

COLDKNUCKLES

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada Ebook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Coldknuckles

Author: Gibson, Wilfrid Wilson (1878-1962)

Date of first publication: 1947

Edition used as base for this ebook: London: Frederick Muller, 1947 [first edition]

Date first posted: 3 February 2013

Date last updated: October 13, 2014

Faded Page ebook#20141058

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

COLDKNUCKLES

by

WILFRID GIBSON

LONDON
FREDERICK MULLER LTD
29 GREAT JAMES STREET W.C.1

FIRST PUBLISHED BY FREDERICK MULLER LTD.
IN 1947
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE CAMELOT PRESS LTD.
LONDON AND SOUTHAMPTON

by
Wilfrid Gibson

Collected Poems, 1905-1925
The Golden Room
Hazards
Islands
Fuel
Coming and Going
The Alert
Challenge
The Searchlights
The Outpost
Solway Ford and Other Poems: A Selection
The Island Stag

Coldknuckles

ONE

I

For mooning at his task, kept in,
Before young Isaac Bell could win
To the bleak ridge above the town,
The dank November night closed down:
And, when he'd passed the last street-lamp,
He'd still got three mirk miles to tramp
Across the mizzle-hidden moor,
Till he'd draw nigh Coldknuckles' door—
Three miles, ere he might reach again
The two-roomed cottage, but and ben,
Where, with his mother, Ellen Bell,
He dwelt, perched high on Caller Fell.
Though sturdily the youngster strode
Along the solitary road,
And brave and sharp his heelplates rang
On the hard metal, while he sang
In little jerks beneath his breath
The ballad of Cockrobin's death,
Yet, pit-a-pat the lad's heart went,
In dread of the skirlnaked bent
Stretching betwixt him and his seat
In the snug ingle by the peat.

How clearly he could see it there
In the red glow—the battered chair,
Awaiting him, with broken back
And slippery seat of shiny black,
Where he would crouch with nodding head,
Till, slithering to the floor, to bed
His mother'd pack him off! But, he
Was hungry now: and there'd be tea—
His cracked blue mug and scrap-heaped plate—
And mother, vexed that he was late!
Ay, she'd the nippy tongue to sting
A lad's wit for woolgathering,
A hettle tongue and skelping hand...
At times, he scarce could understand
What came to her at all, that she
Should glare at him so huffily
And mutter to herself, as if
His face had given her a gliff.
What was there in his looks at all
To take a scunner at? What call
Had his own mother ... Why, at school,
Though, odd whiles, teacher'd dub him "fool,"

His classmates liked him well enough:
They kenned Coldknuckles was no guff
At games, or, fighting...

But, her tongue,
He'd not mind that now, though it stung
As bees when you stirred up their bike.
'Twas this long road he didn't like—
This lonesome road he couldn't stand,
With not a house on either hand
To show a lad a friendly light
And keep his heart up this thick night,
No glisk nor glimmer all the way.
And he'd to go by Dead Man's Brae,
Where underneath a ragged wood
A dour forbidding church had stood;
And to its soggy burial ground
Had gathered from the country round
Forgotten generations in;
While men of God and men of sin
Had mouldered in its shadow dank,
And raised a crop of nettles rank,
Nurturing with rain-rotted bones
The weeds that swarmed the cracked headstones,
As though they strove with all their might
To screen those kinless names from sight—
Forgotten by the countryside
That once was all their love and pride—
Till nettle, darnel, dock and rush,
Thistle and sprawling bramble bush,
Flourishing fat on that sour sod,
Had buried the grim house of God,
Whose half-sunk weather-perished stones
Crumbled above man's crumbling bones.
Yet, the first nippy night would show
Those tombstones, naked, row on row,
Above the nettles stricken black.

Cold prickles crawled up Isaac's back,
Bristling his scalp, till, cluttering,
He would have given anything
If only he might make a round
And dodge that spooky burial ground:
But in such fog he feared to quit
The road, lest he should stray, and It,
Through sluthery moss and clungy sump,
Should track him until the Last Trump—
The nameless shapeless Dread, that now
Dogged close at heel; though when, or, how
The Thing had fallen in behind,
He could not tell; and, fleyed to find
His own fetch following, and learn
His doom of death, he dared not turn
His eyes to meet that grisly grin
Which sent cold shivers under his skin,

As, mimicking the way he walked,
Stealthily his own spectre stalked,
Fumbling chill fingers through his hair....
Then, all at once, the foggy air
Was ripped with ellerish yells and wails;
And boggles out of old wives' tales—
Brag, homey, hobthrush, wirrikow—
Were flaffering all about him now.
Skirl after skirl sang through the night,
Till he was bivvering with fright;
When, in his lug, more shrill than skreel
Of pencil on slate, or, piercing squeal
Of griding drag-locked wagon-wheel,
Shivered a last nerve-riving shriek.
He felt a soft wing brush his cheek;
And knew those eldritch hoots and howls
Were only cries of hungry owls,
Chilling his very blood to ice,
As, quartering the bent for mice,
They hunted, baffled by blind mist.
So, now unclasping one clenched fist,
Whose fingernails had bitten deep
Into his aching palm to keep
His courage from quite oozing out,
He gave a hearty hoyting shout;
Then, fingers thrust between his teeth.
After the owls, across the heath
He sent a mocking whistle shrill,
Whose echo, tossed from hill to hill,
Seemed to reply from every art;
And warmed the cockles of his heart;
And kept his pecker up a while....
Yet, when he'd trudged another mile
And neared the fog-filled burial ground,
And now could only catch the sound
Of his own heelplates, as he trod
The endless turnpike, iron-shod,
Clat-clat, clat-clatter, heel and toe,
As if for ever he must go
Through that unearthly hush, aghast,
Getting no further, till at last
He'd drop, deadbeat, he longed to hear
The hoolets shrieking, shrill and clear:
Because, far worse than any yell,
He feared that fogbound eerie fell
Silence, wherein the Unseen Thing,
Bristling, with sinews taut to spring,
If he should stumble in the least,
Slunk round him like a sleiching beast.

It seemed he must let out a scream
To break the spell: when, as in dream,
Far off and faint, he caught the ring
Of hoofs and heard the lumbering

Of wheels; and hope was in his heart
It might be some belated cart
Rumbling towards him through the night.
If only he could see a light,
Might only change a word or two,
In passing with some chap he knew—
"What fettle, Isaac?"—"What cheer, Dick?"—
He'd scuttle by the graves so slick,
Before the spryest ghost....

His heart

Stopt dead. He stood stockstill. No cart—
No earthly cart could make the row
Of hoofs and wheels that he heard now—
The pattering and clattering,
The rumbling and the lumbering,
The hubblyshew and hullabaloo
Racketing through the night, that drew,
Slowly and surely nigh and nigher....
His blood congealed to ice, that fire
Melted to water in a trice,
Then in his veins to prickling ice
Crystalled again in agony.
That coming Thing could only be
The Death Coach; and his eye must see
The headless driver lashing on
His headless steeds....

Now redly shone

Through thinning mist a wavering light:
And, rooted to the road with fright,
He heard a hackle-raising yowl,
And knew it for the Barguest's howl—
The hound with eyes of glowing coal
That hunts the godforsaken soul....
When, slouching through the drizzle stole
Two wambling shambling shapes, that strode
With feet splayed wide across the road,
Swaying their lean heads, evil-eyed,
On squirmy necks from side to side....
Now two huge monsters blocked the way,
Dark as tarpaulined loads of hay,
With tails before and tails behind....
Then, jittering, he seemed struck blind
By a bright flash; and heard a yell—
"Say—are we making straight for hell?"

II

It seemed a wild wanchancy night,
Hag-ridden, held him, till the light
No longer dazzled his scared eyes;
And now he saw with glad surprise

Something familiar in the ray
A lantern shot across the way—
Ay, horses!—and as brave a pair
Of greys as ever drew a share
Up Barebones Ridge; and they stood now
With steaming flanks, as though the plough
Had sweltered them, drooked tails and manes
Dripping in puddles: then the reins,
Red leather, starred with studs of brass,
Pranked with half-moons of looking-glass
Jarbled with raindrops, and headstalls
And girths, above which gilded balls,
As big as oranges, floated high,
Like four suns dangled from the sky,
Their long black slender stems, unseen,
Astonished him...

Along the sheen
Of the wet reins his glance slid back
To the brown hands that held them slack
And up the bare arms, round which squirmed
Tattooed blue scaly snakes that wormed
Under uprolled shirt-sleeves of red,
To shoot out, each, a flame-tongued head,
Defiant, on the bare brown chest.
Then Isaac's dazed eyes came to rest,
As suddenly he saw a man
Against a scarlet caravan,
Picked out with chamfers, newly-gilt,
Slouched on the limmers, cap, a-tilt,
And watching him with grinning stare—
A tall man, sinewy and spare,
With cold unblinking eyes, the blue
Of tempered steel, that ran him through,
Searching his vitals.

"So," he said
"Your wits are homing, gonnerhead?
Likely, I staggered you a bit."
Then, pursing up his lips to spit
Over the off-wheel, he revealed
The scar of an old gash, long-healed,
From scalp to jowl, a livid streak,
As though a knife had slit his cheek,
Or, some wild beast had chanced to draw
Through the hale flesh a cruel claw.

"On such a night, it's hard to tell
Whether you're heading slap for hell—
Or, Hexham, son."

"You're ganning right
For Hexham"—flurried still with fright
Stammered the boy. With keener stare
The man's eyes scanned him, with the flare
Of yellow light full on his face,
As though his memory sought to trace

Something familiar in the lean
Clearcut young features and the clean
Blue winkers: then his own hard eyes
Twinkled, as, with amused surprise,
He drawled "I called you 'son'—by gad!
What is the name you go by, lad?"

"Isaac they call me, though I get
Coldknuckles, oftener," dozzened yet
By such queer chancings, chirped the boy.

"Isaac Coldknuckles? What a ploy!
Whatever made her ... But, your dad
Was likely called Coldknuckles, lad?"

"My dad? Nay, it's the house where we,
I and my mother bide."

"I see,"

The stranger said. "And what may be
Your mammy's name, son?"

"Ellen Bell."

"Of all the queer starts! Ay, it's hell!
Only in hell a man may meet
Himself, a lad again, and greet
His own past stottering on two feet,
The half-forgotten sin he spawned
Grown to his living spit!" He yawned;
Then laughed "'Twould serve God-fearing John
As a grand text for spouting on."
Now, over his, a woman's head,
A tousled mop of frowsy red,
Was thrust across the van's half-door.

