

New Numbers

Volume 1.
Number 2.
April, 1914.

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NEW NUMBERS

Journal of
the
Royal
Society

PRINTED AT
BY THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

THE END OF THE WORLD — Lascelles Abercrombie

New Numbers

Lascelles Abercrombie

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PUBLISHED AT
RYTON, DYMOCK, GLOUCESTER.

(To E.M.)

PERSONS.

HUFF, the Farmer.

SHALE, the Labourer.

SOLLERS, the Wainwright.

A DOWSER.

MERRICK, the Smith.

Mrs. HUFF.

VINE, the Publican.

WARP, the Molecatcher.

Men and Women of the Village.

ACT I.

Scene ; A Public House kitchen. HUFF the Farmer and SOLLERS the Wainwright talking ; another man, a stranger, sitting silent.

Huff : Ay, you may think we're well off—

Sollers :

Now for croaks !

Old toad ! who's trodden on you now ?—Go on ;

But if you can, croak us a new tune.

Huff :

Ay,

You think you're well off—and don't grab my words

Before they're spoken—but some folks, I've heard,

Pity us, living quiet in the valley.

Sollers : Well, I suppose 'tis their affair.

Huff :

Is it ?

But what I mean to say,—if they think small

Of us that live in the valley, mayn't it show

That we aren't all so happy as we think ?

MERRICK the Smith comes in.

Merrick : Quick, cider ! I believe I've swallowed a coal.

Sollers : Good evening. True, the heat's a wonder to-night.

[*Smith draws himself cider.*]

Huff : Haven't you brought your flute? We've all got room
For music in our minds to-night, I'll swear.
Working all day in the sun do seem to push
The thought out of your brain.

Sollers : O, 'tis the sun
Has trodden on you? That's what makes you croak?
Ay, whistle him somewhat: put a tune in his brain;
He'll else croak us out of pleasure with drinking.

Merrick : 'Tis quenching, I believe.—A tune? Too hot.
You want a fiddler.

Huff : Nay, I want your flute.
I like a piping sound, not scraping o' guts.

Merrick : This is no weather for a man to play
Flutes or music at all that asks him spend
His breath and spittle: you want both yourself
These oven days. Wait till a fiddler comes.

Huff : Who ever comes down here?

Sollers : There's someone come.

[*Pointing with his pipe to the stranger.*]

Merrick : Good evening, mister. Are you a man for tunes?

Stranger : And if I was, I'd give you none to-night.

Merrick : Well, no offence: there's no offence, I hope,
In taking a dummy for a tuneful man.
Is it for can't or won't you are?

Stranger : You wouldn't, if you carried in your mind
What I've been carrying all day.

Sollers : What's that?

Stranger : You wait; you'll know about it soon; O yes,
Soon enough it will find you out and rouse you.

Huff : Now ain't that just the way we go down here?

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Here in the valley we're like dogs in a yard,
Chained to our kennels and wall'd in all round,
And not a sound of the world jumps over our hills.
And when there comes a passenger among us,
One who has heard what's stirring out beyond,
'Tis a grutchy mumchance fellow in the dimals!

Stranger: News, is it, you want? I could give you news!—
I wonder, did you ever hate to feel
The earth so fine and splendid?

Huff: O, you're one
Has stood in the brunt of the world's wickedness,
Like me? But listen, and I'll give you a tale
Of wicked things done in this little valley,
Done against me, will surely make you think
The Devil here fetcht up his masterpiece.

Sollers: Ah, but it's hot enough without you talking
Your old hell fire about that pair of sinners.
Leave them alone and drink.

Huff: I'll smell them grilling
One of these days.

Merrick: But there'll be nought to drink
When that begins! Best keep your skin full now.

Stranger: What do I care for wickedness? Let those
Who've played with dirt, and thought the game was bold,
Make much of it while they can: there's a big thing
Coming down to us, ay, well on it's road,
Will make their ploys seem mighty piddling sport.

Huff: This is a fool; or else it's what I think,—
The world now breeds such crowd that they've no room
For well grown sins: they hatch 'em small as flies.

But you stay here, out of the world awhile,
 Here where a man's mind, and a woman's mind,
 Can fling out large in wickedness: you'll see
 Something monstrous here, something dreadful.

Stranger: I've seen enough of that. Though it was only
 Fancying made me see it, it was enough:
 I've seen the folk of the world yelling aghast,
 Scurrying to hide themselves. I want nought else
 Monstrous and dreadful.—

Merrick: What had roused 'em so?
 Some house afire?

Huff: A huzzy flogged to death
 For her hard-faced adultery?

Stranger (*too intent to hear them*): O to think of it!
 Talk, do, chatter some nonsense, else I'll think:
 And then I'm feeling like a grub that crawls
 All abroad in a dusty road; and high
 Above me, and shaking the ground beneath me, come
 Wheels of a thundering wain, right where I'm plodding.

Sollers: Queer thinking, that.

Stranger: And here's a queerer thing.
 I have a sort of lust in me, pushing me still
 Into that terrible way of thinking, like
 Black men in India lie them down and long
 To feel their holy wagon crack their spines.

Merrick: Do you mean beetles? I've driven over scores,
 They sprawling on their backs, or standing mazed.
 I never knew they liked it.

Sollers: He means frogs.
 I know what's in his mind. When I was young

My mother would catch us frogs and set them down,
Lapt in a screw of paper, in the ruts,
And carts going by would quash 'em; and I'd laugh,
And yet be thinking, "Suppose it was myself
Twisted stiff in huge paper, and wheels
Big as the wall of a barn treading me flat!"

Huff: I know what's in his mind: just madness it is.
He's lookt too hard at his fellows in the world;
Sight of their monstrous hearts, like devils in cages,
Has jolted all the gearing of his wits.
It needs a tough brain, ay, a brain like mine,
To pore on ugly sin and not go mad.

Stranger: Madness! You're not far out.—I came up here
To be alone and quiet in my thoughts,
Alone in my own dreadful mind. The path,
Of red sand trodden hard, went up between
High hedges overgrown of hawthorn blowing
White as clouds; ay it seemed burrowed through
A white sweet-smelling cloud,—I walking there
Small as a hare that runs its tunnelled drove
Thro' the close heather. And beside my feet
Blue greygles drifted gleaming over the grass;
And up I climbed to sunlight green in birches,
And the path turned to daisies among grass
With bonfires of the broom beside, like flame
Of burning straw: and I lookt into your valley.
I could scarce look.
Anger was smarting in my eyes like grit.
O the fine earth and fine all for nothing!
Mazed I walkt, seeing and smelling and hearing:

The meadow lands all shining fearfully gold,—
Cruel as fire the sight of them toucht my mind ;
Breathing was all a honey taste of clover
And bean flowers : I would have rather had it
Carrion, or the stink of smouldering brimstone.
And larks aloft, the happy piping fools,
And squealing swifts that slid on hissing wings,
And yellowhammers playing spry in hedges :
I never noted them before ; but now—
Yes, I was mad, and crying mad, to see
The earth so fine, fine all for nothing !

