

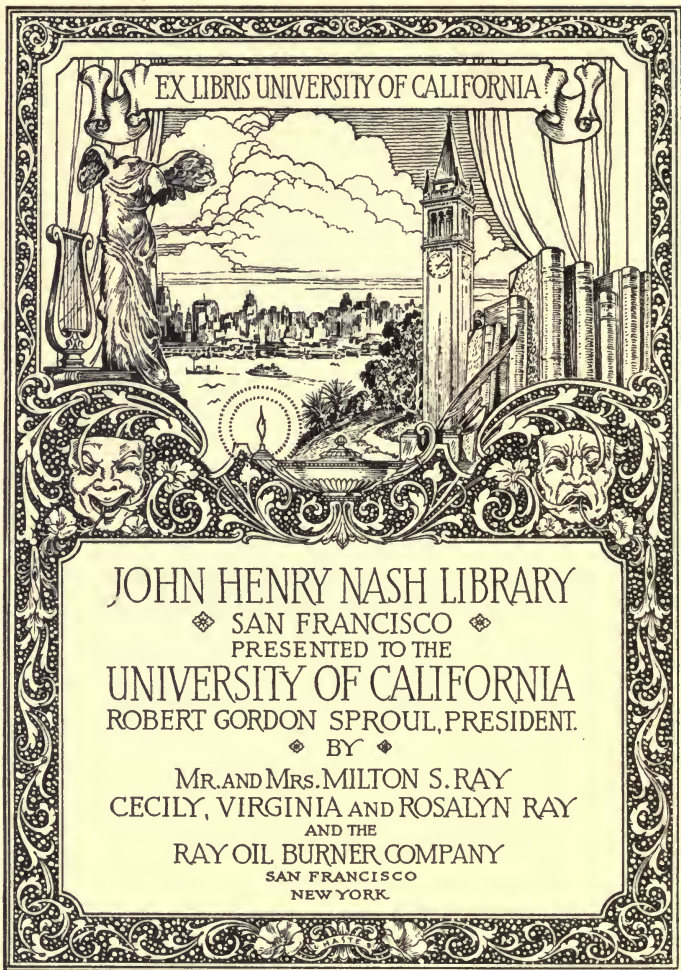
TWO POEMS

BY

JOHN FREEMAN

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TWO POEMS
BY
JOHN FREEMAN

THE RED PATH

A Narrative

AND

THE WOUNDED BIRD

BY

JOHN FREEMAN



CAMBRIDGE
DUNSTER HOUSE

1921

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JOHN FREEMAN

The Red Path

THE RED PATH

I

LYING there, in a quiet October air,
He waited, tired of so long lying there
For yet unhurrying death; and as he waited
The neighbour waited too, and they both hated
The thought of that slow Shadow moving on belated—
Which of them the more impatient I know not,
But she, being woman, less concealed her thought.

She asked him once, and dared not ask again,
“Shall I send for your wife?” but the old man when
“Your wife!” he heard, shook his weak head and frowned
And cast pale angry orbs the room around,
Lest his wife should be there.

She never came.

He died keeping almost to the end the same
Smouldering fury, with quick sparks of rage
Which the neighbour bore with as the whim of age.
“’Twas strange,” she said, “how he turned from his wife
and sons!

Never a word of the boys—fine boys—though once
They lived together. How he hated his wife—
A poor thing she—terrified out of her life
If he swore at her. Now lying here he seems

The Red Path

Small and gentle as a child that sleeps and dreams"—
Sole elegist, this was her elegy.

And he out of his cloud looked mad to see
His widow stand unmourning at the grave,
Still timid as if she feared the very grave
That held his angry bones. Yes, as she moved
Away, remembering her sons beloved,
In his dark cloud the self-vexed ghost grew mad
To see what sweetness even illusion had.

