Classic Poetry Series

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

- 87 poems -

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Gilbert Keith Chesterton (29 May 1874 – 14 June 1936)

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an English writer. He published works on philosophy, ontology, poetry, plays, journalism, public lectures and debates, literary and art criticism, biography, Christian apologetics, and fiction, including fantasy and detective fiction. Chesterton has been called the "prince of paradox". Time magazine, in a review of a biography of Chesterton, observed of his writing style: "Whenever possible Chesterton made his points with popular sayings, proverbs, allegories—first carefully turning them inside out." For example, Chesterton wrote "Thieves respect property. They merely wish the property to become their property that they may more perfectly respect it."
Chesterton is well known for his reasoned apologetics and even some of those who disagree with him have recognized the universal appeal of such works as Orthodoxy and The Everlasting Man. Chesterton, as a political thinker, cast aspersions on both progressivism and conservatism, saying, "The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of the Conservatives is to prevent the mistakes from being corrected." Chesterton routinely referred to himself as an "orthodox" Christian, and came to identify such a position more and more with Catholicism, eventually converting to Roman Catholicism from High Church Anglicanism. George Bernard Shaw, Chesterton's "friendly enemy" according to Time, said of him, "He was a man of colossal genius". Biographers have identified him as a successor to such Victorian authors as <A href="http://www.poemhunter.com/matthew-arnold/">Matthew Arnold, Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman Cardinal, and John Ruskin.

Life

Born in Campden Hill in Kensington, London, Chesterton was educated at St Paul's School. He attended the Slade School of Art in order to become an illustrator and also took literature classes at University College London but did not complete a degree at either. In 1896 Chesterton began working for the London publisher Redway, and T. Fisher Unwin, where he remained until 1902. During this period he also undertook his first journalistic work as a freelance art and literary critic. In 1901 he married Frances Blogg, to whom he remained married for the rest of his life. In 1902 he was given a weekly opinion column in the Daily News, followed in 1905 by a weekly column in The Illustrated London News, for which he would continue to write for the next thirty years.

According to Chesterton, as a young man he became fascinated with the occult and, along with his brother Cecil, experimented with Ouija boards. However, as he grew older, he became an increasingly orthodox Christian, culminating in his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1922.

Chesterton early showed a great interest and talent in art. He had planned to become an artist and his writing shows a vision that clothed abstract ideas in concrete and memorable images. Even his fiction seemed to be carefully concealed parables. Father Brown is perpetually correcting the incorrect vision of the bewildered folks at the scene of the crime and wandering off at the end with the criminal to exercise his priestly role of recognition and repentance. For example, in the story The Flying Stars, Father Brown entreats the character Flambeau to give up his life of crime: "There is still youth and honour and humour in you; don't fancy they will last in that trade. Men may keep a sort of level of good, but no man has ever been able to keep on one level of evil. That road goes down and down. The kind man drinks and turns cruel; the frank man kills and lies about it. Many a man I've known started like you to be an honest outlaw, a merry robber of the rich, and ended stamped into slime."

Chesterton was a large man, standing 6 feet 4 inches (1.93 m) and weighing around 21 stone (130 kg; 290 lb). His girth gave rise to a famous anecdote. During World War I a lady in London asked why he was not 'out at the Front'; he replied, 'If you go round to the side, you will see that I am.' On another occasion he remarked to his friend George Bernard Shaw: "To look at you, anyone would think a famine had struck England". Shaw retorted, "To look at you, anyone would think you have caused it". P. G. Wodehouse once described a very loud crash as "a sound like Chesterton falling onto a sheet of tin."

Chesterton usually wore a cape and a crumpled hat, with a swordstick in hand, and a cigar hanging out of his mouth. Chesterton had a tendency to forget where he was supposed to be going and miss the train that was supposed to take him there. It is reported that on several occasions he sent a telegram to his wife Frances from some distant (and incorrect) location, writing such things as "Am at Market Harborough. Where ought I to be?" to which she would reply, "Home." As a result of these memory problems and of Chesterton being extremely clumsy as a child, there has been speculation that Chesterton had undiagnosed developmental dyspraxia.

Chesterton loved to debate, often engaging in friendly public disputes with such men as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell and Clarence Darrow. According to his autobiography, he and Shaw played cowboys in a silent movie that was never released.

Death

Chesterton died of congestive heart failure on the morning of 14 June 1936, at his home in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. His last known words were a greeting spoken to his wife. The homily at Chesterton's Requiem Mass in Westminster Cathedral, London, was delivered by Ronald Knox on June 27, 1936. Knox said, "All of this generation has grown up under Chesterton's influence so completely that we do not even know when we are thinking Chesterton." He is buried in Beaconsfield in the Catholic Cemetery. Chesterton's estate was probated at £28,389, approximately equivalent to £1.3 million in 2005.

Near the end of his life he was invested by Pope Pius XI as Knight Commander with Star of the Papal Order of St. Gregory the Great (KC*SG). The Chesterton Society has proposed that he be beatified.

Writing

Chesterton wrote around 80 books, several hundred poems, some 200 short stories, 4000 essays, and several plays. He was a literary and social critic, historian, playwright, novelist, Catholic theologian and apologist, debater,

and mystery writer. He was a columnist for the Daily News, the Illustrated London News, and his own paper, G. K.'s Weekly; he also wrote articles for the Encyclopædia Britannica, including the entry on Charles Dickens and part of the entry on Humour in the 14th edition (1929). His best-known character is the priest-detective Father Brown, who appeared only in short stories, while The Man Who Was Thursday is arguably his best-known novel. He was a convinced Christian long before he was received into the Catholic Church, and Christian themes and symbolism appear in much of his writing. In the United States, his writings on distributism were popularized through The American Review, published by Seward Collins in New York.

Of his nonfiction, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (1906) has received some of the broadest-based praise. According to Ian Ker (The Catholic Revival in English Literature, 1845–1961, 2003), "In Chesterton's eyes Dickens belongs to Merry, not Puritan, England" ; Ker treats Chesterton's thought in Chapter 4 of that book as largely growing out of his true appreciation of Dickens, a somewhat shop-soiled property in the view of other literary opinions of the time.

Chesterton's writings consistently displayed wit and a sense of humour. He employed paradox, while making serious comments on the world, government, politics, economics, philosophy, theology and many other topics.

Views and contemporaries

Chesterton's writing has been seen by some analysts as combining two earlier strands in English literature. Dickens' approach is one of these. Another is represented by Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, whom Chesterton knew well: satirists and social commentators following in the tradition of Samuel Butler, vigorously wielding paradox as a weapon against complacent acceptance of the conventional view of things.

Chesterton's style and thinking were all his own, however, and his conclusions were often opposed to those of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. In his book Heretics, Chesterton has this to say of Wilde: "The same lesson [of the pessimistic pleasure-seeker] was taught by the very powerful and very desolate philosophy of Oscar Wilde. It is the carpe diem religion; but the carpe diem religion is not the religion of happy people, but of very unhappy people. Great joy does not gather the rosebuds while it may; its eyes are fixed on the immortal rose which Dante saw." More briefly, and with a closer approximation of Wilde's own style, he writes in Orthodoxy concerning the necessity of making symbolic sacrifices for the gift of creation: "Oscar Wilde said that sunsets were not valued because we could not pay for sunsets. But Oscar Wilde was wrong; we can pay for sunsets. We can pay for them by not being Oscar Wilde."

Chesterton and Shaw were famous friends and enjoyed their arguments and discussions. Although rarely in agreement, they both maintained good-will toward and respect for each other. However, in his writing, Chesterton expressed himself very plainly on where they differed and why. In Heretics he writes of Shaw:

After belabouring a great many people for a great many years for being unprogressive, Mr. Shaw has discovered, with characteristic sense, that it is very doubtful whether any existing human being with two legs can be progressive at all. Having come to doubt whether humanity can be combined with progress, most people, easily pleased, would have elected to abandon progress and remain with humanity. Mr. Shaw, not being easily pleased, decides to throw over humanity with all its limitations and go in for progress for its own sake. If man, as we know him, is incapable of the philosophy of progress, Mr. Shaw asks, not for a new kind of philosophy, but for a new kind of man. It is rather as if a nurse had tried a rather bitter food for some years on a baby, and on discovering that it was not suitable, should not

throw away the food and ask for a new food, but throw the baby out of window, and ask for a new baby.

Shaw represented the new school of thought, modernism, which was rising at the time. Chesterton's views, on the other hand, became increasingly more focused towards the Church. In Orthodoxy he writes: "The worship of will is the negation of will... If Mr. Bernard Shaw comes up to me and says, 'Will something', that is tantamount to saying, 'I do not mind what you will', and that is tantamount to saying, 'I have no will in the matter.' You cannot admire will in general, because the essence of will is that it is particular."

This style of argumentation is what Chesterton refers to as using 'Uncommon Sense' — that is, that the thinkers and popular philosophers of the day, though very clever, were saying things that were nonsensical. This is illustrated again in Orthodoxy: "Thus when Mr. H. G. Wells says (as he did somewhere), "All chairs are quite different", he utters not merely a misstatement, but a contradiction in terms. If all chairs were quite different, you could not call them "all chairs." Or, again from Orthodoxy:

The wild worship of lawlessness and the materialist worship of law end in the same void. Nietzsche scales staggering mountains, but he turns up ultimately in Tibet. He sits down beside Tolstoy in the land of nothing and Nirvana. They are both helpless — one because he must not grasp anything, and the other because he must not let go of anything. The Tolstoyan's will is frozen by a Buddhist instinct that all special actions are evil. But the Nietzscheite's will is quite equally frozen by his view that all special actions are good; for if all special actions are good, none of them are special. They stand at the crossroads, and one hates all the roads and the other likes all the roads. The result is — well, some things are not hard to calculate. They stand at the cross-roads.

"All healthy men, ancient and modern, Western and Eastern, hold that there is in sex a fury that we cannot afford to inflame; and that a certain mystery must attach to the instinct if it is to continue delicate and sane." In the middle of his epic poem The Ballad of the White Horse he famously states:

For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry,
And all their songs are sad.

Another contemporary and friend from schooldays was Edmund Bentley, inventor of the clerihew. Chesterton himself wrote clerihews and illustrated his friend's first published collection of poetry, Biography for Beginners (1905), which popularized the clerihew form. Chesterton was also godfather to Bentley's son, Nicolas, and opened his novel The Man Who Was Thursday with a poem written to Bentley.

Chesterton faced accusations of anti-Semitism during his lifetime, as well as posthumously. In a work of 1917, titled “A Short History of England,” Chesterton considers the year of 1290, when by royal decree, Edward I expelled Jews from England, an edict not rescinded until 1655. In writing of the official expulsion and banishment of 1290, Chesterton writes that Edward I was “just and conscientious” a monarch never more truly representative of his people than when he expelled the Jews, “as powerful as they are unpopular.” Chesterton writes Jews were “capitalists of their age” so that when Edward “flung the alien financiers out of the land,” he acted as “knight errant,” and “tender father of his people.” In The New Jerusalem, Chesterton made it clear that he believed that there was a "Jewish Problem" in Europe, in the sense that he believed that Jewish culture (not Jewish ethnicity) separated itself from the nationalities of Europe. He suggested the formation of a Jewish homeland as a solution, and was later invited to Palestine by Jewish Zionists who saw him as an ally in their cause.

The Wiener Library (London's archive on anti-semitism and Holocaust history) has defended Chesterton against the charge of anti-Semitism: "he was not an enemy, and when the real testing time came along he showed

what side he was on." Chesterton, like Belloc, openly expressed his abhorrence of Hitler's rule almost as soon as it started.

The Chesterbelloc

Chesterton is often associated with his close friend, the poet and essayist Hillaire Belloc. George Bernard Shaw coined the name Chesterbelloc for their partnership, and this stuck. Though they were very different men, they shared many beliefs; Chesterton eventually joined Belloc in his natal Catholicism, and both voiced criticisms towards capitalism and socialism. They instead espoused a third way: distributism. G. K.'s Weekly, which occupied much of Chesterton's energy in the last 15 years of his life, was the successor to Belloc's New Witness, taken over from Cecil Chesterton, Gilbert's brother who died in World War I.

Literary legacy

Chesterton's The Everlasting Man contributed to C.S. Lewis' conversion to Christianity. In a letter to Sheldon Vanauken (14 December 1950) Lewis calls the book "the best popular apologetic I know", and to Rhonda Bodle he wrote (31 December 1947)"the [very] best popular defence of the full Christian position I know is G. K. Chesterton's The Everlasting Man." The book was also cited in a list of 10 books that "most shaped his vocational attitude and philosophy of life."

Chesterton's 1906 biography of Charles Dickens was largely responsible for creating a popular revival for Dickens's work as well as a serious reconsideration of Dickens by scholars.

Chesterton's novel The Man Who Was Thursday inspired the Irish Republican leader Michael Collins with the idea: "if you didn't seem to be hiding nobody hunted you out."

Etienne Gilson praised Chesterton's Aquinas volume as follows: "I consider it as being, without possible comparison, the best book ever written on Saint Thomas...the few readers who have spent twenty or thirty years in studying St. Thomas Aquinas, and who, perhaps, have themselves published two or three volumes on the subject, cannot fail to perceive that the so-called 'wit' of Chesterton has put their scholarship to shame."

Chesterton's column in the Illustrated London News on September 18, 1909 had a profound effect on Mahatma Gandhi. P. N. Furbank asserts that Gandhi was "thunderstruck" when he read it, while Martin Green notes that "Gandhi was so delighted with this that he told Indian Opinion to reprint it."

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, author of seventy books, identified Chesterton as the stylist who had the greatest impact on his own writing, stating in his autobiography Treasure in Clay "The greatest influence in writing was G.K. Chesterton who never used a useless word, who saw the value of a paradox, and avoided what was trite."

Canadian Media Guru Marshall McLuhan was heavily influenced by Chesterton; McLuhan said the book What's Wrong with the World changed his life in terms of ideas and religion.

The author Neil Gaiman has stated that The Napoleon of Notting Hill was an important influence on his own book Neverwhere, and used a quote from it as an epigraph to that novel. Gaiman also based the character Gilbert, from the comic book The Sandman, on Chesterton.

Argentine author and essayist Jorge Luis Borges cited Chesterton as a major influence on his own fiction. In an interview with Richard Burgin during the late 1960s, Borges said, "Chesterton knew how to make the most of a detective story."

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"The Wife of Flanders", p. 77; "The Ballad of St. Barbara", p. 220.

Selected Poems

Alliterativism (1914)
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A Ballade of an Anti-puritan
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A Ballad of Abbreviations

The American's a hustler, for he says so,
  And surely the American must know.
He will prove to you with figures why it pays so
  Beginning with his boyhood long ago.
When the slow-maturing anecdote is ripest,
  He'll dictate it like a Board of Trade Report,
And because he has no time to call a typist,
  He calls her a Stenographer for short.

He is never known to loiter or malinger,
  He rushes, for he knows he has 'a date' ;
He is always on the spot and full of ginger,
  Which is why he is invariably late.
When he guesses that it's getting even later,
  His vocabulary's vehement and swift,
And he yells for what he calls the Elevator,
  A slang abbreviation for a lift.

Then nothing can be nattier or nicer
  For those who like a light and rapid style.
Than to trifle with a work of Mr Dreiser
  As it comes along in waggons by the mile.
He has taught us what a swift selective art meant
  By description of his dinners and all that,
And his dwelling, which he says is an Apartment,
  Because he cannot stop to say a flat.

We may whisper of his wild precipitation,
  That it's speed in rather longer than a span,
But there really is a definite occasion
  When he does not use the longest word he can.
When he substitutes, I freely make admission,
  One shorter and much easier to spell ;
If you ask him what he thinks of Prohibition,
  He may tell you quite succinctly it is Hell.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Ballad of Theatricals

Though all the critics' canons grow-
Far seedier than the actors' own-
Although the cottage-door's too low-
Although the fairy's twenty stone-
Although, just like the telephone,
She comes by wire and not by wings,
Though all the mechanism's known-
Believe me, there are real things.

Yes, real people-even so-
Even in a theatre, truth is known,
Though the agnostic will not know,
And though the gnostic will not own,
There is a thing called skin and bone,
And many a man that struts and sings
Has been as stony-broke as stone . . .
Believe me, there are real things

There is an hour when all men go;
An hour when man is all alone.
When idle minstrels in a row
Went down with all the bugles blown-
When brass and hymn and drum went down,
Down in death's throat with thunderings-
Ah, though the unreal things have grown,
Believe me, there are real things.

ENVOY.

Prince, though your hair is not your own
And half your face held on by strings,
And if you sat, you'd smash your throne-
-Believe me, there are real things.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Ballade of an Anti-puritan

They spoke of Progress spiring round,
Of light and Mrs Humphrey Ward-
It is not true to say I frowned,
Or ran about the room and roared;
I might have simply sat and snored-
I rose politely in the club
And said, `I feel a little bored;
Will someone take me to a pub?'

The new world's wisest did surround
Me; and it pains me to record
I did not think their views profound,
Or their conclusions well assured;
The simple life I can't afford,
Besides, I do not like the grub-
I want a mash and sausage, `scored'-
Will someone take me to a pub?

I know where Men can still be found,
Anger and clamorous accord,
And virtues growing from the ground,
And fellowship of beer and board,
And song, that is a sturdy cord,
And hope, that is a hardy shrub,
And goodness, that is God's last word-
Will someone take me to a pub?

Envoi
Prince, Bayard would have smashed his sword
To see the sort of knights you dub-
Is that the last of them-O Lord
Will someone take me to a pub?

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Ballade of Suicide

The gallows in my garden, people say,
Is new and neat and adequately tall;
I tie the noose on in a knowing way
As one that knots his necktie for a ball;
But just as all the neighbours--on the wall--
Are drawing a long breath to shout "Hurray!"
The strangest whim has seized me. . . . After all
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

To-morrow is the time I get my pay--
My uncle's sword is hanging in the hall--
I see a little cloud all pink and grey--
Perhaps the rector's mother will not call-- I fancy that I heard from Mr. Gall
That mushrooms could be cooked another way--
I never read the works of Juvenal--
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

The world will have another washing-day;
The decadents decay; the pedants pall;
And H.G. Wells has found that children play,
And Bernard Shaw discovered that they squall,
Rationalists are growing rational--
And through thick woods one finds a stream astray
So secret that the very sky seems small--
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

Envoi

Prince, I can hear the trumpet of Germinal,
The tumbrils toiling up the terrible way;
Even to-day your royal head may fall,
I think I will not hang myself to-day.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Broad Minded Bishop Rebukes The Verminous St. Francis

If Brother Francis pardoned Brother Flea,
There still seems need of such strange charity,
Seeing he is, for all his gay goodwill,
Bitten by funny little creatures still.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Child of the Snows

There is heard a hymn when the panes are dim,
And never before or again,
When the nights are strong with a darkness long,
And the dark is alive with rain.

Never we know but in sleet and in snow,
The place where the great fires are,
That the midst of the earth is a raging mirth
And the heart of the earth a star.

And at night we win to the ancient inn
Where the child in the frost is furled,
We follow the feet where all souls meet
At the inn at the end of the world.

The gods lie dead where the leaves lie red,
For the flame of the sun is flown,
The gods lie cold where the leaves lie gold,
And a Child comes forth alone.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Christmas Carol

The Christ-child lay on Mary's lap,
His hair was like a light.
(O weary, weary were the world,
But here is all aright.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary's breast
His hair was like a star.
(O stern and cunning are the kings,
But here the true hearts are.)

The Christ-child lay on Mary's heart,
His hair was like a fire.
(O weary, weary is the world,
But here the world's desire.)

The Christ-child stood on Mary's knee,
His hair was like a crown,
And all the flowers looked up at Him,
And all the stars looked down

'A Christmas Carol' poem

I

The shepherds went their hasty way,
And found the lowly stable-shed
Where the Virgin-Mother lay:
And now they checked their eager tread,
For to the Babe, that at her bosom clung,
A Mother's song the Virgin-Mother sung.

II

They told her how a glorious light,
Streaming from a heavenly throng.
Around them shone, suspending night!
While sweeter than a mother's song,
Blest Angels heralded the Savior's birth,
Glory to God on high! and Peace on Earth.

III

She listened to the tale divine,
And closer still the Babe she pressed:
And while she cried, the Babe is mine!
The milk rushed faster to her breast:
Joy rose within her, like a summer's morn;
Peace, Peace on Earth! the Prince of Peace is born.

IV

Thou Mother of the Prince of Peace,
Poor, simple, and of low estate!
That strife should vanish, battle cease,
O why should this thy soul elate?
Sweet Music's loudest note, the Poet's story,
Didst thou ne'er love to hear of fame and glory?

V

And is not War a youthful king,
A stately Hero clad in mail?
Beneath his footsteps laurels spring;
Him Earth's majestic monarchs hail
Their friends, their playmate! and his bold bright eye
Compels the maiden's love-confessing sigh.

VI

Tell this in some more courtly scene,
To maids and youths in robes of state!
I am a woman poor and mean,
And wherefore is my soul elate.
War is a ruffian, all with guilt defiled,
That from the aged father's tears his child!

VII

A murderous fiend, by fiends adored,
He kills the sire and starves the son;
The husband kills, and from her board
Steals all his widow's toil had won;
Plunders God's world of beauty; rends away
All safety from the night, all comfort from the day.

VIII

Then wisely is my soul elate,
That strife should vanish, battle cease:
I'm poor and of low estate,
The Mother of the Prince of Peace.
Joy rises in me, like a summer's morn:
Peace, Peace on Earth! The Prince of Peace is born!

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Cider Song

To J.S.M.

The wine they drink in Paradise
They make in Haute Lorraine;
God brought it burning from the sod
To be a sign and signal rod
That they that drink the blood of God
Shall never thirst again.

The wine they praise in Paradise
They make in Ponterey,
The purple wine of Paradise,
But we have better at the price;
It's wine they praise in Paradise,
It's cider that they pray.

The wine they want in Paradise
They find in Plodder's End,
The apple wine of Herford,
Of Hafod Hill and Herford,
Where woods went down to Herford,
And there I had a friend.

The soft feet of the blessed go
In the soft western vales,
The road of the silent saints accord,
The road from heaven to Herford,
Where the apple wood of Herford
Goes all the way to Wales.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Hymn

O God of earth and altar,
Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide,
Take not thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,
From lies of tongue and pen,
From all the easy speeches
That comfort cruel men,
From sale and profanation
Of honour and the sword,
From sleep and from damnation,
Deliver us, good Lord.

Tie in a living tether
The prince and priest and thrall,
Bind all our lives together,
Smite us and save us all;
In ire and exultation
Aflame with faith, and free,
Lift up a living nation,
A single sword to thee.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Little Litany

When God turned back eternity and was young,
Ancient of Days, grown little for your mirth
(As under the low arch the land is bright)
Peered through you, gate of heaven--and saw the earth.

Or shutting out his shining skies awhile
Built you about him for a house of gold
To see in pictured walls his storied world
Return upon him as a tale is told.

Or found his mirror there; the only glass
That would not break with that unbearable light
Till in a corner of the high dark house
God looked on God, as ghosts meet in the night.

Star of his morning; that unfallen star
In that strange starry overturn of space
When earth and sky changed places for an hour
And heaven looked upwards in a human face.

Or young on your strong knees and lifted up
Wisdom cried out, whose voice is in the street,
And more than twilight of twiformed cherubim
Made of his throne indeed a mercy-seat.

Or risen from play at your pale raiment's hem
God, grown adventurous from all time's repose,
Or your tall body climbed the ivory tower
And kissed upon your mouth the mystic rose.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Prayer in Darkness

This much, O heaven—if I should brood or rave,
 Pity me not; but let the world be fed,
 Yea, in my madness if I strike me dead,
Heed you the grass that grows upon my grave.

If I dare snarl between this sun and sod,
 Whimper and clamour, give me grace to own,
 In sun and rain and fruit in season shown,
The shining silence of the scorn of God.

Thank God the stars are set beyond my power,
 If I must travail in a night of wrath,
 Thank God my tears will never vex a moth,
Nor any curse of mine cut down a flower.

Men say the sun was darkened: yet I had
 Thought it beat brightly, even on—Calvary:
 And He that hung upon the Torturing Tree
Heard all the crickets singing, and was glad.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Song of Defeat

The line breaks and the guns go under,
The lords and the lackeys ride the plain;
I draw deep breaths of the dawn and thunder,
And the whole of my heart grows young again.
For our chiefs said 'Done,' and I did not deem it;
Our seers said 'Peace,' and it was not peace;
Earth will grow worse till men redeem it,
And wars more evil, ere all wars cease.
But the old flags reel and the old drums rattle,
As once in my life they throbbed and reeled;
I have found my youth in the lost battle,
I have found my heart on the battlefield.
  For we that fight till the world is free,
  We are not easy in victory:
  We have known each other too long, my brother,
  And fought each other, the world and we.

And I dream of the days when work was scrappy,
And rare in our pockets the mark of the mint,
When we were angry and poor and happy,
And proud of seeing our names in print.
For so they conquered and so we scattered,
When the Devil road and his dogs smelt gold,
And the peace of a harmless folk was shattered;
When I was twenty and odd years old.
When the mongrel men that the market classes
Had slimy hands upon England's rod,
And sword in hand upon Afric's passes
Her last Republic cried to God.
  For the men no lords can buy or sell,
  They sit not easy when all goes well,
  They have said to each other what naught can smother,
  They have seen each other, our souls and hell.

