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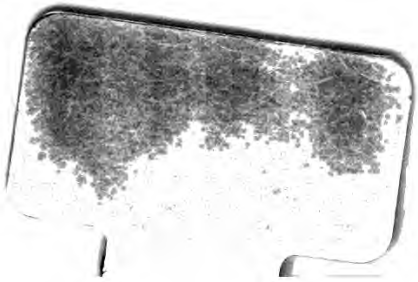

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THREE POEMS

EDWIN ARLINGTON

ROBINSON

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Librarian,

THREE POEMS

BY

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

CAMBRIDGE

MAY 1928

16
JUN
1929

NOTE

The first two poems in this book appeared in the issues of the HARVARD ADVOCATE *of October 16 and December 11, 1891, respectively. The third is a hitherto unpublished fragment of "Lancelot" and should be inserted in the text of that poem between Cantos III and VI.*

B. F.

BALLADE OF THE WHITE SHIP

Down they went to the still green water —
The dim white ship like a white bird lay;
Laughing at life and the world they sought her,
And out they sailed on the silvering bay:
The quick ship flew on her roistering way
And the keen moon fired the light foam flying
Up from the flood where the faint stars play,
And the bones of the brave in the wave are lying.

'T was a king's gay son with a king's gay daughter,
And full three hundred beside, they say,
Hurrying on to the lone cold slaughter
So soon to seize them and hide them for aye;
But they danced and they drank and their souls grew gay,
Nor ever they knew of a ghoul's eye spying
Their splendor a flickering phantom to stay
Where the bones of the brave in the wave are lying.

Through the mist of a drunken dream they brought her
(This wild white bird) for the sea fiend's prey;
The ravenous reef in his hard clutch caught her
And whirled her down where the dead men stay —
A torturing silence of wan dismay:
The shrieks and curses of mad souls dying.
Then down they sank to slumber and sway
Where the bones of the brave in the wave are lying.

L'envoi

Prince, do you sleep 'mid the perishing clay
To the mournful dirge of the sea birds' crying,
Or does blood still quicken and steel still slay
Where the bones of the brave in the wave are lying?

IN HARVARD 5

In Harvard 5 the deathless lore
That haunts old Avon's classic shore
Wakens the long triumphant strain
Of Pride and Passion, Mirth and Pain,
That fed the poet's mind of yore.

Time's magic glass is turned once more
And back the sands of ages pour
While shades of mouldering monarchs reign
    In Harvard 5.

Their spirits flutter through the door,
Quaint phantoms flit across the floor:
Now fancy marks the crimson stain
Of Murder . . . and there falls again
The fateful gloom of Elsinore
    In Harvard 5.

LANCELOT. CANTO IV

Time and the dark
Had come, but not alone. The southern gate
That had been open wide for Lancelot
Made now an entrance for three other men,
Who strode along the gravel or the grass,
Careless of who should hear them. When they came
To the great oak and the two empty chairs
One paused, and held the others with a tongue
That sang an evil music while it spoke:
"Sit here my admirable Colgrevance,
And you, my gentle Agravaine, sit here.
For me, well I have had enough of sitting;
And I have heard enough and seen enough
To blast a kingdom into kingdom come,
Had I so fierce a mind — which happily
I have not, for the king here is my father.

There's been a comment and a criticism
Abounding, I believe, in Camelot
For some time at my undeserved expense,
But God forbid that I should make my father
Less happy than he will be when he knows
What I shall have to tell him presently;
And that will only be what he has known
Since Merlin, or the ghost of Merlin, came
Two years ago to warn him. Though he sees
One thing he will not see; and this must end.
We must have no blind kings in Camelot,
Or we shall have no land worth harrowing,
And our last harvest will be food for strangers.
My father, as you know, has gone a-hunting."

"We know about the king," said Agravaine,
"And you know more than any about the queen.
We are still waiting, Mordred. Colgrevance
And I are waiting."

Mordred laughed at him
Indulgently: "Did I say more than any?
If so, then inadvertently I erred;
For there is one man here, one Lancelot,
Who knows, I fancy, a deal more than I do,
And I know much. Yes, I know much too much.
Yet who shall snuff the light of what he knows
To blind the king he serves? No, Agravaine,
A wick like that would smoke and smell of treason."

