Last Poems

by A. E. Housman

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Title: Last Poems by A. E. Housman

Author: A. E. Housman

Release date: April 1, 2005 [eBook #7848] Most recently updated: October 23, 2018

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7848

Credits: Produced by A. P. Saulters, and David Widger

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LAST POEMS

By A. E. Housman

I publish these poems, few though they are, because it is not likely that I shall ever

be impelled to write much more. I can no longer expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the early months of 1895 I wrote the greater part of my first book, nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came; and it is best that what I have written should be printed while I am here to see it through the press and control its spelling and punctuation. About a quarter of this matter belongs to the April of the present year, but most of it to dates between 1895 and 1910.

September 1922

We'll to the woods no more, The laurels are all cut, The bowers are bare of bay That once the Muses wore; The year draws in the day And soon will evening shut: The laurels all are cut, We'll to the woods no more. Oh we'll no more, no more To the leafy woods away, To the high wild woods of laurel And the bowers of bay no more.

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I. THE WEST

Beyond the moor and the mountain crest —Comrade, look not on the west— The sun is down and drinks away From air and land the lees of day. The long cloud and the single pine Sentinel the ending line, And out beyond it, clear and wan, Reach the gulfs of evening on. The son of woman turns his brow West from forty countries now, And, as the edge of heaven he eyes, Thinks eternal thoughts, and sighs. Oh wide's the world, to rest or roam, With change abroad and cheer at home, Fights and

furloughs, talk and tale, Company and beef and ale. But if I front the evening sky Silent on the west look I, And my comrade, stride for stride, Paces silent at my side, Comrade, look not on the west: 'Twill have the heart out of your breast; 'Twill take your thoughts and sink them far, Leagues beyond the sunset bar. Oh lad, I fear that yon's the sea Where they fished for you and me, And there, from whence we both were ta'en, You and I shall drown again. Send not on your soul before To dive from that beguiling shore, And let not yet the swimmer leave His clothes upon the sands of eve. Too fast to yonder strand forlorn We journey, to the sunken bourn, To flush the fading tinges eyed By other lads at eventide. Wide is the world, to rest or roam, And early 'tis for turning home: Plant your heel on earth and stand, And let's forget our native land. When you and I are split on air Long we shall be strangers there; Friends of flesh and bone are best; Comrade, look not on the west.

II.

As I gird on for fighting My sword upon my thigh, I think on old ill fortunes Of better men than I. Think I, the round world over, What golden lads are low With hurts not mine to mourn for And shames I shall not know. What evil luck soever For me remains in store, 'Tis sure much finer fellows Have fared much worse before. So here are things to think on That ought to make me brave, As I strap on for fighting My sword that will not save.

III.

Her strong enchantments failing, Her towers of fear in wreck, Her limbecks dried of poisons And the knife at her neck, The Queen of air and darkness Begins to shrill and cry, 'O young man, O my slayer, To-morrow you shall die.' O Queen of air and darkness, I think 'tis truth you say, And I shall die to-morrow; But you will die to-day.

IV. ILLIC JACET

Oh hard is the bed they have made him, And common the blanket and cheap; But there he will lie as they laid him: Where else could you trust him to sleep? To sleep when the bugle is crying And cravens have heard and are brave, When mothers and sweethearts are sighing And lads are in love with the grave. Oh dark is the chamber and lonely, And lights and companions depart; But lief will he lose them and only Behold the desire of his heart. And low is the roof, but it covers A sleeper content to repose; And far from his friends and his lovers He lies with the sweetheart he chose.

V. GRENADIER

The Queen she sent to look for me, The sergeant he did say, 'Young man, a soldier will you be For thirteen pence a day?' For thirteen pence a day did I Take off the things I wore, And I have marched to where I lie, And I shall march no more. My mouth is dry, my shirt is wet, My blood runs all away, So now I shall not die in debt For thirteen pence a day. To-morrow after new young men The sergeant he must see, For things will all be over then Between the Queen and me. And I shall have to bate my price, For in the grave, they say, Is neither knowledge nor device Nor thirteen pence a day.

