

## A Legend of Urswick Tarn

Re-told by T.N. Postlethwaite Christmas 1911.

### The Legend of Urswick Tarn

A land of white and green; the white crags  
Ridges of lime-stone lined athwart the sward  
Of lawns and grassy sheepwalks; or long roads,  
Lime metalled, stretching till the dip of fields,  
Swelling in lift and fall of green may hide  
The nearing hedgerows. Clustered in a vale,  
Made deeper by a higher rise of bank,  
The hamlet rests moon-crescent round a Tarn,  
White homesteads roofed in blue, save where  
The hand of Time, with artist touch has placed  
On ridge and wall and chimney-stack great blots  
Of orange lichen, or the violet-green  
Of clinging stone-crop.

Thro' the village way  
At eve and morn, slow-footed, warm-breathed kine  
Bring to the byre their store of hoarded wealth.  
The farmers working on Monastic lands,  
With saws and by-words of Monastic times,  
Are masters of the acres claimed of yore  
To swell the coffers of an Abbey's needs.  
The calm country life pervades the air,  
The ease of country folk prolongs the day,  
The clatter of the women in their work  
Lends moments for the village tale to speed.  
In laughing groups the children round the doors  
Combine to play the games of yesterday,  
Scarce moving to give space for lumbering carts  
That claim the fair-way. Or some loose-limbed lad  
With promise of the northern manhood's bulk  
Steals from a lissome girl a fleeting smile  
That tells of love's new birth. While fronting all  
Unrippled lies the Tarn.

Upon the edge  
A short score yards of pebbly landing, with  
Some bigger boulders bathing in the brink  
Of shallow waters, day and eve there sat  
The oldest dweller of the village; one  
Who carrying memory back to other times  
Would tell of civic strife, how twice the Scots,  
Aided by those who could not change their troth  
From King to King, had fought and lost and died.  
Or, turning to an earlier page of thought,

Would voice again the tales his Grandsire told  
Of the passed days when Noll ruled, and content  
Priest Nicholas had held the Church, despite  
The threats of Roundhead malcontents. The man, -  
Old Willie Wane, - seated before his door  
That opened on the Coot-stones, long would gaze  
Upon the Tarn, the circling belt of reeds,  
The broad leaved lilies carpeting in blots  
The Mere, the scurrying coots, the water-fowl  
Shrill-voiced or plaintive. Then as evening brought  
An ease to toil, the resting villagers  
Would gather round his chair and shyly ask  
For tales and by-words of an older time.

And some would listen long, the men composed,  
The women scornful as the tale ran on,  
The children open-mouthed, while here and there  
A youth would tempt a girl away to tell  
A story older still. But most would stay  
And listen to "The legend of the Tarn."

"Far in the past, in ruder times, when life  
Meant battling from end to end, there came  
Those, whom the ice-bound winters of the North  
In their own birth-land gave but little hope  
Of home and victualage - with dark-sailed boats  
Marauders on our shore, and some would stay  
And blend their lives with those who held the soil.  
And to this vale from seaward strangers came,  
To slay, and rob, make friends, and marry maids.  
These, as time sped, grew prosperous, tilled the lands,  
And raised a town, with markets for their goods,  
With yearly fairs, and old-time holidays,  
And feasts culled from the Church's Calendar.

But in the later years when ease of life  
Brought luxury, an eviller way arose,  
They who had worshipped northern gods of yore,  
- Gods who taught battle, warring with the storms  
And winds of angry seas, respect to maids  
And women, and the reverence due to age -  
Forgot that creed, and e'en the purer faith  
Of love and self-effacement they had taken  
With their new lands, - men sleek in self-content  
Seekers of lawless love, and lustful sloth  
Drink maddened.

Only most of all the blight  
Fell on the women. These with slanderous speech,  
From tongues that spat out venom black as night,  
Poisoned the days, tattlers and gadabouts,

Casting an evil eye on all. No maid's  
Fair frame was safe beneath their gaze, no youth  
Could match him to a bride without the sneer  
That kills the joy of wedding. And at length  
God's priest they willed to slander, one who had trod  
The historic fields of Christ's own hallowing,  
And through great toils and dangers marvellous  
Had bowed his knees before the Sacred Tomb,  
Lifted his voice within the Holy Cave  
Of Love's Nativity, kissed the True Rood,  
And humbly drank of Jordan's mystic tide.

Him in their thriftless idleness they sought  
With plaints of hardship, how their daily task  
Made life unlovely, since no beck, no pool,  
No river eased their toil, when morn and night  
The thirsting herds gathered around the wells.  
Unceasingly the windlass claimed their care,  
Unceasingly the clank of rolling chains,  
And swaying buckets filled their ears  
With din monotonous.

