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Country Sentiment

by Robert Graves

August, 1998 [Etext #1418]

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COUNTRY SENTIMENT

by

Robert Graves

To Nancy Nicholson

Note

Some of the poems included in this volume have appeared in "The New Statesman", "The Owl", "Reveille", "Land and Water", "Poetry", and other papers, English and American.

Robert Graves.

Harlech,
North Wales.

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A FROSTY NIGHT.

Mother

Alice, dear, what ails you,
Dazed and white and shaken?
Has the chill night numbed you?
Is it fright you have taken?

Alice

Mother, I am very well,
I felt never better,
Mother, do not hold me so,
Let me write my letter.

Mother

Sweet, my dear, what ails you?

Alice

No, but I am well;
The night was cold and frosty,
There's no more to tell.

Mother

Ay, the night was frosty,
Coldly gaped the moon,
Yet the birds seemed twittering
Through green boughs of June.

Soft and thick the snow lay,
Stars danced in the sky.
Not all the lambs of May-day

Skip so bold and high.

Your feet were dancing, Alice,
Seemed to dance on air,
You looked a ghost or angel
In the starlight there.

Your eyes were frosted starlight,
Your heart fire and snow.
Who was it said, "I love you"?

Alice

Mother, let me go!

A SONG FOR TWO CHILDREN.

"Make a song, father, a new little song,
All for Jenny and Nancy."
Balow lalow or Hey derry down,
Or else what might you fancy?

Is there any song sweet enough
For Nancy and for Jenny?
Said Simple Simon to the pieman,
"Indeed I know not any."

"I've counted the miles to Babylon,
I've flown the earth like a bird,
I've ridden cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
But no such song have I heard."

"Some speak of Alexander,
And some of Hercules,
But where are there any like Nancy and Jenny,
Where are there any like these?"

DICKY.

Mother

Oh, what a heavy sigh!
Dicky, are you ailing?

Dicky

Even by this fireside, mother,
My heart is failing.

To-night across the down,
Whistling and jolly,
I sauntered out from town
With my stick of holly.

Bounteous and cool from sea
The wind was blowing,
Cloud shadows under the moon
Coming and going.

I sang old roaring songs,
Ran and leaped quick,
And turned home by St. Swithin's
Twirling my stick.

And there as I was passing
The churchyard gate
An old man stopped me, "Dicky,
You're walking late."

I did not know the man,
I grew afeared
At his lean lolling jaw,
His spreading beard.

His garments old and musty,
Of antique cut,
His body very lean and bony,
His eyes tight shut.

Oh, even to tell it now
My courage ebbs...
His face was clay, mother,
His beard, cobwebs.

In that long horrid pause
"Good-night," he said,
Entered and clicked the gate,
"Each to his bed."

Mother

Do not sigh or fear, Dicky,
How is it right
To grudge the dead their ghostly dark
And wan moonlight?

We have the glorious sun,
Lamp and fireside.
Grudge not the dead their moonshine
When abroad they ride.

THE THREE DRINKERS.

Blacksmith Green had three strong sons,
With bread and beef did fill 'em,
Now John and Ned are perished and dead,
But plenty remains of William.

John Green was a whiskey drinker,
The Land of Cakes supplied him,
Till at last his soul flew out by the hole
That the fierce drink burned inside him.

Ned Green was a water drinker,
And, Lord, how Ned would fuddle!
He rotted away his mortal clay
Like an old boot thrown in a puddle.

Will Green was a wise young drinker,
Shrank from whiskey or water,
But he made good cheer with headstrong beer,
And married an alderman's daughter.

THE BOY OUT OF CHURCH.

As Jesus and his followers
Upon a Sabbath morn
Were walking by a wheat field
They plucked the ears of corn.

They plucked it, they rubbed it,
They blew the husks away,
Which grieved the pious pharisees
Upon the Sabbath day.

And Jesus said, "A riddle
Answer if you can,
Was man made for the Sabbath
Or Sabbath made for man?"

I do not love the Sabbath,
The soapsuds and the starch,
The troops of solemn people
Who to Salvation march.

I take my book, I take my stick
On the Sabbath day,
In woody nooks and valleys
I hide myself away.

To ponder there in quiet

God's Universal Plan,
Resolved that church and Sabbath
Were never made for man.

AFTER THE PLAY.

Father

Have you spent the money I gave you to-day?

John

Ay, father I have.
A fourpence on cakes, two pennies that away
To a beggar I gave.

Father

The lake of yellow brimstone boil for you in Hell,
Such lies that you spin.
Tell the truth now, John, ere the falsehood swell,
Say, where have you been?

John

I'll lie no more to you, father, what is the need?
To the Play I went,
With sixpence for a near seat, money's worth indeed,
The best ever spent.

Grief to you, shame or grief, here is the story--
My splendid night!
It was colour, scents, music, a tragic glory,
Fear with delight.

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, title of the tale:
He of that name,
A tall, glum fellow, velvet cloaked, with a shirt of mail,
Two eyes like flame.

All the furies of fate circled round the man,
Maddening his heart,
There was old murder done before play began,
Ay, the ghost took part.

There were grave-diggers delving, they brought up bones,
And with rage and grief
All the players shouted in full, kingly tones,
Grand, passing belief.

Oh, there were ladies there radiant like day,

And changing scenes:
Great sounding words were tossed about like hay
By kings and queens.

How the plot turned about I watched in vain,
Though for grief I cried,
As one and all they faded, poisoned or slain,
In great agony died.

Father, you'll drive me forth never to return,
Doubting me your son--

Father

So I shall, John

John

--but that glory for which I burn
Shall be soon begun.

