WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY
1849–1903

In Hospital

Waiting

A square, squat room (a cellar on promotion),
Drab to the soul, drab to the very daylight;
Plasters astray in unnatural-looking tinware;
Scissors and lint and apothecary’s jars.

Here, on a bench a skeleton would writhe from,
Angry and sore, I wait to be admitted;
Wait till my heart is lead upon my stomach,
While at their ease two dressers do their chores.

One has a probe—it feels to me a crowbar.

A small boy sniffs and shudders after bluestone.¹
A poor old tramp explains his poor old ulcers.
Life is (I think) a blunder and a shame.

1874

Madam Life’s a Piece in Bloom

Madam Life’s a piece in bloom
Death goes dogging everywhere:
She’s the tenant of the room,
He’s the ruffian on the stair.

You shall see her as a friend,
You shall bilk him once or twice;
But he’ll trap you in the end,
And he’ll stick you for her price.

With his kneebones at your chest,
And his knuckles in your throat,
You would reason—plead—protest!
Clutching at her petticoat;

But she’s heard it all before,
Well she knows you’ve had your fun.

1888

¹ Or copper sulphate, commonly used in emergency wards as an emetic for patients who have taken poison.
Gingerly she gains the door,
And your little job is done.

Barmaid

Though, if you ask her name, she says elise,
Being plain Elizabeth, e'en let it pass,
And own that, if her aspirates take their ease,
She ever makes a point, in washing glass,
Handling the engine, turning taps for tots,
And countering change, and scorning what men say,
Of posing as a dove among the pots,
Nor often gives her dignity away.
Her head's a work of art; and, if her eyes
Be tired and ignorant, she has a waist;
Cheaply the mode she shadows; and she tries
From penny novels to amend her taste;
And, having mopped the zinc for certain years,
And faced the gas, she fades and disappears.

1. From London Types. This poem (in quatorzains) accompanied a picture of a barmaid by William Nicholson. Cf. Tennyson's sonnet, She Took the Dappled Partridge, in which the woman's posing is likened to a "master painting" (line 4).
2. Handle of the pump for drawing up beer from casks to the bar. "Tots": small drinks of whiskey or other hard liquors.
3. Pewter beer mugs.