

Classic Poetry Series

Wilfred Wilson Gibson

- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Home

So long had I travelled the lonely road,
Though, now and again, a wayfaring friend
Walked shoulder to shoulder, and lightened the load,
I often would think to myself as I strode,
No comrade will journey with you to the end.

And it seemed to me, as the days went past,
And I gossiped with cronies, or brooded alone,
By wayside fires, that my fortune was cast
To sojourn by other men's hearths to the last,
And never to come to my own hearthstone.

The lonely road no longer I roam.
We met, and were one in the heart's desire.
Together we came, through the wintry gloam,
To the little old house by the cross-ways, home;
And crossed the threshold, and kindled the fire.

Wilfred Wilson Gibson

The Blind Rower

And since he rowed his father home,
His hand has never touched an oar.
All day he wanders on the shore,
And hearkens to the swishing foam.
Though blind from birth, he still could row
As well as any lad with sight;
And knew strange things that none may know
Save those who live without the light.

When they put out that Summer eve
To sink the lobster-pots at sea,
The sun was crimson in the sky;
And not a breath was in the sky;
The brooding, thunder-laden sky,
That, heavily and wearily,
Weighed down upon the waveless sea
That scarcely seemed to heave.

The pots were safely sunk; and then
The father gave the word for home:
He took the tiller in his hand,
And, in his heart already home,
He brought her nose round towards the land,
To steer her straight for home.

He never spoke,
Nor stirred again:
A sudden stroke,
And he lay dead,
With staring eyes, and lips off lead.

The son rowed on, and nothing feared:
And sometimes, merrily,
He lifted up his voice, and sang,
Both high and low,
And loud and sweet:
For he was ever gay at sea,
And ever glad to row,
And rowed as only blind men row:
And little did the blind lad know
That death was at his feet:
For still he thought his father steered;
Nor knew that he was all alone
With death upon the open sea.
So merrily, he rowed, and sang:
And, strangely on the silence rang
That lonely melody,
As, through the livid, brooding gloam,
By rock and reef, he rowed for home--
The blind man rowed the dead man home.

But, as they neared the shore,

He rested on his oar:
And, wondering that his father kept
So very quiet in the stern,
He laughed, and asked him if he slept;
And vowed he heard him snore just now.
Though, when his father spoke no word,
A sudden fear upon him came:
And, crying on his father's name,
With flinching heart, he heard
The water lapping on the shore;
And all his blood ran cold, to feel
The shingle grate beneath the keel:
And stretching over towards the stern,
His knuckle touched the dead man's brow.

But help was near at hand;
And safe he came to land:
Though none has ever known
How he rowed in, alone,
And never touched a reef.
Some say they saw the dead man steer--
The dead man steer the blind man home--
Though, when they found him dead,
His hand was cold as lead.

So, ever restless, to and fro,
In every sort of weather,
The blind lad wanders on the shore,
And hearkens to the foam.
His hand has never touched an oar,
Since they came home together--
The blind, who rowed his father home--
The dear, who steered his blind son home.

Wilfred Wilson Gibson

The Crane

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

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

But though she has no time to talk,
She always cleans the window-pane,
That I may see it clear and plain:
And as I watch it move, I walk
Who never walked in all my days . . .
And often, as I dream agaze,
I'm up and out, and it is I
Who swing the crane across the sky.

Right up above the wharf I stand,
And touch a lever with my hand,
To lift a bunch of girders high,
A truck of coal, a field of grain
In sacks, a bundle of big trees,
Or beasts, too frightened in my grip
To wonder at their skiey trip:
And then I let the long arm dip
Without a hitch, without a slip,
To set them safely in the ship
That waits to take them overseas.

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

And sometimes when it turns me dizzy,
I lie and watch her, ever busy;
And wonder at a lot of things
I never speak to her about:
I wonder why she never sings
Like other people on the stair . . .

