

Vernon Watkins (1906-67)

9 *Ballad of the Two Tapsters*

Two tapsters traded on Thames's side
When the tide of Thames ran dry.
Their swaggering barrels were big with pride,
But the wine was hard to buy.

They had corks and taps and a counter of wood 5
But the running wine was gone.
'The old moon's money has gone for good,
But the new moon has not shone.'

'I saw her shining, I saw her shine,'
A tapping beggar cried. 10
'She carried her fortune, I made it mine,
And sleep upon Thames's side.'

He told how he slept and saw in the mud
The gold and the silver lie,
And a great round barrel, huge as a flood, 15
Through a corner of his starved eye.

He had watched men trundle it out of the rut
And over a plank; it fell.
He heard the wine run into the butt
As the sea runs into a shell. 20

Two tapsters traded on Thames's side,
But the trade in the wine went ill.
They were down to their last white penny;
There were shadows and dust in the till.

'O where can we get new wine to sell, 25
And where can we get it soon?'
'Our barrels are dry as a swollen cork,

Though round as the round full moon.'

They fetched an empty barrel,
They rolled it upon its side. 30
They propped it against the window-sill
And they pushed the window wide.

Just as the dark came stealing
And the moon rose white and still,
They laid it high on its rolling rim 35
And left it there to fill.

In a room of fragile moonlight
Under a cask they hide,
And they soon hear mermaids singing
Like drowned men under the tide. 40

Asleep like rats in the yellow straw,
They dream of a sinking ship,
White horses, a wake, then slipping,
A waggoner cracking his whip.

Now from the window leaking 45
The flood of light seeps in.
They hear the rattle of wheels on the street
But not one rap at the Inn.

Then up leaps the younger, and leaning
Out of the window, cries: 50
'Here comes old Beatwind driving
With the glint of gold in his eyes.'

'O where are you going to, Beatwind?'
'To Putney's market of wine.'
'And have you got a corner on that cart of yours 55
For a butt or a barrel of mine?'

'What wine would it be that you might sell,
And how shall you pay the fee,

Who are banned from the vineyards of Rhine, Moselle,
Champagne and Burgundy? 60

O what have you got in that barrel?
He gave them a bargaining frown.
'It will cost you the coats on your bankrupt backs
To get this barrel to town.'

I dreamed last night of a dancing-girl 65
And the bands on her arms were gold,
But the bands on her ankles were silver:
O what may the great cask hold?

Two tapsters laugh in the sunlight,
In the Winter sunlight cold. 70
'Now, waggoner, wager your cart and horse,
Here's a barrel your men won't hold.'

Then two men tried to take it,
And four, and six men tried,
But the strongest sinews seemed like straw 75
That floats on Atlantic's side.

I dreamed last night of a dancing-girl
And the bands on her arms were gold,
But the bands on her ankles were silver:
O what may the great cask hold? 80

Be warned, you Thames-side traders,
If gambling men you be,
You cannot bend to the shores of the world
Or strive with the great dark sea.

1954

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