It is all as of old, the empty clangour,
The Nothing scrawled on a five-foot page,
The huckster who, mocking holy anger,
Painfully paints his face with rage.
And the faith of the poor is faint and partial,
And the pride of the rich is all for sale,
And the chosen heralds of England's Marshal
Are the sandwich-men of the Daily Mail,
And the niggards that dare not give are glutted,
And the feeble that dare not fail are strong,
So while the City of Toil is gutted,
I sit in the saddle and sing my song.
  For we that fight till the world is free,
  We have no comfort in victory;
  We have read each other as Cain his brother,
  We know each other, these slaves and we.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

A Word

A word came forth in Galilee, a word like to a star;
It climbed and rang and blessed and burnt wherever brave hearts are;
A word of sudden secret hope, of trial and increase
Of wrath and pity fused in fire, and passion kissing peace.
A star that o'er the citied world beckoned, a sword of flame;
A star with myriad thunders tongued: a mighty word there came.

The wedge's dart passed into it, the groan of timber wains,
The ringing of the river nails, the shrieking of the planes;
The hammering on the roofs at morn, the busy workshop roar;
The hiss of shavings drifted deep along the windy floor;
The heat browned toiler's crooning song, the hum of human worth
Mingled of all the noise of crafts, the ringing word went forth.

The splash of nets passed into it, the grind of sand and shell,
The boat-hook's clash, the boas-oars' jar, the cries to buy and sell,
The flapping of the landed shoals, the canvas crackling free,
And through all varied notes and cries, the roaring of the sea,
The noise of little lives and brave, of needy lives and high;
In gathering all the throes of earth, the living word went by.

Earth's giants bowed down to it, in Empire's huge eclipse,
When darkness sat above the thrones, seven thunders on her lips,
The woes of cities entered it, the clang of idols' falls,
The scream of filthy Caesars stabbed high in their brazen halls,
The dim hoarse floods of naked men, the world-realms' snapping girth,
The trumpets of Apocalypse, the darkness of the earth:
The wrath that brake the eternal lamp and hid the eternal hill,

A world's destruction loading, the word went onward still-
The blaze of creeds passed into it, the hiss of horrid fires,
The headlong spear, the scarlet cross, the hair-shirt and the briars,
The cloistered brethren's thunderous chaunt, the errant champion's song,
The shifting of the crowns and thrones, the tangle of the strong.

The shattering fall of crest and crown and shield and cross and cope,
The tearing of the gauds of time, the blight of prince and pope,
The reign of ragged millions leagued to wrench a loaded debt,
Loud with the many-throated roar, the word went forward yet.
The song of wheels passed into it, the roaring and the smoke,
The riddle of the want and wage, the fogs that burn and choke.

The breaking of the girths of gold, the needs that creep and swell,
The strengthening hope, the dazing light, the deafening evangel,
Through kingdoms dead and empires damned, through changes without cease,
With earthquake, chaos, born and fed, rose,-and the word was 'Peace.'

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Americanisation

Britannia needs no Boulevards,
 No spaces wide and gay:
Her march was through the crooked streets
 Along the narrow way.
Nor looks she where, New York's seduction,
The Broadway leadeth to destruction.

Britannia needs no Cafes:
 If Coffee needs must be,
Its place should be the Coffee-house
 Where Johnson growled for Tea;
But who can hear that human mountain
Growl for an ice-cream soda-fountain?

She needs no Russian Theatrey
 Mere Father strangles Mother,
In scenes where all the characters
 And colours kill each other--
Her boast is freedom had by halves,
And Britons never shall be Slavs.

But if not hers the Dance of Death,
 Great Dostoievsky's dance,
And if the things most finely French
 Are better done in France--
Might not Americanisation
Be best applied to its own nation?

Ere every shop shall be a store
 And every Trade a Trust . . .
Lo, many men in many lands
 Know when their cause is just.
There will be quite a large attendance
When we Declare our Independence.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

An Answer to Frances Cornford

Why do you rush through the fields in trains,
Guessing so much and so much.
Why do you flash through the flowery meads,
Fat-head poet that nobody reads;
And why do you know such a frightful lot
About people in gloves and such?

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Antichrist, or the Reunion of Christendom: An Ode

Are they clinging to their crosses,
F. E. Smith,
Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses,
Are they, Smith?
Do they, fasting, trembling, bleeding,
Wait the news from this our city?
Groaning "That's the Second Reading!"
Hissing "There is still Committee!"
If the voice of Cecil falters,
If McKenna's point has pith,
Do they tremble for their altars?
Do they, Smith?

Russian peasants round their pope
Huddled, Smith,
Hear about it all, I hope,
Don't they, Smith?
In the mountain hamlets clothing
Peaks beyond Caucasian pales,
Where Establishment means nothing
And they never heard of Wales,
Do they read it all in Hansard --
With a crib to read it with --
"Welsh Tithes: Dr. Clifford answered."
Really, Smith?

In the lands where Christians were,
F. E. Smith,
In the little lands laid bare,
Smith, O Smith!
Where the Turkish bands are busy
And the Tory name is blessed
Since they hailed the Cross of Dizzy
On the banners from the West!
Men don't think it half so hard if
Islam burns their kin and kith,
Since a curate lives in Cardiff
Saved by Smith.

It would greatly, I must own,
Soothe me, Smith!
If you left this theme alone,
Holy Smith!
For your legal cause or civil
You fight well and get your fee;
For your God or dream or devil
You will answer, not to me.
Talk about the pews and steeples
And the cash that goes therewith!
But the souls of Christian peoples...
Chuck it, Smith!

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

By the Babe Unborn

If trees were tall and grasses short,
  As in some crazy tale,
If here and there a sea were blue
  Beyond the breaking pale,

If a fixed fire hung in the air
  To warm me one day through,
If deep green hair grew on great hills,
  I know what I should do.

In dark I lie; dreaming that there
  Are great eyes cold or kind,
And twisted streets and silent doors,
  And living men behind.

Let storm clouds come: better an hour,
  And leave to weep and fight,
Than all the ages I have ruled
  The empires of the night.

I think that if they gave me leave
  Within the world to stand,
I would be good through all the day
  I spent in fairyland.

They should not hear a word from me
  Of selfishness or scorn,
If only I could find the door,
  If only I were born.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Cyclopean

A mountainous and mystic brute
No rein can curb, no arrow shoot,
Upon whose doomed deformed back
I sweep the planets' scorching track.

Old is the elf, and wise, men say,
His hair grows green as ours grows grey;
He mocks the stars with myriad hands,
High as that swinging forest stands.

But though in pigmy wanderings dull
I scour the deserts of his skull,
I never find the face, eyes, teeth,
Lowering or laughing underneath.

I met my foe in an empty dell,
His face in the sun was naked hell.
I thought, ‘One silent, bloody blow,
No priest would curse, no crowd would know.'

Then cowered: a daisy, half concealed,
Watched for the fame of that poor field;
And in that flower and suddenly
Earth opened its one eye on me.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Ecclesiastes

There is one sin: to call a green leaf gray,
    Whereat the sun in heaven shuddereth.
There is one blasphemy: for death to pray,
    For God alone knoweth the praise of death.

There is one creed: ’’neath no world-terror’s wing
    Apples forget to grow on apple-trees.
There is one thing is needful everything
    The rest is vanity of vanities.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Elegy in a Country Churchyard

The men that worked for England
They have their graves at home:
And bees and birds of England
About the cross can roam.

But they that fought for England,
Following a falling star,
Alas, alas for England
They have their graves afar.

And they that rule in England,
In stately conclave met,
Alas, alas for England,
They have no graves as yet.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Eternities

I cannot count the pebbles in the brook.
   Well hath He spoken: "Swear not by thy head.
   Thou knowest not the hairs," though He, we read,
Writes that wild number in His own strange book.

I cannot count the sands or search the seas,
   Death cometh, and I leave so much untrod.
   Grant my immortal aureole, O my God,
And I will name the leaves upon the trees,

In heaven I shall stand on gold and glass,
   Still brooding earth's arithmetic to spell;
   Or see the fading of the fires of hell
Ere I have thanked my God for all the grass.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Femina Contra Mundum

The sun was black with judgment, and the moon
Blood: but between
I saw a man stand, saying: 'To me at least
The grass is green.

'There was no star that I forgot to fear
With love and wonder.
The birds have loved me'; but no answer came --
Only the thunder.

Once more the man stood, saying: 'A cottage door,
Wherethrough I gazed
That instant as I turned -- yea, I am vile;
Yet my eyes blazed.

'For I had weighed the mountains in a balance,
And the skies in a scale,
I come to sell the stars -- old lamps for new --
Old stars for sale.'

Then a calm voice fell all the thunder through,
A tone less rough:
'Thou hast begun to love one of my works
Almost enough.'

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

For a War Memorial

(SUGGESTED INSCRIPTION PROBABLY NOT SUGGESTED BY THE COMMITTEE)

The hucksters haggle in the mart
The cars and carts go by;
Senates and schools go droning on;
For dead things cannot die.

A storm stooped on the place of tombs
With bolts to blast and rive;
But these be names of many men
The lightning found alive.

If usurers rule and rights decay
And visions view once more
Great Carthage like a golden shell
Gape hollow on the shore,

Still to the last of crumbling time
Upon this stone be read
How many men of England died
To prove they were not dead.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Gloria in Profundis

There has fallen on earth for a token
A god too great for the sky.
He has burst out of all things and broken
The bounds of eternity:
Into time and the terminal land
He has strayed like a thief or a lover,
For the wine of the world brims over,
Its splendour is spilt on the sand.

Who is proud when the heavens are humble,
Who mounts if the mountains fall,
If the fixed stars topple and tumble
And a deluge of love drowns all-
Who rears up his head for a crown,
Who holds up his will for a warrant,
Who strives with the starry torrent,
When all that is good goes down?

For in dread of such falling and failing
The fallen angels fell
Inverted in insolence, scaling
The hanging mountain of hell:
But unmeasured of plummet and rod
Too deep for their sight to scan,
Outrushing the fall of man
Is the height of the fall of God.

Glory to God in the Lowest
The spout of the stars in spate-
Where thunderbolt thinks to be slowest
And the lightning fears to be late:
As men dive for sunken gem
Pursuing, we hunt and hound it,
The fallen star has found it
In the cavern of Bethlehem.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Gold Leaves

Lo! I am come to autumn,
   When all the leaves are gold;
Grey hairs and golden leaves cry out
   The year and I are old.

In youth I sought the prince of men,
   Captain in cosmic wars,
Our Titan, even the weeds would show
   Defiant, to the stars.

But now a great thing in the street
   Seems any human nod,
Where shift in strange democracy
   The million masks of God.

In youth I sought the golden flower
   Hidden in wood or wold,
But I am come to autumn,
   When all the leaves are gold.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Here is the Little Door

Here is the little door, lift up the latch, oh lift!
We need not wander more but enter with our gift;
Our gift of finest gold,
Gold that was never bought nor sold;
Myrrh to be strewn about his bed;
Incense in clouds about his head;
All for the Child who stirs not in his sleep.
But holy slumber holds with ass and sheep.

Bend low about his bed, for each he has a gift;
See how his eyes awake, lift up your hands, O lift!
For gold, he gives a keen-edged sword
(Defend with it Thy little Lord!),
For incense, smoke of battle red.
Myrrh for the honoured happy dead;
Gifts for his children terrible and sweet,
Touched by such tiny hands and
Oh such tiny feet.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Jealousy

'The Roman Catholic Church has never forgiven us for converting Sir Arthur Conan Doyle from his Agnosticism; and when Men like Mr. Dennis Bradley can no longer be Content with the old Faith, a Spirit of Jealousy is naturally roused.'
-A Spiritualist Paper

She sat upon her Seven Hills
She rent the scarlet robes about her,
Nor yet in her two thousand years
Had ever grieved that men should doubt her;
But what new horror shakes the mind
Making her moan and mutter madly;
Lo! Rome's high heart is broken at last
Her foes have borrowed Dennis Bradley.

If she must lean on lesser props
Of earthly fame or ancient art,
Make shift with Raphael and Racine
Put up with Dante and Descartes,
Not wholly can she mask her grief
But touch the wound and murmur sadly,
'These lesser things are theirs to love
Who lose the love of Mr. Bradley.'

She saw great Origen depart
And Photius rend the world asunder,
Her cry to all the East rolled back
In Islam its ironic thunder,
She lost Jerusalem and the North
Accepting these arrangements gladly
Until it came to be a case
Of Conan Doyle v. Dennis Bradley.

O fond and foolish hopes that still
In broken hearts unbroken burn,
What if, grown weary of new ways,
The precious wanderer should return
The Trumpet whose uncertain sound
Has just been cracking rather badly
May yet within her courts remain
His Trumpet-blown by Dennis Bradley.

His and her Trumpet blown before
The battle where the good cause wins
Louder than all the Irish harps
Or the Italian violins;
When armed and mounted like St. Joan
She meets the mad world riding madly
Under the Oriflamme of old
Crying, 'Mont-joie St. Dennis Bradley!'

But in this hour she sorrows still,
Though all anew the generations

Rise up and call her blessed, claim
Her name upon the new born Nations
But still she mourns the only thing
She ever really wanted badly;
The sympathy of Conan Doyle
The patronage of Dennis Bradley.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Lepanto

White founts falling in the Courts of the sun,
And the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run;
There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared,
It stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard;
It curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips;
For the inmost sea of all the earth is shaken with his ships.
They have dared the white republics up the capes of Italy,
They have dashed the Adriatic round the Lion of the Sea,
And the Pope has cast his arms abroad for agony and loss,
And called the kings of Christendom for swords about the Cross.
The cold queen of England is looking in the glass;
The shadow of the Valois is yawning at the Mass;
From evening isles fantastical rings faint the Spanish gun,
And the Lord upon the Golden Horn is laughing in the sun.

Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half attainted stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,
That once went singing southward when all the world was young.
In that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid,
Comes up along a winding road the noise of the Crusade.
Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,
Don John of Austria is going to the war,
Stiff flags straining in the night-blasts cold
In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old-gold,
Torchlight crimson on the copper kettle-drums,
Then the tuckets, then the trumpets, then the cannon, and he comes.
Don John laughing in the brave beard curled,
Spurning of his stirrups like the thrones of all the world,
Holding his head up for a flag of all the free.
Love-light of Spain--hurrah!
Death-light of Africa!
Don John of Austria
Is riding to the sea.

Mahound is in his paradise above the evening star,
(Don John of Austria is going to the war.)
He moves a mighty turban on the timeless houri's knees,
His turban that is woven of the sunsets and the seas.
He shakes the peacock gardens as he rises from his ease,
And he strides among the tree-tops and is taller than the trees;
And his voice through all the garden is a thunder sent to bring
Black Azrael and Ariel and Ammon on the wing.
Giants and the Genii,
Multiplex of wing and eye,
Whose strong obedience broke the sky
When Solomon was king.

They rush in red and purple from the red clouds of the morn,
From the temples where the yellow gods shut up their eyes in scorn;

They rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea
Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be,
On them the sea-valves cluster and the grey sea-forests curl,
Splashed with a splendid sickness, the sickness of the pearl;
They swell in sapphire smoke out of the blue cracks of the ground,--
They gather and they wonder and give worship to Mahound.
And he saith, "Break up the mountains where the hermit-folk can hide,
And sift the red and silver sands lest bone of saint abide,
And chase the Giaours flying night and day, not giving rest,
For that which was our trouble comes again out of the west.
We have set the seal of Solomon on all things under sun,
Of knowledge and of sorrow and endurance of things done.
But a noise is in the mountains, in the mountains, and I know
The voice that shook our palaces--four hundred years ago:
It is he that saith not 'Kismet'; it is he that knows not Fate;
It is Richard, it is Raymond, it is Godfrey at the gate!
It is he whose loss is laughter when he counts the wager worth,
Put down your feet upon him, that our peace be on the earth."
For he heard drums groaning and he heard guns jar,
(Don John of Austria is going to the war.)
Sudden and still--hurrah!
Bolt from Iberia!
Don John of Austria
Is gone by Alcalar.

St. Michaels on his Mountain in the sea-roads of the north
(Don John of Austria is girt and going forth.)
Where the grey seas glitter and the sharp tides shift
And the sea-folk labour and the red sails lift.
He shakes his lance of iron and he claps his wings of stone;
The noise is gone through Normandy; the noise is gone alone;
The North is full of tangled things and texts and aching eyes,
And dead is all the innocence of anger and surprise,
And Christian killeth Christian in a narrow dusty room,
And Christian dreadeth Christ that hath a newer face of doom,
And Christian hateth Mary that God kissed in Galilee,--
But Don John of Austria is riding to the sea.
Don John calling through the blast and the eclipse
Crying with the trumpet, with the trumpet of his lips,
Trumpet that sayeth ha!
    Domino gloria!
Don John of Austria
Is shouting to the ships.

King Philip's in his closet with the Fleece about his neck
(Don John of Austria is armed upon the deck.)
The walls are hung with velvet that is black and soft as sin,
And little dwarfs creep out of it and little dwarfs creep in.
He holds a crystal phial that has colours like the moon,
He touches, and it tingles, and he trembles very soon,
And his face is as a fungus of a leprous white and grey
Like plants in the high houses that are shuttered from the day,

And death is in the phial and the end of noble work,
But Don John of Austria has fired upon the Turk.
Don John's hunting, and his hounds have bayed--
Booms away past Italy the rumour of his raid.
Gun upon gun, ha! ha!
Gun upon gun, hurrah!
Don John of Austria
Has loosed the cannonade.

The Pope was in his chapel before day or battle broke,
(Don John of Austria is hidden in the smoke.)
The hidden room in man's house where God sits all the year,
The secret window whence the world looks small and very dear.
He sees as in a mirror on the monstrous twilight sea
The crescent of his cruel ships whose name is mystery;
They fling great shadows foe-wards, making Cross and Castle dark,
They veil the plumèd lions on the galleys of St. Mark;
And above the ships are palaces of brown, black-bearded chiefs,
And below the ships are prisons, where with multitudinous griefs,
Christian captives sick and sunless, all a labouring race repines
Like a race in sunken cities, like a nation in the mines.
They are lost like slaves that sweat, and in the skies of morning hung
The stair-ways of the tallest gods when tyranny was young.
They are countless, voiceless, hopeless as those fallen or fleeing on
Before the high Kings' horses in the granite of Babylon.
And many a one grows witless in his quiet room in hell
Where a yellow face looks inward through the lattice of his cell,
And he finds his God forgotten, and he seeks no more a sign--
(But Don John of Austria has burst the battle-line!)
Don John pounding from the slaughter-painted poop,
Purpling all the ocean like a bloody pirate's sloop,
Scarlet running over on the silvers and the golds,
Breaking of the hatches up and bursting of the holds,
Thronging of the thousands up that labour under sea
White for bliss and blind for sun and stunned for liberty.

Vivat Hispania!
Domino Gloria!
Don John of Austria
Has set his people free!

Cervantes on his galley sets the sword back in the sheath
(Don John of Austria rides homeward with a wreath.)
And he sees across a weary land a straggling road in Spain,
Up which a lean and foolish knight for ever rides in vain,
And he smiles, but not as Sultans smile, and settles back the blade....
(But Don John of Austria rides home from the Crusade.)

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Modern Elfland

I cut a staff in a churchyard copse,
   I clad myself in ragged things,
I set a feather in my cap
   That fell out of an angel's wings.

I filled my wallet with white stones,
   I took three foxgloves in my hand,
I slung my shoes across my back,
   And so I went to fairyland.

But lo, within that ancient place
   Science had reared her iron crown,
And the great cloud of steam went up
   That telleth where she takes a town.

But cowled with smoke and starred with lamps,
   That strange land's light was still its own;
The word that witched the woods and hills
   Spoke in the iron and the stone.

Not Nature's hand had ever curved
   That mute unearthly porter's spine.
Like sleeping dragon's sudden eyes
   The signals leered along the line.

The chimneys thronging crooked or straight
   Were fingers signalling the sky;
The dog that strayed across the street
   Seemed four-legged by monstrosity.

'In vain,' I cried, 'though you too touch
   The new time's desecrating hand,
Through all the noises of a town
   I hear the heart of fairyland.'

I read the name above a door,
   Then through my spirit pealed and passed:
'This is the town of thine own home,
   And thou hast looked on it at last.'

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

On the Disastrous Spread of Aestheticism in all Classes

Impetuously I sprang from bed,
 Long before lunch was up,
That I might drain the dizzy dew
 From the day's first golden cup.

In swift devouring ecstasy
 Each toil in turn was done;
I had done lying on the lawn
 Three minutes after one.

For me, as Mr. Wordsworth says,
 The duties shine like stars;
I formed my uncle's character,
 Decreasing his cigars.

But could my kind engross me? No!
 Stern Art-what sons escape her?
Soon I was drawing Gladstone's nose
 On scraps of blotting paper.

Then on-to play one-fingered tunes
 Upon my aunt's piano.
In short, I have a headlong soul,
 I much resemble Hanno.

(Forgive the entrance of the not
 Too cogent Carthaginian.
It may have been to make a rhyme;
 I lean to that opinion.)

Then my great work of book research
 Till dusk I took in hand-
The forming of a final, sound
 Opinion on The Strand.

But when I quenched the midnight oil,
 And closed the Referee,
Whose thirty volumes folio
 I take to bed with me,

I had a rather funny dream,
 Intense, that is, and mystic;
I dreamed that, with one leap and yell,
 The world became artistic.

The Shopmen, when their souls were still,
 Declined to open shops-
And Cooks recorded frames of mind
 In sad and subtle chops.

The stars were weary of routine:
 The trees in the plantation

Were growing every fruit at once,
 In search of sensation.

The moon went for a moonlight stroll,
 And tried to be a bard,
And gazed enraptured at itself:
 I left it trying hard.

The sea had nothing but a mood
 Of 'vague ironic gloom,'
With which t'explain its presence in
 My upstairs drawing-room.

The sun had read a little book
 That struck him with a notion:
He drowned himself and all his fires
 Deep in a hissing ocean.

Then all was dark, lawless, and lost:
 I heard great devilish wings:
I knew that Art had won, and snapt
 The Covenant of Things.

I cried aloud, and I awoke,
 New labours in my head.
I set my teeth, and manfully
 Began to lie in bed.

Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing,
 So I my life conduct.
Each morning see some task begun,
 Each evening see it chucked.

But still, in sudden moods of dusk,
 I hear those great weird wings,
Feel vaguely thankful to the vast
 Stupidity of things.

Envoi

Clear was the night: the moon was young
 The larkspurs in the plots
Mingled their orange with the gold
 Of the forget-me-nots.

The poppies seemed a silver mist:
 So darkly fell the gloom.
You scarce had guessed yon crimson streaks
 Were buttercups in bloom.

But one thing moved: a little child
 Crashed through the flower and fern:

And all my soul rose up to greet
 The sage of whom I learn.

I looked into his awful eyes:
 I waited his decree:
I made ingenious attempts
 To sit upon his knee.

The babe upraised his wondering eyes,
 And timidly he said,
"A trend towards experiment
 In modern minds is bred.

"I feel the will to roam, to learn
 By test, experience, nous,
That fire is hot and ocean deep,
 And wolves carnivorous.

"My brain demands complexity,"
 The lisping cherub cried.
I looked at him, and only said,
 "Go on. The world is wide."

A tear rolled down his pinafore,
 "Yet from my life must pass
The simple love of sun and moon,
 The old games in the grass;

"Now that my back is to my home
 Could these again be found?"
I looked on him and only said,
 "Go on. The world is round."

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Rotarians

The Symbol
The speaking at the Rotary is Praise devoid of Proof
The talking at the Rotary turns mostly on the oof
But both require an Emblem; and a Wheel is just the thing
When you argue in a circle and do business in a Ring.

At a Rotarian Lunch
Broken on another wheel than Rotary
St. Catherine's body set her spirit free
Here rests the body that the soul may squirm
In all joints broken to a jointless worm.

A Declaration of Dependence
The Jeffersonian justice which
Degenerate hucksters quote
Republicans have had by right
Rotarians by rote

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Songs of Education

I. HISTORY

Form 991785, Sub-Section D

The Roman threw us a road, a road,
And sighed and strolled away:
The Saxon gave us a raid, a raid,
A raid that came to stay;
The Dane went west, but the Dane confessed
That he went a bit too far;
And we all became, by another name,
The Imperial race we are.

The Imperial race, the inscrutable race,
The invincible race we are.

Though Sussex hills are bare, are bare,
And Sussex weald is wide,
From Chichester to Chester
Men saw the Norman ride;
He threw his sword in the air and sang
To a sort of a light guitar;
It was all the same, for we all became
The identical nobs we are.

The identical nobs, individual nobs,
Unmistakable nobs we are.

The people lived on the land, the land,
They pottered about and prayed;
They built a cathedral here and there
Or went on a small crusade:
Till the bones of Becket were bundled out
For the fun of a fat White Czar,
And we all became, in spoil and flame,
The intelligent lot we are.

The intelligent lot, the intuitive lot,
The infallible lot we are.

O Warwick woods are green, are green,
But Warwick trees can fall:
And Birmingham grew so big, so big,
And Stratford stayed so small.
Till the hooter howled to the morning lark
That sang to the morning star:
And we all became, in freedom's name,
The fortunate chaps we are.

The fortunate chaps, felicitous chaps,
The fairy-like chaps we are.