VI. LANCER

I 'listed at home for a lancer, Oh who would not sleep with the brave? I 'listed at home for a lancer To ride on a horse to my grave. And over the seas we were bidden A country to take and to keep; And far with the brave I have ridden, And now with the brave I shall sleep. For round me the men will be lying That learned me the way to behave. And showed me my business of dying: Oh who would not sleep with the brave? They ask and there is not an answer; Says I, I will 'list for a lancer, Oh who

would not sleep with the brave? And I with the brave shall be sleeping At ease on my mattress of loam, When back from their taking and keeping The squadron is riding home. The wind with the plumes will be playing, The girls will stand watching them wave, And eyeing my comrades and saying Oh who would not sleep with the brave? They ask and there is not an answer; Says you, I will 'list for a lancer, Oh who would not sleep with the brave?

VII.

In valleys green and still Where lovers wander maying They hear from over hill A music playing. Behind the drum and fife, Past hawthornwood and hollow, Through earth and out of life The soldiers follow. The soldier's is the trade: In any wind or weather He steals the heart of maid And man together. The lover and his lass Beneath the hawthorn lying Have heard the soldiers pass, And both are sighing. And down the distance they With dying note and swelling Walk the resounding way To the still dwelling.

VIII.

Soldier from the wars returning, Spoiler of the taken town, Here is ease that asks not earning; Turn you in and sit you down. Peace is come and wars are over, Welcome you and welcome all, While the charger crops the clover And his bridle hangs in stall. Now no more of winters biting, Filth in trench from fall to spring, Summers full of sweat and fighting For the Kesar or the King. Rest you, charger, rust you, bridle; Kings and kesars, keep your pay; Soldier, sit you down and idle At the inn of night for aye.

IX.

The chestnut casts his flambeaux, and the flowers Stream from the hawthorn on the wind away, The doors clap to, the pane is blind with showers. Pass me the can, lad; there's an end of May. There's one spoilt spring to scant our mortal lot, One season ruined of our little store. May will be fine next year as like as not: Oh ay, but then we shall be twenty-four. We for a certainty are not the first Have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled Their hopeful plans to emptiness, and cursed Whatever brute and blackguard made the world. It is in truth iniquity on high To cheat our sentenced souls of aught they crave, And mar the merriment as you and I Fare on our long fool's-errand to the grave. Iniquity it is; but pass the can. My lad, no pair of kings our mothers bore; Our only portion is the estate of man: We want the moon, but we shall get no more. If here to-day the cloud of thunder lours To-morrow it will hie on far behests; The flesh will grieve on other bones than ours Soon, and the soul will mourn in other breasts. The troubles of our proud and angry dust Are from eternity, and shall not fail. Bear them we can, and if we can we must. Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.

X.

Could man be drunk for ever With liquor, love, or fights, Lief should I rouse at morning And lief lie down of nights. But men at whiles are sober And think by fits and starts, And if they think, they fasten Their hands upon their hearts.

XI.

Yonder see the morning blink: The sun is up, and up must I, To wash and dress and eat and drink And look at things and talk and think And work, and God knows why. Oh often have I washed and dressed And what's to show for all my pain? Let me lie abed and rest: Ten thousand times I've done my best And all's to do again.

XII.

The laws of God, the laws of man, He may keep that will and can; Not I: let God and man decree Laws for themselves and not for me; And if my ways are not as theirs Let them mind their own affairs. Their deeds I judge and much condemn, Yet when did I make laws for them? Please yourselves, say I, and they Need only look the other way. But no, they will not; they must still Wrest their neighbour to their will, And make me dance as they desire With jail and gallows and hell-fire. And how am I to face the odds Of man's bedevilment and God's? I, a stranger and afraid In a world I never made. They will be master, right or wrong; Though both are foolish, both are strong, And since, my soul, we cannot fly To Saturn or Mercury, Keep we must, if keep we can, These foreign laws of God and man.

XIII. THE DESERTER

"What sound awakened me, I wonder, For now 'tis dumb." "Wheels on the road most like, or thunder: Lie down; 'twas not the drum.: "Toil at sea and two in haven And trouble far: Fly, crow, away, and follow, raven, And all that croaks for war." "Hark, I heard the bugle crying, And where am I? My friends are up and dressed and dying, And I will dress and die." "Oh love is rare and trouble plenty And carrion cheap, And daylight dear at four-and-twenty: Lie down again and sleep." "Reach me my belt and leave your prattle: Your hour is gone; But my day is the day of battle, And that comes dawning on. "They mow the field of man in season: Farewell, my fair, And, call it truth or call it treason, Farewell the vows that were." "Ay, false heart, forsake me lightly: 'Tis like the brave. They find no bed to joy in rightly Before they find the grave. "Their love is for their own undoing. And east and west They scour about the world a-wooing The bullet in their breast. "Sail away the ocean over, Oh sail away, And lie there with your leaden lover For ever and a day."

