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POEMS... in the Manner of Housman

By JOHN McANDREWS

(Conclusion)

XIII

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

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

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

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

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

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

XII

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

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

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

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

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

XIV

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

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

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

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

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

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

XV

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

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

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

XVI

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

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

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

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

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

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

XVII

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

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

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

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

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

XVIII

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

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

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

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

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

XIX

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

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

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

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

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

XX

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

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

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

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

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

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

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