

A VENTURE IN VERSE

BY

MARJORY NICHOLLS

Nicholls, Marjory, 1891-1930.
Venture in verse / by Marjory
Nicholls.

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Foreword

To those who have passed through the academical groves of Victoria University College, the author of the following verses will need no introduction. Nor indeed is it required in the case of those who have not, for the verses will speak for her much more eloquently than any words of mine can do. For though most of them have made their first appearance in the College Magazine, they are of much wider interest and sympathy than cloistered productions are wont to be, and their founts and origins are scattered far and wide over the stretches of the earth.

Imaginative without being turgid, facile without being slovenly, Miss Nicholls's verse has above all the rare distinction of a freshness and thoughtfulness, without which all verse is but body without spirit. These qualities should assure for it the warm welcome and appreciation which it certainly deserves.

S. EICHELBAUM.

DEDICATED
TO
MY FRIENDS NEAR AND FAR

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A Would-Be Wanderer

Voices call—
I cry "I come!"
After all
I stay at home.

Why cannot I throw my cares away,
And journey forth like Paragot
'Long roads where tall, straight poplars grow,
And the sun beats white on the dust all day?

Rest at an inn (if it come my way),
For I'll walk any road I please,
Chanting verse from Euripides
Or Villon's ballads of yesterday.

Or loll, Bohemian-wise, and dream
About Verlaine or Baudelaire—
That poet strange with pea-green hair,
Who supped, o' nights, from a skull of cream.

And on out of France and into Spain,
Seeking castles I once built there;
Finding them where they always were—
Up in the air, with the clouds and rain.

From castanets with their dizzy click,
Away with feet that never tire,
Till I've fulfilled my heart's desire—
(Tho' roads be rocky and rain-mist' thick).

To look right well into lives and ways,
 To try to understand the earth,
To learn the import and the worth
 Of the little deeds that fill our days.

Then, following still my calling voice,
 Hear the world's winds in many woods,
And satisfy my many moods,
 And feel my life grow, and so, rejoice.

Voices call—
I cry, "I come!"
After all
I stay at home.

"THE SPIKE," 1911.

Three Gifts

I sat on the grass
 Beneath a green tree;
There were three little loves
 Came flying to me—
One bore a red rose,
 One bore a white,
One bore a nettle,
 Clasping it tight.

So I stretched out my hand
 For the roses sweet.
The Love with the nettle
 Stood quiet at my feet.
“The red rose for Love,
 The white for Faith
Nettles for Pain,”
 Was all he saith.

So I took the red rose,
 And I took the white,
And I took the nettles
 And grasped them so tight.
For Life should give Love,
 And Love needs Faith;
And Life will bring Pain,
 As the wee Love saith.

WELLINGTON, 1911.

Welcome

Little fairies, come!
From the bluebells neath the tree,
From the white foam on the sea—
Whisper sweetly unto me
As I lie here drowsily,
Little fairies, come!

Little brownies, come!
Leave the acorns on the oak,
Leave the busy forest folk,
Fly down through the chimney smoke—
Little brownies, come!

Little pixies, come!
From the dock-leaves by the stream
Where the speckled trout do gleam
In the sun's bright, glancing beam—
Bring me, each of you, a dream—
Little pixies, come!

LOWER HUTT, 1911.

Joie de Vivre

Joy flashed with a stream down a mountain-side
Where I washed my face at dawn,
When the sun leaped up and laughed at the world,
And the gladsome day was born.
Joy walked with me straight down the mountain-path,
And along the dusty ways;
She laughed with the breeze, and sang with the birds,
That fairest of summer days.

When I slept at noon-tide she filled my dreams,
Then waked me quick to see
The sunlight that danced on the river blue,
The beauty of grass and tree.
And then on thro' the golden afternoon,
And into the woodland ways,
Where the twilight shadows were soft and green,
All hid from the sun's hot rays.

When the sun grew tired and sank from our sight,
And the grey dusk reigned instead,
Joy led me along thro' the village street
In search of a meal and bed.
And when I had supped and mused for awhile,
To bed I went, well-content;
The smile on my lips was my prayer of thanks,
For a day with Joy, well-spent.

"THE SPIKE," 1911.

