Classic Poetry Series

Francis Ledwidge

- 48 poems -

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Francis Ledwidge (19 August 1887 – 31 July 1917)

Francis Edward Ledwidge was an Irish war poet from County Meath. Sometimes known as the "poet of the blackbirds", he was killed in action at the Battle of Passchendaele during World War I.

Early life

Ledwidge was born at Janeville, Slane, in Ireland, the eighth of nine children in a poverty-stricken family. His parents, Patrick Ledwidge (the Ledwidge family, from Shropshire, was granted land in Meath after the Norman invasion) and wife Anne Lynch (1853–1926), believed in giving their children the best education they could afford. But when Francis was only five his father Patrick died prematurely, which forced his wife and the children out to work at an early age. Francis left the local national school aged thirteen, and while he continued to self-educate himself, he worked at what work he could find, as farm hand, road mender and supervisor of roads, as copper miner (sacked for organising a strike having been a trade union activist since 1906) and shop assistant. Appointed secretary of the Slane branch of the Meath Labour Union (1913–14) he had aspirations of permanent white-collar work. His politics were nationalist as well as left-wing.

Young poet

Strongly built, with striking brown eyes and a sensuous face, Ledwidge was a keen poet writing where ever he could – sometimes even on gates or fence posts. From the age of fourteen his works were published in his local newspaper, the Drogheda Independent reflecting his passion for the Boyne Valley. While working as a road labourer he won the patronage of the writer, Lord Dunsany, after he wrote to him in 1912, enclosing copybooks of his early work. Dunsany, a man of letters already well-known in Dublin and London literary and dramatic circles, and whose own start in publishing had been with a few poems, promoted him in Dublin and introduced him to W.B. Yeats with whom he became acquainted.

Dunsany supported Ledwidge with money and literary advice for some years, providing him with access to and a workspace in Dunsany Castle's Library where he met the Irish writer Katharine Tynan, corresponding with her regularly. Dunsany later prepared his first collection of poetry Songs of the Fields, which successfully appealed to the expectations of the Irish Literary Revival and its social taste for rural poetry.

Home Rule and World War I

Ledwidge was a keen patriot and nationalist. His efforts to found a branch of the Gaelic League in Slane were thwarted by members of the local council. The area organiser encouraged him to continue his struggle, but Francis gave up. He did manage to act as a founding member with his brother Joseph of the Slane Branch of the Irish Volunteers (1914), a nationalist force sworn to defend the introduction of Home Rule for Ireland, by force if need be.

On the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, and on account of Ireland's involvement in the war, the Irish Volunteers split into two factions, the National Volunteers who supported John Redmond’s appeal to join Irish regiments in support of the Allied war cause and those who did not. Francis was originally of the latter party. Nevertheless, having defended this position strongly at a local authority meeting, he enlisted (24 October 1914) in Lord Dunsany’s regiment, joining 5th battalion Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, part of the 10th (Irish) Division. This was against the urgings of Dunsany who opposed his enlistment and had offered him a stipend to support him if he stayed away from the war. Some have speculated that he went to war because his sweetheart Ellie Vaughey had found a new lover, John O'Neill, whom she later married, but Ledwidge himself wrote, and forcefully, that he could not stand aside while others sought to defend Ireland's freedom.

Poetry and war

Ledwidge seems to have fitted into Army life well, and rapidly achieved promotion to lance corporal. In 1915, he saw action at Suvla Bay in the Dardanelles, where he suffered severe rheumatism. Having survived huge losses sustained by his company in the Battle of Gallipoli, he became ill after a back injury on a tough mountain journey in Serbia (December 1915), a locale which inspired a number of poems.

Ledwidge was dismayed by the news of the Easter Rising, and was court-martialled and demoted for overstaying his home leave and being drunk in uniform (May 1916). He gained and lost stripes over a period in Derry (he was a corporal when the introduction to his first book was written), and then, returned to the front, received back his lance corporal's stripe one last time in January 1917 when posted to the Western Front, joining 1st Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, part of 29th Division.

Ledwidge continued to write when feasible throughout the war years, though he lost much work, for example, in atrocious weather in Serbia. He sent much of his output to Lord Dunsany, himself moving on war assignments, as well as to readers among family, friends and literary contacts.

On 31 July 1917, a group from Ledwidge's battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers were road-laying in preparation for an assault during the Third Battle of Ypres, near the village of Boezinge, northwest of Ieper (Ypres). While Ledwidge was drinking tea in a mud hole with his comrades, a shell exploded alongside, killing the poet and five others. A chaplain who knew him, Father Devas, arrived soon after, and recorded "Ledwidge killed, blown to bits."

