

Classic Poetry Series

**Wilfrid Wilson Gibson**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2004

**Publisher:**

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

## Wilfrid Wilson Gibson(1878 - 1962)

Wilfred Wilson Gibson (1878-1962), a close friend of Rupert Brooke and a protégé of Edward Marsh, was born in Hexham, England in 1878.

Gibson worked for a time as a social worker in London's East End. He published his first verse in 1902, *Mountain Lovers*. He had several poems included in various Georgian poetry collections prior to the war. He also wrote a play, *Daily Bread*, which was produced in 1910.

After the outbreak of war, Gibson served as a private in the infantry on the Western Front. It was therefore from the perspective of the ordinary soldier that Gibson wrote his war poetry.

His active service was brief, but his poetry belies his lack of experience, *Breakfast* being a prime example of ironic war verse written during the very early stages of the conflict.

Following the armistice, Gibson continued writing poetry and plays. His work was particularly concerned with the poverty of industrial workers and village labourers. *Collected Poems: 1905-1925* was published in 1926, *The Island Stag* in 1927, and *Within Four Walls* in 1950.

Wilfred Wilson Gibson died in 1962.

# Cherries

A HANDFUL of cherries  
She gave me in passing,  
The wizened old woman,  
And wished me good luck-  
And again I was dreaming,  
A boy in the sunshine,  
And life but an orchard  
Of cherries to pluck.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

# 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.

Wilfrid 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.

Wilfrid 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.

Wilfrid 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 heady 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.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

# The Lonely Road

The Lonely Road

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.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson

# The Messages

"I cannot quite remember.... There were five  
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three  
Whispered their dying messages to me...."

Back from the trenches, more dead than alive,  
Stone-deaf and dazed, and with a broken knee,  
He hobbled slowly, muttering vacantly:

"I cannot quite remember.... There were five  
Dropt dead beside me in the trench, and three  
Whispered their dying messages to me....

"Their friends are waiting, wondering how they thrive—  
Waiting a word in silence patiently....  
But what they said, or who their friends may be

"I cannot quite remember.... There where five  
Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and three  
Whispered their dying messages to me...."

Wilfrid 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.

Wilfrid Wilson Gibson