FIRES - BOOK II

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Title: Fires - Book II
The Ovens, and Other Tales

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Release Date: May 09, 2013 [eBook #42678]

Language: English

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Produced by Al Haines.

FIRES

BOOK II
THE OVENS, AND OTHER TALES

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

LONDON
ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET
M CM XII

BY THE SAME WRITER
WOMENKIND (1912)
DAILY BREAD (1910)
THE STONEFOLDS (1907)
ON THE THRESHOLD (1907)

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Thanks are due to the editors of THE ENGLISH REVIEW, RHYTHM *and* THE NATION *for leave to reprint some of these tales.*

FIRES

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 up 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, as 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-pat-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 bed:
I felt her staring, as she said:
"I wonder if he ever hears
The pit-pat-pattering of sheep,
Or smells the broken bracken 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 fear 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 moonlit road...
Or what's the wrong that she has done...
I wonder if 'twould 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.

THE LIGHTHOUSE

Just as my watch was done, the fog had lifted;
And we could see the flashing of our light;
And see, once more, the reef beyond the Head,
O'er which, six days and nights, the mist had drifted–
Six days and nights in thick white mist had drifted,
Until it seemed all time to mist had drifted,
And day and night were but one blind white night.

But on the seventh midnight the wind shifted:
And I was glad to tumble into bed,
Thankful to hear no more the blaring horn,
That ceaselessly had sounded, night and morn,
With moaning echoes through the mist, to warn
The blind, bewildered ships at sea:
Yet, though as tired as any dog,
I lay awhile, and seemed to feel
Fog lying on my eyes still heavily;
And still, the horn unceasingly
Sang through my head, till gradually

Through night's strange stillness, over me
Sweet sleep began to steal,
Sleep, blind and thick and fleecy as the fog.

For all I knew, I might have slept
A moment, or eternity;
When, startled by a crash,
I waked to find I'd leapt
Upright on the floor:
And stood there, listening to the smash
Of falling glass ... and then a thud
Of something heavy tumbling
Into the next room...
A pad of naked feet...
A moan ... a sound of stumbling ...
A heavier thud ... and then no more.
And I stood shivering in the gloom,
With creeping flesh, and tingling blood,
Until I gave myself a shake
To bring my wits more wide awake;
And lit a lantern, and flung wide the door.
Half-dazed, and dazzled by the light,
At first it seemed I'd only find
A broken pane, a flapping blind:
But when I raised the lantern o'er my head,
I saw a naked boy upon the bed,
Who crouched and shuddered on the folded sheet;
And, on his face, before my feet,
A naked man, who lay as if quite dead,
Though on his broken knuckles blood was red:
And all my wits awakened at the sight.

I set the lantern down; and took the child,
Who looked at me, with piteous eyes and wild;
And chafed his chill, wet body, till it glowed;
And forcing spirit 'twixt his chattering teeth,
I tucked him snugly in beneath
The blankets, and soon left him warmly stowed:
And stooped to tend the man, who lay
Still senseless on the floor.

I turned him off his face;
And laid him on the other bed;
And washed and staunched his wound.
And yet for all that I could do,
I could not bring him to,
Or see a trace
Of life returning to that heavy head.

It seemed he'd swooned,
When through the window he'd made way,
Just having strength to lay
The boy in safety. Still as death,
He lay, without a breath:
And seeing I could do no more
To help him in the fight for life;
I turned again to tend the lad;
And, as I looked on him, was glad
To find him sleeping quietly.

So, fetching fuel, I lit a fire:
And quickly had as big a blaze
As any housewife could desire:
Then, 'twixt the beds, I set a chair,
That I might watch until they stirred:
And as I saw them lying there–
The sleeping boy, and him who lay
In that strange stiller sleep, 'twas plain
That they were son and father, now
I'd time to look, and wonder how,
In such a desperate plight,
Without a stitch or rag,
They'd taken refuge from the night.
And, as I wondered drowsily,
It seemed yet queerer and more queer;
For round the Head the rocks are sheer,
With scarce a foothold for a bird;
And it seemed quite beyond belief
That any wrecked upon the reef,
Could swim ashore, and scale the crag,
By daylight, let alone by night

But, they who live beside the sea
Know naught's too wonderful to be:
And, as I sat, and heard
The quiet breathing of the child,
Great weariness came over me;
And, in a kind of daze,
I watched the blaze,
With nodding head:
And must have slept, for, presently,
I found the man was sitting up in bed:
And talking to himself, with wide, unseeing eyes.
At first, I hardly made out what he said:
But soon his voice, so hoarse and wild,
Grew calm: and, straining, I could hear
The broken words, that came with many sighs.