The poems Ledwidge wrote on active service revealed his pride at being a soldier, as he believed, in the service of Ireland. He wondered whether he would find a soldier's death. The dead were buried at Carrefour de Rose, and later re-interred in the nearby Artillery Wood Military Cemetery, Boezinge, (where the Welsh poet Hedd Wyn, killed on the same day, is also buried). A stone tablet commemorates him in the Island of Ireland Peace Park, Messines, Belgium. His work as “peasant poet” and “soldier poet”, once a standard part of the Irish school curriculum, faded from view for many decades of the 20th century. Its intensity, coupled with a revived interest in his period, has restored it to life.

Publications and reception

Much of Ledwidge's work was published in newspapers and journals in Ireland and the UK. The only work published in book form during Ledwidge's lifetime was the original Songs of the Fields (1915), which was very well

received. The critic Edward Marsh printed three of the poems in the Georgian Poetry series, and remained a correspondent for the remainder of Ledwidge's life. A second volume, Songs of Peace was in preparation when Ledwidge died; patron and friend Lord Dunsany wrote the introduction while both were in Derry in September 1916.

Following the war, Dunsany arranged for more of Ledwidge's work to be published, first in a third and final new volume, Last Songs, and then later in an anthology in 1919; he commented on the work with words such as:

"[I was] astonished by the brilliance of that eye and that had looked at the fields of Meath and seen there all the simple birds and flowers, with a vividness which made those pages like a magnifying glass, through which one looked at familiar things for the first time."

Some of Ledwidge's poetry was put to music by the British Composer and song-writer Michael Head, most notably in the very well received song cycle published in 1920, "Over the rim of the moon". This includes the well-known song, "The Ships of Arcady".

Quotes

Oh what a pleasant world 'twould be,

How easy we'd step thro' it,

If all the fools who meant no harm,

Could manage not to do it!

- From a personal letter.

He shall not hear the bittern cry

in the wild sky, where he is lain,

Nor voices of the sweeter birds

Above the wailing of the rain

Nor shall he know when the loud March blows

Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,

Blowing to flame the golden cup

Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the dark cow leaves the moor

And pastures poor with greedy weeds

Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn

Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

- Lament for Thomas MacDonagh

Documentary film

Ledwidge was the subject of an RTÉ documentary entitled Behind the Closed

Eye, first broadcast on January 18, 1973. It won awards for Best Story and Best Implementation Documentary at the Golden Prague International Television Festival.

Works:

Songs of the Fields (1915)
Songs of Peace (1917)
Last Songs (1918)
The complete poems of Francis Ledwidge; with introductions by Lord Dunsany (1919)
Later collections:

Alice Curtayne: ‘’The complete poems of Francis Ledwidge’’ (1974) who also wrote a comprehensive biography of the poet, including some previously unpublished work

Liam O'Meara: ‘’The poems of Francis Ledwidge’’ (1997), (ISBN 1 870 49147 5), including some previously unpublished work

Ulick O’Connor (introduction by): ‘’The best of Francis Ledwidge’’, The Inchicore Ledwidge Society, Risposte Books (2004), ISBN 1-901596-10-9

Hubert Dunn:‘’The Minstrel Boy’’, (2006) some more poems released in a commemorative volume

Dermot Bolger: In 1992 long-time Ledwidge admirer, Dublin poet Dermot Bolger, published a Selected Poems of Francis Ledwidge. This was re-issued by New Island Books in 2007 under the title "A Ledwidge Treasury", with an introduction by Seamus Heaney and an afterword by Dermot Bolger. In 2007 Bolger's play about the life of Ledwidge, "Walking the Road", (New Island Books, 2007) was staged in Dublin and in the Town Hall Theatre, Ieper, close where Ledwidge died. It was commissioned to mark the 90th anniversary of his death. In 1998 Bolger and the poet's nephew, Joseph Ledwidge, were invited by the 'In Flanders Fields Museum' to unveil a monument on the spot where Ledwidge was killed.

A Fairy Hunt

Who would hear the fairy horn
Calling all the hounds of Finn
Must be in a lark's nest born
When the moon is very thin.

I who have the gift can hear
Hounds and horn and tally ho,
And the tongue of Bran as clear
As Christmas bells across the snow.

And beside my secret place
Hurries by the fairy fox,
With the moonrise on his face,
Up and down the mossy rocks.

Then the music of a horn
And the flash of scarlet men,
Thick as poppies in the corn
All across the dusky glen.

Oh! the mad delight of chase!
Oh ! the shouting and the cheer !
Many an owl doth leave his place
In the dusty tree to hear.

Francis Ledwidge

A Little Boy in the Morning

He will not come, and still I wait.
He whistles at another gate
Where angels listen. Ah I know
He will not come, yet if I go
How shall I know he did not pass
barefooted in the flowery grass?

The moon leans on one silver horn
Above the silhouettes of morn,
And from their nest-sills finches whistle
Or stooping pluck the downy thistle.
How is the morn so gay and fair
Without his whistling in its air?
The world is calling, I must go.
How shall I know he did not pass
Barefooted in the shining grass?

