

Classic Poetry Series

Frances Darwin Cornford
- poems -

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Frances Darwin Cornford(30 March 1886 - 19 August 1960)

Frances Cornford should not be confused with her husband Francis Cornford.

Frances Crofts Cornford (née Darwin) was an English poet.

She was the daughter of the botanist Francis Darwin and Ellen Crofts, born into the Darwin — Wedgwood family. She was a granddaughter of the British naturalist Charles Darwin. Her elder half-brother was the golf writer Bernard Darwin. She was raised in Cambridge, among a dense social network of aunts, uncles, and cousins, and was educated privately.

In 1909, Frances Darwin married Francis Cornford, a classicist and poet. They had 5 children: Helena (b. 1913), [John](http://www.poemhunter.com/ruPERT-john-cornford/) (1915-1936), a poet and Communist who was killed in the Spanish Civil War. Christopher (1917-1993), an artist and writer

Clare, who became the mother of Matthew Chapman Hugh

Frances Cornford published several books of verse, including *Poems* (1910), *Spring Morning* (1915), *Autumn Midnight* (1923), and *Different Days* (1928). *Mountains and Molehills* (1935) was illustrated with woodcuts by Cornford's cousin Gwen Raverat.

She wrote poems including *The Guitarist Tunes Up*:

*With what attentive courtesy he bent
Over his instrument;
Not as a lordly conqueror who could
Command both wire and wood,
But as a man with a loved woman might,
Inquiring with delight
What slight essential things she had to say
Before they started, he and she, to play.*

One of Frances Cornford's poems was a favourite of the late Philip Larkin and his lover Maeve Brennan. *All Souls' Night* uses the superstition that a dead lover will appear to a still faithful partner on that November date. Maeve, many years after Larkin's death, would re-read the poem on All Souls:

*My love came back to me
Under the November tree
Shelterless and dim.
He put his hand upon my shoulder,
He did not think me strange or older,
Nor I him.*

Although the myth enhances the poem - it can be read as the meeting of older, former lovers.

She is buried at the Parish of the Ascension Burial Ground in Cambridge.

A Recollection

MY father's friend came once to tea.
He laughed and talked. He spoke to me.
But in another week they said
That friendly pink-faced man was dead.

' How sad . .' they said, 'the best of men . .'
So I said too, 'How sad '; but then
Deep in my heart I thought with pride,
'I know a person who has died.'

Frances Darwin Cornford

Autumn Evening

The Shadows flickering, the daylight dying,□
And I upon the old red sofa lying,□
The great brown shadows leaping up the wall,□
The sparrows twittering; and that is all.□

I thought to send my soul to far-off lands,□
Where fairies scamper on the windy sands,□
Or where the autumn rain comes drumming down□
On huddled roofs in an enchanted town.□

But O, my sleepy soul, it will not roam,□
It is too happy and too warm at home:□
With just the shadows leaping up the wall,□
The sparrows twittering; and that is all.

Frances Darwin Cornford

Autumn Morning At Cambridge

I ran out in the morning, when the air was clean and new,□
And all the grass was glittering and grey with autumn dew,□
I ran out to the apple tree and pulled an apple down,□
And all the bells were ringing in the old grey town.□

Down in the town, off the bridges and the grass□
They are sweeping up the leaves to let the people pass,□
Sweeping up the old leaves, golden-reds and browns,□
While the men go to lecture with the wind in their gowns.

Frances Darwin Cornford

Feri's Dream

I Had a little dog, and my dog was very small;
He licked me in the face, and he answered to my call;
Of all the treasures that were mine, I loved him most of all.

His nose was fresh as morning dew and blacker than the night;
I thought that it could even snuff the shadows and the light;
And his tail he held bravely, like a banner in a fight.

His body covered thick with hair was very good to smell ;
His little stomach underneath was pink as any shell;
And I loved him and honoured him, more than words can tell.

We ran out in the morning, both of us, to play,
Up and down across the fields for all the sunny day ;
But he ran so swiftly--he ran right away.

I looked for him, I called for him, entreatingly. Alas,
The dandelions could not speak, though they had seen him pass,
And nowhere was his waving tail among the waving grass.

The sun sank low. I ran; I prayed: ' If God has not the power
To find him, let me die. I cannot bear another hour.'
When suddenly I came upon a great yellow flower.

And all among its petals, such was Heaven's grace,
In that golden hour, in that golden place,
All among its petals, was his hairy face.

Frances Darwin Cornford

In France

The poplars in the fields of France
Are golden ladies come to dance ;
But yet to see them there is none
But I and the September sun.

The girl who in their shadow sits
Can only see the sock she knits ;
Her dog is watching all the day
That not a cow shall go astray.

The leisurely contented cows
Can only see the earth they browse ;
Their piebald bodies through the grass
With busy, munching noses pass.

Alone the sun and I behold
Processions crowned with shining gold
The poplars in the fields of France,
Like glorious ladies come to dance.

