

## Flannan Isle

*Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, 1921*

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,  
As 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 ghastly 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--  
Too big, by far, in my belief,  
For guillemot or shag--  
Like seamen sitting bold upright  
Upon a half-tide reef:  
But, as we near'd, they plunged from sight,  
Without a sound, or spurt of white.

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:  
And 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 on the table-head a chair  
Lay tumbled on the floor.  
We listen'd; but we only heard  
The feeble cheeping of a bird  
That starved upon its perch:  
And, listening still, without a word,  
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--  
O 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  
Of many a likely lad:  
How six had come to a sudden end  
And three had gone stark mad:  
And one whom we'd all known as friend  
Had leapt from the lantern one still night,  
And fallen dead by the lighthouse wall:  
And long we thought  
On the three we sought,  
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.