

Casters Bridge

From this low mossy seat can I yet see
As in the days of yore, an ancient tree
Of Beech and Sycamore on either side
Yon sparkling streamlet, with its silvery tide
Stretched over it, with its arc of dark grey stone
And Battlemented sides, by moss overgrown
Old Casters Bridge had yet a voice to tell
The bygone legends of this lonely dell

And there the black-brook rolling underneath
Flows with impetuous torrent from yon heath,
Which clothes the jutting sides of that ravine,
Where the tall pine trees rear their heads between.
In yonder copse a hostel once had stood,
Near to that fence of briars and underwood;
And, 'neath those rising hillocks on the green,
The old foundations yet are plainly seen.

Strange things have long been talked about and told
By patriarchs of the country, grey and old,
Who in their youth had heard their sires relate
Darings and deeds of robbers, and their fate.
And the old Forest Road then wound along
Through shading trees, which echoed to the song
Of birds; and wild notes, mingling low,
Came murmuring from old Dane's perpetual flow.

Though quite secluded, and for miles remote
From human dwellings, once the devious route
Of that broad road resounded to the tread
Of beast of burden, through the country led:
And cattle drivers, from the cultured Frith
Beyond those purple hills, with jocund mirth,
Chatted and laughed along the heathery way,
Or sung, with well-tuned voice, some quaint old roundelay.

But that was past, and then there came a time
When these deep wilds no longer heard the chime
Of merry human voices, and the rude
But social sounds that broke the solitude.
Traffic had ceased, the cause long since unknown;
And this wide track, by grass soon overgrown,
Was only pressed by the lone traveller's tread,
As through those arching cliffs he onward sped.

Haste, weary pilgrim, to that distant plain,
Where the bright sky in daylight shines again,
And from these dark recesses, make all speed
To reach yon heights, which to the country lead:
Nor look around for shelter here, nor rest,
Nor in that gloomy hostel be a guest.
Among the soil, where once had stood the door,
Portions may yet be found of molten ore;

And it is said, a furnace came
To that lone dwelling, long of doubtful fame.
Mysterious whispers through the country spread;
And when, by pleasure or for profit, led

Through that wild forest, "with staves in hands,"
The peasantry essayed to go in bands.
And then, they often heard it rumoured o'er
That men had journeyed on that way before;

But as they singly and alone had been,
No trace of them had yet been found or seen
Over the dreary Roches some had crost,
And it was feared, inevitably lost!
Tedious the way along that forest then;
And near its entrance, in a stony glen,
Now called The Paddock, by the beaten road,
A good old farmer and his wife abode.

Passing this place, a Pedlar took his way,
And though invited much, and warned to stay
By all the horrors which could thither tend,
He was resolved to reach his journey's end ;
So giving many thanks, he took his pack,
And placed it sturdily upon his back.
Leaving the grim old Roches to the right,
Lit by the evening sun, grotesque and bright,

He hastened to ascend the neighbouring hill,
And stood on that broad heath all bare and still,
Casting a glance, keen and sagacious o'er
The country he had thought to see no more.
For he had left it in his youth, and been
The sport of fortune, and through many a scene
Of danger and vicissitude had passed,
Thus to those strange old haunts to come at last.

In all his wanderings, he had never met
With aught like this, so glorious and yet
So wild in its magnificence, the sun
With lingering rapture, cast a lustre on
The gorgeous landscape; and the Pedlar's soul
Upwards, in humble adoration, stole!
But he must forward press, or else the night
Would surely overtake him and the light

Would soon be dim; and the moon cold and pale,
Have risen, ere his steps could reach the vale.
There he emerged at length, and soon espied
A lonely cottage near the riverside,
And by the door he saw a mastiff stand
To note when travellers were near at hand.
Then forth there came a man with grisly beard,
And close behind, a woman stood, and peered

With furtive looks and then they both begin
To soothe the dog, and ask the stranger in.
Familiar all the rest, but of this place
He could not, in his mind, recall a trace;
But he was weary, and that day had come
From far and now, as he drew nearer home,
The thought arose that he would turn and rest,
And for the night repose, then start refreshed.

While thus he pondered, on his listening ear

There broke the sound of children's voices near;
So on the instant, without more ado,
To the wide open door he slowly drew.
Eased of his burthen, then, without restraint,
He stretched his limbs and feeling tired and faint,
Called loudly for his supper and a bed,
And then he heard the slow and distant tread

Of many feet; so going to the door,
He thought they must be busy melting ore
From the great light and heat their only trade,
Of which, they said, a living could be made.
The latch he had already in his hand,
But a strange thought, that moment, made him stand
And listen: and a voice distinctly said,
"Mother, when will that queer old man be dead?"

"I'm sure the oven will soon be very hot!"
Though chained with trembling horror to the spot,
The wary Pedlar's footsteps lingered not,
But without thought, on to the river went,
And thought and power, for that brief space were lent
By Providence: for, climbing up the side,
From where the stonework rose above the tide,
He reached the top, and grasped a narrow ridge,
Within the arching roof of Caster's Bridge!

