

Classic Poetry Series

Charles G. D. Roberts

- poems -

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An Epitaph for a Husbandman

He who would start and rise
Before the crowing cocks, --
No more he lifts his eyes,
Whoever knocks.
He who before the stars
Would call the cattle home, --
They wait about the bars
For him to come.
Him at whose hearty calls
The farmstead woke again
The horses in their stalls
Expect in vain.

Busy and blithe and bold
He laboured for the morrow, --
The plough his hands would hold
Rusts in the furrow.

His fields he had to leave,
His orchards cool and dim;
The clods he used to cleave
Now cover him.

But the green, growing things
Lean kindly to his sleep, --
White roots and wandering strings,
Closer they creep.

Because he loved them long
And with them bore his part,
Tenderly now they throng
About his heart.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Ave! (An Ode for the Shelley Centenary, 1892)

I

O tranquil meadows, grassy Tantramar,
Wide marshes ever washed in clearest air,
Whether beneath the sole and spectral star
The dear severity of dawn you wear,
Or whether in the joy of ample day
And speechless ecstasy of growing June
You lie and dream the long blue hours away
Till nightfall comes too soon,
Or whether, naked to the unstarred night,
You strike with wondering awe my inward sight, --

II

You know how I have loved you, how my dreams
Go forth to you with longing, though the years
That turn not back like your returning streams
And fain would mist the memory with tears,
Though the inexorable years deny
My feet the fellowship of your deep grass,
O'er which, as o'er another, tenderer sky,
Cloud phantoms drift and pass, --
You know my confident love, since first, a child,
Amid your wastes of green I wandered wild.

III

Inconstant, eager, curious, I roamed;
And ever your long reaches lured me on;
And ever o'er my feet your grasses foamed,
And in my eyes your far horizons shone.
But sometimes would you (as a stillness fell
And on my pulse you laid a soothing palm)
Instruct my ears in your most secret spell;
And sometimes in the calm
Initiate my young and wondering eyes
Until my spirit grew more still and wise.

IV

Purged with high thoughts and infinite desire
I entered fearless the most holy place,
Received between my lips the secret fire,
The breath of inspiration on my face.
But not for long these rare illumined hours,
The deep surprise and rapture not for long.
Again I saw the common, kindly flowers,
Again I heard the song
Of the glad bobolink, whose lyric throat
Peeled like a tangle of small bells afloat.

V

The pounce of mottled marsh-hawk on his prey;
The flicker of sand-pipers in from sea
In gusty flocks that puffed and fled; the play

Of field-mice in the vetches, -- these to me
Were memorable events. But most availed
Your strange unquiet waters to engage
My kindred heart's companionship; nor failed
To grant this heritage, --
That in my veins forever must abide
The urge and fluctuation of the tide.

VI

The mystic river whence you take your name,
River of hubbub, raucous Tantramar,
Untamable and changeable as flame,
It called me and compelled me from afar,
Shaping my soul with its impetuous stress.
When in its gaping channel deeps withdrawn
Its waves ran crying of the wilderness
And winds and stars and dawn,
How I companioned them in speed sublime,
Led out a vagrant on the hills of Time!

VII

And when the orange flood came roaring in
From Fundy's tumbling troughs and tide-worn caves,
While red Minudie's flats were drowned with din
And rough Chignecto's front oppugned the waves,
How blithely with the refluent foam I raced
Inland along the radiant chasm, exploring
The green solemnity with boisterous haste;
My pulse of joy outpouring
To visit all the creeks that twist and shine
From Beauséjour to utmost Tormentine.

VIII

And after, when the tide was full, and stilled
A little while the seething and the hiss,
And every tributary channel filled
To the brim with rosy streams that swelled to kiss
The grass-roots all awash and goose-tongue wild
And salt-sap rosemary, -- then how well content
I was to rest me like a breathless child
With play-time rapture spent, --
To lapse and loiter till the change should come
And the great floods turn seaward, roaring home.

IX

And now, O tranquil marshes, in your vast
Serenity of vision and of dream,
Wherethrough by every intricate vein have passed
With joy impetuous and pain supreme
The sharp, fierce tides that chafe the shores of earth
In endless and controlless ebb and flow,
Strangely akin you seem to him whose birth

One hundred years ago
With fiery succour to the ranks of song
Defied the ancient gates of wrath and wrong.
X

Like yours, O marshes, his compassionate breast,
Wherein abode all dreams of love and peace,
Was tortured with perpetual unrest.
Now loud with flood, now languid with release,
Now poignant with the lonely ebb, the strife
Of tides from the salt sea of human pain
That hiss along the perilous coasts of life
Beat in his eager brain;
But all about the tumult of his heart
Stretched the great calm of his celestial art.
XI

Therefore with no far flight, from Tantramar
And my still world of ecstasy, to thee,
Shelley, to thee I turn, the avatar
Of Song, Love, Dream, Desire, and Liberty;
To thee I turn with reverent hands of prayer
And lips that fain would ease my heart of praise,
Whom chief of all whose brows prophetic wear
The pure and sacred bays
I worship, and have worshipped since the hour
When first I felt thy bright and chainless power.
XII

About thy sheltered cradle in the green
Untroubled groves of Sussex, brooded forms
That to the mother's eye remained unseen, --
Terrors and ardours, passionate hopes, and storms
Of fierce retributive fury, such as jarred
Ancient and sceptred creeds, and cast down kings,
And oft the holy cause of Freedom marred,
With lust of meaner things,
With guiltless blood, and many a frenzied crime
Dared in the face of unforgetful Time.
XIII

