

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **James Kenneth Stephen**

**- poems -**

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#### **4th July 1882, Malines. Midnight**

Belgian, with cumbrous tread and iron boots,  
Who in the murky middle of the night,  
Designing to renew the foul pursuits  
In which thy life is passed, ill-favoured wight,  
And wishing on the platform to alight  
Where thou couldst mingle with thy fellow brutes,  
Didst walk the carriage floor (a leprous sight),  
As o'er the sky some baleful meteor shoots:  
Upon my slippered foot thou didst descend,  
Didst rouse me from my slumbers mad with pain,  
And laughedst loud for several minutes' space.  
Oh may'st thou suffer tortures without end:  
May fiends with glowing pincers rend thy brain,  
And beetles batten on thy blackened face!

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James Kenneth Stephen

## **A Parodist's Apology**

If I've dared laugh at you, Robert Browning,  
'Tis with eyes that with you have often wept:  
You have oftener left me smiling or frowning,  
Than any beside, one bard except.

But once you spoke to me, storm-tongued poet,  
A trivial word in an idle hour;  
But thrice I looked on your face and the glow it  
Bore from the flame of the inward power.

But you'd many a friend you never knew of,  
Your words lie hid in a hundred hearts,  
And thousands of hands that you've grasped but few of  
Would be raised to shield you from slander's darts.

For you lived in the sight of the land that owned you,  
You faced the trial, and stood the test:  
They have piled you a cairn that would fain have stoned you:  
You have spoken your message and earned your rest.

James Kenneth Stephen

## A Sonnet

Two voices are there: one is of the deep;  
It learns the storm-cloud's thunderous melody,  
Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea,  
Now bird-like pipes, now closes soft in sleep:  
And one is of an old half-witted sheep  
Which bleats articulate monotony,  
And indicates that two and one are three,  
That grass is green, lakes damp, and mountains steep:  
And, Wordsworth, both are thine: at certain times  
Forth from the heart of thy melodious rhymes,  
The form and pressure of high thoughts will burst:  
At other times -- good Lord! I'd rather be  
Quite unacquainted with the A.B.C.  
Than write such hopeless rubbish as thy worst.

James Kenneth Stephen

## **A Sonnet (Two Voices Are There)**

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## After the Golden Wedding (Three Soliloquies)

### I. The husband's.

She's not a faultless woman; no!  
She's not an angel in disguise:  
She has her rivals here below:  
She's not an unexampled prize:

She does not always see the point  
Of little jests her husband makes:  
And, when the world is out of joint,  
She makes a hundred small mistakes:

She's not a miracle of tact:  
Her temper's not the best I know:  
She's got her little faults in fact,  
Although I never tell her so.

But this, my wife, is why I hold you  
As good a wife as ever stepped,  
And why I meant it when I told you  
How cordially our feast I kept:

You've lived with me these fifty years,  
And all the time you loved me dearly:  
I may have given you cause for tears:  
I may have acted rather queerly.

I ceased to love you long ago:  
I loved another for a season:  
As time went on I came to know  
Your worth, my wife: and saw the reason

Why such a wife as you have been  
Is more than worth the world beside;  
You loved me all the time, my Queen;  
You couldn't help it if you tried.

You loved me as I once loved you,  
As each loved each beside the altar:  
And whatsoever I might do,  
Your loyal heart could never falter.

And, if you sometimes fail me, sweetest,  
And don't appreciate me, dear,  
No matter: such defects are meetest  
For poor humanity, I fear.

And all's forgiven, all's forgot,  
On this our golden wedding day;  
For, see! she loves me: does she not?  
So let the world e'en go its way.

I'm old and nearly useless now,  
Each day a greater weakling proves me:  
There's compensation anyhow:  
I still possess a wife that loves me.

## 2. The wife's.

Dear worthy husband! good old man!  
Fit hero of a golden marriage:  
I'll show towards you, if I can,  
And absolutely wifely carriage.