Sollers : (*spits*) : Pst ! yellow hammers ! He talks gentry talk.
That's worse than being mad.

Stranger : I tell you, you'll be feeling them to-morn
And hating them to be so wonderful.

Merrick : Let's have some sense. Where do you live ?

Stranger : Nowhere .
I'm always travelling.

Huff : Why, what's your trade ?

Stranger : A dowser.

Huff : You're the man for me !

Stranger : Not I.

Huff : Ho, this is better than a fiddler now !
One of those fellows who have nerves so clever
That they can feel the waters of underground
Tingling in their fingers ?
You find me a spring in my high grazing-field,
I'll give you what I save in trundling water.

Stranger : I find you water now !—No, but I'll find you
Fire and fear and unbelievable death.

VINE the Publican comes in.

Vine : Are ye all served ? Ay, seems so ; what's your score ?

Merrick : Two ciders.

Huff : Three.

Sollers : And two for me.

Vine (to *Dowser*) : And you ?

Dowser : Naught. I was waiting on you.

Vine : Will you drink ?

Dowser : Ay ! Drink ! what else is left for a man to do
Who knows what I know ?

Vine : Good. What is't you know ?
You tell it out and set my trade a-buzzing.

Sollers : He's queer. Give him his mug and ease his tongue.

Vine : I had to swill the pigs : else I'd been here ;
But we've the old fashion in this house ; you draw,
I keep the score. Well, what's the worry on you ?

Sollers : O he's in love.

Dowser : You fleering grinning louts,
I'll give it you now ; now have it in your faces !

Sollers : Crimini, he's going to fight !

Dowser : You try and fight with the thing that's on my side !

Merrick : A ranter !

Huff : A boozy one then.

Dowser : Open yon door ;
'Tis dark enough by now. Open it, you.

Vine : Hold on. Have you got something fierce outside ?

Merrick : A Russian bear ?

Sollers : Dowsers can play strange games.

Huff : No tricks !

Dowser : This is a trick to rouse the world.

[*He opens the door.*]

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Look out! Between the elms! There's my fierce thing.

Merrick: He means the star with the tail like a feather of fire.

Sollers: Comet, it's called.

Huff: Do you mean the comet, mister?

Dowser: What do you think of it?

Huff: Pretty enough.

But I saw a man loose off a rocket once;

It made more stir and flare of itself; though you

Does better at steady burning.

Dowser: Stir and flare!

You'll soon forget your rocket.

Merrick: Tell you what

I thought last night, now, going home. Says I,

'Tis just the look of a tadpole: if I saw

A tadpole silver as a dace that swam

Upside-down towards me through black water,

I'd see the plain spit of that star and his tail.

Sollers: And how does your thought go?

Dowser: It's what I know!—

A tadpole and a rocket!—My dear God,

And I can still laugh out!—What do you think

Your tadpole's made of? What lets your rocket fling

Those streaming sparks across the half of night,

Splashing the burning spray of its haste among

The quiet business of the other stars?

Ay, that's a fiery jet it leaves behind

In such enormous drift! What sort of fire

Is spouted so, spouted and never quenching?—

There is no name for that star's fire: it is

The fire that was before the world was made,

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The fire that all the things we live among
Remember being; and whitest fire we know
Is its poor copy in their dreaming trance!

Huff: That would be hell fire.

Dowser: Ay, if you like, hell fire,
Hell fire flying through the night! 'Twould be
A thing to blink about, a blast of it
Swept in your face, eh? and a thing to set
The whole stuff of the earth smoking rarely?
Which of you said "the heat's a wonder to-night"?
You have not done with marvelling. There'll come
A night when all your clothes are a pickle of sweat,
And, for all that, the sweat on your salty skin
Shall dry and crack, in the breathing of a wind
That's like a draught come through an open'd furnace.
The leafage of the trees shall brown and faint,
All sappy growth turning to brittle rubbish
As the near heat of the star strokes the green earth;
And time shall brush the fields as visibly
As a rough hand brushes against the nap
Of gleaming cloth—killing the season's colour,
Each hour charged with the wasting of a year;
And sailors panting on their warping decks
Will watch the sea steam like broth about them.
You'll know what I know then!—That towering star
Hangs like a fiery buzzard in the night
Intent over our earth—Ay, now his journey
Points, straight as a plummet's drop, down to us!

Huff: Why, that's the end of the world!

Dowser: You've said it now.

Sollers : What, soon ? In a day or two ?

Merrick : You can't mean that !

Vine : End of the World ! Well now, I never thought
To hear the news of that. If you've the truth

In what you say, likely this is an evening
That we'll be talking over often and often.

"How was it, Sollers ?" I'll say ; "or you, Merrick,
Do you mind clearly how he lookt ?"—And then—

"'End of the world !' he said, and drank—like that,
Solemn !"—And right he was : he had it all

As sure as I have when my sow's to farrow.

Dowser : Are you making a joke of me ? Keep your mind
For tippling while you can.

Vine : Was that a joke ?
I'm always bad at seeing 'em, even my own.

Dowser : A fool's ! 'Twill cheer you when the earth blows up
Like as it were all gunpowder.

Vine : You mean
The star will butt his burning head against us ?
'Twill knock the world to flinders, I suppose ?

Dowser : Ay, or with that wild monstrous tail of his
Smash down upon the air, and make it bounce
Like water under the flukes of a harpooned whale,
And thrash it to a poisonous fire ; and we
And all the life of the world drowned in blazing !

Vine : 'Twill be a handsome sight. If my old wife
Were with me now ! This would have suited her.
"I do like things to happen !" she would say ;
Never shindy enough for her ; and now
She's gone, and can't be seeing this !

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Dowser : You poor fool.
How will it be a sight to you, when your eyes
Are scorcht to little cinders in your head ?

Vine : Whether or no, there must be folks outside
Willing to know of this. I'll scatter your news.

[*He goes.*

[*A short pause : then SOLLERS breaks out.*

Sollers : No, no ; it wouldn't do for me at all ;
Nor for you neither, Merrick ? End of the World ?
Bogy ! A parson's tale or a bairn's !

