Goblin Market

By Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830–1894)

MORNING and evening

Maids heard the goblins cry:

“Come buy our orchard fruits,

Come buy, come buy:

Apples and quinces, 5

Lemons and oranges,

Plump unpecked cherries,

Melons and raspberries,

Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,

Swart-headed mulberries, 10

Wild free-born cranberries,

Crab-apples, dewberries,

Pine-apples, blackberries,

Apricots, strawberries;—

All ripe together 15

In summer weather,—

Morns that pass by,

Fair eves that fly;

Come buy, come buy:

Our grapes fresh from the vine, 20

Pomegranates full and fine,

Dates and sharp bullaces,

Rare pears and greengages,

Damsons and bilberries,

Taste them and try: 25

Currants and gooseberries,

Bright-fire-like barberries,

Figs to fill your mouth,

Citrons from the South,

Sweet to tongue and sound to eye; 30

Come buy, come buy.”

Evening by evening

Among the brookside rushes,

Laura bowed her head to hear,

Lizzie veiled her blushes: 35

Crouching close together

In the cooling weather,

With clasping arms and cautioning lips,

With tingling cheeks and finger tips.

“Lie close,” Laura said, 40

Pricking up her golden head:

“We must not look at goblin men,

We must not buy their fruits:

Who knows upon what soil they fed

Their hungry, thirsty roots?” 45

“Come buy,” call the goblins,

Hobbling down the glen.

“Oh,” cried Lizzie, “Laura, Laura,

You should not peep at goblin men.”

Lizzie covered up her eyes, 50

Covered close, lest they should look;

Laura reared her glossy head,

And whispered like the restless brook:

“Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,

Down the glen tramp little men. 55

One hauls a basket,

One bears a plate,

One lugs a golden dish

Of many pounds’ weight.

How fair the vine must grow 60

Whose grapes are so luscious;

How warm the wind must blow

Through those fruit bushes.”

“No,” said Lizzie: “No, no, no;

Their offers should not charm us, 65

Their evil gifts would harm us.”

She thrust a dimpled finger

In each ear, shut eyes, and ran:

Curious Laura chose to linger,

Wondering at each merchant man. 70

One had a cat’s face,

One whisked a tail,

One tramped at a rat’s pace,

One crawled like a snail,

One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry, 75

One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

She heard a voice like voice of doves

Cooing all together:

They sounded kind and full of loves

In the pleasant weather. 80

Laura stretched her gleaming neck

Like a rush-imbedded swan,

Like a lily from the beck,

Like a moonlit poplar branch,

Like a vessel at the launch 85

When its last restraint is gone.

Backwards up the mossy glen

Turned and trooped the goblin men,

With their shrill repeated cry,

“Come buy, come buy.” 90

When they reached where Laura was

They stood stock still upon the moss,

Leering at each other,

Brother with queer brother;

Signalling each other, 95

Brother with sly brother.

One set his basket down,

One reared his plate;

One began to weave a crown

Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown 100

(Men sell not such in any town);

One heaved the golden weight

Of dish and fruit to offer her:

“Come buy, come buy,” was still their cry.

Laura stared but did not stir, 105

Longed, but had no money:

The whisk-tailed merchant bade her taste

In tones as smooth as honey,

The cat-faced purr’d,

The rat-paced spoke a word 110

Of welcome, and the snail-paced even was heard;

One parrot-voiced and jolly

Cried “Pretty Goblin” still for “Pretty Polly:”—

One whistled like a bird.

But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste: 115

“Good folk, I have no coin;

To take were to purloin:

I have no copper in my purse,

I have no silver either,

And all my gold is on the furze 120

That shakes in windy weather

Above the rusty heather.”

“You have much gold upon your head,”

They answered all together:

“Buy from us with a golden curl.” 125

She clipped a precious golden lock,

She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,

Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:

Sweeter than honey from the rock,

Stronger than man-rejoicing wine, 130

Clearer than water flowed that juice;

She never tasted such before,

How should it cloy with length of use?

She sucked and sucked and sucked the more

Fruits which that unknown orchard bore; 135

She sucked until her lips were sore;

Then flung the emptied rinds away,

But gathered up one kernel-stone,

And knew not was it night or day

As she turned home alone. 140

Lizzie met her at the gate,

Full of wise upbraidings:

“Dear, you should not stay so late,

Twilight is not good for maidens;

Should not loiter in the glen, 145

In the haunts of goblin men.

Do you not remember Jeanie,

How she met them in the moonlight,

Took their gifts both choice and many,

Ate their fruits and wore their flowers, 150

Plucked from bowers

Where summer ripens at all hours?

But ever in the noonlight

She pined and pined away;

Sought them by night and day, 155

Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;

Then fell with the first snow,

While to this day no grass will grow

Where she lies low:

I planted daisies there a year ago 160

That never blow.

You should not loiter so.”

“Nay, hush,” said Laura:

“Nay, hush, my sister:

I ate and ate my fill, 165

Yet my mouth waters still;

To-morrow night I will

Buy more:” and kissed her:

“Have done with sorrow;

I’ll bring you plums to-morrow 170

Fresh on their mother twigs,

Cherries worth getting;

You cannot think what figs

My teeth have met in,

What melons icy-cold 175

Piled on a dish of gold

Too huge for me to hold,

What peaches with a velvet nap,

Pellucid grapes without one seed:

Odorous indeed must be the mead 180

Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink

With lilies at the brink,

And sugar-sweet their sap.”

Golden head by golden head,

Like two pigeons in one nest 185

Folded in each other’s wings,

They lay down in their curtained bed:

Like two blossoms on one stem,

Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,

Like two wands of ivory 190

Tipped with gold for awful kings.

Moon and stars gazed in at them,

Wind sang to them lullaby,

Lumbering owls forbore to fly,

Not a bat flapped to and fro 195

Round their rest:

Cheek to cheek and breast to breast

Locked together in one nest.

Early in the morning,

When the first cock crowed his warning, 200

Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,

Laura rose with Lizzie:

Fetched in honey, milked the cows,

Aired and set to rights the house,

Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat, 205

Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,

Next churned butter, whipped up cream,

Fed their poultry, sat and sewed;

Talked as modest maidens should:

Lizzie with an open heart, 210

Laura in an absent dream,

One content, one sick in part;

One warbling for the mere bright day’s delight,

One longing for the night.

At length slow evening came: 215

They went with pitchers to the reedy brook;

Lizzie most placid in her look,

Laura most like a leaping flame.

They drew the gurgling water from its deep;

Lizzie plucked purple and rich golden flags, 220

Then turning homewards, said: “The sunset flushes

Those furthest loftiest crags;

Come, Laura, not another maiden lags,

No wilful squirrel wags,

The beasts and birds are fast asleep.” 225

But Laura loitered still among the rushes

And said the bank was steep.

And said the hour was early still,

The dew not fall’n, the wind not chill:

Listening ever, but not catching 230

The customary cry,

“Come buy, come buy,”

With its iterated jingle

Of sugar-baited words:

Not for all her watching 235

Once discerning even one goblin

Racing, whisking, tumbling, hobbling;

Let alone the herds

That used to tramp along the glen,

In groups or single, 240

Of brisk fruit-merchant men.

Till Lizzie urged, “O Laura, come;

I hear the fruit-call, but I dare not look;

You should not loiter longer at this brook;

Come with me home. 245

The stars rise, the moon bends her arc,

Each glowworm winks her spark,

Let us get home before the night grows dark:

For clouds may gather

Though this is summer weather, 250

Put out the lights, and drench us through;

Then if we lost our way what should we do?”

Laura turned cold as stone

To find her sister heard that cry alone,

That goblin cry, 255

“Come buy our fruits, come buy.”

Must she, then, buy no more such dainty fruit?

Must she no more that succous pasture find,

Gone deaf and blind?

Her tree of life drooped from the root: 260

She said not one word in her heart’s sore ache;

But peering thro’ the dimness, nought discerning,

Trudged home, her pitcher dripping all the way;

So crept to bed, and lay

Silent till Lizzie slept; 265

Then sat up in a passionate yearning,

And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept

As if her heart would break.

Day after day, night after night,

Laura kept watch in vain 270

In sullen silence of exceeding pain.

She never caught again the goblin cry:

“Come buy, come buy;”—

She never spied the goblin men

Hawking their fruits along the glen: 275

But when the noon waxed bright,

Her hair grew thin and grey;

She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn

To swift decay and burn

Her fire away. 280

One day remembering her kernel-stone,

She set it by a wall that faced the south;

Dewed it with tears, hoped for a root,

Watched for a waxing shoot,

But there came none; 285

It never saw the sun,

It never felt the trickling moisture run:

While with sunk eyes and faded mouth

She dreamed of melons, as a traveller sees

False waves in desert drouth 290

With shade of leaf-crowned trees,

And burns the thirstier in the sandful breeze.

She no more swept the house,

Tended the fowls or cows,

Fetched honey, kneaded cakes of wheat, 295

Brought water from the brook:

But sat down listless in the chimney-nook,

And would not eat.

Tender Lizzie could not bear

To watch her sister’s cankerous care, 300

Yet not to share.

She night and morning

Caught the goblins’ cry:

“Come buy our orchard fruits,

Come buy, come buy:”— 305

Beside the brook, along the glen,

She heard the tramp of goblin men,

The voice and stir

Poor Laura could not hear;

Longed to buy fruit to comfort her, 310

But feared to pay too dear.

She thought of Jeanie in her grave,

Who should have been a bride;

But who for joys brides hope to have

Fell sick and died 315

In her gay prime,

In earliest Winter time,

With the first glazing rime,

With the first snow-fall of crisp Winter time.

Till Laura dwindling 320

Seemed knocking at Death’s door:

Then Lizzie weighed no more

Better and worse;

But put a silver penny in her purse,

Kissed Laura, crossed the heath with clumps of furze 325

At twilight, halted by the brook:

And for the first time in her life

Began to listen and look.

Laughed every goblin

When they spied her peeping: 330

Came towards her hobbling,

Flying, running, leaping,

Puffing and blowing,

Chuckling, clapping, crowing,

Clucking and gobbling, 335

Mopping and mowing,

Full of airs and graces,

Pulling wry faces,

Demure grimaces,

Cat-like and rat-like, 340

Ratel and wombat-like,

Snail-paced in a hurry,

Parrot-voiced and whistler,

Helter skelter, hurry skurry,

Chattering like magpies, 345

Fluttering like pigeons,

Gliding like fishes,—

Hugged her and kissed her,

Squeezed and caressed her:

Stretched up their dishes, 350

Panniers, and plates:

“Look at our apples

Russet and dun,

Bob at our cherries,

Bite at our peaches, 355

Citrons and dates,

Grapes for the asking,

Pears red with basking

Out in the sun,

Plums on their twigs; 360

Pluck them and suck them,

Pomegranates, figs.”

“Good folk,” said Lizzie,

Mindful of Jeanie:

“Give me much and many”:— 365

Held out her apron,

Tossed them her penny.

“Nay, take a seat with us,

Honour and eat with us,”

They answered grinning: 370

“Our feast is but beginning.

Night yet is early,

Warm and dewpearly,

Wakeful and starry:

Such fruits as these 375

No man can carry;

Half their bloom would fly,

Half their dew would dry,

Half their flavour would pass by.

Sit down and feast with us, 380

Be welcome guest with us,

Cheer you and rest with us.”—

“Thank you,” said Lizzie; “but one waits

At home alone for me:

So without further parleying, 385

If you will not sell me any

Of your fruits, though much and many,

Give me back my silver penny

I tossed you for a fee.”—

They began to scratch their pates, 390

No longer wagging, purring,

But visibly demurring,

Grunting and snarling.

One called her proud,

Cross-grained, uncivil; 395

Their tones waxed loud,

Their looks were evil.

Lashing their tails

They trod and hustled her,

Elbowed and jostled her, 400

Clawed with their nails,

Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,

Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,

Twitched her hair out by the roots,

Stamped upon her tender feet, 405

Held her hands and squeezed their fruits

Against her mouth to make her eat.

White and golden Lizzie stood,

Like a lily in a flood,—

Like a rock of blue-veined stone 410

Lashed by tides obstreperously,—

Like a beacon left alone

In a hoary, roaring sea,

Sending up a golden fire,—

Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree 415

White with blossoms honey-sweet

Sore beset by wasp and bee,—

Like a royal virgin town

Topped with gilded dome and spire

Close beleaguered by a fleet 420

Mad to tug her standard down.

One may lead a horse to water,

Twenty cannot make him drink.

Though the goblins cuffed and caught her,

Coaxed and fought her, 425

Bullied and besought her,

Scratched her, pinched her black as ink,

Kicked and knocked her,

Mauled and mocked her,

Lizzie uttered not a word; 430

Would not open lip from lip

Lest they should cram a mouthful in:

But laughed in heart to feel the drip

Of juice that syrupped all her face,

And lodged in dimples of her chin, 435

And streaked her neck, which quaked like curd.

At last the evil people,

Worn out by her resistance

Flung back her penny, kicked their fruit

Along whichever road they took, 440

Not leaving root or stone or shoot;

Some writhed into the ground,

Some dived into the brook

With ring and ripple,

Some scudded on the gale without a sound, 445

Some vanished in the distance.

In a smart, ache, tingle,

Lizzie went her way;

Knew not was it night or day;

Sprang up the bank, tore through the furze, 450

Threaded copse and dingle,

And heard her penny jingle

Bouncing in her purse,—

Its bounce was music to her ear.

She ran and ran 455

As if she feared some goblin man

Dogged her with gibe or curse

Or something worse:

But not one goblin skurried after,

Nor was she pricked by fear; 460

The kind heart made her windy-paced

That urged her home quite out of breath with haste

And inward laughter.

She cried, “Laura,” up the garden,

“Did you miss me? 465

Come and kiss me.

Never mind my bruises,

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices

Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,

Goblin pulp and goblin dew, 470

Eat me, drink me, love me;

Laura, make much of me:

For your sake I have braved the glen

And had to do with goblin merchantmen.”

Laura started from her chair, 475

Flung her arms up in the air,

Clutched her hair:

“Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted

For my sake the fruit forbidden?

Must your light like mine be hidden, 480

Your young life like mine be wasted,

Undone in mine undoing,

And ruined in my ruin,

Thirsty, cankered, goblin-ridden?”

She clung about her sister, 485

Kissed and kissed and kissed her:

Tears once again

Refreshed her shrunken eyes,

Dropping like rain

After long sultry drouth; 490

Shaking with aguish fear and pain,

She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth.

Her lips began to scorch,

That juice was wormwood to her tongue,

She loathed the feast: 495

Writhing as one possessed, she leaped and sung,

Rent all her robe, and wrung

Her hands in lamentable haste,

And beat her breast.

Her locks streamed like the torch 500

Borne by a racer at full speed,

Or like the mane of horses in their flight,

Or like an eagle when she stems the light

Straight toward the sun,

Or like a caged thing freed, 505

Or like a flying flag when armies run.

Swift fire spread through her veins, knocked at her heart,

Met the fire smouldering there

And overbore its lesser flame;

She gorged on bitterness without a name: 510

Ah! fool, to choose such part

Of soul-consuming care!

Sense failed in the mortal strife:

Like the watch-tower of a town

Which an earthquake shatters down, 515

Like a lightning-stricken mast,

Like a wind-uprooted tree

Spun about,

Like a foam-topped waterspout

Cast down headlong in the sea. 520

She fell at last;

Pleasure past and anguish past,

Is it death or is it life?

Life out of death.

That night long Lizzie watched by her, 525

Counted her pulse’s flagging stir,

Felt for her breath,

Held water to her lips, and cooled her face

With tears and fanning leaves;

But when the first birds chirped about their eaves, 530

And early reapers plodded to the place

Of golden sheaves,

And dew-wet grass

Bowed in the morning winds so brisk to pass,

And new buds with new day 535

Opened of cup-like lilies on the stream,

Laura awoke as from a dream,

Laughed in the innocent old way,

Hugged Lizzie, but not twice or thrice;

Her gleaming locks showed not one thread of gray, 540

Her breath was sweet as May

And light danced in her eyes.

Days, weeks, months, years,

Afterwards, when both were wives

With children of their own; 545

Their mother-hearts beset with fears,

Their lives bound up in tender lives;

Laura would call the little ones

And tell them of her early prime,

Those pleasant days long gone 550

Of not-returning time:

Would talk about the haunted glen,

The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,

Their fruits like honey to the throat,

But poison in the blood; 555

(Men sell not such in any town):

Would tell them how her sister stood

In deadly peril to do her good,

And win the fiery antidote:

Then joining hands to little hands 560

Would bid them cling together,

“For there is no friend like a sister

In calm or stormy weather;

To cheer one on the tedious way,

To fetch one if one goes astray, 565

To lift one if one totters down,

To strengthen whilst one stands.”