The months or years which your career  
May still comprise before you perish,  
Shall serve to prove that I, my dear,  
Can honour, and obey, and cherish.

Till death us part, as soon he must,  
(And you, my dear, should shew the way)  
I hope you'll always find me just  
The same as on our wedding day.

I never loved you, dearest: never!  
Let that be clearly understood:  
I thought you good, and rather clever,  
And found you really rather good.

And, what was more, I loved another,  
But couldn't get him: well, but, then  
You're just as bad, my erring brother,  
You most impeccable of men:--

Except for this: my love was married  
Some weeks before I married you:  
While you, my amorous dawdler, tarried  
Till we'd been wed a year or two.

You loved me at our wedding: I  
Loved some one else: and after that  
I never cast a loving eye  
On others: you -- well, tit for tat!

But after all I made you cheerful:  
Your whims I've humoured: saw the point  
Of all your jokes: grew duly tearful,  
When you were sad, yet chose the joint

You liked the best of all for dinner,  
And soothed you in your hours of woe:  
Although a miserable sinner,  
I am a good wife, as wives go.

I bore with you and took your side,  
And kept my temper all the time:  
I never flirted; never cried,  
No ranked it as a heinous crime,

When you preferred another lady,  
Or used improper words to me,  
Or told a story more than shady,  
Or snored and snorted after tea,

Or otherwise gave proofs of being  
A dull and rather vain old man:  
I still succeeded in agreeing  
With all you said, (the safest plan),

Yet always strove my point to carry,  
And make you do as I desired:  
I'm glad my people made me marry!  
They hit on just what I required.

Had love been wanted - well, I couldn't  
Have given what I'd not to give;  
Or had a genius asked me! wouldn't  
The man have suffered? now, we live

Among our estimable neighbours  
A decent and decorous life:  
I've earned by my protracted labours  
The title of a model wife.

But when beneath the turf you're sleeping,  
And I'm sitting here in black,  
Engaged, as they'll suppose, in weeping,  
I shall not wish to have you back.

### 3. The Vicar's.

A good old couple! kind and wise!  
And oh! what love for one another!  
They've won, those two, life's highest prize,  
Oh! let us copy them, my brother.

James Kenneth Stephen

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James Kenneth Stephen

## Drinking Song

There are people, I know, to be found,  
Who say, and apparently think,  
That sorrow and care may be drowned  
By a timely consumption of drink.

Does not man, these enthusiasts ask,  
Most nearly approach the divine,  
When engaged in the soul-stirring task  
Of filling his body with wine?

Have not beggars been frequently known,  
When satisfied, soaked, and replete,  
To imagine their bench was a throne  
And the civilised world at their feet?

Lord Byron has finely described  
The remarkably soothing effect  
Of liquor, profusely imbibed,  
On a soul that is shattered and wrecked.

In short, if your body or mind  
Or your soul or your purse come to grief,  
You need only get drunk, and you'll find  
Complete and immediate relief.

For myself, I have managed to do  
Without having recourse to this plan,  
So I can't write a poem for you,  
And you'd better get someone who can.

James Kenneth Stephen

## England and America

### 1. ON A RHINE STEAMER.

Republic of the West,  
Enlightened, free, sublime,  
Unquestionably best  
Production of our time.

The telephone is thine,  
And thine the Pullman Car,  
The caucus, the divine  
Intense electric star.

To thee we likewise owe  
The venerable names  
Of Edgar Allan Poe,  
And Mr. Henry James.

In short it's due to thee,  
Thou kind of Western star,  
That we have come to be  
Precisely what we are.

But every now and then,  
It cannot be denied,  
You breed a kind of men  
Who are not dignified,

Or courteous or refined,  
Benevolent or wise,  
Or gifted with a mind  
Beyond the common size,

Or notable for tact,  
Agreeable to me,  
Or anything, in fact,  
That people ought to be.

### 2. ON A PARISIAN BOULEVARD.

Britannia rules the waves,  
As I have heard her say;  
She frees whatever slaves  
She meets upon her way.

