

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

3 *The Female Vagrant*

By Derwent's side my Father's cottage stood,  
(The Woman thus her artless story told)  
One field, a flock, and what the neighbouring flood  
Supplied, to him were more than mines of gold.  
Light was my sleep; my days in transport roll'd: 5  
With thoughtless joy I stretch'd along the shore  
My father's nets, or watched, when from the fold  
High o'er the cliffs I led my fleecy store,  
A dizzy depth below! his boat and twinkling oar.

My father was a good and pious man, 10  
An honest man by honest parents bred,  
And I believe that, soon as I began  
To lisp, he made me kneel beside my bed,  
And in his hearing there my prayers I said:  
And afterwards, by my good father taught, 15  
I read, and loved the books in which I read;  
For books in every neighbouring house I sought,  
And nothing to my mind a sweeter pleasure brought.

Can I forget what charms did once adorn  
My garden, stored with pease, and mint, and thyme, 20  
And rose and lilly for the sabbath morn?  
The sabbath bells, and their delightful chime;  
The gambols and wild freaks at shearing time;  
My hen's rich nest through long grass scarce espied;  
The cowslip-gathering at May's dewy prime; 25  
The swans, that, when I sought the water-side,  
From far to meet me came, spreading their snowy pride.

The staff I yet remember which upbore  
The bending body of my active sire;  
His seat beneath the honeyed sycamore 30  
When the bees hummed, and chair by winter fire;  
When market-morning came, the neat attire

With which, though bent on haste, myself I deck'd;  
My watchful dog, whose starts of furious ire,  
When stranger passed, so often I have check'd; 35  
The red-breast known for years, which at my casement peck'd.

The suns of twenty summers danced along, —  
Ah! little marked, how fast they rolled away:  
Then rose a mansion proud our woods among,  
And cottage after cottage owned its sway, 40  
No joy to see a neighbouring house, or stray  
Through pastures not his own, the master took;  
My Father dared his greedy wish gainsay;  
He loved his old hereditary nook,  
And ill could I the thought of such sad parting brook. 45

But, when he had refused the proffered gold,  
To cruel injuries he became a prey,  
Sore traversed in whate'er he bought and sold.  
His troubles grew upon him day by day,  
Till all his substance fell into decay. 50  
His little range of water was denied;  
All but the bed where his old body lay,  
All, all was seized, and weeping, side by side,  
We sought a home where we uninjured might abide.

Can I forget that miserable hour, 55  
When from the last hill-top, my sire surveyed,  
Peering above the trees, the steeple tower,  
That on his marriage-day sweet music made?  
Till then he hoped his bones might there be laid,  
Close by my mother in their native bowers: 60  
Bidding me trust in God, he stood and prayed, —  
I could not pray: — through tears that fell in showers,  
Glimmer'd our dear-loved home, alas! no longer ours!

There was a youth whom I had loved so long,  
That when I loved him not I cannot say. 65  
'Mid the green mountains many and many a song  
We two had sung, like little birds in May.  
When we began to tire of childish play  
We seemed still more and more to prize each other:

We talked of marriage and our marriage day; 70  
And I in truth did love him like a brother,  
For never could I hope to meet with such another.

His father said, that to a distant town  
He must repair, to ply the artist's trade.  
What tears of bitter grief till then unknown! 75  
What tender vows our last sad kiss delayed!  
To him we turned: — we had no other aid.  
Like one revived, upon his neck I wept,  
And her whom he had loved in joy, he said  
He well could love in grief: his faith he kept; 80  
And in a quiet home once more my father slept.

Four years each day with daily bread was blest,  
By constant toil and constant prayer supplied.  
Three lovely infants lay upon my breast;  
And often, viewing their sweet smiles, I sighed, 85  
And knew not why. My happy father died  
When sad distress reduced the children's meal:  
Thrice happy! that from him the grave did hide  
The empty loom, cold hearth, and silent wheel,  
And tears that flowed for ills which patience could not heal. 90

'Twas a hard change, an evil time was come;  
We had no hope, and no relief could gain.  
But soon, with proud parade, the noisy drum  
Beat round, to sweep the streets of want and pain.  
My husband's arms now only served to strain 95  
Me and his children hungering in his view:  
In such dismay my prayers and tears were vain:  
To join those miserable men he flew;  
And now to the sea-coast, with numbers more, we drew.

