

**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.