A teeming mother she  
Of Parliaments and Laws;  
Majestic, mighty, free:  
Devoid of common flaws.

For here did Shakspeare write  
His admirable plays:

For her did Nelson fight  
And Wolseley win his bays.

Her sturdy common sense  
Is based on solid grounds:  
By saving numerous pence  
She spends effective pounds.

The Saxon and the Celt  
She equitably rules;  
Her iron rod is felt  
By countless knaves and fools.

In fact, mankind at large,  
Black, yellow, white and red,  
Is given to her in charge,  
And owns her as a head.

But every here and there--  
Deny it if you can--  
She breeds a vacant stare  
Unworthy of a man:

A look of dull surprise;  
A nerveless idle hand:  
An eye which never tries  
To threaten or command:

In short, a kind of man,  
If man indeed he be,  
As worthy of our ban  
As any that we see:

Unspeakably obtuse,  
Abominably vain,  
Of very little use,  
And execrably plain.

James Kenneth Stephen

## Men and Women

### 1. IN THE BACKS.

As I was strolling lonely in the Backs,  
I met a woman whom I did not like.  
I did not like the way the woman walked:  
Loose-hipped, big-boned, disjointed, angular.  
If her anatomy comprised a waist,  
I did not notice it: she had a face  
With eyes and lips adjusted thereunto,  
But round her mouth no pleasing shadows stirred,  
Nor did her eyes invite a second glance.  
Her dress was absolutely colourless,  
Devoid of taste or shape or character;  
Her boots were rather old, and rather large,  
And rather shabby, not precisely matched.  
Her hair was very far from beautiful  
And not abundant: she had such a hat  
As neither merits nor expects remark.  
She was not clever, I am very sure,  
Nor witty nor amusing: well-informed  
She may have been, and kind, perhaps, of heart;  
But gossip was writ plain upon her face.  
And so she stalked her dull unthinking way;  
Or, if she thought of anything, it was  
That such a one had got a second class,  
Or Mrs So-and-So a second child.  
I did not want to see that girl again:  
I did not like her: and I should not mind  
If she were done away with, killed, or ploughed.  
She did not seem to serve a useful end:  
And certainly she was not beautiful.

### 2. ON THE KING'S PARADE.

As I was waiting for the tardy tram,  
I met what purported to be a man.  
What seemed to pass for its material frame,  
The semblance of a suit of clothes had on,  
Fit emblem of the grand sartorial art  
And worthy of a more sublime abode.  
Its coat and waistcoat were of weird design  
Adapted to the fashion's latest whim.  
I think it wore an Athen©ium tie.  
White flannels draped its too ethereal limbs  
And in its vacant eye there glared a glass.

In vain for this poor derelict of flesh,  
Void of the spirit it was built to house,  
Have classic poets tuned their deathless lyre,  
Astute historians fingered mouldering sheets  
And reared a palace of sententious truth.

In vain has y been added unto x,  
In vain the mighty decimal unrolled,  
Which strives indefinitely to be Yg  
In vain the palpitating frog has groaned  
Beneath the licensed knife: in vain for this  
The surreptitious corpse been disinterred  
And forced, amid the disinfectant fumes,  
To yield its secrets to philosophy.  
In vain the stress and storm of politics  
Beat round this empty head: in vain the priest  
Pronounces loud anathemas: the fool  
In vain remarks upon the fact that God  
Is missing in the world of his belief.  
Vain are the problems whether space, or time,  
Or force, or matter can be said to be:  
Vain are the mysteries of Melchisedec,  
And vain Methuselah's unusual years.

It had a landlady I make no doubt;  
A friend or two as vacant as itself;  
A kitchen-bill; a thousand cigarettes;  
A dog which knew it for the fool it was.  
Perhaps it was a member of the Union,  
Who votes as often as he does not speak,  
And "recommends" as wildly as he spells.  
Its income was as much beyond its merits  
As less than its inane expenditure.  
Its conversation stood to common sense  
As stands the Sporting Times (its favourite print)  
To wit or humour. It was seldom drunk,  
But seldom sober when it went to bed.

