Martin Robertson

The Sleeping Beauty's Prince

Part One

No, not a prince. The boy we'll come to know
was born at court but not to royalty.
Where? When? Oh, far away and long ago—
farther than swallows in the autumn fly,
I cannot count the generations gone—
but once upon a time, in some demesne,
there lived, in service to a King and Queen,
a poor young widow with an only son.
A mother's boy (he never knew his father)
beloved and loving, but a lonely child,
timid, he walked his long dreams with a friend
who'd share his joy and pain, who'd lead, or rather
more often be led through the threatening wild
by him, the brave one, to some happy end.

Thus was the field ploughed for the seed to fall
of love, that was his life and is our theme.
It fell in his fourth year. He could recall
all his long age the scene—clear as a dream
and, like a dream, framed in obscurity.
Out of the positive blackness of the night
under the bright lights, against gold and white,
he watched entranced the colour-sparkling sea:
the King, the Queen, the court, the foreign throng
of princes—the princesses stayed at home.
He did not miss them, heart more than content
with other forms, compulsive as a song
and as incorporeal, sharp as frost or flame:
the fairies, gathering for the grand event.

This poem is reprinted from Now and Then, the website devoted to the poetry of Martin Robertson, at http://rtnl.org.uk/now_and_then/

A crowned white cradlehood, and under it
a pink sleep, while the dowerers bent above.
Beauty one gave her; another kindness; and wit;
charm; and a true heart. They did not give love.
Love would follow the others presently,
love felt for her, when the pink bud should flower
(even before). None chose to give her power
to love. Better, they thought, keep fancy free?
Or thought, that's in her and need not be given?
Or did not think? Well satisfied, the five
stand round and look down at the gifted bud.
The little boy, wrapped to a kind of heaven,
loves the whole lot. So long as he's alive
this vision is the image of his good.

Cold, and a kind of darkness, which did not drown
the blaze, but seemed to drain it of all power.
A stiff, a frozen silence settled down
like a sea-mist. A minute or an hour,
a hundred years... Time, it seemed, had stopped,
as stood against the starry donors—loss,
negation, new-moon darkness—Carabosse!
And words like cave-drips from her cold mouth dropped:
"All remembered but I? And all so quick
to bless? Amen! She shall be brave and wise
and beautiful and happy, and as the bud
is dying into the flower, she shall prick
her thumb, and all these heavenly qualities
shall die into a little bead of blood."

Silence and darkness. Darkness, silence and cold.
Cold, silent, dark. An endless impasse. No
answer, no possible way out to the old
infinitely distant lost warm hum and glow.
The long-drawn moment, intolerably taut,
suddenly loosens to a blessed light:
a figure by the cradle, white by white—
one more forgotten fairy, but this one not
thereby to malice moved or bitterness.
To Carabosse all things are ground for hate,
but here we meet the other side—pity
and love: "The spell is cast which must unbless,
but I can half uncurse it. Needling fate
shall pierce her youth, and yet she shall not die.

"The prick shall bring not death but a long sleep.
A sleep not as you know it, from which you rouse
to your known world, but sleep so long, so deep,
almost a kind of death. About the house
shall spread and sprawl a thorny wilderness
one hundred years—until her fated love
(if, when he come, he's brave and true enough)
shall force a way and wake her with a kiss.
And it's to love that, wakened so, she'll waken:
love is the gift I brought. I give it now,
and who can say if that's the better gift
or the lost sleep among the bush and bracken?"
Silent the throng watched the white sisters go,
each on his silent thoughts alone, adrift.

Told and retold the story, botched, refined,
was with him all his childhood. He never knew
a time he did not know it; and behind
those words, a wordless image, far more true,
his own white vision burned—and the dark flood
engulfed it—then the triumph of the light,
yet blackness not annulled. Must that long night
divide the princess from her womanhood?...
The story and the vision. Latent, though,
later to flower, the love. Now, from that day,
nine years went on without the boy once more
seeing the girl. Preferment's chancy flow
at court washed the poor widow far away
to be a hunting-castle's housekeeper.

Far among far-spread forests half-ringed by hills,
a distant, lovely, rough and empty land.
Learning from rangers, lost for lonely miles,
he knew at last the tracked woods like his hand.
Later he learned the fords of the broad flow
beneath the nearer hills. Alone long days
walking, scrambling, he added mountain-ways
to his wood-knowledge. The forest-plain below
stretched to the farther slopes; far beyond those
he knew the city lay, and the princess,
the fated child of many day-dreams' yearning
whom *he* must somehow save. The vision rose
blotting the world out with its otherness.
But while he dreamed senses and limbs were learning.

The other way the rare-pathed hills spread on
till nothing lay beyond them but the sky.
Half their sweep, though, was blotted out by one
which towered towards him, beckoning threateningly.
Often he wanted, once or twice essayed
its final peak; but reached his fourteenth year
before one summer's long day saw him there.
Staring from it, not back but far ahead,
he glimpsed remote between blue-distanced downs
a faint flat blue, and knew it for the sea—
and longed to lose for once the wooded plain
and, lying hard and living hard for once,
to make his way there and for once be free...
Supper, bed, mother brought him home again.

His mother, waiting up, met him in wild—
reproach? Not so—excitement. Messengers
hot from the Court—the Queen and royal child
expected daily.
Always, other years,
the King and the male court alone had come,
with princely guests, from the late autumn on
till the New Year to hunt. Those three months gone
the castle was for nine their quiet home.
But now the Queen, it seemed, had not been well.
The doctors talked of country peace—she ought,
they said, to rest in woods and upland air,
and so... He went to bed under a spell
and lay awake long on the dancing thought
'The princess, my princess, is coming here.'

The fairy gifts had worked—if what they gave
in truth had made her what she was in truth.
The Queen was beautiful, the King was brave—
when they were prince and princess in their youth
she had been worthy to be won, and he
to win her; but their autumn's spring-time daughter
was something more, and 'what the fairies brought her'
serves at least to express her rarity.

—

Next morning hooves and grinding wheels awoke him.
He looked down on the yard, straight from above:
carriage-top, horse-backs, backs of stooping men—
one face: hers, lifted sleeping. So she took him
once more a child asleep, took him in love
that would not leave him till he died, nor then.

Awake she took (all unaware) control
of her new love-kingdom, his conquered being.
Her look, her walk, her laugh, her voice, the whole
informed by her warm spirit—only seeing,
hearing, her life with others fed his joy.
But unhoped chance soon made him one with those:
the princess wished to walk the woods; they chose
to be her guide (oh, well-spent years!) the boy.
So that summer for seven enchanted weeks
they were together in the green forest.
Nettles or brambles, she plunged gaily in
but he feared Carabosse in the thorny brakes
and coaxed her to the ford; soon from the crest
gazed on his kingdom, standing by its Queen.

He loved her, yes. What did she think of him?
What could she think, the nine-year-old princess?
The circumscription of her small world's rim
held spreading riches: peace and happiness
and love—as love comes to a happy child:
mother and nurse and father, near and dear,
taken for granted. Not as yet for her
painful passion obsessively distilled.
Child, happy; princess too. The boy was only,
at first, a servant—one whose natural state
was being at her bidding. Then at most
at moments a companion. More? Well, lonely
she sometimes was; hardly aware, and yet
glad in the woods to be with one friend lost.

