FIRES - BOOK III

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FIRES

BOOK III
THE HARE, 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 RHYTHM, *and* THE NATION, *for leave to reprint some of these tales .*

FIRES

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.

THE SLAG

Among bleak hills of mounded slag they walked,
'Neath sullen evening skies that seemed to sag
O'er-burdened by the belching smoke, and lie
Upon their aching foreheads, dense and dank,
Till both felt youth within them fail and flag–
Even as the flame which shot a fiery rag
A fluttering moment through the murky sky
Above the black blast-furnaces, then sank
Again beneath the iron bell close-bound–
And it was all that they could do to drag
Themselves along, 'neath that dead-weight of smoke,
Over the cinder-blasted, barren ground.
Though fitfully and fretfully she talked,
He never turned his eyes to her, or spoke:
And as he slouched with her along the track
That skirted a stupendous, lowering mound,
With listless eyes, and o'er-strained sinews slack,
She bit a petted, puckered lip, and frowned
To think she ever should be walking out
With this tongue-tied, slow-witted, hulking lout,
As cold and dull and lifeless as the slag.

And, all on edge, o'erwrought by the crampt day
Of crouched, close stitching at her dull machine,
It seemed to her a girl of seventeen

Should have, at least, an hour of careless talking–
Should have, at least, an hour of life, out walking
Beside a lover, mettlesome and gay–
Not through her too short freedom doomed to lag
Beside a sparkless giant, glum and grim,
Till all her eager youth should waste away.
Yet, even as she looked askance at him–
Well-knit, big-thewed, broad-chested, steady-eyed–
She dimly knew of depths she could not sound
In this strong lover, silent at her side:
And, once again, her heart was touched with pride
To think that he was hers, this strapping lad–
Black-haired, close-cropt, clean-skinned, and neatly clad...
His crimson neckerchief, so smartly tied–
And hers alone, and more than all she had
In all the world to her ... and yet, so grave!
If he would only shew that he was glad
To be with her–a gleam, a spark of fire,
A spurt of flame to shoot into the night,
A moment through the murky heavens to wave
An eager beacon of enkindling light
In answer to her young heart's quick desire!

Yet, though he walked with dreaming eyes agaze,
As, deep within a mound of slag, a core
Of unseen fire may smoulder many days,
Till suddenly the whole heap glow ablaze,
That seemed, but now, dead cinder, grey and cold,
Life smouldered in his heart. The fire he fed
Day-long in the tall furnace just ahead
From that frail gallery slung against the sky
Had burned through all his being, till the ore
Glowed in him. Though no surface-stream of gold
Quick-molten slag of speech was his to spill
Unceasingly, the burning metal still
Seethed in him, from the broken furnace-side
To burst at any moment in a tide
Of white-hot molten iron o'er the mould...

But still he spoke no word as they strolled on

Into the early-gathering Winter night:
And, as she watched the leaping furnace-light,
She had no thought of smouldering fires unseen...
The daylong clattering whirr of her machine
Hummed in her ears again–the straining thread
And stabbing needle starting through her head–
Until the last dull gleam of day was gone...

When, all at once, upon the right,
A crackling crash, a blinding flare...
A shower of cinders through the air...
A grind of blocks of slag aslide...
And, far above them, in the night,
The looming heap had opened wide
About a fiery, gaping pit...
And, startled and aghast at it,
With clasping hands they stood astare,
And gazed upon the awful glare:
And, as she felt him clutch her hand,
She seemed to know her heart's desire,
For evermore with him to stand
In that enkindling blaze of fire...
When, suddenly, he left her side;
And started scrambling up the heap:
And, looking up, with stifled cry,
She saw, against the glowing sky,
Almost upon the pit's red brink,
A little lad, stock-still with fright
Before the blazing pit of dread
Agape before him in the night,
Where, playing castles on the height
Since noon, he'd fallen, spent, asleep
And dreaming he was home in bed...