The mean contents of these superior clothes  
Were they but duly trained by careful hands,  
And castigated with remorseless zeal,  
Endowed with purpose, gifted with a mind,  
And taught to work, or play, or talk, or laugh,  
Might possibly aspire--I do not know--  
To pass, in time, for what they dare to scorn,  
An ordinary undergraduate.

What did this thing crawling 'twixt heaven and earth,  
Amid the network of our grimy streets?  
What end was it intended to subserve,  
What lowly mission fashioned to neglect?  
It did not seem to wish for a degree,  
And what its object was I do not know,  
Unless it was to catch the tardy tram.

James Kenneth Stephen

## **My Education**

At school I sometimes read a book,  
And learned a lot of lessons;  
Some small amount of pains I took,  
And showed much acquiescence  
In what my masters said, good men!  
Yet after all I quite  
Forgot the most of it: but then  
I learned to write.

At Lincoln's Inn I'd read a brief,  
Abstract a title, study  
Great paper-piles, beyond belief  
Inelegant and muddy:  
The whole of these as time went by  
I soon forgot: indeed  
I tried to: yes: but by and by  
I learned to read.

By help of Latin, Greek and Law  
I now can write and read too:  
Then perish each forgotten saw,  
Each fact I do not need too:  
But still whichever way I turn  
At one sad task I stick:  
I fear that I shall never learn  
Arithmetic.

James Kenneth Stephen

### **Of F.W.H.M. to One that Smokes**

Spare us the hint of slightest desecration,  
Spotless preserve us an untainted shrine;  
Not for thy sake, oh goddess of creation,  
Not for thy sake, oh woman, but for mine.

James Kenneth Stephen

## Steam-Launches on the Thames

Henley, June 7, 1891.

Shall we, to whom the stream by right belongs,  
Who travel silent, save, perchance, for songs;  
Whose track's a ripple,--leaves the Thames a lake,  
Nor frights the swan--scarce makes the rushes shake;  
Who harmonize, exemplify, complete  
And vivify a scene already sweet:  
Who travel careless on, from lock to lock,  
Oblivious that the world contains a clock,  
With pace commensurate to our desires,  
Propelled by other force than Stygian fire's;  
Shall we be driven hence to leave a place  
For these, who bring upon our stream disgrace:  
The rush, the roar, the stench, the smoke, the steam,  
The nightmare striking through our heavenly dream;  
The scream as shrill and hateful to the ear  
As when a peacock vents his rage and fear;  
Which churn to fury all a glassy reach,  
And heave rude breakers on a pebbly beach:  
Which half o'erwhelm with waves our frailer craft,  
While graceless shop-boys chuckle fore and aft:  
Foul water-toadstools, noisome filth-stained shapes,  
Fit only to be manned by dogs and apes:  
Blots upon nature: scars that mar her smile:  
Obscene, obtrusive, execrable, vile?

James Kenneth Stephen

## **The Ballade of the Incompetent Ballade-Monger**

I am not ambitious at all:  
I am not a poet, I know  
(Though I do love to see a mere scrawl  
To order and symmetry grow).  
My muse is uncertain and slow,  
I am not expert with my tools,  
I lack the poetic argot:  
But I hope I have kept to the rules.

When your brain is undoubtedly small,  
'Tis hard, sir, to write in a row,  
Some five or six rhymes to Nepaul,  
And more than a dozen to Joe:  
The metre is easier though,  
Three rhymes are sufficient for 'ghouls,'  
My lines are deficient in go,  
But I hope I have kept to the rules.

Unable to fly let me crawl,  
Your patronage kindly bestow:  
I am not the author of Saul,  
I am not Voltaire or Rousseau:  
I am not desirous, oh no!  
To rise from the ranks of the fools,  
To shine with Gosse, Dobson and Co.:  
But I hope I have kept to the rules.

