
WILLIAM MORRIS

I Know a Little Garden-Close¹

I know a little garden-close
Set thick with lily and red rose,
Where I would wander if I might
From dewy dawn to dewy night,
5 And have one with me wandering.

And though within it no birds sing,
And though no pillared house is there,
And though the apple boughs are bare
Of fruit and blossom, would to God,
10 Her feet upon the green grass trod,
And I beheld them as before.

There comes a murmur from the shore,
And in the close two fair streams are,
Drawn from the purple hills afar,
15 Drawn down unto the restless sea:
Dark hills whose heath-bloom feeds no bee,
Dark shore no ship has ever seen,
Still beaten by the billows green,
Whose murmur comes unceasingly
20 Unto the place for which I cry.

For which I cry both day and night,
For which I let slip all delight,
That maketh me both deaf and blind,
Careless to win, unskilled to find,
25 And quick to lose what all men seek.

Yet tottering as I am, and weak,
Still have I left a little breath
To seek within the jaws of death
An entrance to that happy place,
30 To seek the unforgotten face
Once seen, once kissed, once reft from me
Anigh the murmuring of the sea.

1867

1. A garden enclosed by trees or hedges. This song is sung to Hylas by a nymph in a scene in *The Life and Death of Jason*.

Christ Keep the Hollow Land¹

Christ keep the Hollow Land
All the summertide;
Still we cannot understand
Where the waters glide:
5 Only dimly seeing them
Coldly slipping through
Many green-lipped cavern mouths
Where the hills are blue.

1856

For the Bed at Kelmscott¹

The wind's on the wold
And the night is a-cold,
And Thames runs chill
'Twixt mead and hill;
5 But kind and dear
Is the old house here,
And my heart is warm
'Midst winter's harm.
Rest, then, and rest,
10 And think of the best
'Twixt summer and spring,
When all birds sing
In the town of the tree,
And ye lie in me
15 And scarce dare move,
Lest the earth and its love
Should fade away
Ere the full of the day.
I am old and have seen
20 Many things that have been—
Both grief and peace
And wane and increase.
No tale I tell
Of ill or well,
25 But this I say,
Night treadeth on day.
And for worst and best
Right good is rest.

1893

1. From a song sung by the heroine of a prose story, *The Hollow Land*, which was published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.

1. Kelmscott Manor was owned by Morris. The bed itself is the speaker.

The Haystack in the Floods¹

Had she come all the way for this,
 To part at last without a kiss?
 Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain
 That her own eyes might see him slain
 5 Beside the haystack in the floods?

Along the dripping leafless woods,
 The stirrup touching either shoe,
 She rode astride as troopers do;
 With kirtle^o kilted to her knee, *long skirt*
 10 To which the mud splashed wretchedly;
 And the wet dripped from every tree
 Upon her head and heavy hair,
 And on her eyelids broad and fair;
 The tears and rain ran down her face.
 15 By fits and starts they rode apace,
 And very often was his place
 Far off from her; he had to ride
 Ahead, to see what might betide
 When the roads crossed; and sometimes, when
 20 There rose a murmuring from his men,
 Had to turn back with promises.
 Ah me! she had but little ease;
 And often for pure doubt and dread
 She sobbed, made giddy in the head
 25 By the swift riding; while, for cold,
 Her slender fingers scarce could hold
 The wet reins; yea, and scarcely, too,
 She felt the foot within her shoe
 Against the stirrup: all for this,
 30 To part at last without a kiss
 Beside the haystack in the floods.

For when they neared that old soaked hay,
 They saw across the only way
 That Judas, Godmar, and the three
 35 Red running lions dismally
 Grinned from his pennon, under which
 In one straight line along the ditch,
 They counted thirty heads.

So then

40 While Robert turned round to his men,
 She saw at once the wretched end,
 And, stooping down, tried hard to rend
 Her coif the wrong way from her head,
 And hid her eyes; while Robert said:

1. After the defeat of the French at Poitiers in 1356, an English knight, Sir Robert de Marny, is

riding with Jehane, his mistress, to reach the frontier of Gascony, which was in English hands.

“Nay, love, ’tis scarcely two to one;
 45 At Poitiers where we made them run
 So fast—why, sweet my love, good cheer,
 The Gascon frontier is so near,
 Nought after this.”

But: “O!” she said,
 “My God! my God! I have to tread
 50 The long way back without you; then
 The court at Paris; those six men,^o
 The gratings of the Chatelet^o
 The swift Seine on some rainy day
 Like this, and people standing by,
 55 And laughing, while my weak hands try
 To recollect how strong men swim.²
 All this, or else a life with him,
 For which I should be damned at last,
 Would God that this next hour were past!”

*the judges
 Paris prison*

60 He answered not, but cried his cry,
 “St. George for Marny!” cheerily;
 And laid his hand upon her rein.
 Alas! no man of all this train
 Gave back that cheery cry again;
 65 And, while for rage his thumb beat fast
 Upon his sword hilt, someone cast
 About his neck a kerchief long,
 And bound him.

Then they went along
 To Godmar; who said: “Now, Jehane,
 70 Your lover’s life is on the wane
 So fast, that, if this very hour
 You yield not as my paramour,
 He will not see the rain leave off:
 Nay, keep your tongue from gibe and scoff,
 75 Sir Robert, or I slay you now.”