XIV. THE CULPRIT

The night my father got me His mind was not on me; He did not plague his fancy To muse if I should be The son you see. The day my mother bore me She was a fool and glad, For all the pain I cost her, That she had borne the lad That borne she had. My mother and my father Out of the light they lie; The warrant would not find them, And here 'tis only I Shall hang so high. Oh let not man remember The soul that God forgot, But fetch the county kerchief And noose me in the knot, And I will rot. For so the game is ended That should not have begun. My father and my mother They had a likely son, And I have none.

XV. EIGHT O'CLOCK

He stood, and heard the steeple Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town. One, two, three, four, to market-place and people It tossed them down. Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour, He stood and counted them and cursed his luck; And then the clock collected in the tower Its strength, and struck.

XVI. SPRING MORNING

Star and coronal and bell April underfoot renews, And the hope of man as well Flowers among the morning dews. Now the old come out to look, Winter past and winter's pains. How the sky in pool and brook Glitters on the grassy plains. Easily the gentle air Wafts the turning season on; Things to comfort them are there, Though 'tis true the best are gone. Now the scorned unlucky lad Rousing from his pillow gnawn Mans his heart and deep and glad Drinks the valiant air of dawn. Half the night he longed to die, Now are sown on hill and plain Pleasures worth his while to try Ere he longs to die again. Blue the sky from east to west Arches, and the world is wide, Though the girl he loves the best Rouses from another's side.

XVII. ASTRONOMY

The Wain upon the northern steep Descends and lifts away. Oh I will sit me down and weep For bones in Africa. For pay and medals, name and rank, Things that he has not found, He hove the Cross to heaven and sank The pole-star underground. And now he does not even see Signs of the nadir roll At night over the ground where he Is buried with the pole.

XVIII.

The rain, it streams on stone and hillock, The boot clings to the clay. Since all is done that's due and right Let's home; and now, my lad, good-night, For I must turn away. Good-night, my lad, for nought's eternal; No league of ours, for sure. Tomorrow I shall miss you less, And ache of heart and heaviness Are things that time should cure. Over the hill the highway marches And what's beyond is wide: Oh soon enough will pine to nought Remembrance and the faithful thought That sits the grave beside. The skies, they are not always raining Nor grey the twelvemonth through; And I shall meet good days and mirth, And range the lovely lands of earth With friends no worse than you. But oh, my man, the house is fallen That none can build again; My man, how full of joy and woe Your mother bore you years ago To-night to lie in the rain.

XIX.

In midnights of November, When Dead Man's Fair is nigh, And danger in the valley, And anger in the sky, Around the huddling homesteads The leafless timber roars, And the dead call the dying And finger at the doors. Oh, yonder faltering fingers Are hands I used to hold; Their false companion drowses And leaves them in the cold. Oh, to the bed of ocean, To Africk and to Ind, I will arise and follow Along the rainy

wind. The night goes out and under With all its train forlorn; Hues in the east assemble And cocks crow up the morn. The living are the living And dead the dead will stay, And I will sort with comrades That face the beam of day.

XX.

The night is freezing fast, To-morrow comes December; And winterfalls of old Are with me from the past; And chiefly I remember How Dick would hate the cold. Fall, winter, fall; for he, Prompt hand and headpiece clever, Has woven a winter robe, And made of earth and sea His overcoat for ever, And wears the turning globe.

XXI.

The fairies break their dances And leave the printed lawn, And up from India glances The silver sail of dawn. The candles burn their sockets, The blinds let through the day, The young man feels his pockets And wonders what's to pay.

XXII.

The sloe was lost in flower, The April elm was dim; That was the lover's hour, The hour for lies and him. If thorns are all the bower, If north winds freeze the fir, Why, 'tis another's hour, The hour for truth and her.