The weather worsened and the Queen got better
or bored, and took her daughter back to town.
The boy, under the drips which did not wet her,
wandered the woods, or from the hill looked down
over dank green dissolving into grey,
dreamed of a dragon or a robber-knight
against her, of his long and terrible fight
finally won. The monster dead, he lay
wounded to death. His lady bent above,
the hot tears running down her face, and cried
'My knight, my prince, my love', and leaning kissed
his dying mouth. He died. Or did her love
raise him to life and set him at her side?
The story shifted like the shifting mist.

Robbers and dragons make an easy dream.
How can a hero find a way to fight
needle or thorn? The fact would come to him
and put his painted fantasies to flight
leaving him sick, until he fled to them
again—or else took refuge in a new
and subtler one. You've guessed it: cannot true
love fore-defeat the devil's monstrous game?
Love's grand illusion 'Love can master Fate'.
His light should dissipate the looming dark,
while the embodiment of his jealousy,
the bright saviour whom he must love and hate,
would sail perforce upon some other mark—
her fated prince, a hundred years away.

The rains of summer's draggled end dragged on
washing the autumn out of leaves and grass
till a hard winter clamped suddenly down
in frost and ice. The black twigs cased in glass
rang on each other in the bitter wind.
A magic of the outer world, for him
to walk in with his world of hidden dreams—
cold, though, and hungry. These bad seasons thinned
the woods of game. The hunting being poor
the princes lolled about the draughty hall
shouting for more wood on the fire, for light
and food, wine and more food. The castle store
was low, replenishment impossible.
The boy went shivering, his belt drawn tight.

The next four years lent him less time to dream
being apprenticed to a tough old man,
huntsman and wood-ranger. Not quite the same
he found the woods of his day's work, as when
ranged for delight alone. Delight he could
stumble on still (as dreamer still he was)
but must do more than watch the seasons pass,
must in their passage make his own work good.
Each time its task: cutting the undergrowth,
keeping down vermin, cherishing the deer.
His dreams shrank further into fantasy.
The hind mates only with the stag. Plain truth
placed him no better than a badger here—
rough-handed serf in perpetuity.

The seasons in the years went round by rote,
each month for work or less work docketed,
only in the King's hunting-season not
strictly determined by the season's need.
Then, four years after the princess's visit
(the boy a gangling woodman of eighteen)
came news again: this Christmas-time the Queen
comes with the court, and the princess. What is it?
Why, a great ball in celebration of
her fourteenth Christmas (she was autumn-born).
Why here? The princess wants it so. The boy's
heart leapt—'She loves. . . '—then dropped again: a love
for here, not him. The hind could only scorn
the badger, yield some insolent stag her joys.

It was October. Work was traversing
the forest, marking movements of the game,
making all ready for the King's hunting.
He walked drowned in his dreams. Then a red flame
smote him—light on the leaves across a clear
glade—smote him. O beauty, delight, love, pain.
A violent longing for the hills again
hustled him to the ford—be hanged the deer!
He made the peak, and in the evening glow
gazed on the marvellous bonfire, which with her
he'd seen a green sea, which soon, bare and black,
she'd see again. She loved this country, so
at least there was a love for them to share.
He gazed to the blue rim. Then turned his back.

Sick with the knowledge of a hopeless dream
he looked the other way, towards the sea,
and once again a longing heaved in him
to kick over the traces and be free.
The world is round, fortunes are made, deeds done.
The youngest son sets out with empty hands,
harvests a mint of luck in distant lands,
returns… The youngest, not the only son.
He dare not hive off on a gambler's hope
that chance, sown on the wind, might somehow sprout
in love. His love he dare not venture from.
Feeling his neck jerk on the tautened rope
he turned again. Descending, to dree out
his weird at home, walked through the black night home.

Past two o'clock. The ball went on and on.
All the princes were slow of foot and wit.
Deep in a curtained window, quite alone,
the princess drank a moment's peace from it.
Half the courtyard was moonlit, half a pool
of night, all empty; and the opposite rooms
showed lightless windows, uninvolved as tombs.
The night, she thought, alone is beautiful.
Out of the black a figure moved, strained face
raised to the curtained room, white in the moon—
that youth she met so often in the wood
who stood aside and fixed her with his gaze
troubling her faintly… Now, suddenly known
her guide of four years back—and understood.

'He loves me. That boy loves me' and she smiled
alone between the curtain and the moon,
felt herself blush, laughed 'Oh how nice'—half child
still, if already half woman, and soon
to leave childhood behind—if anyone
really does that; and if, for her, the doom
wished on her in the cradle's overcome—
the threat which burdens all but her alone.
They hoped to keep her hands from thorns and pins
but dared not tell her why. No hint of fear
clouded her rosy thought of being loved—
a new thought almost; though a smoother prince
had praised her beauty, claimed to worship her,
and made a pass; but left her little moved.

Next day she slept late, but late afternoon
dry and still drew her down a forest-track.
The trunks rose black out of the level brown;
against the blue the patterned twigs were black;
more beautiful than summer's green tent now
this brown carpet; yet this brown carpet's not
that summer four years gone—that's gone to rot
in yielding featureless black mould below.
For the first time Time's inescapable stream
sensed in that truth, her heart cried out in fear
for some firm rock, rose circling and alit
on love—not the half-child's romantic dream:
some deep unknown knowledge of love, her rare
spirit made in the cradle one with it.

Out of her thoughts she looked into the wood,
feeling its foredoomed beauty like a pain.
And there of course against a dark trunk stood
that boy, his gaze intent on her again—
loitering, spying on her high griefs—coarse, rude—
crossly she turned her look and step aside.
But felt at once her natural kindness chide
her churlishness; and felt, too, gratitude.
This love was not that dredged from her deep dream,
but any love's a wind-break when gales bend
the unseasoned heart. Sidelong she saw him wait,
gaze patiently. She frowned, but turned to him
smiling: "You were my kind guide and my friend
a happy summer I shall not forget."

He blushed. The thousand things he had to say
went from his mind, water from a cracked pot.
Pitying but irked the princess turned away.
Then, blushing, stammering, he blurted out
"You looked sad as you walked. If I could do. . ."
He stopped; and she flushed too, but angrily
(how dare this stuttering yokel spy on me!)
Yet she was grateful to him for that too
and something made her speak. "Those summer leaves
are sunk to mud. How should one not be sad
since we must all go under with the green?"
Words found him—"The leaves die but the tree lives
to leaf again. Trees fall but not the wood.
And though the forest perish, it has been."

"But what's the comfort there?" she asked. "The blight
is just that flat fact that what is must cease."
"But no. No. All that once has been delight,
even if it end, still by that miracle is"—
and then he thought of a pricked finger, of
a sleep that must see him into the ground
before another woke her; and knew drowned
his brave thought in the pain of powerless love,
and was silent and sad. The princess sighed
and a small bitter wind sighed through the wood
filling with dusk. She shivered and turned back
home, but smiled as she turned, and said good night. . .
How can one love and not be understood?
He brooded long, there on the darkening track.