I shall wear great boots, shall strut and shout,
Keep my locks curled.
The fame of my name shall go ringing about
Over half the world.

Father

Horror that your Prince found, John may you find,
Ever and again
Dying before the house in such torture of mind
As you need not feign.

While they clap and stamp at your nightly fate,
They shall never know
The curse that drags at you, until Hell's gate.
You have heard me. Go!

SONG: ONE HARD LOOK.

Small gnats that fly
In hot July
And lodge in sleeping ears,
Can rouse therein
A trumpet's din
With Day-of-Judgement fears.

Small mice at night
Can wake more fright
Than lions at midday.
An urchin small

Torments us all
Who tread his prickly way.

A straw will crack
The camel's back,
To die we need but sip,
So little sand
As fills the hand
Can stop a steaming ship.

One smile relieves
A heart that grieves
Though deadly sad it be,
And one hard look
Can close the book
That lovers love to see--

TRUE JOHNNY.

Johnny, sweetheart, can you be true
To all those famous vows you've made,
Will you love me as I love you
Until we both in earth are laid?
Or shall the old wives nod and say
His love was only for a day:
 The mood goes by,
 His fancies fly,
And Mary's left to sigh.

Mary, alas, you've hit the truth,
And I with grief can but admit
Hot-blooded haste controls my youth,
My idle fancies veer and flit
From flower to flower, from tree to tree,
And when the moment catches me,
 Oh, love goes by
 Away I fly
And leave my girl to sigh.

Could you but now foretell the day,
Johnny, when this sad thing must be,
When light and gay you'll turn away
And laugh and break the heart in me?
For like a nut for true love's sake
My empty heart shall crack and break,
 When fancies fly
 And love goes by
And Mary's left to die.

When the sun turns against the clock,
When Avon waters upward flow,

When eggs are laid by barn-door cock,
When dusty hens do strut and crow,
When up is down, when left is right,
Oh, then I'll break the troth I plight,
 With careless eye
 Away I'll fly
And Mary here shall die.

THE VOICE OF BEAUTY DROWNED.

Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!
The other birds woke all around,
Rising with toot and howl they stirred
Their plumage, broke the trembling sound,
They craned their necks, they fluttered wings,
"While we are silent no one sings,
And while we sing you hush your throat,
Or tune your melody to our note."

Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!
The screams and hootings rose again:
They gaped with raucous beaks, they whirred
Their noisy plumage; small but plain
The lonely hidden singer made
A well of grief within the glade.
"Whist, silly fool, be off," they shout,
"Or we'll come pluck your feathers out."

Cry from the thicket my heart's bird!
Slight and small the lovely cry
Came trickling down, but no one heard.
Parrot and cuckoo, crow, magpie
Jarred horrid notes and the jangling jay
Ripped the fine threads of song away,
For why should peeping chick aspire
To challenge their loud woodland choir?

Cried it so sweet that unseen bird?
Lovelier could no music be,
Clearer than water, soft as curd,
Fresh as the blossomed cherry tree.
How sang the others all around?
Piercing and harsh, a maddening sound,
With Pretty Poll, tuwit-tu-woo,
Peewit, caw caw, cuckoo-cuckoo.

THE GOD CALLED POETRY.

Now I begin to know at last,

These nights when I sit down to rhyme,
The form and measure of that vast
God we call Poetry, he who stoops
And leaps me through his paper hoops
A little higher every time.

Tempts me to think I'll grow a proper
Singing cricket or grass-hopper
Making prodigious jumps in air
While shaken crowds about me stare
Aghast, and I sing, growing bolder
To fly up on my master's shoulder
Rustling the thick strands of his hair.

He is older than the seas,
Older than the plains and hills,
And older than the light that spills
From the sun's hot wheel on these.
He wakes the gale that tears your trees,
He sings to you from window sills.

At you he roars, or he will coo,
He shouts and screams when hell is hot,
Riding on the shell and shot.
He smites you down, he succours you,
And where you seek him, he is not.

To-day I see he has two heads
Like Janus--calm, benignant, this;
That, grim and scowling: his beard spreads
From chin to chin" this god has power
Immeasurable at every hour:
He first taught lovers how to kiss,
He brings down sunshine after shower,
Thunder and hate are his also,
He is YES and he is NO.

The black beard spoke and said to me,
"Human frailty though you be,
Yet shout and crack your whip, be harsh!
They'll obey you in the end:
Hill and field, river and marsh
Shall obey you, hop and skip
At the terror of your whip,
To your gales of anger bend."

The pale beard spoke and said in turn
"True: a prize goes to the stern,
But sing and laugh and easily run
Through the wide airs of my plain,
Bathe in my waters, drink my sun,
And draw my creatures with soft song;
They shall follow you along

Graciously with no doubt or pain."

Then speaking from his double head
The glorious fearful monster said
"I am YES and I am NO,
Black as pitch and white as snow,
Love me, hate me, reconcile
Hate with love, perfect with vile,
So equal justice shall be done
And life shared between moon and sun.
Nature for you shall curse or smile:
A poet you shall be, my son."

ROCKY ACRES.

This is a wild land, country of my choice,
With harsh craggy mountain, moor ample and bare.
Seldom in these acres is heard any voice
But voice of cold water that runs here and there
Through rocks and lank heather growing without care.
No mice in the heath run nor no birds cry
For fear of the dark speck that floats in the sky.