Carpe Diem

Oh the world is fair to see!
This I found out suddenly,
When I looked forth from my window on an early summer-day.
So I left my books behind,
Ran out where the sun and wind,
Vied together in caressing rustling leaves and flowers gay.

Oh, a flower fair there grew,
Glowing purple, rich in hue;
I reached eager hands to pluck it, captivated at the sight.
But I stopped, for to my ear
Came a voice so calm and clear,
Where a sage stood smiling somewhat at my eager youth's delight.

"So," said he, "youth's eagerness,
Grasping fleeting happiness,
Spoiling, therefore, in its blindness life's long-lasting riper fruit!
Leave the garden blowing bright
In your books find all delight,
Wait till Autumn, and remember from the seed will spring the
root."

So I went back to my books
Not without some backward looks
At the flower, nodding brightly, half-inviting me to stay.
But consoled myself and said,
"Why the flower soon is dead;
But the fruit will give me others; I shall have a tree one day."

Hard I worked both day and night
While the summer time was bright,
And the birds were fluting sweetly and the trees were thick with
leaves;
Right on through the Autumn warm
When the fruits began to form
Till the leaves began to yellow, and the men had bound the
sheaves.

Oh, the world is grey to see,
This I found out suddenly
When I looked forth from my window on an Autumn afternoon.
For the trees were growing bare,
And a chill was in the air,
"I must go to seek my fruitage; it behoves me to go soon."

But I read till night, and then
Flung aside my book and pen,
Saying, "I shall go to-morrow, pluck my fruit to-morrow morn."
While I tried in vain to sleep,
Came a storm with thunder deep,
And that night amid its moaning, Winter, wailing child, was born.

Not a fruit was there to see
When I came unto my tree—
While the garden shivered round me in its scarecrow winter suit;
And the wind, so piercing cold
Mocked me crying, "You are old!"
And I turned away so slowly, sans my flower, sans my fruit.

"THE REPORTER," 1911.

Little Daughter

My daughter, my little child
Who, but yesterday
Was, in my count of the years
But a child at play;
My daughter, my little child
Now wanders apart
Obsessed with some secret thought—
Some sorrow of heart.

My daughter, my little child—
I drew to my side—
But never a word she said
In her maiden pride—
My daughter, my little child—
I learnt of her grief—
She shivered and shook in my arms
Like a wind-tossed leaf.

My daughter, my little child
Her love would not say,
But sobbed of Life's loneliness
And its thorny way.
My daughter, my little child
With the blue above
Saw only the grey of things—
Oh, bitter was love!

WELLINGTON, 1912.

O, Give Me Peace

The sun is white upon the streets ;
 The dust is thick upon the pane ;
And summer, with its burning heats,
 Has dried my life, and tired my brain.

The busy clock ticks ceaselessly,
 And people talk, but little say ;
While thoughts that struggle to be free
 Fail in the fight and die away.

When will the twilight shadows come
 And make the day-things soft and grey ?
Then shall I walk when eve has come,
 And try to find some peaceful way.

And pushing at an old church-door,
 Find as I tread the dim, hushed aisle
A calm my yearning fades before,
 I'll shut my mind and brain awhile,

Woo memory, and kneel and pray ;
 The simple words unrest bid cease ;
So for this moment of the day
 I'll have what I am seeking, "Peace."

"THE SPIKE," 1912.

Lady Mine

I do see you, Lady Mine,
In that half-awaking time,
When the creeping moonbeams find
Access thro' my lacey blind,
Filling all my little room
With a pearly glimm'ring gloom;
Then you come in thoughts to me
Like a sweet reality.
Not a timid sheltered maid,
Primrose-like, 'neath leafy shade,
But who has with Sorrow stept,
Known Earth's griefs and for them wept;
And the knowledge leaves you kind;
Tho' you've felt the bitter wind,
You thought always, when it blew,
Of those sheltered less than you.
And your voice is soft and sweet,
Slow to rate, and swift to greet.
You've for friend the cunning sprite
Humour, with his rogue's delight!
You love flowers, tender things,
Babies' smiles; a bird that sings;
Reading, and the many tasks
That a little household asks.
In your woman-thoughts, so wise;
Life-love shining in your eyes,
Round my heart you do entwine,
And I love you, Lady Mine!

“THE SPIKE, 1912.