"Say, Abe, what are you stopping for?"
She asked, "and who's the poor lost lamb?"

"Isaac, the son of Abraham."

"Ay, ay, I heard you call him 'son':
But, we can't pull up for each one
Of your mishaps we chance upon;
Or, we'll not reach Tyne Green to-night."

"Forgimity! Redpoll, you're right!"

"Drive on, drive on! The lads behind
Are getting riled."

"I've half a mind
To take the young limb with us."

"Nay!

Drive on. You're blocking up the way."

Then back she ducked into the van
To soothe her squalling bairn. Her man

Grinned, as though Isaac shared his joke;
And, gathering up the traces, spoke
"Redpoll, or, black-poll, it's all one:
She's jealous for your brother, son.
Well, every she-wolf for her whelp;
Each mammy, her own brat to skelp!"
Then, winking one blue eye, he said
"Coldknuckles, you nip home to bed;
And, when you've lisp'd your prayers to-night,
Before your mam has dows'd the light,
Give her an extra kiss—from dad."

He grinned: and now the gaping lad
Caught from the shadows in the rear
Hoarse bawlings and shrill whistles clear—
"Has Jumbo fallen in a fit?"
"Why can't you put a jerk in it?"
"What's up with Cold Steel?"
"Abraham,
Get a move on with that red pram!"
"Is't doomsday that you're waiting for?"

Then the hair-raising muffled roar
Of unknown beasts iced Isaac's blood,
As on the van lurched; and he stood
Back in the ditch; and watched amazed,
Still in the clutch of nightmare dazed,
While caravan on caravan,
Green, yellow, purple, blue and tan,
Each with a white black-spotted dog
Trotting beneath, loomed through the fog;
And horses, such as made him stare
With wide delighted eyes—each pair
A perfect match—cream, chestnut, bay,
Roan, piebald, skewbald, sorrel, grey,
Snow-white and jet-black—on they drew
Through lamplit mist. And now, anew,
The long fantastical parade
Was for another moment stayed,
As, lank and lantern-jawed, a man
Dropt from a black funereal van,
Drawn by black horses, like a hearse;
And, crouching down, with pious curse,
Lifted a hirpling hoof and scooped
A lodged stone out: while, as he stooped,
Over the half-door grinned a face
At Isaac with a sly grimace:
And jetty eyes and curly hair
Bobbed up; and Isaac saw the bare
Plump arms and girlish breasts, as white
As twin moons in enchanted night,
While over the black half-door hung
A little lass with out-thrust tongue;
Till the man lifted up his head,

And sent her scuttling, as he said
"To bed, you whore of Babylon!"
When, in a twinkling, she was gone.
"What's up? What's up, God-fearing John?
And who's the lady-friend, to-night,
Has charmed your sour mug so polite?"
Wheezed a fat voice from the next van.
But, muttering to himself, the man
Leapt to the limmers: and again
The caravan in misty rain
Was lost to sight: and, following then
Came yellow closed vans, each the den
Of some wild prisoned beast that snored
Uneasily, or, wakeful, roared
Half-scared defiance in the hell
Of jolting night that in its spell
Had wampished him and held him fast.
And now a bunch of ponies passed,
With startled eyes and nostrils wide,
Jostling and joggling side by side,
By those dread yowlings driven half-wild:
And then a string of wagons, piled,
Each with its huge tarpaulined load,
Rumbled and swayed along the road,
Like mist-clad mountains moving by,
Toppling beneath the weight of sky.

Yet, when at length it seemed the last
Of all those marvels had rolled past—
The garish dream-procession gone,
Though, dwindling, one red star still shone
From the last tailboard, by its light
He caught a glimpse of something white,
Shambling alone; and heard the patter
Of little hoofs, as, clatter-clatter,
Came a white donkey. On its back
A ghoulish figure, gaunt and black,
Muttering and mumbling, sat astride
With long legs dangling either side—
A gaunt black guy without a face,
Only a grinning fierce grimace
Of teeth and whites of rolling eyes.
While Isaac shied in stark surprise,
The negro groaned as though in pain
"The goddam rain—the goddam rain!"
And then again and yet again
"O Jesus Christ, the goddam rain!"

III

As though made fey by the refrain,
He stood, bewattled, while the insane

Lamplighted hurly-burly sped,
Glooming and glancing, through his head;
And a loud darkness shot with flame
And laced with scarlet life became—
No longer the chill cheerless grey
That was his world of everyday:
For everyday had died to-night,
Blindfolded by a beam of light
And raked and riddled through and through
By two cold eyes of steely blue.
As home he turned with kindled mind
The frightened bairn was left behind;
And now a fearless callant strode
With manly stride the ringing road,
Spellbound, through an enchanted night;
His quickened heart and brain alight
With hazardous imaginings
Of flighty queer outlandish things
That, flashing, each, an unsheathed knife
Out of the darkness, through his life
Jabbed riving wildfires. In the strife
Of dreams that like remembrance seemed
And memories like something dreamed
Flaunting barbaric visions flared
Before his eyes; and, now unscared
By blaring beasts whose yowls had searched
His midriff, as dark vans had lurched
And lumbered by him, his roused blood,
No longer curdled, in a flood,
A rampant burning torrent, flowed
Through his young limbs that pulsed and glowed
With nigh unbearable delight.
He scarcely noticed that the night
Had twitched its muffling mist aside
And now looked down on him clear-eyed;
Or, how about him far and wide
Again owls hooted—only owls,
No horneys now with shrieks and howls!
And even Dead Man's Brae was passed
Without a quaver; and at last,
As in a trice, he'd reached the turn
Where the road bridged the Caller Burn;
And he must strike across the moor
The beast-track to Coldknuckles' door.
Beneath the signpost's arm of wood,
No longer swithering, Isaac stood
Haze-gazing into the clear sky
Whose constellations spinning by
In burning fury, seemed to be
An icy-cold tranquillity
To his unrealising sight,
Mazed yet by smoky lantern light.
After the flaring rattling rout
Of gaudy van and raucous shout

That made his senses reel and swim,
Consoling quiet stole through him
And cooled the fevers of his heart.
Somewhere a stoat yelped. With a start
He leapt the broken drystone-dyke
And took the track up Callersyke,
Where over boulders through brown fern
Tumbled the singing Caller Burn,
Whose tinkling treble, cool and clear,
Had sounded in his baby-ear
The first notes of awaking life;
So soon to mingle with harsh strife
Of raspy words that bit and stung
From his resentful mother's tongue,
That wreaked on him the rankling blame
Because his birth had brought her shame—
Words, even waters brawling down
In winter spate could barely drown.
Onward he plunged through crackling heath
Until at last he stood beneath
The hanging eaves of heather-thatch;
And paused, half-scared to lift the latch,
And face his mother's wrath, so late.
He well knew, she'd be in a state,
A fine fantigue! He'd have to pay
For all had fashed her through the day;
Or, happen, she'd just sit and glower
At him till bedtime, dern and dour,
Without a word. You never knew
How she'd take on; but, see it through,
He'd got to. And he had to-night
Some news to tell her—ay, it might
Divert her spleen from him, to hear
All he'd been seeing. So, his fear,
By hunger overcome, at last
He raised the clicking sneck and passed
Stealthily in: and then once more
With wilting courage by the door
He daffled, seeing his mother there
Bolt-upright in her straight-backed chair,
Staring into the fire's dull red.
She didn't speak, or, turn her head—
Never let on she knew he'd come;
But still sat glowering, grim and glum,
Into the sultry flameless peat.
Then as he stole with grating feet
Across the sanded flags, amazed,
With sinking heart again, half-dazed
He faltered now, for he could see
On the bare board no sign of tea.
When, without turning, Ellen said,
Tetchily "Why aren't you in bed?
It's long past bedtime."

Desperately

He blurted out "I want my tea."
"Your tea?" she sneered, "'twas cleared away
Three hours ago. My working-day,
Ten hours on end of picking stones
Till I'm a rackle of aching bones,
Is all too long. I'll not set to,
This time of night, to wait on you—
You needn't think it, my braw lad!
If you can't come in time, by gad!
You've got to go without, and learn,
Till you've the guts to do your turn,
To mend your mooning feckless ways;
Not keep me drudging all my days
To pamper you in idleness.
So, just look slippy and undress
And into bed with you." He stood
A second, scowling, as his blood,
Prickling with anger, flushed his cheek:
But, choking when he strove to speak,
Bitterness galled his heart; and he,
Turning to go ben, sullenly,
Had set his hand upon the latch,
When, spiriting like a kindling match,
A thought flared in his reckless head;
And, spluttering spitefully, he said
"What wild beast gave dad such a claw,
To scar his face from brow to jaw?"
His mother started from her chair
And flounced round with a flustered stare
And eager questions: but, he said
No more; and made to go to bed;
Slipped off his togs, and tumbled in,
And drew the patched quilt to his chin;
And lay there, mum, with eyes shut tight;
Though at the bedfoot half the night,
A thrawn wild randy, in the dim
And shadowy room, she heckled him,
Threatening, or, coaxing, all in vain.
Something was frozen in his brain;
And, though he kind of pitied her,
He couldn't get his tongue to stir:
So, nattering curses at his head,
At length she crept away to bed.

IV

The raw wind at the windowpane
Wept, blurring it with blobs of rain,
As, in the dismal and forlorn
Dank dusk of the November morn
Arousing, for a spell he lay

Half-dreading a new humdrum day.
Then his dull blinkers suddenly
Sparkled alive with fiery glee,
Reviewing with intense delight
The queer clamjamfry that last night
Had burst into his life to change
The world for him, with those chance strange
Words that had struck his startled ear.
He heard again the chuckling jeer
That told him all the truth, unguessed,
His mother in her bitter breast
Had kept from him—that he had, too,
Like every other bairn he knew
A father, still alive. No lad,
Not one of all his schoolmates had
A dad the like of thon!—with eyes
Blue as the steel of frosty skies—
Steel eyes that seemed to pierce you through
And slice your very heart in two
And drain it of its blood; and then,
Twinkling, brought it to life again
And, with a flutter of delight,
Set it once more with all its might
Beating within your breast, until
It seemed about to burst and spill
Your life in laughter. Little he,
In days that had dragged drearily,
Since he could mind, had ever known
Of laughter, dwelling here alone
With his sour mother, harsh and stern
As stony fields she picked to earn
Their livelihood; till, older, he
Could lend a hand and work, maybe,
At Farmer Black's and help to keep
Things going, herding stupid sheep.
Not, if he knew it! Sheep—when all
His heart since he could first recall
Hankered to live with horses! Nay:
Now he could see another way,
And meant to take it! Then again
Passed a procession through his brain;
But, this time, only cantering
Horses with manes and tails aswing
And spanking hoofs—cream chestnut, grey,
Roan, piebald, skewbald, sorrel, bay,
Snow-white, jet-black...