He soars and he hovers rocking on his wings,
He scans his wide parish with a sharp eye,
He catches the trembling of small hidden things,
He tears them in pieces, dropping from the sky:
Tenderness and pity the land will deny,
Where life is but nourished from water and rock
A hardy adventure, full of fear and shock.

Time has never journeyed to this lost land,
Crakeberries and heather bloom out of date,
The rocks jut, the streams flow singing on either hand,
Careless if the season be early or late.
The skies wander overhead, now blue, now slate:
Winter would be known by his cold cutting snow
If June did not borrow his armour also.

Yet this is my country be loved by me best,
The first land that rose from Chaos and the Flood,
Nursing no fat valleys for comfort and rest,
Trampled by no hard hooves, stained with no blood.
Bold immortal country whose hill tops have stood
Strongholds for the proud gods when on earth they go,
Terror for fat burghers in far plains below.

ADVICE TO LOVERS.

I knew an old man at a Fair
Who made it his twice-yearly task
To clamber on a cider cask
And cry to all the yokels there:--

"Lovers to-day and for all time
Preserve the meaning of my rhyme:
Love is not kindly nor yet grim
But does to you as you to him.

"Whistle, and Love will come to you,
Hiss, and he fades without a word,
Do wrong, and he great wrong will do,
Speak, he retells what he has heard.

"Then all you lovers have good heed
Vex not young Love in word or deed:
Love never leaves an unpaid debt,
He will not pardon nor forget."

The old man's voice was sweet yet loud
And this shows what a man was he,
He'd scatter apples to the crowd
And give great draughts of cider, free.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S FALL.

Frowning over the riddle that Daniel told,
Down through the mist hung garden, below a feeble sun,
The King of Persia walked: oh, the chilling cold!
His mind was webbed with a grey shroud vapour-spun.

Here for the pride of his soaring eagle heart,
Here for his great hand searching the skies for food,
Here for his courtship of Heaven's high stars he shall smart,
Nebuchadnezzar shall fall, crawl, be subdued.

Hot sun struck through the vapour, leaf strewn mould
Breathed sweet decay: old Earth called for her child.
Mist drew off from his mind, Sun scattered gold,
Warmth came and earthy motives fresh and wild.

Down on his knees he sinks, the stiff-necked King,
Stoops and kneels and grovels, chin to the mud.
Out from his changed heart flutter on startled wing
The fancy birds of his Pride, Honour, Kinglihood.

He crawls, he grunts, he is beast-like, frogs and snails
His diet, and grass, and water with hand for cup.
He herds with brutes that have hooves and horns and tails,
He roars in his anger, he scratches, he looks not up.

GIVE US RAIN.

"Give us Rain, Rain," said the bean and the pea,
"Not so much Sun,
Not so much Sun."
But the Sun smiles bravely and encouragingly,
And no rain falls and no waters run.

"Give us Peace, Peace," said the peoples oppressed,
"Not so many Flags,
Not so many Flags."
But the Flags fly and the Drums beat, denying rest,
And the children starve, they shiver in rags.

ALLIE.

Allie, call the birds in,
The birds from the sky.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
Down they all fly.
First there came
Two white doves
Then a sparrow from his nest,
Then a clucking bantam hen,
Then a robin red-breast.

Allie, call the beasts in,
The beasts, every one.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
In they all run.
First there came
Two black lambs,
Then a grunting Berkshire sow,
Then a dog without a tail,
Then a red and white cow.

Allie, call the fish up,
The fish from the stream.
Allie calls, Allie sings,
Up they all swim.
First there came
Two gold fish,
A minnow and a miller's thumb,
Then a pair of loving trout,
Then the twisted eels come.

Allie, call the children,
Children from the green.
Allie calls, Allie sings,

Soon they run in.
First there came
Tom and Madge,
Kate and I who'll not forget
How we played by the water's edge
Till the April sun set.

LOVING HENRY.

Henry, Henry, do you love me?
Do I love you, Mary?
Oh, can you mean to liken me
To the aspen tree.
Whose leaves do shake and vary,
From white to green
And back again,
Shifting and contrary?

Henry, Henry, do you love me,
Do you love me truly?
Oh, Mary, must I say again
My love's a pain,
A torment most unruly?
It tosses me
Like a ship at sea
When the storm rages fully.

Henry, Henry, why do you love me?
Mary, dear, have pity!
I swear, of all the girls there are
Both near and far,
In country or in city,
There's none like you,
So kind, so true,
So wise, so brave, so pretty.

BRITTLE BONES.

Though I am an old man
With my bones very brittle,
Though I am a poor old man
Worth very little,
Yet I suck at my long pipe
At peace in the sun,
I do not fret nor much regret
That my work is done.

If I were a young man
With my bones full of marrow,

Oh, if I were a bold young man
Straight as an arrow,
And if I had the same years
To live once again,
I would not change their simple range
Of laughter and pain.

If I were a young man
And young was my Lily,
A smart girl, a bold young man,
Both of us silly.
And though from time before I knew
She'd stab me with pain,
Though well I knew she'd not be true,
I'd love her again.

If I were a young man
With a brisk, healthy body,
Oh, if I were a bold young man
With love of rum toddy,
Though I knew that I was spiting
My old age with pain,
My happy lip would touch and sip
Again and again.

If I were a young man
With my bones full of marrow,
Oh, if I were a bold young man
Straight as an arrow,
I'd store up no virtue
For Heaven's distant plain,
I'd live at ease as I did please
And sin once again.

APPLES AND WATER.

Dust in a cloud, blinding weather,
Drums that rattle and roar!
A mother and daughter stood together
Beside their cottage door.