A Fleeting Gleam

Love in your life has flashed
Like water white down a fall—
Laughing, vivid and bright
But passing—and that was all.

WELLINGTON, 1913.

Depression

My mind is like a wretched room,
So bare, so drear;
Dull with a heavy, ugly gloom,
No light, no cheer.

My thoughts are like the beetles black
That creep the floor,
Scurry and hide in yawning crack
In wall and door.

My feelings,—like the meagre light
My candle gives,
So faint, so fearful of the night,
It scarcely lives.

My outlook through a dingy pane—
Distress and sin—
Or if I turn around again
To look within—

My room is but a sordid place—
The paper torn,
Nothing of beauty there, nor grace,
All mean, forlorn.

“THE SPIKE,” 1912.

Sonnet

Viola

A maiden in the Springtime of her years
Looked for her Summertime before 'twas due;
And dreamed a dream of love, and wished it true,
And many nights were long with sighs and tears.
She kept love secret, with a thousand fears
Lest one might drag her treasure into view,
And in her heart her treasure richer grew,
Piled up with love's high thought, that Heaven nears.
But, as time passed, the gems their lustre lost,
And she grew sad awhile, but then took heart,
For somewhere in Life's garden proudly stands
(And she will find it someday, there apart)
A tree, whose blossoms, by the glad winds tossed,
Will fall like showered love into her hands.

"THE SPIKE," 1913.

From the Deck (Indian Ocean)

I looked at the rim of the world, where no land is,
 But only the sea and sky;
And I thought of the red-roofed, climbing town,
Where the streets run up, and the streets dip down,
 And the cool land breeze blows by.

I looked at the racing clouds that flecked no hills,
 But only shadowed the sea;
And I thought of the play over fern and grass,
Of the glooms of shade as the quick clouds pass,
 And the wind drives by in glee.

I looked at the heaving blue, where no peace is,
 But only unrest always;
And I thought of the hills that steadfast stand,
While the wise old stars look down on the land,
 And the world gains strength for day.

I looked at the blue above, and the blue beneath,
 And my heart grew soon to know
The wonderful beauty of changeable things,
The joy of the spray; of a bird's white wings—
 And I felt happier so.

“THE SPIKE,” 1914.

Botsabelo

(A Mission Station in the East Transvaal)

How wide the sky that smiles above the land,
 How red the road that cuts across the veldt;
 Into the sky's fair blue the far hills melt;
While in the foreground knobbed kopjes stand.
The Cape-cart bumps on stones, and sinks in sand,
 The white-hot sun makes all its power felt;
 The mules strain hard, urged by the sharp blows dealt
By the brown Kaffir driver's practised hand.

And then the veldt's monotony was changed;
 We passed into a valley, green and fair;
We saw a church-spire rising to the sky,
 And heard soft native voices chanting there;
In the green fields the mild-eyed oxen ranged
And smiling, brown-faced children hastened by.

KRUGERSDORP, 1914.

Sonnet

Red Hibiscus in a Sydney Street

When I look up and see your flaunting head
And the long tongue that serpent-like shoots out,
I ask, as swift thoughts throng in revellers' rout,
What in the world as wicked is as red?
I see a columned hall and tables spread,
A woman, white and red, with smiles that flout,
Two wine-flushed suitors and a sudden shout,
Quarrel's quick curses, and the red wine shed—
A gleam of swords, a bright and startling stain;
Fear's frantic flight, and silence in the hall;
Save when the night-wind strays in, flower-sweet,
And from the gutt'ring candles white drops fall.
Hibiscus, you do breathe of passion's pain—
Why do you glow by this grey city street?

“THE SPIKE, 1914.

Sonnet

A Melbourne Rescue Home

There stood a house square-built, of warm brown stone,
And over it the sky was stainless blue—
While in the dusty garden round it, grew
Thin holly-hocks, and olives, lanky grown.
The spirit of the place I thought was shown
By the sad flowers, and the grey dust too,
And when the open door I entered through
My soul was heavy and my heart made moan.

But when a mother face there shone on me
And when I saw a little sleeping child
My bitterness fell from me suddenly;
And then a golden, glancing sunbeam smiled
In at a window, and there seemed to be
Hope smiling with it, strong, serene and mild.

ADELAIDE, 1914.

Sonnet

(To M.F.)

