

IV - RELIGIOUS POEMS

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 labyrinthine lore, We are the three wise men of yore, And we
know all things but the truth.

We have gone round and round the hill, And lost the wood among the
trees, And learnt long names for every ill, And served the mad 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 tricks 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.

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 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,
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 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.

A SONG OF GIFTS TO GOD

When the first Christmas presents came, the straw where Christ was rolled
Smelt sweeter than their frankincense, burnt brighter than their gold, And a
wise man said, "We will not give; the thanks would be but cold."

"Nay," said the next, "To all new gifts, to this gift or another, Bends the
high gratitude of God; even as He now, my brother, Who had a Father for all
time, yet thanks Him for a Mother.

"Yet scarce for Him this yellow stone or prickly-smells and sparse. Who
holds the gold heart of the sun that fed these timber bars, Nor any scentless
lily lives for One that smells the stars."

Then spake the third of the Wise Men; the wisest of the three: "We may not
with the widest lives enlarge His liberty, Whose wings are wider than the
world. It is not He, but we.

"We say not He has more to gain, but we have more to lose. Less gold shall
go astray, we say, less gold, if thus we choose, Go to make harlots of the
Greeks and hucksters of the Jews.

"Less clouds before colossal feet redden in the under-light, To the blind
gods from Babylon less incense burn to-night, To the high beasts of Babylon,
whose mouths make mock of right."

Babe of the thousand birthdays, we that are young yet grey, White with the
centuries, still can find no better thing to say, We that with sects and whims
and wars have wasted Christmas Day.

Light Thou Thy censer to Thyself, for all our fires are dim, Stamp Thou
Thine image on our coin, for Caesar's face grows dim, And a dumb devil of
pride and greed has taken hold of him.

We bring Thee back great Christendom, churches and towns and towers.
And if our hands are glad, O God, to cast them down like flowers, 'Tis not that
they enrich Thine hands, but they are saved from ours.

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

Said the Lord God, "Build a house, Build it in the gorge of death,
Found it in the throats of hell. Where the lost sea muttereth, Fires and
whirlwinds, build it well."

Laboured sternly flame and wind, But a little, and they cry, "Lord, we
doubt of this Thy will, We are blind and murmur why," And the winds are
murmuring still.

Said the Lord God, "Build a house, Cleave its treasure from the earth,
With the jarring powers of hell Strive with formless might and mirth,
Tribes and war-men, build it well."

Then the raw red sons of men Brake the soil, and lopped the wood,
But a little and they shrill, "Lord, we cannot view Thy good," And the wild
men clamour still.

Said the Lord God, "Build a house, Smoke and iron, spark and steam,
Speak and vote and buy and sell; Let a new world throb and stream,
Seers and makers, build it well."

Strove the cunning men and strong, But a little and they cry, "Lord,
mayhap we are but clay, And we cannot know the why," And the wise
men doubt to-day.

Yet though worn and deaf and blind, Force and savage, king and seer
Labour still, they know not why; At the dim foundation here, Knead and
plough and think and ply.

Till at last, mayhap, hereon, Fused of passion and accord, Love its
crown and peace its stay Rise the city of the Lord That we darkly build to-
day.

A HYMN FOR THE CHURCH MILITANT

Great God, that bowest sky and star, Bow down our towering thoughts to
thee, And grant us in a faltering war The firm feet of humility.

Lord, we that snatch the swords of flame, Lord, we that cry about Thy
car. We too are weak with pride and shame, We too are as our foemen
are.

Yea, we are mad as they are mad, Yea, we are blind as they are blind,
Yea, we are very sick and sad Who bring good news to all mankind.

The dreadful joy Thy Son has sent Is heavier than any care; We find,
as Cain his punishment, Our pardon more than we can bear.

Lord, when we cry Thee far and near And thunder through all lands
unknown The gospel into every ear, Lord, let us not forget our own.

Cleanse us from ire of creed or class, The anger of the idle tings; Sow
in our souls, like living grass, The laughter of all lowly things.

THE BEATIFIC VISION

Then Bernard smiled at me, that I should gaze But I had gazed already;
caught the view, Faced the unfathomable ray of rays Which to itself and
by itself is true.

Then was my vision mightier than man's speech; Speech snapt before it
like a flying spell; And memory and all that time can teach Before that
splendid outrage failed and fell.

As when one dreameth and remembereth not Waking, what were his
pleasures or his pains, With every feature of the dream forgot, The
printed passion of the dream remains:--

Even such am I; within whose thoughts resides No picture of that sight
nor any part Nor any memory: in whom abides Only a happiness within
the heart,

A secret happiness that soaks the heart As hills are soaked by slow
unsealing snow, Or secret as that wind without a chart Whereon did the
wild leaves of Sibyl go.

O light uplifted from all mortal knowing, Send back a little of that
glimpse of thee. That of its glory I may kindle glowing One tiny spark for
all men yet to be.

THE TRUCE OF CHRISTMAS

Passionate peace is in the sky-- And in the snow in silver sealed The
beasts are perfect in the field, And men seem men so suddenly-- (But take
ten swords and ten times ten And blow the bugle in praising men; For
we are for all men under the sun, And they are against us every one;
And misers haggle and madmen clutch, And there is peril in praising much.
And we have the terrible tongues uncurled That praise the world to the sons
of the world.)