"Mother, the heavens are bright like brass,
The dust is shaken high,
With labouring breath the soldiers pass,
Their lips are cracked and dry."

"Mother, I'll throw them apples down,
I'll bring them pails of water."
The mother turned with an angry frown
Holding back her daughter.

"But mother, see, they faint with thirst,
They march away to die,"
"Ah, sweet, had I but known at first
Their throats are always dry."

"There is no water can supply them
In western streams that flow,
There is no fruit can satisfy them
On orchard trees that grow."

"Once in my youth I gave, poor fool,
A soldier apples and water,
So may I die before you cool
Your father's drouth, my daughter."

MANTICOR IN ARABIA.

(The manticors of the montaines
Mighte feed them on thy braines.--Skelton.)

Thick and scented daisies spread
Where with surface dull like lead
Arabian pools of slime invite
Manticors down from neighbouring height
To dip heads, to cool fiery blood
In oozy depths of sucking mud.
Sing then of ringstraked manticor,
Man-visaged tiger who of yore
Held whole Arabian waste in fee
With raging pride from sea to sea,
That every lesser tribe would fly
Those armed feet, that hooded eye;
Till preying on himself at last
Manticor dwindled, sank, was passed
By gryphon flocks he did disdain.
Ay, wyverns and rude dragons reign
In ancient keep of manticor
Agreed old foe can rise no more.
Only here from lakes of slime
Drinks manticor and bides due time:
Six times Fowl Phoenix in yon tree
Must mount his pyre and burn and be
Renewed again, till in such hour
As seventh Phoenix flames to power
And lifts young feathers, overnice
From scented pool of steamy spice
Shall manticor his sway restore
And rule Arabian plains once more.

OUTLAWS.

Owls: they whinney down the night,
Bats go zigzag by.
Ambushed in shadow out of sight
The outlaws lie.

Old gods, shrunk to shadows, there
In the wet woods they lurk,
Greedy of human stuff to snare
In webs of murk.

Look up, else your eye must drown
In a moving sea of black
Between the tree-tops, upside down
Goes the sky-track.

Look up, else your feet will stray
Towards that dim ambuscade,
Where spider-like they catch their prey
In nets of shade.

For though creeds whirl away in dust,
Faith fails and men forget,
These aged gods of fright and lust
Cling to life yet.

Old gods almost dead, malign,
Starved of their ancient dues,
Incense and fruit, fire, blood and wine
And an unclean muse.

Banished to woods and a sickly moon,
Shrunk to mere bogey things,
Who spoke with thunder once at noon
To prostrate kings.

With thunder from an open sky
To peasant, tyrant, priest,
Bowing in fear with a dazzled eye
Towards the East.

Proud gods, humbled, sunk so low,
Living with ghosts and ghouls,
And ghosts of ghosts and last year's snow
And dead toadstools.

BALOO LOO FOR JENNY.

Sing baloo loo for Jenny
And where is she gone?

Away to spy her mother's land,
Riding all alone.

To the rich towns of Scotland,
The woods and the streams,
High upon a Spanish horse
Saddled for her dreams.

By Oxford and by Chester,
To Berwick-on-the-Tweed,
Then once across the borderland
She shall find no need.

A loaf for her at Stirling,
A scone at Carlisle,
Honeyed cakes at Edinbro'--
That shall make her smile.

At Aberdeen clear cider,
Mead for her at Nairn,
A cup of wine at John o' Groats--
That shall please my bairn.

Sing baloo loo for Jenny,
Mother will be fain
To see her little truant child
Riding home again.

HAWK AND BUCKLE.

Where is the landlord of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of Master Straddler this hot summer weather?
He's along in the tap-room with broad cheeks a-chuckle,
And ten bold companions all drinking together.

Where is the daughter of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of Mistress Jenny this hot summer weather?
She sits in the parlour with smell of honeysuckle,
Trimming her bonnet with red ostrich feather.

Where is the ostler of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of Willy Jakeman this hot summer weather?
He is rubbing his eyes with a slow and lazy knuckle
As he wakes from his nap on a bank of fresh heather.

Where is the page boy of old Hawk and Buckle,
And what of our young Charlie this hot summer weather?
He is bobbing for tiddlers in a little trickle-truckle,
With his line and his hook and his breeches of leather.

Where is the grey goat of old Hawk and Buckle,

And what of pretty Nanny this hot summer weather?
She stays not contented with little or with muckle,
Straining for daisies at the end of her tether.

For this is our motto at old Hawk and Buckle,
We cling to it close and we sing all together,
"Every man for himself at our old Hawk and Buckle,
And devil take the hindmost this hot summer weather."

THE "ALICE JEAN".

One moonlit night a ship drove in,
A ghost ship from the west,
Drifting with bare mast and lone tiller,
Like a mermaid drest
In long green weed and barnacles:
She beached and came to rest.

All the watchers of the coast
Flocked to view the sight,
Men and women streaming down
Through the summer night,
Found her standing tall and ragged
Beached in the moonlight.

Then one old woman looked and wept
"The 'Alice Jean'? But no!
The ship that took my Dick from me
Sixty years ago
Drifted back from the utmost west
With the ocean's flow?

"Caught and caged in the weedy pool
Beyond the western brink,
Where crewless vessels lie and rot
in waters black as ink.
Torn out again by a sudden storm
Is it the 'Jean', you think?"

A hundred women stared agape,
The menfolk nudged and laughed,
But none could find a likelier story
For the strange craft.
With fear and death and desolation
Rigged fore and aft.

The blind ship came forgotten home
To all but one of these
Of whom none dared to climb aboard her:
And by and by the breeze
Sprang to a storm and the "Alice Jean"

Foundered in frothy seas.