With brain afire, too strained to think,
She watched her lover climb and leap
From jag to jag
Of broken slag...
And still he only seemed to creep...
She felt that he would never reach

That little lad, though he should climb
Until the very end of time...
And, as she looked, the burning breach
Gaped suddenly more wide...
The slag again began to slide,
And crash into the pit,
Until the dazed lad's feet
Stood on the edge of it.
She saw him reel and fall...
And thought him done for ... then
Her lover, brave and tall,
Against the glare and heat,
A very fire-bright god of men!
He stooped ... and now she knew the lad
Was safe with Robert, after all.

And while she watched, a throng of folk
Attracted by the crash and flare,
Had gathered round, though no one spoke
But all stood terror-stricken there,
With lifted eyes and indrawn breath,
Until the lad was snatched from death
Upon the very pit's edge, when,
As Robert picked him up, and turned,
A sigh ran through the crowd; and fear
Gave place to joy, as cheer on cheer
Sang through the kindled air...

But still she never uttered word,
As though she neither saw nor heard;
Till as, at last, her lad drew near,
She saw him bend with tender care
Over the sobbing child who lay
Safe in his arms, and hug him tight
Against his breast–his brow alight
With eager, loving eyes that burned
In his transfigured face aflame...
And even when the parents came
It almost seemed that he was loth
To yield them up their little son;

As though the lad were his by right
Of rescue, from the pit's edge won.

Then, as his eyes met hers, she felt
An answering thrill of tenderness
Run, quickening, through her breast; and both
Stood quivering there, with envious eyes,
And stricken with a strange distress,
As quickly homeward through the night
The happy parents bore their boy...

And then, about her reeling bright,
The whole night seemed to her to melt
In one fierce, fiery flood of joy.

DEVIL'S EDGE

All night I lay on Devil's Edge,
Along an overhanging ledge
Between the sky and sea:
And as I rested 'waiting sleep,
The windless sky and soundless deep
In one dim, blue infinity
Of starry peace encompassed me.

And I remembered, drowsily,
How 'mid the hills last night I 'd lain
Beside a singing moorland burn;
And waked at dawn, to feel the rain
Fall on my face, as on the fern
That drooped about my heather-bed:
And how by noon the wind had blown
The last grey shred from out the sky,
And blew my homespun jacket dry,
As I stood on the topmost stone
That crowns the cairn on Hawkshaw Head,

And caught a gleam of far-off sea;
And heard the wind sing in the bent
Like those far waters calling me:
When, my heart answering to the call,
I followed down the seaward stream,
By silent pool and singing fall;
Till with a quiet, keen content,
I watched the sun, a crimson ball,
Shoot through grey seas a fiery gleam,
Then sink in opal deeps from sight.

And with the coming on of night,
The wind had dropped: and as I lay,
Retracing all the happy day,
And gazing long and dreamily
Across the dim, unsounding sea,
Over the far horizon came
A sudden sail of amber flame;
And soon the new moon rode on high
Through cloudless deeps of crystal sky.

Too holy seemed the night for sleep:
And yet, I must have slept, it seems;
For, suddenly, I woke to hear
A strange voice singing, shrill and clear,
Down in a gully black and deep
That cleft the beetling crag in twain.
It seemed the very voice of dreams
That drive hag-ridden souls in fear
Through echoing, unearthly vales,
To plunge in black, slow-crawling streams,
Seeking to drown that cry, in vain...
Or some sea creature's voice that wails
Through blind, white banks of fog unlifting
To God-forgotten sailors drifting
Rudderless to death...
And as I heard,
Though no wind stirred,
An icy breath
Was in my hair...

And clutched my heart with cold despair...
But, as the wild song died away,
There came a faltering break
That shivered to a sobbing fall;
And seemed half-human, after all...

And yet, what foot could find a track
In that deep gully, sheer and black...
And singing wildly in the night!
So, wondering I lay awake,
Until the coming of the light
Brought day's familiar presence back.