There foul neglect for months and months we bore, 100  
Nor yet the crowded fleet its anchor stirred.  
Green fields before us and our native shore,  
By fever, from polluted air incurred,  
Ravage was made, for which no knell was heard.  
Fondly we wished, and wished away, nor knew, 105  
'Mid that long sickness, and those hopes deferr'd,

That happier days we never more must view:  
The parting signal streamed, at last the land withdrew,

But from delay the summer calms were past. 110  
On as we drove, the equinoctial deep  
Ran mountains-high before the howling blast.  
We gazed with terror on the gloomy sleep  
Of them that perished in the whirlwind's sweep,  
Untaught that soon such anguish must ensue, 115  
Our hopes such harvest of affliction reap,  
That we the mercy of the waves should rue.  
We reached the western world, a poor, devoted crew.

Oh! dreadful price of being to resign  
All that is dear *in* being! better far 120  
In Want's most lonely cave till death to pine,  
Unseen, unheard, unwatched by any star;  
Or in the streets and walks where proud men are,  
Better our dying bodies to obtrude,  
Than dog-like, wading at the heels of war,  
Protract a curst existence, with the brood 125  
That lap (their very nourishment!) their brother's blood.

The pains and plagues that on our heads came down,  
Disease and famine, agony and fear,  
In wood or wilderness, in camp or town, 130  
It would thy brain unsettle even to hear.  
All perished — all, in one remorseless year,  
Husband and children! one by one, by sword  
And ravenous plague, all perished: every tear  
Dried up, despairing, desolate, on board  
A British ship I waked, as from a trance restored. 135

Peaceful as some immeasurable plain  
By the first beams of dawning light impress'd,  
In the calm sunshine slept the glittering main.  
The very ocean has its hour of rest,  
That comes not to the human mourner's breast. 140  
Remote from man, and storms of mortal care,  
A heavenly silence did the waves invest;  
I looked and looked along the silent air,

Until it seemed to bring a joy to my despair.

Ah! how unlike those late terrific sleeps! 145  
And groans, that rage of racking famine spoke,  
Where looks inhuman dwelt on festering heaps!  
The breathing pestilence that rose like smoke!  
The shriek that from the distant battle broke!  
The mine's dire earthquake, and the pallid host 150  
Driven by the bomb's incessant thunder-stroke  
To loathsome vaults, where heart-sick anguish toss'd,  
Hope died, and fear itself in agony was lost!

Yet does that burst of woe congeal my frame,  
When the dark streets appeared to heave and gape, 155  
While like a sea the storming army came,  
And Fire from Hell reared his gigantic shape,  
And Murder, by the ghastly gleam, and Rape  
Seized their joint prey, the mother and the child!  
But from these crazing thoughts my brain, escape! 160  
— For weeks the balmy air breathed soft and mild,  
And on the gliding vessel Heaven and Ocean smiled.

Some mighty gulph of separation past,  
I seemed transported to another world: —  
A thought resigned with pain, when from the mast 165  
The impatient mariner the sail unfurl'd,  
And whistling, called the wind that hardly curled  
The silent sea. From the sweet thoughts of home,  
And from all hope I was forever hurled.  
For me — farthest from earthly port to roam 170  
Was best, could I but shun the spot where man might come.

