

FLANNAN ISLE

“Though three men dwell on Flannan Isle
To keep the lamp alight,
As we steer’d under the lee, we caught
No glimmer through the night.”

A passing ship at dawn had brought
The news; and quickly we set sail,
To find out what strange thing might ail
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The winter day broke blue and bright
With glancing sun and glancing spray
While o’er the swell our boat made way,
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But as we near’d the lonely Isle,
and look’d up at the naked height,
And saw the lighthouse towering white,
With blinded lantern that all night
Had never shot a spark
Of comfort through the dark,
So ghostly in the cold sunlight
It seem’d, that we were struck the while
With wonder all too dread for words.
And, as into the tiny creek
We stole, beneath the hanging crag
We saw three queer black ugly birds—

And still too ’mazed to speak,
We landed and made fast the boat
And climb’d the track in single file,
Each wishing he was safe afloat
On any sea however far,
So it be far from Flannan Isle:
And still we seem’d to climb and climb
As though we’d lost all count of time
And so must climb for evermore;
Yet all too soon we reached the door—
The black, sun-blister’d lighthouse-door,
That gaped for us ajar.

As, on the threshold for a spell
We paused, we seem’d to breathe the smell
Of limewash and of tar,
Familiar as our daily breath,
As though ’twere some strange scent of death;
As so yet wondering side by side,
We stood a moment still tongue-tied,
And each with black foreboding eyed
The door ere we should fling it wide
To leave the sunlight for the gloom:
Till, plucking courage up, at last
Hard on each other’s heels we pass’d
Into the living-room.

Yet, as we crowded through the door
We only saw a table spread
For dinner, meat and cheese and bread;
But all untouch’d and no one there
As though, when they sat down to eat,
Ere they could even taste,
Alarm had come and they in haste
Had risen and left the bread and meat,
For at the table-hed a chair
Lay tumbled on the floor.

We set about our hopeless search.
We hunted high, we hunted low,
And soon ransack’d the empty house:
Then o’er the Island to and fro
We ranged, to listen and to look
In every cranny, cleft or nook
That might have hid a bird or mouse:
But though we searched from shore to shore
We found no sign in any place,
And soon again stood face to face
Before the gaping door,
And stole into the room once more
As frighten’d children steal.
Aye, though we hunted high and low
And hunted everywhere,
Of the three men’s fate we found no trace
Of any kind in any place
But a door ajar and an untouch’d meal
And an overtoppled chair.

And as we listen’d in the gloom
Of that forsaken living-room—
A chill clutch on our breath—
We thought how ill-chance came to all
Who kept the Flannan Light,
And how the rock had been the death
And of what might yet befall.

Like curs a glance has brought to heel
We listen’d, flinching there,
And look’d and look’d on the untouch’d meal
And the overtoppled chair.

We seem’d to stand for an endless while,
Though still no word was said,
Three men alive on Flannan Isle
Who thought on three men dead.

-Wilfred Wilson Gibson