Now, as the pang
Of hunger rived his reins, he sprang
Eagerly out of bed and dressed,
Quickly and quietly; his breast,
A hubbub of excitement: then
Into the but stole from the ben;
And saw his mother in the grey
Cold light of the late laggard day

Still huddled on her tumbled bed;
Now sleeping, with uneasy head
Tossing its tangled tousled hair
Over the grubby pillow, where
No respite had come to her, till
Her wrath had smouldered to a chill
Ashy indifference. With a look,
Half-bold, half-fearful, now he took
Out of the cupboard a stale crust
And chunk of cheese and slyly thrust
Them in his pocket. Gingerly
He tiptoed to the door; then he
Lifted the latch; and presently
Stood safe outside; and nimbly dropt
Down the steep brae, as the rain stopt,
And daylight kindled the raw air,
And flushed the wet fells to a fair
Welcoming world of glistening green.

Dazzled by the quicksilver sheen,
And hearkening to the Caller Burn
That rushed rain-swollen through dank fern,
He tarried, blithely drinking deep
The snell fresh breeze; until a sheep
Suddenly baa-ed at him; when he,
Rounding on it, yelped tauntingly
"Sheep!"—and set off upon his way
Into the promise of the day;
Now breaking blue, with billowy white
Clouds swinging through a lift of light;
Munching his breakfast, as he went
Across the shadow-dappled bent.

The solitude, that overnight
Had flushed his harried heart with fright,
No haunt of owls, or, ghouls, now seemed,
As in the morning light it gleamed
Like a new world to which his eyes
Were just awaking in surprise—
A world, alive with the delights
Of fresh and spirit-kindling sights—
A weasel sleeking through the green
Tussocks of wet ling in its clean
Spruce chestnut-coloured coat; a slick
Grass-snake that at a lightning lick
Whisked underneath a sheltering stone;
Seemed curious creatures, newly-known;
And the light-heeled careering hare,
A beast fantastical and rare;
A kestrel hovering overhead
With tawny quivering wings outspread;
A blackcock, with his queer curled tail,
Perched, clucking, on a wet fence-rail;
A hoodie, honking from a pike,

That set sheep scurrying up the syke;
And grouse that swerved on whirring wings;
Seemed freakish unfamiliar things;
While in his ear the Caller Burn
Sang a fresh tune at every turn;
And even the ruined graveyard stones,
Mounded above the mouldering bones,
Flourished their nettles in the light,
Glistered with raindrops, wonder-bright;
As now again he gaily strode
With cheerful clatter the highroad,
Where he had watched in mist and rain
The passing of the circus-train
Out of the night into the night;
And, drawn on by the blue steel-bright
Strong magnet of his father's eyes,
Hiked up the slithery rain-wet rise
With hope-hot heart and racing blood,
Trailing the wheel tracks through the mud
Towards Hexham Town, six miles away;
Where on Tyne Green, beyond the grey
Towers of the Abbey and Moot Hall,
He reckoned, surely now, that all
The caravans had come to rest.
And, as he topped the stiff hillcrest
And caught, far off, the silver shine
Of the swift waters of the Tyne,
He seemed to see already there
The preparations for the Fair,
In fancy, and the big tent's round
Rising serenely from the ground,
On the turf gleaming like the white
Mushroom that springs up overnight;
Though several miles yet stretched between
That hilltop and far off Tyne Green.

Then, entering on the last mile,
He rested on a wayside stile
To ease his blistered heels that burned
Like embers; while his thoughts returned
Now to Coldknuckles, and saw there
His mother shake back unkempt hair
That draggled round her haggish head
From opening eyes, and slip from bed
With scowling brows, and cross the floor
To batter on the shut ben-door
And rout him from his rest; and heard
With fearful heart each fratching word
She uttered, when no answer came.
He heard her shrilling out his name
With curses, as, this many a year
He'd heard her, till his shivering fear,
Numbed by that nagging nattering spite
That scarified him day and night

At length had hardened into ice
In his young heart. She called him thrice;
Then savagely flung the door wide....
But, when she found no son inside,
What she would do, he dared not think....

And now he felt his courage sink
As he slouched, weary and alone
And famished, on the stile's cold stone:
When all at once he seemed to hear
His father chortle in his ear;
And see again those eyes of blue
Twinkle, even as they stabbed him through;
And his heart felt in closer kin
With that gay giant, than with his thin
And shrewish mother, as he rose
And shrugged himself in his patched clothes:
Then, in a daze, down Causey Hill
From Yarridge dropt; and, dreaming still,
Through Hencotes trudged, and by the Sele
And Church Flags, clinking 'neath his heel,
Reached the stall-crowded market place;
And, crossing it with lagging pace,
As from the embattled Abbey Tower
The bell boomed out the noonday hour,
Down steep Bull Bank, came to the Tyne.
Then, with a gush, the song and shine,
The roaring and the white froth-gleam
Of the rain-swollen tawny stream,
Whose spate of waters, ridge on ridge,
Through spanning arches of the bridge
Swirled crashing, charged his heart anew
With courage as he slowly drew
Towards Tyne Green; and saw the wide
Haugh set about on every side
With horseless caravans—and then,
A husky bunch of hefty men,
Led by his father, hoisting high
The big-top's king-post to the sky.

V

He watched the flagged pole stab the blue of noon,
Swayed by the tugging of guy-ropes; but, soon
By Abe and the gaunt gangling nigger gripped
The post into its iron socket slipped,
Steadied by taut stays: and his father now,
Mopping the perspiration from his brow,
Turned to his glum companion and, with a laugh
That rippled all his thews, began to chaff
The surly Sambo: and, as they stood there
With tawny gold and ebony torsos bare,

They towered in the wan November light
Like very images of day and night.
While as, admiring, Isaac stared, agape,
Startled he felt sharp fingers tweak his nape;
And, yanked round, with a yell looked with surprise
Into the saucy and sloe-coloured eyes
Of the young hussy who the night before
Had grinned at him above the low half-door
Of sour God-fearing John's black caravan.

"Well, bless me, if it's not the bogieman
Who dithered by the roadside in a fright
As if he'd met his own fetch in the night!"
She tardy clucked, while Isaac, blushing red,
In dumb annoyance turned away his head
Just as a lean hand on Kit's shoulder fell
And gripped it—and "You flirtigig of hell!"
Rasped out the riled voice of God-fearing John—
"I might have guessed it, when I found you gone
And the dinner charred to cinder. The true whelp
Of your man-wolfing mother!"

With a yelp,
Skedaddling, from his clutch the lassie slipped;
And over her scuttling heels her father tripped
And sprawled upon the turf; while a hot spate
Of Bible-curses at rampageous rate
Belched from his lips.

"Now, take it easy, John!"
Abe's voice sang out "or, you'll find them all gone
And not the mildest mutter of a curse
Left you when you barge into something worse.
If I'd a mind to make you eat your words
You'd find them riskier swallowing than the swords
You slither down your gullet greedily;
And far more fatal fare they'd prove to be
I'll warrant. Why, because a lightskirt bitch,
Bolting, deserts the old dog in the ditch,
Vent pious anger on her helpless pup?"

Now, thrusting through the throng, Abe hiked John up
On to his pins; then stopt with a sharp stare
As now he spotted Isaac gaping there;
Then grinned, guffawing "So, you've turned up, son,
For dinner? Well, there'll be enough for one
Extra I've little doubt; for Redpoll's got
A generous fist in filling up the pot.
But, we had best look sharp, before young Bill,
Your brother, has a chance to eat his fill
And gobble up the best, or, we'll just get
The nipper's leavings. There's none so sharpset
Of all my little lot of cats: no whip,
Nor, even redhot iron could keep the rip
Back from the stewpot once he'd caught a whiff
Of cooking collops. Little doubt that if

Old Roarer and he should start fair on a feast
The younker'd snatch the titbits from the beast
And lick him easily!"

With hand upon
Isaac's proud shoulder, now he steered his son
Through all the gear that cluttered up the way
Towards the scarlet caravan. As they,
Together, turned to cross the Green, the eye
Of Sambo lowered at them in slouching by;
And his low forehead, ruckled with a scowl,
And the white snarling teeth in that black jowl
For Isaac held a menace: but, Cold Steel,
Chuckling at his own notions, close at heel
Stalked on, indifferently, towards the van,
As though he took no count of any man.

So, Isaac rapidly forgot his fear,
As to the scarlet van they now drew near;
And Redpoll, ladling out into a dish
Hot stew, glanced up.

"And so, you've had your wish?"

Grinning at Abe, she gurgled—"one more cub
To tame?" She set upon an upturned tub
The steaming bowl. "Well, you had best fall to
Before Bill guzzles all."

Sharp eyes of blue,
Met Isaac's, as the whipper-snapper, Bill,
Greedily gorging, set to with a will.

And while Abe supped and munched he murmured now,
Shaking the yellow hair back from his brow—
"Another cub—ay, and too old to learn,
At his advanced age, any circus-turn,
I take it—too stiff-jointed, and no brat
Supple enough to make an acrobat.
If I'm not out of my reckoning, he must be
Hard upon twelve years old—ay, easily."
Then Redpoll tittered "Aren't you just the true
And faithful lover! Lord—to fancy you
Should keep an ancient date like that in mind!"
Abe only grinned. "Well, anyway, we'll find
Something to suit. There's jobs enough to do
About a circus, if he'll cotton to."
He turned to Isaac. "What's the game you had
In mind when you set out so rashly, lad,
To track us? What's your fancy—horses?"

"Ay!"

Came, gaspingly, the eager boy's reply.
"Ah well, we'll find out. But you'd best begin
To tuck some fodder in that empty skin,
Young bag-of-bones. Then you can come with me
To lend a hand: and, afterwards, we'll see
What the boss says. It's time we were away,
If we're to get the big-top rigged to-day

And all set going for tomorrow's show.
Just clear your plate, Coldknuckles, and we'll go."

