

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

THE WILD KNIGHT AND
OTHER POEMS

Gilbert Chesterton

The Wild Knight and Other Poems

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NOTE

My thanks are due to the Editors of the *Outlook* and the *Speaker* for the kind permission they have given me to reprint a considerable number of the following poems. They have been selected and arranged rather with a view to unity of spirit than to unity of time or value; many of them being juvenile.

_Another tattered rhymster in the ring,
With but the old plea to the sneering schools,
That on him too, some secret night in spring
Came the old frenzy of a hundred fools

To make some thing: the old want dark and deep,
The thirst of men, the hunger of the stars,
Since first it tinged even the Eternal's sleep,
With monstrous dreams of trees and towns and mars.

When all He made for the first time He saw,
Scattering stars as misers shake their pelf.
Then in the last strange wrath broke His own law,
And made a graven image of Himself._

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 that 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.

THE WORLD'S LOVER

My eyes are full of lonely mirth:
Reeling with want and worn with scars,
For pride of every stone on earth,
I shake my spear at all the stars.

A live bat beats my crest above,
Lean foxes nose where I have trod,
And on my naked face the love
Which is the loneliness of God.

Outlawed: since that great day gone by —
When before prince and pope and queen
I stood and spoke a blasphemy —
'Behold the summer leaves are green.'

They cursed me: what was that to me
Who in that summer darkness furl'd,
With but an owl and snail to see,
Had blessed and conquered all the world?

They bound me to the scourging-stake,
They laid their whips of thorn on me;
I wept to see the green rods break,
Though blood be beautiful to see.

Beneath the gallows' foot abhorred
The crowds cry 'Crucify!' and 'Kill!'
Higher the priests sing, 'Praise the Lord,
The warlock dies'; and higher still

Shall heaven and earth hear one cry sent
Even from the hideous gibbet height,
'Praise to the Lord Omnipotent,
The vultures have a feast to-night.'

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.

A CHORD OF COLOUR

My Lady clad herself in grey,
That caught and clung about her throat;
Then all the long grey winter day
On me a living splendour smote;
And why grey palmers holy are,
And why grey minsters great in story,
And grey skies ring the morning star,
And grey hairs are a crown of glory.

My Lady clad herself in green,
Like meadows where the wind-waves pass;
Then round my spirit spread, I ween,
A splendour of forgotten grass.
Then all that dropped of stem or sod,
Hoarded as emeralds might be,
I bowed to every bush, and trod
Amid the live grass fearfully.

My Lady clad herself in blue,
Then on me, like the seer long gone,
The likeness of a sapphire grew,
The throne of him that sat thereon.
Then knew I why the Fashioner
Splashed reckless blue on sky and sea;
And ere 'twas good enough for her,
He tried it on Eternity.

Beneath the gnarled old Knowledge-tree
Sat, like an owl, the evil sage:
'The World's a bubble,' solemnly
He read, and turned a second page.
'A bubble, then, old crow,' I cried,
'God keep you in your weary wit!
'A bubble – have you ever spied
'The colours I have seen on it?'

THE HAPPY MAN

To teach the grey earth like a child,
To bid the heavens repent,
I only ask from Fate the gift
Of one man well content.

Him will I find: though when in vain
I search the feast and mart,
The fading flowers of liberty,
The painted masks of art.

I only find him at the last,
On one old hill where nod
Golgotha's ghastly trinity —
Three persons and one god.

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

I do not cry, beloved, neither curse.
Silence and strength, these two at least are good.
He gave me sun and stars and ought 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.

A NOVELTY

Why should I care for the Ages
Because they are old and grey?
To me, like sudden laughter,
The stars are fresh and gay;
The world is a daring fancy,
And finished yesterday.

Why should I bow to the Ages
Because they were drear and dry?
Slow trees and ripening meadows
For me go roaring by,
A living charge, a struggle
To escalate the sky.

The eternal suns and systems,
Solid and silent all,
To me are stars of an instant,
Only the fires that fall
From God's good rocket, rising
On this night of carnival.