The star that burns on revolution smote
Wild heats and change on thine ascendant sphere,
Whose influence thereafter seemed to float
Through many a strange eclipse of wrath and fear,
Dimming awhile the radiance of thy love.
But still supreme in thy nativity,
All dark, invidious aspects far above,
Beamed one clear orb for thee, --

The star whose ministrations just and strong
Controlled the tireless flight of Dante's song.
XIV

With how august contrition, and what tears
Of penitential unavailing shame,
Thy venerable foster-mother hears
The sons of song impeach her ancient name,
Because in one rash hour of anger blind
She thrust thee forth in exile, and thy feet
Too soon to earth's wild outer ways consigned, --
Far from her well-loved seat,
Far from her studious halls and storied towers
And weedy Isis winding through his flowers.
XV

And thou, thenceforth the breathless child of change,
Thine own Alastor, on an endless quest
Of unimagined loveliness didst range,
Urged ever by the soul's divine unrest.
Of that high quest and that unrest divine
Thy first immortal music thou didst make,
Inwrought with fairy Alp, and Reuss, and Rhine,
And phantom seas that break
In soundless foam along the shores of Time,
Prisoned in thine imperishable rhyme.
XVI

Thyself the lark melodious in mid-heaven;
Thyself the Protean shape of chainless cloud,
Pregnant with elemental fire, and driven
Through deeps of quivering light, and darkness loud
With tempest, yet beneficent as prayer;
Thyself the wild west wind, relentless strewing
The withered leaves of custom on the air,
And through the wreck pursuing
O'er lovelier Arnos, more imperial Romes,
Thy radiant visions to their viewless homes.
XVII

And when thy mightiest creation thou
Wert fain to body forth, -- the dauntless form,
The all-enduring, all-forgiving brow
Of the great Titan, flinchless in the storm
Of pangs unspeakable and nameless hates,
Yet rent by all the wrongs and woes of men,
And triumphing in his pain, that so their fates
Might be assuaged, -- oh then

Out of that vast compassionate heart of thine
Thou wert constrained to shape the dream benign.
XVIII

-- O Baths of Caracalla, arches clad
In such transcendent rhapsodies of green
That one might guess the sprites of spring were glad
For your majestic ruin, yours the scene,
The illuminating air of sense and thought;
And yours the enchanted light, O skies of Rome,
Where the giant vision into form was wrought;
Beneath your blazing dome
The intensest song our language ever knew
Beat up exhaustless to the blinding blue! --
XIX

The domes of Pisa and her towers superb,
The myrtles and the ilexes that sigh
O'er San Giuliano, where no jars disturb
The lonely aziola's evening cry,
The Serchio's sun-kissed waters, -- these conspired
With Plato's theme occult, with Dante's calm
Rapture of mystic love, and so inspired
Thy soul's espousal psalm,
A strain of such elect and pure intent
It breathes of a diviner element.
XX

Thou on whose lips the word of Love became
A rapt evangel to assuage all wrong,
Not Love alone, but the austerer name
Of Death engaged the splendours of thy song.
The luminous grief, the spacious consolation
Of thy supreme lament, that mourned for him
Too early haled to that still habitation
Beneath the grass-roots dim, --
Where his faint limbs and pain-o'erwearied heart
Of all earth's loveliness became a part,
XXI

But where, thou sayest, himself would not abide, --
Thy solemn incommunicable joy
Announcing Adonais has not died,
Attesting death to free but not destroy,
All this was as thy swan-song mystical.
Even while the note serene was on thy tongue
Thin grew the veil of the Invisible,
The white sword nearer swung, --

And in the sudden wisdom of thy rest
Thou knewest all thou hadst but dimly guessed.
XXII

Lament, Lericì, mourn for the world's loss!
Mourn that pure light of song extinct at noon!
Ye waves of Spezzia that shine and toss
Repent that sacred flame you quenched too soon!
Mourn, Mediterranean waters, mourn
In affluent purple down your golden shore!
Such strains as his, whose voice you stilled in scorn,
Our ears may greet no more,
Unless at last to that far sphere we climb
Where he completes the wonder of his rhyme!
XXIII

How like a cloud she fled, thy fateful bark,
From eyes that watched to hearts that waited, till
Up from the ocean roared the tempest dark --
And the wild heart Love waited for was still!
Hither and thither in the slow, soft tide,
Rolled seaward, shoreward, sands and wandering shells
And shifting weeds thy fellows, thou didst hide
Remote from all farewells,
Nor felt the sun, nor heard the fleeting rain,
Nor heeded Casa Magni's quenchless pain.
XXIV

Thou heedest not? Nay, for it was not thou,
That blind, mute clay relinquished by the waves
Reluctantly at last, and slumbering now
In one of kind earth's most compassionate graves!
Not thou, not thou, -- for thou wert in the light
Of the Unspeakable, where time is not.
Thou sawest those tears; but in thy perfect sight
And thy eternal thought
Were they not even now all wiped away
In the reunion of the infinite day!
XXV

There face to face thou sawest the living God
And worshippedst, beholding Him the same
Adored on earth as Love, the same whose rod
Thou hadst endured as Life, whose secret name
Thou now didst learn, the healing name of Death.
In that unroutable profound of peace,
Beyond experience of pulse and breath,
Beyond the last release

Of longing, rose to greet thee all the lords
Of Thought, with consummation in their words:
XXVI

