

THE OVENS

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

HE trailed along the cinder-track
Beside the sleek canal, whose black
Cold slinking waters shivered back
Each frosty spark of starry light:
And each star pricked, an icy pin,
Through his old jacket worn and thin:
The raw wind rasped his shrinking skin
As if stark-naked to its bite;
Yet, cutting through him like a knife,
It would not cut the thread of life;
But only turned his feet to stones
With red-hot soles, that weighed like lead
In his old broken boots. His head,
Sunk low upon his sunken chest,
Was but a burning, icy ache
That strained a skull which would not break
To let him tumble down to rest.
He felt the cold stars in his bones;
And only wished that he were dead
With no curst, searching wind to shred
The very flesh from off his bones—
No wind to whistle through his bones,
His naked icy, burning bones:
When, looking up, he saw, ahead,
The far coke-ovens' glowing light
That burnt a red hole in the night.
And but to snooze beside that fire
Was all the heaven of his desire . . .
To tread no more this cursed track
Of cranching cinders, through a black
And blasted world of cinder-heaps,
Beside a sleek canal that creeps
Like crawling ice through every bone,
Beneath the cruel stars, alone

With this hell-raking wind that sets
The cold teeth rattling castanets . . .
Aye, heaven, indeed! that core of red
In night's black heart that seemed quite dead.

Though still far off, the crimson glow
Through his chilled veins began to flow,
And filled his shrivelled heart with heat:
And, as he dragged his senseless feet
That lagged as though to hold him back
In cold, eternal hell of black,
With heaven before him, blazing red,
The set eyes staring in his head
Were held by spell of fire quite blind
To that black world that fell behind,
A cindery wilderness of death,
As he drew slowly near and nearer,
And saw the ovens glowing clearer—
Low-domed and humming hives of heat—
And felt the blast of burning breath
That quivered from each white-hot brick:
Till, blinded by the blaze, and sick,
He dropped into a welcome seat
Of warm, white ashes, sinking low
To soak his body in the glow
That shot him through with prickling pain,
An eager agony of fire,
Delicious after the cold ache,
And scorched his tingling frosted skin.
Then, gradually, the anguish passed;
And blissfully he lay, at last,
Without an unfulfilled desire,
His grateful body drinking in
Warm, blessed, snug forgetfulness.

And yet, with staring eyes awake,
As though no drench of heat could slake

His thirst for fire, he watched a red
Hot eye that burned within a chink
Between the bricks: while overhead
The quivering stream of hot gold air
Surged up to quench the cold starlight.
His brain, too numbed and dull to think
Throughout the day, in that fierce glare
Awoke, at last, with startled stare
Of pitiless, insistent sight
That stript the stark, mean, bitter strife
Of his poor, broken, wasted life,
Crippled from birth, and struggling on,
The last, least shred of hope long gone,
To some unknown, black, bitter end.
But, even as he looked, his brain
Sank back to sightless sloth again:
Then all at once he seemed to choke,
And knew it was the stealthy strife
And deadly fume of burning coke
That filled his lungs, and seemed to soak
Through every pore, until the blood
Grew thick and heavy in his veins,
And he could scarcely draw a breath.
He lay, and murmured, drowsily,
With closing eyes: "If this be death,
It's snug and easy . . . let it come . . .
For life is cold and hard . . . the flood
Is rising with the heavy rains
That pour and pour . . . that damned old drum,
Why ever can't they let it be? . . .
Beat-beating, beating, beating, beat . . ."
Then, suddenly, he sat upright,
For, close behind him in the night,
He heard a breathing loud and deep,
And caught a whiff of burning leather.
He shook himself alive, and turned;
And on a heap of ashes white,
O'ercome by the full blast of heat,

Where fiercest the dread blaze burned,
He saw a young girl stretched in sleep.