II

“Go, and go now!” in his anger he had cried,
The harsh hands twitching cruelly at his side.
Her fingers clasped, her rainy eyes, her breast
Lifting with sobs in quick and desperate unrest
Were scorned—all tears and words alike unheeded
Except he hated more as she pleaded
The old pleas. Always had he hated her
Since motherhood rubbed away the little fair
For which he’d chosen her; the children’s growth
Cost all her peace, as their birth stole her youth.
He hated them all three; her most because
She was the gentle thing she ever was,
But less the transient pleasing:—his sons then
He hated since they shadowed happier men.
They vexed him with remembrance of those days
Far off, and half unreal to his gaze,
When he was happy, and most when he had returned
With nervous step, quick eye, skin deeply burned,

The Red Path

From Africa, after voyaging long
The wreckful, typhoon-haunted tropic seas among;
Days that glowed as with phosphorescent lights
Beneath the spawning stars of southern nights;
Days when he had come to this sea-neighbouring town,
Lingered, and stayed—and thirty years had gone.

There he had met her, in her springtime's flush
That makes youth lovely till the shadows brush
Too soon the brightness. Was it love had kept
Brief sentry in his empty heart, then slept
And sleeping died, and dying yielded him
To the mastery of his own unmerciful whim?
If it was love, love slept and sleeping died
Of a nightmare that pressed snakelike at love's side....

She for a while feared not and was content,
Being of his delight the instrument.
But he, turning his money to a little more
And yet a little, grew more nervous than before,
With angers flashing at a word or touch
Amiss, or look of humbleness too much.
Once he had seen her, thinking herself unseen,
Almsgiving to a beggar cunning and mean,
And snatched her gift, and drawn her fainting home.
"You give to a beggar—my money you give, give—Come!
A beggar to a beggar—my money—Come!"
Her arm shewed long the red sting of his hand,
But dread and shame stung deeper than his hand;
And she, left to her household tasks, felt all
That tyranny rising round her like a wall,

The Red Path

Or a great chimney with one small disk of blue
Above, to slide its beamy brightness through
Her spirit.

It was her boys that brightness poured
Into the starven breast, and each neglected chord
Plucked to a plaintive lovely air of love
Trembling so thin her ill-feigned calm above
Her husband scarce could hear, or if he heard,
Darkening, the music muted at a word.

When the first child was born so happy was she
That she forgot her old anxiety,
Loosening the long suppression of the flood
Of mother-love that, swifter than her blood,
In veins and nerves, through fingers, eyes, lips, feet
Leapt, and left in her the sole painful heat
Of utmost giving. But her husband loured
And stung her again, seeing that love outpoured,
By him despised—outpoured on his own son.
Might he not love his son—her flesh, his own,
Born of her body, bone of his very bone?
He might not, for a madness in him ran—
From what gnat-haunted, hid miasmatic fen
Secretly flown, who knows?—He could but hate,
As she could not but love. Once as she sat
Nursing her sick child, singing a wordless song,
Tenderness quickening the hours so long,
Suddenly he spoke angered from the door
Where unheard he stood hearing: —“I tell you, no more,
No more. Put the child down, let it alone,

The Red Path

Let it die!"—Startled, she stooped down,
Clasped the child and sobbed; while he looked aching on.
"My curse on you both!" he muttered. She heard no more,
If more he said.

Yet another child she bore,
Begotten of his hate and her dumb fear.
Gladness renewed brief spring awhile in her,
Feeling that young life drawn by blinded longings near.
For now two sons her despised body had brought
Into the sensual world out of her womb of thought—
So blessed she—and so more hapless when
Sadness renewed long winter's ache again.

So John and Robert grew in that ill home,
Nourished in love and terror, light and gloom,
While she, with love suppressed, fears unsuppressed,
Grew wan and wretched, then more wretched lest
Her looks vex him anew, as vex they would,
As she sat at meals, patient, silent, subdued.
Sometimes for weeks he'd leave her—she knew why—
Returning with new angers in his eye.
Sometimes at night he'd lock her in her room,
Return next noon and mocking call, "Come, Come!"
And bid John to unlock his mother's door.
Long past humiliation, this she bore
Complaintless. When her mother dying lay
She dared not visit her save by stealth, or stay
Longer than lies might serve... So his long hate,
Perverted from brief love, made her life desolate.