He of the seven cities claimed, whose eyes,
Though blind, saw gods and heroes, and the fall
Of Ilium, and many alien skies,
And Circe's Isle; and he whom mortals call
The Thunderous, who sang the Titan bound
As thou the Titan victor; the benign
Spirit of Plato; Job; and Judah's crowned
Singer and seer divine;
Omar; the Tuscan; Milton, vast and strong;
And Shakespeare, captain of the host of Song.
XXVII

Back from the underworld of whelming change
To the wide-glittering beach thy body came;
And thou didst contemplate with wonder strange
And curious regard thy kindred flame,
Fed sweet with frankincense and wine and salt,
With fierce purgation search thee, soon resolving
Thee to the elements of the airy vault
And the far spheres revolving,
The common waters, the familiar woods,
And the great hills' inviolate solitudes.
XXVIII

Thy close companions there officiated
With solemn mourning and with mindful tears, --
The pained, imperious wanderer unmated
Who voiced the wrath of those rebellious years;
Trelawney, lion-limbed and high of heart;
And he, that gentlest sage and friend most true,
Whom Adonais loved. With these bore part
One grieving ghost, that flew
Hither and thither through the smoke unstirred
In wailing semblance of a wild white bird.
XXIX

O heart of fire, that fire might not consume,
Forever glad the world because of thee;
Because of thee forever eyes illumine
A more enchanted earth, a lovelier sea!
O poignant voice of the desire of life,
Piercing our lethargy, because thy call
Aroused our spirits to a nobler strife
Where base and sordid fall,

Forever past the conflict and the pain
More clearly beams the goal we shall attain!
XXX

And now once more, O marshes, back to you
From whatsoever wanderings, near or far,
To you I turn with joy forever new,
To you, O sovereign vests of Tantramar!
Your tides are at the full. Your wizard flood,
With every tribute stream and brimming creek,
Ponders, possessor of the utmost good,
With no more left to seek, --
But the hour wanes and passes; and once more
Resounds the ebb with destiny in its roar.
XXXI

So might some lord of men, whom force and fate
And his great heart's unvanquishable power
Have thrust with storm to his supreme estate,
Ascend by night his solitary tower
High o'er the city's lights and cries uplift.
Silent he ponders the scrolled heaven to read
And the keen stars' conflicting message sift,
Till the slow signs recede,
And ominously scarlet dawns afar
The day he leads his legions forth to war.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Bat, Bat, Come Under my Hat

(A Modernity)

Twelve good friends
Passed under her hat,
And devil a one of them
Knew where he was at.
Had they but known,
Then had they known all things, --
The littleness of great things,
The unmeasured immensity of small things.
They had known the Where and the Why,
The When and the Wherefore,
And how the Eternal
Conceived the Eternal, and therefore
Beginning began the Beginning;
They had apprehended
The ultimate virtue of sinning;
They had caught the whisper
That Vega vibrates to Arcturus,
Piercing the walls
Of heavy flesh that immure us.

But if they had known,
Then had there been no mystery;
And Life had been poorer,
And laughter unsurer,
And the shadow of death securer,
By lack of this brief history.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Canada

O Child of Nations, giant-limbed,
Who stand'st among the nations now
Unheeded, unadored, unhymned,
With unanointed brow, --
How long the ignoble sloth, how long
The trust in greatness not thine own?
Surely the lion's brood is strong
To front the world alone!
How long the indolence, ere thou dare
Achieve thy destiny, seize thy fame, --
Ere our proud eyes behold thee bear
A nation's franchise, nation's name?

The Saxon force, the Celtic fire,
These are thy manhood's heritage!
Why rest with babes and slaves? Seek higher
The place of race and age.

I see to every wind unfurled
The flag that bears the Maple Wreath;
Thy swift keels furrow round the world
Its blood-red folds beneath;

Thy swift keels cleave the furthest seas;
Thy white sails swell with alien gales;
To stream on each remotest breeze
The black smoke of thy pipes exhales.

O Falterer, let thy past convince
Thy future, -- all the growth, the gain,
The fame since Cartier knew thee, since
Thy shores beheld Champlain!

(Montcalm and Wolfe! Wolfe and Montcalm!
Quebec, thy storied citadel
Attest in burning song and psalm
How here thy heroes fell!

O Thou that bor'st the battle's brunt
At Queenston and at Lundy's Lane, --
On whose scant ranks but iron front
The battle broke in vain! --

Whose was the danger, whose the day,
From whose triumphant throats the cheers,
At Chrysler's Farm, at Chateauguay,
Storming like clarion-bursts our ears?

On soft Pacific slopes, -- beside
Strange floods that northward rave and fall, --
Where chafes Acadia's chainless tide --
Thy sons await thy call.

They wait; but some in exile, some
With strangers housed, in stranger lands, --
And some Canadian lips are dumb
Beneath Egyptian sands.

O mystic Nile! Thy secret yields
Before us; thy most ancient dreams
Are mixed with far Canadian fields
And murmur of Canadian streams.

But thou, my country, dream not thou!
Wake, and behold how night is done, --
How on thy breast, and o'er thy brow,
Bursts the uprising sun!

Charles G. D. Roberts

Canadian Streams

O rivers rolling to the sea
From lands that bear the maple-tree,
How swell your voices with the strain
Of loyalty and liberty!

A holy music, heard in vain
By coward heart and sordid brain,
To whom this strenuous being seems
Naught but a greedy race for gain.

O unsung streams--not splendid themes
Ye lack to fire your patriot dreams!
Annals of glory gild your waves,
Hope freights your tides, Canadian streams!