He sat awhile with heavy gaze
Fixed on her in a dull amaze,
Until he saw her scorched boots smoking:
Then whispering huskily: "She's dying,
While I look on and watch her choking!"
He roused and pulled himself together;
And rose, and went where she was lying:
And, bending o'er the senseless lass,
In his weak arms he lifted her;
And bore her out beyond the glare,
Beyond the stealthy, stifling gas,
Into the fresh and eager air:
And laid her gently on the ground
Beneath the cold and starry sky:
And did his best to bring her round;
Though still, for all that he could try,
She seemed with each deep, laboring breath
Just brought up on the brink of death.
He sought and found an icy pool,
Though he had but his cap to fill,
And bathed her hands and face, until
The troubled breath was quieter,
And her flushed forehead felt quite cool:
And then he saw an eyelid stir;
And, shivering, she sat up, at last,
And looked about her sullenly.
"I'm cold . . . I'm mortal cold," she said:
"What call had you to waken me?
I was so warm and happy, dead . . .
And still those staring stars!" Her head
Dropt in her hands: and thick and fast
The tears came with a heavy sobbing.
He stood quite helpless while she cried;
And watched her shaken bosom throbbing
With passionate, wild, weak distress,

Till it was spent. And then she dried
Her eyes upon her singed black dress;
Looked up, and saw him standing there,
Wondering, and more than half-afraid.
But now, the nipping, hungry air
Took hold of her, and struck fear dead.
She only felt the starving sting
That must, at any price, be stayed;
And cried out: "I am famishing!"
Then from his pocket he took bread
That he had been too weak and sick
To eat o'ernight: and eager-eyed,
She took it timidly; and said:
"I have not tasted food two days."
And as he waited by her side,
He watched her with a quiet gaze;
And saw her munch the broken crust
So gladly, seated in the dust
Of that black desert's bitter night,
Beneath the freezing stars, so white
And hunger-pinched; and at the sight
Keen pity touched him to the quick;
Although he never said a word
Till she had finished every crumb,
And then he led her to a seat
A little closer to the heat,
But well beyond the deadly stife.
And in the ashes, side by side,
They sat together, dazed and dumb,
With eyes upon the ovens' glare,
Each looking nakedly on life.

And then, at length, she sighed, and stirred;
Still staring deep and dreamy-eyed
Into the whitening, steady glow.
With jerky, broken words and slow,
And biting at her finger-ends,
She talked at last: and spoke out all

Quite open-heartedly, as though
There were not any stranger there—
The fire and he, both bosom-friends.
She'd left her home three months ago—
She, country-born and country-bred,
Had got the notion in her head
That she'd like city-service best . . .
And so no country-place could please . . .
And she had worried without rest
Until, at last, she got her ends;
And, wiser than her folk and friends,
She left her home among the trees . . .
The trees grew thick for miles about
Her father's house . . . the forest spread
As far as ever you could see . . .
And it was green, in Summer, green . . .
Since she had left her home, she'd seen
No greenness could compare with it . . .
And everything was fresh and clean,
And not all smutched and smirched with smoke . . .
They burned no sooty coal and coke,
But only wood-logs, ash and oak . . .
And by the fire at night they'd sit . . .
Ah! wouldn't it be rare and good
To smell the sappy, sizzling wood,
Once more; and listen to the stream
That runs just by the garden-gate . . .
And often, in a Winter spate,
She'd wakened from a troubled dream,
And lain in bed, and heard it roar;
And quaked to hear it, as a child . . .
Just mad to sweep the house away!
It seemed so angry and so wild—
And now, it was three months or more
Since she had heard it, on the day . . .
The day she left . . . and Michael stood . . .
He was a woodman, too; and he
Worked with her father in the wood . . .