THE CUPBOARD.

Mother

What's in that cupboard, Mary?

Mary

Which cupboard, mother dear?

Mother

The cupboard of red mahogany
With handles shining clear.

Mary

That cupboard, dearest mother,
With shining crystal handles?
There's nought inside but rags and jags
And yellow tallow candles.

Mother

What's in that cupboard, Mary?

Mary

Which cupboard, mother mine?

Mother

That cupboard stands in your sunny chamber,
The silver corners shine.

Mary

There's nothing there inside, mother,
But wool and thread and flax,
And bits of faded silk and velvet,
And candles of white wax.

Mother

What's in that cupboard, Mary?
And this time tell me true.

Mary

White clothes for an unborn baby, mother,
But what's the truth to you?

THE BEACON.

The silent shepherdess,
She of my vows,
Here with me exchanging love
Under dim boughs.

Shines on our mysteries
A sudden spark--
"Dout the candle, glow-worm,
Let all be dark.

"The birds have sung their last notes,
The Sun's to bed,
Glow-worm, dout your candle."
The glow-worm said:

"I also am a lover;
The lamp I display
Is beacon for my true love
Wandering astray.

"Through the thick bushes
And the grass comes she
With a heartload of longing
And love for me.

"Sir, enjoy your fancy,
But spare me harm,
A lover is a lover,
Though but a worm."

POT AND KETTLE.

Come close to me, dear Annie, while I bind a lover's knot.
A tale of burning love between a kettle and a pot.
The pot was stalwart iron and the kettle trusty tin,
And though their sides were black with smoke they bubbled love within.

Forget that kettle, Jamie, and that pot of boiling broth,
I know a dismal story of a candle and a moth.
For while your pot is boiling and while your kettle sings
My moth makes love to candle flame and burns away his wings.

Your moth, I envy, Annie, that died by candle flame,
But here are two more lovers, unto no damage came.

There was a cuckoo loved a clock and found her always true.
For every hour they told their hearts, "Ring! ting! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

As the pot boiled for the kettle, as the kettle for the pot,
So boils my love within me till my breast is glowing hot.
As the moth died for the candle, so could I die for you.
And my fond heart beats time with yours and cries, "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!"

GHOST RADDLED.

"Come, surly fellow, come! A song!"
What, madmen? Sing to you?
Choose from the clouded tales of wrong
And terror I bring to you.

Of a night so torn with cries,
Honest men sleeping
Start awake with glaring eyes,
Bone-chilled, flesh creeping.

Of spirits in the web hung room
Up above the stable,
Groans, knockings in the gloom,
The dancing table.

Of demons in the dry well
That cheep and mutter,
Clanging of an unseen bell,
Blood choking the gutter.

Of lust frightful, past belief,
Lurking unforgotten,
Unrestrainable endless grief
From breasts long rotten.

A song? What laughter or what song
Can this house remember?
Do flowers and butterflies belong
To a blind December?

NEGLECTFUL EDWARD.

Nancy

"Edward back from the Indian Sea,
What have you brought for Nancy?"

Edward

"A rope of pearls and a gold earring,
And a bird of the East that will not sing.
A carven tooth, a box with a key--"

Nancy

"God be praised you are back," says she,
"Have you nothing more for your Nancy?"

Edward

"Long as I sailed the Indian Sea
I gathered all for your fancy:
Toys and silk and jewels I bring,
And a bird of the East that will not sing:
What more can you want, dear girl, from me?"

Nancy

"God be praised you are back," said she,
"Have you nothing better for Nancy?"

Edward

"Safe and home from the Indian Sea,
And nothing to take your fancy?"

Nancy

"You can keep your pearls and your gold earring,
And your bird of the East that will not sing,
But, Ned, have you nothing more for me
Than heathenish gew-gaw toys?" says she,
"Have you nothing better for Nancy?"

THE WELL-DRESSED CHILDREN.

Here's flowery taffeta for Mary's new gown:
Here's black velvet, all the rage, for Dick's birthday coat.
Pearly buttons for you, Mary, all the way down,
Lace ruffles, Dick, for you; you'll be a man of note.

Mary, here I've bought you a green gingham shade
And a silk purse brocaded with roses gold and blue,
You'll learn to hold them proudly like colours on parade.
No banker's wife in all the town half so grand as you.

I've bought for young Diccon a long walking-stick,
Yellow gloves, well tanned, at Woodstock village made.
I'll teach you to flourish 'em and show your name is DICK,

Strutting by your sister's side with the same parade.

On Sunday to church you go, each with a book of prayer:
Then up the street and down the aisles, everywhere you'll see
Of all the honours paid around, how small is Virtue's share.
How large the share of Vulgar Pride in peacock finery.

THUNDER AT NIGHT.

Restless and hot two children lay
Plagued with uneasy dreams,
Each wandered lonely through false day
A twilight torn with screams.

True to the bed-time story, Ben
Pursued his wounded bear,
Ann dreamed of chattering monkey men,
Of snakes twined in her hair...

Now high aloft above the town
The thick clouds gather and break,
A flash, a roar, and rain drives down:
Aghast the young things wake.

Trembling for what their terror was,
Surprised by instant doom,
With lightning in the looking glass,
Thunder that rocks the room.

The monkeys' paws patter again,
Snakes hiss and flash their eyes:
The bear roars out in hideous pain:
Ann prays: her brother cries.

They cannot guess, could not be told
How soon comes careless day,
With birds and dandelion gold,
Wet grass, cool scents of May.