Dear Sir, though my language is low,  
Let me dip in Pierian pools:  
My verses are only so so,  
But I hope I have kept to the rules.

James Kenneth Stephen

## **The Last Ride Together (after Browning)**

(From Her Point of View)

When I had firmly answered 'No',  
And he allowed that that was so,  
I really thought I should be free  
For good and all from Mr B.,  
And that he would soberly acquiesce:  
I said that it would be discreet  
That for a while we should not meet;  
I promised I would always feel  
A kindly interest in his weal;  
I thanked him for his amorous zeal;  
In short, I said all I could but 'yes'.

I said what I'm accustomed to,  
I acted as I always do;  
I promised he should find in me  
A friend, - a sister, if that might be:  
But he was still dissatisfied:  
He certainly was most polite;  
He said exactly what was right,  
He acted very properly,  
Except indeed for this, that he  
Insisted on inviting me  
To come with him for 'one more last ride'.

A little while in doubt I stood:  
A ride, no doubt, would do me good:  
I had a habit and a hat  
Extremely well worth looking at:  
The weather was distinctly fine:  
My horse too wanted exercise,  
And time, when one is riding, flies:  
Besides it really seemed, you see,  
The only way of ridding me  
Of pertinacious Mr B.:  
So my head I graciously incline.

I won't say much of what happened next:  
I own I was extremely vexed:  
Indeed I should have been aghast  
If anyone had seen what passed:  
But nobody need ever know  
That, as I leaned forward to stir the fire,  
He advanced before I could well retire,  
And I suddenly felt, to my great alarm,  
The grasp of a warm unlicensed arm,  
An embrace in which I found no charm;  
I was awfully glad when he let me go.

Then we began to ride: my steed  
Washer fresh, too fresh indeed,

And at first I thought of little, save  
The way to escape an early grave,  
As the dust rose up on either side.  
My stern companion jogged along  
On a brown old cob both broad and strong:  
He looked as he does when he's writing verse,  
Or endeavouring not to swear and curse,  
Or wondering where he has left his purse,  
Indeed it was a sombre ride.

I spoke of the weather to Mr B.,  
But he neither listened nor spoke to me;  
I praised his horse, and I smiled the smile  
Which was wont to move him once on a while;  
I said I was wearing his favourite flowers:  
But I wasted my words on the desert air,  
For he rode with a fixed and gloomy stare:  
I wonder what he was thinking about:  
As I don't read verse, I shan't find out:  
It was something subtle and deep, no doubt,  
A theme to detain a man for hours.

Ah! there was the corner where Mr S.  
So nearly induced me to whisper 'yes':  
And here it was that the next but one  
Proposed on horseback, or would have done,  
Had his horse not most opportunely shied;  
Which perhaps was due to an unseen flick  
He received from my whip: 'twas a scurvy trick,  
But I never could do with that young man:  
I hope his present young woman can.  
Well, I must say, never, since time began,  
Did I go for a duller or longer ride.

He never smiles and he never speaks:  
He might go on like this for weeks:  
He rolls a slightly frenzied eye  
Towards the blue and burning sky,  
And the cob bounds on with tireless stride,  
If we aren't at home for lunch at two  
I don't know what Papa will do;  
But I know full well he will say to me  
'I never approved of Mr B.;  
It's the very devil that you and he  
Ride, ride together, for ever ride.'

James Kenneth Stephen

## **The Malefactor's Plea**

Of sentences that stir my bile,  
Of phrases I detest,  
There's one beyond all others vile;  
"He did it for the best."

Of course he did: I don't suppose,  
Nor can you think I should,  
The man's among my deadliest foes,  
Or is not fairly good.

Of course he did it for the best:  
What should he do it for?  
But did he do it? that's the test:  
I ask to know no more.

Alas! he did: and here am I,  
Quite ruined, half disgraced;  
And you can really ask me why  
My wrath is not effaced:

And there is he, good worthy man,  
With self-esteem possessed,  
Still saying, as of course he can,  
"I did it for the best."