And wanted her, she knew . . . but she
Was proud, and thought herself too good
To marry any country-lad . . .
'Twas queer to think she'd once been proud—
And such a little while ago —
A beggar, wolfing crusts! . . . The pride
That made her quit her countryside
Soon left her stranded in the crowd . . .
And precious little pride she had
To keep her warm these freezing days
Since she had fled the city-ways
To walk back home . . . aye! home again:
For in the town, she'd tried, in vain,
For honest work to earn her bread . . .
At one place, they'd nigh slaved her dead,
And starved her, too; and when she left,
Had cheated her of half her wage:
But she'd no means to stop the theft . . .
And she'd had no more work to do . . .
Two months since, now . . . it seemed an age!
How she had lived, she scarcely knew . . .
And still, poor fool, too proud to write
To home for help until, at length,
She'd not a penny for a bite,
Or pride enough to clothe her back . . .
So, she was tramping home, too poor
To pay the train-fare . . . she'd the strength,
If she'd the food . . . but that hard track,
And that cold, cruel bitter night
Had taken all the heart from her . . .
If Michael knew, she felt quite sure . . .
For she would rather drop stone-dead
Than live as some . . . if she had cared
To feed upon the devil's bread,
She could have earned it easily . . .
She'd pride enough to starve instead,
Aye, starve, than fare as some girls fared . . .
But, that was all behind . . . and she

Was going home . . . and yet, maybe,
If they'd a home like hers, they, too,
Would be too proud . . . she only knew
The thought of home had kept her straight,
And saved her, ere it was too late.
She'd soon be home again . . . And now
She sat with hand upon her brow;
And did not speak again nor stir.

And as he heard her words, his gaze
Still set upon the steady glare,
His thoughts turned back to city-ways;
And he remembered common sights
That he had seen in city nights:
And, once again, in early June,
He wandered through the midnight street;
And heard those ever-pacing feet
Of young girls, children yet in years,
With gaudy ribbons in their hair,
And shameless, fevered eyes astare,
And slack lips set in brazen leers,
Who walked the pavements of despair,
Beneath the fair, full Summer moon . . .
Shadowed by worn-out wizened hags,
With claw-hands clutching filthy rags
About old bosoms shrunk and thin,
And mouths aler without a tooth,
Who dogged them, cursing their sleek youth
That filched their custom and their bread . . .
Then, in a reek of hot gaslight,
He stood, where, through the Summer night,
Half-dozing in the stifling air,
The greasy landlord, fat with sin,
Sat, lolling in his easy chair,
Just half-way up the brothel stair,
To tax the earnings they brought in,
And hearken for the policeman's tread . . .
Then, shuddering back from that foul place,

And turning from the ovens' glare,
He looked into her dreaming face,
And saw green, sunlit woodlands there,
With waters flashing in between
Low-drooping boughs of Summer green.

And, as he looked, still in a dream
She murmured: Michael would, she knew . . .
Though she'd been foolish . . . he was true,
As true as steel and fond of her . . .
And then she sat with eyes agleam
In dreaming silence, till the stir
Of cold dawn shivered through the air:
When, twisting up her tumbled hair,
She rose; and said she must be gone.
Though she'd still far to go, the day
Would see her well upon her way . . .
And she had best be jogging on,
While she'd the strength . . . and so, Good-bye.

And as, beneath the paling sky,
He trudged again the cinder-track
That stretched before him, dead and black,
He muttered: "It's a chance the light
Has found me living still . . . and she . . .
She, too . . . and Michael . . . and through me!
God knows whom I may wake to-night."

I SING THE BATTLE

HARRY KEMP

I SING the song of the great clean guns that belch forth
death at will.
“Ah, but the wailing mothers, the lifeless forms and still!”

I sing the song of the billowing flags, the bugles that cry before.
“Ah, but the skeletons flapping rags, the lips that speak no
more!”

I sing the clash of bayonets, of sabres that flash and cleave.
“And wilt thou sing the maimed ones, too, that go with pinned-
up sleeve?”

I sing acclaimed generals that bring the victory home.
“Ah, but the broken bodies that drip like honey-comb!”

I sing of hosts triumphant, long ranks of marching men.
“And wilt thou sing the shadowy hosts that never march
again?”