TO E.M.--A BALLAD OF NURSERY RHYME.

Strawberries that in gardens grow
Are plump and juicy fine,
But sweeter far as wise men know
Spring from the woodland vine.

No need for bowl or silver spoon,
Sugar or spice or cream,
Has the wild berry plucked in June

Beside the trickling stream.

One such to melt at the tongue's root,
Confounding taste with scent,
Beats a full peck of garden fruit:
Which points my argument.

May sudden justice overtake
And snap the froward pen,
That old and palsied poets shake
Against the minds of men.

Blasphemers trusting to hold caught
In far-flung webs of ink,
The utmost ends of human thought
Till nothing's left to think.

But may the gift of heavenly peace
And glory for all time
Keep the boy Tom who tending geese
First made the nursery rhyme.

By the brookside one August day,
Using the sun for clock,
Tom whiled the languid hours away
Beside his scattering flock.

Carving with a sharp pointed stone
On a broad slab of slate
The famous lives of Jumping Joan,
Dan Fox and Greedy Kate.

Rhyming of wolves and bears and birds,
Spain, Scotland, Babylon,
That sister Kate might learn the words
To tell to toddling John.

But Kate who could not stay content
To learn her lesson pat
New beauty to the rough lines lent
By changing this or that.

And she herself set fresh things down
In corners of her slate,
Of lambs and lanes and London town.
God's blessing fall on Kate!

The baby loved the simple sound,
With jolly glee he shook,
And soon the lines grew smooth and round
Like pebbles in Tom's brook.

From mouth to mouth told and retold

By children sprawled at ease,
Before the fire in winter's cold,
in June, beneath tall trees.

Till though long lost are stone and slate,
Though the brook no more runs,
And dead long time are Tom, John, Kate,
Their sons and their sons' sons.

Yet as when Time with stealthy tread
Lays the rich garden waste
The woodland berry ripe and red
Fails not in scent or taste,

So these same rhymes shall still be told
To children yet unborn,
While false philosophy growing old
Fades and is killed by scorn.

JANE.

As Jane walked out below the hill,
She saw an old man standing still,
His eyes in tranced sorrow bound
On the broad stretch of barren ground.

His limbs were knarled like aged trees,
His thin beard wrapt about his knees,
His visage broad and parchment white,
Aglint with pale reflected light.

He seemed a creature fall'n afar
From some dim planet or faint star.
Jane scanned him very close, and soon
Cried, "'Tis the old man from the moon."

He raised his voice, a grating creak,
But only to himself would speak.
Groaning with tears in piteous pain,
"O! O! would I were home again."

Then Jane ran off, quick as she could,
To cheer his heart with drink and food.
But ah, too late came ale and bread,
She found the poor soul stretched stone-dead.
And a new moon rode overhead.

VAIN AND CARELESS.

Lady, lovely lady,
Careless and gay!
Once when a beggar called
She gave her child away.

The beggar took the baby,
Wrapped it in a shawl,
"Bring her back," the lady said,
"Next time you call."

Hard by lived a vain man,
So vain and so proud,
He walked on stilts
To be seen by the crowd.

Up above the chimney pots,
Tall as a mast,
And all the people ran about
Shouting till he passed.

"A splendid match surely,"
Neighbours saw it plain,
"Although she is so careless,
Although he is so vain."

But the lady played bobcherry,
Did not see or care,
As the vain man went by her
Aloft in the air.

This gentle-born couple
Lived and died apart.
Water will not mix with oil,
Nor vain with careless heart.

NINE O'CLOCK.

I.

Nine of the clock, oh!
Wake my lazy head!
Your shoes of red morocco,
Your silk bed-gown:
Rouse, rouse, speck-eyed Mary
In your high bed!
A yawn, a smile, sleepy-starey,
Mary climbs down.
"Good-morning to my brothers,
Good-day to the Sun,
Halloo, halloo to the lily-white sheep
That up the mountain run."

II.

Good-night to the meadow, farewell to the nine o'clock Sun,
"He loves me not, loves me, he loves me not" (O jealous one!)
"He loves me, he loves me not, loves me"--O soft nights of June,
A bird sang for love on the cherry-bough: up swam the Moon.

THE PICTURE BOOK.

When I was not quite five years old
I first saw the blue picture book,
And Fraulein Spitzenburger told
Stories that sent me hot and cold;
I loathed it, yet I had to look:
It was a German book.

I smiled at first, for she'd begun
With a back-garden broad and green,
And rabbits nibbling there: page one
Turned; and the gardener fired his gun
From the low hedge: he lay unseen
Behind: oh, it was mean!

They're hurt, they can't escape, and so
He stuffs them head-down in a sack,
Not quite dead, wriggling in a row,
And Fraulein laughed, "Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"
And gave my middle a hard smack,
I wish that I'd hit back.

Then when I cried she laughed again;
On the next page was a dead boy
Murdered by robbers in a lane;
His clothes were red with a big stain
Of blood, he held a broken toy,
The poor, poor little boy!

I had to look: there was a town
Burning where every one got caught,
Then a fish pulled a nigger down
Into the lake and made him drown,
And a man killed his friend; they fought
For money, Fraulein thought.

Old Fraulein laughed, a horrid noise.
"Ho, ho!" Then she explained it all
How robbers kill the little boys
And torture them and break their toys.
Robbers are always big and tall:
I cried: I was so small.

How a man often kills his wife,
How every one dies in the end
By fire, or water or a knife.
If you're not careful in this life,
Even if you can trust your friend,
You won't have long to spend.