Then, as they went, together, they caught a laugh;
And the fat voice that Isaac had heard chaff
God-fearing John last night, from a near van
Rallied them—"Well, Cold Steel, my gallant man,
You'd seem to have found yourself again all right,
Begot and born all in a single night,
Seemingly, though your double's not fullgrown—
Yet, none too bad for one night's work, I'll own!"
And Isaac, glancing up, saw lounging there
A muckle woman in an easy chair
By the van door, burbling at her own joke,
With rolls of fat aquiver. Now she spoke
More solemnly, while under her smooth brow
Her small eyes smouldered. "I spied you just now
Handling that skunk, John Molt; and hoped, by heck,
You were about to wring his pious neck:
But, like a gaumless nowt, you let him go—
Why, the de'il kens! Yet, sure as hell, I know
You missed a grand chance; and may live to rue
The day you mulled what you were meant to do,
And spared him still to make his daughter's life
The Bedlam that it's been since his wise wife,
Bewalloped till nigh witless, cut her stick.
Yet, though your fumbling failed to do the trick,
Or, you were too fainthearted, happen, your son
One day will finish what you've left undone:
For, in my bones, I feel Kit Molt and he
Are tokened for each other."

"That may be,"

Laughed Abe—"But, bones! Who could have guessed you'd got
A single bone in all that little lot
Of lovely flesh?"

Now the Fat Women smiled;
And turned to Isaac. "Well, let's trust the child
Has got at least more gumption and more spunk;
And, bones, or, not, I feel that he won't funk
When the time comes. Well, what's to be, will be:
And, looking into the future, I seem to see
God-fearing John, a huddled body, He
With broken neck beneath the open sky."

Then Cold Steel answered "Though you may be right,
You're not the only one with second sight:
I've got bones, too: and, sure as anything,
I sense my son was never born to swing.
But, happen, now you'd care to prophesy
How Isaac's father, too, will come to die?"

Yet, though her tranced eyes burned with a fey light,
Now the Fat Woman kept plump lips pursed tight:
While Cold Steel jeered "The Witch of Endor's dumb

For once, it seems: but, what's to come, will come."

VI

When the thronged day was through at last,
Within the van with eyes shut fast,
Famished for sleep that failed to come,
Young Isaac lay—the throb and thrum
Of wild thoughts buzzing in his brain,
Shooting off sparkles as again
They circled in a crazy way
About the doings of the day.

Again he shut Coldknuckles' door
Behind him; and, almost before
He'd quit the threshold, seemed to be
Watching the king-post jerkily
Jabbing the sky of Winter blue....
The post that juggled, ere he knew,
Into a nigger, tall and thin,
With sweat drops glistening on his skin—
Drops that changed, even as he stared,
To blood; while now gaunt Sambo glared
With goggling eyeballs in his face....
Then, just as he drew back a pace
To clasp his father's hand, and hide,
Someone was giggling by his side;
And now he looked with hurt surprise
Into Kit's cute and saucy eyes
That mocked him till the blood again
Swilled, scalding, through each burning vein.
And now there threshed about his ear
John's curses, crumpling him with fear,
As the foul flood, in furious spate
Outpouring, in some dreadful fate
Seemed to embroil both him and Kit—
Though what that cheeky little chit
Could have to do with him—well, he,
Lord knows, was blest if he could see!
Yet, he half-pitied her that she
Should have a dad the like of thon,
That blatherskite, God-fearing John,
Instead of Cold Steel. He'd a man
For father now: and in a van
Was bedded—he, who never before
Had slept outside Coldknuckles' door....
And now he snoozed—then suddenly
Stared with wide eyes, half-fearfully,
Into Old Roarer's gaping jaw,
While, by the bars, with lifted paw,
The lion glared and growled, as he,
Helping his father eagerly

To feed the beasts, had flung the red
Raw chunks towards that huge maned head..
And now he seemed to wince again
Beside the highroad in the rain,
And look again with shuddering awe
On nightmare creatures ... till he saw,
As drizzle changed to golden dust,
Those humped, and those trunked beasts were just
Camels and elephants, who stood,
Tucking in hay from racks of wood,
In the great shadowy lamplit tent...
And now he dozed again, quite spent;
And saw, in dream, the rumpled bed
At Coldknuckles—his mother's head
Tossing in sleep uneasily
On the crushed pillow....

But, even as he

Looked, that harsh wried familiar face
By some strange miracle gave place
To younger features; and he saw there
The chubby cheeks and curly hair
Of the sword-swallower's sonsy lass—
Though, somehow, it had come to pass
That, even as Kit lay there and smiled
In sleep, she was no more a child—
A woman, grown, whose waking eyes
Looked into his without surprise....

And now it seemed he strove to keep
His feet, against a flock of sheep
That charged him down a slippery steep,
Till he was buried in a heap
Of smothering fleeces ... and sank deep
In quiet dream-unhaunted sleep.

VII

Within the big-top the next afternoon,
Tranced by the razzle-dazzle and the noise,
Isaac sat glowing 'mid a gang of boys
At his first circus; while the jigging tune
The brassband blared set hopping in his breast
His jolly heart, as, with inane grimaces,
Leering, in rainbow tints, from chalk-white faces
Clowns capered, cackling out jest after jest.
And, as he snuffed the sawdust reek and heard
The melody and the laughter, that vast tent
Was paradise to him, as his wits went
Around it, somersaulting, then were stirred
To utter bliss, when, like a heavenly dream,
Suddenly surged into the outer ring
A torrent of white horses, flourishing

Long manes and tails, like foam, while, in a stream,
Keeping time with the music, round and round
They circled; and young Isaac's heart was whirled
In the swift maelstrom as it swept and swirled
And throbbed and thudded to the threshing sound.
Then turn on startling turn with eyes enthralled
He watched; and now it seemed his heart with ease
Swung to the tent-top on a high trapeze,
To drop into a pit of dread, appalled;
Then with the youngest acrobat, a boy
About his own age, a redheaded lad—
The hot blood coursing through his veins like mad
Until it seemed his heart must burst with joy—
He soared again in ever-wilder flights;
And now with Redpoll on her dappled grey
He balanced, tiptoe, as, serenely gay
She rode the ring in natty emerald tights;
Then pins and needles prickled through his veins
As grim black-avised John thrust sword and knife
Down his long gullet, till the very life
Seemed leaking out of Isaac's own pierced reins:
But, soon his heart revived when, winged with gauze
Of tinselled red, Kit pranced in on a plump
Wee piebald pony; and, at every jump,
His heart leapt with her, while, to loud applause,
She flashed through flaming hoops: and now at last,
After some score of sequin-spangled stars
Had dazzled him, a ring of iron bars
Was set up in the centre, while the vast
And breathless audience awaited in hushed awe
The grand finale; when from a wheeled cage
Abe's lions sprang, sullen with thwarted rage,
On to the sawdust; and now Isaac saw
His father in a leopard-skin arrayed
Holding them in subjection with a glance
From eyes of steel that countered each advance
They made towards him, starkly undismayed;
And with smart whip-cracks made those skulkers poise
On globes and bound through hoops and abjectly
Cower in the dust, while, calmly smoking, he
Stood on Old Roarer's skull....

The shattering noise

Of the applauding audience brattled still
Through Isaac's noddle as he left the tent,
Bamboozled; and with lagging footsteps went
Towards the caravan, to find young Bill,
Agape, and raking with resentful gaze
A figure seated on the steps, a black
Bolt-upright form; and Isaac started back,
Seeing his mother there, in stunned amaze.

VIII

Cowed in numb panic, gasping, he quaked there
With eyes that shrank to meet the shrivelling glare
That sapped his vitals; though, as yet, no word
She spoke, nor, from her rigid posture stirred:
for that crazed contemplation seemed a chain,
Shackling his limbs, to haul him back again
Home to Coldknuckles. Then she rose at last,
And clutched him by the arm; and, turning, cast
A scornful squint at the red caravan
And sniffed; then shrilled out fiercely "Come, my man,
It's time to end these cantrips. I have lost
A day, already. You don't count the cost
Of your calleevering: but, by hell, you'll learn,
You will, when you've got your own bread to earn
And thankless mouths to feed, that every bite
Has to be slaved for, and that it's no light
Job labouring life-long at picking stones,
Until I'm just a rackle of aching bones.
I can't afford to squander another day:
So, we had best be getting on our way.
'Twas luck I twigged, from what you splurged at me
Before you sulked, where you might chance to be."
She tugged his arm: he struggled to escape;
But, now her left hand nipped him by the nape
And held him, while she screeched out savagely
"You wastrel, you'll not get away from me
A second time, by God!—though you may be
Your gangrel of a father's very spit
And image, ay!—and he was quick to quit
When he had tricked and cheated me and had
His sport. Nay, you'll not follow him, my lad,
Not, though I've got to lug you by the scruff
Back to Coldknuckles. I've had more than enough
Of being left to struggle on my own
Till I am wellnigh worn to skin and bone
Without a hand to help. If I've my way,
I reckon to make your father's bastard pay
For his desertion. So, you may as well
Come quietly before I give you hell."

Desperately Isaac wriggled; when his eye
Caught sight of Abe and Redpoll standing by
With arms akimbo, grinning mockingly—
He, still in his spotted leopard-skin, and she,
In her green tights: and Ellen, turning, saw
Those jaunty figures; and, with sagging jaw,
Taken aback, gaped glowering, as Abe spoke,
Ironically smiling, "What's the joke?
What lark has the limb been up to? What's he done,
That you should lay your hand upon my son?"

"Your son?"

"My son."

"And not a jot you've cared
About your son—and mine!"

"Ay, true, we shared
The game of his begetting! But, you've had
More than your due of him since: so, now the lad
Chooses to let his father have a turn."

"Ay, now he's growing old enough to earn,
You'd filch him from me?—the fine father who
Deserted me and..."

"never even knew
He'd got a son!"

"left me to bear the blame
And bring disgrace upon my parents' name,
While he went gallivanting through the dirt
To tag himself to some newfangled skirt."

"Skirt, say you! Redpoll, you'd best slip inside
The van with those bold legs of yours and hide
Your shame from this chaste madam, and before
You catch your death of cold. I've little more
To say; and, sure enough, I ken no door
Could keep your ears from snooping all they care
To eavesdrop."

