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“A Ruined Altar”

“The hair shall kettle on thy cold hearth-stane.” — Thomas the Rhymer

Green is the valley, and fair the slopes around it,
Wide waves of barley shining to the sun;
Softly the stock-doves murmur in the pine trees,
Deep through the hollow the happy waters run.

Ruthless and ruinous lies the little homestead,
All the grey walls of it crumbling to the ground;
Only the hearth-place, steadfast and unshaken,
Stands, like a tomb, 'mid the lusty leafy round.

Foxglove and hemlock blossom in the garden,
Where those bright ragwort tramples on the rose;
Gone is the gate, and lost the little pathway,—
High on the threshold the gaunt nettle grows.

Here, long ago, were toil, and thought, and laughter,
Poor schemes for pleasures, piteous plans for gain,
Love, fear, and strife—for men were born and died here—
Strange human passion, bitter human pain.

Now the square hearth-place, shrouded deep in shadow,
Holds in its hollow wild things of the wood;
Here comes the hawk, and hear the vagrant swallow
Nests in the niche where cup and trencher stood.

Shy furry forms, that hide in break and covert,
Leap on the stone where leapt the yellow flame;
Up the wide chimney, black with vanished smoke-wreaths,
Clambers the weed that wreathes the mantel-frame.

But when cometh Winter and all the weeds are withered
In these bare chambers open to the rain,
Then, when the wind moans in the broken chimney,

And the hare shivers in the sodden lane,

Then the old hearth-nook mourns the folk that filled it,
Mourns for the cheer of the red and golden blaze;
Heaped with the snow-drifts, standing bleak and lonely,
Dreams of the dead and their long-forgotten days.

[1904]