Down by the harbour-mouth that day,
A fisher told the tale to me.
Three months before, while out at sea,
Young Philip Burn was lost, though how,
None knew, and none would ever know.
The boat becalmed at noonday lay...
And not a ripple on the sea...
And Philip standing in the bow,
When his six comrades went below
To sleep away an hour or so,
Dog-tired with working day and night,
While he kept watch ... and not a sound
They heard, until, at set of sun
They woke; and coming up, they found
The deck was empty, Philip gone...
Yet not another boat in sight...
And not a ripple on the sea.
How he had vanished, none could tell.
They only knew the lad was dead
They'd left but now, alive and well...
And he, poor fellow, newly-wed...
And when they broke the news to her,
She spoke no word to anyone:
But sat all day, and would not stir–
Just staring, staring in the fire,
With eyes that never seemed to tire;
Until, at last, the day was done,

And darkness came; when she would rise,
And seek the door with queer, wild eyes;
And wander singing all the night
Unearthly songs beside the sea:
But always the first blink of light
Would find her back at her own door.

'Twas Winter when I came once more
To that old village by the shore:
And as, at night, I climbed the street,
I heard a singing, low and sweet,
Within a cottage near at hand:
And I was glad awhile to stand
And listen by the glowing pane:
And as I hearkened, that sweet strain
Brought back the night when I had lain
Awake on Devil's Edge...
And now I knew the voice again,
So different, free of pain and fear–
Its terror turned to tenderness–
And yet the same voice none the less,
Though singing now so true and clear
And drawing nigh the window-ledge,
I watched the mother sing to rest
The baby snuggling to her breast.

THE LILAC TREE

"I planted her the lilac tree
Upon our wedding day:
But, when the time of blossom came,
With her dead babe she lay...
And, as I stood beside the bed,
The scent of lilac filled the room:
And always when I smell the bloom,
I think upon the dead."

He spoke: and, speaking, sauntered on,
The young girl by his side:
And then they talked no more of death,
But only of the happy things
That burst their buds, and spread their wings,
And break in song at Whitsuntide,
That burst to bloom at Whitsuntide,
And bring the summer in a breath.

And, as they talked, the young girl's life
Broke into bloom and song;
And, one with all the happy things
That burst their buds, and spread their wings,
Her very blood was singing,
And at her pulses ringing;
Life tingled through her, sweet and strong,
From secret sources springing:
And, all at once, a quickening strife
Of hopes and fears was in her heart,
Where only wondering joy had been;
And, kindling with a sudden light,
Her eyes had sight
Of things unseen:
And, in a flash, a woman grown,
With pangs of knowledge, fierce and keen,
She knew strange things unknown.

A year went by: at Whitsuntide,
He brought her home, a bride.

He planted her no lilac tree
Upon their wedding day:
And strange distress came over her,
As on the bed she lay:
For as he stood beside the bed,
The scent of lilac filled the room.
Her heart knew well he smelt the bloom,
And thought upon the dead.
Yet, she was glad to be his wife:
And when the blossom-time was past,

Her days no more were overcast;
And deep she drank of life:
And, thronged with happy household cares,
Her busy days went pleasantly:
Her foot was light upon the stairs;
And every room rang merrily,
And merrily, and merrily,
With song and mirth, for unto her
His heart seemed hers, and hers alone:
Until new dreams began to stir
Her wondering breast with bliss unknown
Of some new miracle to be:
And, though she moved more quietly,
And seldom sang, yet, happily,
From happy dawn to happy night
The mother's eyes shone bright.