The court went home. The seasons settled him
into their timeless round of beauty and chore
and the established tyranny of his dream,
more solid and more hopeless than before.
For her, that country deeply called to her.
In autumn (her own mistress, near fifteen)
she came again, to set beside the green
and bare the forest in its hour of fire.
She passed him often, sometimes paused to speak—
she liked his thinking (none of those she knew
were given to thought), but his thought acquiesced
too easily in Fate for her to take.
Her higher spirit burned rather to do
than bear—his seemed at best a second-best.

She liked his love (no word of love was said
by either) but she felt there too that he
took passively the fact of love, instead
of making it a life or breaking free.
One day she broke out—"But you should be gone
away from here, my father's woods, your mother"
she almost said 'and me' but slipped another
phrase in in time "and make some life your own."
He sighed. Easy, he thought, for her to say.
She does not know (he thought she did not know)
the bond that holds me without hope. To lose
my prison and my peace by going away…
Could I?… But only said: "How can I go?
My mother needs me here. I cannot choose."

They parted, not pleased with each other or
themselves. She to her room to ply her thread
in secret—work forbidden her, not for
any good reason but because, they said,
the fingers of a princess were not meant
for needlework. She laughed at that and, clever,
found ways to circumvent them which they never
guessed. She was sempstress now, and competent.
She was at work on a white handkerchief—
a plain square plainly hemmed, but she would fill,
she thought, the centre with embroidery.
She'd meant it for the young wood-ranger, if...
If nothing—she would give it to him still—
how dare she lecture him so priggishly?

He gazed unseeing at a glowing tree
hating himself, his love, his hopelessness.
And suddenly that vision of the sea
and dreamed escape sprang back to him. Still less
now than before he felt the power of
breaking away for good, but thought 'I'll make
the difficult traverse to that bourne and back,
bring back some token of my labour and love.'
It was her birthday soon. The court would come.
He'd have no part in that, but fetch a gift
from the unknown coast by the unknown steep
mountains, most rarely dared by any from
the forest, fearful of the cloven and cliffed
wind-naked way. He went peaceful to sleep.

Up early, off—a letter left to warn
his mother—hoped perhaps within a week
or two or three, at least he would return
within the month. He asked her, too, to speak
a word for him to the head forester
(partly he hated trouble; more, he knew
she would feel better with a task to do,
a stake in the adventure as it were).
Dark through the woods, he reached the ford with dawn,
and when night came, deep in the mountains stopped,
his water-bottle filled at a cold stream,
a shot bird roasted on a stick-fire. On
thin rough grass of a valley-alp he dropped
his weariness, and slept without a dream.

The way was harsh but he was viable.
Wind-bitter nights were much the worst of it.
Waking before dawn always, stiff with chill,
still tired, set off simply to stir some heat.
Some afternoons he slept, utterly done,
but grudged all such delays, the daylight's waste—
not that he had a real reason for haste
but challenged himself always to press on.
This restlessness robbed him of some delight.
Issuing to sunlight from an icy stream,
a dark bush jewelled with flowers and butterflies
shook him with beauty—or the early night,
stars contouring a high black mountain's rim.
But often mind forgot the joy of eyes.

Valley, col, valley formed his zigzag way
by star and sun bent truly to his goal,
and on the afternoon of the fifth day
he looked down a broad valley from a col
higher than any hill which lay beyond.
The peaks were breaking to the coastal plain.
That night was warmer. He slept late, and then
half a day's walking brought him to the sand—
soft sand which rose in a long rampart, crowned
with coarse grass—pricked him and drew blood. He smiled
thinking of her who now was safe at home.
And then smote on his ears the full, strange sound
muted before—the breakers. And the wild
sea stretched to the horizon. He was come.

The even roar, compact of swish and slap
innumerably varied and repeated,
entranced his hearing, as the featureless scape—
blues and greens melting in each other, fretted
with winking, wrinkled flashes—held his gaze.
Still on the sand he sat, in the cool wind,
while time passed and the sun went low behind
levelling the light across the circled space.
Slowly darkness seeped up out of the sea
like something palpable, veiling the meeting
of sea and sky, thickening, till only foam
shone in the black; light imperceptibly
withdrawn from all, to those thin streaks retreating
and to the star-pricks of the velvet dome.

Dazzle of sun out of the sea, loud cries
of fierce white birds circling, fish-plunging, woke him.
He stretched and stripped, plunged too. The fire-in-ice
and the harsh salt combined almost to choke him.
He struggled out. Soon, rested, cautiously
tried his fresh-water-swimmer's limbs again
in this new element to master. Then
glowing picked up his bow and with sure eye
shot down a seagull for his breakfast, roasted
on old dry driftwood from the high-tide mark.
He ate, and watched the sun change on the wave,
and in a dream was home again, and boasted
to the princess bending intent to mark
the toils and triumphs of her slighted slave.

How could such little liberty send his mind
on such an insolent flight?—the parable
forgotten of the badger and the hind,
and with it the sad facts. Perhaps we all
are schizophrenes *in posse*. He for one
showed the cleft now.
He looked along the sand
for something for his love—a love-gift and
a proof that this new world was truly won.
Northwards the dunes ran straight between the sea
and broadening plain. To south, hill crowded hill
against the shore, and the curved surf-line closed
in cliffs and a rock-naked promontory.
That way he trudged, and suddenly—check and chill—
knew himself not alone upon this coast.

She sat where the sand ceased against the rock,
an old, bowed woman, busily engaged.
Black dress, black scarf over her bent head, black
thick gauntlets on her hands. Most deeply aged
he could not doubt her, though he could not see
anything of her but her sombre wraps.
A knife in one hand, in the other perhaps,
he thought, a hedgehog. Curiosity
drove him against repulsion. At her side
a heap of the spined lumps, by it another
of rainbow-varied domes which, he saw now,
her knife had shaved. She raised her head and eyed
him hard. He shivered in the sun. What other
such frozen gaze frighted him long ago?

He dropped his eyes from hers to the gloved hands
which deftly shaved and gutted the gay shell.
That tempted him. "What are they?" "Sea-urchins."
"May I. . . ?" She laughed (gull's cry) "To buy and sell
love-presents is unlucky" (that laugh again).
"Get one yourself", she nodded at the sea.
He looked along the rock, and presently
glimpsed them, clumped low under the water-line.
He waded in and took one in his hand
and knifed it from the stone. The pricks drew blood,
and this time too he thought of the princess
but in cold fear. He sat down on the sand,
tried to clean out the shell but cracked it—would
gladly have fled, but stayed from stubbornness.

Next time with bleeding hands he harvested
nine, cleaned up three unbroken, placed them in
his pouch, turned homeward. The hag, nothing said
worked steadily, but as he left, again
lifted her eyes on him and laughed once more.
Her laughter's end was lost in a gull's cry,
repeated, dropped, picked up, interminably
tormenting as he moved along the shore.
His fingers' festering pain burned up his arm.
Almost blindly he turned towards the hills,
began the long drag. Day and night and day
(time lost) closed in fever's bewildering storm.
His arrows one by one lost on missed kills,
memory or instinct somehow kept his way.