XXIII.

In the morning, in the morning, In the happy field of hay, Oh they looked at one another By the light of day. In the blue and silver morning On the haycock as they lay, Oh they looked at one another And they looked away.

XXIV. EPITHALAMIUM

He is here, Urania's son, Hymen come from Helicon; God that glads the lover's heart, He is here to join and part. So the groomsman quits your side And the bridegroom seeks the bride: Friend and comrade yield you o'er To her that hardly loves you more. Now the sun his skyward beam Has tilted from the Ocean stream. Light the Indies, laggard sun: Happy bridegroom, day is done, And the star from OEta's steep Calls to bed but not to sleep. Happy bridegroom, Hesper brings All desired and timely things. All whom morning sends to roam, Hesper loves to lead them home. Home return who him behold, Child to mother, sheep to fold, Bird to nest from wandering wide: Happy bridegroom, seek your bride. Pour it out, the golden cup Given and guarded, brimming up, Safe through jostling markets borne And the thicket of the thorn; Folly spurned and danger past, Pour it to the god at last. Now, to smother noise and light, Is stolen abroad the wildering night, And the blotting shades confuse Path and meadow full of dews; And the high heavens, that all control, Turn in silence round the pole. Catch the starry beams they shed Prospering the marriage bed, And breed the land that reared your prime Sons to stay the rot of time. All is quiet, no alarms; Nothing fear of nightly harms. Safe you sleep on guarded ground, And in silent circle round The thoughts of friends keep watch and ward, Harnessed angels, hand on sword.

XXV. THE ORACLES

'Tis mute, the word they went to hear on high Dodona mountain When winds were in the oakenshaws and all the cauldrons tolled, And mute's the midland navel-stone beside the singing fountain, And echoes list to silence now where gods told lies of old. I took my question to the shrine that has not ceased from speaking, The heart within, that tells the truth and tells it twice as plain; And from the cave of oracles I heard the priestess shrieking That she and I should surely die and never live again. Oh priestess, what you cry is clear, and sound good sense I think it; But let the

screaming echoes rest, and froth your mouth no more. 'Tis true there's better boose than brine, but he that drowns must drink it; And oh, my lass, the news is news that men have heard before. The King with half the East at heel is marched from lands of morning; Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air. And he that stands will die for nought, and home there's no returning. The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair.

XXVI.

The half-moon westers low, my love, And the wind brings up the rain; And wide apart lie we, my love, And seas between the twain. I know not if it rains, my love, In the land where you do lie; And oh, so sound you sleep, my love, You know no more than I.

XXVII.

The sigh that heaves the grasses Whence thou wilt never rise Is of the air that passes And knows not if it sighs. The diamond tears adorning Thy low mound on the lea, Those are the tears of morning, That weeps, but not for thee.

XXVIII.

Now dreary dawns the eastern light, And fall of eve is drear, And cold the poor man lies at night, And so goes out the year. Little is the luck I've had, And oh, 'tis comfort small To think that many another lad Has had no luck at all.

XXIX.

Wake not for the world-heard thunder Nor the chime that earthquakes toll. Star may plot in heaven with planet, Lightning rive the rock of granite, Tempest tread the

oakwood under: Fear not you for flesh nor soul. Marching, fighting, victory past, Stretch your limbs in peace at last. Stir not for the soldiers drilling Nor the fever nothing cures: Throb of drum and timbal's rattle Call but man alive to battle, And the fife with death-notes filling Screams for blood but not for yours. Times enough you bled your best; Sleep on now, and take your rest. Sleep, my lad; the French are landed, London's burning, Windsor's down; Clasp your cloak of earth about you, We must man the ditch without you, March unled and fight short-handed, Charge to fall and swim to drown. Duty, friendship, bravery o'er, Sleep away, lad; wake no more.

XXX. SINNER'S RUE

I walked alone and thinking, And faint the nightwind blew And stirred on mounds at crossways The flower of sinner's rue. Where the roads part they bury Him that his own hand slays, And so the weed of sorrow Springs at the four cross ways. By night I plucked it hueless, When morning broke 'twas blue: Blue at my breast I fastened The flower of sinner's rue. It seemed a herb of healing, A balsam and a sign, Flower of a heart whose trouble Must have been worse than mine. Dead clay that did me kindness, I can do none to you, But only wear for breastknot The flower of sinner's rue.

