

THE EARL'S QUEST.

*Written at Camp Despair, 20,000 ft., Chogo Ri  
Lungma, Baltistan.*

So now the Earl was well a-weary of  
The grievous folly of this wandering.  
Had he been able to have counted Love

Or Power, or Knowledge as the sole strong thing  
Fit to suffice his quest, his eyes had gleamed  
With the success already grasped. The sting

Of all he suffered, was that he esteemed  
His quest partook of all and yet of none.  
So as he rode the woodlands out there beamed

The dull large spectre of a grim flat sun,  
Red and obscure upon the leaden haze  
That lapped and wrapped and rode the horizon.

The Earl rode steadily on. A crest caught rays  
Of that abominable sunset, sharp  
With needles of young pines, their tips ablaze.

Their feet dead black; the wind's dark fingers warp  
To its own time their strings, a sombre mode  
Found by a ghost on a forgotten harp

Or (Still more terrible!) the lost dread ode  
That used to all the dead knights to their chief  
To the lone waters from the shadowy road.

So deemed the weary Earl of the wind's grief,  
And seemed to see about him form by form  
Like mighty wrecks, wave-shattered on a reef,

Moulded and mastered by the shapeless storm  
A thousand figures of himself the mist  
Enlarged, distorted: yet without a qualm

(So sad was he) he mounted the last twist  
Of the path's hate, and faced the wind, and saw  
The lead gleam to a surly amethyst

As the sun dipped, and Night put forth a paw  
Like a black panther's, and efface the East.  
Then, with a sudden inward catch of awe

As if behind him sprang some silent beast,  
So shuddered he, and spurred his horse, and found  
A black path towards the water; he released

The bridle; so the way went steep, ill bound  
On an accursed task, so dark it loomed  
Amid its yews and cypresses, each mound

About each root, a grave, where Hell entombed  
A vampire till the night broke sepulchre  
And all its phantoms desperate and doomed

Began to gather flesh, to breathe, to stir.  
Such was the path, yet hard should find the work  
Glamour, to weave her web of gossamer

Over such eyesight as the Earl's for murk.  
He had watched for larvae by the midnight roads,  
The stake-transpierced corpse, the caves where lurk

The demon spiders, and the shapeless toads  
Fed by their lovers duly on the draught  
That bloats and blisters, blackens and corrodes.

These had he seed of old ; so now he laughed,  
Not without bitterness deep-lying, that erst  
He had esteemed such foolish devil's craft

Part of his quest, his quest when fair and first  
He flung the last, the strongest horsemen back  
With such a buffet that no skill amerced

Its debt but headlong in his charger's track  
He must be hurled, rib-shattered by the shock ;  
And the loud populace exclaimed "Alack!"

Their favourite foiled. But oh! the royal stock  
Of holy kings from Christ to Charlemagne  
Hailed him, anointed him, fair lock by lock,

With oil that drew incalculable gain  
From those six olives in the midst whereof  
Christ prayed the last time, ere the fatal Wain

Stood in the sky reversed, and utmost Love  
Entered the sadness of Gethsemane.  
So did the king ; so did the priest above

Place his old hands upon the Earl's, decree  
The splendid and the solemn accolade  
That he should go forth to the world and be

Knight-errant ; so did then the fairest maid  
Of all that noble company keep hid  
The love that melted her ; she took the blade

Blessed by a mage, who slew the harmless kid  
With solemn rite and water poured athwart  
In stars and sigils,—fire leapt out amid,

And blazed upon the blade ; and stark cold swart  
Demons came hurtling to enforce the spell,  
Until the exorcism duly wrought

Fixed in the living steel so terrible  
A force nor man nor devil might assail,  
Nay—might approach the wary warrior well,

So long as he was clothed in silver mail  
Of purity, and iron-helmeted  
With ignorance of fear: so through the hail

Of flowers, of cries, of looks, of white and red,  
Fear, hatred, envy, love—nay, self-conceit  
Of girls that preened itself and masqued instead

Of love—he rode with head deep bowed—too sweet,  
Too solemn at that moment to respond,  
Or even to lift his evening eyes to greet

The one he knew was nearest—too, too fond!  
He dared not—not for his sake but for hers.  
So he bent down, and passed away beyond

In space, in time. [The myriad ministers  
Of God, seeing her soul, prayed God to send  
One spirit yet to turn him—subtly stirs

The eternal gory of god's mouth; "The end  
Is not, nor the beginning." Such the speech  
Our language fashions down—to comprehend.]

The wood broke suddenly upon the beach,  
Curved, flat; the water oozing on the sand  
Stretched waveless out beyond where eye might reach,

A grey and shapeless place, a hopeless land!  
Yet in that vast, that weary sad expanse  
The Earl saw three strange objects on the strand

His keen eye noted at the firstborn glance,  
And recognised as pointers for his soul;  
So that his soul was fervid in the dance,

Knowing itself one step more near the goal,  
Should he but make the perfect choice of these.  
Farthest, loose tethered, at a stake's control,

A shallop rocked before the sullen breeze.  
Midway, a hermit's hut stood solitary,  
A dim light set therein. Near and at ease

A jolly well-lit inn—no phantom airy!  
Solid and warm, short snatches of light song  
Issuing cheery now and then. "Be wary!"

Quoth the wise Earl, "I wander very long  
Far from my quest, assuredly to fall  
Sideways each step towards the House of Wrong,

"Were but one choice demented. Choice is small  
Here though. (A flash of insight in his mind)  
Which of these three gets answer to its call?

"Yon shallop?—leave to Galahad! Resigned  
Yon hermit to be welcome Lancelot!  
For me—the inn—what fate am I to find?

"Who cares? Shall I seek ever—do ye wot?—  
But in the outre, the obscure, the occult?  
My Master is of might to lift me what

"Hangs, veil of glamour, on my 'Quisque vult,'  
The morion's motto: to exhaust the cross,  
Bidding it glow with roses—the result

"What way he will: may be adventure's loss  
is gain to common sense; whereby I guess  
Wise men have hidden Mount Biagenos

"And all its height from fools who looked no less  
For snows to lurk beneath the roots of yew,  
Or in the caverns grim with gloominess

“Hid deep i’ the forests they would wander through,  
Instead of travelling the straightforward road.  
I call them fools—well, I have been one too.

“Now then at least for the secure abode  
And way of luck—knight-errantry once doffed,  
The ox set kicking at his self-set goad,

“Here’s for the hostel and the light aloft!  
Roderic, my lad! there’s pelf to pay the score  
For ale and cakes and venison and a soft

“Bed we have missed this three months—now no more  
Of folly! Avaunt, old Merlin’s nonsense lore!  
Ho there! Travellers! Mine host! Open the door!”

*Desunt cetera.*

In the second part—joyous inn fireside—the Earl refuses power, knowledge, and love (offered him by a guest) by the symbolic drink of ale and the cherry cheeks of the maid.

In part three she, coming secretly to him, warns him he must destroy the three vices, faith, hope, and charity. This he does easily, save the love of the figure of the Crucified; but at last conquering this, he attains. [These were never written.]