Merrick : That's it.
Your trade's a gift, easy as playing tunes.
But Sollers here and I, we've had to drill
Sinew and muscle into their hard lesson,
Until they work in timber and glowing iron
As kindly as I pick up my pint : your work
Grows in your nature, like plain speech in a child,
But we have learnt to think in a foreign tongue ;
And something must come out of all our skill !
We shan't go sliding down as glib as you
Into notions of the End of the World.

Sollers : Give me a tree, you may say, and give me steel,
And I'll put forth my shapely mind ; I'll make,
Out of my head like telling a well-known tale,
A wain that goes as comely on the roads
As a ship sailing, the lines of it true as gospel.
Have I learnt that all for nothing ?—O no !
End of the World ? It wouldn't do at all.
No more making of wains, after I've spent
My time in getting the right skill in my hands ?

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Dowser : Ay, you begin to feel it now, I think ;
But you complain like boys for a game spoilt :
Shaping your carts, forging your iron ! But Life,
Life, the mother who lets her children play
So seriously busy, trade and craft,—
Life with her skill of a million year's perfection
To make her heart's delighted glorying
Of sunlight, and of clouds about the moon,
Spring lighting her daffodils, and corn
Ripening gold to ruddy, and giant seas,
And mountains sitting in their purple clothes—
O life I am thinking of, life the wonder,
All blotcht out by a brutal thrust of fire
Like a midge that a clumsy thumb squashes and smears.

Huff : Let me but see the show beginning, though !
You'd mind me then ! O I would like you all
To watch how I should figure, when the star
Brandishes over the whole air its flame
Of thundering fire ; and naught but yellow rubbish
Parcht on the perishing ground, and there are tongues
Chapt with thirst, glad to lap stinking ponds,
And pale glaring faces spying about
On the earth withering, terror the only speech !
Look for me then, and see me stand alone
Easy and pleasant in the midst of it all.
Did you not make your merry scoff of me ?
Was it your talk, that when yon shameless pair
Threw their wantoning in my face like dirt,
I had no heart against them but to grumble ?
You would be saying that, I know ! But now,

Now I believe it's time for you to see
My patient heart at last taking its wages.

Sollers : Pull up, man ! Screw the brake on your running tongue,
Else it will rattle you down the tumbling way
This fellow's gone.

Merrick : And one man's enough
With brain quagged axledeep in crazy mire.
We won't have you beside him in his puddles,
And calling out with him on the End of the World
To heave you out with a vengeance.

Huff : What you want !
Have I not borne enough to make me know
I must be righted sometime ?—And what else
Would break the hardy sin in them, which lets
Their souls parade so daring and so tall
Under God's hate and mine ? What else could pay
For all my wrong but a blow of blazing anger
Striking down to shiver the earth, and change
Their strutting wickedness to horror and crying ?

Merrick : Be quiet, Huff ! If you mean to believe
This dowser's stuff, and join him in his bedlam,
By God, you'll have to reckon with my fist.

SHALE comes in. *HUFF* glares at him speechless, but with
wrath evidently working.

Shale : Where's the joker ? You, is it ? Here's hot news
You've brought us ; all the valley's hissing aloud,
And makes as much of you falling into it
As a pail of water would of a glowing coal.

Sollers : Don't you start burbling too, Shale.

Shale : That's the word !

Burbling, simmering, ay and bumpy-boiling :
All the women are mobbed together close
Under the witan-trees, and their full minds
Boil like so many pans slung on a fire.
Why, starlings trooping in a copse in fall
Could make no scandal like it.

Merrick : What is it, man ?

Shale : End of the World! The flying star! End of the World!

Sollers : They don't believe it though ?

Shale : What? the whole place

Has gone just randy over it!

Merrick : Hold your noise!

Sollers : I shall be daft if this goes on.

Shale : Ay, so ?

The End of the World's been here? You look as though
You'd startled lately. And there's the virtuous man!
How would End of the World suit our good Huff,
Our old crab-verjuice Huff?

Huff (*seizing the DOWSER and bringing him up in front of SHALE*)

Look at him there!

This is the man I told you of, when you
Were talking small of sin. You made it out,
Did you, a fool's mere nasty game, like dogs
That snuggle in muck, and grin and roll themselves
With snoring pleasure? Ah, but you are wrong.
'Tis something that goes thrusting dreadfully
Its wilful bravery of evil against
The worth and right of goodness in the world:
Ay, do you see how his face still brags at me?
And long it has been, the time he's had to walk

Lording about me with his wickedness.
Do you know what he dared? I had a wife,
A flighty pretty linnet-headed girl,
But mine: he practised on her with his eyes;
He knew of luring glances, and she went
After his calling lust: and all since then
They've lived together, fleering in my face,
Pleased in sight of the windows of my house
With doing wrong, and making my disgrace.
O but wait here with me; wait till your news
Is not to be mistaken, for the way
The earth buckles and sings like hot boards:
You'll surely see how dreadful sin can be
Then, when you mark these two running about,
With raging fear for what they did against me
Buzzing close to their souls, stinging their hearts,
And they like scampering beasts when clegs are fierce,
Or flinging themselves low as the ground to writhe,
Their arms hugging their desperate heads. And then
You'll see what 'tis to be an upright man,
Who keeps a patient anger for his wrongs
Thinking of judgment coming—you will see that
When you mark how my looks hunt these wretches,
And smile upon their groans and posturing anguish.
O watch how calm I'll be, when the blazing air
Judges their wickedness; you watch me then
Looking delighted, like a nobleman
Who sees his horse winning an easy race.

Merrick: You fool, Huff, you believe it now!

Huff: You fool,

Merrick, how should I not believe a thing
That calls aloud on my mind and spirit, and they
Answer to it like starving conquering soldiers
Told to break out and loot ?

Shale : You vile old wasp !

Sollers : We've talkt enough : let's all go home and sleep ;
There might be a fiend in the air about us, one
Who pours his will into our minds to see
How we can frighten one another.

Huff : A fiend !

Shale will soon have the flapping wings of a fiend,
And flaming wings, beating about his head.
There'll be no air for Shale, very soon now,
But the breathing of a fiend : the star's coming !
The star that breathes a horrible fury of fire
Like glaring fog into the empty night ;
And in the gust of its wrath the world will soon
Shrivel and spin like paper in a furnace.
I knew they both would have to pay me at last
With sight of their damned souls for all my wrong !

Shale : Somebody stop his gab.

Merrick (seizing the DOWSER and shaking him) : Is it the truth ?
Is it the truth we're in the way of the star ?

Sollers : O let us go home ; let us go home and sleep !