"Your words are mostly smoke, if I may say so,"
Said Colgrevance. "What is it you have seen,
And what are we to do? I wish no ill
To Lancelot. I know no evil of him,
Or of the queen; and I'll hear none of either,
Save what you, on your oath, may tell me now.
I look yet for the trail of your dark fancy
To blur your testament."
"No, Colgrevance,
There are no blurs or fancies exercising
Tonight where I am. Lancelot will ascend
Anon, betimes, and with no drums or shawms
To sound the appointed progress of his feet;
And he will not be lost along the way
For there are landmarks and he knows them all.
No, Colgrevance, there are no blurs or fancies
Unless it be that your determination
Has made them for your purpose what them seem.
But here I beg your pardon, Colgrevance.
We reticent ones are given to say too much
With our tongues once in action. Pray forgive.

Your place tonight will be a shadowed alcove,
Where you may see this knight without a stain
While he goes in where no man save the king
Has dared before to follow. Agravaine
And I will meet you on the floor below,
Having already beheld this paragon – Joseph
Go by us for your clinching observation.
Then we, with a dozen or so for strength, will act;
And there shall be no more of Lancelot."

"Mordred, I wish no ill to Lancelot,
And I know none of him," said Colgrevance.
"My dream is of a sturdier way than this
For me to serve my king. Give someone else
That alcove, and let me be one of the twelve.
I swear it irks the marrow of my soul
To shadow Lancelot — though I may fight him,
If so it is to be. Furthermore, Mordred,
You gave me not an inkling of the part
That you have read off now so pleasantly
For me to play. No, Mordred, by the God
Who knows the right way and the wrong, I'll be
This night no poisonous inhabitant
Of alcoves in your drama, even for you.
No man were more the vassal of his friend
Than I am, but I'm damned if I'll be owned."

In a becoming darkness Mordred smiled
Away the first accession of his anger.
"Say not like that," he answered, musically.
"Be temperate, Colgrevance. Remember always
Your knighthood and your birth. Remember, too,
That I may hold him only as my friend
Who loves me for myself, not for my station.
We're born for what we're born for, Colgrevance;
And you and I and Agravaine are born
To serve our king. It's all for the same end,
Whether we serve in alcoves, or behind
A velvet arras on another floor.
What matters it, if we be loyal men —
With only one defection?"
"Which is — what?"
Said Agravaine, who breathed hard and said little,
Albeit he had no fame abroad for silence.

"Delay — procrastination — overcaution —
Or what word now assimilates itself
The best with your inquiring mood, my brother.
These operations that engage us now
Were planned and executed long ago,

Had I but acted upon what was written
No less indelibly than at this hour,
Though maybe not so scorchingly on me,
'If there were only Mordred in the way,' —
I heard her saying it — 'would you come tonight?'
Saint Brandan! How she muzzled and smothered him!
Forgive me, Colgrevance, when I say more
Than my raw vanity may reconcile
With afterthought. But that was what she said
To Lancelot, and that was what I heard.
And what I saw was of an even bias
With all she told him here. God, what a woman!
She floats about the court so like a lily,
That even I'd be fooled were I the king,
Seeing with his eyes what I would not see.
But now the stars are crying in their courses
For this to end, and we are men to end it.
Meanwhile, for the king's hunting and his health,
We have tonight a sort of wassailing;
Wherefore we may as well address ourselves
Against our imminent activities,
To something in the way of trencher service —
Which also is a service to the king.
For they who serve must eat. God save the king!"

They took the way of Lancelot along
The darkened hedges to the palace lights,
With Mordred humming lowly to himself
A chant of satisfaction. Colgrevance,
Not healed of an essential injury,
Nor given the will to cancel his new pledge
To Mordred, made with neither knowing why,
Passed in without a word, leaving his two
Companions hesitating on the steps
Outside, one scowling and the other smiling.
"Mordred, you may have gone an inch too far
With Colgrevance tonight. Why set a trap
For trouble? We've enough with no additions.
His fame is that of one among the faithful,
Without a fear, and fearless without guile."

"And that is why we need him, Agravaine,"
Said Mordred with another singing laugh.
"He'll go as was appointed by his fate
For my necessity. A man to achieve
High deeds must have a Colgrevance or two
Around him for unused emergencies,
And for the daily sweat, your Colgrevance
May curse himself till he be violet,
Yet he will do your work. There is none else
Apparently, that God will let him do."

"Not always all of it," said Agravaine,
But Mordred answered with another laugh
And led the way in to the wassailing,
Where Dagonet was trolling a new song
To Lancelot, who smiled — as if in pain
To see so many friends and enemies,
All cheering him, all drinking, and all gay.

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