St. Lawrence, whose wide water laves
The shores that ne'er have nourished slaves!
Swift Richelieu of liliated fame!
Niagara of glorious graves!

Thy rapids, Ottawa, proclaim
Where Daulac and his heroes came!
Thy tides, St. John, declare La Tour,
And, later, many a loyal name!

Thou inland stream, whose vales, secure
From storm, Tecumseh's death made poor!
And thou small water, red with war,
'Twixt Beaubassin and Beauséjour!

Dread Saguenay, where eagles soar,
What voice shall from the bastioned shore
The tale of Roberval reveal,
Or his mysterious fate deplore?

Annapolis, do thy floods yet feel
Faint memories of Champlain's keel,
Thy pulses yet the deed repeat
Of Poutrincourt and d'Iberville?

And thou far tide, whose plains now beat
With march of myriad weathering feet,
Saskatchewan, whose virgin sod
So late Canadian blood made sweet?

Your bulwark hills, your valleys broad,
Streams where de Salaberry trod,
Where Wolfe achieved, where Brock was slain,--
Their voices are the voice of God!

O sacred waters! not in vain,
Across Canadian height and plain,

Ye sound us in triumphant tone
The summons of your high refrain.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Grey Rocks, and Greyer Sea

Grey rocks, and greyer sea,
And surf along the shore --
And in my heart a name
My lips shall speak no more.

The high and lonely hills
Endure the darkening year --
And in my heart endure
A memory and a tear.

Across the tide a sail
That tosses, and is gone --
And in my heart the kiss
That longing dreams upon.

Grey rocks, and greyer sea,
And surf along the shore --
And in my heart the face
That I shall see no more.

Charles G. D. Roberts

In an Old Barn

Tons upon tons the brown-green fragrant hay
O'erbrims the mows beyond the time-warped eaves,
Up to the rafters where the spider weaves,
Though few flies wander his secluded way.
Through a high chink one lonely golden ray,
Wherein the dust is dancing, slants unstirred.
In the dry hush some rustlings light are heard,
Of winter-hidden mice at furtive play.
Far down, the cattle in their shadowed stalls,
Nose-deep in clover fodder's meadowy scent,
Forget the snows that whelm their pasture streams,
The frost that bites the world beyond their walls.
Warm housed, they dream of summer, well content
In day-long contemplation of their dreams.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Monition

A faint wind, blowing from World's End,
Made strange the city street.
A strange sound mingled in the fall
Of the familiar feet.
Something unseen whirled with the leaves
To tap on door and sill.
Something unknown went whispering by
Even when the wind was still.
And men looked up with startled eyes
And hurried on their way,
As if they had been called, and told
How brief their day.

Charles G. D. Roberts

O Earth, Sufficing All our Needs

O earth, sufficing all our needs, O you
With room for body and for spirit too,
How patient while your children vex their souls
Devising alien heavens beyond your blue!
Dear dwelling of the immortal and unseen,
How obstinate in my blindness have I been,
Not comprehending what your tender calls,
Veiled promises and reassurance, mean.
Not far and cold the way that they have gone
Who through your sundering darkness have withdrawn;
Almost within our hand-reach they remain
Who pass beyond the sequence of the dawn.

Not far and strange the Heaven, but very near,
Your children's hearts unknowingly hold dear.
At times we almost catch the door swung wide.
An unforgotten voice almost we hear.

I am the heir of Heaven -- and you are just.
You, you alone I know -- and you I trust.
I have sought God beyond His farthest star --
But here I find Him, in your quickening dust.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Philander's Song

(from "The Sprightly Pilgrim")

I sat and read Anacreon.

Moved by the gay, delicious measure

I mused that lips were made for love,

And love to charm a poet's leisure.

And as I mused a maid came by

With something in her look that caught me.

Forgotten was Anacreon's line,

But not the lesson he had taught me.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Tantramar Revisited

Summers and summers have come, and gone with the flight of the swallow;
Sunshine and thunder have been, storm, and winter, and frost;
Many and many a sorrow has all but died from remembrance,
Many a dream of joy fall'n in the shadow of pain.
Hands of chance and change have marred, or moulded, or broken,
Busy with spirit or flesh, all I most have adored;
Even the bosom of Earth is strewn with heavier shadows, --
Only in these green hills, aslant to the sea, no change!
Here where the road that has climbed from the inland valleys and woodlands,
Dips from the hill-tops down, straight to the base of the hills, --
Here, from my vantage-ground, I can see the scattering houses,
Stained with time, set warm in orchards, meadows, and wheat,
Dotting the broad bright slopes outspread to southward and eastward,
Wind-swept all day long, blown by the south-east wind.

Skirting the sunbright uplands stretches a riband of meadow,
Shorn of the labouring grass, bulwarked well from the sea,
Fenced on its seaward border with long clay dykes from the turbid
Surge and flow of the tides vexing the Westmoreland shores.
Yonder, toward the left, lie broad the Westmoreland marshes, --
Miles on miles they extend, level, and grassy, and dim,
Clear from the long red sweep of flats to the sky in the distance,
Save for the outlying heights, green-rampired Cumberland Point;
Miles on miles outrolled, and the river-channels divide them, --
Miles on miles of green, barred by the hurtling gusts.