But, as her time drew near,
Her heart was filled with fear:
And when the lilac burst to bloom,
And brought the Summer in a breath,
A presence seemed to fill the room,
And fill her heart with death:
And, as her husband lay asleep,
Beside her, on the bed,
Into her breast the thought would creep
That he was dreaming of the dead.
And all the mother's heart in her
Was mad with mother-jealousy
Of that sweet scented lilac tree;
And, blind with savage ecstasy,
Night after night she lay,
Until the blink of day,
With staring eyes and wild,
Half-crazy, lest the lilac tree
Should come betwixt him and his child.
By day, her mother-tenderness
Was turned to brooding bitterness,
Whene'er she looked upon the bloom:
And, if she slept at all at night,

Her heart would waken in affright
To smell the lilac in the gloom:
And, when it rained, it seemed to her,
The fresh keen scent was bitterer:
Though, when the blaze of morning came,
And flooded all the room,
The perfume burnt her heart like flame.
As, in the dark,
One night she lay,
A dark thought shot
Through her hot heart:
And, from a spark
Of smouldering wrong,
Hate burst to fire.
Now, quaking cold,
Now, quivering hot,
With breath indrawn,
Through time untold,
She 'waited dawn
That lagged too long
For her desire.

And when, at last, at break of day,
Her husband rose, and went his way
About his daily toil,
She, too, arose, and dressed,
With frenzy in her breast;
And stole downstairs, and took a spade,
And digged about the lilac roots,
And laid them bare of soil:
Then, with a jagged blade,
She hacked and slashed the naked roots–
She hacked and slashed with frantic hand,
Until the lilac scarce might stand;
And then again the soil she laid
About the bleeding roots–
(It seemed to her, the sap ran red
About the writhing roots!)
But, now her heart was eased of strife,
Since she had sapped the lilac's life;

And, frenzy-spent, she dropped the knife:
Then, dizzily she crept to bed,
And lay all day as one nigh dead.

That night a sudden storm awoke,
And struck the slumbering earth to life:
And, as the heavens in thunder broke,
She lay exulting in the strife
Of flash and peal,
And gust and rain;
For now, she thought: the lightning-stroke
Will lay the lilac low;
And he need never know
How I ... and then, again,
Her heart went cold with dread,
As she remembered that the knife
Still lay beneath the lilac tree...
A blinding flash,
A lull, a crash,
A rattling peal...
And suddenly,
She felt her senses reel:
And, crying out: "The knife! The knife!"
Her pangs were on her...
Dawn was red,
When she awoke upon the bed
To life–and knew her babe was dead.
She rose: and cried out fearfully:
"The lilac tree! The lilac tree!"
Then fell back in a swoon.

But, when she waked again at noon,
And looked upon her sleeping child;
And laid her hand upon its head,
No more the mother's heart was wild,
For hate and fear were dead;
And all her brooding bitterness
Broke into tears of tenderness.

And, not a word the father said

About the lilac, lying dead.

A week went by, and Whitsuntide
Came round: and, as she lay,
And looked upon the newborn day,
Her husband, lying by her side,
Spoke to her very tenderly:
"Wife, 'tis again our wedding day,
And we will plant a lilac tree
In memory of the babe that died."

They planted a white lilac tree
Upon their wedding day:
And, when the time of blossom came,
With kindly hearts they lay.
The sunlight streamed upon the bed:
The scent of lilac filled the room:
And, as they smelt the breathing bloom,
They thought upon the dead.

THE OLD MAN

The boat put in at dead of night;
And, when I reached the house, 'twas sleeping dark.
I knew my gentlest tap would be a spark
To set my home alight:
My mother ever listening in her sleep
For my returning step, would leap
Awake with welcome; and my father's eyes
Would twinkle merrily to greet me;
And my young sister would run down to meet me
With sleepy sweet surprise.

And yet, awhile, I lingered
Upon the threshold, listening;
And watched the cold stars glistening,

And seemed to hear the deep
Calm breathing of the house asleep–
In easy sleep, so deep, I almost feared to break it;
And, even as I fingered
The knocker, loth to wake it,
Like some uncanny inkling
Of news from otherwhere,
I felt a cold breath in my hair,
As though, with chin upon my shoulder,
One waited hard, upon my heel,
With pricking eyes of steel,
Though well I knew that not a soul was there.