ULTIMATE

The vision of a haloed host
That weep around an empty throne;
And, aureoles dark and angels dead,
Man with his own life stands alone.

'I am,' he says his bankrupt creed:
'I am,' and is again a clod:
The sparrow starts, the grasses stir,
For he has said the name of God.

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.

THE BEATIFIC VISION

Through what fierce incarnations, furled
In fire and darkness, did I go,
Ere I was worthy in the world
To see a dandelion grow?

Well, if in any woes or wars
I bought my naked right to be,
Grew worthy of the grass, nor gave
The wren, my brother, shame for me.

But what shall God not ask of him
In the last time when all is told,
Who saw her stand beside the hearth,
The firelight garbing her in gold?

THE HOPE OF THE STREETS

The still sweet meadows shimmered: and I stood
And cursed them, bloom of hedge and bird of tree,
And bright and high beyond the hunch-backed wood
The thunder and the splendour of the sea.

Give back the Babylon where I was born,
The lips that gape give back, the hands that grope,
And noise and blood and suffocating scorn
An eddy of fierce faces – and a hope

That 'mid those myriad heads one head find place,
With brown hair curled like breakers of the sea,
And two eyes set so strangely in the face
That all things else are nothing suddenly.

ECCLESIASTES

There is one sin: to call a green leaf grey,
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.

THE SONG OF THE CHILDREN

The World is ours till sunset,
Holly and fire and snow;
And the name of our dead brother
Who loved us long ago.

The grown folk mighty and cunning,
They write his name in gold;
But we can tell a little
Of the million tales he told.

He taught them laws and watchwords,
To preach and struggle and pray;
But he taught us deep in the hayfield
The games that the angels play.

Had he stayed here for ever,
Their world would be wise as ours —
And the king be cutting capers,
And the priest be picking flowers.

But the dark day came: they gathered:
On their faces we could see
They had taken and slain our brother,
And hanged him on a tree.

THE FISH

Dark the sea was: but I saw him,
One great head with goggle eyes,
Like a diabolic cherub
Flying in those fallen skies.

I have heard the hoarse deniers,
I have known the wordy wars;
I have seen a man, by shouting,
Seek to orphan all the stars.

I have seen a fool half-fashioned
Borrow from the heavens a tongue,
So to curse them more at leisure —
— And I trod him not as dung.

For I saw that finny goblin
Hidden in the abyss untrod;
And I knew there can be laughter
On the secret face of God.

Blow the trumpets, crown the sages,
Bring the age by reason fed!
(He that sitteth in the heavens,
'He shall laugh' — the prophet said.)

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.

THOU SHALT NOT KILL

I had grown weary of him; of his breath
And hands and features I was sick to death.
Each day I heard the same dull voice and tread;
I did not hate him: but I wished him dead.
And he must with his blank face fill my life —
Then my brain blackened; and I snatched a knife.

But ere I struck, my soul's grey deserts through
A voice cried, 'Know at least what thing you do.'
'This is a common man: knowest thou, O soul,
What this thing is? somewhere where seasons roll
There is some living thing for whom this man
Is as seven heavens girt into a span,
For some one soul you take the world away —
Now know you well your deed and purpose. Slay!'

Then I cast down the knife upon the ground
And saw that mean man for one moment crowned.
I turned and laughed: for there was no one by —
The man that I had sought to slay was I.

A CERTAIN EVENING

That night the whole world mingled,
The souls were babes at play,
And angel danced with devil.
And God cried, 'Holiday!'

The sea had climbed the mountain peaks,
And shouted to the stars
To come to play; and down they came
Splashing in happy wars.

The pine grew apples for a whim,
The cart-horse built a nest;
The oxen flew, the flowers sang,
The sun rose in the west.

And 'neath the load of many worlds,
The lowest life God made
Lifted his huge and heavy limbs
And into heaven strayed.

To where the highest life God made
Before His presence stands;
But God himself cried, 'Holiday!'
And she gave me both her hands.

A MAN AND HIS IMAGE

All day the nations climb and crawl and pray
In one long pilgrimage to one white shrine,
Where sleeps a saint whose pardon, like his peace,
Is wide as death, as common, as divine.