A crowd of men and women burst in and shout confusedly

1. Look out for the star !
2. 'Tis moving, moving.
3. Grows as you stare at it.
4. Bigger than ever.

1. Down it comes with a diving pounce,
As though it had lookt for us and at last found us.

2. O so near and coming so quick !

3. And how the burning hairs of its tail
Do seem surely to quiver for speed.

4. We saw its great tail twitch behind it,
'Tis come so near, so gleaming near.

1. The tail is wagging !

2. Come out and see !

3. The star is wagging its tail and eyeing us—

4. Like a cat huncht to leap on a bird.

Merrick : Out of my way and let me see for myself.

[*They all begin to hustle out* :

HUFF speaks in midst of the turmoil.

Huff : Ay, now begins the just man's reward ;
And hatred of the evil thing
Now is to be satisfied.

Wrong ventured out against me and braved :
And I'll be glad to see all breathing pleasure
Burn as foolishly to naught
As a moth in candle flame,
If I but have my will to watch over those
Who injured me bawling hoarse heartless fear.

They are all gone but HUFF, SHALE and the DOWSER.

Shale : As for you, let you and the women make
Your howling scare of this ; I'll stand and laugh.
But if it truly were the End of the World,
I'd be the man to face it out, not you :
I who have let life go delighted through me,
Not you, who've sulkt away your chance of life

In mumping about being paid for goodness.

[*Going.*]

Huff (*after him*) : You wait, you wait!

[*He follows the rest.*]

Dowser (*alone*) : Naught but a plague of flies!

I cannot do with noises, and light fools

Terrified round me; I must go out and think

Where there is quiet and no one near. O, think!

Life that has done such wonders with its thinking,

And never daunted in imagining;

That has put on the sun and the shining night,

The flowering of the earth and tides of the sea,

And irresistible rage of fate itself,

All these as garments for its spirit's journey—

O now this life, in the brute chance of things,

Murder'd, uselessly murder'd! And naught else

For ever but senseless rounds of hurrying motion

That cannot glory in itself. O no!

I will not think of that; I'll blind my brain

With fancying the splendours of destruction;

When like a burr in the star's fiery mane

The crackling earth is caught and rusht along,

The forests on the mountains blazing so,

That from the rocks of ore beneath them come

White-hot rivers of smelted metal pouring

Across the plains to roar into the sea. . . .

The Curtain is lowered for a few moments only.

ACT II.

As before, a little while after. The room is empty when the curtain goes up. SOLLERS runs in and paces about, but stops short when he catches sight of a pot dog on the mantelpiece.

Sollers : The pace it is coming down!—What to do now?—
 My brain has stopt: it's like a clock that's fallen
 Out of a window and broke all its cogs.—
 Where's that old cider, Vine would have us pay
 Twopence a glass for? Let's try how it smells:
 Old Foxwhelp, and a humming stingo it is!

(To the pot dog.)

Hullo, you! What are you grinning at?—
 I know! There'll be no score against me for this drink!
 O that score! I've drunk it down for a week
 With every gulp of cider, and every gulp
 Was half the beauty it should have been, the score
 So scratcht my swallowing throat, like a wasp in the drink!
 And I need never have heeded it!—
 Old grinning dog! You've seen me happy here;
 And now, all's done! But do you know this too,
 That I can break you now, and never called
 To pay for you? *[Throwing the dog on the floor.*

I shall be savage soon!

We're leaving all this!—O, and it was so pleasant
 Here, in here, of an evening.— Smash!

[He sweeps a lot of crockery on to the floor.

It's all no good! Let's make a wreck of it all!

[Picking up a chair and swinging it.

Damn me! Now I'm forgetting to drink, and soon

'Twill be too late. Where's there a mug not shivered?

[*He goes to draw himself cider. MERRICK rushes in.*

Merrick: You at the barrels too? Out of the road!

[*He pushes SOLLERS away and spills his mug.*

Sollers: Go and kick out of doors, you black donkey.

Merrick: Let me come at the vessel, will you?

[*They wrestle savagely.*

Sollers:

Keep off;

I'm the first here. Lap what you've spilt of mine.

Merrick: You with your chiselling and screw-driving,
Your wooden work, you bidding me, the man
Who hammers a meaning into red hot iron?

[*VINE comes in slowly. He is weeping; the two wrestlers stop and stare at him, as he sits down, and holds his head in his hands, sobbing.*

Vine: O this is a cruel affair!

Sollers: Here's Vine crying!

Vine: I've seen the moon.

Merrick: The moon? 'Tisn't the moon

That's tumbling on us, but yon raging star.

What notion now is clotted in your head?

Vine: I've seen the moon; it has nigh broke my heart.

Sollers: Not the moon too jumping out of her ways?

Vine: No, no;—but going quietly and shining,

Pushing away a flimsy gentle cloud

That would drift smoky round her, fending it off

With steady rounds of blue and yellow light.

It was not much to see. She was no more

Than a curved bit of silver rind. But I

Never before so noted her—

Sollers : What he said,
The dowser !

Merrick : Ay, about his yellowhammers.

Sollers : And there's a kind of stifle in the air
Already !

Merrick : It seems to me, my breathing goes
All hot down my wind pipe, hot as cider
Mulled and steaming travels down my swallow.

Sollers : And a queer racing through my ears of blood.

Merrick : I wonder, is the star come closer still ?

Sollers : O, close, I know, and viciously heading down.

Vine : She was so silver ! And the sun had left
A kind of tawny red, a dust of fine
Thin light upon the blue where she was lying,—
Just a curled paring of the moon, amid
The faint grey cloud that set the gleaming wheel
Around the tilted slip of shining silver.
O it did seem to me so safe and homely,
The moon quietly going about the earth ;
It's a rare place we have to live in, here ;
And life is such a comfortable thing——
And what's the sense of it all ? Naught but to make
Cruel as may be the slaughtering of it. [*He breaks down again.*]

Sollers : It beats my mind ! [*He begins to walk up and down
desperately.*]

Merrick : 'Twas bound to come sometime,
Bound to come, I suppose. 'Tis a poor thing
For us, to fall plumb in the chance of it ;
But, now or another time, 'twas bound to be.—
I have been thinking back. When I was a lad

I was delighted with my life : there seemed
Naught but things to enjoy. Say we were bathing :
There'd be the cool smell of the water, and cool
The splashing under the trees : but I did loathe
The sinking mud slithering round my feet,
And I did love to loathe it so ! And then
We'd troop to kill a wasp's nest ; and for sure
I would be stung ; and if I liked the dusk
And singing and the game of it all, I loved
The smart of the stings, and fleeing the buzzing furies.
And sometimes I'd be looking at myself
Making so much of everything ; there'd seem
A part of me speaking about myself :
" You know, this is much more than being happy.
'Tis hunger of some power in you, that lives
On your heart's welcome for all sorts of luck,
But always looks beyond you for its meaning."
And that's the way the world's kept going on,
I believe now. Misery and delight
Have both had liking welcome from it, both
Have made the world keen to be glad and sorry.
For why ? It felt the living power thrive
The more it made everything, good and bad,
Its own belonging, forged to its own affair,—
The living power that would do wonders someday.
I don't know if you take me ?