Ereit was done, came upon his track
Right to the water's edge, a murderous pack
Of women, men, and dogs; who surveilled
Their horrid purpose, as he lay concealed.
Some up, and others down, they scoured the stream
With torches in their hands; nor did they dream
Of his escape, or that their destined prey
Would ever see the light of opening day.

With what tenacity his fingers clung,
As on his ear their dreadful voices rung!
And thus the night in greater part was passed,
And every breath the Pedlar deemed his last!
At length deciding that the place was cleared,
They o'er the bridge and down the river steered;
And then he freely breathed, and strove to think
So gliding down, he crept along the brink,

And struck into a thicket, from the dell,
Which in his boyhood he remembered well.
Slowly beneath the briars, which grew among
The tangled brushwood, on he moved along
With hands and feet all torn, beyond that height,
O'er which the moon poured forth her silvery light.
There he was safe and stood upon his feet,
And then his heart with wilde motions beat;

And from it spent up terror, eased by sighs,
He raised with speechless gratitude his eyes,
And poured his soul in thankfulness and praise
To that great Power, who through such dreadful ways
Had safely brought him, and now strangely cast
His footsteps near his dear old home at last!

That word was like a magnet to his soul,
Which turned as true as needle to the pole;
And well he knew that had his eyes been dim,
That devious road would still be plain to him.
But they were bright and piercing, and on high
The moon careered in beauty silently;
And many a turning did his footsteps take
Through lowland dingle and by upland brake,

Ere on a slope he got, and then there rushed
The tide of old remembrances, which gushed
As from a well-spring that had long been dry,
Till, at its need, some hidden streams supply.
In sorrow and in sad abasement now
He called to mind how he had made a vow
Never to come again till he had earned
Some lordly independence; and had spurned

His mother's dear caresses and her tears,
And laughed in thoughtless mockery at her fears.
The homestead seemed as firm, as when of old
He left it; and the gable, strange and bold,
Still looked grotesque; and at an angle there,
He saw the ancient pollard, grey and bare.
Nature appeared externally the same;
And then hope, with her tender memories, came

And whispered to his heart, so long estranged,
That, perhaps, within all might be yet unchanged.
Now from the narrow window lights were gleaming,
And sounds of merriment and joy came teeming,
And Sitting figures, full of life and glee,
Were keeping up some old festivity.
He seemed as in a dream, when by the hand
They led him forth to join that charmed band :

Enough for them, a night-worn stranger,
He partook their mirth and hospitality.
Then did the past before his vision roll,
As he beheld the strange old wassail bowl;
And looking in the corner, there he saw
An aged dame, whose word appeared the law.
Straight he began, with earnest eyes, to trace
The features of his memory on her face;

And kneeling at her feet in sorrow wild,
Implored his mother to behold her child!
The voice of nature once more called to life
Her hope deferred; but the forgotten strife
'Twixt grief and joy seemed for a while too great
Like ground, on which the spring shower falls too late.
His father and his brother both were gone,
And there he waiting sat, all still and lone;

But sightless though she was, upon her ear
Fell the familiar tones, to memory dear;
And it was strange to see her fingers now
Part the blanched locks from off his furrowed brow,
And then, a throb of pleasure at her heart,
Make the relieving tears, unbidden, start.
Yet bright days were in store, for he had wealth,

And, better far than riches, he had health;
And that gay youthful band around him strove
To shed an atmosphere of peace and love;

While in his godly life they all might see
The sacred uses of adversity.
Now to the nearest town, without delay,
The honest Pedlar wended on his way
Of all that happened in that dread resort
Of desperadoes, that their promised aid
By the authorities was quickly made;

And down those rugged steeps, and through the vale,
Came proud plumes waving in the autumn gale,
And the high sun gleamed on their glittering spears,
As o'er the grey old bridge that bright red band appears
The soldiers came; and from the infested place
They dragged the wretched inmates, with no space
To hide or fly; for from the walls around
They fiercely razed the building to the ground.

And then no doubt remained as to their crimes,
Which they in full confessed, and of the times
When weary travellers, albeit brave and bold,
Had lost their lives, a sacrifice to gold.
So they had murdered them, and quenched their life
Of light and hope; all in their wretched strife
For filthy lucre, which now sure, though slow,
Had wrought their own irrevocable woe:

For to the laws atonement must be made,
And their most wretched lives the forfeit paid!
Then, it is said, there came a fearful flood,
Which inundated the whole neighbourhood;
And rising high, to where those ruins lay,
It washed them, in its fury, all away!
Ages are gone since then, and gently now
Glides on that river in its peaceful flow:

It sounds a mournful requiem to the past,
Sighing and moaning in the forest blast;
Then oft, like sweetest music, soft and clear,
Soothes with bewitching tones the listening ear;
And to the unquiet soul and troubled breast,
Breathes, from yon far-off land, of peace and rest.