I hated it--old Fraulein picked
Her teeth, slowly explaining it.
I had to listen, Fraulein licked
Her fingers several times and flicked
The pages over; in a fit
Of rage I spat at it...

And lying in my bed that night
Hungry, tired out with sobs, I found
A stretch of barren years in sight,
Where right is wrong, but strength is right,
Where weak things must creep underground,
And I could not sleep sound.

THE PROMISED LULLABY.

Can I find True-Love a gift
In this dark hour to restore her,
When body's vessel breaks adrift,
When hope and beauty fade before her?
But in this plight I cannot think
Of song or music, that would grieve her,
Or toys or meat or snow-cooled drink;
Not this way can her sadness leave her.
She lies and frets in childish fever,
All I can do is but to cry
"Sleep, sleep, True-Love and lullaby!"

Lullaby, and sleep again.
Two bright eyes through the window stare,
A nose is flattened on the pane
And infant fingers fumble there.
"Not yet, not yet, you lovely thing,
But count and come nine weeks from now,
When winter's tail has lost the sting,
When buds come striking through the bough,
Then here's True-Love will show you how
Her name she won, will hush your cry
With "Sleep, my baby! Lullaby!"

RETROSPECT

HAUNTED.

Gulp down your wine, old friends of mine,
Roar through the darkness, stamp and sing
And lay ghost hands on everything,
But leave the noonday's warm sunshine
To living lads for mirth and wine.

I met you suddenly down the street,
Strangers assume your phantom faces,
You grin at me from daylight places,
Dead, long dead, I'm ashamed to greet
Dead men down the morning street.

RETROSPECT: THE JESTS OF THE CLOCK.

He had met hours of the clock he never guessed before--
Dumb, dragging, mirthless hours confused with dreams and fear,
Bone-chilling, hungry hours when the gods sleep and snore,
Bequeathing earth and heaven to ghosts, and will not hear,
And will not hear man groan chained to the sodden ground,
Rotting alive; in feather beds they slumbered sound.

When noisome smells of day were sicklied by cold night,
When sentries froze and muttered; when beyond the wire
Blank shadows crawled and tumbled, shaking, tricking the sight,
When impotent hatred of Life stifled desire,
Then soared the sudden rocket, broke in blanching showers.
O lagging watch! O dawn! O hope-forsaken hours!

How often with numbed heart, stale lips, venting his rage
He swore he'd be a dolt, a traitor, a damned fool,
If, when the guns stopped, ever again from youth to age
He broke the early-rising, early-sleeping rule.
No, though more bestial enemies roused a fouler war
Never again would he bear this, no never more!

"Rise with the cheerful sun, go to bed with the same,
Work in your field or kailyard all the shining day,
But," he said, "never more in quest of wealth, honour, fame,
Search the small hours of night before the East goes grey.
A healthy mind, a honest heart, a wise man leaves
Those ugly impious times to ghosts, devils, soldiers, thieves."

Poor fool, knowing too well deep in his heart
That he'll be ready again if urgent orders come,
To quit his rye and cabbages, kiss his wife and part
At the first sullen rapping of the awakened drum,
Ready once more to sweat with fear and brace for the shock,

To greet beneath a falling flare the jests of the clock.

HERE THEY LIE.

Here they lie who once learned here
All that is taught of hurt or fear;
Dead, but by free will they died:
They were true men, they had pride.

TOM TAYLOR.

On pay-day nights, neck-full with beer,
Old soldiers stumbling homeward here,
Homeward (still dazzled by the spark
Love kindled in some alley dark)
Young soldiers mooning in slow thought,
Start suddenly, turn about, are caught
By a dancing sound, merry as a grig,
Tom Taylor's piccolo playing jig.
Never was blown from human cheeks
Music like this, that calls and speaks
Till sots and lovers from one string
Dangle and dance in the same ring.
Tom, of your piping I've heard said
And seen--that you can rouse the dead,
Dead-drunken men awash who lie
In stinking gutters hear your cry,
I've seen them twitch, draw breath, grope, sigh,
Heave up, sway, stand; grotesquely then
You set them dancing, these dead men.
They stamp and prance with sobbing breath,
Victims of wine or love or death,
In ragged time they jump, they shake
Their heads, sweating to overtake
The impetuous tune flying ahead.
They flounder after, with legs of lead.
Now, suddenly as it started, play
Stops, the short echo dies away,
The corpses drop, a senseless heap,
The drunk men gaze about like sheep.
Grinning, the lovers sigh and stare
Up at the broad moon hanging there,
While Tom, five fingers to his nose,
Skips off...And the last bugle blows.

COUNTRY AT WAR.

And what of home--how goes it, boys,
While we die here in stench and noise?
"The hill stands up and hedges wind
Over the crest and drop behind;
Here swallows dip and wild things go
On peaceful errands to and fro
Across the sloping meadow floor,
And make no guess at blasting war.
In woods that fledge the round hill-shoulder
Leaves shoot and open, fall and moulder,
And shoot again. Meadows yet show
Alternate white of drifted snow
And daisies. Children play at shop,
Warm days, on the flat boulder-top,
With wildflower coinage, and the wares
Are bits of glass and unripe pears.
Crows perch upon the backs of sheep,
The wheat goes yellow: women reap,
Autumn winds ruffle brook and pond,
Flutter the hedge and fly beyond.
So the first things of nature run,
And stand not still for any one,
Contemptuous of the distant cry
Wherewith you harrow earth and sky.
And high French clouds, praying to be
Back, back in peace beyond the sea,
Where nature with accustomed round
Sweeps and garnishes the ground
With kindly beauty, warm or cold--
Alternate seasons never old:
Heathen, how furiously you rage,
Cursing this blood and brimstone age,
How furiously against your will
You kill and kill again, and kill:
All thought of peace behind you cast,
Till like small boys with fear aghast,
Each cries for God to understand,
'I could not help it, it was my hand.'"

