

## Behind the Arras

I like the old house tolerably well,  
Where I must dwell  
Like a familiar gnome;  
And yet I never shall feel quite at home.

I love to roam.

Day after day I loiter and explore  
From door to door;  
So many treasures lure  
The curious mind. What histories obscure  
They must immure!

I hardly know which room I care for best;  
This fronting west,  
With the strange hills in view,  
Where the great sun goes,—where I may go too,  
When my lease is through,—

Or this one for the morning and the east,  
Where a man may feast  
His eyes on looming sails,  
And be the first to catch their foreign hails  
Or spy their bales

Then the pale summer twilights towards the pole!  
It thrills my soul  
With wonder and delight,  
When gold-green shadows walk the world at night,  
So still, so bright.

There at the window many a time of year,  
Strange faces peer,  
Solemn though not unkind,  
Their wits in search of something left behind  
Time out of mind;

As if they once had lived here, and stole back  
To the window crack  
For a peep which seems to say,  
"Good fortune, brother, in your house of clay!"  
And then, "Good day!"

I hear their footsteps on the gravel walk,  
Their scraps of talk,  
And hurrying after, reach  
Only the crazy sea-drone of the beach  
In endless speech.

And often when the autumn noons are still,  
By swale and hill  
I see their gipsy signs,  
Trespassing somewhere on my border lines;  
With what designs?

I forth afoot; but when I reach the place,  
Hardly a trace,  
Save the soft purple haze  
Of smouldering camp-fires, any hint betrays  
Who went these ways.

Or tatters of pale aster blue, descried  
By the roadside,  
Reveal whither they fled;  
Or the swamp maples, here and there a shred  
Of Indian red.

But most of all, the marvellous tapestry  
Engrosses me,  
Where such strange things are rife,  
Fancies of beasts and flowers, and love and strife,  
Woven to the life;

Degraded shapes and splendid seraph forms,  
And teeming swarms  
Of creatures gauzy dim  
That cloud the dusk, and painted fish that swim,  
At the weaver's whim;

And wonderful birds that wheel and hang in the air;  
And beings with hair,  
And moving eyes in the face,  
And white bone teeth and hideous grins, who race  
From place to place;

They build great temples to their John-a-nod,  
And fume and plod  
To deck themselves with gold,  
And paint themselves like chattels to be sold,  
Then turn to mould.

Sometimes they seem almost as real as I;  
I hear them sigh;  
I see them bow with grief,  
Or dance for joy like any aspen leaf;  
But that is brief.

They have mad wars and phantom marriages;  
Nor seem to guess  
There are dimensions still,  
Beyond thought's reach, though not beyond love's will,  
For soul to fill.

And some I call my friends, and make believe  
Their spirits grieve,  
Brood, and rejoice with mine;  
I talk to them in phrases quaint and fine  
Over the wine;

I tell them all my secrets; touch their hands;  
One understands  
Perhaps. How hard he tries  
To speak! And yet those glorious mild eyes,  
His best replies!

I even have my cronies, one or two,  
My cherished few.  
But ah, they do not stay!  
For the sun fades them and they pass away,  
As I grow gray.

Yet while they last how actual they seem!  
Their faces beam;  
I give them all their names,  
Bertram and Gilbert, Louis, Frank and James,  
Each with his aims;

One thinks he is a poet, and writes verse  
His friends rehearse;  
Another is full of law;  
A third sees pictures which his hand can draw  
Without a flaw.

Strangest of all, they never rest. Day long  
They shift and throng,  
Moved by invisible will,  
Like a great breath which puffs across my sill,  
And then is still;

It shakes my lovely manikins on the wall;  
Squall after squall,  
Gust upon crowding gust,  
It sweeps them willy nilly like blown dust  
With glory or lust.

It is the world-ghost, the time-spirit, come  
None knows wherefrom,  
The viewless draughty tide  
And wash of being. I hear it yaw and glide,  
And then subside,

Along these ghostly corridors and halls  
Like faint footfalls;  
The hangings stir in the air;  
And when I start and challenge, "Who goes there?"  
It answers, "Where?"

The wail and sob and moan of the sea's dirge,  
Its plangor and surge;  
The awful biting sough  
Of drifted snows along some arctic bluff,  
That veer and luff,

And have the vacant boding human cry,  
As they go by;—  
Is it a banished soul  
Dredging the dark like a distracted mole  
Under a knoll?

Like some invisible henchman old and gray,  
Day after day  
I hear it come and go,  
With stealthy swift unmeaning to and fro,  
Muttering low,

Ceaseless and daft and terrible and blind,  
Like a lost mind.  
I often chill with fear  
When I bethink me, What if it should peer  
At my shoulder here!

Perchance he drives the merry-go-round whose track  
Is the zodiac;  
His name is No-man's-friend;  
And his gabbling parrot-talk has neither trend,  
Beginning, nor end.