Francis Ledwidge

A Mother's Song

Little ships of whitest pearl
With sailors who were ancient kings,
Come over the sea when my little girl
Sings.

And if my little girl should weep,
Little ships with torn sails
Go headlong down among the deep
Whales.

Francis Ledwidge

A Rainy Day in April

When the clouds shake their hyssops, and the rain
Like holy water falls upon the plain,
'Tis sweet to gaze upon the springing grain
And see your harvest born.

And sweet the little breeze of melody
The blackbord puffs upon teh budding tree,
While the wild poppy lights upon the lea
And blazes 'mid the corn.

The skylark soars the freshening shower to hail,
And the meek daisy holds aloft her pail.
And Spring all radiant by the wayside pale
Sets up her rock and reel.

See how she weaves her mantle fold on fold,
Hemming the woods and carpeting the wold.
Her warp is of the green, her woof the gold,
The spinning world her wheel.

Francis Ledwidge

A Soldier's Grave

Then in the lull of midnight, gentle arms
Lifted him slowly down the slopes of death
Lest he should hear again the mad alarms
Of battle, dying moans, and painful breath.

And where the earth was soft for flowers we made
A grave for him that he might better rest.
So, Spring shall come and leave it seet arrayed,
And there the lark shall turn her dewy nest

Francis Ledwidge

After Court Martial

My mind is not my mind, therefore
I take no heed of what men say,
I lived ten thousand years before
God cursed the town of Nineveh.

The Present is a dream I see
Of horror and loud sufferings,
At dawn a bird will waken me
Unto my place among the kings.

And though men called me a vile name,
And all my dream companions gone,
Tis I the soldier bears the shame,
Not I the king of Babylon.

Francis Ledwidge

Ardan Mór

AS I was climbing Ardan Mór
From the shore of Sheelin lake,
I met the herons coming down
Before the water’s wake.

And they were talking in their flight
Of dreamy ways the herons go
When all the hills are withered up
Nor any waters flow.

Francis Ledwidge

At A Poet's Grave

When I leave down this pipe my friend
And sleep with flowers I loved, apart,
My songs shall rise in wilding things
Whose roots are in my heart.

And here where that sweet poet sleeps
I hear the songs he left unsung,
When winds are fluttering the flowers
And summer-bells are rung.

Francis Ledwidge

At Currabwee

Every night at Currabwee
Little men with leather hats
Mend the boots of Faery
From the tough wings of the bats.
So my mother told to me,
And she is wise you will agree. .

Louder than a cricket's wing
All night long their hammer's glee
Times the merry songs they sing
Of Ireland glorious and free.
So I heard Joseph Plunkett say,
You know he heard them but last May.

And when the night is very cold
They warm their hands against the light
Of stars that make the waters gold
Where they are labouring all the night.
So Pearse said, and he knew the truth,
Among the stars he spent his youth.

And I, myself, have often heard
Their singing as the stars went by,
For am I not of those who reared
The banner of old Ireland high,
From Dublin town to Turkey's shores,
And where the Vardar loudly roars?

Francis Ledwidge

Autumn

Now leafy winds are blowing cold,
And South by West the sun goes down,
A quiet huddles up the fold
In sheltered corners of the brown.

Like scattered fire the wild fruit strews
The ground beneath the blowing tree,
And there the busy squirrel hews
His deep and secret granary.

And when the night comes starry clear,
The lonely quail complains beside
The glistening waters on the mere
Where widowed Beauties yet abide.

And I, too, make my own complaint
Upon a reed I plucked in June,
And love to hear it echoed faint
Upon another heart in tune.

Francis Ledwidge

Behind the Closed Eye

I walk the old frequented ways
That wind around the tangled braes,
I live again the sunny days
Ere I the city knew.

And scenes of old again are born,
The woodbine lassoing the thorn,
And drooping Ruth-like in the corn
The poppies weep the dew.

Above me in their hundred schools
The magpies bend their young to rules,
And like an apron full of jewels
The dewy cobweb swings.

And frisking in the stream below
The troutlets make the circles flow,
And the hungry crane doth watch them grow
As a smoker does his rings.

Above me smokes the little town,
With its whitewashed walls and roofs of brown
And its octagon spire toned smoothly down
As the holy minds within.

And wondrous impudently sweet,
Half of him passion, half conceit,
The blackbird calls adown the street
Like the piper of Hamelin.

I hear him, and I feel the lure
Drawing me back to the homely moor,
I'll go and close the mountain's door
On the city's strife and din.

Francis Ledwidge

Ceol Sidhe

When May is here, and every morn
Is dappled with pied bells,
And dewdrops glance along the thorn
And wings flash in the dells,
I take my pipe and play a tune
Of dreams, a whispered melody,
For feet that dance beneath the moon
In fairy jollity.

