

Poems in the manner of housman [end]

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POEMS... *in the Manner of Housman*

By JOHN McANDREWS

(Conclusion)

XIII

I am tired of pretty fellows,
Jaunty, clean, assured,
Since I know that frail things never
Have for long endured.

Reeds, or ropes of milkweed-down,
Castles built of sand,
Are more lasting than the boys
Who my love withstand.

So I'll leave the flowers and saplings
For the wall of stone,
Massive arms and granite thighs,
Strength no friend has shown.

You are young but well you know
That in your flesh, your face,
The hard immortal bone awaits
The day you take your place

Lone within the quiet tavern
Wherein sleep the dead,
And the youth has no desire
To share his crumbling bed.

Then I call you, come and be
The heavy-bodied groom,
That you may lie calmly when
You are inside the tomb.

XII

Two by two the skaters go
Down the tufted field,
Torches bright and hands across
And flesh that does not yield.

Oh you fellow whom I see
With the maid you charm,
Will you tell me all the truth
How you lost an arm?

«Comrade, I will tell you this
Though I know you not,
I was hunting hawks one day
When an unknown shot

«Took me through and through my shoulder,
Left me but one hand
To put round my darling's breast,
As you see us stand.»

Lad, go forward with your skating,
Leave me here alone,
Listening to the restless night-wind
Through the pine trees moan.

XIV

Words are awkward futile things
To tell what's in the heart of me,
And I had sworn in love burned out
No flame again could ever be.

But life will center round last night,
The brandy, firelight, pipes, and tales
Of ancient war-lords of Japan,
Of Siegfried's lime-leaf, and the Gaels.

The hours crept slowly through the dark,
Your arm lay light, and hushed my soul,
And as you slept I mutely sang
And wept, and thought my life was droll.

This morning when the dawn came grey
And fell upon your firm young grace,
I called my happiness a whore
Who trails her lads with painted face

And lures them to her spotted bed
To let their bodies ease her lust,
And with her lips finds words to pray
Between each savage take and thrust.

Ah God, I care not what you ask,
Take health and name and all you see,
But leave me for a little yet,
This lad, this boy, this agony.

XV

Come, lad, and drink the topful cup,
Till dregs are gone and bottom's up,
And I will think me of a tale
To match the bitter blend of ale.
Or if the mood is not with you,
A simple jest for simple brew.

There was a lad who had a friend
Who swore to love him till the end,
And every time the friend was near
The lad heard music bright and clear
And saw beyond the spinning blue
The birth of stars and death of rue,
And felt a fever in his veins
But chilly cold within his reins.
Then a maiden passed the door,
The friend looked once and looked no more,
He took his things, he took his pack,
And never turned him to look back.
The lad with half a stricken smile
Straightway downed hemlock from a phial.
They hanged the lover as the knave
And cast him in a quicklime grave.
The lad lies underneath the limb
With no friend's bones to company him.

Alas, I see you are not glad
To hear a tale end up so sad,
But how can I of lightness think
When ale's the bitter stuff I drink?
And likely, lad, you'll nowhere find
A simpler brew of any kind.

XVI

Tonight you took my heart's hot flesh
 And crushed it till it bled,
 And in my hurt I can but wish
 That you or I were dead.

I hoped the time would never come
 When you would call to give
 Some kind excuse, if true or not,
 And then trust me to live

The days without you, when each hour
 Drags with its weight of love
 Across this parched and burning plain
 With no cool wind above.

«My friend, a visitor from away
 Has put me in this plight,
 I cannot see you, but I will
 A week tomorrow night.»

You could not hear in my response
 The thousand feeble cries,
 And I will mind me that no man
 When he's forsaken sighs.

And how you hurt me in my heart
 No one will ever know,
 For up and down the streets of town
 Most gaily will I go.

XVII

Damn the one who calls him thin,
 He is not that to me,
 I will tell you what he is
 That you can never be.

My love is like a greyhound
 Coursing quick and slim,
 Lithe and sleek and full of power,
 Smooth of flank and limb.

He is for me a song at night,
 An arrow in the air,
 An athlete poising at the mark,
 Keen-eyed, tense, aware.

An eagle on its swiftest wing,
 An antelope at flight,
 A swallow on its way to warmth,
 Skimming through the light.

A man who's lean and strong and tall,
 And with a virgin quick,
 But almost slow enough with me
 To be love's heretic.

XVIII

Is there some strange old magic here
 To make him fill your place?
 Or do I over the knights and pawns
 See nothing but your face?

I do not know, I cannot tell;
 You and this great-thewed lad
 May have been one in other days,
 Conspired to make me sad.

Enough it is this time, God knows,
 To put me in my grave,
 That you deny me all those things
 My soul and body crave:

The sight of you, your hand on mine,
 Your voice within my room,
 The feeling that you are for me
 Beloved bride and groom.

Therefore perhaps it would be best
 I to this other cleave,
 And let you follow your own way,
 And I new patterns weave.

XIX

I hate the fat and busy fool
 To whom I let you go,
 And so will you, I swear it true,
 Ere April melts the snow.

In name a neighbor, life a friend,
 In flesh a man of power,
 I loved you first, I wrote your praise—
 He takes you for an hour.

May be I would not want you for
 As long a time as he,
 But you'd discover in that space,
 How wild a love can be!

He will not find you docile as
 He found his other boys,
 And you will loathe him when you see
 How he all things destroys.

I hate him with a sickened rage,
 His very name abhor,
 It's jealousy, I will admit,
 But more than that—it's war!

XX

I heard the solemn bells at dawn
 Ring from the far-off town,
 For six long weeks my lad will not
 Ever with me lie down.

Now on his forehead with the ash
 The priest imprints the cross,
 And makes my friend the son of God,
 And mocks my bitter loss.

Not he alone gives up his joy
 To sup the souring wine,
 Or leaves the table and his love
 To drink the choking brine.

Oh Lent is long and Lent is grey,
 And peace it brings to some,
 From other souls it steals their bread
 And leaves no single crumb.

The wind whips angry through the trees
 And blusters me around,
 And drives my lean and naked soul
 Blighted to the ground.

This wind of Wednesday stings and kills
 And sweeps delight away,
 And teaches evil men to fear,
 But good men how to pray.

For me there's neither fear nor prayer;
 How can a dead thing die?
 There on my couch, as in the grave,
 My broken pleasures lie.