Sollers : I do, fine ;

I've felt the very thought go through my mind
When I was at my wains ; though 'twas a thing
Of such a flight I could not read its colour.—

Why was I like a man sworn to a thing
 Working to have my wains in every curve,
 Ay, every tenon, right and as they should be?
 Not for myself, not even for those wains:
 But to keep in me living at its best
 The skill that must go forward and shape the world,
 Helping it on to make some masterpiece.

Merrick: And never was there aught to come of it!
 The world was always looking to use its life
 In some great handsome way at last. And now—
 We are just fooled. There never was any good
 In the world going on or being at all.
 The fine things life has plotted to do are worth
 A rotten toadstool kickt to flying bits.
 End of the World? Ay, and the end of a joke.

Vine: Well, Huff's the man for this turn.

Merrick: Ay, the good man!
 He could but grunt when times were pleasant; now
 There's misery enough to make him trumpet.
 And yet, by God, he shan't come blowing his horn
 Over my misery!

We are just fooled, did I say?— We fooled ourselves,
 Looking for worth in what was still to come;
 And now there's a stop to our innings. Well, that's fair:
 I've been a living man, and might have been
 Nothing at all! I've had the world about me,
 And felt it as my own concern. What else
 Should I be crying for? I've had my turn.
 The world may be for the sake of naught at last,
 But it has been for my sake: I've had that.

[He sits again, and broods.]

Sollers : I can't stay here. I must be where my sight
May silence with its business all my thinking,—
Though it will be the star plunged down so close
It puffs its flaming vengeance in my face.

[*He goes.*

Vine : I wish there were someone who had done me wrong,
Like Huff with his wife and Shale ; I wish there were
Somebody I would like to see go crazed
With staring fright. I'd have my pleasure then
Of living on into the End of the World.
But there is no one at all for me, no one
Now my poor wife is gone.

Merrick : Why, what did she
To harm you ?

Vine : Didn't she marry me ?—It's true
She made it come all right. She died at last.
Besides, it would be wasting wishes on her,
To be in hopes of her weeping at this.
She'd have her hands on her hips and her tongue jumping
As nimble as a stoat, delighting round
The way the world's to be terrible and tormented.—
Ay, but I'll have a thing to tell her now
When she begins to ask the news ! I'll say
“ You've misst such a show as never was nor will be,
A roaring great affair of death and ruin ;
And I was there—the world smasht to sparkles ! ”
O, I can see her vext at that !

[*MERRICK has been sunk in thought during this, but VINE seems to brighten at his notion, and speaks quite cheerfully to HUFF who now comes in, looking mopish, and sits down.*

Vine : We've all been envying you, Huff. You're well off,
You with your goodness and your enemies
Showing you how to relish it with their terror.
When do you mean the gibing is to start ?

Huff : There's time enough.

Vine : O, do they still hold out ?
If they should be for spiting you to the last !
You'd best keep on at them : think out a list
Of frantic things for them to do, when air
Is scorching smother and the sin they did
Frightens their hearts. You'll shout them into fear,
I undertake, if you find breath enough.

Huff : You have the breath. What's all your pester for ?
You leave me be.

Vine : Why, you're to do for me
What I can't do myself.—And yet it's hard
To make out where Shale hurt you. What's the sum
Of all he did to you ? Got you quit of marriage
Without the upset of a funeral.

Huff : Why need you blurt your rambling mind at me ?
Let me bide quiet in my thought awhile,
And it's a little while we have for thought.

Merrick : I know your thought ! Paddling round and around,
Like a squirrel working in a spinning cage
With his neck stretcht to have his chin poke up,
And silly feet busy and always going ;
Paddling round the story of your good life,
Your small good life, and how the decent men
Have jeered at your wry antic.

Huff : My good life !

And what good has my goodness been to me?
You show me that! Somebody show me that!
A caterpillar munching a cabbage-heart,
Always drudging further and further from
The sounds and lights of the world, never abroad
Nor flying free in warmth and air sweet-smelling:
A crawling caterpillar, eating his life
In a deaf dark—that's my gain of goodness!
And it's too late to hatch out now!—
I can but fancy what I might have been;
I scarce know how to sin!— But I believe
A long while back I did come near to it.

Merrick: Well done!— O but I should have guesst all this!

Huff: I was in Droitwich; and the sight of the place
Is where they cook the brine: a long dark shed,
Hot as an oven, full of a grey steam
And ruddy light that leaks out of the furnace;
And stirring the troughs, ladling the brine that boils
As thick as treacle, a double standing row,
Women—boldly talking in wicked jokes
All day long. I went to see 'em. It was
A wonderful rousing sight. Not one of them
Was really wearing clothes: half of a sack
Pinned in an apron was enough for most,
And here and there might be a petticoat;
But nothing in the way of bodices.—
O, they knew words to shame a carter's face!

Merrick: This is the thought you would be quiet in!

Huff: Where else can I be quiet? Now there's an end
Of daring, 'tis the one place my life has made

Where I may try to dare in thought. I mind,
 When I stood in the midst of those bare women,
 All at once, outburst with a rising buzz,
 A mob of flying thoughts was wild in me:
 Things I might do swarmed in my brain pell-mell,
 Like a heap of flies kickt into humming cloud.
 I beat them down; and now I cannot tell
 For certain what they were. I can call up
 Naught venturesome and darting like their style;
 Very tame braveries now!—O Shale's the man
 To smile upon the End of the World; 'tis Shale
 Has lived the bold stiff fashion, and filled himself
 With thinking pride in what a man may do.—
 I wish I had seen those women more than once!

Vine: Well, here's an upside down! This is old Huff!
 What have you been in your heart all these years?
 The man you were or the new man you are?

Huff: Just a dead flesh!

Merrick: Nay, Huff the good man at least
 Was something alive, though snarling like trapt vermin.
 But this? What's this for the figure of a man?
 'Tis a boy's smutty picture on a wall.

Huff: I was alive, was I? Like a blind bird
 That flies and cannot see the flight it takes,
 Feeling it with mere rowing of its wings.
 But Shale—he's had a stirring sense of what he is.