And when the pastoral hills are grey
And the dim stars are spread,
A scamper fills the grass like play
Of feet where fairies tread.
And many a little whispering thing
Is calling the Shee.
The dewy bells of evening ring,
And all is melody.

Francis Ledwidge

Dawn

Quiet miles of golden sky,
And in my heart a sudden flower.
I want to clap my hands and cry
For Beauty in her secret bower.

Quiet golden miles of dawn—
Smiling all the East along ;
And in my heart nigh fully blown,
A little rose-bud of a song.

Francis Ledwidge

Fairies

Maiden-poet, come with me
To the heaped up cairn of Maeve,
And there we'll dance a fairy dance
Upon a fairy's grave.

In and out among the trees,
Filling all the night with sound,
The morning, strung upon her star,
Shall chase us round and round.

What are we but fairies too,
Living but in dreams alone,
Or, at the most, but children still,
Innocent and overgrown ?

Francis Ledwidge

Had I A Golden Pound (After The Irish)

Had I a golden pound to spend,
My love should mend and sew no more.
And I would buy her a little quern,
Easy to turn on the kitchen floor.

And for her windows curtains white,
With birds in flight and flowers in bloom,
To face with pride the road to town,
And mellow down her sunlit room.

And with the silver change we'd prove
The truth of Love to life's own end,
With hearts the years could but embolden,
Had I a golden pound to spend.

Francis Ledwidge

In A Cafe

Kiss the maid and pass her round,
Lips like hers were made for many.
Our loves are far from us to-night,
But these red lips are sweet as any.

Let no empty glass be seen
Aloof from our good table's sparkle,
At the acme of our cheer
Here are francs to keep the circle.

They are far who miss us most-
Sip and kiss -how well we love them,
Battling through the world to keep
Their hearts at peace, their God above them.

Francis Ledwidge

In France

THE silence of maternal hills
Is round me in my evening dreams;
And round me music-making rills
And mingling waves of pastoral streams.

Whatever way I turn I find
The path is old unto me still.
The hills of home are in my mind,
And there I wander as I will.

Francis Ledwidge

Ireland

I called you by sweet names by wood and linn,
You answered not because my voice was new,
And you were listening for the hounds of Finn
And the long hosts of Lugh.

And so, I came unto a windy height
And cried my sorrow, but you heard no wind,
For you were listening to small ships in flight,
And the wail on hills behind.

And then I left you, wandering the war
Armed with will, from distant goal to goal,
To find you at the last free as of yore,
Or die to save your soul.

And then you called to us from far and near
To bring your crown from out the deeps of time,
It is my grief your voice I couldn't hear
In such a distant clime.

Francis Ledwidge

June

Broom out the floor now, lay the fender by,
And plant this bee-sucked bough of woodbine there,
And let the window down. The butterfly
Floats in upon the sunbeam, and the fair
Tanned face of June, the nomad gipsy, laughs
Above her widespread wares, the while she tells
The farmers' fortunes in the fields, and quaffs
The water from the spider-peopled wells.

The hedges are all drowned in green grass seas,
And bobbing poppies flare like Elmo's light,
While siren-like the pollen-staind bees
Drone in the clover depths. And up the height
The cuckoo's voice is hoarse and broke with joy.
And on the lowland crops the crows make raid,
Nor fear the clappers of the farmer's boy,
Who sleeps, like drunken Noah, in the shade.

And loop this red rose in that hazel ring
That snares your little ear, for June is short
And we must joy in it and dance and sing,
And from her bounty draw her rosy worth.
Ay! soon the swallows will be flying south,
The wind wheel north to gather in the snow,
Even the roses spilt on youth's red mouth
Will soon blow down the road all roses go.

Francis Ledwidge

Lady Fair

Lady fair, have we not met
In our lives elsewhere ?
Darkling in my mind to-night
Faint fair faces dare
Memory's old unfaithfulness
To what was true and fair.
Long of memory is Regret,
But what Regret has taken flight
Through my memory's silences ?
Lo ! I turn it to the light.
'Twas but a pleasure in distress,
Too faint and far off for redress.
But some light glancing in your hair
And in the liquid of your eyes
Seem to murmur old good-byes
In our lives elsewhere.
Have we not met. Lady fair ?

Francis Ledwidge

Lament for the Poets: 1916

I heard the Poor Old Woman say:
"At break of day the fowler came,
And took my blackbirds from their songs
Who loved me well thro' shame and blame

No more from lovely distances
Their songs shall bless me mile by mile,
Nor to white Ashbourne call me down
To wear my crown another while.

With bended flowers the angels mark
For the skylark the place they lie,
From there its little family
Shall dip their wings first in the sky.

And when the first suprise of flight
Sweet songs excite, from the far dawn
Shall there come blackbirds loud with love,
Sweet echoesmof the singers gone.

