Henry Duff Traill (1842-1900)

1   *After Dilettante Concetti*

"Why do you wear your hair like a man,
                                    Sister Helen?
This week is the third since you began."
"I'm writing a ballad; be still if you can,
                                    Little brother.   5
                    (*O Mother Carey, mother!*
What chickens are these between sea and heaven?)"

"But why does your figure appear so lean,
                                    Sister Helen?
And why do you dress in sage, sage green?"   10
"Children should never be heard, if seen,
                                    Little brother?
                    (*O Mother Carey, mother!*
What fowls are a-wing in the stormy heaven!)"

"But why is your face so yellowy white,   15
                                    Sister Helen?
And why are your skirts so funnily tight?"
"Be quiet, you torment, or how can I write,
                                    Little brother?
                    (*O Mother Carey, mother!*   20
How gathers thy train to the sea from the heaven!)"

"And who's Mother Carey, and what is her train,
                                    Sister Helen?
And why do you call her again and again?"
"You troublesome boy, why that's the refrain,   25
                                    Little brother.
                    (*O Mother Carey, mother!*
What work is toward in the startled heaven?)"

"And what's a refrain?   What a curious word,
                                    Sister Helen!   30

Is the ballad you're writing about a sea-bird?"
"Not at all; why should it be?   Don't be absurd,
                              Little brother.
                 (*O Mother Carey, mother!*
Thy brood flies lower as lowers the heaven.)"   35

                 (*A big brother speaketh:*)

"The refrain you've studied a meaning had,
                              Sister Helen!
It gave strange force to a weird ballàd.
But refrains have become a ridiculous 'fad'
                              Little brother.   40
                 And *Mother Carey, mother*,
Has a bearing on nothing in earth or heaven.

"But the finical fashion has had its day,
                              Sister Helen.
And let's try in the style of a different lay   45
To bid it adieu in poetical way,
                              Little brother.
                 So, Mother Carey, mother!
Collect your chickens and go to — heaven."

       (*A pause. Then the big brother singeth, accompanying
            himself in a plaintive wise on the triangle:*)

"Look in my face.   My name is Used-to-was;   50
   I am also called Played-out and Done-to-death,
   And It-will-wash-no-more.   Awakeneth
Slowly, but sure awakening it has,
The common-sense of man; and I, alas!
   The ballad-burden trick, now known too well,   55
   Am turned to scorn, and grown contemptible —
A too transparent artifice to pass.

"What a cheap dodge I am!   The cats who dart
   Tin-kettled through the streets in wild surprise
   Assail judicious ears not otherwise;   60

And yet no critics praise the urchin's 'art,'
Who to the wretched creature's caudal part
   Its foolish empty-jingling 'burden' ties."

1882

(From *Recaptured Rhymes.*   Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882)