A prince of madness too, I'd cry, "A rat!"  
And lunge thereat,—  
Let out at one swift thrust  
The cunning arch-delusion of the dust  
I so mistrust,

But that I fear I should disclose a face  
Wearing the trace  
Of my own human guise,  
Piteous, unharmed, loving, sad, and wise  
With the speaking eyes.

I would the house were rid of his grim pranks,  
Moaning from banks  
Of pine trees in the moon,  
Startling the silence like a demoniac loon

At dead of noon.

Or whispering his fool-talk to the leaves  
About my eaves.  
And yet how can I know  
'T is not a happy Ariel masking so  
In mocking woe?

Then with a little broken laugh I say,  
Snatching away  
The curtain where he grinned  
(My feverish sight thought) like a sin unsinned,  
"Only the wind!"

Yet often too he steals so softly by.  
With half a sigh,  
I deem he must be mild,  
Fair as a woman, gentle as a child,  
And forest wild.

Passing the door where an old wind-harp swings,  
With its five strings,  
Contrived long years ago  
By my first predecessor bent to show  
His handcraft so,

He lay his fingers on the aeolian wire,  
As a core of fire  
Is laid upon the blast  
To kindle and glow and fill the purple vast  
Of dark at last.

Weird wise, and low, piercing and keen and glad,  
Or dim and sad  
As a forgotten strain  
Born when the broken legions of the rain  
Swept through the plain—

He plays, like some dread veiled mysteriarch,  
Lighting the dark,  
Bidding the spring grow warm,  
The gendering merge and loosing of spirit in form,  
Peace out of storm.

For music is the sacrament of love;

He broods above  
The virgin silence, till  
She yields for rapture shuddering, yearning still  
To his sweet will.

I hear him sing, "Your harp is like a mesh,  
Woven of flesh  
And spread within the shoal  
Of life, where runs the tide-race of the soul  
In my control.

"Though my wild way may ruin what it bends,  
It makes amends  
To the frail downy clocks,  
Telling their seed a secret that unlocks  
The granite rocks.

"The womb of silence to the crave of sound  
Is heaven unfound,  
Till I, to soothe and slake  
Being's most utter and imperious ache,  
Bid rhythm awake.

"If with such agonies of bliss, my kin,  
I enter in  
Your prison house of sense,  
With what a joyous freed intelligence  
I shall go hence."

I need no more to guess the weaver's name,  
Nor ask his aim,  
Who hung each hall and room  
With swarthy-tinged vermilion upon gloom;  
I know that loom.

Give me a little space and time enough,  
From ravelings rough  
I could revive, reweave,  
A fabric of beauty art might well believe  
Were past retrieve.

O men and women in that rich design,  
Sleep-soft, sun-fine,  
Dew-tenuous and free,  
A tone of the infinite wind-themes of the sea,  
Borne in to me,

Reveals how you were woven to the might  
Of shadow and light.  
You are the dream of One  
Who loves to haunt and yet appears to shun  
My door in the sun;

As the white roving sea tern fleck and skim  
The morning's rim;  
Or the dark thrushes clear  
Their flutes of music leisurely and sheer,  
Then hush to hear.

I know him when the last red brands of day  
Smoulder away,  
And when the vernal showers  
Bring back the heart to all my valley flowers  
In the soft hours.

O hand of mine and brain of mine, be yours,  
While time endures,  
To acquiesce and learn!  
For what we best may dare and drudge and yearn,  
Let soul discern.

So, fellows, we shall reach the gusty gate,  
Early or late,  
And part without remorse,  
A cadence dying down unto its source  
In music's course;

You to the perfect rhythms of flowers and birds,  
Colors and words,  
The heart-beats of the earth,  
To be remoulded always of one worth  
From birth to birth;

I to the broken rhythm of thought and man,  
The sweep and span  
Of memory and hope  
About the orbit where they still must grope  
For wider scope,

To be through thousand springs restored, renewed,  
With love imbrued,  
With increments of will  
Made strong, perceiving unattainment still

From each new skill.

Always the flawless beauty, always the chord  
Of the Overword,  
Dominant, pleading, sure,  
No truth too small to save and make endure.  
No good too poor!

And since no mortal can at last disdain  
That sweet refrain,  
But lets go strife and care,  
Borne like a strain of bird notes on the air,  
The wind knows where;

Some quiet April evening soft and strange,  
When comes the change  
No spirit can deplore,  
I shall be one with all I was before,  
In death once more.

### About the Author

Bliss Carman (1861 - 1929) Born April 15, 1861 in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Son of William Carman and Sophia Mary Bliss (Sophia Mary Bliss was a descendent of Daniel Bliss of Concord, Massachusetts, the great-grandfather of Ralph Waldo Emerson; and was the aunt of...

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