She laid her hand upon her brow,
 Then gazed upon the palm, as though
 She thought her forehead bled, and: “No!”
 She said, and turned her head away,
 80 As there was nothing else to say,
 And everything were settled: red
 Grew Godmar’s face from chin to head:
 “Jehane, on yonder hill there stands
 My castle, guarding well my lands;
 85 What hinders me from taking you,

2. In trial by water a woman accused of witchcraft or other crimes was thrown into the river to determine her guilt or innocence. For this ordeal the accused would customarily have her hands tied. If she sank she was deemed innocent and thereafter

spared by being hauled from the water. If she floated she was guilty and thereafter burned. In Morris’s version Jehane would have no chance of escaping death; if she swam she would be burned, and if she sank she would be drowned (line 108).

And doing that I list to do
 To your fair willful body, while
 Your knight lies dead?"

A wicked smile

Wrinkled her face, her lips grew thin,
 90 A long way out she thrust her chin:
 "You know that I should strangle you
 While you were sleeping; or bite through
 Your throat, by God's help: ah!" she said,
 "Lord Jesus, pity your poor maid!
 95 For in such wise they hem me in,
 I cannot choose but sin and sin,
 Whatever happens: yet I think
 They could not make me eat or drink,
 And so should I just reach my rest."
 100 "Nay, if you do not my behest,
 O Jehane! though I love you well,"
 Said Godmar, "would I fail to tell
 All that I know?" "Foul lies," she said.
 "Eh? lies, my Jehane? by God's head,
 105 At Paris folks would deem them true!
 Do you know, Jehane, they cry for you:
 'Jehane the brown! Jehane the brown!
 Give us Jehane to burn or drown!'
 Eh!—gag me Robert!—sweet my friend,
 110 This were indeed a piteous end
 For those long fingers, and long feet,
 And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet;
 An end that few men would forget
 That saw it. So, an hour yet:
 115 Consider, Jehane, which to take
 Of life or death!"

So, scarce awake,

Dismounting, did she leave that place,
 And totter some yards: with her face
 Turned upward to the sky she lay,
 120 Her head on a wet heap of hay,
 And fell asleep: and while she slept,
 And did not dream, the minutes crept
 Round to the twelve again; but she,
 Being waked at last, sighed quietly,
 125 And strangely childlike came, and said:
 "I will not." Straightway Godmar's head,
 As though it hung on strong wires, turned
 Most sharply round, and his face burned.

For Robert, both his eyes were dry,
 130 He could not weep, but gloomily
 He seemed to watch the rain; yea, too,
 His lips were firm; he tried once more
 To touch her lips; she reached out, sore

And vain desire so tortured them,
 135 The poor gray lips, and now the hem
 Of his sleeve brushed them.

With a start

Up Godmar rose, thrust them apart;
 From Robert's throat he loosed the bands
 Of silk and mail; with empty hands
 140 Held out, she stood and gazed, and saw,
 The long bright blade without a flaw
 Glide out from Godmar's sheath, his hand
 In Robert's hair; she saw him bend
 Back Robert's head; she saw him send
 145 The thin steel down; the blow told well,
 Right backward the knight Robert fell,
 And moaned as dogs do, being half dead,
 Unwitting, as I deem: so then
 Godmar turned grinning to his men,
 150 Who ran, some five or six, and beat
 His head to pieces at their feet.

Then Godmar turned again and said:
 "So, Jehane, the first fitte³ is read!
 Take note, my lady, that your way
 155 Lies backward to the Chatelet!"
 She shook her head and gazed awhile
 At her cold hands with a rueful smile,
 As though this thing had made her mad.

This was the parting that they had
 160 Beside the haystack in the floods.

1858

From The Earthly Paradise

An Apology

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,
 I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
 Or make quick-coming death a little thing,
 Or bring again the pleasure of past years,
 5 Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,
 Or hope again for aught that I can say,
 The idle singer of an empty day.

But rather, when, aweary of your mirth,
 From full hearts still unsatisfied ye sigh,
 10 And, feeling kindly unto all the earth,
 Grudge every minute as it passes by,

3. Canto of a poem.

Made the more mindful that the sweet days die—
Remember me a little then, I pray,
The idle singer of an empty day.

15 The heavy trouble, the bewildering care
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,
These idle verses have no power to bear;
So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead,
20 Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day.

 Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?¹
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
25 Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,²
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.

 Folk say a wizard to a northern king
30 At Christmastide such wondrous things did show,
That through one window men beheld the spring,
And through another saw the summer glow,
And through a third the fruited vines a-row,
While still, unheard, but in its wonted way,
35 Piped the drear wind of that December day.

 So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the beating of the steely sea,
40 Where tossed about all hearts of men must be;
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,
Not the poor singer of an empty day.

1868–70

A Death Song¹

What cometh here from west to east a-wending?
And who are these, the marchers stern and slow?
We bear the message that the rich are sending
Aback to those who bade them wake and know.

1. In 1856, when Morris was an undergraduate, he wrote in a letter: "I can't enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another."

2. At the cave of Morpheus, god of dreams, were

two gates: through the gate of horn came prophetic dreams, and through the ivory gate came fictitious dreams.

1. In a Socialist parade of 1887, in which Morris was one of the marchers, his friend Alfred Linnell was beaten by the police and died of injuries. Morris printed this poem as a penny pamphlet to raise money for Linnell's family.

5 *Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.*

We asked them for a life of toilsome earning—
They bade us bide their leisure for our bread;
We craved to speak to tell our woeful learning—
10 We come back speechless, bearing back our dead.
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.*

They will not learn; they have no ears to hearken;
They turn their faces from the eyes of fate;
15 Their gay-lit halls shut out the skies that darken.
But, lo! this dead man knocking at the gate.
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.*

Here lies the sign that we shall break our prison;
20 Amidst the storm he won a prisoner's rest;
But in the cloudy dawn the sun arisen
Brings us our day of work to win the best.
*Not one, not one, nor thousands must they slay,
But one and all if they would dusk the day.*