*Shouting outside. Then SOLLERS walks in again, very
 quiet and steady. He stands in the middle, looking down
 on the floor.*

Vine: What do they holla for there?

Sollers : The earth.

Merrick : The earth ?

Sollers : The earth's afire.

Huff : The earth blazing already ? [*Shouts again.*

O, not so soon as this ?

Vine : What sort of a fire ?

Sollers : The earth has caught the heat of the star, you fool.

Merrick : I know : there's come some dazzle in your eyes
From facing to the star ; a lamp would do it.

Huff : It will be that. Your sight, being so strained,
Is flashing of itself.

Sollers : Say what you like.

There's a red flare out of the land beyond
Looking over the hills into our valley.

The thing's begun, 'tis certain. Go and see.

Vine : I won't see that. I will stay here.

Sollers : Ay, creep

Into your oven. You'll be cooler there.—

O my God, we'll all be coals in an hour ! [*Shouts again.*

Huff : And I have naught to stand in my heart upright,
And vow it made my living time worth more
Than if my time had been death in a grave !

Several persons run in.

The Crowd. 1. The river's the place !

2. The only safe place now !

3. Best all charge down to the river !

4. For there's a blaze,

A travelling blaze comes racing along the earth.

Sollers : 'Tis true. The air's red-hot above the hills.

The Crowd : 1. Ay, but the burning now crests the hill-tops
In quiver of yellow flame.

2. And a great smoke
Waving and tumbling upward.

3. The river now!

4. The only place we have, not to be roasted!

Merrick : And what will make us water-rats or otters,
To keep our breath still living through a dive
That lasts until the earth's burnt out? Or how
Would that trick serve, when we stand up to gasp,
And find the star waiting for our plunged heads
To knock them into pummy?

Vine : Scarce more dazed
I'd be with that than now. I shall be bound,
When I'm to give my wife the tale of it all,
To be devising: more of this to-do
My mind won't carry.

Huff : O ashamed I am,
Ashamed!— It needn't have been downright feats,
Such as the braving men, the like of Shale,
Do easily, and smile, keeping them up.
If I could look back to one manful hour
Of romping in the face of all my goodness!—

SHALE comes in, dragging Mrs. HUFF by the hand.

Shale : Huff! Where's Huff?—Huff, you must take her back!
You'll take her back? She's yours: I give her up.

Merrick : Belike here's something bold again.

Mrs. Huff (to *SHALE*) : Once more,
Listen.

Shale : I will not listen. There's no time
For aught but giving you back where you belong;—
And that's with you, Huff. Take her.

Huff : Here is depth
I cannot see to. Is it your last fling?—
The dolt I am in these things!— What's this way
You've found of living wickedly to the end?

Shale : Scorn as you please, but take her back, man, take her.

Huff : But she's my wife! Take her back now? What for?

Mrs. Huff : What for? Have you not known of thieves that throw
Their robbery down, soon as they hear a step
Sounding behind them on the road, and run
A long way off, and pull an honest face?
Ay, see Shale's eyes practising baby-looks!
He never stole, not he!

Shale : Don't hear her talk.

Mrs. Huff : But he was a talker once! Love was the thing;
And love, he swore, would make the wrong go right,
And Huff was a kind of devil—and that's true——

Huff : What? I've been devilish and never knew?

Mrs. Huff : The devil in the world that hates all love.
But Shale said, he'd the love in him would hold
If the world's frame and the fate of men were crackt.

Shale : What I said!
Whoever thought the world was going to crack?

Mrs. Huff : And now he hears someone move behind him.—
They'll say, perhaps, "You stole this!"—Down it goes,
Thrown to the dirty road—thrown to Huff!

Shale : Yes, to the owner.

Mrs. Huff : It was not such brave thieving.
You did not take me from my owner, Shale:
There's an old robber will do that some day,
Not you.

Vine : Were you thinking of me then, missis ?

Mrs. Huff (*still to SHALE*) : You found me lost in the dirt : I was with Huff.

You lifted me from there ; and there again,
Like a frightened urchin, you're for throwing me.

Shale : Let it be that ! I'm firm
Not to have you about me, when the thing,
Whatever it is, that's standing now behind
The burning of the world, comes out on us.

Huff : The way men cheat ! This windle-stalk was he
Would hold a show of spirit for the world
To study while it ruined !—Make what you please
Of your short wrangle here, but leave me out.
I have my thoughts—O far enough from this. [*Turning away.*]

Shale (*seizing him*) : You shall not put me off. I tell you, Huff,
You are to take her back now.

Huff : Take her back !
And what has she to do with what I want ?

Shale : Isn't she yours ? I must be quit of her ;
I'll not be in the risk of keeping her.
She's yours !

Huff : And what's the good of her now to me ?
What's the good of a woman whom I've married ?

During this, WARP the molecatcher has come in.

Warp : Shale and Huff at their old pother again !

Merrick : The molecatcher !

Sollers : Warp, have you travelled far ?
Is it through frenzy and ghastly crowds you've come ?

Vine : Have you got dreadful things to tell us, Warp ?

Warp : Why, no.

But seemingly you'd have had news for me,
If I'd come later. Is Huff to murder Shale,
Or Shale for murdering Huff? One way or 'tother,
'Tis time 'twas settled surely.—Mrs. Huff,
They're neither of them worth you: here's your health.

[*Draws and drinks.*]

Huff: Where have you been? Are you not new from folk
That throng together in a pelting horror?

Warp: Do you think the whole land hearkens to the flurry
Of an old dog biting at a young dog's throat?

Merrick: No, no! Not their shrill yapping; you've not heard
The world's near to be blasted?

Warp: No mutter of it.
I am from walking the whole ground I trap,
And there's no likeness of it, but the moles
I've turned up dead and dried out of three counties.

Sollers: Why, but the fire that's eating the whole earth;
The breath of it is scarlet in the sky!
You must have seen that?

Warp: But what's taken you?
You are like boys that go to hunt for ghosts,
And turn the scuttle of rats to a roused demon
Crawling to shut the door of the barn they search.
Fire? Yes, fire is a playing a pretty game
Yonder, and has its golden fun to itself,
Seemingly.

Sollers: You don't know what 'tis that burns?

Warp: Call me a mole and not a molecatcher
If I do not. It is a rick that burns;
And a strange thing I'll count it if the rick

THE END OF THE WORLD *Lascelles Abercrombie*

Be not old Huff's.

Sollers : That flare a fired stack ?

Huff : Only one of my ricks alight ? O Glory !
There may be chance for me yet.

Merrick : Best take the train
To Droitwich, Huff.