As now, Redpoll climbed the stair,
Smiling, she glanced at Ellen and said "Maybe,
Before you leave you'd like a cup of tea?"
In fury bridling, Ellen turned as though
To strike her: when Abe spoke again "Let go
The youngster's arm!" And, shrinking from the glare
Of his marrow-piercing liontamer stare,
Ellen obeyed, as Abe snapped clinchingly
"My testy termagant, attend to me!
If we could try the trick of Solomon,
Then we might, each of us, have half a son;
But, as we cannot split him, you may as well
Be hiking back again to your own hell."
And, while he spoke, Isaac saw with surprise
Something like admiration fire her eyes,
As Ellen looked at Cold Steel: then the grey
Eyes clouded as, downcast, she turned away
With a low sobbing moan: and, foiled, she went
Blindly by crowding caravan and tent,
Stumbling into the cauldribe winter gloam,
Without him, traiking towards her lonely home.

And then the fat voice from a nearby van
Wheezed "Well done, Cold Steel! Spoken like a man—
Ay, like a man! for men must have their way
At all costs, though the woman's left to pay."

TWO

I

His dearest wish, come true—to spend
His days with horses, and to tend
Their toilet till he knew each hair
In their groomed glossy coats, no care
Now haunted Isaac's happy days;
As over England by green ways
The circus roamed from fair to fair.
As month traipsed after month, and year,
Stravaiging year, he lost all fear
Of those unknown and nameless things—
Uncanny cruel cankerings
That through his uncouth and unkind
Upbringing had beset his mind.
Now cold neglect and nettling stings
Of nagging spite were clean forgot,
Since it had fallen to his lot
To share the generous circus-life
With his own father and Abe's wife,
Happy-go-lucky Redpoll, and
The rest of that odd friendly band
Of troupers. Though, at times, the knife
Of Cold Steel's tongue with caustic fierce
Stark daggered wit would seem to pierce
His very vitals, and, afraid,
He'd shrink from that keen scathing blade;
Yet, even as he squirmed, the smile
Lurking in those blue eyes the while
Would staunch the wound, when he obeyed
Wholeheartedly his father's will;
And he would feel again the thrill
To think that such a man could be
His parent—one who dauntlessly
A pride of lions could subdue,
And, as he put Old Roarer through
His paces, could lightheartedly
Outjest the cutest clown of all.
And, now he'd grown into a tall
And strapping open-hearted lad,
Among the company Isaac had
A host of friends; while only two—
Rabid John Molt, and Sambo, who
Would glump for days in rancid mad
Festering resentment at some jest
Of Cold Steel's, spurned him: all the rest
Were ever hail-fellow-well-met with him.
But he was closest chums with Jim,
The acrobat of his own age;
And the two, meeting, would engage
In friendly tussles, limb with limb
And tongue with tongue, when they were free

To court each other's company.

Jim was a good sort, sure enough,
Though a hot-headed blade—a tough
Customer to deal with when he'd got
A grievance. But, a nervy lot
Were all the acrobats: and he
Would somehow manage usually
To cool Jim's head, however hot.
Jim—ay, he never would forget
His madpash rage the day they met!
Isaac, cut up at something Kit
Had squawked, had given back the chit
As good as she gave; when loony Jim,
His dander raised, lunged out at him
And sent him staggering with a hit
Clean on the jaw. They'd fought it out;
And Jim, when Isaac set about
Him seriously, had given in;
And yet, somehow had seemed to win
The battle; for, as he lay there
With bloody snout and rumped hair,
He'd looked up with a friendly grin.

Even when Kit, though now more shy,
As, cock-a-hoop, he jaunted by,
Lashed out some sally that would flick
His self-conceit, he, now more quick
Of wit than she, when she let fly,
Would give her tit for tat. He held
No grudge against her now—impelled
To pity her that she should be
The victim of the tyranny
Of vile God-fearing John. And most
Of all the many-coloured host
Of horses that so happily
He helped to curry every day
And feed and water—sorrel, grey,
Cream, chestnut, roan, snow-white, jet-black—
He loved the pony on whose back
He'd seen Kit ride into the ring
With gauzy red wings fluttering—
The piebald that at every crack
Of the ringmaster's whip had reared
And snorted, while Kit lightly cleared
With easy spring the hoops of flame—
The skittish beast that none could tame
Save Kit, herself; and that, like her,
For all the check of bit and spur,
To hold its own was always game.
Yet, sometimes came into his head
The queer things the Fat Woman said
That first day about Kit and him.
And, though she hadn't mentioned Jim—

Only himself and Molt and Kit—
Jim somehow seemed involved in it.

And then his waffled wits would swim
In dizzy eddies, while cold sweat
Trickled until his brow was wet....
When he'd recall how mockingly
His father'd scorned her prophecy
About God-fearing John's grim death:
And now again with easier breath
He'd think of Kit more happily.

II

One night, as, under a clear moonlit sky,
With hands in pockets, Isaac sauntered by
The shadowy booths and caravans alone;
Dribbling with dawdling feet a rounded stone
Before him, harking back, he called to mind
The time when he'd seen Sambo jog behind
The circus-train that dwindled out of sight
Down the dark fell road into the wet night,
A rammelly figure, like a faceless clown,
On his white ass with long legs dangling down.
Softly he chuckled as he heard again
That sour voice muttering "The goddam rain!
O Jesus Christ, the goddam rain!" But, now
A vague dread troubled him, recalling how
Sambo would glower at his father's back
When Cold Steel, passing him, would chance to crack
Some joke at his expense; even though his face
Strained in a smirking wide white-toothed grimace
While Abe's eyes still were on him: and a cold
Shudder went through him, when, as now he strolled
By the big tent of the menagerie,
The canvas door-flap lifted furtively
And he saw Sambo stealthily sneak out.
He wondered what the devil he'd been about,
What mischief he'd been up to: for he'd got
No business there, well Isaac knew; and not
A soul was ever allowed inside the tent
While the beasts slept. Then, as the moocher went
Slinking into the shadows of the night,
Halted, uncertain, in the full moonlight,
Isaac, still rattled, heard a stunning roar
As a huge beast burst out through the tent-door
With tossing mane and, gnashing, pawed the ground;
While his moon-kindled eyes ranged all around,
To fix themselves on Isaac with a glare,
As, jellied in cold terror, he quaked there.
Then in a flash the brute towards him sprang;
And Isaac winced to see each separate fang

In that great gaping hellmouth of a jaw,
As, pinning him to earth with clamping paw,
Old Roarer snarled above him where he lay....
But, even as he seemed to pass away,
He caught his father's voice; and a clenched fist
Crashed on the monster's muzzle....

Then a mist

Smothered his senses, blanketing him in night....
And he knew nothing of the desperate fight
'Twixt man and beast that raged in the moonlight
About his body and how Cold Steel fought
With naked fists; till he at last was caught—
Just as, with iron bars and brands of flame,
To rescue him his circus-comrades came—
And crushed beneath those fatal pounding paws
And mauled and mangled by those steel-tanged claws....
Till, next day Isaac wakened in his bed
At length, to learn that Abraham was dead;
And how, even as he writhed, with gasping breath
He'd gibed into the very face of death,
Deriding, "Though the fat witch wouldn't tell
What she foresaw, it seems she knew too well!
But, anyhow, God-fearing John can spout
Above my corpse—'Your sins will find you out!'"

III

That night as in his bunk he lay
His wits in fevered disarray;
While, worn with weeping, Redpoll slept
With worried breathing; Isaac kept
Going over and over in his brain
Again, again, and yet again,
All that had happened since the night
By the fell road in flinching fright
He'd quailed with gooseflesh quivering....
Like tumbling clowns, galravitching
Around, grotesque, with painted faces
That leered in loony lewd grimaces
Which only iced his blood with dread,
Thoughts helter-skeltered through his head....
Again he heard those skirling owls;
The Death Coach rumbling; and the howls
Of the caged beasts.... And now his sight
Was dazzled by the lantern light;
And once again that ripping yell—
"Say, are we making straight for hell!"
Sang through his blood; and the steel-blue
Eyes of his father scanned him through.
For hell! Well, sure enough, he'd brought
Hell to his hapless father, caught

And mangled by those fiendish claws
And cruel crunching hellmouth jaws....

His father, smoking by the door
Of the red van, had heard the roar;
And strolled towards the menagerie,
Without foreboding, just to see
That all was well: when he had found
Isaac straked out upon the ground,
Helpless, beneath Old Roarer's paw;
And springing, even as he saw,
Without a care for his own hide,
Like lightning to the lion's side,
Flourished a fist and, with a shout,
Had socked it on its tender snout
To turn it from his son; and then,
The pluckiest of plucky men,
Had faced the beast's resentful rage,
And sought to trounce it to its cage
With naked neaves....

And now again

The looby clowns in Isaac's brain
Lolloped his sick thoughts round and round.
Until, no schoolboy now, he found
Himself back at Coldknuckles, where,
With eyes experience made aware,
Bewildered, by his mother's bed,
He watched that dream-tormented head
Toss on the pillow: and now he knew
All that poor Ellen had gone through,
To blight her heart with bitterness:
And, even in his own distress,
Felt for her, sensing all it cost
Her love in old days when she'd lost
Cold Steel, and learnt she'd got to live
Without him. He could nigh forgive
Her hardness to himself, now he
Could realise her misery,
Since he'd lost Cold Steel, too....

Next day,

He'd half a mind to break away,
To quit the circus, and return
To the old cottage by the burn
And help his mother ... help to keep...
There were worse jobs than minding sheep...
Sheep ... sheep....

And now he sank in deep
Unfevered and refreshing sleep.

And then, in dream, he stood again
By the dark turnpike in the rain,
As he had stood that fateful night:
Yet, now he looked with sheer delight
In the black mischief of Kit's eyes;

As, grinning at him with surprise,
Over the van's half-door she leant....
And then once more into the tent
She rode with red wings fluttering,
As the wee piebald round the ring
Cantered.... Then, through a hoop of flame...
That was the red van's door, she came—
As she had come to-day to stand
Beside him with a nervous hand
Fingering her lips; while dimmed eyes spoke
A wordless sympathy....

Then he woke,
As daylight streamed into the van—
A lad, no longer, but, a man.

THREE

I

Through the cold crystal of the April sky
Great clouds, like clipper-ships, from out the west
Swept, dappling rushy slack and craggy crest
With swift blue shadows as they billowed by:
And Isaac's heart sailed with them, through the clear
Noon lift careering; while up the fellroad,
Amid a clatter of hoofs, he gaily strode,
With the loose ponies bringing up the rear
Of the procession; as the circus-train
Across the Pennines travelled: and he heard
The welcome notes of each familiar bird,
Curlew and golden-plover, once again;
And those wild voices seemed to utter all
The unutterable joy that through his blood
Went rioting in a rejoicing flood,
Responsive to each mellow fluting call
And tingling whistle...

while he seemed to see
Kit stand, with dark curls drooping round her head,
As on that tragic morning by his bed;
Her bright eyes dimmed with utter sympathy.
For, in a flash he'd known, as she stood there,
Something his heart had never known before:
And, even when a shadow dusked the door,
As, with harsh croak, Molt stumbled up the stair;
And, like an evil-eyed old raven stood
Behind her; and, with visage sour and black
Had glowered at them, bidding Kit get back
To work, he'd felt that life might still be good,
In spite of all; as he, with heart aflame,
Looking into the future with fresh eyes,

Let go the past, rejoiced to realise
Nothing between them now could be the same.