Frances Darwin Cornford

On Rupert Brooke

A young Apollo, golden-haired,
Stands dreaming on the verge of strife,
Magnificently unprepared
For the long littleness of life.

Frances Darwin Cornford

Pre-Existence

I laid me down upon the shore
And dreamed a little space;
I heard the great waves break and roar;
The sun was on my face.

My idle hands and fingers brown
Played with the pebbles grey;
The waves came up, the waves went down,
Most thundering and gay.

The pebbles, they were smooth and round
And warm upon my hands,
Like little people I had found
Sitting among the sands.

The grains of sands so shining-small
Soft through my fingers ran;
The sun shone down upon it all,
And so my dream began:

How all of this had been before;
How ages far away
I lay on some forgotten shore
As here I lie to-day.

The waves came shining up the sands,
As here to-day they shine;
And in my pre-pelasgian hands
The sand was warm and fine.

I have forgotten whence I came,
Or what my home might be,
Or by what strange and savage name
I called that thundering sea.

I only know the sun shone down
As still it shines to-day,
And in my fingers long and brown
The little pebbles lay.

Frances Darwin Cornford

Rhyme For A Phonetician

Brave English language, you are strong as trees,
Yet intricate and stately. Thus one sees
Through branches clear-embroidered stars. You please
Our sense as damask roses on the breeze,
And barns that smell of hay, and bread-and-cheese.
Rustic yet Roman, yours are dignities
Sonorous as the seas sound. On my knees
I would give thanks for all your words. Yet these
Our legacy and our delight he'd squeeze
And nip and dock and drill, to write with ease
Kornershul memoz faw the Pawchoogeese.

Frances Darwin Cornford

The Coast: Norfolk

As on the highway's quiet edge
He mows the grass beside the hedge,
The old man has for company
The distant, grey, salt-smelling sea,
A popped field, a cow and calf,
The finches on the telegraph.
Across his faded back a hone,
He slowly, slowly scythes alone
In silence of the wind-soft air,
With ladies' bedstraw everywhere,
With whitened corn, and tarry poles,
And far-off gulls like risen souls.

Frances Darwin Cornford

The Guitarist Tunes Up

With what attentive courtesy he bent
Over his instrument;
Not as a lordly conquerer who could
Command both wire and wood,
But as a man with a loved woman might,
Inquiring with delight
What slight essential things she had to say
Before they started, he and she, to play.

Frances Darwin Cornford

The New-Born Baby's Song

When I was twenty inches long,
I could not hear the thrush's song;
The radiance of the morning skies
Was most displeasing to my eyes.

For loving looks, caressing words,
I cared no more than sun or birds;
But I could bite my mother's breast,
And that made up for all the rest.

Frances Darwin Cornford

The Old Witch In The Copse

I am a Witch, and a kind old Witch,
There's many a one knows that--
Alone I live in my little dark house
With Pillycock, my cat.
A girl came running through the night,
When all the winds blew free:--
'O mother, change a young man's heart
That will not look on me.
O mother, brew a magic mead
To stir his heart so cold.'
'Just as you will, my dear,' said I;
'And I thank you for your gold.'
So here am I in the wattled copse
Where all the twigs are brown,
To find what I need to brew my mead
As the dark of night comes down.
Primroses in my old hands,
Sweet to smell and young,
And violets blue that spring in the grass
Wherever the larks have sung.
With celandines as heavenly crowns
Yellowy-gold and bright; All of these,
O all of these,
Shall bring her Love's delight.
But orchids growing snakey green
Speckled dark with blood,
And fallen leaves that curled and shrank
And rotted in the mud,
With blistering nettles burning harsh
And blinding thorns above;
All of these, O all of these
Shall bring the pains of Love.
Shall bring the pains of Love, my Puss,
That cease not night or day,
The bitter rage, nought can assuage
Till it bleeds the heart away.
Pillycock mine, my hands are full
My pot is on the fire.
Purr, my pet, this fool shall get

Her fool's desire.

Frances Darwin Cornford

The Ragwort

The thistles on the sandy flats
Are courtiers with crimson hats ;
The ragworts, growing up so straight,
Are emperors who stand in state,
And march about, so proud and bold,
In crowns of fairy-story gold.

The people passing home at night
Rejoice to see the shining sight,
They quite forget the sands and sea
Which are as grey as grey can be,
Nor ever heed the gulls who cry
Like peevish children in the sky.

Frances Darwin Cornford

The Watch

I wakened on my hot, hard bed;□
Upon the pillow lay my head;□
Beneath the pillow I could hear□
My little watch was ticking clear.□
I thought the throbbing of it went□
Like my continual discontent,□
I thought it said in every tick:□
I am so sick, so sick, so sick;□
O death, come quick, come quick, come quick,□
Come quick, come quick, come quick, come quick.

Frances Darwin Cornford

To A Lady Seen From The Train

O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?

O fat white woman whom nobody loves,
Why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
When the grass is soft as the breast of doves
And shivering sweet to the touch?

O why do you walk through the fields in gloves,
Missing so much and so much?

Frances Darwin Cornford