"Yes, lad: she's going: but, there's naught to fear:
For I can swim: and tow you in the belt.
Come, let's join hands together; and leap clear...
Aye, son: it's dark and cold ... but you have felt
The cold and dark before...
And you should scorn...
And we must be near shore...
For, hark the horn!
Think of your mother, and your home, and leap...
She thinks of us, lad, waking or asleep...
You would not leave her lonely?
Nay! ... then ... go! ...
Well done, lad! ... Nay! I'm here...
Aye, son, it's cold: but you're too big to fear.
Now then, you're snug: I've got you safe in tow:
The worst is over: and we've only
To make for land ... we've naught ... to do ... but steer...
But steer ... but steer..."

He paused; and sank down in the bed, quite done:
And lay a moment silent, while his son
Still slumbered in the other bed,
And on his quiet face the firelight shone.
Then, once again, the father raised his head,

And rambled on...
"Say, lad, what cheer?
I thought you'd dropped asleep: but you're all right.
We'll rest a moment ... I'm quite out of breath...
It's further than ... Nay, son! there's naught to fear...
The land must be quite near...
The horn is loud enough!
Aye, lad, it's cold:
But, you're too old
To cry for cold.
Now ... keep ... tight hold:
And we'll be off again.
I've got my breath..."

He sank, once more, as still as death,
With hands that clutched the counterpane:
But still the boy was sleeping quietly.
And then, the father sat up suddenly:
And cried: "See! See!
The land! the land!
It's near ... I touch it with my hand."
And now, "Oh God!" he moaned.
Small wonder, when he saw what lay before–
The black, unbroken crags, so grim and high,
That must have seemed to him to soar
Sheer from the sea's edge to the sky.
But, soon, he plucked up heart, once more:
"We're safe, lad–safe ashore!
A narrow ledge, but land, firm land.
We'll soon be high and dry.
Nay, son: we can't stay here:
The waves would have us back;
Or we should perish of the cold.
Come, lad: there's naught to fear...
You must be brave and bold.
Perhaps, we'll strike a track.
Aye, son: it's steep, and black,
And slimy to the hold:
But we must climb, and see! the mist is gone.
The stars are shining clear...

Think, son, your mother's at the top;
And you'll be up in no time. See, that star,
The brightest star that ever shone,
Just think it's she who watches you;
And knows that you'll be brave and true.
Come, lad: we may not stop...
Or, else, the cold...
Give me your hand...
Your foot there, now ... just room to stand.
It cannot be so far...
We'll soon be up ... this work should make us warm.
Thank God, it's not a storm,
Or we should scarce ... your foot, here, firm...
Nay, lad! you must not squirm.
Come, be a man: you shall not fall:
I'll hold you tight.
There: now, you are my own son, after all!
Your mother, lad,
Her star burns bright...
And we're already half-way up the height...
Your mother will be glad,
Aye, she'll be glad to hear
Of her brave boy who had no fear.

Your foot ... your hand ... 'twas but a bird
You startled out of bed:
'Twould think it queer
To wake up, suddenly, and see your head!
And, when you stirred...
Nay! steady, lad!
Or you will send your dad...
Your hand ... your foot ... we'll rest upon this ledge...
Why, son, we're at the top! I feel the edge,
And grass, soft, dewy grass!
Let go, one moment; and I'll draw you up...
Now, lad! ... Thank God! that's past...
And you are safe, at last:
You're safe, you're safe ... and now, my precious lass
Will see her son, her little son, again.

I never thought to reach the top, to-night.
God! What a height!
Nay! but you must not look: 'twould turn your head
And we must not stand shivering here...
And see ... a flashing light...
It's sweeping towards us: and now you stand bright.
Ah, your poor, bleeding hands and feet!
My little son, my sweet!
There's nothing more to fear.
A lighthouse, lad! And we must make for it.
You're tired; I'll carry you a bit.
Nay, son: 'twill warm me up...
And there will be a fire and bed;
And ev'n perhaps a cup
Of something hot to drink,
And something good to eat.
And think, son, only think,
Your home ... and mother ... once again."