For them no Fast  
Or Church's Festival should hold its place,  
On Easter-day they would not take the Lord,  
Epiphany should lack its tapers, while  
The bell on Sabbath might unheeded swing,  
Till God should give to them their heart's desire.

If Heaven's blessing dwelt with him who served  
Within the Church, then let him heed their plaint,  
And get them water, running free without  
The toil of ever winding at the wheel.

He heard the cry and reasoning with them taught  
Submission to a wiser will than theirs.  
But vainly. Even louder in their wrath  
They craved the boon, to rid them of the wells  
Pierced deeply in the rock, the water troughs  
Chiselled with cunning care, the clanking chains,  
The groaning ropes, the toilsome wheel, and all  
That showed the country side a land of drought,  
Parched, waterless, unblest.

Then to their woe  
He bade them gather in God's hallowed garth,  
Awaiting where the Pitying Mother tells  
Her Sorrows to the world. Hence with slow foot  
To make the circuit of the Church, whilst he  
Kneeling with hands uplifted called to Heaven.  
Once round the garth they trod the pilgrimage,

And Heaven gave its gift of fleecy flakes,  
The shroud of mercy on the sleeping graves,  
The veil of sorrow on the sinful heads.  
Again they made their journey, and again  
The Heavens parted, sending from the rift  
Ice sheeting down in hail-stones, ruthlessly,  
Beating on roof and tree and postulant,  
A fury pitiless. They stayed, and fear  
Half prompted them to waver in their quest.  
Yet passed from mouth to ear the whispered taunt  
And pride forbade submission. So again  
The circuit was completed.

With the clash  
Of Heaven's thunderings and the wail of winds  
Sweeping the trembling earth, in the far west  
Arose the roar of deluge and the rush  
Of frightened beasts fleeing the on-coming flood,  
As down the valley, threading by their homes,  
A rippling line of waters found its way,  
Parting the pastures, cutting through the loam  
Of yellow corn-lands, curving round the foot  
Of hills and sloping spinnies, till at length  
It lost its being in the southern sea.  
The prayer was answered, God had designed to give  
The gift of waters.

But there came a day  
When Autumn's sheeted floods in driving showers  
Beat on the hillslopes, hurrying to the beck  
A thousand tiny runners mirk and brown  
And muddled, borrowing the differing hues  
Of differing soils, and making in the banks  
A water course of strange fantastic shades.  
Great was the out-cry as the darkened flood  
Made threat of spoiling all the housewife's care,  
The flax-stalks steeping in the dug out pools  
Beside the river, and the long white swathes  
Of bleaching linen newly from the loom,  
The hanks of twisted thread - the handiwork  
Of spinners at the wheel, thick skeins of wool  
Laboriously carded from the fleece.  
The herds were lowing for their mid-day draught,  
And nothing offered but the turgid flood.  
The women found the erst rejected wells,  
But all the gear was rusted with disuse,  
The warping buckets gaped at every seam,  
The wheel refused their office.

Once again  
They sought the priest, with curses terrible

They mocked his sacred calling, craving still  
A fuller gift of waters, standing pools  
Resisting any stain of showers.

Again

In words prophetic came the warning voice.  
They heeded not; but ere he prayed anew  
He sent them to their homes and bade them show  
Above the topmost roof-ridge floating high  
A hanging ell of linen, if at last  
Heaven gave them penitence.

No sign appeared,  
The gift of waters was their only plea.

God answered; voicing in the storm His Will  
With winds that swept the hill-tops, and forked flame  
That flashed from out the blackness of the sky,  
An opened chasms in the meeting earth.  
The stream became a torrent, in its course  
Carrying its spoil of battle, stubborn trees  
Up-rooted, banks of soil, the out-field sheds  
Of cattle, boulders, and the wealth that lies  
Scattered across the pastures of the land.  
A thousand runlets added to the bulk  
Of hurrying waters, till the awful flood  
Threatened the village. Then 'midst the wild cry  
Of fear-struck women and wail of babes,  
The angrier imprecations of the men,  
The panic on-rush of the flocks and herds,  
The roar of waters and the din of storm,  
And rending of the earth, **THE GIFT BECAME  
A LASTING TARN WHERE ONCE A VILLAGE STOOD."**

An now the tale completed, Willie turned,  
With pointing finger to the listening throng,  
"Is there no home a woman's tongue makes black?  
Is there no maid who fears the slanderous speech?  
No lad who trembles for his loved-one's fame?  
Think you the lesson is as yet all learnt?  
The water still remains!"

The old man laughed.  
The women sulked, and one and other went  
In scornful dudgeon, angered that the eye  
Of others sought her. And from lips of men  
Came laughing whispers, "Let us bide content  
The waters still can kiss the Ducking Stool."