SOSPAN FACH.

(The Little Saucepan)

Four collier lads from Ebbw Vale
Took shelter from a shower of hail,
And there beneath a spreading tree
Attuned their mouths to harmony.

With smiling joy on every face
Two warbled tenor, two sang bass,
And while the leaves above them hissed with
Rough hail, they started "Aberystwyth."

Old Parry's hymn, triumphant, rich,
They changed through with even pitch,
Till at the end of their grand noise
I called: "Give us the 'Sospan' boys!"

Who knows a tune so soft, so strong,
So pitiful as that "Saucepan" song
For exiled hope, despaired desire
Of lost souls for their cottage fire?

Then low at first with gathering sound
Rose their four voices, smooth and round,
Till back went Time: once more I stood
With Fusiliers in Mametz Wood.

Fierce burned the sun, yet cheeks were pale,
For ice hail they had leaden hail;
In that fine forest, green and big,
There stayed unbroken not one twig.

They sang, they swore, they plunged in haste,
Stumbling and shouting through the waste;
The little "Saucepan" flamed on high,
Emblem of hope and ease gone by.

Rough pit-boys from the coaly South,
They sang, even in the cannon's mouth;
Like Sunday's chapel, Monday's inn,
The death-trap sounded with their din.

The storm blows over, Sun comes out,
The choir breaks up with jest and shout,
With what relief I watch them part--
Another note would break my heart!

THE LEVELLER.

Near Martinpüsch that night of hell
Two men were struck by the same shell,
Together tumbling in one heap
Senseless and limp like slaughtered sheep.

One was a pale eighteen-year-old,
Girlish and thin and not too bold,
Pressed for the war ten years too soon,
The shame and pity of his platoon.

The other came from far-off lands

With bristling chin and whiskered hands,
He had known death and hell before
In Mexico and Ecuador.

Yet in his death this cut-throat wild
Groaned "Mother! Mother!" like a child,
While that poor innocent in man's clothes
Died cursing God with brutal oaths.

Old Sergeant Smith, kindest of men,
Wrote out two copies there and then
Of his accustomed funeral speech
To cheer the womenfolk of each.

HATE NOT, FEAR NOT.

Kill if you must, but never hate:
Man is but grass and hate is blight,
The sun will scorch you soon or late,
Die wholesome then, since you must fight.

Hate is a fear, and fear is rot
That cankers root and fruit alike,
Fight cleanly then, hate not, fear not,
Strike with no madness when you strike.

Fever and fear distract the world,
But calm be you though madmen shout,
Through blazing fires of battle hurled,
Hate not, strike, fear not, stare Death out!

A RHYME OF FRIENDS.
(In a Style Skeltonical)

Listen now this time
Shortly to my rhyme
That herewith starts
About certain kind hearts
In those stricken parts
That lie behind Calais,
Old crones and aged men
And young children.
About the Picardais,
Who earned my thousand thanks,
Dwellers by the banks
Of mournful Somme
(God keep me therefrom
Until War ends)--
These, then, are my friends:

Madame Averlant Lune,
From the town of Bethune;
Good Professeur la Brune
From that town also.
He played the piccolo,
And left his locks to grow.
Dear Madame Hojdes,
Sempstress of Saint Fe.
With Jules and Susette
And Antoinette.
Her children, my sweethearts,
For whom I made darts
Of paper to throw
In their mimic show,
"La guerre aux tranches."
That was a pretty play.

There was old Jacques Caron,
Of the hamlet Mailleton.
He let me look
At his household book,
"Comment vivre cent ans."
What cares I took
To obey this wise book,
I, who feared each hour
Lest Death's cruel power
On the popped plain
Might make cares vain!

By Noeus-les-mines
Lived old Adelphine,
Withered and clean,
She nodded and smiled,
And used me like a child.
How that old trot beguiled
My leisure with her chatter,
Gave me a china platter
Painted with Cherubim
And mottoes on the rim.
But when instead of thanks
I gave her francs
How her pride was hurt!
She counted francs as dirt,
(God knows, she was not rich)
She called the Kaiser bitch,
She spat on the floor,
Cursing this Prussian war,
That she had known before
Forty years past and more.

There was also "Tomi,"
With looks sweet and free,
Who called me cher ami.

This orphan's age was nine,
His folk were in their graves,
Else they were slaves
Behind the German line
To terror and rapine--
O, little friends of mine
How kind and brave you were,
You smoothed away care
When life was hard to bear.
And you, old women and men,
Who gave me billets then,
How patient and great-hearted!
Strangers though we started,
Yet friends we ever parted.
God bless you all: now ends
This homage to my friends.

A FIRST REVIEW.

Love, Fear and Hate and Childish Toys
Are here discreetly blent;
Admire, you ladies, read, you boys,
My Country Sentiment.

But Kate says, "Cut that anger and fear,
True love's the stuff we need!
With laughing children and the running deer
That makes a book indeed."

Then Tom, a hard and bloody chap,
Though much beloved by me,
"Robert, have done with nursery pap,
Write like a man," says he.

Hate and Fear are not wanted here,
Nor Toys nor Country Lovers,
Everything they took from my new poem book
But the flyleaf and the covers.

End of Project Gutenberg'sg Etext of Country Sentiment, by Robert Graves

lyleaf and the covers.

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