Once more, the weary head
Sank back upon the bed:
And, for a while, he hardly stirred;
But only muttered, now and then,
A broken word,
As though to cheer
His son, who still slept quietly,
Upon the other side of me.

And then, my blood ran cold to hear
A sudden cry of fear:
"My son! My son!
Ah, God, he's done!
I thought I'd laid him on the bed...
I've laid him on white mist, instead:
He's fallen sheer..."

Then, I sprang up; and cried: "Your son is here!"
And, taking up the sleeping boy,
I bore him to his father's arms:
And, as he nestled to his breast,

Kind life came back to those wild eyes;
And filled them with deep joy:
And, free of all alarms,
The son and father lay,
Together, in sweet rest,
While through the window stole the strange, clear light of day.

THE MONEY

They found her cold upon the bed.
The cause of death, the doctor said,
Was nothing save the lack of bread.

Her clothes were but a sorry rag
That barely hid the nakedness
Of her poor body's piteous wreck:
Yet, when they stripped her of her dress,
They found she was not penniless;
For, in a little silken bag,
Tied with red ribbon round her neck,
Was four-pound-seventeen-and-five.

"It seems a strange and shameful thing
That she should starve herself to death,
While she'd the means to keep alive.
Why, such a sum would keep the breath
Within her body till she'd found
A livelihood; and it would bring...
But, there is very little doubt
She'd set her heart upon a grand
And foolish funeral–for the pride
Of poor folk, who can understand!–
And so, because she was too proud
To meet death penniless, she died."

And talking, talking, they trooped out:

And, as they went, I turned about
To look upon her in her shroud;
And saw again the quiet face
That filled with light that shameful place,
Touched with the tender, youthful grace
Death brings the broken and outworn
To comfort kind hearts left to mourn.

And as I stood, the sum they'd found
Rang with a queer, familiar ring
Of some uncouth, uncanny sound
Heard in dark ages underground;
And "four-pound-seventeen-and-five"
Through all my body seemed to sing,
Without recalling anything
To help me, strive as I might strive.

But, as I stumbled down the stairs
Into the alley's gloom and stench–
A whiff of burning oil
That took me unawares–
And I knew all there was to tell.
And, though the rain in torrents fell,
I walked on, heedless, through the drench
And, all the while, I seemed to sit
Upon a tub in Lansel pit;
And in the candle-light to see
John Askerton, a "deputy,"
Who paused awhile to talk with me,
His kind face glistening black with toil.

"'Twas here I found him dead, beside
His engine. All the other men
Were up–for things were slack just then–
And I'd one foot upon the cage;
When, all at once, I caught the smell
Of burning. Even as I turned
To see what it could be that burned,
The seam behind was choked with stife.
And so I dropped on hands and knees,

And crawled along the gallery,
Beneath the smoke, that I might see
What ailed: and as I crept, half-blind,
With smarting eyes, and breath awheeze,
I scarcely knew what I should find.
At times, I thought I'd never know...
And 'twas already quite an age
Since I set out ... I felt as though
I had been crawling all my life
Beneath the stifling cloud of smoke
That clung about me fit to choke:
And when, at last, I'd struggled here,
'Twas long ere I could see things clear...
That he was lying here ... and he
Was dead ... and burning like a tree...
A tree-trunk soaked in oil ... No doubt,
The engine had caught fire, somehow;
And when he tried to put it out,
His greasy clothes had caught ... and now
As fine a lad as you could see...
And such a lad for singing ... I
Had heard him when I worked hard by;
And often quiet I would sit
To hear him, singing in the pit,
As though his heart knew naught of it,
And life was nothing but a song.

"He'd not been working with us long:
And little of his ways I knew:
But, when I'd got him up, at last;
And he was lying in the shed,
The sweet song silent in his breast;
And there was nothing more to do:
The notion came into my head
That he had always been well-dressed;
And seemed a neat and thrifty lad...
And lived in lodgings ... so, maybe,
Would carry on him all he had.
So, back into the cage I stepped:
And, when it reached the bottom, crept

Along the gallery again
And, in the dust where he had lain,
I rummaged, until I found all
That from his burning pockets fell.
And when it seemed there was no more,
I thought how, happy and alive,
And recking naught what might befall,
He, too, for all that I could tell,
Just where I stood, had reckoned o'er
That four-pound-seventeen-and-five.