The idle humble hill and wood Are bowed upon the sacred birth, And
for one little hour the earth Is lazy with the love of good-- (But ready are
you, and ready am I, If the battle blow and the guns go by; For we are
for all men under the sun, And they are against us every one; And the
men that hate herd all together, To pride and gold, and the great white
feather And the thing is graven in star and stone That the men who love
are all alone.)

Hunger is hard and time is tough, But bless the beggars and kiss the
kings, For hope has broken the heart of things, And nothing was ever
praised enough. (But bold the shield for a sudden swing And point the
sword when you praise a thing, For we are for all men under the sun,
And they are against us every one; And mime and merchant, thane and
thrall Hate us because we love them all; Only till Christmastide go by
Passionate peace is in the sky.)

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.

A CHRISTMAS SONG FOR THREE GUILDS

TO BE SUNG A LONG TIME AGO--OR HENCE

THE CARPENTERS

St. Joseph to the Carpenters said on a Christmas Day: "The master shall have patience and the prentice shall obey; And your word unto your women shall be nowise hard or wild: For the sake of me, your master, who have worshipped Wife and Child. But softly you shall frame the fence, and softly carve the door, And softly plane the table--as to spread it for the poor, And all your thoughts be soft and white as the wood of the white tree. But if they tear the Charter, Jet the tocsin speak for me! Let the wooden sign above your shop be prouder to be scarred Than the lion-shield of Lancelot that hung at Joyous Garde."

THE SHOEMAKERS

St. Crispin to the shoemakers said on a Christmastide: "Who fashions at another's feet will get no good of pride. They were bleeding on the Mountain, the feet that brought good news, The latchet of whose shoes we were not worthy to unloose. See that your feet offend not, nor lightly lift your head, Tread softly on the sunlit roads the bright dust of the dead. Let your own feet be shod with peace; be lowly all your lives. But if they touch the Charter, ye shall nail it with your knives. And the bill-blades of the commons drive in all as dense array As once a crash of arrows came, upon St. Crispin's Day."

THE PAINTERS

St. Luke unto the painters on Christmas Day he said: "See that the robes are white you dare to dip in gold and red; For only gold the kings can give, and only blood the saints; And his high task grows perilous that mixes them in paints. Keep you the ancient order; follow the men that knew The labyrinth of black and whits, the maze of green and blue; Paint mighty things, paint paltry things, paint silly things or sweet. But if men break the Charter, you may slay them in the street. And if you paint one post for them, then ... but you know it well, You paint a harlot's face to drag all heroes down to hell."

ALL TOGETHER

Almighty God to all mankind on Christmas Day said He: "I rent you from the old red hills and, rending, made you free. There was charter, there was challenge; in a blast of breath I gave; You can be all things other; you cannot be a slave. You shall be tired and tolerant of fancies as they fade, But if men doubt the Charter, ye shall call on the Crusade-- Trumpet and torch and catapult, cannon and bow and blade, Because it was My challenge to all the things I made."

THE NATIVITY

The thatch on the roof was as golden, Though dusty the straw was and
old, The wind had a peal as of trumpets, Though blowing and barren and
cold, The mother's hair was a glory Though loosened and torn, For
under the eaves in the gloaming A child was born.

Have a myriad children been quickened. Have a myriad children grown
old, Grown gross and unloved and embittered, Grown cunning and
savage and cold? God abides In a terrible patience, Unangered, unworn,
And again for the child that was squandered A child is born.

What know we of æons behind us, Dim dynasties lost long ago, Huge
empires, like dreams unremembered, Huge cities for ages laid low? This
at least--that with blight and with blessing With flower and with thorn,
Love was there, and his cry was among them, "A child is born."

Though the darkness be noisy with systems, Dark fancies that fret and
disprove, Still the plumes stir around us, above us The wings of the
shadow of love: Oh! princes and priests, have ye seen it Grow pale
through your scorn. Huge dawns sleep before us, deep changes, A child
is born.

And the rafters of toil still are gilded With the dawn of the star of the
heart, And the wise men draw near in the twilight, Who are weary of
learning and art, And the face of the tyrant is darkened. His spirit is torn,
For a new King is enthroned; yea, the sternest, A child is born.

And the mother still joys for the whispered First stir of unspeakable
things, Still feels that high moment unfurling Red glory of Gabriel's wings.
Still the babe of an hour is a master Whom angels adorn, Emmanuel,
prophet, anointed, A child is born.

And thou, that art still in thy cradle, The sun being crown for thy brow.
Make answer, our flesh, make an answer, Say, whence art thou come--who
art thou? Art thou come back on earth for our teaching To train or to
warn--? Hush--how may we know?--knowing only A child is born.

A CHILD OF THE SNOWS

There is heard a hymn when the panes 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.

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 citted 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 timberwains, The ringing of the rivet 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 boat-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 giant sins bowed down to it, in Empire's huge eclipse, When darkness sat above the thrones, seven thunders on her lips, The woe of cities entered it, the clang of idols' falls, The scream of filthy Caesars stabbed high in their brazen halls, The dim hoarse Hoods of naked men, the worldrealms 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."