II

They camped at sunset out beyond the town
Of Casdehaugh: when, as towards the stream
With other lads he led the horses down
To water them; still in a happy dream
Moving, and dazzled by the swirl and gleam,
Isaac saw on a nearby grassy rise
Kit standing, gazing with abstracted stare
Into the glow that kindled her dark eyes
And flecked with golden glints her night-black hair;
When, as with keen delight he watched her there,
He saw Jim join her—Jim, his friend—and now
Felt strangely envious, scarcely knowing why,
To see them stand, together, on the brow
Of the little knoll against the sunset sky.
Jim spoke to her; and, laughing in reply,
Kit turned to him: and, as her laughter rang
Merrily in his ears, through Isaac's breast
There shot an instant sharp and searching pang;
And through his veins there surged a hot unrest:
And, as the colour seeped from out the West,
When, with the others, up the stony bank
He drove the unwilling horses from their drink,
While with swift-dipping disc the red sun sank,
His heart within his bosom seemed to sink:
And, even when he spied a dark form slink
Towards the cheerful couple, and now heard
Kit's furious father call her every name
He could lay tongue to, though Isaac's heart was stirred
At the same instant to uneasy shame,
Just yet he could not bring himself to blame
The raging parent. Then, in horror, he,
Recovering, felt appalled to realise
He had given way to silly jealousy
Of his best friends, and seemed to sympathise,
Even for an instant, with the devilries
Of the maniac who made Kit's life a hell,
Because his wife, finding wedlock too grim,
Had left him. True, you couldn't always tell
What Jim was up to: but, anyhow, if Jim
Was out for trouble, he could settle him!
And Kit, though much too plucky to let on
What she'd got to put up with, well he knew
In the black van with grim God-fearing John
Had little enough for laughter, it was true—
And why, then, grudge the lass a chuckle or two!

So, all the horses stabled and rubbed down,

He loitered in the shadow of a tent,
Until towards the little market-town,
With Bible tucked beneath his arm, Molt went,
A gawky sombre-visaged figure, bent
On playing the prophet, belching out hellfire
Over the loafers in the market-square.
Then Isaac, urgent for his heart's desire,
Made for the black van, trusting to find there
Kit, by herself; and though, with casual air
Among the lighted tents and vans he strolled,
As if he were but idly pottering,
Like the fiery white mare none but Kit could hold,
Which bore her nowadays around the ring,
Within his breast his heart went galloping
Towards her; and he knew, at all costs, he
Must try his luck and once for all speak out
His heart to her, must speak out, even though she
Should laugh into his very face and flout
His love, or, angrily send him about
His business.

But, now, on coming there,
He found the van in darkness—not a light
From door or window glanced, as, by the stair
He stayed distracted in the heart of night;
And all his eager hopes were put to flight,
Fearing that Kit, perhaps...

And now again
He saw those figures in the sunset gleam;
And his hot heart was shot with searing pain,
While, in the very nightmare of a dream,
His withers wrung, he heard the raucous stream
Of Bible-curses; and his bosom burned
With furious trouble as he made to go
With stumbling steps...

But, in a jiffy turned,
When from the caravan there came a low
And stifled sobbing: and, relieved to know
That Kit was there; yet, wondering why she wept
Alone there in the darkness, up the stair
With one brisk bound he scrambled and then stept
Over the half-door of the van: but, there
Saw nothing and heard nothing, till the flare,
As now he struck a match, suddenly lit
The dark interior: when, with eyelids red
With weeping, staring at him, he saw Kit
Straiked stiffly at full length upon her bed.
Then, as his startled eyes from her still head
Shifted, he saw now why so rigidly
She lay, and that her arms were tightly bound
Against her sides by a broad belt; and he
Now noticed yet another strap around
Her ankles was drawn tight. Without a sound
She still stared at him, as impetuously
He leapt across the van and, working fast,

Undid the buckled bonds and set her free.
Yet, even when her limbs were loosed at last.
She still lay motionless and mute as he
Lighted a candle; and now anxiously
Looked down at her: and, when she did not stir
Nor speak; and in her eyes no glimmering
Of her quick spirit gleamed, he questioned her,
Until she roused and in a quivering
Fury sat up: then with an angry fling
Swung back the tangled locks from her pale face;
And for the first time poured into his ears,
Speaking with sobbing breath at pelting pace,
The gruesome story of her girlish years;
While down her cheeks, unchecked, a spate of tears
Teemed: and he learnt how, since her mother'd fled,
On Kit her father had vented all his spite,
And how she'd dwelt with him in constant dread
Of his maniacal frenzies day and night,
And how, if he so much as caught a sight
Of her with any lad, he'd larrup the life
Well-nigh out of her body; and, no doubt
Fearing she'd try to leave him, like his wife,
When after dark he wanted to go out
He always bound her to her bed with stout
Straps pinioning her.

And now that she had done,
Isaac, who'd hearkened with a savage grin,
Growled "Just you wait till he..."

"And you, the son
Of Cold Steel!"

"Just you wait till he comes in!
He'll hear from me..."

"From you, the child of sin!
Do you think he'd even heed a word from you?"
Kit gave a troubled smile. "Nay: you'd best go
Before he can get back. If he but knew
You had been here, he'd do me in; and so,
You'd better bunk before he gets to know.
There's not a soul in all the world that he
Hated like Cold Steel; and if he twigged that I..."

"Hobnobbed with Cold Steel's bastard? Ay, I see!
And you, yourself, too, likely?"

In reply
Kit glanced at him: and with a choking cry
He caught her to him; and a moment they
Were clasped together: and then anxiously
Kit struggled free; and, thrusting him away,
Cried "Nay! You must clear out before..."

But he
Smiled down at her, announcing quietly
"When I leave, you leave with me."

With a stare
Of half-incredulous hope and eyes alight

Kit gaped at him; then whispered "Ay—but, where—
Where could we make for at this time of night?"
Grudgingly he admitted "Ay, you're right!
We'll have to set about it cannily
And plot things out if we're to get away
Without your father kenning, and so that he
Can't sleuth us: yet, though you may need to stay
A bit before we hook it, the first day
We sniff the ghost of a chance of making it
In safety, we'll skedaddle at once and take
The road, together. Ay, by God, we'll flit
At the first inkling, even though it should break
Your father's heart!"

"Then scoot, for goodness sake,
Before he comes and cops you here; unless
You're feeling sorry for him and want to wait
Till he prowls back from preaching and confess
Your sinful schemes, or, it will be too late!"
Kit cried: and then she seemed to hesitate;
And now, as though reluctantly, she said
"Before you quit, it would be well, maybe,
To truss me up again upon the bed,
And buckle up the straps; or, certainly,
He'll guess that someone has been here with me."

"To think that I" laughed Isaac, as he drew
The straps about her limbs, but, not so tight,
"Should aid your father to imprison you!"
Then, kissing her again he dowsed the light
And over the half-door slept into the night.

III

He paused an instant by the stair,
Breathing the fresh and glittering air:
For now the risen moon with still
Enchantment lusted heath and hill;
And seemed to light his very blood
As through his body the full flood
Of joyful passion surged, now he
Knew Kit was his—that he and she
Should face life with a single heart,
Together....

Then he gave a start
And in his bosom his heart leapt,
As someone from the shadow stept:
And now he saw that it was Jim
Who stood there glowering at him.
While Isaac, flummoxed, with a stare
Gaped at him, Jim began to square
His shoulders and then smartly struck,
Mumbling "It seems you've had the luck

With Kit, Coldknuckles, at least, so far:
But, from now on you'll have to spar
To keep it—ay, by hell, you will!"
Then as, unruffled, Isaac still
Eyed him, Jim paused: and Isaac spoke
"I don't much like this sort of joke;
But, if you're keen to smash your face
Upon my fist, this is no place
To set to work. Before we know,
Kit's father will be back: and so,
If you don't want him butting in
Before I even can begin
To spoil your phizgog, we must find
A quiet spot away behind
The whins, where I can in a tick
Settle your hash, with just a lick
Across your gob, and yark your hide,
Till you'll regret you even tried
Your tricks on me. A punch or two
Should polish off a runt lie you:
And, when they swipe you on the snout,
Happen, before I've knocked you out,
You'll feel my knuckles not so cold."

So, Jim, assenting with a bold
Defiant swagger, towards the whins
Turned, crying "And the best man wins!"
And Isaac, following, in the light
They faced each other, stript to fight.
They faced each other: but, now Jim
Daffled as though doubt dothered him;
While Isaac still withheld the blow
That would have laid his best friend low:
And then Jim sighed "I always knew
I'd never half a chance with you;
For you were always first with Kit:
But, if you feel you've got to hit,
I'll take my punishment all right:
Though, even if I won the fight,
'Twould make no difference with her."
But, Isaac, smiling, did not stir:
And with a shuddering moan Jim sank
All of a heap upon the bank:
When Isaac down beside him dropt
And waited till the shudders stopt:
Then quietly he spoke to him
"Come, tell me just what took you, Jim?"
And now Jim answered with a groan
"Coldknuckles, I have always known
That you were much the better man:
Yet, when I saw you quit the van
Where you had been with Kit, I felt
I'd got to give your gob a welt."
"Ay, ay, Jim, I quite understand!"

Now Isaac laid a kindly hand
Upon Jim's shoulder; and began
To tell how he within the van
Had found poor Kit strapt to her bed....
And Jim, at every word he said,
Quivered with anger; and, when he knew
What Kit and Isaac planned to do,
He sprang up shouting eagerly
"You leave God-fearing John to me!
And, when you've got all set to go,
Just drop a hint and let me know.
I'm damned, if I don't find a way
To keep him busy all that day!
Happen, a Sunday would be best:
For Sunday is no Day of Rest
With John, if he can find a few
Gowks who don't mind being spouted to
And told how they will frizzle and fry
In hell in the sweet by and by."