"Aye, like enough ... for soon we heard
That in a week he'd looked to wed.
He'd meant to give the girl that night
The money to buy furniture.
She came, and watched till morning-light
Beside the body in the shed:
Then rose: and took, without a word,
The money he had left for her."

* * * * *

Then, as I wandered through the rain,
I seemed to stand in awe again
Beside that lonely garret-bed.
And it was good to think the dead
Had known the wealth she would not spend
To keep a little while alive–
His four-pound-seventeen-and-five–
Would buy her houseroom in the end.

THE SNOW

Just as the school came out,
The first white flakes were drifting round about:
And all the children shouted with delight

To see such flakes, so big, so white,
Tumbling from a cloud so black,
And whirling helter-skelter
Across the windy moor:
And as they saw the light flakes race,
Started off in headlong chase,
Swooping on them with a shout,
When they seemed to drop for shelter
Underneath the dry-stone wall.

And then the master, at the schoolhouse door,
Called out to them to hurry home, before
The storm should come on worse: and watched till all
Had started off by road or moorland track:
When, turning to his wife, he said:
It looked like dirty weather overhead:
He thought 'twould be a heavy fall,
And threatened for a roughish night;
But they would all reach home in broad daylight.
'Twas early, yet; he'd let the school out soon;
As it had looked so lowering since forenoon;
And many had a goodish step to go:
And it was but ill-travelling in the snow.
Then by the fire he settled down to read;
And to the weather paid no further heed.

And, on their road home, full three miles away,
John, and his little sister, Janey, started;
And, at the setting out, were happy-hearted
To be let loose into a world so gay,
With jolly winds and frisking flakes at play
That flicked your cheek, and whistled in your teeth:
And now hard on each other's heels they darted
To catch a flake that floated like a feather,
Then dropt to nestle in a clump of heather;
And often tumbled both together
Into a deep delicious bed
Of brown and springy heath.
But, when the sky grew blacker overhead,
As if it were the coming on of night,

And every little hill, well-known to sight,
Looked big and strange in its new fleece of white;
And as yet faster and more thickly
The big flakes fell,
To John the thought came that it might be well
To hurry home; so, striding on before,
He set a steady face across the moor;
And called to Janey she must come more quickly.

The wind soon dropped: and fine and dry the snow
Came whispering down about them, as they trudged
And, when they'd travelled for a mile or so,
They found it ankle-deep: for here the storm
Had started long before it reached the school:
And, as he felt the dry flakes tingling warm
Upon his cheek, and set him all aglow,
John in his manly pride, a little grudged
That now and then he had to wait awhile
For Janey, lagging like a little fool:
But, when they'd covered near another mile
Through that bewildering white without a sound,
Save rustling, rustling, rustling all around;
And all his well-known world, so queer and dim,
He waited until she caught up to him;
And felt quite glad that he was not alone.

And when they reached the low, half-buried stone
That marked where some old shepherd had been found,
Lost in the snow in seeking his lost sheep,
One wild March night, full forty years ago,
He wished, and wished, that they were safe and sound
In their own house: and as the snow got deeper,
And every little bank seemed strangely steeper,
He thought, and thought of that lost sleeper;
And saw him lying in the snow,
Till every fleecy clump of heath
Seemed to shroud a man beneath;
And now his blood went hot and cold
Through very fear of that dread sight;
And then he felt that, in sheer fright,

He must take to his heels in flight,
He cared not whither, so that it might be
Where there were no more bundles, cold and white,
Like sheeted bodies, plain to see.
And, all on edge, he turned to chide
His sister, dragging at his side:
But, when he found that she was crying,
Because her feet and hands were cold,
He quite forgot to scold:
And spoke kind words of cheer to her:
And saw no more dead shepherds lying
In any snowy clump of heather.
So, hand in hand, they trudged together,
Through that strange world of drifting gloam,
Sharp-set and longing sore for home.