Utterly weak but unfevered, aware,
he lay on the home-ridge. The leaves were blowing
from the brown wood, but the boughs not yet bare
concealed the castle still. To one not knowing
this might have been an uninhabited wild.
Now, down the mountain through the closing day,
stumbling, shaking, took the familiar way,
hungry for bed, home, mother, like a child.
Hungry too for the sight of the princess.
But at the ford his weakness frightened him—
all but swept off he made the bank just. Quite
spent, he could only drag his feebleness
to a known woodman's hut there by the stream
to beg food and a shelter for the night.

The hut was dark, and silent to his knock.
He pushed the door and struck a light. No one.
Empty the single room. On a rough block
were cheese and bread, a jug of water. Down
in one corner he saw a few hides spread.
He did not wait his host—drank and fell to
on the hard victuals (they were far from new
did cross his mind) and dropped flat on the bed.
Next morning, fit and fresh, the mystery
puzzled him of the empty room, stale food
but other thoughts took over. Combed and cleaned
he threw out two shells (broken) of the three,
wrapped up the last in red leaves from the wood
and took the track he could have followed blind.

His head was clear, his heart strangely at peace.
'I know my way' he thought. 'As it has been
all through my life, for all my life it is:
I am her servant and she is my queen.
I am to love her, serve her, all my life
in what I can. I am her forester.'
It came unnaturally calm and clear.
'She is my lady and a prince's wife.'
He stumbled, looked up, did not know the place.
Turning bewildered, the old well-known road
stretched where he'd come—but turning again, grew
a monstrous hill of thorn before his face
just where a sudden thinning of the wood
should mark him near the castle. Then he knew.

He hurled himself against the armoured mass
hardly in hope (even though unexpressed)
to break its spell-rooted defence, and pass
in, but because the blind pain in his breast
drove him into the teeth of any pain
which might distract him. So with naked hands
he tore at the barbed tightly-woven strands
which yielded only to tear deeper. Then,
dropped in a daze, he bled on the leaf-mould
uncaring, when his eye lit on the shell
dropped there unharmed. Vaguely he touched it—leapt
suddenly, knowing for what she was the old
woman. As though it bore itself the spell
he flung it from him in the thorns, and wept.

The blood clotted and the tears ceased to come,
the sun climbed and declined, but he lay on—
the princess and his mother and his home,
his occupation and his dream, all gone.
Would he, from lack of will to live, have let
death take him there under the thorns? Who knows?
But the last word is not with Carabosse,
or in this story was not, or not yet.
Dusk was already filling up the wood
when an awareness seeped to his numbed life
of someone there. He stared dully. Then, late,
smarted into himself. Before him stood
an old woman in black. He snatched his knife
and rose at her with all his pain in hate.

And then he saw her eyes and knew his error
and dropped the knife and backed against the thorn
his heart contracting in a kind of terror
at hope out of complete despair reborn.
The image of the christening rose once more
before him in its primal clarity—
and could that last best apparition be
here but to lay some ointment to his sore?
And yet, what could she do? By her own spell
a hundred years, a hundred years, were laid—
a hundred years to lay him in the grave
and raise a prince to rouse the bride. The knell
'a hundred years' turned to a voice. She said
"The hundred years' sleep was not all I gave.

"My gift was love. And where love is, I am.
You love the princess, and you think your love
is lost, but love is never lost. I came
to tell you this. It may seem little enough
or nothing to you now, but it's far from
nothing, or little. And I offer too
what may seem nothing or seem all to you
but is a hope to which you yet may come.
If you dare live on, while the princess sleeps
in timeless youth, love on through ageing time
till with your hundredth year your life is done,
you shall be born the prince for whom time keeps
the keys of this thorn fortress"—smiled at him.
His eyes closed, and he opened them alone.

‘To be her prince and have her for my bride’
his heart was flooded with unreasoning joy.
The age of time between, life and death, died
into a handsgrasp for the yearning boy.
And then a patch of doubt formed suddenly
‘How will the young price know that he is I?
Or will he know? He will not, certainly.
My only joy to know I shall be he’—
or might be he… The doubt spread to eclipse
the joy. But no. The fairy’s word was bond,
should he love out his life. Yet what, in truth,
had she to offer? Not these hands and lips
to take my love, but others formed beyond
the grave. ‘A sacrifice, *my* love, *my* youth.’

Among these words the bleak fact of his loss,
dropped sharp as new, contorted him with pain,
its black authority cutting across
all argument; and slowly ebbed again.
Numb, cold and utterly worn out, he found
that he was walking back down the dark road
and could no more. He dropped flat where he stood
and slept like death on the uneven ground.
Like death, but in the dawn touched by a dream
half apprehended as he woke. He moved
through the mountains towards the untrammelled sea
but heard his mother calling, calling him,
and turned—with dreadful pain, for what he loved
lay on, away from her, and yet was she.

Waking, he knew the pain for what it was
and knew the supposed choice already made.
Freedom he'd half so longed for was now his
total and dead. The world before him laid
was his and nothing. Now he'd journey far
and make himself a life, but not a new
heart-life, since to the old he must be true.
Not courage nor the offered avatar
guided his thought to a deliberate choice
of dedication. The offering of his life
had been made and accepted long ago.
A better might dare now go free, rejoice
in a new land in a new love, a wife
perhaps, children. For him it was not so.

He made his way to the head forester's house
and found it, as he guessed, empty—all gone
together to the castle? Carabosse
had seen to that?—or else the other one?
He washed and patched and looted. Clean and clad,
his bow restrung, his quiver once more full,
he set out through the winter-beautiful
woods for the hills. And there we leave the lad.
Later there's more of him that may be heard
from one who knew him in his exiled age,
but now we take a new hero—or say
him rebegotten by the fairy's word?
A prince—the same or not? Well, turn the page
and meet his parents on their wedding-day.

Intermezzo

Down the white hill-road, high above the sea
the six white horses swept the golden carriage.
The young queen looked, and a curve suddenly
gave her the sea-lapped city where this marriage
should make her life. Strange, and most beautiful,
and frightening. Shaken by a hot tear-shower
she turned to the firm shoulder there, a tower
founded on rock above her quivering pool.
It was a love-match (though most suitable)
yet he was frightening too—yet comforting
against her wider fears. She wept a bit,
then, feeling better, dried her eyes—as well
she did—"The Queen—Long live the King—The King
and Queen—Long live the Queen." So, this was it.

The horses swerved as the skilled driver swung
the heeling coach home through a needle's eye
into the court—but was there something wrong?
A bump, a flurry, and a choked-down cry
lost in the cheers of the domestic mass
as they drew still, and out the welcomed pair
stepped in their beauty down, stepped up the stair,
the moment's shadow vanished.
So it was
that just at midnight, when at last the Queen
felt pain crown her initiation's joy,
an old forester whom a wheel had crushed
died. Eighty years, they said, and more he'd been
about the place, coming a stranger boy.
They closed his eyes. Now the palace was hushed.