The people, they left the land, the land,
But they went on working hard:
And the village green that had got mislaid
Turned up in the squire's back-yard:
But twenty men of us all got work
On a bit of his motor car;
And we all became, with the world's acclaim,
The marvellous mugs we are:

The marvellous mugs, miraculous mugs,
The mystical mugs we are.

II. GEOGRAPHY

Form 17955301, Sub-Section Z

The earth is a place on which England is found,
And you find it however you twirl the globe round;
For the spots are all red and the rest is all grey,
And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

Gibraltar's a rock that you see very plain,
And attached to its base is the district of Spain.
And the island of Malta is marked further on,
Where some natives were known as the Knights of St. John.

Then Cyprus, and east to the Suez Canal,
That was conquered by Dizzy and Rothschild his pal
With the Sword of the Lord in the old English way:
And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

Our principal imports come far as Cape Horn;
For necessities, cocoa; for luxuries, corn;
Thus Brahmins are born for the rice-field, and thus,
The Gods made the Greeks to grow currants for us;
Of earth's other tributes are plenty to choose,
Tobacco and petrol and Jazzing and Jews:
The Jazzing will pass but the Jews they will stay;
And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

Our principle exports, all labelled and packed,
At the ends of the earth are delivered intact:
Our soap or our salmon can travel in tins
Between the two poles and as like as two pins;
So that Lancashire merchants whenever they like
Can water the beer of a man in Klondike
Or poison the meat of a man in Bombay;
And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

The day of St. George is a musty affair
Which Russians and Greeks are permitted to share;

The day of Trafalgar is Spanish in name
And the Spaniards refuse to pronounce it the same;
But the day of the Empire from Canada came
With Morden and Borden and Beaverbrook's fame
And saintly seraphical souls such as they:
And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

V. THE HIGHER MATHEMATICS

Form 339125, Sub-Section M

Twice one is two,
Twice two is four,
But twice two is ninety-six if you know the way to score.
Half of two is one,
Half of four is two,
But half of four is forty per cent. if your name is Montagu:
For everything else is on the square
If done by the best quadratics;
And nothing is low in High Finance
Or the Higher Mathematics.

A straight line is straight
And a square mile is flat:
But you learn in trigonometrics a trick worth two of that.
Two straight lines
Can't enclose a Space,
But they can enclose a Corner to support the Chosen Race:
For you never know what Dynamics do
With the lower truths of Statics;
And half of two is a touring car
In the Higher Mathematics.

There is a place apart
Beyond the solar ray,
Where parallel straight lines can meet in an unofficial way.
There is a room that holds
The examiner or his clerks,
Where you can square the circle or the man that gives the marks.
Where you hide in the cellar and then look down
On the poets that live in the attics;
For the whole of the house is upside down
In the Higher Mathematics.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

St, Francis Xavier

The Apostle of the Indies

He left his dust, by all the myriad tread
Of yon dense millions trampled to the strand,
Or 'neath some cross forgotten lays his head
Where dark seas whiten on a lonely land:
He left his work, what all his life had planned,
A waning flame to flicker and to fall,
Mid the huge myths his toil could scarce withstand,
And the light died in temple and in hall,
And the old twilight sank and settled over all.

He left his name, a murmur in the East,
That dies to silence amid older creeds,
With which he strove in vain: the fiery priest
Of faiths less fitted to their ruder needs:
As some lone pilgrim, with his staff and beads,
Mid forest-brutes whom ignorance makes tame,
He dwelt, and sowed an Eastern Church's seeds
He reigned, a teacher and a priest of fame:
He died and dying left a murmur and a name.

He died: and she, the Church that bade him go,
Yon dim Enchantress with her mystic claim,
Has ringed his forehead with her aureole-glow,
And monkish myths, and all the whispered fame
Of miracle, has clung about his name:
So Rome has said: but we, what answer we
Who in grim Indian gods and rites of shame
O'er all the East the teacher's failure see,
His Eastern Church a dream, his toil a vanity.

This then we say: as Time's dark face at last
Moveth its lips of thunder to decree
The doom that grew through all the murmuring past
To be the canon of the times to be:
No child of truth or priest of progress he,
Yet not the less a hero of his wars
Striving to quench the light he could not see,
And God, who knoweth all that makes and mars,
Judges his soul unseen which throbs among the stars.

God only knows, man failing in his choice,
How far apparent failure may succeed,
God only knows what echo of His voice
Lives in the cant of many a fallen creed,
God only gives the labourer his meed
For all the lingering influence widely spread,
Broad branching into many a word and deed
When dim oblivion veils the fountain-head;
So lives and lingers on the spirit of the dead.

This then we say: let all things further rest
And this brave life, with many thousands more,
Be gathered up in the eternal's breast
In that dim past his Love is bending o'er:
Healing all shattered hopes and failure sore:
Since he had bravely looked on death and pain
For what he chose to worship and adore,
Cast boldly down his life for loss or gain
In the eternal lottery: not to be in vain.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Aristocrat

The Devil is a gentleman, and asks you down to stay
At his little place at What'sitsname (it isn't far away).
They say the sport is splendid; there is always something new,
And fairy scenes, and fearful feats that none but he can do;
He can shoot the feathered cherubs if they fly on the estate,
Or fish for Father Neptune with the mermaids for a bait;
He scaled amid the staggering stars that precipice, the sky,
And blew his trumpet above heaven, and got by mastery
The starry crown of God Himself, and shoved it on the shelf;
But the Devil is a gentleman, and doesn't brag himself.

O blind your eyes and break your heart and hack your hand away,
And lose your love and shave your head; but do not go to stay
At the little place in What'sitsname where folks are rich and clever;
The golden and the goodly house, where things grow worse for ever;
There are things you need not know of, though you live and die in vain,
There are souls more sick of pleasure than you are sick of pain;
There is a game of April Fool that's played behind its door,
Where the fool remains for ever and the April comes no more,
Where the splendour of the daylight grows drearier than the dark,
And life droops like a vulture that once was such a lark:
And that is the Blue Devil that once was the Blue Bird;
For the Devil is a gentleman, and doesn't keep his word.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Ballad of God-Makers

A bird flew out at the break of day
   From the nest where it had curled,
And ere the eve the bird had set
   Fear on the kings of the world.

The first tree it lit upon
   Was green with leaves unshed;
The second tree it lit upon
   Was red with apples red;

The third tree it lit upon
   Was barren and was brown,
Save for a dead man nailed thereon
   On a hill above a town.

That night the kings of the earth were gay
   And filled the cup and can;
Last night the kings of the earth were chill
   For dread of a naked man.

'If he speak two more words,' they said,
   'The slave is more than the free;
If he speak three more words,' they said,
'The stars are under the sea.'

Said the King of the East to the King of the West,
   I wot his frown was set,
'Lo, let us slay him and make him as dung,
   It is well that the world forget.'

Said the King of the West to the King of the East,
   I wot his smile was dread,
'Nay, let us slay him and make him a god,
   It is well that our god be dead.'

They set the young man on a hill,
   They nailed him to a rod;
And there in darkness and in blood
   They made themselves a god.

And the mightiest word was left unsaid,
   And the world had never a mark,
And the strongest man of the sons of men
   Went dumb into the dark.

Then hymns and harps of praise they brought,
   Incense and gold and myrrh,
And they thronged above the seraphim,
   The poor dead carpenter.

'Thou art the prince of all,' they sang,
   'Ocean and earth and air.'

Then the bird flew on to the cruel cross,
   And hid in the dead man's hair.

‘Thou art the son of the world.' they cried, `
   ‘Speak if our prayers be heard.'
And the brown bird stirred in the dead man's hair
   And it seemed that the dead man stirred.

Then a shriek went up like the world's last cry
   From all nations under heaven,
And a master fell before a slave
   And begged to be forgiven.

They cowered, for dread in his wakened eyes
   The ancient wrath to see;
And a bird flew out of the dead Christ's hair,
   And lit on a lemon tree.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Ballad of St. Barbara

(St Barbara is the patron saint of gunners, and those in danger
of sudden death.)

When the long grey lines came flooding upon Paris in the plain,
We stood and drank of the last free air we never could taste again:
They had led us back from the lost battle, to halt we knew not where
And stilled us: and our gaping guns were dumb with our despair.
The grey tribes flowed for ever from the infinite lifeless lands
And a Norman to a Breton spoke, his chin upon his hands.

'There was an end to Ilium; and an end came to Rome;
And a man plays on a painted stage in the land that he calls home;
Arch after arch of triumph, but floor beyond falling floor,
That lead to a low door at last; and beyond that is no door.'

And the Breton to the Norman spoke, like a small child spoke he,
And his sea-blue eyes were empty as his home beside the sea:
'There are more windows in one house than there are eyes to see,
There are more doors in a man's house, but God has hid the key:
Ruin is a builder of windows; her legend witnesseth
Barbara, the saint of gunners, and a stay in sudden death.'

It seemed the wheel of the world stood still an instant in its turning,
More than the kings of the earth that turned with the turning of Valmy mill:
While trickled the idle tale and the sea-blue eyes were burning,
Still as the heart of a whirlwind the heart of the world stood still.

'Barbara the beautiful
Had praise of tongue and pen:
Her hair was like a summer night
Dark and desired of men.

Her feet like birds from far away
That linger and light in doubt;
And her face was like a window
Where a man's first love looked out.

Her sire was master of many slaves,
A hard man of his hands;
They built a tower about her
In the desolate golden lands,

Sealed as the tyrants sealed their tombs,
Planned with an ancient plan,
And set two windows in the tower
Like the two eyes of a man.'

Our guns were set towards the foe; we had no word for firing.
Grey in the gateway of St Gond the Guard of the tyrant shone;
Dark with the fate of a falling star, retiring and retiring,
The Breton line went backward and the Breton tale went on.

'Her father had sailed across the sea
For the harbour of Africa
When all the slaves took up their tools
For the bidding of Barbara.

She smote the bare wall with her hand
And bade them smite again;
She poured them wealth of wine and meat
To stay them in their pain.

And cried through the lifted thunder
Of thronging hammer and hod
'Throw open the third window
In the third name of God.'

Then the hearts failed and the tools fell,
And far towards the foam,
Men saw a shadow on the sands
And her father coming home.'

Speak low and low, along the line the whispered word is flying,
Before the touch, before the time, we may not loose a breath:
Their guns must mash us to the mire and there be no replying,
Till the hand is raised to fling us for the final dice to death.

''There were two windows in your tower,
Barbara, Barbara,
For all between the sun and moon
In the lands of Africa.

Hath a man three eyes, Barbara,
A bird three wings,
That you have riven roof and wall
To look upon vain things?'

Her voice was like a wandering thing
That falters yet is free,
Whose soul has drunk in a distant land
Of the rivers of liberty.

'There are more wings than the wind knows
Or eyes that see the sun
In the light of the lost window
And the wind of the doors undone.

For out of the first lattice
Are the red lands that break
And out of the second lattice
Sea like a green snake,

But out of the third lattice
Under low eaves like wings

Is a new corner of the sky
And the other side of things.'

It opened in the inmost place an instant beyond uttering,
A casement and a chasm and a thunder of doors undone,
A seraph's strong wing shaken out the shock of its unshuttering,
That split the shattered sunlight from a light beyond the sun.

'Then he drew sword and drave her
Where the judges sat and said,
'Caesar sits above the gods,
Barbara the maid.

Caesar hath made a treaty
With the moon and with the sun,
All the gods that men can praise
Praise him every one.

There is peace with the anointed
Of the scarlet oils of Bel,
With the Fish God, where the whirlpool
Is a winding stair to hell,

With the pathless pyramids of slime,
Where the mitred negro lifts
To his black cherub in the cloud
Abominable gifts,

With the leprous silver cities
Where the dumb priests dance and nod,
But not with the three windows
And the last name of God.''

They are firing, we are falling, and the red skies rend and shiver us,
Barbara, Barbara, we may not loose a breath -
Be at the bursting doors of doom, and in the dark deliver us,
Who loosen the last window on the sun of sudden death.

'Barbara the beautiful
Stood up as queen set free,
Whose mouth is set to a terrible cup
And the trumpet of liberty.

'I have looked forth from a window
That no man now shall bar,
Caesar's toppling battle-towers
Shall never stretch so far.

The slaves are dancing in their chains,
The child laughs at the rod,
Because of the bird of the three wings,
And the third face of God.'

The sword upon his shoulder
Shifted and shone and fell,
And Barbara lay very small
And crumpled like a shell.'

What wall upon what hinges turned stands open like a door?
Too simple for the sight of faith, too huge for human eyes,
What light upon what ancient way shines to a far-off floor.
The line of the lost land of France or the plains of Paradise?

'Caesar smiled above the gods
His lip of stone was curled,
His iron armies wound like chains
Round and round the world,

And the strong slayer of his own
That cut down flesh for grass,
Smiled too, and went to his own tower
Like a walking tower of brass,

And the songs ceased and the slaves were dumb;
And far towards the foam
Men saw a shadow on the sands;
And her father coming home...

Blood of his blood upon the sword
Stood red but never dry.
He wiped it slowly, till the blade
Was blue as the blue sky.

But the blue sky split with a thunder-crack,
Spat down a blinding brand,
And all of him lay black and flat
As his shadow on the sand.'

The touch and the tornado; all our guns give tongue together,
St Barbara for the gunnery and God defend the right,
They are stopped and gapped and battered as we blast away the weather,
Building window upon window to our lady of the light.

For the light is come on Liberty, her foes are falling, falling,
They are reeling, they are running, as the shameful years have run,
She is risen for all the humble, she has heard the conquered calling,
St Barbara of the Gunners, with her hand upon the gun.

They are burst asunder in the midst that eat of their own flatteries,
Whose lip is curled to order as its barbered hair is curled...
Blast of the beauty of sudden death, St Barbara of the batteries!
That blow the new white window in the wall of all the world.

For the hand is raised behind us, and the bolt smites hard

Through the rending of the doorways, through the death-gap of the Guard,
For the cry of the Three Colours is in Conde and beyond
And the Guard is flung for carrion in the graveyard of St Gond,
Through Mondemont and out of it, through Morin marsh and on
With earthquake of salutation the impossible thing is gone,
Gaul, charioted and charging, great Gaul upon a gun,
Tip-toe on all her thousand years and trumpeting to the sun:
As day returns, as death returns, swung backwards and swung home,
Back on the barbarous reign returns the battering-ram of Rome.
While that the east held hard and hot like pincers in a forge,
Came like the west wind roaring up the cannon of St George,
When the hunt is up and racing over stream and swamp and tarn
And their batteries, black with battle, hold the bridgeheads of the Marne,
And across the carnage of the Guard, by Paris in the plain,
The Normans to the Bretons cried and the Bretons cheered again...
But he that told the tale went home to his house beside the sea
And burned before St Barbara, the light of the windows three,
Three candles for an unknown thing, never to come again,
That opened like the eye of God on Paris in the plain.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Ballad of the Anti-Puritan

They spoke of Progress spiring round,
Of light and Mrs Humphrey Ward--
It is not true to say I frowned,
Or ran about the room and roared;
I might have simply sat and snored--
I rose politely in the club
And said, `I feel a little bored;
Will someone take me to a pub?'

The new world's wisest did surround
Me; and it pains me to record
I did not think their views profound,
Or their conclusions well assured;
The simple life I can't afford,
Besides, I do not like the grub--
I want a mash and sausage, `scored'--
Will someone take me to a pub?

I know where Men can still be found,
Anger and clamorous accord,
And virtues growing from the ground,
And fellowship of beer and board,
And song, that is a sturdy cord,
And hope, that is a hardy shrub,
And goodness, that is God's last word--
Will someone take me to a pub?

Envoi
Prince, Bayard would have smashed his sword
To see the sort of knights you dub--
Is that the last of them--O Lord
Will someone take me to a pub?

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Ballad of the White Horse

DEDICATION

Of great limbs gone to chaos,
A great face turned to night--
Why bend above a shapeless shroud
Seeking in such archaic cloud
Sight of strong lords and light?

Where seven sunken Englands
Lie buried one by one,
Why should one idle spade, I wonder,
Shake up the dust of thanes like thunder
To smoke and choke the sun?

In cloud of clay so cast to heaven
What shape shall man discern?
These lords may light the mystery
Of mastery or victory,
And these ride high in history,
But these shall not return.

Gored on the Norman gonfalon
The Golden Dragon died:
We shall not wake with ballad strings
The good time of the smaller things,
We shall not see the holy kings
Ride down by Severn side.

Stiff, strange, and quaintly coloured
As the broidery of Bayeux
The England of that dawn remains,
And this of Alfred and the Danes
Seems like the tales a whole tribe feigns
Too English to be true.

Of a good king on an island
That ruled once on a time;
And as he walked by an apple tree
There came green devils out of the sea
With sea-plants trailing heavily
And tracks of opal slime.

Yet Alfred is no fairy tale;
His days as our days ran,
He also looked forth for an hour
On peopled plains and skies that lower,
From those few windows in the tower
That is the head of a man.

But who shall look from Alfred's hood
Or breathe his breath alive?
His century like a small dark cloud

Drifts far; it is an eyeless crowd,
Where the tortured trumpets scream aloud
And the dense arrows drive.

Lady, by one light only
We look from Alfred's eyes,
We know he saw athwart the wreck
The sign that hangs about your neck,
Where One more than Melchizedek
Is dead and never dies.

Therefore I bring these rhymes to you
Who brought the cross to me,
Since on you flaming without flaw
I saw the sign that Guthrum saw
When he let break his ships of awe,
And laid peace on the sea.

Do you remember when we went
Under a dragon moon,
And `mid volcanic tints of night
Walked where they fought the unknown fight
And saw black trees on the battle-height,
Black thorn on Ethandune?
And I thought, "I will go with you,
As man with God has gone,
And wander with a wandering star,
The wandering heart of things that are,
The fiery cross of love and war
That like yourself, goes on."

O go you onward; where you are
Shall honour and laughter be,
Past purpled forest and pearled foam,
God's winged pavilion free to roam,
Your face, that is a wandering home,
A flying home for me.

Ride through the silent earthquake lands,
Wide as a waste is wide,
Across these days like deserts, when
Pride and a little scratching pen
Have dried and split the hearts of men,
Heart of the heroes, ride.

Up through an empty house of stars,
Being what heart you are,
Up the inhuman steeps of space
As on a staircase go in grace,
Carrying the firelight on your face
Beyond the loneliest star.

Take these; in memory of the hour
We strayed a space from home
And saw the smoke-hued hamlets, quaint
With Westland king and Westland saint,
And watched the western glory faint
Along the road to Frome.

BOOK I THE VISION OF THE KING

Before the gods that made the gods
Had seen their sunrise pass,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
Was cut out of the grass.

Before the gods that made the gods
Had drunk at dawn their fill,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale
Was hoary on the hill.

Age beyond age on British land,
Aeons on aeons gone,
Was peace and war in western hills,
And the White Horse looked on.

For the White Horse knew England
When there was none to know;
He saw the first oar break or bend,
He saw heaven fall and the world end,
O God, how long ago.

For the end of the world was long ago,
And all we dwell to-day
As children of some second birth,
Like a strange people left on earth
After a judgment day.

For the end of the world was long ago,
When the ends of the world waxed free,
When Rome was sunk in a waste of slaves,
And the sun drowned in the sea.

When Caesar's sun fell out of the sky
And whoso hearkened right
Could only hear the plunging
Of the nations in the night.

When the ends of the earth came marching in
To torch and cresset gleam.

And the roads of the world that lead to Rome
Were filled with faces that moved like foam,
Like faces in a dream.

And men rode out of the eastern lands,
Broad river and burning plain;
Trees that are Titan flowers to see,
And tiger skies, striped horribly,
With tints of tropic rain.

Where Ind's enamelled peaks arise
Around that inmost one,
Where ancient eagles on its brink,
Vast as archangels, gather and drink
The sacrament of the sun.

And men brake out of the northern lands,
Enormous lands alone,
Where a spell is laid upon life and lust
And the rain is changed to a silver dust
And the sea to a great green stone.

And a Shape that moveth murkily
In mirrors of ice and night,
Hath blanched with fear all beasts and birds,
As death and a shock of evil words
Blast a man's hair with white.

And the cry of the palms and the purple moons,
Or the cry of the frost and foam,
Swept ever around an inmost place,
And the din of distant race on race
Cried and replied round Rome.

And there was death on the Emperor
And night upon the Pope:
And Alfred, hiding in deep grass,
Hardened his heart with hope.

A sea-folk blinder than the sea
Broke all about his land,
But Alfred up against them bare
And gripped the ground and grasped the air,
Staggered, and strove to stand.

He bent them back with spear and spade,
With desperate dyke and wall,
With foemen leaning on his shield
And roaring on him when he reeled;
And no help came at all.

He broke them with a broken sword

A little towards the sea,
And for one hour of panting peace,
Ringed with a roar that would not cease,
With golden crown and girded fleece
Made laws under a tree.

The Northmen came about our land
A Christless chivalry:
Who knew not of the arch or pen,
Great, beautiful half-witted men
From the sunrise and the sea.

Misshapen ships stood on the deep
Full of strange gold and fire,
And hairy men, as huge as sin
With horned heads, came wading in
Through the long, low sea-mire.

Our towns were shaken of tall kings
With scarlet beards like blood:
The world turned empty where they trod,
They took the kindly cross of God
And cut it up for wood.

Their souls were drifting as the sea,
And all good towns and lands
They only saw with heavy eyes,
And broke with heavy hands,

Their gods were sadder than the sea,
Gods of a wandering will,
Who cried for blood like beasts at night,
Sadly, from hill to hill.

They seemed as trees walking the earth,
As witless and as tall,
Yet they took hold upon the heavens
And no help came at all.

They bred like birds in English woods,
They rooted like the rose,
When Alfred came to Athelney
To hide him from their bows

There was not English armour left,
Nor any English thing,
When Alfred came to Athelney
To be an English king.

For earthquake swallowing earthquake
Uprent the Wessex tree;

The whirlpool of the pagan sway
Had swirled his sires as sticks away
When a flood smites the sea.

And the great kings of Wessex
Wearied and sank in gore,
And even their ghosts in that great stress
Grew greyer and greyer, less and less,
With the lords that died in Lyonesse
And the king that comes no more.

And the God of the Golden Dragon
Was dumb upon his throne,
And the lord of the Golden Dragon
Ran in the woods alone.

And if ever he climbed the crest of luck
And set the flag before,
Returning as a wheel returns,
Came ruin and the rain that burns,
And all began once more.

And naught was left King Alfred
But shameful tears of rage,
In the island in the river
In the end of all his age.

In the island in the river
He was broken to his knee:
And he read, writ with an iron pen,
That God had wearied of Wessex men
And given their country, field and fen,
To the devils of the sea.

And he saw in a little picture,
Tiny and far away,
His mother sitting in Egbert's hall,
And a book she showed him, very small,
Where a sapphire Mary sat in stall
With a golden Christ at play.

It was wrought in the monk's slow manner,
From silver and sanguine shell,
Where the scenes are little and terrible,
Keyholes of heaven and hell.

In the river island of Athelney,
With the river running past,
In colours of such simple creed
All things sprang at him, sun and weed,
Till the grass grew to be grass indeed
And the tree was a tree at last.

Fearfully plain the flowers grew,
Like the child's book to read,
Or like a friend's face seen in a glass;
He looked; and there Our Lady was,
She stood and stroked the tall live grass
As a man strokes his steed.

Her face was like an open word
When brave men speak and choose,
The very colours of her coat
Were better than good news.

She spoke not, nor turned not,
Nor any sign she cast,
Only she stood up straight and free,
Between the flowers in Athelney,
And the river running past.

One dim ancestral jewel hung
On his ruined armour grey,
He rent and cast it at her feet:
Where, after centuries, with slow feet,
Men came from hall and school and street
And found it where it lay.

"Mother of God," the wanderer said,
"I am but a common king,
Nor will I ask what saints may ask,
To see a secret thing.

"The gates of heaven are fearful gates
Worse than the gates of hell;
Not I would break the splendours barred
Or seek to know the thing they guard,
Which is too good to tell.

"But for this earth most pitiful,
This little land I know,
If that which is for ever is,
Or if our hearts shall break with bliss,
Seeing the stranger go?

"When our last bow is broken, Queen,
And our last javelin cast,
Under some sad, green evening sky,
Holding a ruined cross on high,
Under warm westland grass to lie,
Shall we come home at last?"

And a voice came human but high up,
Like a cottage climbed among

The clouds; or a serf of hut and croft
That sits by his hovel fire as oft,
But hears on his old bare roof aloft
A belfry burst in song.

"The gates of heaven are lightly locked,
We do not guard our gain,
The heaviest hind may easily
Come silently and suddenly
Upon me in a lane.

"And any little maid that walks
In good thoughts apart,
May break the guard of the Three Kings
And see the dear and dreadful things
I hid within my heart.

"The meanest man in grey fields gone
Behind the set of sun,
Heareth between star and other star,
Through the door of the darkness fallen ajar,
The council, eldest of things that are,
The talk of the Three in One.

"The gates of heaven are lightly locked,
We do not guard our gold,
Men may uproot where worlds begin,
Or read the name of the nameless sin;
But if he fail or if he win
To no good man is told.

"The men of the East may spell the stars,
And times and triumphs mark,
But the men signed of the cross of Christ
Go gaily in the dark.

"The men of the East may search the scrolls
For sure fates and fame,
But the men that drink the blood of God
Go singing to their shame.

"The wise men know what wicked things
Are written on the sky,
They trim sad lamps, they touch sad strings,
Hearing the heavy purple wings,
Where the forgotten seraph kings
Still plot how God shall die.