Prayers such as others pray are hard to me,
The God I strive to know doth ask not prayers;
I do not tell Him of my woes and cares,
He knows them all and bade them come, maybe.
My thanks I give to Him in laughter free;
I sigh reproach o'er the sad world's affairs;
He cannot be omnipotent, who dares
(I then do think) such misery let be.
But, when I think of thee, oh friend of mine,
Then I love God, and thank Him for thy life;
The wonder of His world amazes me;
All things in order move and not in strife.
The God that shaped so fair a life as thine
Will shape to wondrous ends all things that be.

LONDON, NOV., 1914.

Sonnet

At Cambridge, May, 1914

The silver river first, a mirrow fair
Wherein the May tree's loveliness is seen;
Then comes a stretch of daisy-starr'd green,
Hedged with great elms, the cuckoos calling there;
The scent of lilac steals upon the air,
Pale gold laburnums o'er the waters lean;
A copper beech-tree, of a wond'rous sheen
Glowing in sunlight, is a splendour rare.
Past colleges and ancient garden-walls,
Under the bridge's arch we slowly glide;
We talk of this and that, of other days;
Our hands we dabble in Cam's cooling tide;
And now and then a silence on us falls,
For words are poor in which to sing thy praise.

"THE SPIKE," 1914.

Sonnet

June Evening at Beaconsfield (Bucks)

Like a trail of smoke from the sunset's flame
A long, frail wisp of cloud hung in the sky;
The west still glowed—the colour, loth to die,
Faded so slowly, and as slowly came
The gray of twilight, long ere it could claim
A conquest o'er the golden light on high,
Which yielded, paling; lastly with a sigh
It sank in grey enveloped—just as Fame
Sinks and is covered by the years that creep.
Dimmer and dimmer grew the ev'ning light;
Among the corn the poppies drowsed asleep,
The milky champions glimmered softly white,
The friendly elms a vigil calm did keep—
Guardians watching through the darkling night.

“THE REPORTER,” 1915.

In a Theatre Queue

In double line along the theatre wall
Our long queue forms itself; nor do we find
Time heavy on our hands, for ev'ry kind
Of entertainer comes, and if some pall
Others slight talent have, and nearly all
Give some amusement, if you feel inclined
To study types. The cripple or the blind
Will ask your bounty, on your pity call.
Some old, old man with feeble voice will sing;
A nigger minstrel work off ancient gags;
A man tear paper into patterns gay,
The long strips fluttering in the wind like rags;
An acrobat will turn, and twist and spring;
And so—the waiting hour whiles away.

LONDON, 1915.

Sonnet

On Salisbury Plain

On either hand stretched the green rolling plain—
Juniper plants, wind-bent, grew here and there
With swaying hare-bells, delicately fair.
A lark's song earthward fell like golden rain,
And I, upgazing, saw an aeroplane
Winging swift flight, and soon it landed where
The dun camp spread—the rows of huts, squat, square
And khaki-brown—victor Utility had Beauty slain.

And while I gazed I thought of England's age.
I saw the Hanging Stones in order set;
The straight white Roman roads, a heritage
Left to the Dane and Norman, and e'en yet
A path for soldiers—those who soon will wage
War for their England—paying Honour's debt.

"THE REPORTER," 1915.

Sonnet

In Memoriam, June 15th, 1915

(Service at St. Paul's, for fallen Anzacs).

We saw the great Cathedral dome o'erhead
Clear cut against the tender primrose sky;
Then, while the London crowds were passing by,
We sat within and thought of our dear dead.
Above the choir the two flags hung outspread;
Once more the Southern Cross was seen on high
But mistily, by many a tear-dimmed eye,
Old hymns were sung, and simple prayers were said;
And words of comfort and of hope were spoken,
All fain to help and cheer the weary-souled
And mend again the saddened hearts now broken.
Then thro' the Church the mighty music rolled,
A wave of solace; lastly ebb'd again
But bearing with it something of our pain.

"FREE LANCE," 1915.

Sonnet
An Oxford Memory

So quiet the air, it seemed to be asleep;
So still the water that it seemed to dream;
The very willows bending o'er the stream
There o'er its slumbers careful watch did keep.
Then, suddenly, there broke the silence deep
A song more golden than a bright sun-beam;
Like gems down-dropping those clear notes did seem;
In that bird's heart spring's gayest joy did leap.