And oft, robb'd of my perfect mind, I thought  
At last my feet a resting-place had found:  
Here will I weep in peace, (so fancy wrought,) 175  
Roaming the illimitable waters round;  
Here watch, of every human friend disowned,  
All day, my ready tomb the ocean-flood —  
To break my dream the vessel reached its bound:  
And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,  
And near a thousand tables pined, and wanted food. 180

By grief enfeebled was I turned adrift,  
Helpless as sailor cast on desert rock;  
Nor morsel to my mouth that day did lift,  
Nor dared my hand at any door to knock. 185  
I lay, where with his drowsy mates, the cock  
From the cross timber of an out-house hung;  
How dismal tolled, that night, the city clock!  
At morn my sick heart hunger scarcely stung,  
Nor to the beggar's language could I frame my tongue.

So passed another day, and so the third: 190  
Then did I try, in vain, the crowd's resort,  
In deep despair by frightful wishes stirr'd,  
Near the sea-side I reached a ruined fort:  
There, pains which nature could no more support,  
With blindness linked, did on my vitals fall; 195  
Dizzy my brain, with interruption short  
Of hideous sense; I sunk, nor step could crawl,  
And thence was borne away to neighbouring hospital.

Recovery came with food: but still, my brain 200  
Was weak, nor of the past had memory.  
I heard my neighbours, in their beds, complain  
Of many things which never troubled me;  
Of feet still bustling round with busy glee,  
Of looks where common kindness had no part,  
Of service done with careless cruelty, 205  
Fretting the fever round the languid heart,  
And groans, which, as they said, would make a dead man start.

These things just served to stir the torpid sense,  
Nor pain nor pity in my bosom raised.  
Memory, though slow, returned with strength; and thence 210  
Dismissed, again on open day I gazed,  
At houses, men, and common light, amazed.  
The lanes I sought, and as the sun retired,  
Came, where beneath the trees a faggot blazed;  
The wild brood saw me weep, my fate enquired, 215  
And gave me food, and rest, more welcome, more desired.

My heart is touched to think that men like these,  
The rude earth's tenants, were my first relief:  
How kindly did they paint their vagrant ease!  
And their long holiday that feared not grief, 220  
For all belonged to all, and each was chief.  
No plough their sinews strained; on grating road  
No wain they drove, and yet, the yellow sheaf  
In every vale for their delight was stowed:  
For them, in nature's meads, the milky udder flowed. 225

Semblance, with straw and panniered ass, they made  
Of potters wandering on from door to door:  
But life of happier sort to me pourtrayed,  
And other joys my fancy to allure;  
The bag-pipe dinning on the midnight moor 230  
In barn uplighted, and companions boon  
Well met from far with revelry secure,  
In depth of forest glade, when jocund June  
Rolled fast along the sky his warm and genial moon.

But ill it suited me, in journey dark 235  
O'er moor and mountain, midnight theft to hatch;  
To charm the surly house-dog's faithful bark,  
Or hang on tiptoe at the lifted latch;  
The gloomy lantern, and the dim blue match,  
The black disguise, the warning whistle shrill, 240  
And ear still busy on its nightly watch,  
Were not for me, brought up in nothing ill;  
Besides, on griefs so fresh my thoughts were brooding still.

What could I do, unaided and unblest?  
Poor Father! gone was every friend of thine: 245  
And kindred of dead husband are at best  
Small help, and, after marriage such as mine,  
With little kindness would to me incline.  
Ill was I then for toil or service fit:  
With tears whose course no effort could confine, 250  
By high-way side forgetful would I sit  
Whole hours, my idle arms in moping sorrow knit.

I lived upon the mercy of the fields,

And oft of cruelty the sky accused;  
On hazard, or what general bounty yields, 255  
Now coldly given, now utterly refused.  
The fields I for my bed have often used:  
But, what afflicts my peace with keenest ruth  
Is, that I have my inner self abused,  
Foregone the home delight of constant truth, 260  
And clear and open soul, so prized ill fearless youth.

Three years a wanderer, often have I view'd,  
In tears, the sun towards that country tend  
Where my poor heart lost all its fortitude:  
And now across this moor my steps I bend — 265  
Oh! tell me whither — for no earthly friend  
Have I. — She ceased, and weeping turned away,  
As if because her tale was at an end  
She wept; — because she had no more to say  
Of that perpetual weight which on her spirit lay. 270

1798

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