awake,  
As though no drench of heat could slake  
His thirst for fire, he watched a red  
Hot eye that burned within a chink  
Between the bricks: while overhead  
The quivering stream of hot, gold air  
Surged up to quench the cold starlight.  
His brain, too numbed and dull to think  
Throughout the day, in that fierce glare  
Awoke, at last, with startled stare  
Of pitiless, insistent sight  
That stript the stark, mean, bitter strife  
Of his poor, broken, wasted life,  
Crippled from birth, and struggling on,  
The last, least shred of hope long gone,  
To some unknown, black, bitter end.  
But, even as he looked, his brain  
Sank back to sightless sloth again;  
Then, all at once, he seemed to choke;  
And knew it was the stealthy stife  
And deadly fume of burning coke  
That filled his lungs, and seemed to soak  
Through every pore, until the blood  
Grew thick and heavy in his veins,

And he could scarcely draw a breath.  
He lay, and murmured drowsily,  
With closing eyes: "If this be death,  
It's snug and easy ... let it come...  
For life is cold and hard ... the flood  
Is rising with the heavy rains  
That pour and pour ... that damned old drum,  
Why ever can't they let it be...  
Beat-beating, beating, beating, beat..."  
Then, suddenly, he sat upright,  
For, close behind him in the night,  
He heard a breathing loud and deep,  
And caught a whiff of burning leather.  
He shook himself alive, and turned;  
And on a heap of ashes white,  
O'ercome by the full blast of heat,  
Where fieriest the dread blaze burned,  
He saw a young girl stretched in sleep.  
He sat awhile with heavy gaze  
Fixed on her in a dull amaze,  
Until he saw her scorched boots smoking:  
Then, whispering huskily: "She's dying,  
While I look on and watch her choking!"  
He roused: and pulled himself together:  
And rose, and went where she was lying:  
And, bending o'er the senseless lass,  
In his weak arms he lifted her;  
And bore her out beyond the glare,  
Beyond the stealthy, stifling gas,  
Into the fresh and eager air:  
And laid her gently on the ground  
Beneath the cold and starry sky:  
And did his best to bring her round;  
Though still, for all that he could try,  
She seemed, with each deep-labouring breath  
Just brought up on the brink of death.  
He sought, and found an icy pool,  
Though he had but a cap to fill,  
And bathed her hands and face, until  
The troubled breath was quieter,

And her flushed forehead felt quite cool:  
And then he saw an eyelid stir;  
And shivering she sat up at last,  
And looked about her sullenly.  
"I'm cold ... I'm mortal cold," she said:  
"What call had you to waken me?  
I was so warm and happy, dead...  
And still those staring stars!" Her head  
Dropt in her hands: and thick and fast  
The tears came with a heavy sobbing.  
He stood quite helpless while she cried;  
And watched her shaken bosom throbbing  
With passionate, wild, weak distress,  
Till it was spent. And then she dried  
Her eyes upon her singed black dress;  
Looked up, and saw him standing there,  
Wondering, and more than half-afraid.  
But now, the nipping, hungry air  
Took hold of her, and struck fear dead.  
She only felt the starving sting  
That must, at any price, be stayed;  
And cried out: "I am famishing!"  
Then from his pocket he took bread  
That he had been too weak and sick  
To eat o'ernight: and eager-eyed,  
She took it timidly; and said:  
"I have not tasted food two days."  
And, as he waited by her side,  
He watched her with a quiet gaze;  
And saw her munch the broken crust  
So gladly, seated in the dust  
Of that black desert's bitter night,  
Beneath the freezing stars, so white  
And hunger-pinched: and at the sight  
Keen pity touched him to the quick;  
Although he never said a word,  
Till she had finished every crumb.  
And then he led her to a seat  
A little closer to the heat,  
But well beyond the deadly stife.

And in the ashes, side by side,  
They sat together, dazed and dumb,  
With eyes upon the ovens' glare,  
Each looking nakedly on life.  
And then, at length, she sighed, and stirred,  
Still staring deep and dreamy-eyed  
Into the whitening, steady glow.  
With jerky, broken words and slow,  
And biting at her finger-ends,  
She talked at last: and spoke out all  
Quite open-heartedly, as though  
There were not any stranger there—  
The fire and he, both bosom-friends.  
She'd left her home three months ago—  
She, country-born and country-bred,  
Had got the notion in her head  
That she'd like city-service best...  
And so no country place could please...  
And she had worried without rest  
Until, at last, she got her ends;  
And, wiser than her folk and friends,  
She left her home among the trees...  
The trees grew thick for miles about  
Her father's house ... the forest spread  
As far as ever you could see...  
And it was green, in Summer, green...  
Since she had left her home, she'd seen  
No greenness could compare with it...  
And everything was fresh and clean,  
And not all smutched and smirched with smoke  
They burned no sooty coal and coke,  
But only wood-logs, ash and oak...  
And by the fire at night they'd sit...  
Ah! wouldn't it be rare and good  
To smell the sappy, sizzling wood,  
Once more; and listen to the stream  
That runs just by the garden-gate...  
And often, in a Winter spate,  
She'd wakened from a troubled dream,  
And lain in bed, and heard it roar;