Until, at last, grown bolder,
I rapped; and in a twinkling,
The house was all afire
With welcome in the night:
First, in my mother's room, a light;
And then, her foot upon the stair;
A bolt shot back; a candle's flare:
A happy cry; and to her breast
She hugged her heart's desire:
And hushed her fears to rest.

Then, shivering in the keen night air,
My sleepy sister, laughing came;
And drew us in: and stirred to flame
The smouldering kitchen-fire; and set
The kettle on the kindling red:
And, as I watched the homely blaze,
And thought of wandering days
With sharp regret;
I missed my father: then I heard
How he was still a-bed;
And had been ailing, for a day or so;
But, now was waking, if I'd go...
My foot already on the stair,
In answer to my mother's word
I turned; and saw in dull amaze,
Behind her, as she stood all unaware,

An old man sitting in my father's chair.
A strange old man ... yet, as I looked at him,
Before my eyes, a dim
Remembrance seemed to swim
Of some old man, who'd lurked about the boat,
While we were still at sea;
And who had crouched beside me, at the oar,
As we had rowed ashore;
Though, at the time, I'd taken little note,
I felt I'd seen that strange old man before:
But, how he'd come to follow me,
Unknown...
And to be sitting there...
Then I recalled the cold breath in my hair,
When I had stood, alone,
Before the bolted door.

And now my mother, wondering sore
To see me stare and stare,
So strangely, at an empty chair,
Turned, too; and saw the old man there.

And as she turned, he slowly raised
His drooping head;
And looked upon her with her husband's eyes.
She stood, a moment, dazed;
And watched him slowly rise,
As though to come to her:
Then, with a cry, she sped
Upstairs, ere I could stir.

Still dazed, I let her go, alone:
I heard her footstep overhead:
I heard her drop beside the bed,
With low forsaken moan.

Yet, I could only stare and stare

Upon my father's empty chair.

THE HARE

My hands were hot upon a hare,
Half-strangled, struggling in a snare–
My knuckles at her warm wind-pipe–
When suddenly, her eyes shot back,
Big, fearful, staggering and black:
And, ere I knew, my grip was slack;
And I was clutching empty air,
Half-mad, half-glad at my lost luck...
When I awoke beside the stack.

'Twas just the minute when the snipe,
As though clock-wakened, every jack,
An hour ere dawn, dart in and out
The mist-wreaths filling syke and slack,
And flutter wheeling round about,
And drumming out the Summer night.
I lay star-gazing yet a bit;
Then, chilly-skinned, I sat upright,
To shrug the shivers from my back;
And, drawing out a straw to suck,
My teeth nipped through it at a bite...
The liveliest lad is out of pluck
An hour ere dawn–a tame cock-sparrow–
When cold stars shiver through his marrow,
And wet mist soaks his mother-wit.
But, as the snipe dropped, one by one;
And one by one the stars blinked out;
I knew 'twould only need the sun
To send the shudders right about:
And, as the clear East faded white,
I watched and wearied for the sun–
The jolly, welcome, friendly sun–

The sleepy sluggard of a sun
That still kept snoozing out of sight,
Though well he knew the night was done
And, after all, he caught me dozing,
And leapt up, laughing, in the sky
Just as my lazy eyes were closing:
And it was good as gold to lie
Full-length among the straw, and feel
The day wax warmer every minute,
As, glowing glad, from head to heel,
I soaked and rolled rejoicing in it...
When from the corner of my eye,
Upon a heathery knowe hard-by,
With long lugs cocked, and eyes astare,
Yet all serene, I saw a hare.