Now, squatting there in the moonlight,
Together, far into the night
They talked things over and made plans:
Then quietly by the darkened vans,
Parting with Jim, Coldknuckles crept
Back to the tent where now he slept.

IV

God-fearing John, to his surprise,
Slowly began to realise
That he at length had gained, in Jim,
Whom he had looked on as a limb
Of Satan and the Devil's own,
His first disciple. Now, alone,
Somehow, he seldom seemed to be;
For Jim was always fleechingly
Waiting to hearken to each word
He uttered, like a new-hatched bird
Gaping beneath its parent's bill
To gobble up its wormy fill.
And when to town, on preaching bent,
John went Jim always with him went,
John's Bible tucked beneath his arm;
And though with something of alarm
Jim's folk resented in amaze
This sudden queer newfangled craze,
And little relished Jim should be
So much in John Molt's company,
Jim never gave a word away
Or let out aught that might betray
What he was up to....

Then at last
The Sunday dawned that had been cast
For the adventure; and Jim strode
With thumping heart down the steep road,
Resolved, whatever might betide,
Never to quit Kit's father's side
Or lose sight of God-fearing John
Until the lovers were safely gone.

V

When Molt and Jim were well upon their way,
As though just relishing a slacker day,
Isaac slouched veering towards the van and stood
Bantering Kit: then towards the fresh larchwood
Beyond the camp they sauntered, chattering
Casually, as though they hadn't got a thing
Upon their minds; till they were out of sight
Of curious eyes. Now, bearing to the right,
They crossed the fells until they struck a road
Running due north; when, side by side, they strode
With steady pace, determined that by night
They'd be some twenty miles upon their flight
Towards Coldknuckles; where Isaac hoped to find,
If not a welcome, a not too unkind
Reception; feeling no one could resist,
Save her cracked father with his cranky twist
Of woman-hatred, Kit's enticing ways.
He reckoned it should take them but three days
To reach his old home. Yet, it did not seem,
As they kept on together in a dream
Of sheer and unbelievable delight—
While all about them in haphazard flight
The lapwings flickered over heath and bent—
To matter to him how, or, where they went,
So that they went together, friend with friend,
Or, even, if their journey had no end,
Or, coming to Coldknuckles, what they'd find
Awaiting them. It seemed they'd left behind
All tribulations; and had now, indeed,
Each in the other, all that they could need.

They walked awhile in silence, drinking in
The sunny April airs that set their skin
Tingling and brisked their blood, as on they strode,
To kindling streams of careless glee that flowed
Through glowing veins from happy hearts that beat
In time and tune with their swift-stepping feet.

But, when at noon they squatted down to eat
The scrumptious sandwiches of bread and meat,
Kit had thought on to bring, beside a burn

That tumbled down a brae through tawny fern;
As they with youth's keen sharpset relish chewed,
They seemed to drop into another mood;
And both recalled now, as if with one mind,
The only things they'd had to leave behind
Regretfully; and with a saddened air
Kit talked of Snowflake, her beloved mare;
And Isaac with slow speech and troubled brow
Of all the horses he adored, that now
He'd had to trust to other hands to tend,
Murmuring their names. But, when he'd reached the end,
Kit sat up with a jerk; and now exclaimed,
While her black eyes with angry passion flamed,
"I'd sooner slit my weasand with your jack-knife
Than go back now to that old loathsome life:
Nay, not for Snowflake, nor, for anything,
Though I was happy riding round the ring,
Could I re-live the hellish life I've had
To lead since Mother left me to that mad
Sword-swallower of a father!"

Isaac smiled

With lively eyes: and then Kit's eyes grew mild
As now she watched the blackface-lambs at play,
Scampering about their mothers on the brae
With jerky side-leaps and weak waffling cries:
And, while she cherished them with fondling eyes,
As they frisked scrambling down a rocky steep,
She murmured "'Twould be good to live with sheep:
Their bleating's soothing, after all the rant
I've had to thole; and they, at least, don't cant:
And, looking after lambs—if I could be
A shepherd, that's the life that would suit me
Down to the ground."

Now Isaac gaped at her

Astounded: then old thoughts began to stir;
And he recalled how utterly he'd scorned
Sheep—Herdwicks, Cheviots, and even the horned
Nimble blackfaces—scorned them, as compared
With horses: but, as now afresh he stared
At the far-scattered flock that calmly grazed
The fell, he looked on ewes and lambs amazed
As though he saw them for the first time through
Kit's kindly eyes, as something strange and new.
Then, glancing round at her with puzzled eyes,
He stammered out, much to his own surprise,
"A shepherd, ay—happen, when I get back
I'll try to get a job with Farmer Black."

Now, springing to her feet, Kit softly laughed;
And, as they took the road again, she chaffed—
"You, Cold Steel's son—and you may come to keep,
Instead of roaring lions, baa-ing sheep!
He'd turn within his grave to think what you,
The lion-tamer's son, had taken to."

But, Isaac, sniffing the fleece-scented breeze
With relish, answered her, now more at ease—
"Ay—but, my mother's folk have all been herds."
And, as he spoke, it seemed the very words
Settled the question for him once for all.

And so, they went their way till evenfall;
When, bedded on the littered straw within
A barn by singing waters of a linn
Whose music seemed the voice of spring moonlight,
Their love fulfilled, they slumbered through the night,
Fagged-out...

till Isaac wakened in affright
From nightmare; and looked out into the grey
Chill glimmer of the dallying dawn of day,
Retracing in his mind what he had dreamed,
Held in bloodcurdling horror....

He had seemed

To stand upon a naked moor alone
Beside an old rain-pitted sarsen-stone,
When he with apprehensive eyes had seen
A figure pledging towards him through the green
Thick sluther of the moss: and, as he gazed
Upon that floundering fugitive, amazed
He realised that it was Jim. And now,
With the sweat streaming from his anguished brow,
Bogged in the mire waist-deep, Jim seemed to stand
Before him; when, as Isaac stretched a hand
To haul him out, into the quaggy night
Of black peathags Jim disappeared from sight.
But now, as Isaac lay uneasily
And questioned with a chilled heart what might be
The meaning of his dream, Kit turned her head
And wakened, smiling. Not a word he said
To her anent it: yet, throughout the day
Qualms about Jim, as they went on their way,
Would cut him to the quick.

But, the next night

He slept, undreaming; and the sparkling light
Of the last morning of their journey seemed
To break the spell as the first sunray gleamed
And turned to gold their rustling dry straw-bed
And kindled glints on Kit's black curly head,
While, snuggling by his side, she slumbered still.

So, unforeboding, on they fared until,
As the hours swiftly drew towards sunset,
They reached at length the spot where first they met.
Now, Isaac, stopping, clearly saw again
The black van drawn up in the drizzling rain,
And Kit, just newly tumbled out of bed,
Above the half-door perk her tousled head
With quizzing grin.... And, with eyes twinkling bright,
Chuckling, Kit, too, recalled that fateful night.

Then, as they climbed, together, the steep rise
And reached the signpost, Isaac with surprise
Saw a smart horse and trap were halted there—
The driver greeting them with a fixed stare,
As now they crossed the bridge and took the turn
Towards Coldknuckles up the Caller Burn.
And, when they'd scaled the brae and stood before
The cottage threshold, instantly the door
Opened and Ellen Bell, with hand on latch,
Stood underneath the wind-torn eaves of thatch,
Peering with eyes that seemed to pierce them through;
Then said "You've come? They're waiting here for you."

Startled, they paused, and made as though to turn:
But, now they found the driver up the burn
Had followed them and close behind them stood,
As stolid as a figure carved in wood.
And so, they crossed the threshold, wondering
What chance had brought them this strange welcoming.

Now, as they entered, from the fireside chair
Another stranger scanned them with shrewd stare:
Then spoke "I take it, you are Isaac Bell
And Katherine Molt?—I've got ill news to tell."
Adding, as Isaac nodded: then, with head
Turned towards Kit, in kinder accents said
"The day you left, your father was found dead."
And while they stared back at him in stark dread,
Went on—"Though Molt was murdered, it may be
You two know nothing: that remains to see:
But, a young acrobat, a lad called Jim—
And, seemingly, you both were thick with him—
Has given himself up. So, whether or no,
You had a hand in it, you've got to go
Right back to Castlehaugh for questioning—
Though Jim may be the only one to swing.
Come, we had best be gadding."

The two men

Now closed on Kit and Isaac; and briskly then
Past Ellen hustled them towards the door,
While she stood, as though fettered to the floor,
In a shocked stupor with a witless stare
Fixed on them, seeming scarcely half-aware
Of what was happening. But, now she broke
Her silence: clutching Isaac's arm, she spoke
With strangely stuttering tongue "Before you go,
Isaac, at least you've got to let me know
If all is well with Abe?" As Isaac said,
Turning towards her gently "Cold Steel's dead."
She loosed her clasp and seemed about to fall;
But, steadying herself against the wall,
Stared after them until they closed the door;
Then slithered, senseless, to the flagstone floor.

VI

As down the long and empty road
That Sunday they together strode,
Jim wheedlingly kept prattling on,
Trying to beguile God-fearing John:
But Molt, hunched in a hangdog mood,
In wry-mouthed silence seemed to brood
Mistrustfully; and now as Jim,
Uneasy, glanced askew at him,
While on he stumped at stolid pace,
Unanswering, in that black-jowled face
With worried eyes he seemed to see
The threat of some calamity,
Some vicious doom that, vague, unknown,
Yet chilled him to the marrowbone.
But, even while his blood crept cold
Within his veins, he kept a hold
Of hope—and now with eyes alight
He seemed to see his friends in flight
Already and well on their way
Together into the new day,
With all their troubles left behind.
Then once again that undefined
Dark menace seemed to frustrate all—
Though, safely and beyond recall,
Surely, by now they must have gone....
When, with a start he now saw John
Abruptly halt and lower down
On him with a suspicious frown
Wrinkling his low and beetling brow.
Then, still without a word, Molt now
Swung sharply round and left Jim's side,
Back towards the camp with dogged stride
Stalking: and in acute concern
Jim followed him to the first turn,
Uncertainly: for all seemed lost:
And then he knew at any cost
Molt must be stopt. He called to John:
But John still stubbornly kept on
Towards the camp and never turned.
And now a flare of anger burned
Jim's heart to fury and the blood
Flushed through his veins in frenzied flood;
And with a frantic wild despair
He nimbly sprang into the air,
As though he leapt to a trapeze:
Then with sure acrobatic ease
Dropt down on John, with shanks hooked round
His neck, and felled him to the ground
With a sharp smashing thud.