And why, whenever she goes out
Upon a windy day, the air
Makes her sad eyes so strangely bright . . .
And if the colour of her hair
Was brown like mine, or always white . . .
And why, when through the noise of feet
Of people passing in the street,
She hears a dog yelp or sheep bleat,
She always starts up in her chair,
And looks before her with strange stare,
Yet seeing nothing anywhere:
Though right before her, through the sky,
The biggest crane goes swinging by.

But it's a lucky day and rare
When she's the time to talk with me . . .
Though, only yesterday, when night
Shut out, at last, the crane from sight . . .
She, in her bed, and thinking I
Was sleeping -- though I watch the sky,
At times, till it is morning light,
And ships are waiting to unload--
I heard her murmur drowsily:
"The pit-pattering of feet,
All night, along the moonlit road . . .
A yelp, a whistle, and a bleat . . .
The bracken's deep and soft and dry . . .
And safe and snug, and no one near . . .
The little burn sings low and sweet,
The little burn sings shrill and clear . . .

And loud all night the cock-grouse talks . . .
There's naught in heaven or earth to fear . . .
The pit-pat-pattering of feet . . .
A yelp, a whistle, and a bleat . . ."
And then she started up in bead:
I felt her staring, as she said:
"I wonder if he ever hears
The pit-pat-pattering of sheep,
Or smells the broken bracke stalks . . .
While she is lying sound asleep
Beside him . . . after all these years --
Just nineteen years, this very night --
Remembering? . . . and now, his son,
A man . . . and never stood upright!"

And then I heard a sound of tears;
But dared not speak, or let her know
I'd caught a single whisper, though
I wondered long what she had done
That she should hear the pattering feet:
And when those queer words in the night

Had fretted me half-dead with fright,
And set my throbbing head abeat . . .
Out of the darkness, suddenly,
The crane's long arm swung over me,
Among the stars, high overhead . . .
And then it dipped, and clutched my bed:
And I had not a breath to cry,
Before it swung me through the sky,
Above the sleeping city high,
Where blinding stars went blazing by . . .

My mother, hunching in her chair,
Day-long, and stitching trousers there,
At three-and-three the dozen pair,
With quiet eyes and smooth white hair . . .
You'd little think a yelp or bleat
Could start her; or that she was weeping
So sorely, when she thought me sleeping.
She never tells me why she fears
The pit-pat-pattering of feet
All night along the moonlight road . . .
Or what's the wrong that she has done . . .
I wonder if 't would bring her tears,
If she could know that I, her son--
A man, who never stood upright,
But all the livelong day must lie,
And watch, beyond the window-pane
The swaying of the biggest crane--
That I, within its clutch, last night,
Went whirling through the starry sky.

Wilfred Wilson Gibson

The Dancing Seal

When we were building Skua Light--
The first men who had lived a night
Upon that deep-sea Isle--
As soon as chisel touched the stone,
The friendly seals would come ashore;
And sit and watch us all the while,
As though they'd not seen men before;
And so, poor beasts, had never known
Men had the heart to do them harm.
They'd little cause to feel alarm
With us, for we were glad to find
Some friendliness in that strange sea;
Only too pleased to let them be
And sit as long as they'd a mind
To watch us: for their eyes were kind
Like women's eyes, it seemed to me.
So, hour on hour, they sat: I think
They liked to hear the chisels clink:
And when the boy sang loud and clear,
They scrambled closer in to hear;
And if he whistled sweet and shrill,
The queer beasts shuffled nearer still:
But every sleek and sheeny skin
Was mad to hear his violin.

When, work all over for the day,
He'd take his fiddle down and play
His merry tunes beside the sea,
Their eyes grew brighter and more bright,
And burned and twinkled merrily:
And as I watched them one still night,
And saw their eager sparkling eyes,
I felt those lively seals would rise
Some shiny night ere he could know,
And dance about him, heel and toe,
Unto the fiddle's headdy tune.

And at the rising of the moon,
Half-daft, I took my stand before
A young seal lying on the shore;
And called on her to dance with me.
And it seemed hardly strange when she
Stood up before me suddenly,
And shed her black and sheeny skin;
And smiled, all eager to begin . . .
And I was dancing, heel and toe,
With a young maiden, white as snow,
Unto a crazy violin.

