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Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel  
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen  
Weber Freiligrath Frey  
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel  
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas  
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach  
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil  
Goethe Elisabeth von Österreich London  
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Trackl Stevenson Lenz Hambrecht Doyle Gjellerup  
Mommssen Thoma Tolstoi Hanrieder Droste-Hülshoff  
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Karrillon Reuter Rousseau Hagen Hauff Baudelaire Gautier  
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Chamberlain Langbein Lafontaine Iffland Sokrates  
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# **Lancashire Idylls (1898)**

Marshall Mather

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## INTRODUCTION.

While Edwin Waugh and Ben Brierley have done much to perpetuate the rude moorland and busy factory life of Lancashire, little has been done to perpetuate the stern Puritanism of the hill sects.

Among these sects there is a poetry and simplicity local in character, yet delightful in spirit; and to recall and record it is the aim of the following Idylls.

The provincialism of Lancashire varies with its valleys. It is only necessary, therefore, to remark that as these Idylls are drawn from a once famous valley in the North-east division of the county, the provincialism is peculiar to that valley—indeed, it would be more correct to say, to that section of the valley wherein Rehoboth lies.



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### I.

#### MR. PENROSE'S NEW PARISH.

- 1. A Moorland Machpelah.
- 2. A Child of the Heather.
- 3. Owd Enoch's Flute.



## I.

### A MOORLAND MACHPELAH.

There was a sepulchral tone in the voice, and well there might be, for it was a voice from the grave. Floating on the damp autumnal air, and echoing round the forest of tombs, it died away over the moors, on the edge of which the old God's-acre stood.

Though far from melodious, it was distinct enough to convey to the ear the words of a well-known hymn—a hymn sung in jerky fragments, the concluding syllable always rising and ending with a gasp, as though the singer found his task too heavy, and was bound to pause for breath.

The startled listener was none other than Mr. Penrose, the newly-appointed minister, who was awaiting a funeral, long overdue. Looking round, his already pale face became a shade paler as he saw no living form, other than himself.

There he stood, alone, a stranger in this moorland haunt, amid falling shadows and rounding gloom, mocked by the mute records and stony memorials of the dead.

Again the voice was heard—another hymn, and to a tune as old as the mossed headstones that threw around their lengthening shadows.

‘I'll praise my Maker—while I've breath,’

followed by a pause, as though breath had actually forsaken the body of the singer. But in a moment or two the strain continued:

‘And when my voice—is lost in death.’

Whereon the sounds ceased, and there came a final silence, death seeming to take the singer at his word.

As Mr. Penrose looked in the direction from which the voice travelled, he saw a shovel thrown out of a newly-made grave, followed by the steaming head and weather-worn face of old Joseph, the

sexton, all aglow with the combined task of grave-digging and singing.

'Why, Joseph, is it you? I couldn't tell where the sound came from. It seems, after all, the grave can praise God, although the prophet tells us it cannot. Do you always sing at your work?'

'Partly whod. You see it's i' this way, sir,' said Joseph; 'grave-diggin's hard wark, and if a felley doesn'd sing a bit o'er it he's like baan to curse, so I sings to stop swears. There's a fearful deal o' oaths spilt in a grave while it's i' th' makin', I can tell yo'; and th' Almeety's name is spoken more daan i' th' hoile than it is up aboon, for all th' parson reads it so mich aat of his book. But this funeral's baan to be lat', Mr. Penrose'; and drawing a huge watch from his fob, he exclaimed: 'Another ten minutes and there's no berryin' i' th' yard this afternoon.'

'I don't understand you, Joseph,' said Mr. Penrose wonderingly.

'We never berry here after four o'clock.'

'But there's no law forbidting a funeral at any hour that I know of—is there?'

'There is wi' me. I'm maisther o' this berryin' hoile, whatever yo' may be o' th' chapel. But they're comin', so I'll oppen th' chapel durs.'

Old Joseph, as he was called, had been grave-digger at Rehoboth for upwards of fifty years, and so rooted were his customs that none cared to call them in question. For minister and deacons he showed little respect. Boys and girls fled from before his shadow; and the village mothers frightened their offspring when naughty by threatening to 'fotch owd Joseph to put them in th' berryhoile.' The women held him in awe, declaring that he sat up at night in the graveyard to watch for corpse-candles. Even the shrewd and hard-headed did not care to thwart him, preferring to be friends rather than foes. Fathers, sons and sons' sons—generation after generation—had been laid to rest by the sinewy arms of Joseph. They came, and they departed; but he, like the earth, remained. A gray, gaunt Tithonus, him 'only cruel immortality consumed.'