No evil deed was ever done,  
Or honest man withstood,  
Since first this weary world begun,  
Except for someone's good.

And can it signify to me  
Whose good he did it for?  
Mine was it? thus 'twas wont to be,  
And will be ever more.

When inoffensive people plant  
A dagger in your breast,  
Your good is what they really want:  
They do it for the best.

James Kenneth Stephen

## The Old School List

In a wild moraine of forgotten books,  
On the glacier of years gone by,  
As I plied my rake for order's sake,  
There was one that caught my eye:  
And I sat by the shelf till I lost myself.  
And roamed in the crowded mist,  
And heard lost voices and saw lost looks,  
As I pored on an Old School List.

What a jumble of names! there were some that I knew,  
As a brother is known: to-day  
Gone I know not where, nay I hardly care,  
For their places are full: and, they--  
What climes they have ranged: how much they're changed!  
Time, place and pursuits assist  
In transforming them: stay where you are: adieu!  
You are all in the Old School List.

There are some who did nothing at school, much since:  
And others much then, since naught:  
They are middle-aged men, grown bald since then:  
Some have travelled, and some have fought:  
And some have written, and some are bitten  
With strange new faiths: desist  
From tracking them: broker or priest of prince,  
They are all in the Old School List.

There's a grave grey lawyer in King's Bench Walk,  
Whose clients are passing few:  
He seldom speaks: in those lonely weeks,  
What on earth can he find to do?  
Well, he stroked the eight -- what a splendid fate!--  
And the Newcastle barely missed:  
"A future Lord Chancellor!" so we'd talk  
In the days of the old School List.

There were several duffers and several bores,  
Whose faces I've half forgot,  
Whom I lived among, when the world was young,  
And who talked "no end of rot":  
Are they now little clerks who stroll in the Parks  
Or scribble with grimy fist,  
Or rich little peers who hire Scotch moors?  
Well -- they're all in the old School List.

There were some who were certain to prosper and thrive,  
And certain to do no more,  
Who were "capital chaps," and, tho' moderate saps,  
Would never stay in after four:  
Now day after day they are packed away,  
After being connubially kissed,  
To work in the city from ten to five:

There they are in the old School List.

There were two good fellows I used to know.  
--How distant it all appears!  
We played together in football weather,  
And messed together for years:  
Now one of them's wed, and the other's dead  
So long that he's hardly missed  
Save by us, who messed with him years ago:  
But we're all in the old School List.

James Kenneth Stephen

## **The Philosopher and the Philanthropist**

Searching an infinite Where,  
Probing a bottomless When,  
Dreamfully wandering,  
Ceaselessly pondering,  
What is the Wherefore of men:  
Bartering life for a There,  
Selling his soul for a Then,  
Baffling obscurity,  
Conning futurity,  
Usefulest, wisest of men!  
Grasping the Present of Life,  
Seizing a definite Now,  
Labouring thornfully,  
Banishing scornfully  
Doubts of his Whither and How:  
Spending his substance in Strife,  
Working a practical How,  
Letting obscurity  
Rest on futurity,  
Usefuler, wiser, I trow.

James Kenneth Stephen

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James Kenneth Stephen

## To R. K.

As long I dwell on some stupendous  
And tremendous (Heaven defend us!)  
Monstr'-inform'-ingens-horrendous  
Demoniaco-seraphic  
Penman's latest piece of graphic.

BROWNING.

Will there never come a season  
Which shall rid us from the curse  
Of a prose which knows no reason  
And an unmelodious verse:  
When the world shall cease to wonder  
At the genius of an Ass,  
And a boy's eccentric blunder  
Shall not bring success to pass:  
When mankind shall be delivered  
From the clash of magazines,  
And the inkstand shall be shivered  
Into countless smithereens:  
When there stands a muzzled stripling,  
Mute, beside a muzzled bore:  
When the Rudyards cease from kipling  
And the Haggards Ride no more.

James Kenneth Stephen

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