Part Two

Born in the purple? Well, not quite imperial—
our stage is not so wide—but born a prince.
No doubt compounded of the same material
as others are, yet there's a difference.
The forester, the poor court-lady's son
we knew before, could not with a like eye
view a like world. And incidentally
the prince's child-world *was* a different one.
A hunting-wood his father's kingdom held
but poor and tame our forester had found it
beside the great-treed miles of memory.
Seldom by that was the young prince enspelled—
but the white shore, the wide horizon round it:
action and dream were centred on the sea.

His nurse would carry him along the shore.
He crowed against the seagulls and the wind
or simply smiled. "Well, you've been born before,
young man," she'd say. He crowed again and grinned.
And once when a great wind-gust caught the water
and spooned a pint of brine over his head,
his chokes and sputters ended, the nurse said,
not in the tears she looked for but in laughter.
Later, the boy walked on the sounding beach
miles, hours. He loved to swim, and learned the tide,
coaxed from his parents early a trim boat
and an old long-shore fisherman to teach
the basic skills; those mastered, knew the pride
of deeper skill. He almost lived afloat.

Gurgle and clop and slap and hiss, water
moving along the moving hollow shell.
Sigh or high song of wind in rigging, air
on rope and wood, in canvas, clap, rattle.
His arm along the tiller, the live thing
moving with him, extension of muscle and bone,
lightly responding to his lean, or thrown
his whole weight's strength against the buffeting.
Half blind with blown spray, or with the white blaze
of light on water—dark cloud, sweeping showers—
or the whole ring an unflawed clarity—
he learnt the infinite variation of days,
season's return, and in the season's hour's,
the same and not the same continually.

The sun struck as it lifted from the sea
flat on the climbing land, flat on the coast
the rock-piled and the sandy promontory
alike in his foreshortened vision lost.
Their sweep enclosed the harbour-city's bay—
rock rising to a mountain, to a range,
sand stretched out from the flat green plain. The change
in land-structure intrigued his thoughts today.
South up the coast, miles to his left, a second
and longer cape, almost sunk in the blue,
reached out from a remoter range, which curled
back to the first (this he less saw than reckoned)
bounding the plain, and the small kingdom too.
The mountains and the sea enclosed his world.

For years he'd sailed the bay and the bare reaches
clear of the heads, for sailing's sake alone,
his mind content to mark the cliffs and beaches
scanned by the eye, the seen one with the known.
But now (he was, or would be soon, eighteen)
restlessness played on him in many shapes.
Today he eyed the coast between the capes
and felt constricted, narrowly hedged in.
West, his mother's tramontane kingdom reached
leagues north, she told him, to the sea again
and all between huge cliffs fronted the sea.
No spot there where a small boat might be beached?
Probably not. He looked along the plain.
South from the southern cape lay mystery.

Home, he found fuss and news, a messenger
arrived, announcing the immediate visit
of his king-uncle, with his wife and their
children. He scowled and went to bed. What is it
that makes an adolescent dream all day
of warm companionship, friendship and love,
but when some actual company's offered, move
heaven and earth to keep out of its way?
The young prince liked his cousins well enough,
but never had the sea and the far shores
called him so coaxingly. He sensed also
an unvoiced elders' plot to pair him off
with one of the two sisters. 'Little bores'
he thought. And suddenly laid plans to go.

His elder cousin was by no means plain
or stupid, and was not averse to him,
but—*princesse* insufficiently *lointaine*—
she simply had no footing in his dream.
The little one perhaps was prettier,
certainly sharper, and inclined to laugh
and laugh at him—which, while of course it half
annoyed him, also made him more aware…
But they were not the point.
Long before dawn
he'd foraged round the kitchens, wine and food
at least a week's supply—written a note
to tell his mother he was gone, and gone.
The sky was clear, the dawn-wind light but good,
as he moved outwards in his loaded boat.

Most of the morning he stood out to sea
against the sun, but somewhere round midday
the wind shifted into the north, and he
turned the bow south. Dim to the starboard lay
a thin blue ribbon, merging past unravelling
detail of trees and harbour, city and beach,
against the rising, broken range, through which
(he smiled) his cousins were already travelling.
Far ahead still the south cape's silhouette,
darker and hard on the bright water, marked
the end of seen and known. His eyelids dropping
against the glare, he drowsed, half dreaming yet
guiding the tiller—whence he had embarked
withdrawn and lost as where he would be stopping.

The wind at evening veered into the west
then died. The starry dark was utterly still.
He dropped the sails and lashed the tiller. Dressed
and wrapped up in a rug he slept until
the summer dawn brightening above the water
woke him—and woke, after the sun was high,
a faint sea-breeze, which shifted presently
and settled steady in the old good quarter.
He was abreast now, nearly, of the cape
and drew in closer. Huge cliffs black and red,
footed in shifting foam, crowned with thin jade,
broke down to island-rocks. One took the shape,
he thought, of a girl sleeping on a bed,
then changed, merged, telescoped. The point was made.

The sky-ring sharp, unbroken, reached and reached
behind the piling rocks. At last appeared
a great wall of south-facing cliff, which stretched
west, west to the horizon, straightly sheared
from grass to surf, golden against the noon,
lovely, inhospitable. In the lee
he lost the breeze, and on a quiet sea
the boat drifted from the last impulse on...
So. This way too... Suppose the weather changes
what hope for a small boat, what hope for him,
between the wild wind and that wall of rock?...
Suppose he made the shore... Those barren ranges
climbing from cape and cliff... He felt the grim
threat, shivered in the sun. So what? Go back?

A gust bellied the sail, and then strengthened.
He moved the tiller automatically
to make the most of the recovered wind.
The boat moved rippling forward on the sea,
purposeful. Suddenly from the cliff-face swept
a flight of white birds, wheeled over the boat
westward, ahead, bright, dwindling. Were they not
a guide? At least an omen. 'I accept.'

—

A day, a night—two, three days and their nights
the smooth horizon, the unbroken cliff
held him as in a dream on either side.
And every day at noon came the white flights
fanning out, wheeling west, ahead, as if
meant for him, sent for him—omen, yes, and guide.

The birds, the ruffled sea, changelessly changing,
the changing changeless cliffs, and thoughts and dreams.
More dream than thought, inconsequently ranging
from lunch to love, from the future (which seems
so full and so eternal, so unknown
behind all dreamed impossible precisions)
to the other penny-face of the same visions,
childhood.
From a deep layer suddenly thrown
up, a clear image: miles of sea-washed sand,
miles, days—crossed by a river hard to cross,
and closed by cliffs. These cliffs, this promontory.
And all along that flat edge of flat land
a young man journeying. A sense of loss,
pain deeply felt. And yet, this was a story.

A story. What, whose story? And why, how
this deep acceptance of a story's pain?
How know the spot's ahead there, waiting now,
where these cliffs, those cliffs, curb that sand-edged plain?
He groped. A glimmer, sinking. If it fails,
darkness... But no, the light flamed up—of course,
the teller of all stories, his old nurse.
But this was different from her other tales.
Fairies and giants, kings and queens of old,
princesses in the toils of sorcerers—
put out for dragons—in some wild distress.
And always at the fatal hour, the bold
prince to confront the monsters in their lairs,
outwit the witches, win the sweet princess.

The old stories, alike but different,
told yet again and asked for yet again,
each phrase expected where it always went.
But once (he now remembered clearly) when
he asked her for a story—'just one more'—
a look he didn't know came in her eyes,
and then she told him, to his shocked surprise,
a story he had never heard before.
It didn't even start with 'Once upon
a time' but "When my mother was a girl"—
particularity, strange and not good—
her parents lived out in the country, down
beside the river where it starts to curl
among the fields, after it leaves the wood.

“Grandfather was the old King’s forester
(your grandfather’s). When I was very small
my mother used to carry me out there
to see them, but old granny had a fall
and died, and grandpa came to live at our
house here”—it was a long time getting started,
but the child’s straying fancy was alerted
suddenly by “a knocking at the door
one dark night late when they were going to bed.
My mother—she was your age, just about—”
(he must, he thought, then have been eight or nine)
“went and opened the door. And there, she said,
stood a young forester. Utterly worn out
he looked, and foreign in his strange-cut green.”

The image of the strange exhausted youth
against the dark, had somehow been conveyed
to strike the boy with a full force of truth,
through time and two discursive tongues relayed.
Much of the rest was vague. He knew the lad
was taken as a forester, and ever
a loved friend in the household by the river
and favourite uncle to the child who had
first opened to him. But he told them little
of who he was or where he had come from,
except that when he reached them he had crossed
the southern mountains, steep and bare, with little
water or vegetation and less game,
footsore and starving, worn out, nearly lost.

The girl grew up and married a young groom
in the King's stables. To their eldest daughter
the forester stood godfather. Their home
was always his. He played with her and taught her
and loved her as his own. And as she grew
he talked to her, more than he ever had
even to her mother. "There was something sad,
so sad. Just what it was I never knew.
But he would talk about the forest-land
where he had lived—that's why he was so good
at all that craft—there wasn't tree or track
he didn't love and have mapped in his mind,
pine for in what he smiled at as our 'wood'.
And yet, I knew, he never would go back."

And one day (they were sitting on the shore)
he told her of another beach he knew,
empty—'Much as this must have been before
they built the city. Far away—' he threw
his right arm out. That beach. He'd been there first
crossing huge mountains, wandering and wild
'full of hope, full of hope' he told the child—
and found there, not the worst, but the next worst
thing in his life. Afraid, afraid went back,
a dreadful journey, sick and almost mad,
across the dreadful mountains to his home
and found the worst. Returned on the same track,
not hopeful or afraid or sick, but sad.
" 'But one day' and he smiled 'the prince will come.'

"I don't know what he meant." He came once more
to the same beach. Then trudged, a weary way,
the narrow ribbon of the flatland shore
stretching on endlessly. Until one day
it curved off, merging into mud. He found
the wide mouth of a sluggish-seeming river.
Beyond, the ribbon stretching out for ever
hardly beckoned; and he'd been nearly drowned
lately, crossing a river he knew well.
He turned along the bank, and certainly
knew this was not his way. Turned from the plain,
plunged straight in, and the unpredictable
current caught him and forced him out to sea.
He fought it, and knew fear and hope again.

"He had to fight the fairy's curse to win
the fairy's promise—that was what he said.
I don't know what he meant." When he won in
at last to land, he lay as good as dead
he didn't know how long. He sensed the air,
came to himself, and pulled himself together,
saw with surprise that it was lovely weather,
felt with surprise gladness to be still there.
He walked a little way upstream to get
his bottles full of the near-brackish marsh-
water—the mountain-water, sweet and clean,
was gone before. "I asked him what he ate—
seagulls he shot and cooked on drift." The harsh-
screaming seagulls were all the life he'd seen.

So, drowsing at the tiller, the boy recalled
the nurse's story told him long ago.
But sharper than the image of her old
face as she drew the memory up, he saw
the beach, the river, with those other eyes,
the boy's a hundred years perhaps away
heavily travelling. And saw one day
beyond the ribbon a faint shadow rise
which broke too the horizon of the sea
and grew at length into a cliff-faced range—
mountains! The river-water was nearly gone
and in the mountains there would surely be
springs—and oh, mountains! what a blessed change
from the flat ribbon stretching on and on.

The nurse's tale? Yes, but he felt aware
of much, much more, than she could ever have said.
He almost felt he *was* the forester,
had lived all this inside that heart and head,
and lived (or died) too that last horrible
reach, among naked, spiny, treacherous stone,
no gull's sad cry for company, alone.
No game, no streams, hardly a rain-puddle;
and worst a hard blank grey sky over all
(no trees to guide his forest-sense)—east, west,
north, south, all points were sullenly the same.
'The fairy's curse'—he knew he fought a spell...
Who knew? Who fought?
A sudden violent blast
roused the prince brutally from his deep dream.

From the south-east the squall struck his port beam
and heeled the boat all but under a wave.
The lifted water driving over him
he fought the tiller's will. At last it gave
and set the righted boat running before
the wind, aslant towards the stretching cliff,
while he wrenched at the sheets, salted and stiff.
Then they gave too, the sails slumped to the floor.
Now he could keep her more into the wind
which shrieked against the straining mast and stays.
The water whitening under the black gale
was scooped up, shaken, broken, shredded, thinned
into a thousand thousand steely rays
which whipped his body with their scalding flail.

The noon was darkness, and the terrible coast
could not be seen. Even the clap and roar
of water heaved and hurled on rock was lost
in general clamour and din. But he was sure
though he put all his weight and strength and soul
against the tiller, he was not holding course
but sidling always closer, must perforce
drive on the rocks at last, and that be all.
The boat staggered under a gathered blow
reeling and cracking, and the tiller's kick
hurled him aside. He lost control. Then he
was fighting water. Nothing he could do
was anything. The water sucked and struck
and hurled him down. Life sang from a far tree.

Horrible pain, sickness and horrible pain
ground him. He groaned, and groaning felt himself
there, somewhere, here, something at least again.
He retched, and felt the salt and bitter gulf
get him hard by the throat again. He retched
again, and brought up more of the foul brine.
He groaned and retched and vomited again,
and knew himself alive and safely beached
out of the sea. He heaved up on his hands,
steadied his swimming head, saw it was night,
a moon—behind, the bright sea under it,
and calm. Miles to his left stretched the cold sands.
With painful care he worked round to his right.
The cliffs. And under them a fire was lit.

He staggered, crawled, dragged himself to the fire.
A hunched black figure crouching in its light
lifted her head and was his nurse. Desire
for nothing happier filled him with delight.
"Come here. Get warm. I've got all that you'll need
if you've the courage for the land-journey."
She stroked his hair, his head laid on her knee.
"The fairy's promise is the prince's bride."
He fell asleep as she was speaking. No
dreams, a deep, sweet, long slumber. When the sun
woke him, he saw by the cold ashes spread
two water-bottles and a woodman's bow
and full quiver. But he was quite alone.
Then he remembered that his nurse was dead.

He picked himself up. He was cold and stiff,
bruised, hungry—but at least could stand and move.
He took the bow. A gull perched on the cliff.
He aimed and loosed, but the shaft passed above
and shattered on the rock. One arrow gone.
Be careful. He looked where the two flasks lay.
A bow, eleven arrows. And the way
home was the grim mountains… But the way on?
The words seemed almost spoken more than thought…
'The prince's bride'… That was a fevered dream.
He looked down at the flasks, the bow, the quiver
and the cold ash. All a dream it was not.
These and the message had been given him.
'All right' he thought. 'The next test is the river.'

That's what he thought. The tests came sooner, though—
came all the time, it seemed, in various ways.
He had been taught to hunt and use the bow
but never practised much, and several days
he didn't manage to bring down a bird.
Three of his arrows landed in the sea
(though one he did get back); and presently
he took, feeling both wicked and absurd,
to stalking gulls slow-pecking on the sand,
getting quite close before he loosed the string,
the only thing that mattered—not to miss.
Hardly a sport, but he was hungry, and
hunger is answerable for anything—
at any rate (he sighed) for more than this.

And then his feet. The forester had spent
his days trudging. The prince grew quickly sore,
but sensibly took off his shoes and went
barefoot through the surf and along the shore.
But all this slowed him, and his flasks were dry
before he reached the river. Feverish
with thirst and weariness, he felt the wish
to rest torture, having no wish to die.
Home howled for him behind. But he was pressed
forward by more than the immediate dry
lust for the river. Far beyond it lay
the fairy-promised girl. That thought caressed
him still, even while he limped mechanically
into the night of his third waterless day.

He shuffled on under the darkening air
hardly aware that he dared not lie down,
stumbled, tumbled, and then he just lay there
as an inanimate thing lies where it's thrown.
And images of violent vividness
drained his life to themselves: a river, wet,
shining against a forest. Then, clearer yet,
her form, her face, the dear unknown princess.
Then darkness.
Rest and faint warmth of the sun
revived him to his pain. He lay awhile,
but something made him rouse. Hardly in him
the force that made him rise and struggle on.
Then his glazed eyes (he might have gone a mile,
two, fifty yards) awoke to the wide stream.

He plunged in where the water met the sand,
dropped in the shallows—kneeling, drank and drank
(the fresh river thrusting the ebb-tide) and
crawled out again, heavy and dizzy, sank
down on the beach.
Later, killed, cooked and ate
and slept. He let twenty-four hours pass
before he faced the question how to cross,
regaining strength and learning how to wait.
He watched the river running furiously
outward, saw the forester's ignorance
(inland bred), waited for the turning tide
and just at the still moment, when the sea
moved again upwards in the endless dance,
he struck out and soon reached the other side.

He had the measure of the sands by now.
His feet were sounder, and he husbanded
the life-blood water with more care. And though
extreme exhaustion and thirst-sickness did
near-crush him when he came, south always south
watching the mountains rise, to where a valley-
stream turned the dunes, his state was radically
better than when he'd reached the river-mouth.

—

A new trouble: the choice of right or left,
of wrong or right. The desert-beach was grim
but was the way, one way and no mistake.
Now, though, the gathering of the valley-cleft
mountains beleaguered him, and offered him
a dozen or a hundred paths to take.

He'd crossed the stream, he could not have said why,
to where the beach-curve ended at the steep
rock. There dossed down, at first uneasily
but later in a long untroubled sleep.
Awaking in the morning he perceived
the difficulty was not really there.
Just what he sought he did not know, or where;
seek it he did, because he had believed
the fairy's promise. And if that were so
he must believe she'd make a guide for him.
He turned inland, thrusting through stiff dune-grass
which speared him till he bled. Beyond, below
the soft sand, he rejoined the mountain-stream,
turned and began the climb towards the pass.

The mountains brought new muscles into play
with new delights. He breathed the air's brightness,
watched light changing on broken rock, as day
climbed and declined. And dreamed of the princess.
Watched, heard, the water churning round a rock
or falling whitely in a widening pool
from the next cliff. He stripped and plunged to cool
his sweating body—knew the fiery shock
of snow-water, colder than he had thought
water could be, and sweet, sweet to the taste.
He crawled out gasping, sat there in the sun
and dreamed of the princess, and watched the root
of a green tree grappling the rock. And dressed
and clambered nimbly up the cliff and on.

High on the col, late in the afternoon,
the rocks to left and right climbed steep and bare
to peak on peak, and on the right spread on
west to a range. His hope perhaps lay there
but not, that seemed quite clear, to be attained
by climbing now. A steep glen at his feet
falling away, told him to follow it,
descending to climb further in the end.
An hour or so later and far below
darkness mastered him, every muscle aching,
where the cleeve widened to the junction of
two larger valleys. Wind from distant snow
struck deeply chill, but too worn-out for waking
curled between two boulders he dreamed of love.

The sun still mountain-hidden in high day,
cramped and cold he stood looking up along
the two valleys, each climbing its own way.
One must be right, he knew, the other wrong,
but nothing told him which. Below, close by,
the joined streams formed a rock-pool, deep and spread.
He shivered, but he stripped, plunged over head
and out, new-fired. Then something caught his eye.
A flowered bush, studded among the flowers
with butterflies in scores, which suddenly moved,
wheeled in the air, a sun-caught cloud, and flew
together up the westering fork. The powers
he trusted had not failed him but had proved
themselves to him, as he to them was, true.

It was that morning from that valley-head
he saw the mountain—a tall flat-topped peak
between two shadowed cliffs sunlit, which said
'I am your way' (if butterflies can speak,
why not mountains?). And from that moment on
through storm and sun, ice-nights and sweating heat
of shadeless, windless noon, he followed it,
lost and recovered, up steep valleys and down,
until, five days' hard going from the coast,
he reached it. Just before he made the top
he turned, looked back, and glimpsed, miles to the east,
the sea. He suddenly felt alone and lost,
homesick, afraid; but turned back, pressed on up.
And there below him lay the great forest.

Acres of leafage unbelievably stretched
almost past sight—only a faint blue rim,
another range. Light, dark brown, reds, golds, patched
and mingled, were a revelation to him
of autumn. But he shivered—terrible
the thought of ways crook-tunnelled all about
or no way. For he knew beyond a doubt
that somewhere in that labyrinth lay his goal.
Not for itself the mountain had commanded
his steps, but that hence he might recognise
the field of his last fight. But the dense floor
kept all its secrets hidden. He descended,
foothills. And evening suddenly showed his eyes
the river of his vision days before.

The other river, once his thirst was slaked,
he'd recognised quite different from that in
the vision—wondered if the girl were faked
too, wholly real as form and face had been.
But here, just so, the river flowed against
the dark forest. And now he knew the love
he'd been made captive by the image of
was true, and his beyond this last defence.

—

Waking to water whispering by the bank,
the dark recesses of the sunstruck wood
brought his forebodings back in force. And yet
he had so much, so very much, to thank
the fairy for, he could not think her good
would fail him—but the fairy's curse?—Ah, that.

Off to his right the bank was flattened back,
and the far left bank too; and at that spot
there seemed a thinning in the trees. A track?
Reached by a ford? The ford he found, but not
the track—or if a track, so overgrown…
Still, he pushed in, and once in the deep shade
the overgrowth was thinner, and he made
progress along what now made itself known
certainly for a way. But long neglect
had left it more a guide-line than a road.
And then, perhaps a quarter of a mile
within the wood, it forked. He paused, but checked
his reason's helpless wondering, and strode
down the right fork. He felt the fairy smile.

Over the miles, under the leafy light,
at fork or cross-track he went still by whim,
rejecting reason's query 'Which is right?'
Till, about noon he thought, there fronted him
no choice, no way—a mountainous barrier
of thorn, lost in the woods each side. 'Go through'
he heard his heart. But 'It's not possible to'
came reason—and this time he bowed to her.
Work along for a gap. Left of the way
bushes and scrub were knotted to the briar.
Right was a space, where a tall pine-tree stood—
the only conifer he'd seen all day
among the beech and oak. Its thin black spire
was sinister, and boded him no good.

He turned on to the unencumbered ground
between the thorn-wall and the pine. But soon
a few yards in under the oaks, he found
the undergrowth master again. The noon
was hidden. His direction was maintained
by the thorn-bastion only, which stretched still
unbroken, unthinned, quite without change, until
he almost thought that it could have no end.
Still through the hostile growth he pressed and thrust,
clothes torn, skin bloody, but he could not stop.
He gained much ground—but was such ground a gain?
The dim light dimmed further, and soon he must,
he thought, drop on the dead-leaf silt, give up,
give in, lie down and not get up again.

No, he would not die yet. And to turn back
was meaningless. He must go on. And then
he broke through bushes out on to a track…
But thorn-crossed like the last. He looked again.
A pine… Oh, fool—full-circle fool. He wept,
knowing his weariness, knowing his goal
here, here, within the circle. Oh fool, fool.
Worn out he dropped on the leaf-mould and slept.

—

Waking, he drank deep from his water-flask
but would not pause to hunt or cook. Eating
could wait. He drew his knife, and carefully
began to cut his way. He forced the task
to be the cutting each thick stem, each string
of spear-thorns. The vast whole he would not see.

Hour after hour, hacking and dragging clear,
breathing hard, head swimming, while sweat and blood
ran down his face, he fought a mounting fear.
He knew in this last fight against the good
fairy, the bad was rousing all her power.
His strength and purpose flowed and ebbed—now weak,
now firm again, then suddenly deadly sick.
But still he dragged and hacked, hour after hour.
Forced by exhaustion to a moment's rest
he saw the little tunnel he had made
in the vast mass. It was impossible.
He gave up.
Deeper in the thorn, a nest
he thought, an odd one, hung. His dull mind played
with its likeness to a sea-urchin shell.

Traditional ornament and lucky charm
in every house… A sea-people… The sea—
oh for the sea! the sea in storm and calm
raised for him in a wren's-nest mockery.
A nest? He peered harder. It *was* a shell,
its shaven bright fragility intact.
How could it be? here? Here it was, a fact,
a sea-gift wished him in this forest-hell.
He found himself again, with greater care,
severing tough stems and more than Gordion-tied
knots. It was almost in his hand—a few
strands now. He took it.
A clotted mass fell clear,
a natural tunnel from the other side
opened to join his own, and he was through.

Beyond an empty space a castle-gate
stood open. He went in. No one at all.
No one. The empty guard-room seemed to wait—
bench, table, brazier, weapons on the wall,
but no one. He passed to the yard within,
paved, echoing, empty—on to the great hall:
tables, stools, hangings, one great chair, and all
empty. The play seemed waiting to begin.
Through all the courtyard rooms, up the curled stair,
through bedrooms, boudoirs, everywhere he went
furnished and empty, and—the sense grew strong—
empty an age—'When that old forester,
who died before my birth, was weeping sent
away, when he as I perhaps was young.'

That floor was empty—up the stair again,
he found himself out on the ramparts. Down,
searched the first floor a second time in vain—
the ground-floor too, but he was still alone…
The fairy's curse—a shocking fear possessed him
that after the hard victories of the way
he might, when all seemed won, yet lose the day,
defeated with the fairy who had blessed him.
A third time frantically round the bare
ground-floor, a third time round the upper, and
in a dark corner of a corridor
a small door somehow missed led to a stair,
low, narrow, black, and twisting to its end
his fingers groping felt another door.

He found the handle. The small room dazzled him
with shafted sunlight falling on a bed.
She seemed to have lain down, dropped into dream,
just now. Her face was from him, but the head
bright in the sun. Her slight and lovely form
was all his dream. He stood and fought his heart
within the door, and mastering it in part
moved, hesitated, afraid to break the charm.
Pausing to quell his heart again, to breathe,
trembling he stood at last by his princess,
heard in the stillness her soft breath, and took
heart, kissed through hair the brow turned off beneath.
She stirred and turned her flower-face—that face.
He kissed her on the mouth and she awoke.

"You?. . . " a faint trouble in a moment gone,
lost in a smile as warm as sunlight—"You."
"Ah, you" his heart in answer glowed upon
her glowing heart, his smile on her smile—two
in one. She raised her face to his face and
kissed his mouth. Then "This" faltering "is yours if. . . "
She pressed into his hand a handkerchief.
And he, finding still in his other hand
the shell "And this is yours." She looked at it
wondering. He, lifting the half-worked stuff,
ran the needle deep in his thumb, and bled,
red on the white. And she cried out, upset,
and dropped the shell, which broke. It was enough,
she broke into a flood of tears and fled.

He half-noticed the room was filled with light,
and hurrying down saw half-unconsciously
the castle ruined. But she was there in sight.
He caught her by the gate-house. "Where am I?
Who am I?" She clung to him with this moan,
weeping and trembling. And he held her close
and called aloud, defying Carabosse
"We are together and each other's own."
He heard, they heard, the wicked fairy's laugh,
felt the good smile, began to understand
the necessary double face of fate,
the two in one, the one and other half
which made a whole.
They kissed, and hand in hand
walked out together through the broken gate.

Epilogue

And how did they get home? And were his mother
and father fond of her at once? His cousins,
how did they and the princess like each other?...
Lived happy ever after?... Children?... Dozens
of questions where a story finishes
follow of course. Mostly the answer, though,
leads to another story; but, I know,
how they got home really belongs to this.

—

The castle ruined, the great thorn-barrier
was breached and withered too. The track they tried
led to the river straight. The fairy's rancour
was stilled for now, and in the other's care
they walked, indeed they rode—at the bank-side
a trim boat, rigged, provisioned, lay at anchor.

They had no notion where the river ran,
but thinking of the mountains and the coast,
trusting the fairy's truth, he led her on,
weighed anchor, set sail. Many days are lost
through which they dreamed their way along that stream,
learning to know each other and their love.
Later, in a swift gorge, rough cliffs above,
shared toil and danger made part of their dream.
Then the hills parted, and the river came
broader and fuller out across a plain
many days more to sand-dunes and the sea.
He knew then the two rivers were the same—
the lesson of the two in one again.
So to the cliffs and round the promontory.