"The wise men know all evil things
Under the twisted trees,
Where the perverse in pleasure pine
And men are weary of green wine

And sick of crimson seas.

"But you and all the kind of Christ
Are ignorant and brave,
And you have wars you hardly win
And souls you hardly save.

"I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.

"Night shall be thrice night over you,
And heaven an iron cope.
Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope?"

Even as she spoke she was not,
Nor any word said he,
He only heard, still as he stood
Under the old night's nodding hood,
The sea-folk breaking down the wood
Like a high tide from sea.

He only heard the heathen men,
Whose eyes are blue and bleak,
Singing about some cruel thing
Done by a great and smiling king
In daylight on a deck.

He only heard the heathen men,
Whose eyes are blue and blind,
Singing what shameful things are done
Between the sunlit sea and the sun
When the land is left behind.

BOOK II THE GATHERING OF THE CHIEFS

Up across windy wastes and up
Went Alfred over the shaws,
Shaken of the joy of giants,
The joy without a cause.

In the slopes away to the western bays,
Where blows not ever a tree,
He washed his soul in the west wind
And his body in the sea.

And he set to rhyme his ale-measures,
And he sang aloud his laws,
Because of the joy of the giants,
The joy without a cause.

The King went gathering Wessex men,
As grain out of the chaff
The few that were alive to die,
Laughing, as littered skulls that lie
After lost battles turn to the sky
An everlasting laugh.

The King went gathering Christian men,
As wheat out of the husk;
Eldred, the Franklin by the sea,
And Mark, the man from Italy,
And Colan of the Sacred Tree,
From the old tribe on Usk.

The rook croaked homeward heavily,
The west was clear and warm,
The smoke of evening food and ease
Rose like a blue tree in the trees
When he came to Eldred's farm.

But Eldred's farm was fallen awry,
Like an old cripple's bones,
And Eldred's tools were red with rust,
And on his well was a green crust,
And purple thistles upward thrust,
Between the kitchen stones.

But smoke of some good feasting
Went upwards evermore,
And Eldred's doors stood wide apart
For loitering foot or labouring cart,
And Eldred's great and foolish heart
Stood open like his door.

A mighty man was Eldred,
A bulk for casks to fill,
His face a dreaming furnace,
His body a walking hill.

In the old wars of Wessex
His sword had sunken deep,
But all his friends, he signed and said,
Were broken about Ethelred;
And between the deep drink and the dead
He had fallen upon sleep.

"Come not to me, King Alfred, Save always for the ale:

Why should my harmless hinds be slain
Because the chiefs cry once again,
As in all fights, that we shall gain,
And in all fights we fail?

"Your scalds still thunder and prophesy
That crown that never comes;
Friend, I will watch the certain things,
Swine, and slow moons like silver rings,
And the ripening of the plums."

And Alfred answered, drinking,
And gravely, without blame,
"Nor bear I boast of scald or king,
The thing I bear is a lesser thing,
But comes in a better name.

"Out of the mouth of the Mother of God,
More than the doors of doom,
I call the muster of Wessex men
From grassy hamlet or ditch or den,
To break and be broken, God knows when,
But I have seen for whom.

Out of the mouth of the Mother of God
Like a little word come I;
For I go gathering Christian men
From sunken paving and ford and fen,
To die in a battle, God knows when,
By God, but I know why.

"And this is the word of Mary,
The word of the world's desire
`No more of comfort shall ye get,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher.' "

Then silence sank. And slowly
Arose the sea-land lord,
Like some vast beast for mystery,
He filled the room and porch and sky,
And from a cobwebbed nail on high
Unhooked his heavy sword.

Up on the shrill sea-downs and up
Went Alfred all alone,
Turning but once e'er the door was shut,
Shouting to Eldred over his butt,
That he bring all spears to the woodman's hut
Hewn under Egbert's Stone.

And he turned his back and broke the fern,

And fought the moths of dusk,
And went on his way for other friends
Friends fallen of all the wide world's ends,
From Rome that wrath and pardon sends
And the grey tribes on Usk.

He saw gigantic tracks of death
And many a shape of doom,
Good steadings to grey ashes gone
And a monk's house white like a skeleton
In the green crypt of the combe.

And in many a Roman villa
Earth and her ivies eat,
Saw coloured pavements sink and fade
In flowers, and the windy colonnade
Like the spectre of a street.

But the cold stars clustered
Among the cold pines
Ere he was half on his pilgrimage
Over the western lines.

And the white dawn widened
Ere he came to the last pine,
Where Mark, the man from Italy,
Still made the Christian sign.

The long farm lay on the large hill-side,
Flat like a painted plan,
And by the side the low white house,
Where dwelt the southland man.

A bronzed man, with a bird's bright eye,
And a strong bird's beak and brow,
His skin was brown like buried gold,
And of certain of his sires was told
That they came in the shining ship of old,
With Caesar in the prow.

His fruit trees stood like soldiers
Drilled in a straight line,
His strange, stiff olives did not fail,
And all the kings of the earth drank ale,
But he drank wine.

Wide over wasted British plains
Stood never an arch or dome,
Only the trees to toss and reel,
The tribes to bicker, the beasts to squeal;
But the eyes in his head were strong like steel,
And his soul remembered Rome.

Then Alfred of the lonely spear
Lifted his lion head;
And fronted with the Italian's eye,
Asking him of his whence and why,
King Alfred stood and said:

"I am that oft-defeated King
Whose failure fills the land,
Who fled before the Danes of old,
Who chaffered with the Danes with gold,
Who now upon the Wessex wold
Hardly has feet to stand.

"But out of the mouth of the Mother of God
I have seen the truth like fire,
This--that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher."

Long looked the Roman on the land;
The trees as golden crowns
Blazed, drenched with dawn and dew-empearled
While faintlier coloured, freshlier curled,
The clouds from underneath the world
Stood up over the downs.

"These vines be ropes that drag me hard,"
He said. "I go not far;
Where would you meet? For you must hold
Half Wiltshire and the White Horse wold,
And the Thames bank to Owsenfold,
If Wessex goes to war.

"Guthrum sits strong on either bank
And you must press his lines
Inwards, and eastward drive him down;
I doubt if you shall take the crown
Till you have taken London town.
For me, I have the vines."

"If each man on the Judgment Day
Meet God on a plain alone,"
Said Alfred, "I will speak for you
As for myself, and call it true
That you brought all fighting folk you knew
Lined under Egbert's Stone.

"Though I be in the dust ere then,
I know where you will be."
And shouldering suddenly his spear
He faded like some elfin fear,
Where the tall pines ran up, tier on tier

Tree overtoppling tree.

He shouldered his spear at morning
And laughed to lay it on,
But he leaned on his spear as on a staff,
With might and little mood to laugh,
Or ever he sighted chick or calf
Of Colan of Caerleon.

For the man dwelt in a lost land
Of boulders and broken men,
In a great grey cave far off to the south
Where a thick green forest stopped the mouth,
Giving darkness in his den.

And the man was come like a shadow,
From the shadow of Druid trees,
Where Usk, with mighty murmurings,
Past Caerleon of the fallen kings,
Goes out to ghostly seas.

Last of a race in ruin--
He spoke the speech of the Gaels;
His kin were in holy Ireland,
Or up in the crags of Wales.

But his soul stood with his mother's folk,
That were of the rain-wrapped isle,
Where Patrick and Brandan westerly
Looked out at last on a landless sea
And the sun's last smile.

His harp was carved and cunning,
As the Celtic craftsman makes,
Graven all over with twisting shapes
Like many headless snakes.

His harp was carved and cunning,
His sword prompt and sharp,
And he was gay when he held the sword,
Sad when he held the harp.

For the great Gaels of Ireland
Are the men that God made mad,
For all their wars are merry,
And all their songs are sad.

He kept the Roman order,
He made the Christian sign;
But his eyes grew often blind and bright,
And the sea that rose in the rocks at night
Rose to his head like wine.

He made the sign of the cross of God,
He knew the Roman prayer,
But he had unreason in his heart
Because of the gods that were.

Even they that walked on the high cliffs,
High as the clouds were then,
Gods of unbearable beauty,
That broke the hearts of men.

And whether in seat or saddle,
Whether with frown or smile,
Whether at feast or fight was he,
He heard the noise of a nameless sea
On an undiscovered isle.

Lifting the great green ivy
And the great spear lowering,
One said, "I am Alfred of Wessex,
And I am a conquered king."

And the man of the cave made answer,
And his eyes were stars of scorn,
"And better kings were conquered
Or ever your sires were born.

"What goddess was your mother,
What fay your breed begot,
That you should not die with Uther
And Arthur and Lancelot?

"But when you win you brag and blow,
And when you lose you rail,
Army of eastland yokels
Not strong enough to fail."

"I bring not boast or railing,"
Spake Alfred not in ire,
"I bring of Our Lady a lesson set,
This--that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher."

Then Colan of the Sacred Tree
Tossed his black mane on high,
And cried, as rigidly he rose,
"And if the sea and sky be foes,
We will tame the sea and sky."

Smiled Alfred, "Seek ye a fable
More dizzy and more dread
Than all your mad barbarian tales

Where the sky stands on its head ?

"A tale where a man looks down on the sky
That has long looked down on him;
A tale where a man can swallow a sea
That might swallow the seraphim.

"Bring to the hut by Egbert's Stone
All bills and bows ye have."
And Alfred strode off rapidly,
And Colan of the Sacred Tree
Went slowly to his cave.

BOOK III THE HARP OF ALFRED

In a tree that yawned and twisted
The King's few goods were flung,
A mass-book mildewed, line by line,
And weapons and a skin of wine,
And an old harp unstrung.

By the yawning tree in the twilight
The King unbound his sword,
Severed the harp of all his goods,
And there in the cool and soundless woods
Sounded a single chord.

Then laughed; and watched the finches flash,
The sullen flies in swarm,
And went unarmed over the hills,
With the harp upon his arm,

Until he came to the White Horse Vale
And saw across the plains,
In the twilight high and far and fell,
Like the fiery terraces of hell,
The camp fires of the Danes--

The fires of the Great Army
That was made of iron men,
Whose lights of sacrilege and scorn
Ran around England red as morn,
Fires over Glastonbury Thorn--
Fires out on Ely Fen.

And as he went by White Horse Vale
He saw lie wan and wide

The old horse graven, God knows when,
By gods or beasts or what things then
Walked a new world instead of men
And scrawled on the hill-side.

And when he came to White Horse Down
The great White Horse was grey,
For it was ill scoured of the weed,
And lichen and thorn could crawl and feed,
Since the foes of settled house and creed
Had swept old works away.

King Alfred gazed all sorrowful
At thistle and mosses grey,
Then laughed; and watched the finches flash,
Till a rally of Danes with shield and bill
Rolled drunk over the dome of the hill,
And, hearing of his harp and skill,
They dragged him to their play.

And as they went through the high green grass
They roared like the great green sea;
But when they came to the red camp fire
They were silent suddenly.

And as they went up the wastes away
They went reeling to and fro;
But when they came to the red camp fire
They stood all in a row.

For golden in the firelight,
With a smile carved on his lips,
And a beard curled right cunningly,
Was Guthrum of the Northern Sea,
The emperor of the ships--

With three great earls King Guthrum
Went the rounds from fire to fire,
With Harold, nephew of the King,
And Ogier of the Stone and Sling,
And Elf, whose gold lute had a string
That sighed like all desire.

The Earls of the Great Army
That no men born could tire,
Whose flames anear him or aloof
Took hold of towers or walls of proof,
Fire over Glastonbury roof
And out on Ely, fire.

And Guthrum heard the soldiers' tale
And bade the stranger play;

Not harshly, but as one on high,
On a marble pillar in the sky,
Who sees all folk that live and die--
Pigmy and far away.

And Alfred, King of Wessex,
Looked on his conqueror--
And his hands hardened; but he played,
And leaving all later hates unsaid,
He sang of some old British raid
On the wild west march of yore.

He sang of war in the warm wet shires,
Where rain nor fruitage fails,
Where England of the motley states
Deepens like a garden to the gates
In the purple walls of Wales.

He sang of the seas of savage heads
And the seas and seas of spears,
Boiling all over Offa's Dyke,
What time a Wessex club could strike
The kings of the mountaineers.

Till Harold laughed and snatched the harp,
The kinsman of the King,
A big youth, beardless like a child,
Whom the new wine of war sent wild,
Smote, and began to sing--

And he cried of the ships as eagles
That circle fiercely and fly,
And sweep the seas and strike the towns
From Cyprus round to Skye.

How swiftly and with peril
They gather all good things,
The high horns of the forest beasts,
Or the secret stones of kings.

"For Rome was given to rule the world,
And gat of it little joy--
But we, but we shall enjoy the world,
The whole huge world a toy.

"Great wine like blood from Burgundy,
Cloaks like the clouds from Tyre,
And marble like solid moonlight,
And gold like frozen fire.

"Smells that a man might swill in a cup,
Stones that a man might eat,

And the great smooth women like ivory
That the Turks sell in the street."

He sang the song of the thief of the world,
And the gods that love the thief;
And he yelled aloud at the cloister-yards,
Where men go gathering grief.

"Well have you sung, O stranger,
Of death on the dyke in Wales,
Your chief was a bracelet-giver;
But the red unbroken river
Of a race runs not for ever,
But suddenly it fails.

"Doubtless your sires were sword-swingers
When they waded fresh from foam,
Before they were turned to women
By the god of the nails from Rome;

"But since you bent to the shaven men,
Who neither lust nor smite,
Thunder of Thor, we hunt you
A hare on the mountain height."

King Guthrum smiled a little,
And said, "It is enough,
Nephew, let Elf retune the string;
A boy must needs like bellowing,
But the old ears of a careful king
Are glad of songs less rough."

Blue-eyed was Elf the minstrel,
With womanish hair and ring,
Yet heavy was his hand on sword,
Though light upon the string.

And as he stirred the strings of the harp
To notes but four or five,
The heart of each man moved in him
Like a babe buried alive.

And they felt the land of the folk-songs
Spread southward of the Dane,
And they heard the good Rhine flowing
In the heart of all Allemagne.

They felt the land of the folk-songs,
Where the gifts hang on the tree,
Where the girls give ale at morning
And the tears come easily.

The mighty people, womanlike,
That have pleasure in their pain
As he sang of Balder beautiful,
Whom the heavens loved in vain.

As he sang of Balder beautiful,
Whom the heavens could not save,
Till the world was like a sea of tears
And every soul a wave.

"There is always a thing forgotten
When all the world goes well;
A thing forgotten, as long ago,
When the gods forgot the mistletoe,
And soundless as an arrow of snow
The arrow of anguish fell.

"The thing on the blind side of the heart,
On the wrong side of the door,
The green plant groweth, menacing
Almighty lovers in the spring;
There is always a forgotten thing,
And love is not secure."

And all that sat by the fire were sad,
Save Ogier, who was stern,
And his eyes hardened, even to stones,
As he took the harp in turn;

Earl Ogier of the Stone and Sling
Was odd to ear and sight,
Old he was, but his locks were red,
And jests were all the words he said
Yet he was sad at board and bed
And savage in the fight.

"You sing of the young gods easily
In the days when you are young;
But I go smelling yew and sods,
And I know there are gods behind the gods,
Gods that are best unsung.

"And a man grows ugly for women,
And a man grows dull with ale,
Well if he find in his soul at last
Fury, that does not fail.

"The wrath of the gods behind the gods
Who would rend all gods and men,
Well if the old man's heart hath still
Wheels sped of rage and roaring will,
Like cataracts to break down and kill,

Well for the old man then--

"While there is one tall shrine to shake,
Or one live man to rend;
For the wrath of the gods behind the gods
Who are weary to make an end.

"There lives one moment for a man
When the door at his shoulder shakes,
When the taut rope parts under the pull,
And the barest branch is beautiful
One moment, while it breaks.

"So rides my soul upon the sea
That drinks the howling ships,
Though in black jest it bows and nods
Under the moons with silver rods,
I know it is roaring at the gods,
Waiting the last eclipse.

"And in the last eclipse the sea
Shall stand up like a tower,
Above all moons made dark and riven,
Hold up its foaming head in heaven,
And laugh, knowing its hour.

"And the high ones in the happy town
Propped of the planets seven,
Shall know a new light in the mind,
A noise about them and behind,
Shall hear an awful voice, and find
Foam in the courts of heaven.

"And you that sit by the fire are young,
And true love waits for you;
But the king and I grow old, grow old,
And hate alone is true."

And Guthrum shook his head but smiled,
For he was a mighty clerk,
And had read lines in the Latin books
When all the north was dark.

He said, "I am older than you, Ogier;
Not all things would I rend,
For whether life be bad or good
It is best to abide the end."

He took the great harp wearily,
Even Guthrum of the Danes,
With wide eyes bright as the one long day
On the long polar plains.

For he sang of a wheel returning,
And the mire trod back to mire,
And how red hells and golden heavens
Are castles in the fire.

"It is good to sit where the good tales go,
To sit as our fathers sat;
But the hour shall come after his youth,
When a man shall know not tales but truth,
And his heart fail thereat.

"When he shall read what is written
So plain in clouds and clods,
When he shall hunger without hope
Even for evil gods.

"For this is a heavy matter,
And the truth is cold to tell;
Do we not know, have we not heard,
The soul is like a lost bird,
The body a broken shell.

"And a man hopes, being ignorant,
Till in white woods apart
He finds at last the lost bird dead:
And a man may still lift up his head
But never more his heart.

"There comes no noise but weeping
Out of the ancient sky,
And a tear is in the tiniest flower
Because the gods must die.

"The little brooks are very sweet,
Like a girl's ribbons curled,
But the great sea is bitter
That washes all the world.

"Strong are the Roman roses,
Or the free flowers of the heath,
But every flower, like a flower of the sea,
Smelleth with the salt of death.

"And the heart of the locked battle
Is the happiest place for men;
When shrieking souls as shafts go by
And many have died and all may die;
Though this word be a mystery,
Death is most distant then.

"Death blazes bright above the cup,

And clear above the crown;
But in that dream of battle
We seem to tread it down.

"Wherefore I am a great king,
And waste the world in vain,
Because man hath not other power,
Save that in dealing death for dower,
He may forget it for an hour
To remember it again."

And slowly his hands and thoughtfully
Fell from the lifted lyre,
And the owls moaned from the mighty trees
Till Alfred caught it to his knees
And smote it as in ire.

He heaved the head of the harp on high
And swept the framework barred,
And his stroke had all the rattle and spark
Of horses flying hard.

"When God put man in a garden
He girt him with a sword,
And sent him forth a free knight
That might betray his lord;

"He brake Him and betrayed Him,
And fast and far he fell,
Till you and I may stretch our necks
And burn our beards in hell.

"But though I lie on the floor of the world,
With the seven sins for rods,
I would rather fall with Adam
Than rise with all your gods.

"What have the strong gods given?
Where have the glad gods led?
When Guthrum sits on a hero's throne
And asks if he is dead?

"Sirs, I am but a nameless man,
A rhymester without home,
Yet since I come of the Wessex clay
And carry the cross of Rome,

"I will even answer the mighty earl
That asked of Wessex men
Why they be meek and monkish folk,
And bow to the White Lord's broken yoke;
What sign have we save blood and smoke?

Here is my answer then.

"That on you is fallen the shadow,
And not upon the Name;
That though we scatter and though we fly,
And you hang over us like the sky,
You are more tired of victory,
Than we are tired of shame.

"That though you hunt the Christian man
Like a hare on the hill-side,
The hare has still more heart to run
Than you have heart to ride.

"That though all lances split on you,
All swords be heaved in vain,
We have more lust again to lose
Than you to win again.

"Your lord sits high in the saddle,
A broken-hearted king,
But our king Alfred, lost from fame,
Fallen among foes or bonds of shame,
In I know not what mean trade or name,
Has still some song to sing;

"Our monks go robed in rain and snow,
But the heart of flame therein,
But you go clothed in feasts and flames,
When all is ice within;

"Nor shall all iron dooms make dumb
Men wondering ceaselessly,
If it be not better to fast for joy
Than feast for misery.

"Nor monkish order only
Slides down, as field to fen,
All things achieved and chosen pass,
As the White Horse fades in the grass,
No work of Christian men.

"Ere the sad gods that made your gods
Saw their sad sunrise pass,
The White Horse of the White Horse Vale,
That you have left to darken and fail,
Was cut out of the grass.

"Therefore your end is on you,
Is on you and your kings,
Not for a fire in Ely fen,
Not that your gods are nine or ten,

But because it is only Christian men
Guard even heathen things.

"For our God hath blessed creation,
Calling it good. I know
What spirit with whom you blindly band
Hath blessed destruction with his hand;
Yet by God's death the stars shall stand
And the small apples grow."

And the King, with harp on shoulder,
Stood up and ceased his song;
And the owls moaned from the mighty trees,
And the Danes laughed loud and long.

BOOK IV THE WOMAN IN THE FOREST

Thick thunder of the snorting swine,
Enormous in the gloam,
Rending among all roots that cling,
And the wild horses whinnying,
Were the night's noises when the King
Shouldering his harp, went home.

With eyes of owl and feet of fox,
Full of all thoughts he went;
He marked the tilt of the pagan camp,
The paling of pine, the sentries' tramp,
And the one great stolen altar-lamp
Over Guthrum in his tent.

By scrub and thorn in Ethandune
That night the foe had lain;
Whence ran across the heather grey
The old stones of a Roman way;
And in a wood not far away
The pale road split in twain.

He marked the wood and the cloven ways
With an old captain's eyes,
And he thought how many a time had he
Sought to see Doom he could not see;
How ruin had come and victory,
And both were a surprise.

Even so he had watched and wondered
Under Ashdown from the plains;
With Ethelred praying in his tent,

Till the white hawthorn swung and bent,
As Alfred rushed his spears and rent
The shield-wall of the Danes.

Even so he had watched and wondered,
Knowing neither less nor more,
Till all his lords lay dying,
And axes on axes plying,
Flung him, and drove him flying
Like a pirate to the shore.

Wise he had been before defeat,
And wise before success;
Wise in both hours and ignorant,
Knowing neither more nor less.

As he went down to the river-hut
He knew a night-shade scent,
Owls did as evil cherubs rise,
With little wings and lantern eyes,
As though he sank through the under-skies;
But down and down he went.

As he went down to the river-hut
He went as one that fell;
Seeing the high forest domes and spars.
Dim green or torn with golden scars,
As the proud look up at the evil stars,
In the red heavens of hell.

For he must meet by the river-hut
Them he had bidden to arm,
Mark from the towers of Italy,
And Colan of the Sacred Tree,
And Eldred who beside the sea
Held heavily his farm.

The roof leaned gaping to the grass,
As a monstrous mushroom lies;
Echoing and empty seemed the place;
But opened in a little space
A great grey woman with scarred face
And strong and humbled eyes.

King Alfred was but a meagre man,
Bright eyed, but lean and pale:
And swordless, with his harp and rags,
He seemed a beggar, such as lags
Looking for crusts and ale.

And the woman, with a woman's eyes
Of pity at once and ire,

Said, when that she had glared a span,
"There is a cake for any man
If he will watch the fire."

And Alfred, bowing heavily,
Sat down the fire to stir,
And even as the woman pitied him
So did he pity her.

Saying, "O great heart in the night,
O best cast forth for worst,
Twilight shall melt and morning stir,
And no kind thing shall come to her,
Till God shall turn the world over
And all the last are first.

"And well may God with the serving-folk
Cast in His dreadful lot;
Is not He too a servant,
And is not He forgot ?

"For was not God my gardener
And silent like a slave;
That opened oaks on the uplands
Or thicket in graveyard gave?

"And was not God my armourer,
All patient and unpaid,
That sealed my skull as a helmet,
And ribs for hauberk made?

"Did not a great grey servant
Of all my sires and me,
Build this pavilion of the pines,
And herd the fowls and fill the vines,
And labour and pass and leave no signs
Save mercy and mystery?

"For God is a great servant,
And rose before the day,
From some primordial slumber torn;
But all we living later born
Sleep on, and rise after the morn,
And the Lord has gone away.

"On things half sprung from sleeping,
All sleepy suns have shone,
They stretch stiff arms, the yawning trees,
The beasts blink upon hands and knees,
Man is awake and does and sees--
But Heaven has done and gone.

For who shall guess the good riddle
Or speak of the Holiest,
Save in faint figures and failing words,
Who loves, yet laughs among the swords,
Labours, and is at rest?

"But some see God like Guthrum,
Crowned, with a great beard curled,
But I see God like a good giant,
That, labouring, lifts the world.

"Wherefore was God in Golgotha,
Slain as a serf is slain;
And hate He had of prince and peer,
And love He had and made good cheer,
Of them that, like this woman here,
Go powerfully in pain.

"But in this grey morn of man's life,
Cometh sometime to the mind
A little light that leaps and flies,
Like a star blown on the wind.

"A star of nowhere, a nameless star,
A light that spins and swirls,
And cries that even in hedge and hill,
Even on earth, it may go ill
At last with the evil earls.

"A dancing sparkle, a doubtful star,
On the waste wind whirled and driven;
But it seems to sing of a wilder worth,
A time discrowned of doom and birth,
And the kingdom of the poor on earth
Come, as it is in heaven.

"But even though such days endure,
How shall it profit her?
Who shall go groaning to the grave,
With many a meek and mighty slave,
Field-breaker and fisher on the wave,
And woodman and waggoner.