XXXI. HELL'S GATE

Onward led the road again Through the sad uncoloured plain Under twilight brooding dim, And along the utmost rim Wall and rampart risen to sight Cast a shadow not of night, And beyond them seemed to glow Bonfires lighted long ago. And my dark conductor broke Silence at my side and spoke, Saying, "You conjecture well: Yonder is the gate of hell." Ill as yet the eye could see The eternal masonry, But beneath it on the dark To and fro there stirred a spark. And again the sombre guide Knew my question, and replied: "At hell gate the damned in turn Pace

for sentinel and burn." Dully at the leaden sky Staring, and with idle eye Measuring the listless plain, I began to think again. Many things I thought of then, Battle, and the loves of men, Cities entered, oceans crossed, Knowledge gained and virtue lost, Cureless folly done and said, And the lovely way that led To the slimepit and the mire And the everlasting fire. And against a smoulder dun And a dawn without a sun Did the nearing bastion loom, And across the gate of gloom Still one saw the sentry go, Trim and burning, to and fro, One for women to admire In his finery of fire. Something, as I watched him pace, Minded me of time and place, Soldiers of another corps And a sentry known before. Ever darker hell on high Reared its strength upon the sky, And our footfall on the track Fetched the daunting echo back. But the soldier pacing still The insuperable sill, Nursing his tormented pride, Turned his head to neither side, Sunk into himself apart And the hell-fire of his heart. But against our entering in From the drawbridge Death and Sin Rose to render key and sword To their father and their lord. And the portress foul to see Lifted up her eyes on me Smiling, and I made reply: "Met again, my lass," said I. Then the sentry turned his head, Looked, and knew me, and was Ned. Once he looked, and halted straight, Set his back against the gate, Caught his musket to his chin, While the hive of hell within Sent abroad a seething hum As of towns whose king is come Leading conquest home from far And the captives of his war, And the car of triumph waits, And they open wide the gates. But across the entry barred Straddled the revolted guard, Weaponed and accoutred well From the arsenals of hell; And beside him, sick and white, Sin to left and Death to right Turned a countenance of fear On the flaming mutineer. Over us the darkness bowed, And the anger in the cloud Clenched the lightning for the stroke; But the traitor musket spoke. And the hollowness of hell Sounded as its master fell, And the mourning echo rolled Ruin through his kingdom old. Tyranny and terror flown Left a pair of friends alone, And beneath the nether sky All that stirred was he and I. Silent, nothing found to say, We began the backward way; And the ebbing luster died From the soldier at my side, As in all his

spruce attire Failed the everlasting fire. Midmost of the homeward track Once we listened and looked back; But the city, dusk and mute, Slept, and there was no pursuit.

XXXII.

When I would muse in boyhood The wild green woods among, And nurse resolves and fancies Because the world was young, It was not foes to conquer, Nor sweethearts to be kind, But it was friends to die for That I would seek and find. I sought them far and found them, The sure, the straight, the brave, The hearts I lost my own to, The souls I could not save. They braced their belts about them, They crossed in ships the sea, They sought and found six feet of ground, And there they died for me.

XXXIII.

When the eye of day is shut, And the stars deny their beams, And about the forest hut Blows the roaring wood of dreams, From deep clay, from desert rock, From the sunk sands of the main, Come not at my door to knock, Hearts that loved me not again. Sleep, be still, turn to your rest In the lands where you are laid; In far lodgings east and west Lie down on the beds you made. In gross marl, in blowing dust, In the drowned ooze of the sea, Where you would not, lie you must, Lie you must, and not with me.

XXXIV.

THE FIRST OF MAY

The orchards half the way From home to Ludlow fair Flowered on the first of May In Mays when I was there; And seen from stile or turning The plume of smoke

would show Where fires were burning That went out long ago. The plum broke forth in green, The pear stood high and snowed, My friends and I between Would take the Ludlow road; Dressed to the nines and drinking And light in heart and limb, And each chap thinking The fair was held for him. Between the trees in flower New friends at fairtime tread The way where Ludlow tower Stands planted on the dead. Our thoughts, a long while after, They think, our words they say; Theirs now's the laughter, The fair, the first of May. Ay, yonder lads are yet The fools that we were then; For oh, the sons we get Are still the sons of men. The sumless tale of sorrow Is all unrolled in vain: May comes to-morrow And Ludlow fair again.

