

Robert Bridges (1844-1930)

1 *Screaming Tarn*

The saddest place that e'er I saw  
Is the deep tarn above the inn  
That crowns the mountain-road, whereby  
One southward bound his way must win.

Sunk on the table of the ridge 5  
From its deep shores is nought to see:  
The unresting wind lashes and chills  
Its shivering ripples ceaselessly.

Three sides 'tis banked with stones aslant,  
And down the fourth the rushes grow, 10  
And yellow sedge fringing the edge  
With lengthen'd image all arow.

'Tis square and black, and on its face  
When noon is still, the mirror'd sky  
Looks dark and further from the earth 15  
Than when you gaze at it on high.

At mid of night, if one be there,  
— So say the people of the hill —  
A fearful shriek of death is heard,  
One sudden scream both loud and shrill. 20

And some have seen on stilly nights,  
And when the moon was clear and round,  
Bubbles which to the surface swam  
And burst as if they held the sound. —

'Twas in the days ere hapless Charles 25  
Losing his crown had lost his head,  
This tale is told of him who kept  
The inn upon the watershed:

He was a lowbred ruin'd man  
Whom lawless times set free from fear: 30  
One evening to his house there rode  
A young and gentle cavalier.

With curling hair and linen fair  
And jewel-hilted sword he went;  
The horse he rode he had ridden far, 35  
And he was with his journey spent.

He asked a lodging for the night,  
His valise from his steed unbound,  
He let none bear it but himself  
And set it by him on the ground. 40

'Here's gold or jewels,' thought the host,  
'That's carrying south to find the king.'  
He chattered many a loyal word,  
And scraps of royal airs gan sing.

His guest thereat grew more at ease 45  
And o'er his wine he gave a toast,  
But little ate, and to his room  
Carried his sack behind the host.

'Now rest you well,' the host he said,  
But of his wish the word fell wide; 50  
Nor did he now forget his son  
Who fell in fight by Cromwell's side.

Revenge and poverty have brought  
Full gentler heart than his to crime;  
And he was one by nature rude, 55  
Born to foul deeds at any time.

With unshod feet at dead of night  
In stealth he to the guest-room crept,  
Lantern and dagger in his hand,

And stabbed his victim while he slept. 60

But as he struck a scream there came,  
A fearful scream so loud and shrill:  
He whelm'd the face with pillows o'er,  
And lean'd till all had long been still.

Then to the face the flame he held 65  
To see there should no life remain: —  
When lo! his brutal heart was quell'd:  
'Twas a fair woman he had slain.

The tan upon her face was paint,  
The manly hair was torn away, 70  
Soft was the breast that he had pierced;  
Beautiful in her death she lay.

His was no heart to faint at crime,  
Tho' half he wished the deed undone.  
He pulled the valise from the bed 75  
To find what booty he had won.

He cut the straps, and pushed within  
His murderous fingers to their theft.  
A deathly sweat came o'er his brow,  
He had no sense nor meaning left. 80

He touched not gold, it was not cold,  
It was not hard, it felt like flesh.  
He drew out by the curling hair  
A young man's head, and murder'd fresh;

A young man's head, cut by the neck. 85  
But what was dreader still to see,  
Her whom he had slain he saw again,  
The twain were like as like can be.

Brother and sister if they were,  
Both in one shroud they now were wound, — 90

Across his back and down the stair,  
Out of the house without a sound.

He made his way unto the tarn,  
The night was dark and still and dank;  
The ripple chuckling neath the boat 95  
Laughed as he drew it to the bank.

Upon the bottom of the boat  
He laid his burden flat and low,  
And on them laid the square sandstones  
That round about the margin go. 100

Stone upon stone he weighed them down,  
Until the boat would hold no more;  
The freeboard now was scarce an inch:  
He stripp'd his clothes and push'd from shore.

All naked to the middle pool 105  
He swam behind in the dark night;  
And there he let the water in  
And sank his terror out of sight.

He swam ashore, and donn'd his dress,  
And scraped his bloody fingers clean; 110  
Ran home and on his victim's steed  
Mounted, and never more was seen.

But to a comrade ere he died  
He told his story guess'd of none:  
So from his lips the crime returned 115  
To haunt the spot where it was done.

1899

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