"Bake ye the big world all again
A cake with kinder leaven;
Yet these are sorry evermore--
Unless there be a little door,
A little door in heaven."

And as he wept for the woman
He let her business be,
And like his royal oath and rash

The good food fell upon the ash
And blackened instantly.

Screaming, the woman caught a cake
Yet burning from the bar,
And struck him suddenly on the face,
Leaving a scarlet scar.

King Alfred stood up wordless,
A man dead with surprise,
And torture stood and the evil things
That are in the childish hearts of kings
An instant in his eyes.

And even as he stood and stared
Drew round him in the dusk
Those friends creeping from far-off farms,
Marcus with all his slaves in arms,
And the strange spears hung with ancient charms
Of Colan of the Usk.

With one whole farm marching afoot
The trampled road resounds,
Farm-hands and farm-beasts blundering by
And jars of mead and stores of rye,
Where Eldred strode above his high
And thunder-throated hounds.

And grey cattle and silver lowed
Against the unlifted morn,
And straw clung to the spear-shafts tall.
And a boy went before them all
Blowing a ram's horn.

As mocking such rude revelry,
The dim clan of the Gael
Came like a bad king's burial-end,
With dismal robes that drop and rend
And demon pipes that wail--

In long, outlandish garments,
Torn, though of antique worth,
With Druid beards and Druid spears,
As a resurrected race appears
Out of an elder earth.

And though the King had called them forth
And knew them for his own,
So still each eye stood like a gem,
So spectral hung each broidered hem,
Grey carven men he fancied them,
Hewn in an age of stone.

And the two wild peoples of the north
Stood fronting in the gloam,
And heard and knew each in its mind
The third great thunder on the wind,
The living walls that hedge mankind,
The walking walls of Rome.

Mark's were the mixed tribes of the west,
Of many a hue and strain,
Gurth, with rank hair like yellow grass,
And the Cornish fisher, Gorlias,
And Halmer, come from his first mass,
Lately baptized, a Dane.

But like one man in armour
Those hundreds trod the field,
From red Arabia to the Tyne
The earth had heard that marching-line,
Since the cry on the hill Capitoline,
And the fall of the golden shield.

And the earth shook and the King stood still
Under the greenwood bough,
And the smoking cake lay at his feet
And the blow was on his brow.

Then Alfred laughed out suddenly,
Like thunder in the spring,
Till shook aloud the lintel-beams,
And the squirrels stirred in dusty dreams,
And the startled birds went up in streams,
For the laughter of the King.

And the beasts of the earth and the birds looked down,
In a wild solemnity,
On a stranger sight than a sylph or elf,
On one man laughing at himself
Under the greenwood tree--

The giant laughter of Christian men
That roars through a thousand tales,
Where greed is an ape and pride is an ass,
And Jack's away with his master's lass,
And the miser is banged with all his brass,
The farmer with all his flails;

Tales that tumble and tales that trick,
Yet end not all in scorning--
Of kings and clowns in a merry plight,
And the clock gone wrong and the world gone right,
That the mummers sing upon Christmas night

And Christmas Day in the morning.

"Now here is a good warrant,"
Cried Alfred, "by my sword;
For he that is struck for an ill servant
Should be a kind lord.

"He that has been a servant
Knows more than priests and kings,
But he that has been an ill servant,
He knows all earthly things.

"Pride flings frail palaces at the sky,
As a man flings up sand,
But the firm feet of humility
Take hold of heavy land.

"Pride juggles with her toppling towers,
They strike the sun and cease,
But the firm feet of humility
They grip the ground like trees.

"He that hath failed in a little thing
Hath a sign upon the brow;
And the Earls of the Great Army
Have no such seal to show.

"The red print on my forehead,
Small flame for a red star,
In the van of the violent marching, then
When the sky is torn of the trumpets ten,
And the hands of the happy howling men
Fling wide the gates of war.

"This blow that I return not
Ten times will I return
On kings and earls of all degree,
And armies wide as empires be
Shall slide like landslips to the sea
If the red star burn.

"One man shall drive a hundred,
As the dead kings drave;
Before me rocking hosts be riven,
And battering cohorts backwards driven,
For I am the first king known of Heaven
That has been struck like a slave.

"Up on the old white road, brothers,
Up on the Roman walls!
For this is the night of the drawing of swords,
And the tainted tower of the heathen hordes

Leans to our hammers, fires and cords,
Leans a little and falls.

"Follow the star that lives and leaps,
Follow the sword that sings,
For we go gathering heathen men,
A terrible harvest, ten by ten,
As the wrath of the last red autumn--then
When Christ reaps down the kings.

"Follow a light that leaps and spins,
Follow the fire unfurled!
For riseth up against realm and rod,
A thing forgotten, a thing downtrod,
The last lost giant, even God,
Is risen against the world."

Roaring they went o'er the Roman wall,
And roaring up the lane,
Their torches tossed a ladder of fire,
Higher their hymn was heard and higher,
More sweet for hate and for heart's desire,
And up in the northern scrub and brier,
They fell upon the Dane.

BOOK V ETHANDUNE: THE FIRST STROKE

King Guthrum was a dread king,
Like death out of the north;
Shrines without name or number
He rent and rolled as lumber,
From Chester to the Humber
He drove his foemen forth.

The Roman villas heard him
In the valley of the Thames,
Come over the hills roaring
Above their roofs, and pouring
On spire and stair and flooring
Brimstone and pitch and flames.

Sheer o'er the great chalk uplands
And the hill of the Horse went he,
Till high on Hampshire beacons
He saw the southern sea.

High on the heights of Wessex
He saw the southern brine,

And turned him to a conquered land,
And where the northern thornwoods stand,
And the road parts on either hand,
There came to him a sign.

King Guthrum was a war-chief,
A wise man in the field,
And though he prospered well, and knew
How Alfred's folk were sad and few,
Not less with weighty care he drew
Long lines for pike and shield.

King Guthrum lay on the upper land,
On a single road at gaze,
And his foe must come with lean array,
Up the left arm of the cloven way,
To the meeting of the ways.

And long ere the noise of armour,
An hour ere the break of light,
The woods awoke with crash and cry,
And the birds sprang clamouring harsh and high,
And the rabbits ran like an elves' army
Ere Alfred came in sight.

The live wood came at Guthrum,
On foot and claw and wing,
The nests were noisy overhead,
For Alfred and the star of red,
All life went forth, and the forest fled
Before the face of the King.

But halted in the woodways
Christ's few were grim and grey,
And each with a small, far, bird-like sight
Saw the high folly of the fight;
And though strange joys had grown in the night,
Despair grew with the day.

And when white dawn crawled through the wood,
Like cold foam of a flood,
Then weakened every warrior's mood,
In hope, though not in hardihood;
And each man sorrowed as he stood
In the fashion of his blood.

For the Saxon Franklin sorrowed
For the things that had been fair;
For the dear dead woman, crimson-clad,
And the great feasts and the friends he had;
But the Celtic prince's soul was sad
For the things that never were.

In the eyes Italian all things
But a black laughter died;
And Alfred flung his shield to earth
And smote his breast and cried--

"I wronged a man to his slaying,
And a woman to her shame,
And once I looked on a sworn maid
That was wed to the Holy Name.

"And once I took my neighbour's wife,
That was bound to an eastland man,
In the starkness of my evil youth,
Before my griefs began.

"People, if you have any prayers,
Say prayers for me:
And lay me under a Christian stone
In that lost land I thought my own,
To wait till the holy horn is blown,
And all poor men are free."

Then Eldred of the idle farm
Leaned on his ancient sword,
As fell his heavy words and few;
And his eyes were of such alien blue
As gleams where the Northman saileth new
Into an unknown fiord.

"I was a fool and wasted ale--
My slaves found it sweet;
I was a fool and wasted bread,
And the birds had bread to eat.

"The kings go up and the kings go down,
And who knows who shall rule;
Next night a king may starve or sleep,
But men and birds and beasts shall weep
At the burial of a fool.

"O, drunkards in my cellar,
Boys in my apple tree,
The world grows stern and strange and new,
And wise men shall govern you,
And you shall weep for me.

"But yoke me my own oxen,
Down to my own farm;
My own dog will whine for me,
My own friends will bend the knee,
And the foes I slew openly

Have never wished me harm."

And all were moved a little,
But Colan stood apart,
Having first pity, and after
Hearing, like rat in rafter,
That little worm of laughter
That eats the Irish heart.

And his grey-green eyes were cruel,
And the smile of his mouth waxed hard,
And he said, "And when did Britain
Become your burying-yard?

"Before the Romans lit the land,
When schools and monks were none,
We reared such stones to the sun-god
As might put out the sun.

"The tall trees of Britain
We worshipped and were wise,
But you shall raid the whole land through
And never a tree shall talk to you,
Though every leaf is a tongue taught true
And the forest is full of eyes.

"On one round hill to the seaward
The trees grow tall and grey
And the trees talk together
When all men are away.

"O'er a few round hills forgotten
The trees grow tall in rings,
And the trees talk together
Of many pagan things.

"Yet I could lie and listen
With a cross upon my clay,
And hear unhurt for ever
What the trees of Britain say."

A proud man was the Roman,
His speech a single one,
But his eyes were like an eagle's eyes
That is staring at the sun.

"Dig for me where I die," he said,
"If first or last I fall--
Dead on the fell at the first charge,
Or dead by Wantage wall;

"Lift not my head from bloody ground,

Bear not my body home,
For all the earth is Roman earth
And I shall die in Rome."

Then Alfred, King of England,
Bade blow the horns of war,
And fling the Golden Dragon out,
With crackle and acclaim and shout,
Scrolled and aflame and far.

And under the Golden Dragon
Went Wessex all along,
Past the sharp point of the cloven ways,
Out from the black wood into the blaze
Of sun and steel and song.

And when they came to the open land
They wheeled, deployed and stood;
Midmost were Marcus and the King,
And Eldred on the right-hand wing,
And leftwards Colan darkling,
In the last shade of the wood.

But the Earls of the Great Army
Lay like a long half moon,
Ten poles before their palisades,
With wide-winged helms and runic blades
Red giants of an age of raids,
In the thornland of Ethandune.

Midmost the saddles rose and swayed,
And a stir of horses' manes,
Where Guthrum and a few rode high
On horses seized in victory;
But Ogier went on foot to die,
In the old way of the Danes.

Far to the King's left Elf the bard
Led on the eastern wing
With songs and spells that change the blood;
And on the King's right Harold stood,
The kinsman of the King.

Young Harold, coarse, with colours gay,
Smoking with oil and musk,
And the pleasant violence of the young,
Pushed through his people, giving tongue
Foewards, where, grey as cobwebs hung,
The banners of the Usk.

But as he came before his line
A little space along,

His beardless face broke into mirth,
And he cried: "What broken bits of earth
Are here? For what their clothes are worth
I would sell them for a song."

For Colan was hung with raiment
Tattered like autumn leaves,
And his men were all as thin as saints,
And all as poor as thieves.

No bows nor slings nor bolts they bore,
But bills and pikes ill-made;
And none but Colan bore a sword,
And rusty was its blade.

And Colan's eyes with mystery
And iron laughter stirred,
And he spoke aloud, but lightly
Not labouring to be heard.

"Oh, truly we be broken hearts,
For that cause, it is said,
We light our candles to that Lord
That broke Himself for bread.

"But though we hold but bitterly
What land the Saxon leaves,
Though Ireland be but a land of saints,
And Wales a land of thieves,

"I say you yet shall weary
Of the working of your word,
That stricken spirits never strike
Nor lean hands hold a sword.

"And if ever ye ride in Ireland,
The jest may yet be said,
There is the land of broken hearts,
And the land of broken heads."

Not less barbarian laughter
Choked Harold like a flood,
"And shall I fight with scarecrows
That am of Guthrum's blood?

"Meeting may be of war-men,
Where the best war-man wins;
But all this carrion a man shoots
Before the fight begins."

And stopping in his onward strides,
He snatched a bow in scorn

From some mean slave, and bent it on
Colan, whose doom grew dark; and shone
Stars evil over Caerleon,
In the place where he was born.

For Colan had not bow nor sling,
On a lonely sword leaned he,
Like Arthur on Excalibur
In the battle by the sea.

To his great gold ear-ring Harold
Tugged back the feathered tail,
And swift had sprung the arrow,
But swifter sprang the Gael.

Whirling the one sword round his head,
A great wheel in the sun,
He sent it splendid through the sky,
Flying before the shaft could fly--
It smote Earl Harold over the eye,
And blood began to run.

Colan stood bare and weaponless,
Earl Harold, as in pain,
Strove for a smile, put hand to head,
Stumbled and suddenly fell dead;
And the small white daisies all waxed red
With blood out of his brain.

And all at that marvel of the sword,
Cast like a stone to slay,
Cried out. Said Alfred: "Who would see
Signs, must give all things. Verily
Man shall not taste of victory
Till he throws his sword away."

Then Alfred, prince of England,
And all the Christian earls,
Unhooked their swords and held them up,
Each offered to Colan, like a cup
Of chrysolite and pearls.

And the King said, "Do thou take my sword
Who have done this deed of fire,
For this is the manner of Christian men,
Whether of steel or priestly pen,
That they cast their hearts out of their ken
To get their heart's desire.

"And whether ye swear a hive of monks,
Or one fair wife to friend,
This is the manner of Christian men,

That their oath endures the end.

"For love, our Lord, at the end of the world,
Sits a red horse like a throne,
With a brazen helm and an iron bow,
But one arrow alone.

"Love with the shield of the Broken Heart
Ever his bow doth bend,
With a single shaft for a single prize,
And the ultimate bolt that parts and flies
Comes with a thunder of split skies,
And a sound of souls that rend.

"So shall you earn a king's sword,
Who cast your sword away."
And the King took, with a random eye,
A rude axe from a hind hard by
And turned him to the fray.

For the swords of the Earls of Daneland
Flamed round the fallen lord.
The first blood woke the trumpet-tune,
As in monk's rhyme or wizard's rune,
Beginneth the battle of Ethandune
With the throwing of the sword.

BOOK VI ETHANDUNE: THE SLAYING OF THE CHIEFS

As the sea flooding the flat sands
Flew on the sea-born horde,
The two hosts shocked with dust and din,
Left of the Latian paladin,
Clanged all Prince Harold's howling kin
On Colan and the sword.

Crashed in the midst on Marcus,
Ogier with Guthrum by,
And eastward of such central stir,
Far to the right and faintlier,
The house of Elf the harp-player,
Struck Eldred's with a cry.

The centre swat for weariness,
Stemming the screaming horde,
And wearily went Colan's hands
That swung King Alfred's sword.

But like a cloud of morning
To eastward easily,
Tall Eldred broke the sea of spears
As a tall ship breaks the sea.

His face like a sanguine sunset,
His shoulder a Wessex down,
His hand like a windy hammer-stroke;
Men could not count the crests he broke,
So fast the crests went down.

As the tall white devil of the Plague
Moves out of Asian skies,
With his foot on a waste of cities
And his head in a cloud of flies;

Or purple and peacock skies grow dark
With a moving locust-tower;
Or tawny sand-winds tall and dry,
Like hell's red banners beat and fly,
When death comes out of Araby,
Was Eldred in his hour.

But while he moved like a massacre
He murmured as in sleep,
And his words were all of low hedges
And little fields and sheep.

Even as he strode like a pestilence,
That strides from Rhine to Rome,
He thought how tall his beans might be
If ever he went home.

Spoke some stiff piece of childish prayer,
Dull as the distant chimes,
That thanked our God for good eating
And corn and quiet times--

Till on the helm of a high chief
Fell shatteringly his brand,
And the helm broke and the bone broke
And the sword broke in his hand.

Then from the yelling Northmen
Driven splintering on him ran
Full seven spears, and the seventh
Was never made by man.

Seven spears, and the seventh
Was wrought as the faerie blades,
And given to Elf the minstrel
By the monstrous water-maids;

By them that dwell where luridly
Lost waters of the Rhine
Move among roots of nations,
Being sunken for a sign.

Under all graves they murmur,
They murmur and rebel,
Down to the buried kingdoms creep,
And like a lost rain roar and weep
O'er the red heavens of hell.

Thrice drowned was Elf the minstrel,
And washed as dead on sand;
And the third time men found him
The spear was in his hand.

Seven spears went about Eldred,
Like stays about a mast;
But there was sorrow by the sea
For the driving of the last.

Six spears thrust upon Eldred
Were splintered while he laughed;
One spear thrust into Eldred,
Three feet of blade and shaft.

And from the great heart grievously
Came forth the shaft and blade,
And he stood with the face of a dead man,
Stood a little, and swayed--

Then fell, as falls a battle-tower,
On smashed and struggling spears.
Cast down from some unconquered town
That, rushing earthward, carries down
Loads of live men of all renown--
Archers and engineers.

And a great clamour of Christian men
Went up in agony,
Crying, "Fallen is the tower of Wessex
That stood beside the sea."

Centre and right the Wessex guard
Grew pale for doubt and fear,
And the flank failed at the advance,
For the death-light on the wizard lance--
The star of the evil spear.

"Stand like an oak," cried Marcus,
"Stand like a Roman wall!

Eldred the Good is fallen--
Are you too good to fall?

"When we were wan and bloodless
He gave you ale enow;
The pirates deal with him as dung,
God! are you bloodless now?"

"Grip, Wulf and Gorlias, grip the ash!
Slaves, and I make you free!
Stamp, Hildred hard in English land,
Stand Gurth, stand Gorlias, Gawen stand!
Hold, Halfgar, with the other hand,
Halmer, hold up on knee!

"The lamps are dying in your homes,
The fruits upon your bough;
Even now your old thatch smoulders, Gurth,
Now is the judgment of the earth,
Now is the death-grip, now!"

For thunder of the captain,
Not less the Wessex line,
Leaned back and reeled a space to rear
As Elf charged with the Rhine maids' spear,
And roaring like the Rhine.

For the men were borne by the waving walls
Of woods and clouds that pass,
By dizzy plains and drifting sea,
And they mixed God with glamoury,
God with the gods of the burning tree
And the wizard's tower and glass.

But Mark was come of the glittering towns
Where hot white details show,
Where men can number and expound,
And his faith grew in a hard ground
Of doubt and reason and falsehood found,
Where no faith else could grow.

Belief that grew of all beliefs
One moment back was blown
And belief that stood on unbelief
Stood up iron and alone.

The Wessex crescent backwards
Crushed, as with bloody spear
Went Elf roaring and routing,
And Mark against Elf yet shouting,
Shocked, in his mid-career.

Right on the Roman shield and sword
Did spear of the Rhine maids run;
But the shield shifted never,
The sword rang down to sever,
The great Rhine sang for ever,
And the songs of Elf were done.

And a great thunder of Christian men
Went up against the sky,
Saying, "God hath broken the evil spear
Ere the good man's blood was dry."

"Spears at the charge!" yelled Mark amain.
"Death on the gods of death!
Over the thrones of doom and blood
Goeth God that is a craftsman good,
And gold and iron, earth and wood,
Loveth and laboureth.

"The fruits leap up in all your farms,
The lamps in each abode;
God of all good things done on earth,
All wheels or webs of any worth,
The God that makes the roof, Gurth,
The God that makes the road.

"The God that heweth kings in oak
Writeth songs on vellum,
God of gold and flaming glass,
Confregit potentias
Acrcuum, scutum, Gorlias,
Gladium et bellum."

Steel and lightning broke about him,
Battle-bays and palm,
All the sea-kings swayed among
Woods of the Wessex arms upflung,
The trumpet of the Roman tongue,
The thunder of the psalm.

And midmost of that rolling field
Ran Ogier ragingly,
Lashing at Mark, who turned his blow,
And brake the helm about his brow,
And broke him to his knee.

Then Ogier heaved over his head
His huge round shield of proof;
But Mark set one foot on the shield,
One on some sundered rock upheeled,
And towered above the tossing field,
A statue on a roof.

Dealing far blows about the fight,
Like thunder-bolts a-roam,
Like birds about the battle-field,
While Ogier writhed under his shield
Like a tortoise in his dome.

But hate in the buried Ogier
Was strong as pain in hell,
With bare brute hand from the inside
He burst the shield of brass and hide,
And a death-stroke to the Roman's side
Sent suddenly and well.

Then the great statue on the shield
Looked his last look around
With level and imperial eye;
And Mark, the man from Italy,
Fell in the sea of agony,
And died without a sound.

And Ogier, leaping up alive,
Hurled his huge shield away
Flying, as when a juggler flings
A whizzing plate in play.

And held two arms up rigidly,
And roared to all the Danes:
"Fallen is Rome, yea, fallen
The city of the plains!

"Shall no man born remember,
That breaketh wood or weald,
How long she stood on the roof of the world
As he stood on my shield.

"The new wild world forgetteth her
As foam fades on the sea,
How long she stood with her foot on Man
As he with his foot on me.

"No more shall the brown men of the south
Move like the ants in lines,
To quiet men with olives
Or madden men with vines.

"No more shall the white towns of the south,
Where Tiber and Nilus run,
Sitting around a secret sea
Worship a secret sun.

"The blind gods roar for Rome fallen,

And forum and garland gone,
For the ice of the north is broken,
And the sea of the north comes on.

"The blind gods roar and rave and dream
Of all cities under the sea,
For the heart of the north is broken,
And the blood of the north is free.

"Down from the dome of the world we come,
Rivers on rivers down,
Under us swirl the sects and hordes
And the high dooms we drown.

"Down from the dome of the world and down,
Struck flying as a skiff
On a river in spate is spun and swirled
Until we come to the end of the world
That breaks short, like a cliff.

"And when we come to the end of the world
For me, I count it fit
To take the leap like a good river,
Shot shrieking over it.

"But whatso hap at the end of the world,
Where Nothing is struck and sounds,
It is not, by Thor, these monkish men
These humbled Wessex hounds--

"Not this pale line of Christian hinds,
This one white string of men,
Shall keep us back from the end of the world,
And the things that happen then.

"It is not Alfred's dwarfish sword,
Nor Egbert's pigmy crown,
Shall stay us now that descend in thunder,
Rending the realms and the realms thereunder,
Down through the world and down."

There was that in the wild men back of him,
There was that in his own wild song,
A dizzy throbbing, a drunkard smoke,
That dazed to death all Wessex folk,
And swept their spears along.

Vainly the sword of Colan
And the axe of Alfred plied--
The Danes poured in like a brainless plague,
And knew not when they died.

Prince Colan slew a score of them,
And was stricken to his knee;
King Alfred slew a score and seven
And was borne back on a tree.

Back to the black gate of the woods,
Back up the single way,
Back by the place of the parting ways
Christ's knights were whirled away.

And when they came to the parting ways
Doom's heaviest hammer fell,
For the King was beaten, blind, at bay,
Down the right lane with his array,
But Colan swept the other way,
Where he smote great strokes and fell.

The thorn-woods over Ethandune
Stand sharp and thick as spears,
By night and furze and forest-harms
Far sundered were the friends in arms;
The loud lost blows, the last alarms,
Came not to Alfred's ears.

The thorn-woods over Ethandune
Stand stiff as spikes in mail;
As to the Haut King came at morn
Dead Roland on a doubtful horn,
Seemed unto Alfred lightly borne
The last cry of the Gael.

BOOK VIII ETHANDUNE: THE LAST CHARGE

Away in the waste of White Horse Down
An idle child alone
Played some small game through hours that pass,
And patiently would pluck the grass,
Patiently push the stone.

On the lean, green edge for ever,
Where the blank chalk touched the turf,
The child played on, alone, divine,
As a child plays on the last line
That sunders sand and surf.

For he dwelleth in high divisions
Too simple to understand,
Seeing on what morn of mystery

The Uncreated rent the sea
With roarings, from the land.

Through the long infant hours like days
He built one tower in vain--
Piled up small stones to make a town,
And evermore the stones fell down,
And he piled them up again.

And crimson kings on battle-towers,
And saints on Gothic spires,
And hermits on their peaks of snow,
And heroes on their pyres,

And patriots riding royally,
That rush the rocking town,
Stretch hands, and hunger and aspire,
Seeking to mount where high and higher,
The child whom Time can never tire,
Sings over White Horse Down.

And this was the might of Alfred,
At the ending of the way;
That of such smiters, wise or wild,
He was least distant from the child,
Piling the stones all day.

For Eldred fought like a frank hunter
That killeth and goeth home;
And Mark had fought because all arms
Rang like the name of Rome.

And Colan fought with a double mind,
Moody and madly gay;
But Alfred fought as gravely
As a good child at play.

He saw wheels break and work run back
And all things as they were;
And his heart was orbed like victory
And simple like despair.

Therefore is Mark forgotten,
That was wise with his tongue and brave;
And the cairn over Colan crumbled,
And the cross on Eldred's grave.

Their great souls went on a wind away,
And they have not tale or tomb;
And Alfred born in Wantage
Rules England till the doom.

Because in the forest of all fears
Like a strange fresh gust from sea,
Struck him that ancient innocence
That is more than mastery.

And as a child whose bricks fall down
Re-piles them o'er and o'er,
Came ruin and the rain that burns,
Returning as a wheel returns,
And crouching in the furze and ferns
He began his life once more.

He took his ivory horn unslung
And smiled, but not in scorn:
"Endeth the Battle of Ethandune
With the blowing of a horn."

On a dark horse at the double way
He saw great Guthrum ride,
Heard roar of brass and ring of steel,
The laughter and the trumpet peal,
The pagan in his pride.