—And his too desolate. In high barren lands

The Red Path

Wolves howl all night over the frozen sands,
And in that desolation their long cry
Torments an unsleeping brain to agony—
Hearing to wild throats wilder throats reply:
Only that sound beneath the starry sky.
So in his brain the savage thoughts crept out,
And crying in his darkness, and about
The naked desert of his spirit, made
Madness of its own energy afraid.
Time wantoned with him, pinched his veiny cheek,
Sharpened his nose, and made his shrill voice weak
For all that simmering fury, and more lean
His hands, and the thin body yet more thin
For all that burning fury.

And within

The lean and sinewy flesh time made more stark
The human spirit. The eternal lamp grew dark,
Passion wove denser clouds of stifling fume;
Came no pure wind or fire's lip to relume
The fading light. Dark grew the light in him,
Only his reinless sense became not dim,
Till he seemed but sense and anger, nothing more,
Except at whiles a mortal worm would bore
(That worm he knew!) deeper into his mind;
Then sadness followed, moaning like a wind.
Sadness and loneliness renewed the sound
Of the wild wolvis howling all around.
To evil loneliness new evil brings,
And sadness to the neck of evil clings.

The Red Path

III

Kindlier was time's wantoning with his boys.
Escaped the house, they gathered summer joys.
The gloom of home had no power to pursue
Their parting steps—like any boys they grew,
Like any boys careless of love and pride
Breathed over them by mother thoughts, and cried
In whispered timid words of welcome and farewell.
... But the old man hated them: no need to tell
He hated them. They knew it in his eye,
Words, silence and perpetual tyranny.
They did not know what poison in him stirred,
What savage, wild pursuing cries he heard;
They did not know, and John, being elder, swore
Many times he would bear no stabbing more.
"I'll stay no longer," he'd cry. His mother wept
Or dread with love fought in her bosom and crept
Into her eyes dim with forbidden tears;
At last, grown bold with his long nineteen years,
Without farewell hastening at dawn away
He disappeared, and wrote from Canada
Once, and no more. His mother could but pray
For his return, yet dread lest he return,
And the embers of old hatred newly burn—
Embers of fire that leapt when the old man heard
That John had gone and, to a fury stirred,
He walked all night up and down and up and down
Chafing as a beast because his quarry is flown;

The Red Path

Or stared out gloomy at the rainy street
Where emptiness bemocked his senseless feet
Up and down all night pacing.—While she lay
Orphaned, unhusbanded, awaiting hopeless day.
Robert more patient stayed yet; but he too
Fretted in the prison of his father's view,
And after much enduring, much resenting,
Tired of abuse, threats and his mother's lamenting,
Persuaded her that he might leave the town
For London, there to live a life of his own
And make a home for her too if need be,
Or she take courage also to be free.

When the old man knew his second son had gone
He swore and foamed and laughed and swore anon,
Glad that the boy had fled, but sick to feel
The boy no longer quivering under his heel;
And in the old furious way his wife upbraided,
As false, undutiful, sullen and degraded—
All the old maggot's spitefulness. Then, "Go,
Go, and go now!" And he barked again, "Go now!"
And she, glad to be bidden, sick to obey,
Went trembling, adread to hear his shouted "Stay!"
But no recall echoed to her faint sense:
Sorrowful, unreluctant passed she thence,
And glancing timorously half-turned back
She saw him at the door, with aspect black
Stirless—because the maggot in his brain
Bored a thought deeper, paused, and bored again.

The Red Path

IV

So to the refuge of her son she hasted,
With fears all around her and no fear untasted;
Till she reached Robert, the burning fears subsided,
And slowly resting, from the past divided,
Quieter her quick pulses beat; she stirred
No more with nerve controlless if she heard
A sudden noise, no graying of her cheek
Told of a shadow, or thought she could not speak.

No word from the old man came: no word she sent;
All day over her needle she was bent,
While at a factory Robert worked: at night
The tired eyes rested, and her inward sight,
Clearing, brought back bitterness and regret
Or for an hour the past she could forget.
Yet always was she grieved that no news came
From John, far wandering, although his name
Every night she repeated in her prayer
Again and again to the unreplying air:
Unanswered went her letters.