Miles on miles beyond the tawny bay is Minudie.
There are the low blue hills; villages gleam at their feet.
Nearer a white sail shines across the water, and nearer
Still are the slim, grey masts of fishing boats dry on the flats.
Ah, how well I remember those wide red flats, above tide-mark
Pale with scurf of the salt, seamed and baked in the sun!
Well I remember the piles of blocks and ropes, and the net-reels
Wound with the beaded nets, dripping and dark from the sea!
Now at this season the nets are unwound; they hang from the rafters
Over the fresh-stowed hay in upland barns, and the wind
Blows all day through the chinks, with the streaks of sunlight, and sways them
Softly at will; or they lie heaped in the gloom of a loft.

Now at this season the reels are empty and idle; I see them
Over the lines of the dykes, over the gossiping grass.
Now at this season they swing in the long strong wind, thro' the lonesome
Golden afternoon, shunned by the foraging gulls.
Near about sunset the crane will journey homeward above them;
Round them, under the moon, all the calm night long,
Winnowing soft grey wings of marsh-owls wander and wander,
Now to the broad, lit marsh, now to the dusk of the dike.
Soon, thro' their dew-wet frames, in the live keen freshness of morning,
Out of the teeth of the dawn blows back the awakening wind.
Then, as the blue day mounts, and the low-shot shafts of the sunlight
Glance from the tide to the shore, gossamers jewelled with dew
Sparkle and wave, where late sea-spoiling fathoms of drift-net

Myriad-meshed, uploomed sombrely over the land.

Well I remember it all. The salt, raw scent of the margin;
While, with men at the windlass, groaned each reel, and the net,
Surging in ponderous lengths, uprose and coiled in its station;
Then each man to his home, -- well I remember it all!

Yet, as I sit and watch, this present peace of the landscape, --
Stranded boats, these reels empty and idle, the hush,
One grey hawk slow-wheeling above yon cluster of haystacks, --
More than the old-time stir this stillness welcomes me home.
Ah, the old-time stir, how once it stung me with rapture, --
Old-time sweetness, the winds freighted with honey and salt!
Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland, --
Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see, --
Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion,
Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Autumn Thistles

The morning sky is white with mist, the earth
White with the inspiration of the dew.
The harvest light is on the hills anew,
And cheer in the grave acres' fruitful girth.
Only in this high pasture is there dearth,
Where the gray thistles crowd in ranks austere,
As if the sod, close-cropt for many a year,
Brought only bane and bitterness to birth.

But in the crisp air's amethystine wave
How the harsh stalks are washed with radiance now,
How gleams the harsh turf where the crickets lie
Dew-freshened in their burnished armour brave!
Since earth could not endure nor heaven allow
Aught of unlovely in the morn's clear eye.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Clearing

Stumps, and harsh rocks, and prostrate trunks all charred,
And gnarled roots naked to the sun and rain,--
They seem in their grim stillness to complain,
And be their pain the evening peace is jarred.
These ragged acres fire and the axe have scarred,
And many summers not assuaged their pain.
In vain the pink and saffron light, in vain
The pale dew on the hillocks stripped and marred!

But here and there the waste is touched with cheer
Where spreads the fire-weed like a crimson flood
And venturous plumes of golden-rod appear;
And round the blackened fence the great boughs lean
With comfort; and across the solitude
The hermit's holy transport peals serene.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Cow Pasture

I see the harsh, wind-ridden, eastward hill,
By the red cattle pastured, blanched with dew;
The small, mossed hillocks where the clay gets through;
The grey webs woven on milkweed tops at will.
The sparse, pale grasses flicker, and are still.
The empty flats yearn seaward. All the view
Is naked to the horizon's utmost blue;
And the bleak spaces stir me with strange thrill.
Not in perfection dwells the subtler power
To pierce our mean content, but rather works
Through incompleteness, and the need that irks, --
Not in the flower, but effort toward the flower.
When the want stirs, when the soul's cravings urge,
The strong earth strengthens, and the clean heavens purge.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Departing of Gluskâp

It is so long ago; and men well-nigh
Forget what gladness was, and how the earth
Gave corn in plenty, and the rivers fish,
And the woods meat, before he went away.
His going was on this wise.

All the works

And words and ways of men and beasts became
Evil, and all their thoughts continually
Were but of evil. Then he made a feast.
Upon the shore that is beside the sea
That takes the setting sun, he ordered it,
And called the beasts thereto. Only the men
He called not, seeing them evil utterly.
He fed the panther's crafty brood, and filled
The lean wolf's hunger; from the hollow tree
His honey stayed the bear's terrific jaws;
And the brown rabbit couched at peace, within
The circling shadow of the eagle's wings.
And when the feast was done he told them all
That now, because their ways were evil grown,
On that same day he must depart from them,
And they should look upon his face no more.
Then all the beasts were very sorrowful.

It was near sunset, and the wind was still,
And down the yellow shore a thin wave washed
Slowly; and Gluskâp launched his birch canoe,
And spread his yellow sail, and moved from shore,
Though no wind followed, streaming in the sail,
Or roughening the clear waters after him.
And all the beasts stood by the shore, and watched.
Then to the west appeared a long red trail
Over the wave; and Gluskâp sailed and sang
Till the canoe grew little, like a bird,
And black, and vanished in the shining trail.
And when the beasts could see his form no more,
They still could hear him, singing as he sailed,
And still they listened, hanging down their heads
In long row, where the thin wave washed and fled.
But when the sound of singing died, and when
They lifted up their voices in their grief,
Lo! on the mouth of every beast a strange
New tongue! Then rose they all and fled apart,
Nor met again in council from that day.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Frosted Pane

One night came Winter noiselessly, and leaned
Against my window-pane.
In the deep stillness of his heart convened
The ghosts of all his slain.
Leaves, and ephemera, and stars of earth,
And fugitives of grass, --
White spirits loosed from bonds of mortal birth,
He drew them on the glass.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Great and Little Weavers

The great and the little weavers,
They neither rest nor sleep.
They work in the height and the glory,
They toil in the dark and the deep.
The rainbow melts with the shower,
The white-thorn falls in the gust,
The cloud-rose dies into shadow,
The earth-rose dies into dust.
But they have not faded forever,
They have not flowered in vain,
For the great and the little weavers
Are weaving under the rain.