And Ogier's red and hated head
Moved in some talk or task;
But the men seemed scattered in the brier,
And some of them had lit a fire,
And one had broached a cask.

And waggons one or two stood up,
Like tall ships in sight,
As if an outpost were encamped
At the cloven ways for night.

And joyous of the sudden stay
Of Alfred's routed few,
Sat one upon a stone to sigh,
And some slipped up the road to fly,
Till Alfred in the fern hard by
Set horn to mouth and blew.

And they all abode like statues--
One sitting on the stone,
One half-way through the thorn hedge tall,
One with a leg across a wall,
And one looked backwards, very small,
Far up the road, alone.

Grey twilight and a yellow star
Hung over thorn and hill;
Two spears and a cloven war-shield lay
Loose on the road as cast away,

The horn died faint in the forest grey,
And the fleeing men stood still.

"Brothers at arms," said Alfred,
"On this side lies the foe;
Are slavery and starvation flowers,
That you should pluck them so?

"For whether is it better
To be prodded with Danish poles,
Having hewn a chamber in a ditch,
And hounded like a howling witch,
Or smoked to death in holes?

"Or that before the red cock crow
All we, a thousand strong,
Go down the dark road to God's house,
Singing a Wessex song?

"To sweat a slave to a race of slaves,
To drink up infamy?
No, brothers, by your leave, I think
Death is a better ale to drink,
And by all the stars of Christ that sink,
The Danes shall drink with me.

"To grow old cowed in a conquered land,
With the sun itself discrowned,
To see trees crouch and cattle slink--
Death is a better ale to drink,
And by high Death on the fell brink
That flagon shall go round.

"Though dead are all the paladins
Whom glory had in ken,
Though all your thunder-sworded thanes
With proud hearts died among the Danes,
While a man remains, great war remains:
Now is a war of men.

"The men that tear the furrows,
The men that fell the trees,
When all their lords be lost and dead
The bondsmen of the earth shall tread
The tyrants of the seas.

"The wheel of the roaring stillness
Of all labours under the sun,
Speed the wild work as well at least
As the whole world's work is done.

"Let Hildred hack the shield-wall

Clean as he hacks the hedge;
Let Gurth the fowler stand as cool
As he stands on the chasm's edge;

"Let Gorlias ride the sea-kings
As Gorlias rides the sea,
Then let all hell and Denmark drive,
Yelling to all its fiends alive,
And not a rag care we."

When Alfred's word was ended
Stood firm that feeble line,
Each in his place with club or spear,
And fury deeper than deep fear,
And smiles as sour as brine.

And the King held up the horn and said,
"See ye my father's horn,
That Egbert blew in his empery,
Once, when he rode out commonly,
Twice when he rode for venery,
And thrice on the battle-morn.

"But heavier fates have fallen
The horn of the Wessex kings,
And I blew once, the riding sign,
To call you to the fighting line
And glory and all good things.

"And now two blasts, the hunting sign,
Because we turn to bay;
But I will not blow the three blasts,
Till we be lost or they.

"And now I blow the hunting sign,
Charge some by rule and rod;
But when I blow the battle sign,
Charge all and go to God."

Wild stared the Danes at the double ways
Where they loitered, all at large,
As that dark line for the last time
Doubled the knee to charge--

And caught their weapons clumsily,
And marvelled how and why--
In such degree, by rule and rod,
The people of the peace of God
Went roaring down to die.

And when the last arrow
Was fitted and was flown,

When the broken shield hung on the breast,
And the hopeless lance was laid in rest,
And the hopeless horn blown,

The King looked up, and what he saw
Was a great light like death,
For Our Lady stood on the standards rent,
As lonely and as innocent
As when between white walls she went
And the lilies of Nazareth.

One instant in a still light
He saw Our Lady then,
Her dress was soft as western sky,
And she was a queen most womanly--
But she was a queen of men.

Over the iron forest
He saw Our Lady stand,
Her eyes were sad withouten art,
And seven swords were in her heart--
But one was in her hand.

Then the last charge went blindly,
And all too lost for fear:
The Danes closed round, a roaring ring,
And twenty clubs rose o'er the King,
Four Danes hewed at him, halloing,
And Ogier of the Stone and Sling
Drove at him with a spear.

But the Danes were wild with laughter,
And the great spear swung wide,
The point stuck to a straggling tree,
And either host cried suddenly,
As Alfred leapt aside.

Short time had shaggy Ogier
To pull his lance in line--
He knew King Alfred's axe on high,
He heard it rushing through the sky,

He cowered beneath it with a cry--
It split him to the spine:
And Alfred sprang over him dead,
And blew the battle sign.

Then bursting all and blasting
Came Christendom like death,
Kicked of such catapults of will,
The staves shiver, the barrels spill,
The waggons waver and crash and kill

The waggoners beneath.

Barriers go backwards, banners rend,
Great shields groan like a gong--
Horses like horns of nightmare
Neigh horribly and long.

Horses ramp high and rock and boil
And break their golden reins,
And slide on carnage clamorously,
Down where the bitter blood doth lie,
Where Ogier went on foot to die,
In the old way of the Danes.

"The high tide!" King Alfred cried.
"The high tide and the turn!
As a tide turns on the tall grey seas,
See how they waver in the trees,
How stray their spears, how knock their knees,
How wild their watchfires burn!

"The Mother of God goes over them,
Walking on wind and flame,
And the storm-cloud drifts from city and dale,
And the White Horse stamps in the White Horse Vale,
And we all shall yet drink Christian ale
In the village of our name.

"The Mother of God goes over them,
On dreadful cherubs borne;
And the psalm is roaring above the rune,
And the Cross goes over the sun and moon,
Endeth the battle of Ethandune
With the blowing of a horn."

For back indeed disorderly
The Danes went clamouring,
Too worn to take anew the tale,
Or dazed with insolence and ale,
Or stunned of heaven, or stricken pale
Before the face of the King.

For dire was Alfred in his hour
The pale scribe witnesseth,
More mighty in defeat was he
Than all men else in victory,
And behind, his men came murderously,
Dry-throated, drinking death.

And Edgar of the Golden Ship
He slew with his own hand,
Took Ludwig from his lady's bower,

And smote down Harmar in his hour,
And vain and lonely stood the tower--
The tower in Guelderland.

And Torr out of his tiny boat,
Whose eyes beheld the Nile,
Wulf with his war-cry on his lips,
And Harco born in the eclipse,
Who blocked the Seine with battleships
Round Paris on the Isle.

And Hacon of the Harvest-Song,
And Dirck from the Elbe he slew,
And Cnut that melted Durham bell
And Fulk and fiery Oscar fell,
And Goderic and Sigael,
And Uriel of the Yew.

And highest sang the slaughter,
And fastest fell the slain,
When from the wood-road's blackening throat
A crowning and crashing wonder smote
The rear-guard of the Dane.

For the dregs of Colan's company--
Lost down the other road--
Had gathered and grown and heard the din,
And with wild yells came pouring in,
Naked as their old British kin,
And bright with blood for woad.

And bare and bloody and aloft
They bore before their band
The body of the mighty lord,
Colan of Caerleon and its horde,
That bore King Alfred's battle-sword
Broken in his left hand.

And a strange music went with him,
Loud and yet strangely far;
The wild pipes of the western land,
Too keen for the ear to understand,
Sang high and deathly on each hand
When the dead man went to war.

Blocked between ghost and buccaneer,
Brave men have dropped and died;
And the wild sea-lords well might quail
As the ghastly war-pipes of the Gael
Called to the horns of White Horse Vale,
And all the horns replied.

And Hildred the poor hedger
Cut down four captains dead,
And Halmar laid three others low,
And the great earls wavered to and fro
For the living and the dead.

And Gorlias grasped the great flag,
The Raven of Odin, torn;
And the eyes of Guthrum altered,
For the first time since morn.

As a turn of the wheel of tempest
Tilts up the whole sky tall,
And cliffs of wan cloud luminous
Lean out like great walls over us,
As if the heavens might fall.

As such a tall and tilted sky
Sends certain snow or light,
So did the eyes of Guthrum change,
And the turn was more certain and more strange
Than a thousand men in flight.

For not till the floor of the skies is split,
And hell-fire shines through the sea,
Or the stars look up through the rent earth's knees,
Cometh such rending of certainties,
As when one wise man truly sees
What is more wise than he.

He set his horse in the battle-breech
Even Guthrum of the Dane,
And as ever had fallen fell his brand,
A falling tower o'er many a land,
But Gurth the fowler laid one hand
Upon this bridle rein.

King Guthrum was a great lord,
And higher than his gods--
He put the popes to laughter,
He chid the saints with rods,

He took this hollow world of ours
For a cup to hold his wine;
In the parting of the woodways
There came to him a sign.

In Wessex in the forest,
In the breaking of the spears,
We set a sign on Guthrum
To blaze a thousand years.

Where the high saddles jostle
And the horse-tails toss,
There rose to the birds flying
A roar of dead and dying;
In deafness and strong crying
We signed him with the cross.

Far out to the winding river
The blood ran down for days,
When we put the cross on Guthrum
In the parting of the ways.

BOOK VIII THE SCOURING OF THE HORSE

In the years of the peace of Wessex,
When the good King sat at home;
Years following on that bloody boon
When she that stands above the moon
Stood above death at Ethandune
And saw his kingdom come--

When the pagan people of the sea
Fled to their palisades,
Nailed there with javelins to cling
And wonder smote the pirate king,
And brought him to his christening
And the end of all his raids.

(For not till the night's blue slate is wiped
Of its last star utterly,
And fierce new signs writ there to read,
Shall eyes with such amazement heed,
As when a great man knows indeed
A greater thing than he.)

And there came to his chrism-loosing
Lords of all lands afar,
And a line was drawn north-westerly
That set King Egbert's empire free,
Giving all lands by the northern sea
To the sons of the northern star.

In the days of the rest of Alfred,
When all these things were done,
And Wessex lay in a patch of peace,
Like a dog in a patch of sun--

The King sat in his orchard,

Among apples green and red,
With the little book in his bosom
And the sunshine on his head.

And he gathered the songs of simple men
That swing with helm and hod,
And the alms he gave as a Christian
Like a river alive with fishes ran;
And he made gifts to a beggar man
As to a wandering god.

And he gat good laws of the ancient kings,
Like treasure out of the tombs;
And many a thief in thorny nook,
Or noble in sea-stained turret shook,
For the opening of his iron book,
And the gathering of the dooms.

Then men would come from the ends of the earth,
Whom the King sat welcoming,
And men would go to the ends of the earth
Because of the word of the King.

For folk came in to Alfred's face
Whose javelins had been hurled
On monsters that make boil the sea,
Crakens and coils of mystery.
Or thrust in ancient snows that be
The white hair of the world.

And some had knocked at the northern gates
Of the ultimate icy floor,
Where the fish freeze and the foam turns black,
And the wide world narrows to a track,
And the other sea at the world's back
Cries through a closed door.

And men went forth from Alfred's face,
Even great gift-bearing lords,
Not to Rome only, but more bold,
Out to the high hot courts of old,
Of negroes clad in cloth of gold,
Silence, and crooked swords,

Scrawled screens and secret gardens
And insect-laden skies--
Where fiery plains stretch on and on
To the purple country of Prester John
And the walls of Paradise.

And he knew the might of the Terre Majeure,
Where kings began to reign;

Where in a night-rout, without name,
Of gloomy Goths and Gauls there came
White, above candles all aflame,
Like a vision, Charlemagne.

And men, seeing such embassies,
Spake with the King and said:
"The steel that sang so sweet a tune
On Ashdown and on Ethandune,
Why hangs it scabbarded so soon,
All heavily like lead?

"Why dwell the Danes in North England,
And up to the river ride?
Three more such marches like thine own
Would end them; and the Pict should own
Our sway; and our feet climb the throne
In the mountains of Strathclyde."

And Alfred in the orchard,
Among apples green and red,
With the little book in his bosom,
Looked at green leaves and said:

"When all philosophies shall fail,
This word alone shall fit;
That a sage feels too small for life,
And a fool too large for it.

"Asia and all imperial plains
Are too little for a fool;
But for one man whose eyes can see
The little island of Athelney
Is too large a land to rule.

"Haply it had been better
When I built my fortress there,
Out in the reedy waters wide,
I had stood on my mud wall and cried:
`Take England all, from tide to tide--
Be Athelney my share.'

"Those madmen of the throne-scramble--
Oppressors and oppressed--
Had lined the banks by Athelney,
And waved and wailed unceasingly,
Where the river turned to the broad sea,
By an island of the blest.

"An island like a little book
Full of a hundred tales,
Like the gilt page the good monks pen,

That is all smaller than a wren,
Yet hath high towns, meteors, and men,
And suns and spouting whales;

"A land having a light on it
In the river dark and fast,
An isle with utter clearness lit,
Because a saint had stood in it;
Where flowers are flowers indeed and fit,
And trees are trees at last.

"So were the island of a saint;
But I am a common king,
And I will make my fences tough
From Wantage Town to Plymouth Bluff,
Because I am not wise enough
To rule so small a thing."

And it fell in the days of Alfred,
In the days of his repose,
That as old customs in his sight
Were a straight road and a steady light,
He bade them keep the White Horse white
As the first plume of the snows.

And right to the red torchlight,
From the trouble of morning grey,
They stripped the White Horse of the grass
As they strip it to this day.

And under the red torchlight
He went dreaming as though dull,
Of his old companions slain like kings,
And the rich irrevocable things
Of a heart that hath not openings,
But is shut fast, being full.

And the torchlight touched the pale hair
Where silver clouded gold,
And the frame of his face was made of cords,
And a young lord turned among the lords
And said: "The King is old."

And even as he said it
A post ran in amain,
Crying: "Arm, Lord King, the hamlets arm,
In the horror and the shade of harm,
They have burnt Brand of Aynger's farm--
The Danes are come again!

"Danes drive the white East Angles
In six fights on the plains,

Danes waste the world about the Thames,
Danes to the eastward--Danes!"

And as he stumbled on one knee,
The thanes broke out in ire,
Crying: "Ill the watchmen watch, and ill
The sheriffs keep the shire."

But the young earl said: "Ill the saints,
The saints of England, guard
The land wherein we pledge them gold;
The dykes decay, the King grows old,
And surely this is hard,

"That we be never quit of them;
That when his head is hoar
He cannot say to them he smote,
And spared with a hand hard at the throat,
`Go, and return no more.' "

Then Alfred smiled. And the smile of him
Was like the sun for power.
But he only pointed: bade them heed
Those peasants of the Berkshire breed,
Who plucked the old Horse of the weed
As they pluck it to this hour.

"Will ye part with the weeds for ever?
Or show daisies to the door?
Or will you bid the bold grass
Go, and return no more?

"So ceaseless and so secret
Thrive terror and theft set free;
Treason and shame shall come to pass
While one weed flowers in a morass;
And like the stillness of stiff grass
The stillness of tyranny.

"Over our white souls also
Wild heresies and high
Wave prouder than the plumes of grass,
And sadder than their sigh.

"And I go riding against the raid,
And ye know not where I am;
But ye shall know in a day or year,
When one green star of grass grows here;
Chaos has charged you, charger and spear,
Battle-axe and battering-ram.

"And though skies alter and empires melt,

This word shall still be true:
If we would have the horse of old,
Scour ye the horse anew.

"One time I followed a dancing star
That seemed to sing and nod,
And ring upon earth all evil's knell;
But now I wot if ye scour not well
Red rust shall grow on God's great bell
And grass in the streets of God."

Ceased Alfred; and above his head
The grand green domes, the Downs,
Showed the first legions of the press,
Marching in haste and bitterness
For Christ's sake and the crown's.

Beyond the cavern of Colan,
Past Eldred's by the sea,
Rose men that owned King Alfred's rod,
From the windy wastes of Exe untrod,
Or where the thorn of the grave of God
Burns over Glastonbury.

Far northward and far westward
The distant tribes drew nigh,
Plains beyond plains, fell beyond fell,
That a man at sunset sees so well,
And the tiny coloured towns that dwell
In the corners of the sky.

But dark and thick as thronged the host,
With drum and torch and blade,
The still-eyed King sat pondering,
As one that watches a live thing,
The scoured chalk; and he said,

"Though I give this land to Our Lady,
That helped me in Athelney,
Though lordlier trees and lustier sod
And happier hills hath no flesh trod
Than the garden of the Mother of God
Between Thames side and the sea,

"I know that weeds shall grow in it
Faster than men can burn;
And though they scatter now and go,
In some far century, sad and slow,
I have a vision, and I know
The heathen shall return.

"They shall not come with warships,

They shall not waste with brands,
But books be all their eating,
And ink be on their hands.

"Not with the humour of hunters
Or savage skill in war,
But ordering all things with dead words,
Strings shall they make of beasts and birds,
And wheels of wind and star.

"They shall come mild as monkish clerks,
With many a scroll and pen;
And backward shall ye turn and gaze,
Desiring one of Alfred's days,
When pagans still were men.

"The dear sun dwarfed of dreadful suns,
Like fiercer flowers on stalk,
Earth lost and little like a pea
In high heaven's towering forestry,
--These be the small weeds ye shall see
Crawl, covering the chalk.

"But though they bridge St. Mary's sea,
Or steal St. Michael's wing--
Though they rear marvels over us,
Greater than great Vergilius
Wrought for the Roman king;

"By this sign you shall know them,
The breaking of the sword,
And man no more a free knight,
That loves or hates his lord.

"Yea, this shall be the sign of them,
The sign of the dying fire;
And Man made like a half-wit,
That knows not of his sire.

"What though they come with scroll and pen,
And grave as a shaven clerk,
By this sign you shall know them,
That they ruin and make dark;

"By all men bond to Nothing,
Being slaves without a lord,
By one blind idiot world obeyed,
Too blind to be abhorred;

"By terror and the cruel tales
Of curse in bone and kin,
By weird and weakness winning,

Accursed from the beginning,
By detail of the sinning,
And denial of the sin;

"By thought a crawling ruin,
By life a leaping mire,
By a broken heart in the breast of the world,
And the end of the world's desire;

"By God and man dishonoured,
By death and life made vain,
Know ye the old barbarian,
The barbarian come again--

"When is great talk of trend and tide,
And wisdom and destiny,
Hail that undying heathen
That is sadder than the sea.

"In what wise men shall smite him,
Or the Cross stand up again,
Or charity or chivalry,
My vision saith not; and I see
No more; but now ride doubtfully
To the battle of the plain."

And the grass-edge of the great down
Was cut clean as a lawn,
While the levies thronged from near and far,
From the warm woods of the western star,
And the King went out to his last war
On a tall grey horse at dawn.

And news of his far-off fighting
Came slowly and brokenly
From the land of the East Saxons,
From the sunrise and the sea.

From the plains of the white sunrise,
And sad St. Edmund's crown,
Where the pools of Essex pale and gleam
Out beyond London Town--

In mighty and doubtful fragments,
Like faint or fabled wars,
Climbed the old hills of his renown,
Where the bald brow of White Horse Down
Is close to the cold stars.

But away in the eastern places
The wind of death walked high,
And a raid was driven athwart the raid,

The sky reddened and the smoke swayed,
And the tall grey horse went by.

The gates of the great river
Were breached as with a barge,
The walls sank crowded, say the scribes,
And high towers populous with tribes
Seemed leaning from the charge.

Smoke like rebellious heavens rolled
Curled over coloured flames,
Mirrored in monstrous purple dreams
In the mighty pools of Thames.

Loud was the war on London wall,
And loud in London gates,
And loud the sea-kings in the cloud
Broke through their dreaming gods, and loud
Cried on their dreadful Fates.

And all the while on White Horse Hill
The horse lay long and wan,
The turf crawled and the fungus crept,
And the little sorrel, while all men slept,
Unwrought the work of man.

With velvet finger, velvet foot,
The fierce soft mosses then
Crept on the large white commonweal
All folk had striven to strip and peel,
And the grass, like a great green witch's wheel,
Unwound the toils of men.

And clover and silent thistle throve,
And buds burst silently,
With little care for the Thames Valley
Or what things there might be--

That away on the widening river,
In the eastern plains for crown
Stood up in the pale purple sky
One turret of smoke like ivory;
And the smoke changed and the wind went by,
And the King took London Town.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Black Virgin

One in thy thousand statues we salute thee
On all thy thousand thrones acclaim and claim
Who walk in forest of thy forms and faces
Walk in a forest calling on one name
And, most of all, how this thing may be so
Who know thee not are mystified to know
That one cries "Here she stands" and one cries "Yonder"
And thou wert home in heaven long ago.

Burn deep in Bethlehem in the golden shadows,
Ride above Rome upon the horns of stone,
From low Lancastrian or South Saxon shelters
Watch through dark years the dower that was shine own:
Ghost of our land, White Lady of Walsinghame,
Shall they not live that call upon thy name
If an old song on a wild wind be blowing
Crying of the holy country whence they came?

Root deep in Chartres the roses blown of glass
Burning above thee in the high vitrailles,
On Cornish crags take for salute of swords
O'er peacock seas the far salute of sails,
Glooming in bronze or gay in painted wood,
A great doll given when the child is good,
Save that She gave the Child who gave the doll,
In whom all dolls are dreams of motherhood.

I have found thee like a little shepherdess
Gay with green ribbons; and passed on to find
Michael called Angel hew the Mother of God
Like one who fills a mountain with a mind:
Molten in silver or gold or garbed in blue,
Or garbed in red where the inner robe burns through,
Of the King's daughter glorious within:
Change shine unchanging light with every hue.

Clothed with the sun or standing on the moon
Crowned with the stars or single, a morning star,
Sunlight and moonlight are thy luminous shadows,
Starlight and twilight thy refractions are,
Lights and half-lights and all lights turn about thee,
But though we dazed can neither see nor doubt thee,
Something remains. Nor can man live without it
Nor can man find it bearable without thee.

There runs a dark thread through the tapestries
That time has woven with all the tints of time
Something not evil but grotesque and groping,
Something not clear; not final; not sublime;
Quaint as dim pattern of primal plant or tree
Or fish, the legless elfins of the sea,
Yet rare as this shine image in ebony

Being most strange in its simplicity.

Rare as the rushing of the wild black swans
The Romans saw; or rocks remote and grim
Where through black clouds the black sheep runs accursed
And through black clouds the Shepherd follows him.
By the black oak of the aeon-buried grove
By the black gems of the miner's treasure-trove
Monsters and freaks and fallen stars and sunken-
Most holy dark, cover our uncouth love.

From shine high rock look down on Africa
The living darkness of devouring green
The loathsome smell of life unquenchable,
Look on low brows and blinking eyes between,
On the dark heart where white folk find no place,
On the dark bodies of an antic race,
On all that fear thy light and love thy shadow,
Turn thou the mercy of thy midnight face.

This also is in thy spectrum; this dark ray;
Beyond the deepening purples of thy Lent
Darker than violet vestment; dark and secret
Clot of old night yet cloud of heaven sent:
As the black moon of some divine eclipse,
As the black sun of the Apocalypse,
As the black flower that blessed Odysseus back
From witchcraft; and he saw again the ships.

In all thy thousand images we salute thee,
Claim and acclaim on all thy thousand thrones
Hewn out of multi-colored rocks and risen
Stained with the stored-up sunsets in all tones-
If in all tones and shades this shade I feel,
Come from the black cathedrals of Castille
Climbing these flat black stones of Catalonia,
To thy most merciful face of night I kneel.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Convert

After one moment when I bowed my head
And the whole world turned over and came upright,
And I came out where the old road shone white,
I walked the ways and heard what all men said,
Forests of tongues, like autumn leaves unshed,
Being not unlovable but strange and light;
Old riddles and new creeds, not in despite
But softly, as men smile about the dead.

The sages have a hundred maps to give
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,
They rattle reason out through many a sieve
That stores the sand and lets the gold go free:
And all these things are less than dust to me
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Deluge

Though giant rains put out the sun,
Here stand I for a sign.
Though earth be filled with waters dark,
My cup is filled with wine.
Tell to the trembling priests that here
Under the deluge rod,
One nameless, tattered, broken man
Stood up, and drank to God.

Sun has been where the rain is now,
Bees in the heat to hum,
Haply a humming maiden came,
Now let the deluge come:
Brown of aureole, green of garb,
Straight as a golden rod,
Drink to the throne of thunder now!
Drink to the wrath of God.

High in the wreck I held the cup,
I clutched my rusty sword,
I cocked my tattered feather
To the glory of the Lord.
Not undone were the heaven and earth,
This hollow world thrown up,
Before one man had stood up straight,
And drained it like a cup.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Donkey

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood,
Then surely I was born;

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Englishman

St George he was for England,
And before he killed the dragon
He drank a pint of English ale
Out of an English flagon.
For though he fast right readily
In hair-shirt or in mail,
It isn't safe to give him cakes
Unless you give him ale.

St George he was for England,
And right gallantly set free
The lady left for dragon's meat
And tied up to a tree;
But since he stood for England
And knew what England means,
Unless you give him bacon
You mustn't give him beans.

St George he is for England,
And shall wear the shield he wore
When we go out in armour
With battle-cross before.
But though he is jolly company
And very pleased to dine,
It isn't safe to give him nuts
Unless you give him wine.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Great Minimum

It is something to have wept as we have wept,
It is something to have done as we have done,
It is something to have watched when all men slept,
And seen the stars which never see the sun.

It is something to have smelt the mystic rose,
Although it break and leave the thorny rods,
It is something to have hungered once as those
Must hunger who have ate the bread of gods.

