

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.]