Unhurt,

Himself, Jim sprang up, still alert
To keep John down: when in dismay
He saw that in the dust Molt lay
Unstirring, with a bloody head
Awry; and knew that he was dead,
His lank neck broken by the fall.
And, as Jim stooped beside him, all
The horror of his reckless rash
Demented deed plumped with a crash
Upon his young dumfounded mind,
Blacking out all; and stunned and blind
He hung beside the body: then,
As consciousness seeped back again,
In instant frantic panic he,
Lugging the limp corpse, flurriedly
Buried it deep in roadside fern.

Uncertain now which way to turn,
He stood there, panting: then, as he
About him now glanced furtively,
Within the brake, alarmed, he saw
A lurking weasel from whose jaw
Dangled a dead grass-snake—and knew,
Like it, he was a killer, too:
Yet, now those sleuthing eyes of jet
Seemed in cold accusation set
Upon him, and he felt that he
Could never dodge discovery
Of his hot-headed crime, since those
Detective eyes had scanned him close—
That he in vain had sought to hide
The murdered corpse by the roadside.

With hunted heart, distraught he stood;
Then leapt the dyke; and through a wood,
Trampling the windflowers and bluebells,
He trekked towards the higher fells,
Still scarcely knowing where he went
Plunging across the tussocked bent;
While startled grouse across his track
Swerved, clucking out "Go back! Go back!"
Or, so it seemed to his scared ears.

But, on he forged, hag-rid with fears,
Till his feet floundering on the brink
Of Hellpit Moss began to sink:
And, as he sank, it seemed to Jim
That this was the best end for him—
'Twere better far, if he must die,
Beneath the black peathags to lie,
Than dangle from a gallows-tree....
When, through his mind flashed vividly
The thought of Kit and Isaac—they

Were, surely, well upon their way...

Were safely...

Yet, if Molt were found—

And they were missing!

To firm ground

He struggled wildly at the thought

Of what might chance, should they be caught

And charged with murder ... they might swing

For him!

So, now through bent and ling,

The grouse still clucking out "Go back!"

Hastily he retraced the track

Over the brae; and, stumbling down

To the highroad, towards the town

He slogged on at impetuous pace

Until he reached the market-place.

VII

While back towards Castlehaugh again

They travelled, first by trap, then train,

Isaac in dream, still seemed to see

His mother staring crazily...

When those dark eyes appeared to turn

To steely piercing blue and burn

Clean through him; and, without surprise

He looked into his father's eyes—

His father, who had died for him,

Had died to save him.... And now Jim—

Jim, too, it seemed.... He couldn't guess

By what unlucky chance, unless

John had turned vicious.... Jim, he knew,

Hot-headed as he was, would do

For Kit's sake anything short of... Ay!

But, this was murder, seemingly:

God-fearing John had been found dead;

And Jim, so the policeman said,

Had given himself up. And they,

Kit and himself..

In tense dismay

He turned his anxious eyes to her,

Where mute she sat and did not stir,

Bolt-upright in the lamp's dim light,

And stared out into the black night

That seemed to swallow the swift train.

What thoughts were harassing her brain

He could but guess. He longed to speak

A word or two to her and seek

To bring some comfort to her heart:

But, they'd been strictly kept apart

Since they set out and not allowed

To talk: and, even when the crowd
Jogged them together as the train
Had drawn up, he had tried in vain
To get a word with her. If he
By some sign could but let her see
That 'twas not for themselves he feared!
He'd little doubt they would be cleared
By Jim's confession. But, 'twould be Jim
Kit thought of, what fate threatened him,
And not herself. For, even though
They went scot-free, what they would owe
To Jim, he dared not even think!

And now, in dream, he saw Jim sink
Into that nightmare moss again;
While he, himself, stretched out in vain
A helpless hand—his dream, come true—
And nothing, nothing he could do,
To rescue Jim from jeopardy,
Even should the questioning leave them free—
Free to live out their lives in peace,
For which Jim paid—ay, their release
Might cost Jim's life. Security
Was always charged for, seemingly:
And, if life granted happiness,
'Twas at expense of the distress
Of someone else. Already Jim,
Even though this had not come to him,
In losing Kit and lending aid
To win them happiness, had paid
In his unselfish sacrifice
A bitter and heartbreaking price,
That, had luck chanced to load the dice
Against himself, he felt sure he
Would never have paid willingly.

Then he recalled what had been said
By the Fat Woman, long since dead.
Her prophecy had come too true—
Ay, and it seemed his father's, too!

So, to the rumble of the train,
These thoughts went round and round again
A sawdust ring within his brain...
Once more his mother's eyes would burn
With hectic glare; and then would turn
By some strange magic, ere he knew,
To Cold Steel's eyes of stabbing blue
Fierce twinkling fire...

till, in a daze

He drowsed; and saw now in amaze
Jim lightly leap, with lively toss
Of red locks, from the squelching moss
Into the air and swing with ease

Across the sky on a trapeze;
When, letting go, in soaring flight
He vanished in celestial light.

VIII

Isaac and Kit once more drew near the dyke
Where the track branched off up the Callersyke:
Then, heavy-hearted, up the brackened brae
With weary stumbling steps they took their way;
Till, on the threshold, now they stood before
Coldknuckles' close-shut warped and weathered door,
With eyes that on the worn boards seemed to see
Pictured the whole infernal misery
Of these last weeks; and Jim, their faithful friend,
In clink, awaiting in his cell the end—
The end his loyalty to them had brought.
And Isaac winced, galled by the gruelling thought—
If he had not on that November day
Opened this very door and stolen away
To seek his fortune, even now Jim might
Above the circus-ring in aerial flight
Be shooting, swallow-like, from one trapeze
To another with his old deceptive ease....
Ay, and his father, too, be lording it
Among the lions, if only...

And yet, Kit—

What would be happening to Kit, if he
Had never ventured—would not she still be
Her father's victim?

If—but, 'twas too late
To think of "ifs": and none could dodge their fate;
Not even haughty Cold Steel, who at least
Appeared to swank it over man and beast
With steady eye and stinging tongue. You'd got
To take your luck in life, like it, or not.
Again he saw the fat witch sitting mum;
And heard Abe swagger "What's to come, will come!"
And recollected how with his last breath
Cold Steel had jested in the jaws of death.

And now, as still they gazed at the grey wood,
The door half-opened; and a stranger stood,
A scrawny wife, eyeing them narrowly;
Then sharply spoke "You're Ellen's son, maybe?"
And, when he answered "Ay!" she told them all
That had occurred.

One day she'd chanced to call

In passing and, on opening the door—
Her rap, unanswered—slumped down on the floor
She had discovered Ellen with her head
In a pool of blood; and had taken her for dead;

But, found that still she breathed. 'Twould seem that she
Had fallen in a fit and helplessly
Had lain there, for how long she could not say:
And she'd been tending Ellen since that day;
Just slipping home at whiles to get things done
As best she could contrive. But, now her son
Was back, she might trust Ellen to his care,
And tackle her own tasks. 'Twas hardly fair,
Quitting her family for so long to fend
For their own selves. Ellen had been no friend
To put yourself out for: since she was young
She'd always had a nippy nagging tongue:
But, finding her like that, she couldn't well
Leave her to die, alone—for, who could tell
Whose ghost might haunt you? She'd not raised her head
Once, since she had been lifted to her bed;
But, lain there, senseless, and had scarcely stirred—
Ay, and she'd never breathed a single word,
Not even a complaint, when, from a cup,
She now and then would manage to dribble a sup
Of soup between her lips. Queer, aught should keep
Ellen from grouching; but, she seemed to sleep,
Even with open eyes. 'Twas hard to know
How long she'd last: but, she, herself, must go,
Since she could leave her in his hands: and he,
With the young wench, whoever she might be,
Should manage to look after her.

And now,

Sleeking the dank hair back from Ellen's brow
She bade good-day to them; and shut the door
Behind her: when across the sanded floor
Isaac tiptoed towards his mother's bed;
And stood there looking down on that still head,
Whose blank eyes gazed up at him with a blind
Unrecognising stare. 'Twas strange to find
His mother mute—so seldom at a loss,
Of old, to greet his coming with a cross
Cantankerous mutter.

But now, startlingly,

A light sprang in her eyes, that seemed to see
Someone she knew; and, lifting up her head,
She whispered "Cold Steel!" and then sank back, dead.

IX

A year went by; and spring came round again
To Coldknuckles; when, dreaming by the peat,
Awaiting Isaac, Kit could hear the sleet
Slashing in gusty squalls against the pane,
And the uproarious brawling of the burn
That crashed down by the cottage in full spate.

She knew the lambing would keep Isaac late;
But, sorely now she longed for his return,
To keep her mind from dwelling on the past
And the mischancy happenings that had wrought
Their still precarious blessings, and had brought
Them through such dire distresses home at last.
Though life went easy with them now, she knew
The horror out of which so desperately
They'd snatched their wedded bliss, remorselessly,
For all his courage, haunted Isaac, too:
And, even when the rapture of desire
Drew them together, she would still surprise
The pang of recollection in his eyes
Blurring the brilliance of their blue fire.

Now Isaac's hand unsnecked the rattling door;
And, springing up, Kit saw him smiling there,
With the wet dripping from his glistening hair
And sleet-soused plaid on to the sanded floor:
And, as he stood there, while the firelight played
On his chilled face, she saw he held a wee
Black motherless lamb; that now he tenderly
Before the fire on the rag hearthrug laid
For her to nurse. Then he looked up at her,
Still smiling; and, now chuckling like Cold Steel,
Remarked "'Twould seem that you've brought life to heel,
To do your bidding, Kit—a well-trained cur!
You've got me, minding sheep; and now, as well,
A lamb to mother, as you wished the day
We guzzled sandwiches upon the brae.
So, though I've got to nip back to the stell,
To-night you won't be lonesome, with the mite
To see to and to keep you company.
But, I had best be off, or, there will be
More orphans to bring back before daylight."

And now Kit filled for him a can of tea
To take out to the bield with him, and cut
Thick slabs of bread and cheese, that, in the hut,
He'd not go hungry; while he patiently
Awaited through the night, alert to aid
The ewes in labour, helping them to bring
New life to birth and ease their suffering.

And, when he'd left, as, now no more afraid
Of life, with black curls clustered round her head,
Kit crouched with the milk-bottle by the peat,
And heard the wee beast sucking at the teat,
Her thoughts no longer brooded on the dead.