Vine (at the door) : It would be like a stack,
But for the star.

Sollers (to WARP) : Yes, as you're so clever,
You can talk down maybe yon brandishing star !

Warp : O, 'tis the star has flickt your brains ? Indeed,
The tail swings long enough to-night for that.
Well, look your best at it ; 'tis off again
To go its rounds, they tell me, from now on ;
And the next time it swaggers in our sky,
The moles a long while will have tired themselves
Of having their easy joke with me. [A pause.

Merrick : You mean
The flight of the star is from us ?

Sollers : But the world,
The whole world reckons on it battering us !

Warp : Who told you that ?

Sollers : A dowser.

Merrick : Where's he gone ?

Warp : A dowser ! say a tramping conjurer.
You'll believe aught, if you believe a dowser.

Sollers : I had it in me to be doubting him.

Merrick ; The noise you made was like that ! But I knew
You'd laugh at me, so sure you were the world
Would shiver like a bursting grindlestone :

Else I'd have said out loud, 'twas a fool's whimsy.

Vine : Where are you now ? What am I now to think ?
Your minds run round in puzzles, like chased hares.
I cannot sight them.

Merrick : Think of going to bed.

Sollers : And dreaming prices for your pigs.

Merrick : O Warp,
You should have seen Vine crying ! The moon, he said,
The silver moon ! Just like an onion 'twas
To stir the water in his eyes.

Sollers : He's left
A puddle of his tears where he was droopt
Over the table

Vine : There's to be no ruin ?—
But what's the word of a molecatcher, to crow
So ringing over a dowser's word ?

Warp : I'll tell you.
These dowsers live on lies : my trade's the truth.
I can read moles, and the way they've dug their journeys,
Where you'd not see a wrinkle.

Vine : And he knows
The buried water.

Warp : There's always buried water,
If you prod deep enough. A dowser finds
Because the whole earth's floating, like a raft.
What does he know ? A twitching in his thews
A dog asleep knows that much. What I know
I've learnt, and if I'd learnt it wrong, I'd starve.
And if I'm right about the grubbing moles,
Won't I be right for news of walking men ?

Merrick : Of course you're right. Let's put the whole thing by,
And have a pleasant drink.

Shale (to *Mrs. HUFF*) : You must be tired
With all this story. Shall we be off for home?

Huff : You brass! You don't go now with her! She's mine:
You gave her up.

Shale : And you made nothing of her.

(to *Mrs. HUFF*) : Come on.

Mrs. Huff : Warp, will you do a thing for me?

Warp : A hundred things.

Mrs. Huff : Then slap me these cur-dogs.

Warp : I will. Where will I slap them, and which first?

Mrs. Huff : Maybe 'twill do if you but laugh at them.

Warp : I'll try for that; but they are not good jokes;
Though there's a kind of monkey-look about them.

Mrs. Huff : They thinking I'd be near one or the other
After this night! Will I be made no more
Than clay that children puddle to their minds,
Moulding it what they fancy?—Shale was brave:
He made a bogy and defied it, till
He frightened of his work and ran away.
But Huff!— Huff was for modelling wickedly:

Huff : Who told you that?

Mrs. Huff : I need no one's telling.
I was your wife once. Don't I know your goodness?
A stupid heart gone sour with jealousy,
To feel its blood too dull and thick for sinning.—
Yes, Huff would figure a wicked thought, but had
No notion how, and flung the clay aside.—
O they were gaudy colours both! But now

Fear has bleacht their swagger and left them blank,
Fear of a loon that cried, End of the World!

Huff: Shale, do you know what we're to do?

Shale: I'd like

To have the handling of that dowsers-man.

Huff: Just that, my lad, just that!

Warp: And your fired rick?

Huff: Let it be blazes! Quick, Shale, after him!

I'll tramp the night out, but I'll take the rogue.

Shale (to the others): You wait, and see us haul him by the ears,
And swim the blatherer in Huff's farm-yard pond.

As HUFF and SHALE go out, they see the comet before them.

Huff: The devil's own star is that!

Shale: And floats as calm

As a pike basking.

Huff: There shouldn't be such stars!

Shale: Neither such dowsers, and we'll learn him that.

[They go off together.]

Sollers: Why, the star's dwindling now, surely!

Merrick: O, small

And dull now to the glowing size it was.

Vine: But is it certain there'll be nothing smasht?

Not even a house knockt roaring down in crumbles?

— And I did think, I'd open my wife's mouth

With envy of the dreadful things I'd seen!

CURTAIN.

I.

I know not how these men or those may take
Their first glad measure of love's character,
Or whether one should let the summer make
Love's festival, and one the falling year.

I only know that in my prime of days
When my young branches came to blossoming,
You were the sign that loosed my lips in praise,
You were the zeal that governed all my spring.

II.

In prudent counsel many gathered near,
Forewarning us of deft and secret snares
That are love's use. We heard them as we hear
The ticking of a clock upon the stairs.

The troops of reason, careful to persuade,
Blackened love's name, but love was more than these,
For we had wills to venture unafraid
The trouble of unnavigable seas.

III.

Their word was but a barren seed that lies
Undrawn of the sun's health and undesired,
Because the habit of their hearts was wise,
Because the wisdom of their tongues was tired.

For in the smother of contentious pride,
And in the fear of each tumultuous mood,
Our love has kept serenely fortified
And ununsurped one stedfast solitude.

IV.

Dark words, and hasty humours of the blood
Have come to us and made no longer stay
Than footprints of a bird upon the mud
That in an hour the tide will take away.

But not March weather over ploughlands blown,
Nor cresses green upon their gravel bed,
Are beautiful with the clean rigour grown
Of quiet thought our love has piloted.

V.

I sit before the hearths of many men,
When speech goes gladly, eager to withhold
No word at all, yet when I pass again
The last of words is captive and untold.

We talk together in love's house, and there
No thought but seeks what counsel you may give,
And every secret trouble from its lair
Comes to your hand, no longer fugitive.

VI.

I woo the world, with burning will to be
Delighted in all fortune it may find,
And still the strident dogs of jealousy
Go mocking down the tunnels of my mind.

Only for you my contemplation goes
Clean as a god's, undarkened of pretence,
Most happy when your garner overflows,
Achieving in your prosperous diligence.

VII.

When from the dusty corners of my brain
Comes limping some ungainly word or deed,
I know not if my dearest friend's disdain
Be durable or brief, spent husk or seed.

But your rebuke and that poor fault of mine
Go straitly outcast, and we close the door,
And I, no promise asking and no sign,
Stand blameless in love's presence as before.

VIII.