Upon my belly in the straw,
I lay, and watched her sleek her fur,
As, daintily, with well-licked paw,
She washed her face and neck and ears:
Then, clean and comely in the sun,
She kicked her heels up, full of fun,
As if she did not care a pin
Though she should jump out of her skin,
And leapt and lolloped, free of fears,
Until my heart frisked round with her.
"And yet, if I but lift my head,
You'll scamper off, young Puss," I said.
"Still, I can't lie, and watch you play,
Upon my belly half-the-day.
The Lord alone knows where I'm going:
But, I had best be getting there.
Last night I loosed you from the snare–
Asleep, or waking, who's for knowing!–
So, I shall thank you now for showing
Which art to take to bring me where
My luck awaits me. When you're ready
To start, I'll follow on your track.
Though slow of foot, I'm sure and steady..."
She pricked her ears, then set them back;

And like a shot was out of sight:
And, with a happy heart and light,
As quickly I was on my feet;
And following the way she went,
Keen as a lurcher on the scent,
Across the heather and the bent,
Across the quaking moss and peat.
Of course, I lost her soon enough,
For moorland tracks are steep and rough;
And hares are made of nimbler stuff
Than any lad of seventeen,
However lanky-legged and tough,
However, kestrel-eyed and keen:
And I'd at last to stop and eat
The little bit of bread and meat
Left in my pocket overnight.
So, in a hollow, snug and green,
I sat beside a burn, and dipped
The dry bread in an icy pool;
And munched a breakfast fresh and cool...
And then sat gaping like a fool...
For, right before my very eyes,
With lugs acock, and eyes astare,
I saw again the selfsame hare.

So, up I jumped, and off she slipped:
And I kept sight of her until
I stumbled in a hole, and tripped;
And came a heavy, headlong spill:
And she, ere I'd the wit to rise,
Was o'er the hill, and out of sight:
And, sore and shaken with the tumbling,
And sicker at my foot for stumbling,
I cursed my luck, and went on, grumbling,
The way her flying heels had fled.

The sky was cloudless overhead;
And just alive with larks asinging:
And, in a twinkling, I was swinging
Across the windy hills, lighthearted.

A kestrel at my footstep started,
Just pouncing on a frightened mouse,
And hung o'erhead with wings a-hover:
Through rustling heath an adder darted:
A hundred rabbits bobbed to cover:
A weasel, sleek and rusty-red,
Popped out of sight as quick as winking:
I saw a grizzled vixen slinking
Behind a clucking brood of grouse
That rose and cackled at my coming:
And all about my way were flying
The peewit, with their slow wings creaking
And little jack-snipe darted, drumming:
And now and then a golden plover
Or redshank piped with reedy whistle.
But never shaken bent or thistle
Betrayed the quarry I was seeking
And not an instant, anywhere
Did I clap eyes upon a hare.

So, travelling still, the twilight caught me:
And as I stumbled on, I muttered:
"A deal of luck the hare has brought me!
The wind and I must spend together
A hungry night among the heather.
If I'd her here..." And as I uttered,
I tripped, and heard a frightened squeal;
And dropped my hands in time to feel
The hare just bolting 'twixt my feet.
She slipped my clutch: and I stood there
And cursed that devil-littered hare,
That left me stranded in the dark
In that wide waste of quaggy peat
Beneath black night without a spark:
When, looking up, I saw a flare
Upon a far-off hill, and said:
"By God, the heather is afire!
It's mischief at this time of year..."
And then, as one bright flame shot higher,
And booths and vans stood out quite clear;

My wits came back into my head:
And I remembered Brough Hill Fair.
And, as I stumbled towards the glare,
I knew the sudden kindling meant
The Fair was over for the day;
And all the cattle-folk away
And gipsy-folk and tinkers now
Were lighting supper-fires without
Each caravan and booth and tent.
And, as I climbed the stiff hill-brow,
I quite forgot my lucky hare.
I'd something else to think about:
For well I knew there's broken meat
For empty bellies after fair-time;
And looked to have a royal rare time
With something rich and prime to eat:
And then to lie and toast my feet
All night beside the biggest fire.