The graveyard at Rehoboth was his kingdom. Here, among the tombs, he reigned with undisputed sway. Whether marked by lettered stone or grassy mound, it mattered little—he knew where each rude forefather of the hamlet lay. Rich in the family lore of the neighbourhood, he could trace back ancestry and thread his way through the maze of relationship to the third and fourth generations. He could recount the sins which had hurried men to untimely graves, and point to the spot where their bones were rotting; and he could tell of virtues that made the memory of the mouldering dust more fragrant than the sweetbriar and the rose that grew upon the graves.

There was one rule which old Joseph would never break, and that was that there should be no interments after four o'clock. Plead with him, press him, threaten him, it was to no purpose; flinch he would not for rich or for poor, for parson or for people. More than once he had driven the mourners back from the gates, and one winter's afternoon, when the corpse had been brought a long distance, it was left for the night in a neighbouring barn. Upon this occasion a riot was with difficulty averted. But old Joseph stood firm, and at the risk of his life carried the day. This was long years ago. Now, throughout the whole countryside it was known that no corpse passed through Rehoboth gates after four o'clock.

'You'll happen look in an' see th' owd woman afore yo' go wom','  
said Joseph to Mr. Penrose, as the minister finished his entry of the funeral in the chapel register, 'hoo's nobbud cratchenly (shaky).'

Joseph and his wife lived in the lower room of a three-storied cottage at the end of the chapel, the second and third stories of the said cottage being utilized by the Rehoboth members as Sunday-schools.

Entering, Mr. Penrose saw the old woman crouching over the hearth and doing her best to feed the fast-dying fires of her vitality. As she raised her wrinkled face, crowned with white hair and covered with a coloured kerchief, a gray shawl wrapped round her lean and stooping shoulders, she smiled a welcome, and bade him be seated.

'So yo'n put away owd Chris,' she said, as soon as Mr. Penrose had taken his seat by her side. 'Well, he were awlus one for sleepin'. Th' owd felley would a slept on a clooas-line if he could a' fun no-

where else to lay hissel. But he'll sleep saander or ever naa. They'll bide some wakkenin' as sleep raand here, Mr. Penrose. Did he come in a yerst, or were he carried?'

'He was carried,' answered the minister, somewhat in uncertainty as to the meaning of the old woman's question.

'I were awlus for carryin'. I make nowt o' poor folk apein' th' quality, and when they're deead and all. Them as keeps carriages while they're wick can ride in yersts to their berryin' if they like, it's nowt to me; but when I dee I's be carried, and noan so far, noather.'

This moralizing on funerals by the sexton's wife was a new phase of life to Mr. Penrose. He had never before met with anyone who took an interest in the matter. It was true that in the city from which he had lately come the question of wicker coffins and of cremation was loudly discussed; but the choice between a hearse and 'carryin'' as a means of transit to the tomb never dawned on him as being anything else than a question of utility—the speediest and easiest means of transit.

After the deliverance of her mind on the snobbishness of poor people in the use of the hearse, she continued:

'It'll noan be so long afore they've to carry me, Mr. Penrose. I towd Joseph yesterneet that his turn 'ud soon come to dig my grave wi' th' rest; and he said, "When thy turn comes, lass, I'll do by thee as thou'd be done by."'

'And how would you be done by?' asked the minister.

'Well, it's i' this way, Mr. Penrose,' said the old woman. 'I want a dry grave, wi' a posy growin' on th' top. I somehaa like posies on graves; they mak' me think of th' owd hymn,

""There everlastin' spring abides,  
And never-witherin' flairs.""

Now, Mr. Penrose was one of the so-called theological young bloods, and held little sympathy with Dr. Watts's sensuous views of a future state. His common-sense, however, and his discretion came to his rescue, and delivered him from a strong temptation to blast the old woman's paradise with a breath of negative criticism.