The sky-lark's song at once awaked the world.
Like a great pearl the sun on high was seen;
A little breeze ruffled the river grey
And sighed among the willow-branches green.
As 'neath the sun's warm rays their buds uncurled
With celandines the meadows wide grew gay.

OXFORD, APRIL, 1915.

Sonnet

A Soldier Dying

To help to shape—to die, before we know
What form and likeness our great work will take—
The rest with willing hands to mould and make
The work that we began, and, ending so,
The rest will stand, their bright eyes all aglow
With joy in the fulfilment! We'll ne'er wake
To hear the thundrous guns whose salvoes shake
The very skies, while glad processions go
Thro' the thronged streets, with streaming banners proud;
While people pour their thankful hearts in praise
That now has passed away the grim war-cloud;
And rosy Peace smiles through the sunlit days;
Though everywhere are heads in sorrow bowed,
Mindful of us, now hid in Death's dark ways.

"THE SPIKE," 1916.

Sonnet

Colpetti Road, Colombo

A Futurist, what would he make of you,
If he stood 'fore his canvas, brush in hand?
What medley of form, at his brain's command
Would leap into being! And colours!—blue,
Red, yellow and green of the brightest hue
And contrasts that no-one can understand
Who never has walked in this sunlit land
Or gazed at its beauties till wonder grew.

Imagine a minute this long roadway
Where the pert crows strut, and palm-trees grow,
While the smoke from the hut-roofs curls blue-grey,
And by go the bullock-carts, creaking slow,
While ever, in many a colour gay,
Pass the quick thronging brown folk, to and fro.

COLOMBO, 1915.

“A Little Place Apart”

A little garden have I made me here,
Of tender, fragrant plants—none bright or gay—
And hither shall I come in twilight-time
To dream awhile of the dear yesterday.

A little breeze comes whispering from the Past—
A magic whisper, wondrous soft and sweet;
I kneel upon the path, to closer come
To those dear blossoms growing at my feet.

A little scent of lavender, so faint;
And rosemary—and that I pluck and hold
Thinking of you—Death came so soon to you. . . .
Another breeze blows by. 'Tis strangely cold.

“THE SPIKE,” 1916.

The Wood Nymph

(To S.L.)

Once in the greenwood Dryads played
 With shy sweet grace, and swift retreat
Into a dimmer forest-glade
 Whene'er they heard a stranger's feet—
Those stealthy feet that were betrayed,
 As on the moss they softly stept,
By dry, brown twigs, whose crackling made
 The Dryads haste, as quick they crept
Into a welcome thicket's shade;
 While cunning Fauns and Satyrs grim
Made the rash stranger's heart afraid—
 Unseen, they mocked and gibed at him.

Long ago are the Dryads fled,
 But still we see their shy, sweet grace.
They must with mortals once have wed—
 I've seen them smile in my Love's face.
The laughter soft that lured and led
 The stranger into woodlands dim;
The graceful form that swiftly sped,
 Just glimpsed thro' leafy shades by him;
The wind-kissed hair that crowned each head—
 All these are hers; but in her eyes
There lurks no shadow of the dread
 The Dryads felt at swift surprise;
For she on mortal love hath fed
 And it hath made her passing wise.

LONDON, 1915.

Joan of Arc

Fair as the lilies on your banner broidered;
 Sweet as their namesakes growing mid the grass;
Bright as your sword, miraculously given,
 And never dimming, though the ages pass—
 Such be the fame of you—
 Dear be the name of you—
Joan, little daughter of God.

Fair are the churches, built your name to honour;
 Sweet are the prayers that thence to Heaven fly;
Bright are the windows pictured with your story
 And never dimming though the years sweep by—
 Such is the fame of you—
 Cherished the name of you—
Joan, little daughter of God.

LONDON, 1915.

My Dreams for You

God has denied me many of my dreams,
 And so I weave them now for you alone,
To hide your grey life from my aching eyes,
 In robes of purple with the gold stars sewn.

All the high hopes your glad youth cherished once;
 All the great deeds your man's heart longed to do;
The loved Ideal, now glimpsed, now vanishing—
 All these I wot of, though untold by you.