XXXV.

When first my way to fair I took Few pence in purse had I, And long I used to stand and look At things I could not buy. Now times are altered: if I care To buy a thing, I can; The pence are here and here's the fair, But where's the lost young man? —To think that two and two are four And neither five nor three The heart of man has long been sore And long 'tis like to be.

XXXVI. REVOLUTION

West and away the wheels of darkness roll, Day's beamy banner up the east is borne, Spectres and fears, the nightmare and her foal, Drown in the golden deluge of the morn. But over sea and continent from sight Safe to the Indies has the earth conveyed The vast and moon-eclipsing cone of night, Her towering foolscap of eternal shade. See, in mid heaven the sun is mounted; hark, The belfries tingle to the noonday chime. 'Tis silent, and the subterranean dark Has crossed the nadir, and begins to climb.

XXXVII. EPITAPH ON AN ARMY OF MERCENARIES

These, in the day when heaven was falling, The hour when earth's foundations fled, Followed their mercenary calling And took their wages and are dead. Their shoulders held the sky suspended; They stood, and earth's foundations stay; What God abandoned, these defended, And saved the sum of things for pay.

XXXVIII.

Oh stay at home, my lad, and plough The land and not the sea, And leave the soldiers at their drill, And all about the idle hill Shepherd your sheep with me. Oh stay with company and mirth And daylight and the air; Too full already is the grave Of fellows that were good and brave And died because they were.

XXXIX.

When summer's end is nighing And skies at evening cloud, I muse on change and fortune And all the feats I vowed When I was young and proud. The weathercock at sunset Would lose the slanted ray, And I would climb the beacon That looked to Wales away And saw the last of day. From hill and cloud and heaven The hues of evening died; Night welled through lane and hollow And hushed the countryside, But I had youth and pride. And I with earth and nightfall In converse high would stand, Late, till the west was ashen And darkness hard at hand, And the eye lost the land. The year might age, and cloudy The lessening day might close, But air of other summers Breathed from beyond the snows, And I had hope of those. They came and were and are not And come no more anew; And all the years and seasons That ever can ensue Must now be worse and few. So here's an end of roaming On eves when autumn nighs: The ear too fondly listens For summer's parting sighs, And then the heart replies.

XL.

Tell me not here, it needs not saying, What tune the enchantress plays In aftermaths of soft September Or under blanching mays, For she and I were long acquainted And I knew all her ways. On russet floors, by waters idle, The pine lets fall its cone; The cuckoo shouts all day at nothing In leafy dells alone; And traveler's joy beguiles in autumn Hearts that have lost their own. On acres of the seeded grasses The changing burnish heaves; Or marshalled under moons of harvest Stand still all night the sheaves; Or beeches strip in storms for winter And stain the wind with leaves. Possess, as I possessed a season, The countries I resign, Where over elmy plains the highway Would mount the hills and shine, And full of shade the pillared forest Would murmur and be mine. For nature, heartless, witless nature, Will neither care nor know What stranger's feet may find the meadow And trespass there and go, Nor ask amid the dews of morning If they are mine or no.

XLI. FANCY'S KNELL

When lads were home from labour At Abdon under Clee, A man would call his neighbor And both would send for me. And where the light in lances Across the mead was laid, There to the dances I fetched my flute and played. Ours were idle pleasures, Yet oh, content we were, The young to wind the measures, The old to heed the air; And I to lift with playing From tree and tower and steep The light delaying, And flute the sun to sleep. The youth toward his fancy Would turn his brow of tan, And Tom would pair with Nancy And Dick step off with Fan; The girl would lift her glances To his, and both be mute: Well went the dances At evening to the flute. Wenlock Edge was umbered, And bright was Abdon Burf, And warm between them slumbered The smooth green miles of turf; Until from grass and clover The upshot beam would fade, And England over Advanced the lofty shade. The lofty shade advances, I fetch my flute and play: Come, lads, and learn the dances And praise the tune to-day. To-morrow, more's the pity, Away we both must

hie, To air the ditty, And to earth I.

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