But, even as I neared the first,
A pleasant whiff of stewing burst
From out a smoking pot a-bubble:
And, as I stopped behind the folk
Who sprawled around, and watched it seething
A woman heard my eager breathing,
And, turning, caught my hungry eye:
And called out to me: "Draw in nigher,
Unless you find it too much trouble;
Or you've a nose for better fare,
And go to supper with the Squire...
You've got the hungry parson's air!"
And all looked up, and took the joke,
As I dropped gladly to the ground
Among them, where they all lay gazing
Upon the bubbling and the blazing.
My eyes were dazzled by the fire
At first; and then I glanced around;
And, in those swarthy, fire-lit faces–
Though drowsing in the glare and heat
And snuffing the warm savour in,

Dead-certain of their fill of meat–
I felt the bit between the teeth,
The flying heels, the broken traces,
And heard the highroad ring beneath
The trampling hoofs: and knew them kin.
Then for the first time, standing there
Behind the woman who had hailed me,
I saw a girl with eyes astare
That looked in terror o'er my head:
And, all at once, my courage failed me...
For now again, and sore-adread,
My hands were hot upon a hare,
That struggled, strangling in the snare...
Then once more as the girl stood clear,
Before me–quaking cold with fear
I saw the hare look from her eyes...

And when, at last, I turned to see
What held her scared, I saw a man–
A fat man with dull eyes aleer–
Within the shadow of the van:
And I was on the point to rise
To send him spinning 'mid the wheels,
And twist his neck between his heels,
And stop his leering grin with mud...
And would have done it in a tick...
When, suddenly, alive with fright,
She started, with red, parted lips,
As though she guessed we'd come to grips,
And turned her black eyes full on me...
And, as I looked into their light,
My heart forgot the lust of fight,
And something shot me to the quick,
And ran like wildfire through my blood,
And tingled to my finger-tips...
And, in a dazzling flash, I knew
I'd never been alive before...
And she was mine for evermore.

While all the others slept asnore

In caravan and tent that night,
I lay alone beside the fire;
And stared into its blazing core,
With eyes that would not shut or tire,
Because the best of all was true,
And they looked still into the light
Of her eyes, burning ever bright.
Within the brightest coal for me...
Once more, I saw her, as she started,
And glanced at me with red lips parted:
And, as she looked, the frightened hare
Had fled her eyes; and, merrily,
She smiled, with fine teeth flashing white,
As though she, too, were happy-hearted...
Then she had trembled suddenly,
And dropped her eyes, as that fat man
Stepped from the shadow of the van,
And joined the circle, as the pot
Was lifted off, and, piping-hot,
The supper steamed in wooden bowls.
Yet, she had hardly touched a bite:
And never raised her eyes all night
To mine again: but on the coals,
As I sat staring, she had stared–
The black curls, shining round her head
From under the red kerchief, tied
So nattily beneath her chin–
And she had stolen off to bed
Quite early, looking dazed and scared.
Then, all agape and sleepy-eyed,
Ere long the others had turned in:
And I was rid of that fat man,
Who slouched away to his own van.

And now, before her van, I lay,
With sleepless eyes, awaiting day:
And, as I gazed upon the glare,
I heard, behind, a gentle stir:
And, turning round, I looked on her
Where she stood on the little stair

Outside the van, with listening air–
And, in her eyes, the hunted hare...
And then, I saw her slip away,
A bundle underneath her arm,
Without a single glance at me.
I lay a moment wondering,
My heart a-thump like anything,
Then, fearing she should come to harm,
I rose, and followed speedily
Where she had vanished in the night.
And, as she heard my step behind,
She started, and stopt dead with fright:
Then blundered on as if struck blind:
And now as I caught up with her,
Just as she took the moorland track,
I saw the hare's eyes, big and black...
She made as though she'd double back...
But, when she looked into my eyes,
She stood quite still and did not stir...
And, picking up her fallen pack,
I tucked it 'neath my arm; and she
Just took her luck quite quietly.
As she must take what chance might come,
And would not have it otherwise,
And walked into the night with me,
Without a word across the fells.

And, all about us, through the night,
The mists were stealing, cold and white,
Down every rushy syke or slack:
But, soon the moon swung into sight:
And, as we went, my heart was light,
And singing like a burn in flood:
And in my ears were tinkling bells:
My body was a rattled drum:
And fifes were shrilling through my blood
That summer night, to think that she
Was walking through the world with me.