These and a hundred sorrows, bravely borne;
 These and your laughter and your tender thought
Have made your soul as fragrant as a rose,
 And to my life a fresh'ning sweetness brought.

So let my tears be diamonds on thy robe;
 For in your life Fame's hopes to Duty bowed;
And only in my dreams you stand a King,
 Above the upturned faces of the crowd.

1916.

Poppies

There are scarlet poppies in her garden-bed,
 Debonair and full of glowing grace;
There are scarlet poppies in a field of France
 And they're flaunting in her dead love's face.

"THE SPIKE," 1917.

No Angels Four

No angels four watch by my bed
 With folded wings and hands of prayer,
And fill my dreams with songs of peace
 Or gleams of gold from aureoled hair.

The only watchers while I sleep
 Are dim white stars far in the sky;
The only song that fills my dreams
 The wind, world-wandering, blowing by.

Matthew and Mark and Luke and John
 Four of God's saints in Heaven bright—
Should they not watch God's children still,
 Sad children desolate thro' the night?

God made the night-wind, sighing soft,
 And God's too, is each dim, white star—
But Earth is wide and Heaven high
 And I am lonely while they are far.

"THE SPIKE," 1917.

She Clothed Herself in Dreams

She clothed herself in dreams all magical—
Did ever Princess in a tale of old
Show half so daintily and rare as she
A lily exquisite—all white and gold?

Or like a shadowed tree, mysterious;
Eyes dark as pools where fallen stars do sleep;
A dim white face and smile inscrutable,
And hair whose strands a subtle fragrance keep.

With little hands so white and slim, yet strong
To take a heart and break it—willed she so—
And moods when laughter bubbled in the throat
And love was answered with a teasing, "No."

She hung a silver mirror in her heart
And in her dreams paced slowly there and smiled;
While other shadows thronging, paid her court,
And all who looked upon her were beguiled.

* * *

A little smile strays on her unknissed lips.
So drab and dull she looks, and yet it seems
As though some pale joy lingers in her life—
Unloved she sits, and clothes herself in dreams.

"SPIKE," 1916.

A Memory in London

The high hills stretching westward are very green and fair,
The yellow gorse grows on them and sturdy, wind-brushed
broom;
The winds from off the mountains come down to dally there,
And friendly stars shine o'er them through evening's
softened gloom.

The grey and silver rain-mists come stealing gently down,
Looking for the forest trees, where now the grasses grow;
For lost has Tinakori its proudly-plumèd crown.
And clear against the sky-line the long-backed ridges show.

A winding road goes climbing and looks down on the sea.
Over the blue waters and the island in the bay—
There's no place on the broad earth is lovelier to me—
With eyes fast closed I picture it, half the world away.

"THE REPORTER," 1916.

Cruel Fear

A Fear came knocking at my lonely heart;
So gaunt and grey he looked, I shook with dread;
His coming stilled my little, laughing Hopes,
All pale they stood and quiet as the dead.

With trembling hands I sought to bar the door;
My fingers failed, and in the grim Fear pressed;
My little Dreams and Hopes crept past and fled,
Winged by swift fear of my unbidden guest.

And there he stays, a shadow by my hearth,
And watches me with cold, cruel eyes alway;
Though once with groping hands I sought the door
Thinking I heard my little Dreams at play.

But as I went he mocked my eagerness
And Hope went shudd'ring from my lonely door;
The firelight died, the room grew stilly cold—
And there the grey fear sits for evermore.

“THE SPIKE,” 1917.

When I am Old

I shall be glad when I am old
 To go to some quiet place,
And sit with folded hands, and know
That none will chide my resting so,
 For then I shall be old.

WELLINGTON, 1916.

Judgment Day

Beauty I saw, upspringing from the ground;
Beauty I heard, down-floating from the sky;
The summer air was murmurous with sound;
And sweet with flower scents the wind stole by.

And in my hands a book that told of war;
Of cruelty, such as only men can do;
Of pain and sorrow such as ne'er before
This weary world has felt, tho' old in woe.

O God, for us Thou hast a Judgment Day!
Yet we, who both earth's pain and sorrow see,
Though to a God in anguished hope we pray,
Yet in our hearts each day are judging Thee!

OCTOBER, 1917.

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Nicholls, Marjory, 1891-1930.
Venture in verse / by Marjory
Nicholls.