And John remembered how that morning,
When they set out the sky was blue–
Clean, cloudless blue; and gave no warning;
And how through air as clear as glass,
The far-off hills he knew
Looked strangely near; and glittered brightly;
Each sprig of heath and blade of grass
In the cold wind blowing lightly,
Each clump of green and crimson moss
Sparkling in the wintry sun.

But now, as they toiled home, across
These unfamiliar fells, nigh done,
The wind again began to blow;
And thicker, thicker fell the snow:
Till Janey sank, too numb to stir:
When John stooped down, and lifted her,
To carry her upon his back.
And then his head began to tire:
And soon he seemed to lose the track...
And now the world was all afire...
Now dazzling white, now dazzling black...
And then, through some strange land of light,
Where clouds of butterflies all white,

Fluttered and flickered all about,
Dancing ever in and out,
He wandered, blinded by white wings,
That rustled, rustled in his ears
With cold, uncanny whisperings...
And then it seemed his bones must crack
With that dead weight upon his back...
When, on his cheek, he felt warm tears,
And a cold tangle of wet hair;
And knew 'twas Janey weeping there:
And, taking heart, he stumbled on,
While in his breast the hearthlight shone:
And it was all of his desire
To sit once more before the fire;
And feel the friendly glowing heat.
But, as he strove with fumbling feet,
It seemed that he would never find
Again that cheery hearth and kind;
But wander ever, bent and blind,
Beneath his burden through the night
Of dreadful, spangly, whispering white.

The wind rose; and the dry snow drifted
In little eddies round the track:
And when, at last, the dark cloud rifted,
He saw a strange lough, lying cold and black,
'Mid unknown, ghostly hills; and knew
That they were lost: and once again,
The snow closed in: and swept from view
The dead black water and strange fells.

But still he struggled on: and then,
When he seemed climbing up an endless steep
And ever slipping, sliding back,
With ankles aching like to crack,
And only longed for sleep;
He heard a tinkling sound of bells,
That kept on ringing, ringing, ringing,
Until his dizzy head was singing;
And he could think of nothing else:

And then it seemed the weight was lifted
From off his back; and on the ground
His sister stood, while, all around
Were giants clad in coats of wool,
With big, curled horns, and queer black faces,
Who bobbed and curtsied in their places,
With blazing eyes and strange grimaces;
But never made a sound;
Then nearly shook themselves to pieces,
Shedding round a smell of warm, wet fleeces:
Then one it seemed as if he knew,
Looking like the old lame ewe,
Began to bite his coat, and pull
Till he could hardly stand: its eyes
Glowing to a monstrous size,
Till they were like a lantern light
Burning brightly through the night...
When someone stooped from out the sky,
To rescue him; and set him high:
And he was riding, snug and warm,
In some king's chariot through the storm,
Without a sound of wheel or hoof–
In some king's chariot, filled with straw,
And he would nevermore be cold...

And then with wondering eyes he saw
Deep caverns of pure burning gold;
And knew himself in fairyland:
But when he stretched an eager hand
To touch the glowing walls, he felt
A queer warm puff, as though of fire...
And suddenly he smelt
The reek of peat; and looking higher,
He saw the old, black porridge-kettle,
Hanging from the cavern roof,
Hanging on its own black crook:
And he was lying on the settle,
While by his side,
With tender look,
His mother knelt;

And he had only one desire
In all the world; and 'twas to fling
His arms about her neck, and hide
His happy tears upon her breast.
And as to her he closely pressed,
He heard his merry father sing:
"There was a silly sleepyhead,
Who thought he'd like to go to bed:
So in a stell he went to sleep,
And snored among the other sheep."

And then his mother gently said:
"Nay, father: do not tease him now:
He's quite worn out: and needs a deal
Of quiet sleep: and, after all,
He brought his sister safe from school."
And now he felt her warm tears fall
Upon his cheek: and thrilled to feel
His father's hand on his hot brow,
And hear him say: "The lad's no fool."

RED FOX

I hated him ... his beard was red...
Red fox, red thief! ... Ah, God, that she–
She with the proud and lifted head
That never stooped to glance at me–
So fair and fancy-free, should wed
A slinking dog-fox such as he!

Was it last night I hated him?
Last night? It seems an age ago...
At whiles, my mind comes over dim
As if God's breath ... yet, ever slow
And dull, too dull she ... limb from limb
Last night I could have torn him, so!

My lonely bed was fire and ice.
I could not sleep. I could not lie.
I shut my hot eyes once or twice...
And saw a red fox slinking by...
A red dog-fox that turned back thrice
To mock me with a merry eye.

And so I rose to pace the floor...
And, ere I knew, my clothes were on...
And as I stood outside the door,
Cold in the Summer moonlight shone
The gleaming barrel ... and no more
I feared the fox, for fear was one.

"The best of friends," I said, "must part..."
"The best of friends must part," I said:
And like the creaking of a cart
The words went wheeling through my head.
"The best of friends..." and, in my heart,
Red fox, already lying dead!

I took the trackway through the wood.
Red fox had sought a woodland den,
When she ... when she ... but, 'twas not good
To think too much on her just then...
The woman must beware, who stood
Between two stark and fearless men.

The pathway took a sudden turn...
And in a trice my steps were stayed.
Before me, in the moonlit fern,
A young dog-fox and vixen played
With their red cubs beside the burn...
And I stood trembling and afraid.

They frolicked in the warm moonlight–
A scuffling heap of heads and heels...
A rascal rush ... a playful bite...
A scuttling brush, and frightened squeals...
A flash of teeth ... a show of fight...

Then lively as a bunch of eels

Once more they gambolled in the brake,
And tumbled headlong in the stream,
Then scrambled gasping out to shake
Their sleek, wet, furry coats agleam.
I watched them, fearful and awake...
I watched them, hateless and adream.

The dog-fox gave a bark, and then
All ran to him: and, full of pride,
He took the trackway up the glen,
His family trotting by his side:
The young cubs nosing for the den,
With trailing brushes, sleepy-eyed.

And then it seems I must have slept–
Dropt dead asleep ... dropt dead outworn.
I wakened, as the first gleam crept
Among the fern, and it was morn...
God's eye about their home had kept
Good watch, the night her son was born.

THE OVENS

He trailed along the cinder-track
Beside the sleek canal, whose black
Cold, slinking waters shivered back
Each frosty spark of starry light;
And each star pricked, an icy pin,
Through his old jacket worn and thin:
The raw wind rasped his shrinking skin
As if stark naked to its bite;
Yet, cutting through him like a knife,
It would not cut the thread of life;
But only turned his feet to stones

With red-hot soles, that weighed like lead
In his old broken boots. His head,
Sunk low upon his sunken chest,
Was but a burning, icy ache
That strained a skull which would not break
To let him tumble down to rest.
He felt the cold stars in his bones:
And only wished that he were dead,
With no curst searching wind to shred
The very flesh from off his bones–
No wind to whistle through his bones,
His naked, icy, burning bones:
When, looking up, he saw, ahead,
The far coke-ovens' glowing light
That burnt a red hole in the night.
And but to snooze beside that fire
Was all the heaven of his desire...
To tread no more this cursed track
Of crunching cinders, through a black
And blasted world of cinder-heaps,
Beside a sleek canal that creeps
Like crawling ice through every bone,
Beneath the cruel stars, alone
With this hell-raking wind that sets
The cold teeth rattling castanets...
Yea, heaven, indeed, that core of red
In night's black heart that seemed quite dead.
Though still far off, the crimson glow
Through his chilled veins began to flow,
And fill his shrivelled heart with heat;
And, as he dragged his senseless feet,
That lagged as though to hold him back
In cold, eternal hell of black,
With heaven before him, blazing red,
The set eyes staring in his head
Were held by spell of fire quite blind
To that black world that fell behind,
A cindery wilderness of death;
As he drew slowly near and nearer,
And saw the ovens glowing clearer–

Low-domed and humming hives of heat–
And felt the blast of burning breath
That quivered from each white-hot brick:
Till, blinded by the blaze, and sick
He dropped into a welcome seat
Of warm white ashes, sinking low
To soak his body in the glow
That shot him through with prickling pain,
An eager agony of fire,
Delicious after the cold ache,
And scorched his tingling, frosted skin.
Then gradually the anguish passed;
And blissfully he lay, at last,
Without an unfulfilled desire,
His grateful body drinking in
Warm, blessed, snug forgetfulness.
And yet, with staring eyes awake,
As though no drench of heat could slake
His thirst for fire, he watched a red
Hot eye that burned within a chink
Between the bricks: while overhead
The quivering stream of hot, gold air
Surged up to quench the cold starlight.
His brain, too numbed and dull to think
Throughout the day, in that fierce glare
Awoke, at last, with startled stare
Of pitiless, insistent sight
That stript the stark, mean, bitter strife
Of his poor, broken, wasted life,
Crippled from birth, and struggling on,
The last, least shred of hope long gone,
To some unknown, black, bitter end.
But, even as he looked, his brain
Sank back to sightless sloth again;
Then, all at once, he seemed to choke;
And knew it was the stealthy stife
And deadly fume of burning coke
That filled his lungs, and seemed to soak
Through every pore, until the blood
Grew thick and heavy in his veins,

And he could scarcely draw a breath.
He lay, and murmured drowsily,
With closing eyes: "If this be death,
It's snug and easy ... let it come...
For life is cold and hard ... the flood
Is rising with the heavy rains
That pour and pour ... that damned old drum,
Why ever can't they let it be...
Beat-beating, beating, beating, beat..."
Then, suddenly, he sat upright,
For, close behind him in the night,
He heard a breathing loud and deep,
And caught a whiff of burning leather.
He shook himself alive, and turned;
And on a heap of ashes white,
O'ercome by the full blast of heat,
Where fieriest the dread blaze burned,
He saw a young girl stretched in sleep.
He sat awhile with heavy gaze
Fixed on her in a dull amaze,
Until he saw her scorched boots smoking:
Then, whispering huskily: "She's dying,
While I look on and watch her choking!"
He roused: and pulled himself together:
And rose, and went where she was lying:
And, bending o'er the senseless lass,
In his weak arms he lifted her;
And bore her out beyond the glare,
Beyond the stealthy, stifling gas,
Into the fresh and eager air:
And laid her gently on the ground
Beneath the cold and starry sky:
And did his best to bring her round;
Though still, for all that he could try,
She seemed, with each deep-labouring breath
Just brought up on the brink of death.
He sought, and found an icy pool,
Though he had but a cap to fill,
And bathed her hands and face, until
The troubled breath was quieter,

And her flushed forehead felt quite cool:
And then he saw an eyelid stir;
And shivering she sat up at last,
And looked about her sullenly.
"I'm cold ... I'm mortal cold," she said:
"What call had you to waken me?
I was so warm and happy, dead...
And still those staring stars!" Her head
Dropt in her hands: and thick and fast
The tears came with a heavy sobbing.
He stood quite helpless while she cried;
And watched her shaken bosom throbbing
With passionate, wild, weak distress,
Till it was spent. And then she dried
Her eyes upon her singed black dress;
Looked up, and saw him standing there,
Wondering, and more than half-afraid.
But now, the nipping, hungry air
Took hold of her, and struck fear dead.
She only felt the starving sting
That must, at any price, be stayed;
And cried out: "I am famishing!"
Then from his pocket he took bread
That he had been too weak and sick
To eat o'ernight: and eager-eyed,
She took it timidly; and said:
"I have not tasted food two days."
And, as he waited by her side,
He watched her with a quiet gaze;
And saw her munch the broken crust
So gladly, seated in the dust
Of that black desert's bitter night,
Beneath the freezing stars, so white
And hunger-pinched: and at the sight
Keen pity touched him to the quick;
Although he never said a word,
Till she had finished every crumb.
And then he led her to a seat
A little closer to the heat,
But well beyond the deadly stife.

And in the ashes, side by side,
They sat together, dazed and dumb,
With eyes upon the ovens' glare,
Each looking nakedly on life.
And then, at length, she sighed, and stirred,
Still staring deep and dreamy-eyed
Into the whitening, steady glow.
With jerky, broken words and slow,
And biting at her finger-ends,
She talked at last: and spoke out all
Quite open-heartedly, as though
There were not any stranger there–
The fire and he, both bosom-friends.
She'd left her home three months ago–
She, country-born and country-bred,
Had got the notion in her head
That she'd like city-service best...
And so no country place could please...
And she had worried without rest
Until, at last, she got her ends;
And, wiser than her folk and friends,
She left her home among the trees...
The trees grew thick for miles about
Her father's house ... the forest spread
As far as ever you could see...
And it was green, in Summer, green...
Since she had left her home, she'd seen
No greenness could compare with it...
And everything was fresh and clean,
And not all smutched and smirched with smoke
They burned no sooty coal and coke,
But only wood-logs, ash and oak...
And by the fire at night they'd sit...
Ah! wouldn't it be rare and good
To smell the sappy, sizzling wood,
Once more; and listen to the stream
That runs just by the garden-gate...
And often, in a Winter spate,
She'd wakened from a troubled dream,
And lain in bed, and heard it roar;