To have seen you and your unforgotten face,
Brave as a blast of trumpets for the fray,
Pure as white lilies in a watery space,
It were something, though you went from me today.

To have known the things that from the weak are
furled,
Perilous ancient passions, strange and high;
It is something to be wiser then the world,
It is something to be older then the sky.

In a time of sceptic moths and cynic rusts,
And fattened lives that of their sweetness tire
In a world of flying loves and fading lusts,
It is something to be sure of a desire.

Lo, blessed are our ears for they have heard;
Yea, blessed are our eyes for they have seen:
Let the thunder break on man and beast and bird
And the lightning. It is something to have been.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Higher Unity

The Rev. Isaiah Bunter has disappeared into the interior of the Solomon Islands, and it is feared that he may have been devoured by the natives, as there has been a considerable revival of religious customs among the Polynesians.--A real paragraph from a real Paper; only the names altered.

It was Isaiah Bunter
Who sailed to the world's end,
And spread religion in a way
That he did not intend.

He gave, if not the gospel-feast,
At least a ritual meal;
And in a highly painful sense
He was devoured with zeal.

And who are we (as Henson says)
That we should close the door?
And should not Evangelicals
All jump at shedding Gore?

And many a man will melt in man,
Becoming one, not two,
When smacks across the startled earth
The Kiss of Kikuyu.

When Man is the Turk, and the Atheist,
Essene, Erastian, Whig,
And the Thug and the Druse and the Catholic
And the crew of the Captain's gig.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Holy of Holies

‘Elder father, though thine eyes
Shine with hoary mysteries,
Canst thou tell what in the heart
Of a cowslip blossom lies?

‘Smaller than all lives that be,
Secret as the deepest sea,
Stands a little house of seeds,
Like an elfin’s granary.

‘Speller of the stones and weeds,
Skilled in Nature’s crafts and creeds,
Tell me what is in the heart
Of the smallest of the seeds.’

‘God Almighty, and with Him
Cherubim and Seraphim,
Filling all eternity—
Adonai Elohim.’

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Horrible History of Jones

Jones had a dog; it had a chain;
Not often worn, not causing pain;
But, as the I.K.L. had passed
Their 'Unleashed Cousins Act' at last,
Inspectors took the chain away;
Whereat the canine barked 'Hooray!'
At which, of course, the S.P.U.
(Whose Nervous Motorists' Bill was through)
Were forced to give the dog in charge
For being Audibly at Large.
None, you will say, were now annoyed,
Save, haply, Jones - the yard was void.
But something being in the lease
About 'alarms to aid the police,'
The U.S.U. annexed the yard
For having no sufficient guard.
Now if there's one condition
The C.C.P. are strong upon
It is that every house one buys
Must have a yard for exercise;
So Jones, as tenant, was unfit,
His state of health was proof of it.
Two doctors of the T.T.U.'s
Told him his legs, from long disuse,
Were atrophied; and saying 'So
From step to higher step we go
Till everything is New and True.'
They cut his legs off and withdrew.
You know the E.T.S.T.'s views
Are stronger than the T.T.U.'s:
And soon (as one may say) took wing
The Arms, though not the Man, I sing.
To see him sitting limbless there
Was more than the K.K. could bear.
'In mercy silence with all speed
That mouth there are no hands to feed;
What cruel sentimentalist,
O Jones, would doom thee to exist -
Clinging to selfish Selfhood yet?
Weak one! Such reasoning might upset
The Pump Act, and the accumulation
Of all constructive legislation;
Let us construct you up a bit --- '
The head fell off when it was hit:
Then words did rise and honest doubt,
And four Commissioners sat about
Whether the slash that left him dead
Cut off his body or his head.

An author in the Isle of Wight
Observed with unconcealed delight

A land of just and old renown
Where Freedom slowly broadened down
From Precedent to Precedent.
And this, I think, was what he meant.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The House of Christmas

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;
We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Human Tree

Many have Earth's lovers been,
Tried in seas and wars, I ween;
Yet the mightiest have I seen:
   Yea, the best saw I.
One that in a field alone
Stood up stiller than a stone
   Lest a moth should fly.

Birds had nested in his hair,
On his shoon were mosses rare,
Insect empires flourished there,
   Worms in ancient wars;
But his eyes burn like a glass,
Hearing a great sea of grass
   Roar towards the stars.

From them to the human tree
Rose a cry continually:
`Thou art still, our Father, we
   Fain would have thee nod.
Make the skies as blood below thee,
Though thou slay us, we shall know thee.
   Answer us, O God!

`Show thine ancient fame and thunder,
Split the stillness once asunder,
Lest we whisper, lest we wonder
   Art thou there at all?'
But I saw him there alone,
Standing stiller than a stone
   Lest a moth should fall.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Judgement of England

'Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey
Where Wealth accumulates and Men decay.'
So rang of old the noble voice in vain
O'er the Last Peasants wandering on the plain,
Doom has reversed the riddle and the rhyme,
While sinks the commerce reared upon that crime,
The thriftless towns litter with lives undone,
To whom our madness left no joy but one;
And irony that glares like Judgment Day
Sees Men accumulate and Wealth decay.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Last Hero

The wind blew out from Bergen from the dawning to the day,
There was a wreck of trees and fall of towers a score of miles away,
And drifted like a livid leaf I go before its tide,
Spewed out of house and stable, beggared of flag and bride.
The heavens are bowed about my head, shouting like seraph wars,
With rains that might put out the sun and clean the sky of stars,
Rains like the fall of ruined seas from secret worlds above,
The roaring of the rains of God none but the lonely love.
Feast in my hall, O foemen, and eat and drink and drain,
You never loved the sun in heaven as I have loved the rain.
The chance of battle changes -- so may all battle be;
I stole my lady bride from them, they stole her back from me.
I rent her from her red-roofed hall, I rode and saw arise,
More lovely than the living flowers the hatred in her eyes.
She never loved me, never bent, never was less divine;
The sunset never loved me, the wind was never mine.
Was it all nothing that she stood imperial in duresse?
Silence itself made softer with the sweeping of her dress.
O you who drain the cup of life, O you who wear the crown,
You never loved a woman's smile as I have loved her frown.

The wind blew out from Bergen to the dawning of the day,
They ride and run with fifty spears to break and bar my way,
I shall not die alone, alone, but kin to all the powers,
As merry as the ancient sun and fighting like the flowers.
How white their steel, how bright their eyes! I love each laughing knave,
Cry high and bid him welcome to the banquet of the brave.
Yea, I will bless them as they bend and love them where they lie,
When on their skulls the sword I swing falls shattering from the sky.
The hour when death is like a light and blood is like a rose, --
You never loved your friends, my friends, as I shall love my foes.

Know you what earth shall lose to-night, what rich uncounted loans,
What heavy gold of tales untold you bury with my bones?
My loves in deep dim meadows, my ships that rode at ease,
Ruffling the purple plumage of strange and secret seas.
To see this fair earth as it is to me alone was given,
The blow that breaks my brow to-night shall break the dome of heaven.
The skies I saw, the trees I saw after no eyes shall see,
To-night I die the death of God; the stars shall die with me;
One sound shall sunder all the spears and break the trumpet's breath:
You never laughed in all your life as I shall laugh in death.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Latest School

See the flying French depart
Like the bees of Bonaparte,
Swarming up with a most venomous vitality.
Over Baden and Bavaria,
And Brighton and Bulgaria,
Thus violating Belgian neutrality.

And the injured Prussian may
Not unreasonably say
"Why, it cannot be so small a nationality
Since Brixton and Batavia,
Bolivia and Belgravia,
Are bursting with the Belgian neutrality."

By pure Alliteration
You may trace this curious nation,
And respect this somewhat scattered Principality;
When you see a B in Both
You may take your Bible oath
You are violating Belgian neutrality.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Logical Vegetarian

"Why shouldn't I have a purely vegetarian drink? Why shouldn't I take vegetables in their highest form, so to speak? The modest vegetarians ought to stick to wine or beer, plain vegetable drinks, instead of filling their goblets with the blood of bulls and elephants, as all conventional meat-eaters do, I suppose"--Dalroy.

You will find me drinking rum,
Like a sailor in a slum,
You will find me drinking beer like a Bavarian
You will find me drinking gin
In the lowest kind of inn
Because I am a rigid Vegetarian.

So I cleared the inn of wine,
And I tried to climb the sign,
And I tried to hail the constable as "Marion."
But he said I couldn't speak,
And he bowled me to the Beak
Because I was a Happy Vegetarian.

Oh, I know a Doctor Gluck,
And his nose it had a hook,
And his attitudes were anything but Aryan;
So I gave him all the pork
That I had, upon a fork
Because I am myself a Vegetarian.

I am silent in the Club,
I am silent in the pub.,
I am silent on a bally peak in Darien;
For I stuff away for life
Shoving peas in with a knife,
Because I am a rigid Vegetarian.

No more the milk of cows
Shall pollute my private house
Than the milk of the wild mares of the Barbarian
I will stick to port and sherry,
For they are so very, very,
So very, very, very, Vegetarian.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Modern Manichee

He sayeth there is no sin, and all his sin
Swells round him into a world made merciless;
The midnight of his universe of shame
Is the vast shadow of his shamelessness.
He blames all that begat him, gods or brutes,
And sires not sons he chides as with a rod.
The sins of the children visited on the fathers
Through all generations, back to a jealous God.

The fields that heal the humble, the happy forests
That sing to men confessed and men consoled,
To him are jungles only, greedy and groping,
Heartlessly new, unvenerably old.
Beyond the pride of his own cold compassion
Is only cruelty and imputed pain:
Matched with that mood, a boy's sport in the forest
Makes comrades of the slayer and the slain.

The innocent lust of the unfallen creatures
Moves him to hidden horror but no mirth;
Misplaced morality rots in the roots unconscious,
His stifled conscience stinks through the green earth.
The green things thrust like horrible huge snails,
Horns green and gross, each lifting a leering eye
He scarce can call a flower; it lolls obscene,
Its organs gaping to the sneering sky.

Dark with that dusk the old red god of gardens
Still pagan but not merry any more,
Stirs up the dull adulteries of the dust,
Blind, frustrate, hopeless, hollow at the core;
The plants are brutes tied with green rope and roaring
Their terrible dark loves from tree to tree:
He shrinks as from a shaft, if by him singing,
A gilded pimp and pandar, goes the bee.

He sayeth, 'I have no sin; I cast the stone',
And throws his little pebble at the shrine,
Casts sin and stone away against the house
Whose health has turned earth's waters into wine.
The venom of that repudiated guilt
Poisons the sea and every natural flood
As once a wavering tyrant washed his hands,
And touching, turned the water black with blood.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Mystery

If sunset clouds could grow on trees
It would but match the may in flower;
And skies be underneath the seas
No topsyturvier than a shower.

If mountains rose on wings to wander
They were no wilder than a cloud;
Yet all my praise is mean as slander,
Mean as these mean words spoken aloud.

And never more than now I know
That man's first heaven is far behind;
Unless the blazing seraph's blow
Has left him in the garden blind.

Witness, O Sun that blinds our eyes,
Unthinkable and unthankable King,
That though all other wonder dies
I wonder at not wondering.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Myth of Arthur

O learned man who never learned to learn,
Save to deduce, by timid steps and small,
From towering smoke that fire can never burn
And from tall tales that men were never tall.
Say, have you thought what manner of man it is
Of who men say "He could strike giants down" ?
Or what strong memories over time's abyss
Bore up the pomp of Camelot and the crown.
And why one banner all the background fills,
Beyond the pageants of so many spears,
And by what witchery in the western hills
A throne stands empty for a thousand years.
Who hold, unheeding this immense impact,
Immortal story for a mortal sin;
Lest human fable touch historic fact,
Chase myths like moths, and fight them with a pin.
Take comfort; rest--there needs not this ado.
You shall not be a myth, I promise you.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The New Fiction

('Leave them alone', we seem to hear Mr. Galsworthy say of his Young People.
--From a Review by Mr. Bettany)

Little Blue-Fits has lost his wits,
And doesn't know where to find them;
Leave them alone and they'll come home,
And leave their tales behind them.

The remarkable tales, with remarkable sales,
And Bonnets and Bees in disorder;
For the Bonnets we view are exceedingly Blue,
And decidedly over the Border.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The New Freethinker

John Grubby who was short and stout
And troubled with religious doubt,
Refused about the age of three
To sit upon the curate's knee;
(For so the eternal strife must rage
Between the spirit of the age
And Dogma, which, as is well known,
Does simply hate to be outgrown).
Grubby, the young idea that shoots,
Outgrew the ages like old boots;
While still, to all appearance, small,
Would have no Miracles at all;
And just before the age of ten
Firmly refused Free Will to men.
The altars reeled, the heavens shook,
Just as he read of in the book;
Flung from his house went forth the youth
Alone with tempests and the Truth.
Up to the distant city and dim
Where his papa had bought for him
A partnership in Chepe and Deer
Worth, say twelve hundred pounds a year.
But he was resolute. Lord Brute
Had found him useful; and Lord Loot,
With whom few other men would act,
Valued his promptitude and tact;
Never did even philanthrophy
Enrich a man more rapidly:
'Twas he that stopped the Strike in Coal,
For hungry children racked his soul;
To end their misery there and then
He filled the mines with Chinamen
Sat in that House that broke the Kings,
And voted for all sorts of things --
And rose from Under-Sec. to Sec.
With scarce a murmur or a check.
Some grumbled. Growlers who gave less
Than generous worship to success,
The little printers in Dundee,
Who got ten years for blasphemy,
(Although he let them off with seven)
Respect him rather less than heaven.
No matter. This can still be said:
Never to supernatural dread
Never to unseen deity,
Did Sir John Grubby bend the knee;
Nor was he bribed by fabled bliss
To kneel to any world but this.
The curate lives in Camden Town,
His lap still empty of renown,
And still across the waste of years
John Grubby, in the House of Peers,

Faces that curate, proud and free,
And never sits upon his knee.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The New Omar

A Book of verses underneath the bough,
 Provided that the verses do not scan,
A loaf of bread, a jug of wine and Thou,
 Short-haired, all angles, looking like a man.

But let the wine be unfermented, Pale,
 Of chemicals compounded, God knows how--
This were indeed the Prophet's Paradise,
 O Paradise were Wilderness enow.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Old Song

A livid sky on London
And like the iron steeds that rear
A shock of engines halted
And I knew the end was near:
And something said that far away, over the hills and far away
There came a crawling thunder and the end of all things here.
For London Bridge is broken down, broken down, broken down,
As digging lets the daylight on the suken streets of yore,
The lightning looked on London town, the broken bridge of London
town.
The ending of a broken road where men shall go no more.

I saw the kings of London town,
The kings that buy and sell,
That built it up with penny loaves
And penny lies as well:

And where the streets were paved with gold the shrivelled paper
shone for gold,
The scorching light of promises that pave the streets of hell.
For penny loaves will melt away, melt away, melt away,
Mock the men that haggled in the grain they did not grow;
With hungry faces in the gate, a hundred thousand in the gate,
A thunder-flash on London and the finding of the foe.

I heard the hundred pin-makers
Slow down their racking din,
Till in the stillness men could hear
The dropping of the pin:
And somewhere men without the wall, beneath the wood, without
the wall,
Had found the place where London ends and England can begin.
For pins and needles bend and break, bend and break, bend and break,
Faster than the breaking spears or the bending of the bow,
Of pagents pale in thunder-light, 'twixt thunderload and thunderlight,
The Hundreds marching on the hills in the wars of long ago.

I saw great Cobbett riding,
The horseman of the shires;
And his face was red with judgement
And a light of Luddite fires:
And south to Sussex and the sea the lights leapt up for liberty,
The trumpet of the yeomanry, the hammer of the squires;
For bars of iron rust away, rust away, rust away,
Rend before the hammer and the horseman riding in,
Crying that all men at the last, and at the worst and at the last,
Have found the place where England ends and England can begin.

His horse-hoofs go before you
Far beyond your bursting tyres;
And time is bridged behind him
And our sons are with our sires.

A trailing meteor on the Downs he rides above the rotting towns,
The Horseman of Apocalypse, the Rider of the Shires.
For London Bridge is broken down, broken down, broken down;
Blow the horn of Huntington from Scotland to the sea --
...Only flash of thunder-light, a flying dream of thunder-light,
Had shown under the shattered sky a people that were free.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Philanthropist

(With apologies to a Beautiful Poem)

ABOU BEN ADHEM (may his tribe decrease
By cautious birth-control and die in peace)
Mellow with learning lightly took the word
That marked him not with them that love the Lord,
And told the angel of the book and pen
'Write me as one that loves his fellow-men:
For them alone I labour; to reclaim
The ragged roaming Bedouin and to tame
To ordered service; to uproot their vine
Who mock the Prophet, being mad with wine,
Let daylight through their tents and through their lives,
Number their camels, even count their wives;
Plot out the desert into streets and squares,
And count it a more fruitful work than theirs
Who lift a vain and visionary love
To your vague Allah in the skies above.'

Gently replied the angel of the pen:
'Labour in peace and love your fellow-men:
And love not God, since men alone are dear,
Only fear God; for you have Cause to fear.'

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Praise of Dust

'What of vile dust?' the preacher said.
  Methought the whole world woke,
The dead stone lived beneath my foot,
  And my whole body spoke.

'You, that play tyrant to the dust,
  And stamp its wrinkled face,
This patient star that flings you not
  Far into homeless space.

'Come down out of your dusty shrine
  The living dust to see,
The flowers that at your sermon's end
  Stand blazing silently.

'Rich white and blood-red blossom; stones,
  Lichens like fire encrust;
A gleam of blue, a glare of gold,
  The vision of the dust.

'Pass them all by: till, as you come
  Where, at a city's edge,
Under a tree-I know it well-
  Under a lattice ledge,

'The sunshine falls on one brown head.
  You, too, O cold of clay,
Eater of stones, may haply hear
  The trumpets of that day

'When God to all his paladins
  By his own splendour swore
To make a fairer face than heaven,
  Of dust and nothing more.'

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Road to Roundabout

Some say that Guy of Warwick
The man that killed the Cow,
And brake the mighty Boar alive
Beyond the bridge at Slough;
Went up against a Loathly Worm
That wasted all the Downs,
And so the roads they twist and squirm
(If a may be allowed the term)
From the writhing of the stricken Worm
That died in seven towns.
I see no scientific proof
That this idea is sound,
And I should say they wound about
To find the town of Roundabout,
The merry town of Roundabout,
That makes the world go round.

Some say that Robin Goodfellow,
Whose lantern lights the meads
(To steal a phrase Sir Walter Scott
In heaven no longer needs),
Such dance around the trysting-place
The moonstruck lover leads;
Which superstition I should scout
There is more faith in honest doubt
(As Tennyson has pointed out)
Than in those nasty creeds.
But peace and righteousness (St John)
In Roundabout can kiss,
And since that's all that's found about
The pleasant town of Roundabout,
The roads they simply bound about
To find out where it is.

Some say that when Sir Lancelot
Went forth to find the Grail,
Grey Merlin wrinkled up the roads
For hope that he would fail;
All roads lead back to Lyonesse
And Camelot in the Vale,
I cannot yield assent to this
Extravagant hypothesis,
The plain, shrewd Briton will dismiss
Such rumours (Daily Mail).
But in the streets of Roundabout
Are no such factions found,
Or theories to expound about,
Or roll upon the ground about,
In the happy town of Roundabout,
That makes the world go round.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Rolling English Road

Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,
And after him the parson ran, the sexton and the squire;
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread
The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.

I knew no harm of Bonaparte and plenty of the Squire,
And for to fight the Frenchman I did not much desire;
But I did bash their baggonets because they came arrayed
To straighten out the crooked road an English drunkard made,
Where you and I went down the lane with ale-mugs in our hands,
The night we went to Glastonbury by way of Goodwin Sands.

His sins they were forgiven him; or why do flowers run
Behind him; and the hedges all strengthening in the sun?
The wild thing went from left to right and knew not which was which,
But the wild rose was above him when they found him in the ditch.
God pardon us, nor harden us; we did not see so clear
The night we went to Bannockburn by way of Brighton Pier.

My friends, we will not go again or ape an ancient rage,
Or stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age,
But walk with clearer eyes and ears this path that wandereth,
And see undrugged in evening light the decent inn of death;
For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Secret People

Smile at us, pay us, pass us; but do not quite forget;
For we are the people of England, that never have spoken yet.
There is many a fat farmer that drinks less cheerfully,
There is many a free French peasant who is richer and sadder than we.
There are no folk in the whole world so helpless or so wise.
There is hunger in our bellies, there is laughter in our eyes;
You laugh at us and love us, both mugs and eyes are wet:
Only you do not know us. For we have not spoken yet.

The fine French kings came over in a flutter of flags and dames.
We liked their smiles and battles, but we never could say their names.
The blood ran red to Bosworth and the high French lords went down;
There was naught but a naked people under a naked crown.
And the eyes of the King's Servants turned terribly every way,
And the gold of the King's Servants rose higher every day.
They burnt the homes of the shaven men, that had been quaint and kind,
Till there was no bed in a monk's house, nor food that man could find.
The inns of God where no man paid, that were the wall of the weak.
The King's Servants ate them all. And still we did not speak.

And the face of the King's Servants grew greater than the King:
He tricked them, and they trapped him, and stood round him in a ring.
The new grave lords closed round him, that had eaten the abbey's fruits,
And the men of the new religion, with their bibles in their boots,
We saw their shoulders moving, to menace or discuss,
And some were pure and some were vile; but none took heed of us.
We saw the King as they killed him, and his face was proud and pale;
And a few men talked of freedom, while England talked of ale.

A war that we understood not came over the world and woke
Americans, Frenchmen, Irish; but we knew not the things they spoke.
They talked about rights and nature and peace and the people's reign:
And the squires, our masters, bade us fight; and scorned us never again.
Weak if we be for ever, could none condemn us then;
Men called us serfs and drudges; men knew that we were men.
In foam and flame at Trafalgar, on Albuera plains,
We did and died like lions, to keep ourselves in chains,
We lay in living ruins; firing and fearing not
The strange fierce face of the Frenchmen who knew for what they fought,
And the man who seemed to be more than a man we strained against and broke;
And we broke our own rights with him. And still we never spoke.

Our patch of glory ended; we never heard guns again.
But the squire seemed struck in the saddle; he was foolish, as if in pain,
He leaned on a staggering lawyer, he clutched a cringing Jew,
He was stricken; it may be, after all, he was stricken at Waterloo.
Or perhaps the shades of the shaven men, whose spoil is in his house,
Come back in shining shapes at last to spoil his last carouse:
We only know the last sad squires rode slowly towards the sea,
And a new people takes the land: and still it is not we.

They have given us into the hand of new unhappy lords,

Lords without anger or honour, who dare not carry their swords.
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.
And the load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs,
Their doors are shut in the evening; and they know no songs.

We hear men speaking for us of new laws strong and sweet,
Yet is there no man speaketh as we speak in the street.
It may be we shall rise the last as Frenchmen rose the first,
Our wrath come after Russia's wrath and our wrath be the worst.
It may be we are meant to mark with our riot and our rest
God's scorn for all men governing. It may be beer is best.
But we are the people of England; and we have not spoken yet.
Smile at us, pay us, pass us. But do not quite forget.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Shakespeare Memorial

Lord Lilac thought it rather rotten
That Shakespeare should be quite forgotten,
And therefore got on a Committee
With several chaps out of the City,
And Shorter and Sir Herbert Tree,
Lord Rothschild and Lord Rosebery,
And F.C.G. and Comyn Carr
Two dukes and a dramatic star,
Also a clergy man now dead;
And while the vain world careless sped
Unheeding the heroic name --
The souls most fed with Shakespeare's flame
Still sat unconquered in a ring,
Remembering him like anything.

Lord Lilac did not long remain,
Lord Lilac did not some again.
He softly lit a cigarette
And sought some other social set
Where, in some other knots or rings,
People were doing cultured things.
-- Miss Zwilt's Humane Vivarium
-- The little men that paint on gum
-- The exquisite Gorilla Girl . . .
He sometimes, in this giddy whirl
(Not being really bad at heart),
Remembered Shakespeare with a start --
But not with that grand constancy
Of Clement Shorter, Herbert Tree,
Lord Rosebery and Comyn Carr
And all the other names there are;
Who stuck like limpets to the spot,
Lest they forgot, lest they forgot.

Lord Lilac was of slighter stuff;
Lord Lilac had had quite enough.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Skeleton

Chattering finch and water-fly
Are not merrier than I;
Here among the flowers I lie
Laughing everlastingly.
No; I may not tell the best;
Surely, friends, I might have guessed
Death was but the good King's jest,
It was hid so carefully.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song against Grocers

God made the wicked Grocer
For a mystery and a sign,
That men might shun the awful shops
And go to inns to dine;
Where the bacon's on the rafter
And the wine is in the wood,
And God that made good laughter
Has seen that they are good.

The evil-hearted Grocer
Would call his mother "Ma'am,"
And bow at her and bob at her,
Her aged soul to damn,
And rub his horrid hands and ask
What article was next
Though MORTIS IN ARTICULO
Should be her proper text.

His props are not his children,
But pert lads underpaid,
Who call out "Cash!" and bang about
To work his wicked trade;
He keeps a lady in a cage
Most cruelly all day,
And makes her count and calls her "Miss"
Until she fades away.

The righteous minds of innkeepers
Induce them now and then
To crack a bottle with a friend
Or treat unmoneyed men,
But who hath seen the Grocer
Treat housemaids to his teas
Or crack a bottle of fish sauce
Or stand a man a cheese?