So a year

Passed, and she grew perforce content to fear
And hope. And then another trouble fell,
For Robert lost his work. In those days still
Men starved because their strength was needed not
And starving they devoured their patient thought
Or bitter thought, and waited till perchance
Their skill was needed for the world's advance....

The Red Path

—O barren Peace, thy bony shade keep far,
Plenitude is the gift of full-girthed War.
Not now men famish, but each day work and thrive,
And children eat, whom Peace would not let live.—
Robert, a silent lad, grew silent more
Since so superfluous, and was heart-sore
That youth and strength and skill should be despised:
And so, thus inly sick, his mother surprised
By saying suddenly, he'd return home,
And see if better fortune there might come.
“Write to your father first,” she urged, “Write first,
Or maybe” . . . He broke in, “This is the worst!
To starve here is the worst, and starve you too.
Anything were better—yes, I'd rather do
Anything, than stay here to shiver and beg,
And slink about, a lean avoided rag.
No, I'll not write but go.” And so he started
On his long walk, intent and sober-hearted,
Through Hertford, Hitchen, Huntingdon, Peterbro',
Past the great fens, diverging to and fro
At any rumour of luck; turning again
Weary with February wind and rain
Northward; by casual tasks half-charity,
Half-slavery, sustained.—Till he could see
The smoking native town, black edging woods,
And in the east the suburb's slaty clouds.

In the low western ward the old home lay,
A small house of chill stone, leafless and gray,
With a narrow garden of dwarf'd fruitless trees

The Red Path

And one long red-tiled path. With ill-worn ease
He knocked. His father opened and out-peered,
Searching his son's face. "Is it you? O, I feared
One day you would come back, and now you've come.
Speak, boy. What do you want? Speak, are ye dumb?
Dumb and a beggar, hey? Come in, my dear,
Be pleased to be seated. Take my seat, sit here . . .
I'll stand, walk, kneel, because my son's returned:
Nobody knows how I've sat alone, and mourned,
And now he's returned—to beg. Sit still, sit still
And beg." The old man gabbled in his shrill
Indistinct fury, and Robert could not speak
Until his father paused; and then was sick
With sadness. But at last, "I'm sorry I'm here,"
He answered slowly, "but you need not fear.
I'd thought perhaps, father—"

"You thought, you thought!

Of course—the things your pious mother taught.
I know! You're to get round me with your cant—
Hardships, homesickness; but I know what you want.
John was the first, then you went and your mother;
Now you're back, then she'll come, and soon your brother,
And live like lords here, thinking I'll keep you all:
You'll sit, and I'm to run whenever you call
And give you what you please."

"That isn't true,

You know it's not. I'll take nothing from you
Now, though I never break bread again." So much
The neighbour heard through the open door. A touch

The Red Path

Or a wind shut it, and no more she heard
As her retreating steps the stiff grass stirred
And crossed the path. "Robert's come back next door,"
She cried. "Poor lad, he'll not come back any more—
Such a storm has the old man raised—he's mad, he's mad,
He must be mad!"—As if none were bad
And none else raged tormenting and tormented
But madmen.

V

"If things go wrong, then I'll not write," he'd said
Kissing his mother good-bye. She shook her head.
"O, but I'll write when things go well, but why
Speak if they don't?" She answered with a sigh.

She waited: all her life was lost in waiting,
And disappointed patience unabating.
But even that last stony refuge failed;
Face to face with midnight thoughts her spirit quailed,
And with sick mind she wrote to Robert, pleading
For a little news with gentle sad upbraiding:
"For," said she, "it's too too lonely now you're gone,
And I've but thoughts of you to feed upon—"
And sent the letter home, for there, maybe
Robert might shelter yet. And she could see
The silent boy in each familiar room
Darkened at mid-day with the sudden gloom
Of her feared husband. "If but for a little while,
Dear Lord, let Thy kind light on Robert smile,
Even through that gloom . . . for a little while, dear Lord,"
She prayed: and many a muted prayer outpoured.

The Red Path

From Robert came no answer, and a week
Passed . . . then a letter flushed her cheek,
In the old man's nervous hand. "You need not write,
He's at rest now, don't worry." And all night
She anguished, seeing in the void the very face
She sought—sad, unintelligent, adaze.
Morn brought no brightness. While her needle flew
Threading the air with light, her worn mind knew
No task but to stab itself with terror through,
Pluck the barb, and stab again. At length distraught
She sent to the neighbour, but dared not hint her thought.
—What joy in the answer Yes, Robert had gone there,
Quarrelled, and gone again, nobody knew where.
But a few days since, voices were guessed once more
Angry; they'd heard the old man shut the door,
And from the casement in late twilight seen
The poor lad turn again, disappearing in
The dark of the trees at the garden's edge.

She read,

Smiled, and dreamed all night upon a happier bed.

And happy she mistaken, since she slept
And a false image of the beloved boy kept,
Seeing him moving in the world of sense:
Evil was robbed awhile of its influence,
And touched her not. She knew not it was John
That broke the old man's silence, then was gone—
Not Robert, who would break no silence more . . .
Happier mistaken!

John had knocked at the door

The Red Path

Twice, then his father opened, looked and shivered,
Cowering and white: the smoking candle quivered
In his infirm hand. "Don't you see father—it's John,
I've come back!" The old man rested his eyes upon
The undreamed-of face. "I thought 'twas Robert again,"
And held the door with his foot, till he saw plain
It was not Robert. "What do you want?" he gasped,
His eyes and voice recovered, his knuckles clasped
Round the candlestick. "Can't I come in awhile?"
The old man moved a little, then stood still,
Murmuring, "Not Robert? Go away!" John stepped by,
Sat down, and stared at his father hopelessly.
"I've come three thousand miles. I've worked across . . .
Better to have stayed—little would be the loss
With this for welcome." The old man glowered unspeaking.
On a loose hinge the door moved slowly creaking,
All else listened. "Where are mother and Robert now?
I know they've left and are living God knows how:
Tell me where, and I'll go." "I'll tell you nothing, go!
You come with Robert's knock and speaking so—
Just as he speaks; but you're not Robert—go, go!"
His voice rose high, his blind hands thrust, he clutched
The door, steadied himself anon, then touched,
Shaking uncertainly, John's shoulder. "Go,
Go where they've gone; I'll tell you nothing. Go!"
And so John went miserable away,
Left the town, and at the river port next day
Meeting a shipmate joined him again and sailed
At evening.

The Red Path

VI

The old man drew the bolt again and faltered
To his tall chair; and now his face was altered,
And tears flowed. "Robert—not Robert? O, my son!"
Again and again; and, "Robert, what was done,
What was done to you that night? You came indeed
That night: where are you now? I heard you plead
For something:—where are you, why do you ask nothing
now?"—

Again and again, head bent, voice fallen low
...Till repetition died. The candle guttered,
And he rose and lit another, and then muttered,
"I'm coming, coming Robert!" opening the door.
The trees and the rising moon hung bright before.
He carried the tall chair out and set it down
In the middle of the path. The rising moon
Made all so plain that he fetched a folding screen.
There then he sat, save by the moon unseen
And that clear Eye that travels through the night
Of time and space and sees the dark all bright.
Bending low he tap-tapped on the tiles, "I am here!
Robert, Robert, Robert, Robert can you hear?"
And at the interstices of mould would peer
And lift with shaking finger a tile or two,
Whispering, "I am here, Robert, where are you?"—
Caressing the cold earth, then gently pressing
The earth back lest it weary of caressing.
"Who was it, Robert, when you came that day,

The Red Path

Who was it you spoke to? Who would drive you away?
Why did you come, and never come again?
O, had you come not, had you come not then!
Whose hand was't struck you, Robert, tell me whose?
Why did you cry out, that I could not choose
But hear? Why had you turned your back to me?
It was your face I feared—didn't you see?
Why did you cry, 'Father, O Father'? Why
Don't you answer now, 'Father, here am I'?

“But I know how it was done. How should such power
Be in so weak a hand at such an hour?
It was not my hand, for my hand is too weak.
Look, Robert, at my hand. Look, can't you speak
But once now,—‘Father, here am I’?”