'There's a grave daan at th' bottom o' th' yard, Mr. Penrose, where th' sunleet rests from morn till neet, an' I've axed Joseph to lay me there, for it's welly awlus warm, and flaars grow from Kesmas to Kesmas. Th' doctor's little lass lies there. Yo never knowd her, Mr. Penrose. Hoo were some pratty, bless her! Did yo' ever read what her faither put o'er th' top o' th' stone?'

Mr. Penrose confessed he was in ignorance of the epitaph over the grave of the doctor's child. As yet the history and romance of the graveyard were unknown to him.

'Well, it's this,' continued his informant:

"Such lilies th' angels gather for th' garden of God."

They'll never write that o'er me, Mr. Penrose. I'm nobbud a withered stalk. Hoo were eight—I'm eighty. But for all that I should like a flaar on mi grave, and Joseph says I shall hev one.'

The autumn gave place to a long and cheerless winter, which all too slowly yielded to a late and nipping spring. The wild March wind swept across the moors, roaring loudly around the old conventicle, chasing the last year's leaves in a mad whirl among the rows of headstones, and hissing, as though in anger, through the rank grasses growing on the innumerable mounds that marked the underlying dead, and then careering off, as though wrathful at its powerlessness to disturb the sleepers, to distant farmsteads and lone folds where starved ewes cowered with their early lambs under shivering thorns, and old men complained of the blast that roused the slumbering rheum and played havoc with their feeble frames. Scanty snow showers fell late under 'the roaring moon of daffodil,' whitening the moorlands and lying glistening in the morning light, to be gathered up by the rays of the sun that day by day climbed higher in the cold blue of the sky of spring. Young blades of green lay scattered like emerald shafts amid the tawny wastes of the winter grass, and swelling branches told of a year's returning life. Just as the golden chalice of the first crocus opened on the graves of the Rehoboth burial-yard, the old woman at the chapel-house died.

The funeral was to take place at three o'clock, but long before the hour old Joseph's kitchen was filled with a motley group of mourners. They came from far and near, from moor and field, and from the cottages over the way. Every branch of the family was represented—sons and daughters, grandchildren, nephews and nieces, even to babies in arms. As they straggled in, the women attired in their best black, and the men wearing their top-hats (a headgear worn by the Lancashire operative only on the state occasion of funerals), it seemed as though old Joseph, like Abraham, was the father of a race as the stars of heaven for multitude, and as the sands by the seashore, innumerable.

An oppressive atmosphere filled the room, where, on a table under the window, the open coffin rested, in which lay, exposed to all eyes, the peaceful features and straightened limbs of the dead. As the mourners entered they bent reverently over the corpse, and moistened its immobile features with their tears, whispering kindly words as to the appearance the old woman wore in death, and calling to mind some characteristic grace and virtue in her past life.

On another table was stacked a number of long clay pipes with tobacco, from which the men assisted themselves, smoking with the silence and stolidity of Indians, the women preserving the same mute attitude, save for an occasional groan and suppressed sigh—the feminine method in Lancashire of mourning for the dead.

The last mourners had long arrived, and the company was seated in an attitude of hushed and painful expectancy for the officiating minister. There was no sign, however, of his appearance; and the mourners asked themselves in silence if he who was to perform the final rites for the dead had forgotten the hour or the day.

The fingers of the old clock slowly crept along the dial-plate towards four, the hour so relentlessly enforced for interments for half a century by the sexton, who was now about to lay away his own wife in the greedy maw of the grave. The monotonous oscillation of the pendulum, sounding as the stroke of a passing bell, gathered solemnity of tone in the felt hush that rested upon all in the room—a hush as deep as that which rested upon the dead. All eyes, under the cover of stealthily drooping lids, stole glances at old Joseph, whose face fought hard to hide the emotions running like pulsing

tides beneath the surface. At last a woman, whose threescore years and ten was the only warrant for her rude interruption, exclaimed:

'Wheer's th' parson? Hes he forgotten, thinksto?'

'Mr. Penrose is ill i' bed,' replied old Joseph, 'but I seed Mr. Hanson fra Burnt Hill Chapel, and he promised as he'd be here in his place.'