And quaked to hear it, as a child...  
 It seemed so angry, and so wild—  
 Just mad to sweep the house away!  
 And now, it was three months or more  
 Since she had heard it, on the day...  
 The day she left ... and Michael stood...  
 He was a woodman, too, and he  
 Worked with her father in the wood...  
 And wanted her, she knew ... but she  
 Was proud, and thought herself too good  
 To marry any country lad...  
 'Twas queer to think she'd once been proud—  
 And such a little while ago—  
 A beggar, wolfing crusts! ... The pride  
 That made her quit her countryside  
 Soon left her stranded in the crowd...  
 And precious little pride she had  
 To keep her warm these freezing days  
 Since she had fled the city-ways  
 To walk back home ... aye! home again:  
 For, in the town, she'd tried in vain,  
 For honest work to earn her bread...  
 At one place, they'd nigh slaved her dead,  
 And starved her, too; and, when she left,  
 Had cheated her of half her wage:  
 But she'd no means to stop the theft...  
 And she'd had no more work to do...  
 Two months since, now ... it seemed an age!  
 How she had lived, she scarcely knew...  
 And still, poor fool, too proud to write  
 To home for help, until, at length,  
 She'd not a penny for a bite,  
 Or pride enough to clothe her back...  
 So, she was tramping home, too poor  
 To pay the train-fare ... she'd the strength,  
 If she'd the food ... but that hard track,  
 And that cold, cruel, bitter night  
 Had taken all the heart from her...  
 If Michael knew, she felt quite sure...  
 For she would rather drop stone-dead

Than live as some ... if she had cared  
 To feed upon the devil's bread,  
 She could have earned it easily...  
 She'd pride enough to starve instead,  
 Aye, starve, than fare as some girls fared...  
 But, that was all behind ... and she  
 Was going home ... and yet, maybe,  
 If they'd a home like hers, they, too,  
 Would be too proud ... she only knew  
 The thought of home had kept her straight,  
 And saved her ere it was too late.  
 She'd soon be home again...

And now

She sat with hand upon her brow;  
 And did not speak again nor stir.

And, as he heard her words, his gaze  
 Still set upon the steady glare,  
 His thoughts turned back to city-ways:  
 And he remembered common sights  
 That he had seen in city nights:  
 And, once again, in early June,  
 He wandered through the midnight street;  
 And heard those ever-pacing feet  
 Of young girls, children yet in years,  
 With gaudy ribbons in their hair,  
 And shameless fevered eyes astare,  
 And slack lips set in brazen leers,  
 Who walked the pavements of despair,  
 Beneath the fair full Summer moon...  
 Shadowed by worn-out, wizened hags,  
 With claw-hands clutching filthy rags  
 About old bosoms, shrunk and thin,  
 And mouths aler without a tooth,  
 Who dogged them, cursing their sleek youth  
 That filched their custom and their bread...  
 Then, in a reek of hot gas light,  
 He stood where, through the Summer night,  
 Half-dozing in the stifling air,  
 The greasy landlord, fat with sin,



Sat, lolling in his easy chair,  
 Just half-way up the brothel stair,  
 To tax the earnings they brought in,  
 And hearken for the policeman's tread...

Then, shuddering back from that foul place  
 And turning from the ovens' glare,  
 He looked into her dreaming face;  
 And saw green, sunlit woodlands there,  
 And waters flashing in between  
 Low-drooping boughs of Summer green.

And as he looked, still in a dream  
 She murmured: "Michael would, she knew...  
 Though she'd been foolish ... he was true,  
 As true as steel, and fond of her...  
 And then she sat with eyes a gleam  
 In dreaming silence, till the stir  
 Of cold dawn shivered through the air:  
 When, twisting up her tumbled hair,  
 She rose; and said, she must be gone.  
 Though she'd still far to go, the day  
 Would see her well upon her way...  
 And she had best be jogging on,  
 While she'd the strength ... and so, "Good-bye."

And as, beneath the paling sky,  
 He trudged again the cinder-track  
 That stretched before him, dead and black,  
 He muttered: "It's a chance the light  
 Has found me living still ... and she—  
 She, too ... and Michael ... and through me  
 God knows whom I may wake to-night."

1910-1911.



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