A beggar in the ditch, I stand and call
My questions out upon the queer parade
Of folk that hurry by, and one and all
Go down the road with never answer made.

I do not question love. I am a lord
High at love's table, and the vigilant king,
Unquestioned, from the hubbub at the board
Leans down to me and tells me everything.

Fish (fly-replete, in depth of June,
Dawdling away their wat'ry noon)
Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
Each secret fishy hope or fear.
Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond,
But is there anything Beyond?
This life cannot be All, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were!
One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
Shall come of Water and of Mud;
And, sure, the reverent eye must see
A Purpose in Liquidity.
We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
The future is not Wholly Dry.
Mud unto mud!—Death eddies near—
Not here the appointed End, not here!
But somewhere, beyond Space and Time,
Is wetter water, slimier slime!
And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin,
The littlest fish may enter in.
Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
But more than mundane weeds are there,
And mud, celestially fair;
Fat caterpillars drift around,
And Paradisal grubs are found;
Unfading moths, immortal flies,
And the worm that never dies.
And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ Alack, and well-a-day ! ”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ The cherry-tree's in flourish ! ”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ The world is growing grey.”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ The cherry-tree's in flourish ! ”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ Both flower and fruit decay.”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ The cherry-tree's in flourish ! ”

Said the Old Young Man to the Young Old Man :

“ Alack, and well-a-day !

The world is growing grey ;

And flower and fruit decay.

Beware Old Man, beware Old Man !

For the end of life is nearing ;

And the grave yawns by the way. . . .”

Said the Young Old Man to the Old Young Man :

“ I'm a trifle hard of hearing ;

And can't catch a word you say. . . .

But the cherry-tree's in flourish ! ”

Humming and creaking, the car down the street
Lumbered and lurched through thunderous gloam ;
Bearing us, spent and dumb with the heat,
From office and counter and factory home :

Sallow-faced clerks, genteel in black ;
Girls from the laundries, draggled and dank ;
Ruddy-faced labourers, slouching slack ;
A broken actor, grizzled and lank ;

A mother with querulous babe on her lap ;
A schoolboy whistling under his breath ;
An old man crouched in a dreamless nap ;
A widow with eyes on the eyes of death ;

A priest ; a sailor with deepsea gaze ;
A soldier in scarlet, with waxed moustache ;
A drunken trollop in velvet and lace ;
All silent in that tense dusk . . . when a flash

Of lightning shivered the sultry gloom :
With shattering brattle the whole sky fell
About us ; and rapt to a dazzling doom
We glided on in a timeless spell,

Unscathed through deluge and flying fire,
In a magical chariot of streaming glass,
Cut off from our kind and the world's desire,
Made one by the awe that had come to pass.

“ What fettle, mate ? ” to me he said
As he went by
With lifted head
And laughing eye,
Where, black against the dawning red,
The pit-heaps cut the sky :
“ What fettle, mate ? ”

“ What fettle, mate ? ” to him I said,
As he went by
With shrouded head
And darkened eye,
Borne homeward by his marrows, dead
Beneath the noonday sky :
“ What fettle, mate ? ”

Against the green flame of the hawthorn-tree
His scarlet tunic burns ;
And livelier than the green sap's mantling glee
The Spring fire tingles through him headily
As quivering he turns

And stammers out the old amazing tale
Of youth and April weather :
While she, with half-breathed jests that, sobbing, fail,
Sits, tight-lipped, quaking, eager-eyed and pale,
Beneath her purple feather.

Her day out from the workhouse-ward, she stands,
A grey-haired woman, decent and precise,
With prim black bonnet and neat paisley shawl,
Among the other children by the stall,
And with grave relish eats a penny ice.

To wizened toothless gums, with quaking hands
She holds it, shuddering with delicious cold:
Nor heeds the jeering laughter of young men,
The happiest, in her innocence, of all:
For, while their insolent youth must soon grow old,
She, who's been old, is now a child again.

In dream, again within the clean, cold hell
Of glazed and aching silence he was trapped ;
And, closing in, the blank walls of his cell
Crushed stifling on him . . . when the bracken snapped,
Caught in his clutching fingers : and he lay
Awake upon his back among the fern,
With free eyes travelling the wide blue day
Unhindered, unremembering ; while a burn
Tinkled and gurgled somewhere out of sight,
Unheard of him, till, suddenly aware
Of its cold music, shivering in the light,
He raised himself ; and with far-ranging stare
Looked all about him : and, with dazed eyes wide
Saw, still as in a numb, unreal dream,
Black figures scouring a far hill-side,
With now and then a sunlit rifle's gleam ;
And knew the hunt was hot upon his track :
Yet hardly seemed to mind, somehow, just then . . .
But kept on wondering why they looked so black
On that hot hillside, all those little men
Who scurried round like beetles—twelve, all told . . .
He counted them twice over ; and began
A third time reckoning them, but could not hold
His starved wits to the business, while they ran
So brokenly, and always stuck at " five " . . .
And " One, two, three, four, five " a dozen times
He muttered . . . " Can you catch a fish alive ? "
Sang mocking echoes of old nursery-rhymes
Through the strained, tingling hollow of his head.

And now, almost remembering, he was stirred
To pity them : and wondered if they'd fed
Since he had, or if, ever since they'd heard
Two nights ago the sudden signal-gun
That raised alarm of his escape, they, too,
Had fasted in the wilderness, and run
With nothing but the thirsty wind to chew,
And nothing in their bellies but a fill
Of cold peat water, till their heads were light

The crackling of a rifle on the hill
Rang in his ears : and stung to headlong flight,
He started to his feet ; and through the brake
He plunged in panic, heedless of the sun
That burned his cropped head to a red-hot ache
Still racked with crackling echoes of the gun.
Then suddenly the sun-enkindled fire
Of gorse upon the moor-top caught his eye ;
And that gold glow held all his heart's desire,
As, like a witless flame-bewildered fly,
He blundered towards the league-wide yellow blaze,
And tumbled headlong on the spikes of bloom ;
And rising, bruised and bleeding and adaze,
Struggled through clutching spines : the dense, sweet fume
Of nutty, acrid scent like poison stealing
Through his hot blood : the bristling yellow glare
Spiking his eyes with fire, till he went reeling,
Stifling and blinded, on—and did not care

Though he were taken—wandering round and round,
“Jerusalem the Golden” quavering shrill,
Changing his tune to “Tommy Tiddler’s Ground”:
Till, just a lost child on that dazzling hill,
Bewildered in a glittering golden maze
Of stinging scented fire, he dropped, quite done,
A shrivelling wisp within a world ablaze
Beneath a blinding sky, one blaze of sun.

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