Recede the drums of the thunder
When the Titan chorus tires,
And the bird-song piercing the sunset
Faints with the sunset fires,

But the trump of the storm shall fail not,
Nor the flute-cry fail of the thrush,
For the great and the little weavers
Are weaving under the hush.

The comet flares into darkness,
The flame dissolves into death,
The power of the star and the dew
They glow and are gone like a breath,

But ere the old wonder is done
Is the new-old wonder begun,
For the great and the little weavers
Are weaving under the sun.

The domes of an empire crumble,
A child's hope dies in tears;
Time rolls them away forgotten
In the silt of the flooding years;

The creed for which men died smiling
Decays to a beldame's curse;
The love that made lips immortal
Drags by in a tattered hearse.

But not till the search of the moon
Sees the last white face uplift,
And over the bones of the kindreds
The bare sands dredge and drift,

Shall Love forget to return
And lift the unused latch,
(In his eyes the look of the traveller,
On his lips the foreign catch),

Nor the mad song leave men cold,
Nor the high dream summon in vain, --
For the great and the little weavers
Are weaving in heart and brain.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Herring Weir

Back to the green deeps of the outer bay
The red and amber currents glide and cringe,
Diminishing behind a luminous fringe
Of cream-white surf and wandering wraiths of spray.
Stealthily, in the old reluctant way,
The red flats are uncovered, mile on mile,
To glitter in the sun a golden while.
Far down the flats, a phantom sharply grey,
The herring weir emerges, quick with spoil.
Slowly the tide forsakes it. Then draws near,
Descending from the farm-house on the height,
A cart, with gaping tubs. The oxen toil
Sombrely o'er the level to the weir,
And drag a long black trail across the light.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Iceberg

I was spawned from the glacier,
A thousand miles due north
Beyond Cape Chidley;
And the spawning,
When my vast, wallowing bulk went under,
Emerged and heaved aloft,
Shaking down cataracts from its rocking sides,
With mountainous surge and thunder
Outraged the silence of the Arctic sea.

Before I was thrust forth
A thousand years I crept,
Crawling, crawling, crawling irresistibly,
Hid in the blue womb of the eternal ice,
While under me the tortured rock
Groaned,
And over me the immeasurable desolation slept.

Under the pallid dawning
Of the lidless Arctic day
Forever no life stirred.
No wing of bird --
Of ghostly owl low winnowing
Or fleet-winged ptarmigan fleeing the pounce of death, --
No foot of backward-glancing fox
Half glimpsed, and vanishing like a breath, --
No lean and gauntly stalking bear,
Stalking his prey.
Only the white sun, circling the white sky.
Only the wind screaming perpetually.

And then the night --
The long night, naked, high over the roof of the world,
Where time seemed frozen in the cold of space, --
Now black, and torn with cry
Of unseen voices where the storm raged by,
Now radiant with spectral light
As the vault of heaven split wide
To let the flaming Polar cohorts through,
And close ranked spears of gold and blue,
Thin scarlet and thin green,
Hurtled and clashed across the sphere
And hissed in sibilant whisperings,
And died.
And then the stark moon, swinging low,
Silver, indifferent, serene,
Over the sheeted snow.

But now, an Alp afloat,
In seizure of the surreptitious tide,
Began my long drift south to a remote
And unimagined doom.

Scornful of storm,
Unjarred by thunderous buffeting of seas,
Shearing the giant floes aside,
Ploughing the wide-flung ice-fields in a spume
That smoked far up my ponderous flanks,
Onward I fared,
My ice-blue pinnacles rendering back the sun
In darts of sharp radiance;
My bases fathoms deep in the dark profound.

And now around me
Life and the frigid waters all aswarm.
The smooth wave creamed
With tiny capelin and the small pale squid, --
So pale the light struck through them.
Gulls and gannets screamed
Over the feast, and gorged themselves, and rose,
A clamour of weaving wings, and hid
Momently my face.
The great bull whales
With cavernous jaws agape,
Scooped in the spoil, and slept,
Their humped forms just awash, and rocking softly, --
Or sounded down, down to the deeps, and nosed
Along my ribbed and sunken roots,
And in the green gloom scattered the pasturing cod.

And so I voyaged on, down the dim parallels,
Convoyed by fields
Of countless calving seals
Mild-featured, innocent-eyed, and unforeknowing
The doom of the red flenching knives.
I passed the storm-racked gate
Of Hudson Strait,
And savage Chidley where the warring tides
In white wrath seethe forever.
Down along the sounding shore
Of iron-fanged, many-watered Labrador
Slow weeks I shaped my course, and saw
Dark Makkowic and dark Napiskawa,
And came at last off lone Belle Isle, the bane
Of ships and snare of bergs.
Here, by the deep conflicting currents drawn,
I hung,
And swung,
The inland voices Gulfward calling me
To ground amid my peers on the alien strand
And roam no more.
But then an off-shore wind,
A great wind fraught with fate,
Caught me and pressed me back,
And I resumed my solitary way.