But in the lovely hush of eve
Weeping I grieve the silent bills"
I heard the Poor Old Woman say
In Derry of the little hills.

Francis Ledwidge

Lament for Thomas McDonagh

He shall not hear the bittern cry
In the wild sky, where he is lain,
Nor voices of the sweeter birds,
Above the wailing of the rain.

Nor shall he know when loud March blows
Thro' slanting snows her fanfare shrill,
Blowing to flame the golden cup
Of many an upset daffodil.

But when the Dark Cow leaves the moor
And pastures poor with greedy weeds
Perhaps he'll hear her low at morn
Lifting her horn in pleasant meads.

Francis Ledwidge

My Mother

God made my mother on an April day,
From sorrow and the mist along the sea,
Lost birds' and wanderers' songs and ocean spray,
And the moon loved her wandering jealously.

Beside the ocean's din she combed her hair,
Singing the nocturne of the passing ships,
Before her earthly lover found her there
And kissed away the music from her lips.

She came unto the hills and saw the change
That brings the swallow and the geese in turns.
But there was not a grief she deemed strange,
For there is that in her which always mourns.

Kind heart she has for all on hill or wave
Whose hopes grew wings like ants to fly away.
I bless the God Who such a mother gave
This poor bird-hearted singer of a day.

Francis Ledwidge

Old Clo

I was just coming in from the garden,
Or about to go fishing for eels,
And, smiling, I asked you to pardon
My boots very low at the heels.
And I thought that you never would go,
As you stood in the doorway ajar,
For my heart would keep saying, 'Old Clo',
You're found out at last as you are.'

I was almost ashamed to acknowledge
That I was the quarry you sought,
For was I not bred in a college
And reared in a mansion, you thought.
And now in the latest style cut
With fortune more kinder I go
To welcome you half-ways. Ah (but
I was nearer the gods when ' Old Clo'.'

Francis Ledwidge

Pan

He knows the safe ways and unsafe
And he will lead the lambs to fold,
Gathering them with his merry pipe,
The gentle and the overbold.

He counts them over one by one,
And leads them back by cliff and steep,
To grassy hills where dawn is wide,
And they may run and skip and leap.

And just because he loves the lambs
He settles them for rest at noon,
And plays them on his oaten pipe
The very wonder of a tune.

Francis Ledwidge

Soliloquy

When I was young I had a care
Lest I should cheat me of my share
Of that which makes it sweet to strive
For life, and dying still survive,
A name in sunshine written higher
Than lark or poet dare aspire.

But I grew weary doing well.
Besides, 'twas sweeter in that hell,
Down with the loud banditti people
Who robbed the orchards, climbed the steeple
For jackdaws' eyes and made the cock
Crow ere 'twas daylight on the clock.
I was so very bad the neighbours
Spoke of me at their daily labours.

And now I'm drinking wine in France,
The helpless child of circumstance.
To-morrow will be loud with war,
How will I be accounted for?

It is too late now to retrieve
A fallen dream, too late to grieve
A name unmade, but not too late
To thank the gods for what is great;
A keen-edged sword, a soldier's heart,
Is greater than a poet's art.
And greater than a poet's fame
A little grave that has no name.

Francis Ledwidge

Spring

Once more the lark with song and speed
Cleaves through the dawn, his hurried bars^;
Fall, like the flute of Ganymede
Twirling and whistling from the stars.

The primrose and the daffodil
Surprise the valleys, and wild thyme
Is sweet on every little hill,
When lambs come down at folding time.

In every wild place now is heard
The magpie's noisy house, and through
The mingled tunes of many a bird
The ruffled wood-dove's gentle coo.

Sweet by the river's noisy brink
The water-lily bursts her crown,
The kingfisher comes down to drink
Like rainbow jewels falling down.

And when the blue and grey entwine
The daisy shuts her golden eye,
And peace wraps all those hills of mine
Safe in my dearest memory.

Francis Ledwidge

Spring and Autumn

Green ripples singing down the corn,
With blossoms dumb the path I tread,
And in the music of the morn
One with wild roses on her head.

Now the green ripples turn to gold
And all the paths are loud with rain,
I with desire am growing old
And full of winter pain.

Francis Ledwidge

Spring Love

I saw her coming through the flowery grass,
Round her swift ankles butterfly and bee
Blent loud and silent wings ; I saw her pass
Where foam-bows shivered on the sunny sea.

Then came the swallow crowding up the dawn,
And cuckoo-echoes filled the dewy South.
I left my love upon the hill, alone,
My last kiss burning on her lovely mouth.

Francis Ledwidge

The Call to Ireland

We have fought so much for the nation
In the tents we helped to divide;
Shall the cause of our common fathers
On our earthstones lie denied?
For the price of a field we have wrangled
While the weather rusted the plow,
' twas yours and 'twas mine and 'tis ours yet
And it's time to be fencing it now.

