

IN THE SALT MARSHES

I

MILES, and miles, and miles of desolation !

Leagues on leagues on leagues without a change !
Sign or token of some eldest nation

Here would make the strange land not so strange.
Time-forgotten, yea since time's creation,

Seem these borders where the sea-birds range.

Slowly, gladly, full of peace and wonder

Grows his heart who journeys here alone.
Earth and all its thoughts of earth sink under
Deep as deep in water sinks a stone.
Hardly knows it if the rollers thunder,
Hardly whence the lonely wind is blown.

Tall the plumage of the rush-flower tosses,

Sharp and soft in many a curve and line
Gleam and glow the sea-coloured marsh-mosses,
Salt and splendid from the circling brine.
Streak on streak of glimmering seashine crosses
All the land sea-saturate as with wine.

Far, and far between, in divers orders,
Clear grey steeples cleave the low grey sky ;
Fast and firm as time-unshaken warders,
Hearts made sure by faith, by hope made high.
These alone in all the wild sea-borders
Fear no blast of days and nights that die.

All the land is like as one man's face is,
Pale and troubled still with change of cares.
Doubt and death pervade her clouded spaces :
Strength and length of life and peace are theirs ;
Theirs alone amid these weary places,
Seeing not how the wild world frets and fares.

Firm and fast where all is cloud that changes,
Cloud-clogged sunlight, cloud by sunlight thinned,
Stern and sweet, above the sand-hill ranges
Watch the towers and tombs of men that sinned
Once, now calm as earth whose only change is
Wind, and light, and wind, and cloud, and wind.

Out and in and out the sharp straits wander,
In and out and in the wild way strives,
Starred and paved and lined with flowers that squander
Gold as golden as the gold of hives,
Salt and moist and multiform : but yonder,
See, what sign of life or death survives ?

Seen then only when the songs of olden
Harps were young whose echoes yet endure,
Hymned of Homer when his years were golden,
Known of only when the world was pure,
Here is Hades, manifest, beholden,
Surely, surely here, if aught be sure!

Where the border-line was crossed, that, sundering
Death from life, keeps weariness from rest,
None can tell, who fares here forward wondering;
None may doubt but here might end his quest,
Here life's lightning joys and woes once thundering
Sea-like round him cease like storm suppressed.

Here the wise wave-wandering steadfast-hearted
Guest of many a lord of many a land
Saw the shape or shade of years departed,
Saw the semblance risen and hard at hand,
Saw the mother long from love's reach parted,
Anticleia, like a statue stand.

Statue? nay, nor tissued image woven
Fair on hangings in his father's hall;
Nay, too fast her faith of heart was proven,
Far too firm her loveliest love of all;
Love wherethrough the loving heart was cloven,
Love that hears not when the loud Fates call;

Love hat lives and stands up re-created
Then when life has ebb'd and anguish fled ;
Love more strong than death or all things fated,
Child's and mother's, lit by love and led ;
Love that found what life so long awaited
Here, when life came down among the dead.

Here, where never came alive another,
Came her son across the Sundering tide
Crossed before by many a warrior brother
Once that warred on Ilion at his side ;
Here spread forth vain hands to clasp the mother
Dead, that sorrowing for his love's sake died.

Parted, though by narrowest of divisions,
Clasp he might not, only might implore,
Sundered yet by bitterest of derisions,
Son, and mother from the son she bore—
Here ? But all dispeopled here of visions
Lies, forlorn of shadows even, the shore.

All too sweet such men's Hellenic speech is,
All too fain they lived of light to see,
Once to see the darkness of these beaches,
Once to sing this Hades found of me
Ghostless, all its gulfs and creeks and reaches,
Sky, and shore, and cloud, and waste, and sea.

II

But aloft and afront of me faring
Far forward as folk in a dream
That strive, between doubting and daring,
Right on till the goal for them gleam,
Full forth till their goal on them lighten,
The harbour where fain they would be,
What headlands there darken and brighten ?
What change in the sea ?

What houses and woodlands that nestle
Safe inland to lee of the hill
As it slopes from the headlands that wrestle
And succumb to the strong sea's will ?
Truce is not, nor respite, nor pity,
For the battle is waged not of hands
Where over the grave of a city
The ghost of it stands.

Where the wings of the sea-wind slacken,
Green lawns to the landward thrive,
Fields brighten and pine-woods blacken,
And the heat in their heart is alive ;

They blossom and warble and murmur,
For the sense of their spirit is free ;
But harder to shoreward and firmer
The grasp of the sea.

Like ashes the low cliffs crumble,
The banks drop down into dust,
The heights of the hills are made humble,
As a reed's is the strength of their trust :
As a city's that armies environ,
The strength of their stay is of sand :
But the grasp of the sea is as iron,
Laid hard on the land.

A land that is thirstier than ruin ;
A sea that is hungrier than death ;
Heaped hills that a tree never grew in ;
Wide sands where the wave draws breath ;
All solace is here for the spirit
That ever for ever may be
For the soul of thy son to inherit,
My mother, my sea.

O delight of the headlands and beaches !
O desire of the wind on the wold,
More glad than a man's when it reaches
That end which it sought from of old,

And the palm of possession is dreary
To the sense that in search of it sinned ;
But nor satisfied ever nor weary
Is ever the wind.

The delight that he takes but in living
Is more than of all things that live ;
For the world that has all things for giving
Has nothing so goodly to give ;
But more than delight his desire is,
For the goal where his pinions would be
Is immortal as air or as fire is,
Immense as the sea.

Though hence come the moan that he borrows
From darkness and depth of the night,
Though hence be the spring of his sorrows,
Hence too is the joy of his might ;
The delight that his doom is for ever
To seek and desire and rejoice,
And the sense that eternity never
Shall silence his voice,

That satiety never may stifle
Nor weariness ever estrange
Nor time be so strong as to rifle
Nor change be so great as to change

His gift that renews in the giving
The joy that exalts him to be
Alone of all elements living
The lord of the sea.

What is fire, that its flame should consume her ?
More fierce than all fires are her waves :
What is earth, that its gulfs should entomb her ?
More deep are her own than their graves.
Life shrinks from his pinions that cover
The darkness by thunders bedinned :
But she knows him, her lord and her lover,
The godhead of wind.

For a season his wings are about her,
His breath on her lips for a space ;
Such rapture he wins not without her
In the width of his worldwide race.
Though the forests bow down, and the mountains
Wax dark, and the tribes of them flee,
His delight is more deep in the fountains
And springs of the sea.

There are those too of mortals that love him,
There are souls that desire and require,
Be the glories of midnight above him
Or beneath him the daysprings of fire :

And their hearts are as harps that approve him
And praise him as chords of a lyre
That were fain with their music to move him
To meet their desire,

To descend through the darkness to grace them
Till darkness were lovelier than light :
To encompass and grasp and embrace them,
Till their weakness were one with his might :
With the strength of his wings to caress them,
With the blast of his breath to set free ;'
With the mouths of his thunders to bless them
For sons of the sea.

For these have the toil and the guerdon
That the wind has eternally : these
Have part in the boon and the burden
Of the sleepless unsatisfied breeze,
That finds not, but seeking rejoices
That possession can work him no wrong :
And the voice at the heart of their voice is
The sense of his song.

For the wind's is their doom and their blessing ;
To desire, and have always above
A possession beyond their possessing,
A love beyond reach of their love.

Green earth has her sons and her daughters,
And these have their guerdons; but we
Are the wind's and the sun's and the water's,
Elect of the sea.