Slowly I bore
South-east by bastioned Bauld,
And passed the sentinel light far-beaming late
Along the liners' track,
And slanted out Atlanticwards, until
Above the treacherous swaths of fog
Faded from the view the loom of Newfoundland.

Beautiful, ethereal
In the blue sparkle of the gleaming day,
A soaring miracle
Of white immensity,
I was the cynosure of passing ships
That wondered and were gone,
Their wreathed smoke trailing them beyond the verge.
And when in the night they passed --
The night of stars and calm,
Forged up and passed, with churning surge
And throb of huge propellers, and long-drawn
Luminous wake behind,
And sharp, small lights in rows,
I lay a ghost of menace chill and still,
A shape pearl-pale and monstrous, off to leeward,
Blurring the thin horizon line.

Day dragged on day,
And then came fog,
By noon, blind-white,
And in the night
Black-thick and smothering the sight.
Folded therein I waited,
Waited I knew not what
And heeded not,
Greatly incurious and unconcerned.
I heard the small waves lapping along my base,
Lipping and whispering, lipping with bated breath
A casual expectancy of death.
I heard remote
The deep, far carrying note
Blown from the hoarse and hollow throat
Of some lone tanker groping on her course.
Louder and louder rose the sound
In deepening diapason, then passed on,
Diminishing, and dying, --
And silence closed around.
And in the silence came again
Those stealthy voices,
That whispering of death.

And then I heard
The thud of screws approaching.
Near and more near,
Louder and yet more loud,
Through the thick dark I heard it, --
The rush and hiss of waters as she ploughed
Head on, unseen, unseeing,
Toward where I stood across her path, invisible.
And then a startled blare
Of horror close re-echoing, -- a glare
Of sudden, stabbing searchlights
That but obscurely pierced the gloom;
And there
I towered, a dim immensity of doom.

A roar
Of tortured waters as the giant screws,
Reversed, thundered full steam astern.
Yet forward still she drew, until,
Slow answering desperate helm,
She swerved, and all her broadside came in view,
Crawling beneath me;
And for a moment I saw faces, blanched,
Stiffly agape, turned upward, and wild eyes
Astare; and one long, quavering cry went up
As a submerged horn gored her through and through,
Ripping her beam wide open;
And sullenly she listed, till her funnels
Crashed on my steep,
And men sprang, stumbling, for the boats.

But now, my deep foundations
Mined by those warmer seas, the hour had come
When I must change.
Slowly I leaned above her,
Slowly at first, then faster,
And icy fragments rained upon her decks.
Then my enormous mass descended on her,
A falling mountain, all obliterating, --
And the confusion of thin, wailing cries,
The Babel of shouts and prayers
And shriek of steam escaping
Suddenly died.
And I rolled over,
Wallowing,
And once more came to rest,
My long hid bases heaved up high in air.

And now, from fogs emerging,
I traversed blander seas,
Forgot the fogs, the scourging
Of sleet-whipped gales, forgot
My austere origin, my tremendous birth,
My journeyings, and that last cataclysm
Of overwhelming ruin.
My squat, pale, alien bulk
Basked in the ambient sheen;
And all about me, league on league outspread,
A gulf of indigo and green.
I laughed in the light waves laced with white, --
Nor knew
How swiftly shrank my girth
Under their sly caresses, how the breath
Of that soft wind sucked up my strength, nor how
The sweet, insidious fingers of the sun
Their stealthy depredations wrought upon me.

Slowly now
I drifted, dreaming.
I saw the flying-fish
With silver gleaming
Flash from the peacock-bosomed wave
And flicker through an arc of sunlit air
Back to their element, desperate to elude
The jaws of the pursuing albacore.

Day after day
I swung in the unhasting tide.
Sometimes I saw the dolphin folk at play,
Their lithe sides iridescent-dyed,
Unheeding in their speed
That long grey wraith,
The shark that followed hungering beneath.
Sometimes I saw a school
Of porpoise rolling by
In ranked array,
Emerging and submerging rhythmically,
Their blunt black bodies heading all one way
Until they faded
In the horizon's dazzling line of light.
Night after night
I followed the low, large moon across the sky,
Or counted the large stars on the purple dark,
The while I wasted, wasted and took no thought,
In drowsed entrancement caught; --
Until one noon a wave washed over me,
Breathed low a sobbing sigh,
Foamed indolently, and passed on;

And then I knew my empery was gone;
As I, too, soon must go.
Nor was I ill content to have it so.

Another night
Gloomed o'er my sight,
With cloud, and flurries of warm, wild rain.
Another day,
Dawning delectably
With amber and scarlet stain,
Swept on its way,
Glowing and shimmering with heavy heat.
A lazing tuna rose
And nosed me curiously,
And shouldered me aside in brusque disdain,
So had I fallen from my high estate.
A foraging gull
Stooped over me, touched me with webbed pink feet,
And wheeled and skreeled away,
Indignant at the chill.