Francis Ledwidge

The Dead Kings

All the dead kings came to me
At Rosnaree, where I was dreaming.
A few stars glimmered through the morn,
And down the thorn the dews were streaming.

And every dead king had a story
Of ancient glory, sweetly told.
It was too early for the lark,
But the starry dark had tints of gold.

I listened to the sorrows three
Of that Eire passed into song.
A cock crowed near a hazel croft,
And up aloft dim larks winged strong.

And I, too, told the kings a story
Of later glory, her fourth sorrow:
There was a sound like moving shields
In high green fields and the lowland furrow.

And one said : ' We who yet are kings
Have heard these things lamenting inly.'
Sweet music flowed from many a bill
And on the hill the morn stood queenly.

And one said : ' Over is the singing,
And bell bough ringing, whence we come ;
With heavy hearts we'll tread the shadows,
In honey meadows birds are dumb.'

And one said : ' Since the poets perished
And all they cherished in the way,
Their thoughts unsung, like petal showers
Inflame the hours of blue and gray.'

And one said : ' A loud tramp of men
We'll hear again at Rosnaree.'
A bomb burst near me where I lay.
I woke, 'twas day in Picardy.

Francis Ledwidge

The Find

I took a reed and blew a tune,
And sweet it was and very clear
To be about a little thing
That only few hold dear.

Three times the cuckoo named himself,
But nothing heard him on the hill,
Where I was piping like an elf
The air was very still.

'Twas all about a little thing
I made a mystery of sound,
I found it in a fairy ring
Upon a fairy mound.

Francis Ledwidge

The Lanawn Shee

Powdered and perfumed the full bee
Winged heavily across the clover,
And where the hills were dim with dew,
Purple and blue the west leaned over.

A willow spray dipped in the stream,
Moving a gleam of silver ringing,
And by a finny creek a maid
Filled all the shade with softest singing.

Listening, my heart and soul at strife,
On the edge of life I seemed to hover,'
For I knew my love had come at last,
That my joy was past and my gladness over.

I tiptoed gently up and stooped
Above her looped and shining tresses,
And asked her of her kin and name,
And why she came from fairy places.

She told me of a sunny coast
Beyond the most adventurous sailor,
Where she had spent a thousand years
Out of the fears that now assail her.

And there, she told me, honey drops
Out of the tops of ash and willow,
And in the mellow shadow Sleep
Doth sweetly keep her poppy pillow.

Nor Autumn with her brown line marks
The time of larks, the length of roses,
But song-time there is over never
Nor flower-time ever, ever closes.

And wildly through uncurling ferns
Fast water turns down valleys singing,
Filling with scented winds the dales,
Setting the bells of sleep a-ringing.

And when the thin moon lowly sinks, '
Through cloudy chinks a silver glory
Lingers upon the left of night
Till dawn delights the meadows hoary.

And by the lakes the skies are white,
(Oh, the delight!) when swans are coming,
Among the flowers sweet joy-bells peal,
And quick bees wheel in drowsy humming*

The squirrel leaves her dusty house

And in the boughs makes fearless gambol,
And, falling down in fire-drops, red,
The fruit is shed from every bramble.

Then, gathered all about the trees
Glad galaxies of youth are dancing,
Treading the perfume of the flowers,
Filling the hours with mazy glancing.

And when the dance is done, the trees
Are left to Peace and the brown woodpecker,
And on the western slopes of sky
The day's blue eye begins to flicker.

But at the sighing of the leaves,
When all earth grieves for lights departed
An ancient and a sad desire
Steals in to tire the human-hearted.

No fairy aid can save them now
Nor turn their prow upon the ocean,
The hundred years that missed each heart
Above them start their wheels in motion.

And so our loves are lost, she sighed,
And far and wide we seek new treasure,
For who on Time or Timeless hills
Can live the ills of loveless leisure ?

(' Fairer than Usna's youngest son,
0, my poor one, what flower-bed holds you?
Or, wrecked upon the shores of home,
What wave of foam with white enfolds you ?

' You rode with kings on hills of green,
And lovely queens have served you banquet,
Sweet wine from berries bruised they brought
And shyly sought the lips which drank it.

' But in your dim grave of the sea
There shall not be a friend to love you.
And ever heedless of your loss
The earth ships cross the storms above you.

' And still the chase goes on, and still
The wine shall spill, and vacant places
Be given over to the new
As love untrue keeps changing faces.

' And I must wander with my song

Far from the young till Love returning,
Brings me the beautiful reward
Of some heart stirred by my long yearning.')

Friend, have you heard a bird lament
When sleet is sent for April weather ?
As beautiful she told her grief,
As down through leaf and flower I led her.