No word

With charmed deceitful ear the old man heard,
But sat on, lightly touching the dark mould,
Insensible of the hour and the air's cold;
Until he coughed and coughed, and at length stood,
Stamped the tiles firm, and slowly in that flood
Of dead light crawled back to the house and slept.

And night by night along the path he crept,
For night by night the maggot in his brain
Bored a thought deeper, paused, and bored again.

But not unseen he sat. For neighbours watched,
Pitied, and then a pitying pleasure snatched
Seeing him sitting there, screened yet unscreened
From laughter. Out of the topmost window leaned
They might see just his bald head bent, or drooped

The Red Path

It seemed on his knees; as if he groped and groped—
Gathering moonbeams. “Or maybe it is there
His money’s buried: perhaps he can’t think where
It’s buried; perhaps he hides it and finds and hides.
He was always mad, and bad and cunning besides.
There he is now. He’ll sit so hour after hour,
Night after night, in moonshine, starshine, shower . . .
Now let’s to bed.”

But he stayed, burned and froze
And trembled; and at last, coughing, uprose.
Then would he go back to the silent house
Where every step must bitter echoes rouse,
And every silence thoughts more bitter than
Even echoes of lost voices to a lost lonely man.
But with the dawn the angry humour woke:
Seven waiting devils entered in and broke
The loneliness, as though to them was given
Each day his soul new plucked from sorrow’s heaven.

But age was kind at length. After a night
When storm had drenched the earth and made the light
Of morning wan and strange, he was found prone
Across the doorway, lying there alone
No one knew how long; lying yet alive.
They raised him,—so! Mixed in his brain did strive
Sadness and madness yet, together enlocking
And parting; still the old abuse and mocking,
And words at times of tenderness profounder
Than madness speaks. The neighbour filled with wonder,
Hearing in the reworded curse entangled

The Red Path

“Robert, Robert, where are you?” till the voice was
strangled
In sobs, and then the restless whisper again,
As it were an echo bubbling in his brain.
Then he grew quiet a little and would say,
Looking around apprehensively, “Stay, stay,
Don’t leave me alone, don’t let them take me away.
Soon I’ll be well. Don’t leave me, or she’ll come
And curse me with herself and bring them home.”
He darkened with the thought. “Don’t leave me alone,
Get some one who will stay when you are gone.
I’ll pay you, for I’ve money, money, d’you hear?
I’ll pay. I’ll soon be well—what is there to fear?
There’s money, money!” So he gibed and coughed
Till, weakening, his wild voice grew soft,
And, “Robert, Robert!” whispering, he would sleep
Uneasy, awakening at any step,
Angry, or crying pitifully. A week
Another week, and he forbore to speak,
And other weeks. Slowly he wore away
And, strangely gentled, died one late October day.

VII

O, brief the sweetness that illusion had
For her who turning from that grave was sad
To tears, waiting, waiting, still in vain
For her beloved son to return again.

Back to the tragic house she could not go:
It must be sold since she hated it so.

The Red Path

She then, alone, to London hastened, turning
The past over and over in her mind and yearning
Almost for the familiar hell, if they
Might sweeten hell with one communing day.
Again her needle threaded its aery dance,
At night again her unrewarded glance
From clock to door flew; wearied was her ear
With the deceit of steps that sounded but came never near.

So the forsaken house was sold and stripped,
Trees were lopped, creepers cut. The silence slipped
Back into the greater silence. Strange feet trod
The long-neglected rooms. A workman stood
One day and looked from the garden's edge, and cried—
"Yes, I remember! It's the old man that died
I worked for years and years ago. I slated
Half the roof again when the great storm had abated....
I remember!"—and walked up to the house and stared
At ceilings, walls, floors, casements unrepaired.
Going each day to and fro he was vexed to see
How the red tiles of the path unevenly
Lay, for a space, sunken and damp; 'twas odd,
'Twas odd, he mused, whenever his footsteps trod
The path. "I set them, bedded on decent rubble—
Well I remember now—sparing no trouble.
I thought 'twas honest work. The tiles were sound,
And I set them all." At length, because it irked
His pride to see how slackly he had worked,
Though twenty years ago, one eve he stayed
To repair the fault and lift the tiles ill-laid,