Last I became
A little glancing globe of cold
That slid and sparkled on the slow-pulsed swell.
And then my fragile, scintillating frame
Dissolved in ecstasy
Of many coloured light,
And I breathed up my soul into the air
And merged forever in the all-solvent sea.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Potato Harvest

A high bare field, brown from the plough, and borne
Aslant from sunset; amber wastes of sky
Washing the ridge; a clamour of crows that fly
In from the wide flats where the spent tides mourn
To yon their rocking roosts in pines wind-torn;
A line of grey snake-fence, that zigzags by
A pond and cattle; from the homestead nigh
The long deep summonings of the supper horn.
Black on the ridge, against that lonely flush,
A cart, and stoop-necked oxen; ranged beside
Some barrels; and the day-worn harvest-folk,
Here emptying their baskets, jar the hush
With hollow thunders. Down the dusk hillside
Lumbers the wain; and day fades out like smoke.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Recessional

Now along the solemn heights
Fade the Autumn's altar-lights;
Down the great earth's glimmering chancel
Glide the days and nights.

Little kindred of the grass,
Like a shadow in a glass
Falls the dark and falls the stillness;
We must rise and pass.

We must rise and follow, wending
Where the nights and days have ending, --
Pass in order pale and slow
Unto sleep extending.

Little brothers of the clod,
Soul of fire and seed of sod,
We must fare into the silence
At the knees of God.

Little comrades of the sky,
Wing to wing we wander by,
Going, going, going, going,
Softly as a sigh.

Hark, the moving shapes confer,
Globe of dew and gossamer,
Fading and ephemeral spirits
In the dusk astir.

Moth and blossom, blade and bee,
Worlds must go as well as we,
In the long procession joining
Mount and star and sea.

Toward the shadowy brink we climb
Where the round year rolls sublime,
Rolls, and drops, and falls forever
In the vast of time.

Like a plummet plunging deep
Past the utmost reach of sleep,
Till remembrance has no longer
Care to laugh or weep.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Salt Flats

Here clove the keels of centuries ago
Where now unvisited the flats lie bare.
Here seethed the sweep of journeying waters, where
No more the tumbling floods of Fundy flow,
And only in the samphire pipes creep slow
The salty currents of the sap. The air
Hums desolately with wings that seaward fare,
Over the lonely reaches beating low.
The wastes of hard and meagre weeds are thronged
With murmurs of a past that time has wronged;
And ghosts of many an ancient memory
Dwell by the brackish pools and ditches blind,
In these low-lying pastures of the wind,
These marshes pale and meadows by the sea.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Skater

My glad feet shod with the glittering steel
I was the god of the winged heel.
The hills in the far white sky were lost;
The world lay still in the wide white frost;
And the woods hung hushed in their long white dream
By the ghostly, glimmering, ice-blue stream.
Here was a pathway, smooth like glass,
Where I and the wandering wind might pass
To the far-off palaces, drifted deep,
Where Winter's retinue rests in sleep.

I followed the lure, I fled like a bird,
Till the startled hollows awoke and heard

A spinning whisper, a sibilant twang,
As the stroke of the steel on the tense ice rang;

And the wandering wind was left behind
As faster, faster I followed my mind;

Till the blood sang high in my eager brain,
And the joy of my flight was almost pain.

Then I stayed the rush of my eager speed
And silently went as a drifting seed, --

Slowly, furtively, till my eyes
Grew big with the awe of a dim surmise,

And the hair of my neck began to creep
At hearing the wilderness talk in sleep.

Shapes in the fir-gloom drifted near.
In the deep of my heart I heard my fear.

And I turned and fled, like a soul pursued,
From the white, inviolate solitude.

Charles G. D. Roberts

The Solitary Woodsman

When the grey lake-water rushes
Past the dripping alder-bushes,
And the bodeful autumn wind
In the fir-tree weeps and hushes, --
When the air is sharply damp
Round the solitary camp,
And the moose-bush in the thicket
Glimmers like a scarlet lamp, --
When the birches twinkle yellow,
And the cornel bunches mellow,
And the owl across the twilight
Trumpets to his downy fellow, --

When the nut-fed chipmunks romp
Through the maples' crimson pomp,
And the slim viburnum flushes
In the darkness of the swamp, --

When the blueberries are dead,
When the rowan clusters red,
And the shy bear, summer-sleekened,
In the bracken makes his bed, --

On a day there comes once more
To the latched and lonely door,
Down the wood-road striding silent,
One who has been here before.

Green spruce branches for his head,
Here he makes his simple bed,
Crouching with the sun, and rising
When the dawn is frosty red.

All day long he wanders wide
With the grey moss for his guide,
And his lonely axe-stroke startles
The expectant forest-side.

Toward the quiet close of day
Back to camp he takes his way,
And about his sober footsteps
Unafraid the squirrels play.

On his roof the red leaf falls,
At his door the bluejay calls,
And he hears the wood-mice hurry
Up and down his rough log walls;

Hears the laughter of the loon
Thrill the dying afternoon;
Hears the calling of the moose
Echo to the early moon.

And he hears the partridge drumming,
The belated hornet humming, --
All the faint, prophetic sounds
That foretell the winter's coming.

And the wind about his eaves
Through the chilly night-wet grieves,
And the earth's dumb patience fills him,
Fellow to the falling leaves.

Charles G. D. Roberts

Twilight on Sixth Avenue at Ninth Street

Over the tops of the houses
Twilight and sunset meet.
The green, diaphanous dusk
Sinks to the eager street.

Astray in the tangle of roofs
Wanders a wind of June.
The dial shines in the clock-tower
Like the face of a strange-screwed moon.

The narrowing lines of the houses
Palely begin to gleam,
And the hurrying crowds fade softly
Like an army in a dream.

Above the vanishing faces
A phantom train flares on
With a voice that shakes the shadows, --
Diminishes, and is gone.

And I walk with the journeying throng
In such a solitude
As where a lonely ocean
Washes a lonely wood.

Charles G. D. Roberts