But when the air with dawn was chill,

As we were travelling down a hill,
She broke her silence with low-sobbing:
And told her tale, her bosom throbbing
As though her very heart were shaken
With fear she'd yet be overtaken...
She'd always lived in caravans–
Her father's, gay as any man's,
Grass-green, picked out with red and yellow
And glittering brave with burnished brass
That sparkled in the sun like flame,
And window curtains, white as snow...
But, they had died, ten years ago,
Her parents both, when fever came...
And they were buried, side by side,
Somewhere beneath the wayside grass...
In times of sickness, they kept wide
Of towns and busybodies, so
No parson's or policeman's tricks
Should bother them when in a fix...
Her father never could abide
A black coat or a blue, poor man...
And so, Long Dick, a kindly fellow,
When you could keep him from the can,
And Meg, his easy-going wife,
Had taken her into their van;
And kept her since her parents died...
And she had lived a happy life,
Until Fat Pete's young wife was taken...
But, ever since, he'd pestered her...
And she dared scarcely breathe or stir,
Lest she should see his eyes aleer...
And many a night she'd lain and shaken,
And very nearly died of fear–
Though safe enough within the van
With Mother Meg and her good-man–
For, since Fat Pete was Long Dick's friend,
And they were thick and sweet as honey;
And Dick owed Pete a pot of money,
She knew too well how it must end...
And she would rather lie stone dead

Beneath the wayside grass than wed
With leering Pete, and live the life,
And die the death, of his first wife...
And so, last night, clean-daft with dread,
She'd bundled up a pack and fled...

When all the sobbing tale was out,
She dried her eyes, and looked about,
As though she'd left all fear behind,
And out of sight were out of mind.
Then, when the dawn was burning red,
"I'm hungry as a hawk!" she said:
And from the bundle took out bread.
And, at the happy end of night,
We sat together by a burn:
And ate a thick slice, turn by turn;
And laughed and kissed between each bite.

Then, up again, and on our way
We went; and tramped the livelong day
The moorland trackways, steep and rough,
Though there was little fear enough
That they would follow on our flight.

And then again a shiny night
Among the honey-scented heather,
We wandered in the moonblaze bright,
Together through a land of light,
A lad and lass alone with life.
And merrily we laughed together,
When, starting up from sleep, we heard
The cock-grouse talking to his wife...
And "Old Fat Pete" she called the bird.

Six months and more have cantered by:
And, Winter past, we're out again–
We've left the fat and weatherwise
To keep their coops and reeking sties,
And eat their fill of oven-pies,
While we win free and out again

To take potluck beneath the sky
With sun and moon and wind and rain.
Six happy months ... and yet, at night,
I've often wakened in affright,
And looked upon her lying there,
Beside me sleeping quietly,
Adread that when she waked, I'd see
The hunted hare within her eyes.

And, only last night, as I slept
Beneath the shelter of a stack...
My hands were hot upon a hare,
Half-strangled, struggling in the snare,
When, suddenly, her eyes shot back,
Big, fearful, staggering and black;
And ere I knew, my grip was slack,
And I was clutching empty air...
Bolt-upright from my sleep I leapt...
Her place was empty in the straw...
And then, with quaking heart, I saw
That she was standing in the night,
A leveret cuddled to her breast...

I spoke no word: but, as the light
Through banks of Eastern cloud was breaking,
She turned, and saw that I was waking:
And told me how she could not rest;
And, rising in the night, she'd found
This baby-hare crouched on the ground;
And she had nursed it quite a while:
But, now, she'd better let it go...
Its mother would be fretting so...
A mother's heart...
I saw her smile,
And look at me with tender eyes:
And as I looked into their light,
My foolish, fearful heart grew wise...
And now, I knew that never there
I'd see again the startled hare,
Or need to dread the dreams of night.

1910-1911.

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