

Cambridge University Press
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Charles Hamilton and Sorley
Excerpt
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OF THE DOWNS

S.M.

I

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I

BARBURY CAMP

We burrowed night and day with tools of lead,
Heaped the bank up and cast it in a ring
And hurled the earth above. And Caesar said,
“Why, it is excellent. I like the thing.”
We, who are dead,
Made it, and wrought, and Caesar liked the thing.

And here we strove, and here we felt each vein
Ice-bound, each limb fast-frozen, all night long.
And here we held communion with the rain
That lashed us into manhood with its thong,
Cleansing through pain.
And the wind visited us and made us strong.

Up from around us, numbers without name,
Strong men and naked, vast, on either hand
Pressing us in, they came. And the wind came
And bitter rain, turning grey all the land.
That was our game,
To fight with men and storms, and it was grand.

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For many days we fought them, and our sweat
Watered the grass, making it spring up green,
Blooming for us. And, if the wind was wet,
Our blood wetted the wind, making it keen
With the hatred
And wrath and courage that our blood had been.

So, fighting men and winds and tempests, hot
With joy and hate and battle-lust, we fell
Where we fought. And God said, "Killed at last
then? What!
Ye that are too strong for heaven, too clean for hell,
(God said) stir not.
This be your heaven, or, if ye will, your hell."

So again we fight and wrestle, and again
Hurl the earth up and cast it in a ring.
But when the wind comes up, driving the rain
(Each rain-drop a fiery steed), and the mists rolling
Up from the plain,
This wild procession, this impetuous thing,

Hold us amazed. We mount the wind-cars, then
Whip up the steeds and drive through all the world,
Searching to find somewhere some brethren,
Sons of the winds and waters of the world.
We, who were men,
Have sought, and found no men in all this world.

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Wind, that has blown here always ceaselessly,
Bringing, if any man can understand,
Might to the mighty, freedom to the free;
Wind, that has caught us, cleansed us, made us
 grand,
Wind that is we
(We that were men)—make men in all this land,

That so may live and wrestle and hate that when
They fall at last exultant, as we fell,
And come to God, God may say, "Do you come then
Mildly enquiring, is it heaven or hell?
Why! Ye were men!
Back to your winds and rains. Be these your heaven
 and hell!"

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II

STONES

THIS field is almost white with stones
That cumber all its thirsty crust.
And underneath, I know, are bones,
And all around is death and dust.

And if you love a livelier hue—
O, if you love the youth of year,
When all is clean and green and new,
Depart. There is no summer here.

Albeit, to me there lingers yet
In this forbidding stony dress
The impotent and dim regret
For some forgotten restlessness.

Dumb, imperceptibly astir,
These relics of an ancient race,
These men, in whom the dead bones were
Still fortifying their resting-place.

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Their field of life was white with stones;
 Good fruit to earth they never brought.
O, in these bleached and buried bones
 Was neither love nor faith nor thought.

But like the wind in this bleak place,
 Bitter and bleak and sharp they grew,
And bitterly they ran their race,
 A brutal, bad, unkindly crew:

Souls like the dry earth, hearts like stone,
 Brains like that barren bramble-tree:
Stern, sterile, senseless, mute, unknown—
 But bold, O, bolder far than we!

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III

EAST KENNET CHURCH AT EVENING

I STOOD amongst the corn, and watched
The evening coming down.
The rising vale was like a queen,
And the dim church her crown.

Crown-like it stood against the hills.
Its form was passing fair.
I almost saw the tribes go up
To offer incense there.

And far below the long vale stretched.
As a sleeper she did seem
That after some brief restlessness
Has now begun to dream.

(All day the wakefulness of men,
Their lives and labours brief,
Have broken her long troubled sleep.
Now, evening brings relief.)

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There was no motion there, nor sound.
She did not seem to rise.
Yet was she wrapping herself in
Her grey of night-disguise.

For now no church nor tree nor fold
Was visible to me:
Only that fading into one
Which God must sometimes see.

No coloured glory streaked the sky
To mark the sinking sun.
There was no redness in the west
To tell that day was done.

Only, the greyness of the eve
Grew fuller than before.
And, in its fulness, it made one
Of what had once been more.

There was much beauty in that sight
That man must not long see.
God dropped the kindly veil of night
Between its end and me.

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IV

AUTUMN DAWN

AND this is morning. Would you think
That this was the morning, when the land
Is full of heavy eyes that blink
Half-opened, and the tall trees stand
Too tired to shake away the drops
Of passing night that cling around
Their branches and weigh down their tops:
And the grey sky leans on the ground?
The thrush sings once or twice, but stops
Affrighted by the silent sound.
The sheep, scarce moving, munches, moans.
The slow herd mumbles, thick with phlegm.
The grey road-mender, hacking stones,
Is now become as one of them.
Old mother Earth has rubbed her eyes
And stayed, so senseless, lying down.
Old mother is too tired to rise
And lay aside her grey nightgown,
And come with singing and with strength
In loud exuberance of day,
Swift-darting. She is tired at length,
Done up, past bearing, you would say.