We danced beneath the dancing moon
All night, beside the dancing sea,
With tripping toes and skipping heels:

And all about us friendly seals
Like Christian folk were dancing reels
Unto the fiddle's endless tune
That kept on spinning merrily
As though it never meant to stop.
And never once the snow-white maid
A moment stayed
To take a breath,
Though I was fit to drop:
And while those wild eyes challenged me,
I knew as well as well could be
I must keep step with that young girl,
Though we should dance to death.

Then with a skirl
The fiddle broke:
The moon went out:
The sea stopped dead:
And, in a twinkling, all the rout
Of dancing folk had fled . . .
And in the chill bleak dawn I woke
Upon the naked rock, alone.

They've brought me far from Skua Isle . . .
I laugh to think they do not know
That as, all day I chip the stone,
Among my fellows here inland,
I smell the sea-wrack on the shore . . .
And see her snowy-tossing hand,
And meet again her merry smile . . .
And dream I'm dancing all the while,
I'm dancing ever, heel and toe,
With a seal-maiden, white as snow,
On that moonshiny Island-strand,
For ever and for evermore.

Wilfred Wilson Gibson

The Stone

"And will you cut a stone for him,
To set above his head?
And will you cut a stone for him--
A stone for him?" she said.

Three days before, a splintered rock
Had struck her lover dead--
Had struck him in the quarry dead,
Where, careless of a warning call,
He loitered, while the shot was fired--
A lively stripling, brave and tall,
And sure of all his heart desired . . .
A flash, a shock,
A rumbling fall . . .
And, broken 'neath the broken rock,
A lifeless heap, with face of clay,
And still as any stone he lay,
With eyes that saw the end of all.

I went to break the news to her:
And I could hear my own heart beat
With dread of what my lips might say;
But some poor fool had sped before;
And, flinging wide her father's door,
Had blurted out the news to her,
Had struck her lover dead for her,
Had struck the girl's heart dead in her,
Had struck life, lifeless, at a word,
And dropped it at her feet:
Then hurried on his witless way,
Scarce knowing she had heard.

And when I came, she stood alone--
A woman, turned to stone:
And, though no word at all she said,
I knew that all was known.

Because her heart was dead,
She did not sigh nor moan.
His mother wept:
She could not weep.
Her lover slept:
She could not sleep.
Three days, three nights,
She did not stir:
Three days, three nights,
Were one to her,
Who never closed her eyes
From sunset to sunrise,
From dawn to evenfall--
Her tearless, staring eyes,
That, seeing naught, saw all.

The fourth night when I came from work,
I found her at my door.
"And will you cut a stone for him?"
She said: and spoke no more:
But followed me, as I went in,
And sank upon a chair;
And fixed her grey eyes on my face,
With still, unseeing stare.
And, as she waited patiently,
I could not bear to feel
Those still, grey eyes that followed me,
Those eyes that plucked the heart from me,
Those eyes that sucked the breath from me
And curdled the warm blood in me,
Those eyes that cut me to the bone,
And cut my marrow like cold steel.

And so I rose and sought a stone;
And cut it smooth and square:
And, as I worked, she sat and watched,
Beside me, in her chair.
Night after night, by candlelight,
I cut her lover's name:
Night after night, so still and white,
And like a ghost she came;
And sat beside me, in her chair,
And watched with eyes aflame.

She eyed each stroke,
And hardly stirred:
she never spoke
A single word:
And not a sound or murmur broke
The quiet, save the mallet stroke.

With still eyes ever on my hands,
With eyes that seemed to burn my hands,
My wincing, overwearied hands,
She watched, with bloodless lips apart,
And silent, indrawn breath:
And every stroke my chisel cut,
Death cut still deeper in her heart:
The two of us were chiselling,
Together, I and Death.

And when at length my job was done,
And I had laid the mallet by,
As if, at last, her peace were won,
She breathed his name, and, with a sigh,
Passed slowly through the open door:
And never crossed my threshold more.

Next night I laboured late, alone,
To cut her name upon the stone.

Wilfred Wilson Gibson