

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

THE BALLAD OF THE
WHITE HORSE

Gilbert Chesterton

The Ballad of the White Horse

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G. K. Chesterton

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Prefatory Note

This ballad needs no historical notes, for the simple reason that it does not profess to be historical. All of it that is not frankly fictitious, as in any prose romance about the past, is meant to emphasize tradition rather than history. King Alfred is not a legend in the sense that King Arthur may be a legend; that is, in the sense that he may possibly be a lie. But King Alfred is a legend in this broader and more human sense, that the legends are the most important things about him.

The cult of Alfred was a popular cult, from the darkness of the ninth century to the deepening twilight of the twentieth. It is wholly as a popular legend that I deal with him here. I write as one ignorant of everything, except that I have found the legend of a King of Wessex still alive in the land. I will give three curt cases of what I mean. A tradition connects the ultimate victory of Alfred with the valley in Berkshire called the Vale of the White Horse. I have seen doubts of the tradition, which may be valid doubts. I do not know when or where the story started; it is enough that it started somewhere and ended with me; for I only seek to write upon a hearsay, as the old balladists did. For the second case, there is a popular tale that Alfred played the harp and sang in the Danish camp; I select it because it is a popular tale, at whatever time it arose. For the third case, there is a popular tale that Alfred came in contact with a woman and cakes; I select it because it is a popular tale, because it is a vulgar one. It has been disputed by grave historians, who were, I think, a little too grave to be good judges of it. The two chief charges against the story are that it was first recorded long after Alfred's death, and that (as Mr. Oman urges) Alfred never really wandered all alone without any thanes or soldiers. Both these objections might possibly be met. It has taken us nearly as long to learn the whole truth about Byron, and perhaps longer to learn the whole truth about Pepys, than elapsed between Alfred and the first writing of such tales. And as for the other objection, do the historians really think that Alfred after Wilton, or Napoleon after Leipsic, never walked about in a wood by himself for the matter of an hour or two? Ten minutes might be made sufficient for the essence of the story. But I am not concerned to prove the truth of these popular traditions. It is enough for me to maintain two things: that they are popular traditions; and that without these popular traditions we should have bothered about Alfred about as much as we bother about Eadwig.

One other consideration needs a note. Alfred has come down to us in the best way (that is, by national legends) solely for the same reason as Arthur and Roland and the other giants of that darkness, because he fought for the Christian civilization against the heathen nihilism. But since this work was really done by generation after generation, by the Romans before they withdrew, and by the Britons while they remained, I have summarised this first crusade in a triple symbol, and given to a fictitious Roman, Celt, and Saxon, a part in the glory of Ethandune. I fancy that in fact Alfred's Wessex was of very mixed bloods; but in any case, it is the chief value of legend to mix up the centuries while preserving the sentiment; to see all ages in a sort of splendid foreshortening. That is the use of tradition: it telescopes history.

G.K.C.

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,
Hearth 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 chattered 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

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