And friend, could I remain unstirred
Without a word for such a sorrow ?
Say, can the lark forget the cloud
When poppies shroud the seeded furrow ?

Like a poor widow whose late grief
Seeks for relief in lonely byeways,
The moon, companionless and dim,
Took her dull rim through starless highways.

I was too weak with dreams to feel
Enchantment steal with guilt upon me,
She slipped, a flower upon the wind,
And laughed to find how she had won me.

From hill to hill, from land to land,
Her lovely hand is beckoning for me,
I follow on through dangerous zones,
Cross dead men's bones and oceans stormy.

Some day I know she'll wait at last
And lock me fast in white embraces,
And down mysterious ways of love
We two shall move to fairy places.

Francis Ledwidge

The Little Children

Hunger points a bony finger
To the workhouse on the hill,
But the little children linger
While there's flowers to gather still
For my sunny window sill.

In my hands I take their faces,
Smiling to my smiles they run.
Would that I could take their places
Where the murky bye-ways shun
The benedictions of the sun

How they laugh and sing returning
Lightly on their secret way.
While I listen in my yearning
Their laughter fills the windy day
With gladness, youth and May.

Francis Ledwidge

The Lost Ones

Somewhere is music from the linnets' bills,
And thro' the sunny flowers the bee-wings drone,
And white bells of convolvulus on hills
Of quiet May make silent ringing, blown
Hither and thither by the wind of showers,
And somewhere all the wandering birds have flown;
And the brown breath of Autumn chills the flowers.

But where are all the loves of long ago?
O little twilight ship blown up the tide,
Where are the faces laughing in the glow
Of morning years, the lost ones scattered wide
Give me your hand, O brother, let us go
Crying about the dark for those who died.

Francis Ledwidge

The Rushes

The rushes nod by the river
As the winds on the loud waves go,
And the things they nod of are many,
For it's many the secret they know.

And I think they are wise as the fairies
Who lived ere the hills were high,
They nod so grave by the river
To everyone passing by.

If they would tell me their secrets
[: I would go by a hidden way,
To the rath when the moon retiring
Dips dim horns into the gray.

And a fairy-girl out of Leinster
In a long dance I should meet,
My heart to her heart beating,
My feet in rhyme with her feet.

Francis Ledwidge

The Shadow People

Old lame Bridget doesn't hear
Fairy music in the grass
When the gloaming's on the mere
And the shadow people pass:
Never hears their slow grey feet
Coming from the village street
Just beyond the parson's wall,
Where the clover globes are sweet
And the mushroom's parasol
Opens in the moonlit rain.
Every night I hear them call
From their long and merry train.
Old lame Bridget says to me,
"It is just your fancy, child."
She cannot believe I see
Laughing faces in the wild,
Hands that twinkle in the sedge
Bowing at the water's edge
Where the finny minnows quiver,
Shaping on a blue wave's ledge
Bubble foam to sail the river.
And the sunny hands to me
Beckon ever, beckon ever.
Oh! I would be wild and free,
And with the shadow people be.

Francis Ledwidge

The Sylph

I saw you and I named a flower
That lights with blue a woodland space,
I named a bird of the red hour
And a hidden fairy place.

And then I saw you not, and knew
Dead leaves were whirling down the mist,
And something lost was crying through -
An evening of amethyst.

Francis Ledwidge

The Wife of Llew

And Gwydion said to Math, when it was Spring:
"Come now and let us make a wife for Llew."
And so they broke broad boughs yet moist with dew,
And in a shadow made a magic ring:
They took the violet and the meadow-sweet
To form her pretty face, and for her feet
They built a mound of daisies on a wing,
And for her voice they made a linnet sing
In the wide poppy blowing for her mouth.
And over all they chanted twenty hours.
And Llew came singing from the azure south
And bore away his wife of birds and flowers.

Francis Ledwidge

Thoughts at the Trysting Stile

Come, May, and hang a white flag on each thorn,
Make truce with earth and heaven; the April child
Now hides her sulky face deep in the morn
Of your new flowers by the water wild
And in the ripples of the rising grass,
And rushes bent to let the south wind pass
On with her tumult of swift nomad wings,
And broken domes of downy dandelion.
Only in spasms now the blackbird sings.
The hour is all a-dream.

Nets of woodbine
Throw woven shadows over dreaming flowers,
And dreaming, a bee-luring lily bends
Its tender bell where blue dyke-water cowers
Thro' briars and folded ferns, and gripping ends
Of wild convolvulus.

The lark's sky-way
Is desolate.
I watch an apple-spray
Beckon across a wall as if it knew
I wait the calling of the orchard maid.
Inly I fell she will come in blue,
With yellow on her hair, and two curls strayed
Out of her comb's loose stocks, and I shall steal
Behind and lay my hands upon her eyes,
'Look not, but be my Psyche!'

And her peal
Of laughter will ring far, and as she tries
For freedom I will call her names of flowers
That climb up walls; then thro' the twilight hours
We'll talk about the loves of ancient queens,
And kisses like wasp-honey, false and sweet,
And how we are entangled in love's snares
Like wind-looped flowers.

Francis Ledwidge

To A Sparrow

Because you have no fear to mingle
Wings with those of greater part,
So like me, with song I single
Your sweet impudence of heart.

And when prouder feathers go where
Summer holds her leafy show,
You still come to us from nowhere
Like grey leaves across the snow.

In back ways where odd and end go
To your meals you drop down sure,
Knowing every broken window
Of the hospitable poor.

There is no bird half so harmless,
None so sweetly rude as you,
None so common and so charmless,
None of virtues nude as you.

But for all your faults I love you,
For you linger with us still,
Though the wintry winds reprove you
And the snow is on the hill.

Francis Ledwidge

To An Old Quill Of Lord Dunsany's

Before you leave my hands' abuses
To lie where many odd things meet you,
Neglected darkling of the Muses,
I, the last of singers, greet you.

Snug in some white wing they found you,
On the Common bleak and muddy,
Noisy goslings gobbling round you .
In the pools of sunset, ruddy.

Have you sighed in wings untravelled
For the heights where others view the
Bluer widths of heaven, and marvelled
At the utmost top of Beauty ?

No ! it cannot be ; the soul you
Sigh with craves nor begs of us.
From such heights a poet stole you
From a wing of Pegasus.

You have been where gods were sleeping
In the dawn of new creations,
Ere they woke to woman's weeping
At the broken thrones of nations.

You have seen this old world shattered
By old gods it disappointed,
Lying up in darkness, battered
By wild comets, unanointed.

But for Beauty unmolested
Have you still the sighing olden ?
I know mountains heather-crested,
Waters white, and waters golden.

There I'd keep you, in the lowly
Beauty-haunts of bird and poet,
Sailing in a wing, the holy
Silences of lakes below it.

But I leave you by where no man
Finds you, when I too be gone
From the puddles on this common
Over the dark Rubicon.

Francis Ledwidge

To One Dead

A blackbird singing
On a moss-upholstered stone,
Bluebells swinging,
Shadows wildly blown,
A song in the wood,
A ship on the sea.
The song was for you
and the ship was for me.

A blackbird singing
I hear in my troubled mind,
Bluebells swinging,
I see in a distant wind.
But sorrow and silence,
Are the wood's threnody,
The silence for you
and the sorrow for me.

Francis Ledwidge

To One Who Comes Now And Then

When you come in, it seems a brighter fire
Crackles upon the hearth invitingly,
The household routine which was wont to tire ,
Grows full of novelty.

You sit upon our home-upholstered chair
And talk of matters wonderful and strange,
Of books, and travel, customs old which dare
The gods of Time and Change.

Till we with inner word our care refute
Laughing that this our bosoms yet assails,
While there are maidens dancing to a flute
In Andalusian vales.

And sometimes from my shelf of poems you take
And secret meanings to our hearts disclose,
As when the winds of June the mid bush shake
We see the hidden rose.

And when the shadows muster, and each tree
A moment flutters, full of shutting wings,
You take the fiddle and mysteriously
Wake wonders on the strings.

And in my garden, grey with misty flowers,
Low echoes fainter than a beetle's horn
Fill all the corners with it, like sweet showers
Of bells, in the owl's morn.

Come often, friend, with welcome and surprise
We'll greet you from the sea or from the town;
Come when you like and from whatever skies
Above you smile or frown.

Francis Ledwidge

Two Songs

I will come no more awhile,
Song-time is over.
A fire is burning in my heart,
I was ever a rover.

You will hear me no more awhile,
The birds are dumb,
And a voice in the distance calls
' Come,' and ' Come.'

Francis Ledwidge

Una Bawn

Una Bawn, the days are long,
And the seas I cross are wide,
I must go when Ireland needs,
And you must bide.

And should I not return to you
When the sails are on the tide,
'Tis you will find the days so long,
Una Bawn, and I must bide.

Francis Ledwidge

With Flowers

These have more language than my song,
Take them and let them speak for me.
I whispered them a secret thing
Down the green lanes of Allary.

You shall remember quiet ways
Watching them fade, and quiet eyes,
And two hearts given up to love,
A foolish and an overwise.

Francis Ledwidge

Youth

She paved the way with perfume sweet
Of flowers that moved like winds alight,
And never weary grew my feet
Wandering through[the spring's delight.

She dropped her sweet fife to her lips
And lured me with her melodies,
To where the great big wandering ships
Put out into the peaceful seas.

But when the year grew chill and brown,
And all the wings of Summer flown,
Within the tumult of a town
She left me to grow old alone.

Francis Ledwidge