The clock beat out its seconds with the same monotonous sound, and the finger crept towards the fateful hour. Then came the wheeze and whir preliminary to the strokes of four, conveying to familiar ears that only eight more minutes remained. At this warning Joseph arose from his seat, and, walking out into the graveyard, made direct to an eminence overlooking the long trend of road, and, raising one hand to shade his now failing sight, looked down the valley to see if the minister was on his way to the grave. It was in vain. Tears began to dim his sight, and for a moment the man overcame the sexton. The struggle was but brief; in another moment he was again the sexton. Returning to the cottage, he scarcely reached the threshold before he cried out, with all the firmness of his cruelly professional tones:

'Parson or no parson, aat o' this dur (door) hoo goes at four o'clock.'

As the clock struck the fateful hour the old woman was carried to her grave; and as they lowered her, Joseph, with uncovered head, let fall the clods from his own hand, repeating, in a hoarse yet tremulous voice, the words:

'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

In another moment the old sexton reeled, and fell into the arms of the men who stood near him. It was but a passing weakness, for he soon pulled himself together, and accompanied the mourners to the funeral tea, which was served in a neighbouring house.

Never afterwards, however, was old Joseph heard to rail at mourners when late, or known to close the Rehoboth gates against an overdue funeral.



## II.

### A CHILD OF THE HEATHER.

'What, Milly! Sitting in the dark?' asked Mr. Penrose, as he entered the chamber of the suffering child, who was gazing through the open window at the silent stars.

'I were just lookin' at th' parish candles, as my faither co's 'em; they burn breetsome to-neet, sir.'

'Looking at them, or looking for them?' queried the somewhat perplexed divine. 'Can I bring the candles to you?'

'Yo' cornd bring 'em ony nearer than they are. They're up yon, sithi,' and so saying the child pointed to the evening sky.

'So you call the stars "parish candles," do you?' smilingly inquired Mr. Penrose. 'I never heard them called by that name before.'

'It's my faither co's 'em "parish candles," not me,' said the child.

'And what do you call them?'

'Happen if I tell yo' yo'll laugh at me, as my faither does.'

'No, I shall not. You need not be afraid.'

'Well, I co 'em angels' een (eyes).'

'A far prettier name than your father gives to them, Milly.'

'An' what dun yo' think hoo co's th' dew as it lies fresh on th' moors in a mornin'?' asked the mother, who was sitting in one of the shadowed corners of the room.

'I cannot say, I am sure, Mrs. Lord. Milly has such wonderful names for everything.'

'Why, hoo co's it angels' tears, and says it drops daan fro' th' een o' them as watches fro' aboon at the devilment they see on th' earth.'

'Milly, you are a poetess!' exclaimed the delighted minister. 'But do you really think the angels weep? Would it not destroy the joy of that place where sorrow and sighing are no more?'

'Well, yo' see, it's i' this road, Mr. Penrose. They say as th' angels are glad when bad folk turn good, and I suppose they'll fret theirsels a bit if th' bad folk keeps bad; and there's mony o' that mak' abaat here.'

Mr. Penrose was silent. Once more Milly was, unknown to herself furnishing him with thoughts; for, again and again, from the sick-bed of this child had he gone forth with fresh fields of revelation opening before him. True, the idea of heaven's grief at earth's sin was not a pleasant one; but if joy at righteousness and repentance, why not grief at wickedness and hardness of heart?

While thus musing in the quiet of the darkening chamber, Milly turned from her contemplation of the stars with the somewhat startling question:

'Mr. Penrose, dun yo' think there'll be yethbobs (tufts of heather) i' heaven?'

'That's bothered her a deal latly,' broke in the mother, with a choking voice. 'Hoo sez hoo noan cares for heaven if hoo cornd play on th' moors, and yer th' wind, and poo yethbobs when hoo gets there. What dun yo' think abaat it, Mr. Penrose?'

Mr. Penrose was not long from college, and the metaphysics and dogmatics of the schools were more to his mind than the poetry and religion of this moorland child. If asked to discourse on personality, or expound the latest phase of German thought, he would have felt himself at home. Here, however, he who was the idol of the classroom sat silenced and foolish before a peasant girl. True, he could enter into an argument for a future state, and show how spiritual laws opposed the mundane imagination of the child. But, after all, wherein was the use?—perhaps the child was nearer the truth than he was himself. He would leave her to her own pristine fancies.