And quaked to hear it, as a child...
It seemed so angry, and so wild–
Just mad to sweep the house away!
And now, it was three months or more
Since she had heard it, on the day...
The day she left ... and Michael stood...
He was a woodman, too, and he
Worked with her father in the wood...
And wanted her, she knew ... but she
Was proud, and thought herself too good
To marry any country lad...
'Twas queer to think she'd once been proud–
And such a little while ago–
A beggar, wolfing crusts! ... The pride
That made her quit her countryside
Soon left her stranded in the crowd...
And precious little pride she had
To keep her warm these freezing days
Since she had fled the city-ways
To walk back home ... aye! home again:
For, in the town, she'd tried in vain,
For honest work to earn her bread...
At one place, they'd nigh slaved her dead,
And starved her, too; and, when she left,
Had cheated her of half her wage:
But she'd no means to stop the theft...
And she'd had no more work to do...
Two months since, now ... it seemed an age!
How she had lived, she scarcely knew...
And still, poor fool, too proud to write
To home for help, until, at length,
She'd not a penny for a bite,
Or pride enough to clothe her back...
So, she was tramping home, too poor
To pay the train-fare ... she'd the strength,
If she'd the food ... but that hard track,
And that cold, cruel, bitter night
Had taken all the heart from her...
If Michael knew, she felt quite sure...
For she would rather drop stone-dead

Than live as some ... if she had cared
To feed upon the devil's bread,
She could have earned it easily...
She'd pride enough to starve instead,
Aye, starve, than fare as some girls fared...
But, that was all behind ... and she
Was going home ... and yet, maybe,
If they'd a home like hers, they, too,
Would be too proud ... she only knew
The thought of home had kept her straight,
And saved her ere it was too late.
She'd soon be home again...
And now
She sat with hand upon her brow;
And did not speak again nor stir.

And, as he heard her words, his gaze
Still set upon the steady glare,
His thoughts turned back to city-ways:
And he remembered common sights
That he had seen in city nights:
And, once again, in early June,
He wandered through the midnight street;
And heard those ever-pacing feet
Of young girls, children yet in years,
With gaudy ribbons in their hair,
And shameless fevered eyes astare,
And slack lips set in brazen leers,
Who walked the pavements of despair,
Beneath the fair full Summer moon...
Shadowed by worn-out, wizened hags,
With claw-hands clutching filthy rags
About old bosoms, shrunk and thin,
And mouths aleer without a tooth,
Who dogged them, cursing their sleek youth
That filched their custom and their bread...
Then, in a reek of hot gas light,
He stood where, through the Summer night,
Half-dozing in the stifling air,
The greasy landlord, fat with sin,

Sat, lolling in his easy chair,
Just half-way up the brothel stair,
To tax the earnings they brought in,
And hearken for the policeman's tread...

Then, shuddering back from that foul place
And turning from the ovens' glare,
He looked into her dreaming face;
And saw green, sunlit woodlands there,
And waters flashing in between
Low-drooping boughs of Summer green.

And as he looked, still in a dream
She murmured: "Michael would, she knew...
Though she'd been foolish ... he was true,
As true as steel, and fond of her...
And then she sat with eyes agleam
In dreaming silence, till the stir
Of cold dawn shivered through the air:
When, twisting up her tumbled hair,
She rose; and said, she must be gone.
Though she'd still far to go, the day
Would see her well upon her way...
And she had best be jogging on,
While she'd the strength ... and so, "Good-bye."

And as, beneath the paling sky,
He trudged again the cinder-track
That stretched before him, dead and black,
He muttered: "It's a chance the light
Has found me living still ... and she–
She, too ... and Michael ... and through me
God knows whom I may wake to-night."

1910-1911.

LONDON: PRINTED BY WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED.

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