His statue in an aureole fills the shrine,
The reckless nightingale, the roaming fawn,
Share the broad blessing of his lifted hands,
Under the canopy, above the lawn.

But one strange night, a night of gale and flood,
A sound came louder than the wild wind's tone;
The grave-gates shook and opened: and one stood
Blue in the moonlight, rotten to the bone.

Then on the statue, graven with holy smiles,
There came another smile – tremendous – one
Of an Egyptian god. 'Why should you rise?
'Do I not guard your secret from the sun?

The nations come; they kneel among the flowers
Sprung from your blood, blossoms of May and June,
Which do not poison them – is it not strange?
Speak!' And the dead man shuddered in the moon.

Shall I not cry the truth?' – the dead man cowered —
Is it not sad, with life so tame and cold,
What earth should fade into the sun's white fires
With the best jest in all its tales untold?

'If I should cry that in this shrine lie hid
Stories that Satan from his mouth would spew;
Wild tales that men in hell tell hoarsely – speak!
Saint and Deliverer! Should I slander you?'

Slowly the cowering corse reared up its head,
'Nay, I am vile ... but when for all to see,
You stand there, pure and painless – death of life!
Let the stars fall – I say you slander me!

'You make me perfect, public, colourless;
You make my virtues sit at ease – you lie!
For mine were never easy – lost or saved,
I had a soul – I was. And where am I?

Where is my good? the little real hoard,
The secret tears, the sudden chivalries;
The tragic love, the futile triumph – where?
Thief, dog, and son of devils – where are these?

I will lift up my head: in leprous loves
Lost, and the soul's dishonourable scars —
By God I was a better man than This
That stands and slanders me to all the stars.

'Come down!' And with an awful cry, the corse
Sprang on the sacred tomb of many tales,
And stone and bone, locked in a loathsome strife,
Swayed to the singing of the nightingales.

Then one was thrown: and where the statue stood
Under the canopy, above the lawn,
The corse stood; grey and lean, with lifted hands
Raised in tremendous welcome to the dawn.

'Now let all nations climb and crawl and pray;
Though I be basest of my old red clan,
They shall not scale, with cries or sacrifice,
The stature of the spirit of a man.'

THE MARINER

The violet scent is sacred
Like dreams of angels bright;
The hawthorn smells of passion
Told in a moonless night.

But the smell is in my nostrils,
Through blossoms red or gold,
Of my own green flower unfading,
A bitter smell and bold.

The lily smells of pardon,
The rose of mirth; but mine
Smells shrewd of death and honour,
And the doom of Adam's line.

The heavy scent of wine-shops
Floats as I pass them by,
But never a cup I quaff from,
And never a house have I.

Till dropped down forty fathoms,
I lie eternally;
And drink from God's own goblet
The green wine of the sea.

THE TRIUMPH OF MAN

I plod and peer amid mean sounds and shapes,
I hunt for dusty gain and dreary praise,
And slowly pass the dismal grinning days,
Monkeying each other like a line of apes.

What care? There was one hour amid all these
When I had stripped off like a tawdry glove
My starriest hopes and wants, for very love
Of time and desolate eternities.

Yea, for one great hour's triumph, not in me
Nor any hope of mine did I rejoice,
But in a meadow game of girls and boys
Some sunset in the centuries to be.

CYCLOPEAN

A mountainous and mystic brute
No rein can curb, no arrow shoot,
Upon whose domed 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.

JOSEPH

If the stars fell; night's nameless dreams
Of bliss and blasphemy came true,
If skies were green and snow were gold,
And you loved me as I love you;

O long light hands and curled brown hair,
And eyes where sits a naked soul;
Dare I even then draw near and burn
My fingers in the aureole?

Yes, in the one wise foolish hour
God gives this strange strength to a man.
He can demand, though not deserve,
Where ask he cannot, seize he can.

But once the blood's wild wedding o'er,
Were not dread his, half dark desire,
To see the Christ-child in the cot,
The Virgin Mary by the fire?

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 cowed 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

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