In a moment Milly continued:

'Th' Bible says, Mr. Penrose, that i' heaven there's a street paved wi' gowd (gold). Naa; I'd raither hev a meadow wi' posies, or th' moors when they're covered wi' yethbobs. If heaven's baan to be all streets, I'd as soon stop o' this side—though they be paved wi' gowd an' o'.'

'Listen yo', how hoo talks, Mr. Penrose. Hoo's awlus talked i' that feshion sin' hoo were a little un. Aar owd minister used to co her "God's child."

Mr. Penrose was a young man, and thought that 'Nature's child' would be, perhaps, a more fitting name, but held his thought unuttered. Wishing Milly and her mother a 'Good-night,' he descended the old stone staircase to the kitchen, where Abraham Lord sat smoking and looking gloomily into the embers of the fire.

'Has th' missus towd thee ought abaat aar Milly?' somewhat sullenly interrogated the father.

'Nothing of any moment,' said Mr. Penrose. 'Of course she could not; we were never together out of your daughter's presence.'

'Then aw'll tell thee. Milly's baan to-morn to th' infirmary to hev her leg tan off.'

The strong man shook in the convulsive grip of his grief. No tears came to his relief; the storm was deep down in his soul; outlet there was none.

'Mr. Penrose,' said he, laying a hand on the minister's shoulder; 'Mr. Penrose, if I'd ha' known afore I were wed that gettin' wed meant a child o' mine being tan fro' me and cut i' pieces by them doctor chaps, I'd never ha' wed, fond o' Martha as I wor and am. No, Mr. Penrose, I never would. They might tak' me, and do what they'n a mind wi' me, at their butcherin' shops. But her—'

Here the strong man was swept by another convulsive storm of feeling too deep for utterance. Subduing his passion by a supreme effort of will, he continued:

'However, them as knows best says as it's her only chance, and I'm noan goin' agen it. I shall go daan wi' her mysel' to-morn.'

Milly, or 'th' little lass o' Lord's,' as the villagers called her, was one of those phenomenal child personalities which now and again visit this world as though to defy all laws of heredity, and remind the selfish and the mighty of that kingdom in which the little one is ruler. A bright, bonny, light-haired girl—the vital feelings of delight pulsed through all her being. Born amid the moorlands, cradled in the heather, nourished on the breezy heights of Rehoboth, she grew

up an ideal child of the hills. For years her morning baptism had been a frolic across the dewy uplands; and, evening by evening, the light of setting suns kindled holy fires in her rapturous and wonder-filled eyes. The native heart, too, was in touch with the native heath; for Milly's nature was deeply poetic, many of her questions betraying a disposition and sympathy strangely out of harmony with the kindly, yet rude, stock from which she sprang. From a toddling child her eye carried sunshine and her presence peace. Unconsciously she leavened the whole village, and toned much of the harsh Calvinism that knit together its iron creed. There was not one who did not in some way respond to the magic of her voice, her mood, her presence. Even Joseph softened as she stood by the yawning graves which he was digging, and questioned him as to the dying and the dead. The old pastor, Mr. Morell, stern man that he was, used to put his hand on her head, and call her his 'Goldilocks'; and he had once been heard to say, after leaving her, 'And a little child shall lead them.' Though somewhat lonely, there was neither priggishness nor precocity in her disposition; she was just herself—unspoiled from the hands of God and of Nature.

Shortly after her twelfth birthday she was caught on the moors by a heavy autumnal shower, and, unwilling to miss her ramble by returning home, pursued her way drenched to the skin. A severe illness was the consequence, an illness which left a weakness in her knee, eventually incapacitating her for all exercise whatever, and keeping her a prisoner to the house. The village doctor laboured long, but in vain was all his skill. At last a specialist from the great city beyond the hills was called, who ordered the child to be removed to the Royal Infirmary, where care, skill, and nourishment would all be within easy reach. So it came to pass one summer morning, as the sun lighted up the wide moors, and the hum of the factories in the valley began to be carried upwards towards the heights, a little crowd of folks gathered round the door of Abraham Lord's cottage to take a farewell of 'th' little lass.' About eight o'clock the doctor drove up, and in a few moments Milly was carried in his and her father's strong arms and gently laid in the cushioned carriage, and then slowly driven away from the home which now for the first time in her life she was leaving. The eyes of the onlookers were as moist as the dewy herbage on which they stood,