He sells us sands of Araby
As sugar for cash down;
He sweeps his shop and sells the dust
The purest salt in town,
He crams with cans of poisoned meat
Poor subjects of the King,
And when they die by thousands
Why, he laughs like anything.

The wicked Grocer groces
In spirits and in wine,
Not frankly and in fellowship
As men in inns do dine;
But packed with soap and sardines
And carried off by grooms,
For to be snatched by Duchesses

And drunk in dressing-rooms.

The hell-instructed Grocer
Has a temple made of tin,
And the ruin of good innkeepers
Is loudly urged therein;
But now the sands are running out
From sugar of a sort,
The Grocer trembles; for his time,
Just like his weight, is short.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song of Education

III. For the Creche

Form 8277059, Sub-Section K

I remember my mother, the day that we met,
A thing I shall never entirely forget;
And I toy with the fancy that, young as I am,
I should know her again if we met in a tram.
    But mother is happy in turning a crank
    That increases the balance in somebody's bank;
    And I feel satisfaction that mother is free
    From the sinister task of attending to me.

They have brightened our room, that is spacious and cool,
With diagrams used in the Idiot School,
And Books for the Blind that will teach us to see;
But mother is happy, for mother is free.
    For mother is dancing up forty-eight floors,
    For love of the Leeds International Stores,
    And the flame of that faith might perhaps have grown cold,
    With the care of a baby of seven weeks old.

For mother is happy in greasing a wheel
For somebody else, who is cornering Steel;
And though our one meeting was not very long,
She took the occasion to sing me this song:
    "O, hush thee, my baby, the time will soon come
    When thy sleep will be broken with hooting and hum;
    There are handles want turning and turning all day,
    And knobs to be pressed in the usual way;

O, hush thee, my baby, take rest while I croon,
For Progress comes early, and Freedom too soon."

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song of Quoodle

They haven't got no noses,
The fallen sons of Eve;
Even the smell of roses
Is not what they supposes;
But more than mind discloses
And more than men believe.

They haven't got no noses,
They cannot even tell
When door and darkness closes
The park a Jew encloses,
Where even the law of Moses
Will let you steal a smell.

The brilliant smell of water,
The brave smell of a stone,
The smell of dew and thunder,
The old bones buried under,
Are things in which they blunder
And err, if left alone.

The wind from winter forests,
The scent of scentless flowers,
The breath of brides' adorning,
The smell of snare and warning,
The smell of Sunday morning,
God gave to us for ours

*

And Quoodle here discloses
All things that Quoodle can,
They haven't got no noses,
They haven't got no noses,
And goodness only knowses
The Noselessness of Man.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song of Right and Wrong

Feast on wine or fast on water
And your honour shall stand sure,
God Almighty's son and daughter
He the valiant, she the pure;
If an angel out of heaven
Brings you other things to drink,
Thank him for his kind attentions,
Go and pour them down the sink.

Tea is like the East he grows in,
A great yellow Mandarin
With urbanity of manner
And unconsciousness of sin;
All the women, like a harem,
At his pig-tail troop along;
And, like all the East he grows in,
He is Poison when he's strong.

Tea, although an Oriental,
Is a gentleman at least;
Cocoa is a cad and coward,
Cocoa is a vulgar beast,
Cocoa is a dull, disloyal,
Lying, crawling cad and clown,
And may very well be grateful
To the fool that takes him down.

As for all the windy waters,
They were rained like tempests down
When good drink had been dishonoured
By the tipplers of the town;
When red wine had brought red ruin
And the death-dance of our times,
Heaven sent us Soda Water
As a torment for our crimes.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song of the Oak

The Druids waved their golden knives
And danced around the Oak
When they had sacrificed a man;
But though the learned search and scan
No single modern person can
Entirely see the joke.
But though they cut the throats of men
They cut not down the tree,
And from the blood the saplings spring
Of oak-woods yet to be.
But Ivywood, Lord Ivywood,
He rots the tree as ivy would,
He clings and crawls as ivy would
About the sacred tree.

King Charles he fled from Worcester fight
And hid him in the Oak;
In convent schools no man of tact
Would trace and praise his every act,
Or argue that he was in fact
A strict and sainted bloke.
But not by him the sacred woods
Have lost their fancies free,
And though he was extremely big
He did not break the tree.
But Ivywood, Lord Ivywood,
He breaks the tree as ivy would,
And eats the woods as ivy would
Between us and the sea.

Great Collingwood walked down the glade
And flung the acorns free,
That oaks might still be in the grove
As oaken as the beams above,
When the great Lover sailors love
Was kissed by Death at sea.
But though for him the oak-trees fell
To build the oaken ships,
The woodman worshipped what he smote
And honoured even the chips.
But Ivywood, Lord Ivywood,
He hates the tree as ivy would,
As the dragon of the ivy would
That has us in his grips.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song of the Strange Ascetic

If I had been a Heathen,
I'd have praised the purple vine,
My slaves should dig the vineyards,
And I would drink the wine.
But Higgins is a Heathen,
And his slaves grow lean and grey,
That he may drink some tepid milk
Exactly twice a day.

If I had been a Heathen,
I'd have crowned Neaera's curls,
And filled my life with love affairs,
My house with dancing girls;
But Higgins is a Heathen,
And to lecture rooms is forced,
Where his aunts, who are not married,
Demand to be divorced.

If I had been a Heathen,
I'd have sent my armies forth,
And dragged behind my chariots
The Chieftains of the North.
But Higgins is a Heathen,
And he drives the dreary quill,
To lend the poor that funny cash
That makes them poorer still.

If I had been a Heathen,
I'd have piled my pyre on high,
And in a great red whirlwind
Gone roaring to the sky;
But Higgins is a Heathen,
And a richer man than I:
And they put him in an oven,
Just as if he were a pie.

Now who that runs can read it,
The riddle that I write,
Of why this poor old sinner,
Should sin without delight-
But I, I cannot read it
(Although I run and run),
Of them that do not have the faith,
And will not have the fun.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Song of the Wheels

King Dives he was walking in his garden all alone,
Where his flowers are made of iron and his trees are made of stone,
And his hives are full of thunder and the lightning leaps and kills,
For the mills of God grind slowly; and he works with other mills.
Dives found a mighty silence; and he missed the throb and leap,
The noise of all the sleepless creatures singing him to sleep.
And he said: 'A screw has fallen--or a bolt has slipped aside--
Some little thing has shifted': and the little things replied:

'Call upon the wheels, master, call upon the wheels;
We are taking rest, master, finding how it feels,
Strict the law of thine and mine: theft we ever shun--
All the wheels are thine, master--tell the wheels to run!
Yea, the Wheels are mighty gods--set them going then!
We are only men, master, have you heard of men?

'O, they live on earth like fishes, and a gasp is all their breath.
God for empty honours only gave them death and scorn of death,
And you walk the worms for carpet and you tread a stone that squeals
Only, God that made them worms did not make them wheels.
Man shall shut his heart against you and you shall not find the spring.
Man who wills the thing he wants not, the intolerable thing--
Once he likes his empty belly better than your empty head
Earth and heaven are dumb before him: he is stronger than the dead.

'Call upon the wheels, master, call upon the wheels,
Steel is beneath your hand, stone beneath your heels,
Steel will never laugh aloud, hearing what we heard,
Stone will never break its heart, mad with hope deferred--
Men of tact that arbitrate, slow reform that heals--
Save the stinking grease, master, save it for the wheels.

'King Dives in the garden, we have naught to give or hold--
(Even while the baby came alive the rotten sticks were sold.)
The savage knows a cavern and the peasants keep a plot,
Of all the things that men have had--lo! we have them not.
Not a scrap of earth where ants could lay their eggs--
Only this poor lump of earth that walks about on legs--
Only this poor wandering mansion, only these two walking trees,
Only hands and hearts and stomachs--what have you to do with these?

You have engines big and burnished, tall beyond our fathers'
ken,
Why should you make peace and traffic with such feeble folk
as men?

'Call upon the wheels, master, call upon the wheels,
They are deaf to demagogues, deaf to crude appeals;
Are our hands our own, master?--how the doctors doubt!
Are our legs our own, master? wheels can run without--
Prove the points are delicate--they will understand.
All the wheels are loyal; see how still they stand!'

King Dives he was walking in his garden in the sun,
He shook his hand at heaven, and he called the wheels to
run,
And the eyes of him were hateful eyes, the lips of him were
curled,
And he called upon his father that is lord below the world,
Sitting in the Gate of Treason, in the gate of broken seals,
'Bend and bind them, bend and bind them, bend and bind
them into wheels,
Then once more in all my garden there may swing and sound
and sweep--
The noise of all the sleepless things that sing the soul to
sleep.'

Call upon the wheels, master, call upon the wheels,
Weary grow the holidays when you miss the meals,
Through the Gate of Treason, through the gate within,
Cometh fear and greed of fame, cometh deadly sin;
If a man grow faint, master, take him ere he kneels,
Take him, break him, rend him, end him, roll him, crush him
with the wheels.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Strange Music

Other loves may sink and settle, other loves may loose and slack,
   But I wander like a minstrel with a harp upon my back,
Though the harp be on my bosom, though I finger and I fret,
   Still, my hope is all before me; for I cannot play it yet.

In your strings is hid a music that no hand hath e'er let fall,
   In your soul is sealed a pleasure that you have not known at all;
Pleasure subtle as your spirit, strange and slender as your frame,
   Fiercer than the pain that folds you, softer than your sorrow's name.

Not as mine, my soul's annointed, not as mine the rude and light
   Easy mirth of many faces, swaggering pride of song and fight;
Something stranger, something sweeter, something waiting you afar,
   Secret as your stricken senses, magic as your sorrows are.

But on this, God's harp supernal, stretched but to be stricken once,
   Hoary time is a beginner, Life a bungler, Death a dunce.
But I will not fear to match them - no by God, I will not fear,
   I will learn you, I will play you and the stars stand still to hear.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Sword of Suprise

Sunder me from my bones, O sword of God
Till they stand stark and strange as do the trees;
That I whose heart goes up with the soaring woods
May marvel as much at these.

Sunder me from my blood that in the dark
I hear that red ancestral river run
Like branching buried floods that find the sea
But never see the sun.

Give me miraculous eyes to see my eyes
Those rolling mirrors made alive in me
Terrible crystals more incredible
Than all the things they see

Sunder me from my soul, that I may see
The sins like streaming wounds, the life's brave beat
Till I shall save myself as I would save
A stranger in the street.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Towers of Time

Under what withering leprous light
The very grass as hair is grey,
Grass in the cracks of the paven courts
Of gods we graved but yesterday.
Senate, republic, empire, all
We leaned our backs on like a wall
And blessed as stron as strong and blamed as stolid--
Can it be these that waver and fall?
    And what is this like a ghost returning,
    A dream grown strong in the strong daylight?
    The all-forsaken, the unforgotten,
    The ever-behind and out of sight.
    We turned our backs and our blind flesh felt it
    Growing and growing, a tower in height.

Ah, not alone the evil splendour
And not the insolent arms alone
Break with the ramrod, stiff and brittle,
The sceptre of the nordic throne;
But things of manlier renown
Reel in the wreck of throne and crown,
With tyrannous tyranny, tyrannous loyalty
Tyrannous liberty, all gone down.

(There is never a crack in the ivory tower
Or a hinge to groan in the house of gold
Or a leaf of the rose in the wind to wither
And she grows young as the world grows old.
A Woman clothed with the sun returning
to clothe the sun when the sun is cold.)

Ah, who had guessed that in a moment
Great Liberty that loosed the tribes,
the Republic of the young men's battles
Grew stale and stank of old men's bribes;
And where we watched her smile in power
A statue like a starry tower
the stone face sneers as in a nightmare
Down on a world that worms devour.
    (Archaic incredible dead dawns breaking
    Deep in the deserts and waste and wealds,
    Where the dead cry aloud on Our Lady of Victories,
    Queen of the Eagles, aloft on the shields,
    And the sun is gone up on the Thundering Legion
    On the roads of Rome to the Battlefields.)

Ah, who had known who had not seen
How soft and sudden on the fame
Of my most noble English ships
The sunset light of Carthage came
And the thing I never had dreamed could be
In the house of my fathers came to me

Through the sea-wall cloven, the cloud and dark,
A voice divided, a doubtful sea.
(The light is bright on the Tower of David,
The evening glows with the morning star
In the skies turned back and the days returning
She walks so near who had wandered far
And in the heart of the swords, the seven times wounded,
Was never wearied as our hearts are.)

How swift as with a fall of snow
New things grow hoary with the light.
We watch the wrinkles crawl like snakes
On the new image in our sight.
The lines that sprang up taut and bold
Sag like primordial monsters old,
Sink in the bas-reliers of fossil
And the slow earth swallows them, fold on fold,
But light are the feet on the hills of the morning
Of the lambs that leap up to the Bride of the Sun,
And swift are the birds as the butterflies flashing
And sudden as laughter the rivulets run
And sudden for ever as summer lightning
the light is bright on the world begun.

Thou wilt not break as we have broken
The towers we reared to rival Thee.
More true to England than the English
More just to freedom than the free.
O trumpet of the intolerant truth
Thou art more full of grace and ruth
For the hopes of th world than the world that made them,
The world that murdered the loves of our youth.
Thou art more kind to our dreams, Our Mother,
Than the wise that wove us the dreams for shade.
God if more good to the gods that mocked Him
Than men are good to the gods they made.
Tenderer with toys than a boy grown brutal,
Breaking the puppets with which he played.

What are the flowers the garden guards not
And how but here should dreams return?
And how on hearths made cold with ruin
the wide wind-scattered ashes burn--
What is the home of the heart set free,
And where is the nesting of liberty,
And where from the world shall the world take shelter
And man be matter, and not with Thee?
Wisdom is set in her throne of thunder,
The Mirror of Justice blinds the day--
Where are the towers that are not of the City,
Trophies and trumpetings, where are they?
Where over the maze of the world returning

The bye-ways bend to the King's highway.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Unpardonable Sin

I do not cry, beloved, neither curse.
 Silence and strength, these two at least are good.
 He gave me sun and start and aught He could,
But not a woman's love; for that is hers.

He sealed her heart from sage and questioner --
 Yea, with seven seals, as he has sealed the grave.
 And if she give it to a drunken slave,
The Day of Judgment shall not challenge her.

Only this much: if one, deserving well,
 Touching your thin young hands and making suit,
 Feel not himself a crawling thing, a brute,
Buried and bricked in a forgotten hell;

Prophet and poet be he over sod,
 Prince among angels in the highest place,
 God help me, I will smite him on the face,
Before the glory of the face of God.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Wife of Flanders

Low and brown barns, thatched and repatched and tattered,
Where I had seven sons until to-day,
A little hill of hay your spur has scattered. . . .
This is not Paris. You have lost your way.

You, staring at your sword to find it brittle,
Surprised at the surprise that was your plan,
Who, shaking and breaking barriers not a little,
Find never more the death-door of Sedan --

Must I for more than carnage call you claimant,
Paying you a penny for each son you slay?
Man, the whole globe in gold were no repayment
For what you have lost. And how shall I repay?

What is the price of that red spark that caught me
From a kind farm that never had a name?
What is the price of that dead man they brought me?
For other dead men do not look the same.

How should I pay for one poor graven steeple
Whereon you shattered what you shall not know?
How should I pay you, miserable people?
How should I pay you everything you owe?

Unhappy, can I give you back your honour?
Though I forgave, would any man forget?
While all the great green land has trampled on her
The treason and terror of the night we met.

Not any more in vengeance or in pardon
An old wife bargains for a bean that's hers.
You have no word to break: no heart to harden.
Ride on and prosper. You have lost your spurs.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

The Wise Men

Step softly, under snow or rain,
    To find the place where men can pray;
The way is all so very plain
    That we may lose the way.

Oh, we have learnt to peer and pore
    On tortured puzzles from our youth,
We know all the labyrinthine lore,
We are the three wise men of yore,
    And we know all things but truth.

We have gone round and round the hill
    And lost the wood among the trees,
And learnt long names for every ill,
And serve the made gods, naming still
    The furies the Eumenides.

The gods of violence took the veil
    Of vision and philosophy,
The Serpent that brought all men bale,
He bites his own accursed tail,
    And calls himself Eternity.

Go humbly ... it has hailed and snowed...
    With voices low and lanterns lit;
So very simple is the road,
    That we may stray from it.

The world grows terrible and white,
    And blinding white the breaking day;
We walk bewildered in the light,
For something is too large for sight,
    And something much too plain to say.

The Child that was ere worlds begun
    (... We need but walk a little way,
We need but see a latch undone...)
The Child that played with moon and sun
    Is playing with a little hay.

The house from which the heavens are fed,
    The old strange house that is our own,
Where trick of words are never said,
And Mercy is as plain as bread,
    And Honour is as hard as stone.

Go humbly, humble are the skies,
    And low and large and fierce the Star;
So very near the Manger lies
    That we may travel far.

Hark! Laughter like a lion wakes

To roar to the resounding plain.
And the whole heaven shouts and shakes,
For God Himself is born again,
And we are little children walking
Through the snow and rain.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

To Belloc

For every tiny town or place
God made the stars especially;
Babies look up with owlish face
And see them tangled in a tree;
You saw a moon from Sussex Downs,
A Sussex moon, untravelled still,
I saw a moon that was the town's,
The largest lamp on Campden Hill.

Yea; Heaven is everywhere at home
The big blue cap that always fits,
And so it is (be calm; they come
To goal at last, my wandering wits),
So is it with the heroic thing;
This shall not end for the world's end
And though the sullen engines swing,
Be you not much afraid, my friend.

This did not end by Nelson's urn
Where an immortal England sits--
Nor where your tall young men in turn
Drank death like wine at Austerlitz.
And when the pedants bade us mark
What cold mechanic happenings
Must come; our souls said in the dark,
'Belike; but there are likelier things.'

Likelier across these flats afar
These sulky levels smooth and free
The drums shall crash a waltz of war
And Death shall dance with Liberty;
Likelier the barricades shall blare
Slaughter below and smoke above,
And death and hate and hell declare
That men have found a thing to love.

Far from your sunny uplands set
I saw the dream; the streets I trod
The lit straight streets shot out and met
The starry streets that point to God.
This legend of an epic hour
A child I dreamed, and dream it still,
Under the great grey water-tower
That strikes the stars on Campden Hill

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

To St. Micheal in Time of Peace

Michael, Michael: Michael of the Morning,
Michael of the Army of the Lord,
Stiffen thou the hand upon the still sword, Michael,
Folded and shut upon the sheathed sword, Michael,
Under the fullness of the white robes falling,
Gird us with the secret of the sword.

When the world cracked because of a sneer in heaven,
Leaving out for all time a scar upon the sky,
Thou didst rise up against the Horror in the highest,
Dragging down the highest that looked down on the Most High:
Rending from the seventh heaven the hell of exaltation
Down the seven heavens till the dark seas burn:
Thou that in thunder threwest down the Dragon
Knowest in what silence the Serpent can return.

Down through the universe the vast night falling
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the Morning!)
Far down the universe the deep calms calling
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the Sword!)
Bid us not forget in the baths of all forgetfulness,
In the sigh long drawn from the frenzy and the fretfulness
In the huge holy sempiternal silence
In the beginning was the Word.

When from the deeps of dying God astounded
Angels and devils who do all but die
Seeing Him fallen where thou couldst not follow,
Seeing Him mounted where thou couldst not fly,
Hand on the hilt, thou hast halted all thy legions
Waiting the Tetelestai and the acclaim,
Swords that salute Him dead and everlasting
God beyond God and greater than His Name.

Round us and over us the cold thoughts creeping
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the battle-cry!)
Round us and under us the thronged world sleeping
(Michael, Michael: Michael of the Charge!)
Guard us the Word; the trysting and the trusting
Edge upon the honour and the blade unrusting
Fine as the hair and tauter than the harpstring
Ready as when it rang upon the targe.

He that giveth peace unto us; not as the world giveth:
He that giveth law unto us; not as the scribes:
Shall he be softened for the softening of the cities

Patient in usury; delicate in bribes?
They that come to quiet us, saying the sword is broken,
Break man with famine, fetter them with gold,
Sell them as sheep; and He shall know the selling
For He was more than murdered. He was sold.

Michael, Michael: Michael of the Mustering,
Michael of the marching on the mountains of the Lord,
Marshal the world and purge of rot and riot
Rule through the world till all the world be quiet:
Only establish when the world is broken
What is unbroken is the word.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

To the Unknown Warrior

You whom the kings saluted; who refused not
The one great pleasure of ignoble days,
Fame without name and glory without gossip,
Whom no biographer befouls with praise.

Who said of you "Defeated"? In the darkness
The dug-out where the limelight never comes,
Nor the big drum of Barnum's show can shatter
That vibrant stillness after all the drums.

Though the time comes when every Yankee circus
Can use our soldiers for its sandwich-men,
When those that pay the piper call the tune,
You will not dance. You will not move again.

You will not march for Fatty Arbuckle,
Though he have yet a favourable press,
Tender as San Francisco to St. Francis
Or all the angels of Los Angeles.

They shall not storm the last unfallen fortress,
The lonely castle where uncowed and free,
Dwells the unknown and undefeated warrior
That did alone defeat Publicity.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Tribute to Gladstone

Lift up your heads; in life, in death,
God knoweth his head was high;
Quit we the coward's broken breath,
Who watched a strong man die.

If ye must say 'No more his peer
Cometh: the flag is furled,'
Stand not too near him; lest we hear
That slander on the world

The good green earth he loved and trod
Is still, with many a scar,
Writ in the chronicles of God
A giant-bearing star.

He fell: but Britain's banner swings
Above his sunken crown;
Black Death shall have his toil of kings
Before the cross goes down.

O young ones of a darker day,
In Art's wan colours clad,
Whose very love and hate are grey,
Whose very sin is sad,

Pass on: one agony long-drawn
Was merrier than your mirth;
When hand in hand came death and dawn
And spring was on the earth.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Variations of an Air

Old King Cole
Was a merry old soul
And a merry old soul was he
He called for his pipe
and he called for his bowl
and he called for his fiddlers three

after Lord Tennyson

Cole, that unwearied prince of Colchester,
Growing more gay with age and with long days
Deeper in laughter and desire of life
As that Virginian climber on our walls
Flames scarlet with the fading of the year;
Called for his wassail and that other weed
Virginian also, from the western woods
Where English Raleigh checked the boast of Spain,
And lighting joy with joy, and piling up
Pleasure as crown for pleasure, bade me bring
Those three, the minstrels whose emblazoned coats
Shone with the oyster-shells of Colchester;
And these three played, and playing grew more fain
Of mirth and music; till the heathen came
And the King slept beside the northern sea.

after W.B. Yeats

Of an old King in a story
From the grey sea-folk I have heard
Whose heart was no more broken
Than the wings of a bird.

As soon as the moon was silver
And the thin stars began,
He took his pipe and his tankard,
Like an old peasant man.

And three tall shadows were with him
And came at his command;
And played before him for ever
The fiddles of fairyland.

And he died in the young summer
Of the world's desire;
Before our hearts were broken
Like sticks in a fire.

after Walt Whitman

Me clairvoyant,
Me conscious of you, old camarado,
Needing no telescope, lorgnette, field-glass, opera-glass, myopic pince-nez,
Me piercing two thousand years with eye naked and not ashamed;
The crown cannot hide you from me,
Musty old feudal-heraldic trappings cannot hide you from me,
I perceive that you drink.
(I am drinking with you. I am as drunk as you are.)
I see you are inhaling tobacco, puffing, smoking, spitting
(I do not object to your spitting),
You prophetic of American largeness,
You anticipating the broad masculine manners of these States;
I see in you also there are movements, tremors, tears, desire for the melodious,
I salute your three violinists, endlessly making vibrations,
Rigid, relentless, capable of going on for ever;
They play my accompaniment; but I shall take no notice of any accompaniment;
I myself am a complete orchestra.
So long.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Who Goes Home?

In the city set upon slime and loam
They cry in their parliament 'Who goes home?'
And there comes no answer in arch or dome,
For none in the city of graves goes home.
Yet these shall perish and understand,
For God has pity on this great land.

Men that are men again; who goes home?
Tocsin and trumpeter! Who goes home?
For there's blood on the field and blood on the foam
And blood on the body when Man goes home.
And a voice valedictory . . . Who is for Victory?
Who is for Liberty? Who goes home?

Gilbert Keith Chesterton

Wine and Water

Old Noah he had an ostrich farm and fowls on the largest scale,
He ate his egg with a ladle in a egg-cup big as a pail,
And the soup he took was Elephant Soup and fish he took was Whale,
But they all were small to the cellar he took when he set out to sail,
And Noah he often said to his wife when he sat down to dine,
"I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine."

The cataract of the cliff of heaven fell blinding off the brink
As if it would wash the stars away as suds go down a sink,
The seven heavens came roaring down for the throats of hell to drink,
And Noah he cocked his eye and said, "It looks like rain, I think,
The water has drowned the Matterhorn as deep as a Mendip mine,
But I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine."

But Noah he sinned, and we have sinned; on tipsy feet we trod,
Till a great big black teetotaller was sent to us for a rod,
And you can't get wine at a P.S.A., or chapel, or Eisteddfod,
For the Curse of Water has come again because of the wrath of God,
And water is on the Bishop's board and the Higher Thinker's shrine,
But I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton