

The Ghost's Petition

By Christina Rossetti

“There's a footstep coming; look out and see.—

“The leaves are falling, the wind is calling;
No one cometh across the lea.’

“There's a footstep coming; O sister, look.”—

“The ripple flashes, the white foam dashes;
No one cometh across the brook.’

“But he promised that he would come:

Tonight, tomorrow, in joy or sorrow,
He must keep his word, and must come home.

“For he promised that he would come;

His word was given; from earth to heaven,
He must keep his word, and must come home.

“Go to sleep, my sweet sister Jane;

You can slumber, who need not number
Hour after hour, in doubt and pain.

“I shall sit here awhile and watch;

Listening, hoping for one hand groping,
In deep shadow, to find the latch.”

After the dark and before the light,

One lay sleeping, and one sat weeping,
Who had watched and wept the weary night.

After the night and before the day

One lay sleeping; and one sat weeping—
Watching, weeping for one away.

There came a footstep climbing the stair,

Some one standing out on the landing
Shook the door like a puff of air.—

Shook the door and in he passed.

Did he enter? In the room center
Stood her husband; the door shut fast.

“O Robin, but you are cold—
Chilled with the night-dew; so lily white you
Look like a stray lamb from our fold.

“O Robin, but you are late:
Come and sit near me—sit here and cheer me.
(Blue the flame burnt in the grate.)

“Lay not down your head on my breast:
I cannot hold you, kind wife, nor fold you
In the shelter that you love best.

“Feel not after my clasping hand:
I am but a shadow, come from the meadow,
Where many lie, but no tree can stand.

“We are the trees that have shed their leaves:
Our heads lie low there, but no tears flow there;
Only I grieve for my wife who grieves.

“I could rest if you would not moan
Hour after hour; I have no power
To shut my ears as I lie alone.

“I could rest if you would not cry,
But there’s no sleeping while you sit weeping—
Watching, weeping so bitterly.”—

“Woe’s me! Woe’s me! For this I have heard.
Oh night of sorrow—oh, black tomorrow!
Is it thus that you keep your word?

“Oh, you who used so to shelter me,
Warm from the least wind—why, now the east wind
Is warmer than you, whom I quake to see.

“Oh, my husband of flesh and blood,
For whom my mother I left, and brother,
And all I had, accounting it good,

“What do you do there, under the ground,
In the dark hollow? I’m fain to follow.
What do you do there? What have you found?”—

“What I do there I must not tell,
But I have plenty—kind wife, content ye:

It is well with us: it is well.

“Tender hand hath made our nest;
Our fear is ended; our hope is blended
With present pleasure, and we have rest.”

“Oh, but Robin, I’m fain to come,
If your present days are so pleasant,
For my days are so wearisome.

“Yet I’ll dry my tears for your sake:
Why should I tease you, who cannot please you
Any more with the pains I take?”