The Red Path

Then setting them anew. The watching neighbour
Smiled to see such uncontracted labour.
“It’s where the old man sat, night after night.
We used to laugh, it was such a funny sight . . .
Why should you trouble?” He smiled back and lifted
Tile by tile, turning them aside, and sifted
Surprized the soft mould: and thrusting lower found
Sad human fragments mixing in the ground.
He called: “For God’s sake come! look, look at that!”
“Why it’s horrible—It’s where the old man sat
Night after night. I told you he sat there.
But I never thought . . . O, I can’t come near,—
Show me. How could he do it, and he so small?
He can’t have done it. They were both too tall.
Which one is it? Why, I was with him when he died.
He went so quiet I could almost have cried;
And to think I nursed him!” So she rambled on
Happy in rich horrors to sup upon,
Like kings on dainties fetched by famished slaves
From tributary islands over tributary waves.

VIII

Even pain is mortal; though dying and born anew,
Yet dying again, and buried where no yew
Laments with changing green and gold and red. . . .
Pain dies, pain dies! The widow drooped her head,
Hurt even to death in the death of her son.
Who shall tell her thought? for thought itself was one
With agony, inseparable. But days

The Red Path

Treading on days pressed smoother the harsh ways
She needs must pass in loneliness; her tears
Fell, but soured not the unevadable years.
Love pierced his dust with deeper roots; she heard
His voice in the soft grasses as they stirred
With the wet south winds, and saw his hazel eyes
In the clear colour of late-unclouding skies.
And then John, when the unhappy news was tost
Abroad of Robert's murder, once more crossed
The Atlantic, and his mother found; and grief
With wild grief mingling, each to the other brought relief.

The Wounded Bird

THE WOUNDED BIRD

STRANGE was that dream. If it was more than dream
I cannot tell.

Under a roof of stars,
Tamarisk wove another thicket roof
With hawthorns whose late lingering rank perfume
Still clung the air. Flowers slept within the grass,
And in the meadow near I stirred the sorrel
Dew'd in the evening hour: the dew was bright
In the swung lantern's smoky ray. Within
The tamarisk thicket the grass sunk saucer-like,
Longest and wettest where the saucer dipped.
Music, and that rank hawthorn must, had drawn
My wandering feet and, as I neared, the light
Slipping from my hand was dowsed in unheard ripple
Of meadow water. So I stood unseen,
At first unseeing, but all ear the while
Thin music wove its bindweed round my sense,
Holding me tranced until beneath the lids
Sight waked, and pierced the impleachèd gloom. And first
I looked whence music came and saw against
A hawthorn bough, bending and brooding over
A hidden fiddle, out of whose womb he drew
Ravishment with each glide upon the strings,

The Wounded Bird

A green-garbed figure, twenty inches high
As he crouched there, dream-wrapt unheeding dwarf.
Nor was that fiddling all; for next I heard
Threading the gossamer lines that music hung
And shook between the stars and starry grass,
Skipping of many feet, now quick, now slow,
Anon heavy-heeled, then tapping of light toe.

There in the dusky light of stars and dew
Were two bright dancers, and around them stept,
First as I looked, pigeons and crooling doves
That flapped their wings, rose, fluttered, sank, stept again
Thridding the changing paces of those dancing
Who moved as music or their silent thoughts
(Another music) bade, and dizzied slowly
Up from the long wet grass to the circle's brink,
Then stood half-faint by low-drooped feather-boughs
And watched in turn the pigeons and pale doves
Still curvetting. Clothed were the resting dancers
In sober green like that their fellow dwarf
Showed as his yet untiring shoulder swayed
Over the fiddle; all ageless and all ancient
As grass and rock and water seemed the three,
And flushed the dancers' cheeks, and their brown eyes
Were dancing yet though limbs were faint and slack
As hand in hand, fast breathing, stood they following
With quick-flashed glance the fiddle and fluttered birds.
And now it seemed the echoing air's self danced
Quivering in the dewlight as in noon's fresh heat:

The Wounded Bird

The thin sound circling up and passing into
A cry that seemed not joy's nor sorrow's only
But each, then neither—both transcending, rising
Purely beyond the last peak of mortal sense
That gleams in white lone converse with deep heavens.
Half thankful was I when the music fell
On altered circuits into lower zones
Where I might listen only with my ear
And turn new eyes (which in that climbing shut)
Again upon the green and fay-like shapes.
—But sank at last that music to a sob
Among her lowest tones, as grieving for
Old loss or loss to come. Lower he leaned,
And gray hairs fell over his bended forehead
While yet that plaintive note prolonged.

How harsh

That strange step was, without the tamarisk bower
What hand was there? The startled birds rose high,
And a shot sounded hollow and close. Then all
The agitated wings and voices flew
Away, dancers and fiddler all withdrew
Unseen; distressed, I stumbled amid the dew.

Comes back my broken dream . . . June's clear light now
Was in the sky and creeping over hedges
As I walked sleep refreshed. Last eve's wheel-tracks
Ran unerased: no foot nor wheel was heard,
No bleat of flock nor hoarse-throat drover's cry.
But I thought of the dancers and the fiddler

The Wounded Bird

And doves and pigeons; wondering, Had I dreamed?
When near above came pigeons in a cloud
Flying and halting and returning and flying
Onward again, with one that scarce could fly.
A minute's span she'd plough her painful way
As through a denser element than thin air,
And faltering, sink; while round her, busy vans
Beat as they'd force the weak void to sustain her;
And she would rise again and flutter and stagger,
Flutter and stagger again, and again sink low.
Last time their hasty wings availed no more.
Into the grassy roadside ditch she fell,
Few hundred yards away.

Quickened I walked;
But all those anxious wings before I neared
Rose, as two children from the bridle-path,
Frieze-clad, ran to the wounded bird. They stooped,
And then the elder struck her, and she shrilled
When his foot scattered stones at her white breast.
"Stop" I yet distant cried; but the boy cared not
Lifting a broken bough to strike the bird.
It seemed she waxed then strangely tall, to height
Of the dwarfed dancers, flapping her healthy wing
Against the boy's limbs though he cried and still
Flogged the bird with his rotten twig until it snapped.
By this I reached and caught the boy away,
Who scowled, his fat, round, red face blubbered with tears,
And then, with an angry sob, his sister dragging
After him, shuffled away.

The Wounded Bird

Large yet, with more
Than heron's height, the ruffled faint bird stood
And, moving on slowly, spattered the dust with blood.

I with like weak step walked. If now I smile,
Seeing myself beside that painful bird
Slow-paced, I smiled not then. Behind the breast
Under the whitest wing the down was crimson
With blood that still oozed, richly wasting, staining
All one side to the pink, dust-feathered feet.
Now in her throat new sound of measured bubbling
Began, like the beginnings of babes' speech,
Till I distinguished the as yet all unmeaning
Syllables. Then I said, "How far away
Is your nest hung, for what safe woodland's breast
Seeks your torn breast?"

The bird then answered, "There,
In the scant spinney beyond the gathered elms—
Could I but reach it—but I thirst, I thirst."
Her words were thick, but pity gave me wit.
Then saw I where a runnelet damped the road
And by the side glinted a cressy pool
With flowerless mint above.—"Here may you drink!"
Eager her beak plunged into the cold trench,
And sipping long it seemed her body shrank,
Smaller her wings grew, and a white pigeon now
With clotted blood smearing her stiffened quills,
Was all I saw before she rose in the air
And slowly flapped towards her wanted nest.

The Wounded Bird

Then I turned back, following the spattered blood,
Thinking of her and of her dancing kin,
For kin they were, and of all cruelty
Spilt on the earth; and where the blood-spots failed
(The rotted twig I snapped again) I turned
Down a steep path to seek the tamarisk bower,
But woke—all dark—and heard the sounding hour.

Such was the dream. If it was more than dream,
Shadow of approaching wrong, image of ill
That wounds the eternal beauty of the world,
I cannot tell.



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