

## BATTLEDORE

### I

NO breath of wind, within, without ;  
No stirring twig, no insect hum ;  
The very beehives dumb ;  
Till shrill and sharp, with shriek and shout,  
The laughing sisters come.

Swarth, heavy-tressed runs Alison,  
Not corn than Blanche more debonair,  
They fill the voiceless air,  
Scarcely a scant scarf bound upon  
Their joyous, rebel hair.

“ Here, sister, here.” “ No, here i’ the shade.”  
“ Look, sister, gather up your skirt ;  
It trails upon the dirt.”  
“ Ah, malapert, now you have made  
My hand bleed ; I am hurt.”

“ Sweet Alison, your hose is rent.”  
“ Sweet Blanche, but look you, do you this :  
Loosen your girdle, sis,  
And draw your gown through.” Indolent  
Blanche laughs at her excess.

Their heart-shaped bats, bent, bound and strung  
With ravelled bow-cord, light and stout  
To drive the ball about,  
Winged plaything from the soutar wrung  
With supplicating pout.

Drum! Drum! How it spins! How straight it flies!  
How blue ’tis! Bluer than the sky!  
“ Sister, you strike awry.”  
Hither and thither, hands and eyes,  
And never feet more spry.

The chatelaine creeps forth a space,  
Down the strait stair, with looks askance  
For peeping eyes. “ Constance!”  
The girls cry out, “ come, take a place.”  
Her eyes fixed, as in trance ;

Thoughts flocking of Provençal fields,  
Of her own youth, grown nigh and nigher,  
Gathering her fine attire,  
The weary Lady Constance yields  
Unto a great desire.

Truth, she is little apt, although  
She strive, and make a brave array  
Of skill; the breathless day  
Catches her throat for to and fro,  
This way and that way. "Nay . . . ."

One hand clasped on her face, and one  
Against her waist, the frightened twain  
Of girls, seeing her pain,  
Shriek, cry: "Swift! water!" Alison  
Wrings at her hands in vain.

"A little sickness, child; 'tis naught;  
'Tis well. Dear Christ! if't be a wight,  
Moris shall he be hight;  
If't be a lass, Ysold. For aught  
I joy, 't may be this night."

## BATTLEDORE

### II

The sheltered garden sleeps among the tall  
Black poplars which grow round it, next the wall.  
The wall is very high, green grown on red.  
All is within, white convent, chapel, all.

Slight supper past, the evening office said,  
Gardening tools locked up, the poultry fed,  
Little is done but lazy chaplets told,  
Weeds plucked, and garden calvaries visited.

Some pace and stitch; some read in little, old,  
Worn, heavily bound missals, which they hold  
With both red hands, where lawns are foiled with flowers,  
Lily and Ladybell and Marygold.

This is the least unshushed of evening hours,  
When blessed peace best wears its dearest dowers:  
Quietly grouped are nuns and novices;  
Two tiny ladies play with battledores.

Drunk with the blows, unsteady with the whizz  
Of whirling flight, the shuttlecock seems, is  
Alive and fluttering at each new shock.  
Sisters are drawing close by twos and threes.

Asthmatic mother, as the shuttlecock  
Flies straight at her, allows herself to knock  
It onward with her leaf fan, muttering,  
Half as excuse: 'Tis nearly nine o'clock.

What better warrant for a foolish thing :  
With swift inventiveness the sisters bring  
Whatever light thing strikes ; old copybooks  
Fulfil the purpose well. Such fluttering

Within the convent walls the sober rooks  
Who live among the poplar branches—Sooks!—  
Had seldom seen. Now all the place prevails  
With cries and laughter to its furthest nooks.

The novices and nuns catch up their tails,  
Better to bustle, darting till their veils  
Float back and tangle in the merry fuss,  
Till sombre weeds swell out like lusty sails. . . . .

Peace, croaks the mother, Peace, the angelus!

JOHN GRAY.