

Greybeards At Play

By

G. K. Chesterton

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A DEDICATION TO E.C.B.

He was, through boyhood's storm and shower, My best, my nearest friend;
We wore one hat, smoked one cigar, One standing at each end.

We were two hearts with single hope, Two faces in one hood; I knew the
secrets of his youth; I watched his every mood.

The little things that none but I Saw were beyond his wont, The streaming
hair, the tie behind, The coat tails worn in front.

I marked the absent-minded scream, The little nervous trick Of rolling in the
grate, with eyes By friendship's light made quick.

But youth's black storms are gone and past, Bare is each aged brow; And,
since with age we're growing bald, Let us be babies now.

Learning we knew; but still to-day, With spelling-book devotion, Words of
one syllable we seek In moments of emotion.

Riches we knew; and well dressed dolls-- Dolls living--who expressed No
filial thoughts, however much You thumped them in the chest.

Old happiness is grey as we, And we may still outstrip her; If we be slippere
pantaloons, Oh let us hunt the slipper!

The old world glows with colours clear; And if, as saith the saint, The world
is but a painted show, Oh let us lick the paint!

Far, far behind are morbid hours, And lonely hearts that bleed. Far, far
behind us are the days, When we were old indeed.

Leave we the child: he is immersed With scientists and mystics: With deep
prophetic voice he cries Canadian food statistics.

But now I know how few and small, The things we crave need be-- Toys and
the universe and you-- A little friend to tea.

Behold the simple sum of things, Where, in one splendour spun, The stars
go round the Mulberry Bush, The Burning Bush, the Sun.

Now we are old and wise and grey, And shaky at the knees; Now is the true
time to delight In picture books like these.

Hoary and bent I dance one hour: What though I die at morn? There is a
shout among the stars, "To-night a child is born." CONTENTS

THE ONENESS OF THE PHILOSOPHER WITH NATURE

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ENVOY

THE ONENESS OF THE PHILOSOPHER WITH NATURE.

I love to see the little stars All dancing to one tune; I think quite highly of
the Sun, And kindly of the Moon.

The million forests of the Earth Come trooping in to tea. The great Niagara
waterfall Is never shy with me.

I am the tiger's confidant, And never mention names: The lion drops the
formal "Sir," And lets me call him James.

Into my ear the blushing Whale Stammers his love. I know Why the
Rhinoceros is sad, --Ah, child! 'twas long ago.

I am akin to all the Earth By many a tribal sign: The aged Pig will often wear
That sad, sweet smile of mine.

My niece, the Barnacle, has got My piercing eyes of black; The Elephant has
got my nose, I do not want it back.

I know the strange tale of the Slug; The Early Sin--the Fall-- The Sleep--the
Vision--and the Vow-- The Quest--the Crown--the Call.

And I have loved the Octopus, Since we were boys together. I love the
Vulture and the Shark: I even love the weather.

I love to bask in sunny fields, And when that hope is vain, I go and bask in
Baker Street, All in the pouring rain.

Come snow! where fly, by some strange law, Hard snowballs--without noise--
Through streets untenanted, except By good unconscious boys.

Come fog! exultant mystery-- Where, in strange darkness rolled, The end of
my own nose becomes A lovely legend old.

Come snow, and hail, and thunderbolts, Sleet, fire, and general fuss; Come
to my arms, come all at once-- Oh photograph me thus!

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OF THE DANGERS ATTENDING ALTRUISM ON THE HIGH SEAS.

Observe these Pirates bold and gay, That sail a gory sea: Notice their bright expression:-- The handsome one is me.

We plundered ships and harbours, We spoiled the Spanish main; But Nemesis watched over us, For it began to rain.

Oh all well-meaning folk take heed! Our Captain's fate was sore; A more well-meaning Pirate, Had never dripped with gore.

The rain was pouring long and loud, The sea was drear and dim; A little fish was floating there: Our Captain pitied him.

"How sad," he said, and dropped a tear Splash on the cabin roof, "That we are dry, while he is there Without a waterproof.

"We'll get him up on board at once; For Science teaches me, He will be wet if he remains Much longer in the sea."

They fished him out; the First Mate wept, And came with rugs and ale: The Boatswain brought him one golosh, And fixed it on his tail. But yet he never loved the ship; Against the mast he'd lean; If spoken to, he coughed and smiled, And blushed a pallid green.

Though plied with hardbake, beef and beer, He showed no wish to sup: The neatest riddles they could ask, He always gave them up.

They seized him and court-martialled him, In some excess of spleen, For lack of social sympathy, (Victoria xii. 18).

They gathered every evidence That might remove a doubt: They wrote a postcard in his name, And partly scratched it out.

Till, when his guilt was clear as day, With all formality They doomed the traitor to be drowned, And threw him in the sea.

The flashing sunset, as he sank, Made every scale a gem; And, turning with a graceful bow, He kissed his fin to them.

MORAL.

I am, I think I have remarked, Terrifically old, (The second Ice-age was a
farce, The first was rather cold.)

A friend of mine, a trilobite Had gathered in his youth, When trilobites were
trilobites, This all-important truth.

We aged ones play solemn parts-- Sire--guardian--uncle--king. Affection is
the salt of life, Kindness a noble thing.

The old alone may comprehend A sense in my decree; But--if you find a fish
on land, Oh throw it in the sea.

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ON THE DISASTROUS SPREAD OF ÆSTHETICISM IN ALL CLASSES.

Impetuously I sprang from bed, Long before lunch was up, That I might
drain the dizzy dew From day's first golden cup.

In swift devouring ecstasy Each toil in turn was done; I had done lying on
the lawn Three minutes after one.

For me, as Mr. Wordsworth says, The duties shine like stars; I formed my
uncle's character, Decreasing his cigars.

But could my kind engross me? No! Stern Art--what sons escape her? Soon I
was drawing Gladstone's nose On scraps of blotting paper.

Then on--to play one-fingered tunes Upon my aunt's piano. In short, I have
a headlong soul, I much resemble Hanno.

(Forgive the entrance of the not Too cogent Carthaginian. It may have been
to make a rhyme; I lean to that opinion).

Then my great work of book research Till dusk I took in hand-- The forming
of a final, sound Opinion on The Strand.

But when I quenched the midnight oil, And closed The Referee, Whose thirty
volumes folio I take to bed with me,

I had a rather funny dream, Intense, that is, and mystic; I dreamed that,
with one leap and yell, The world became artistic.

The Shopmen, when their souls were still, Declined to open shops--

And Cooks recorded frames of mind In sad and subtle chops.

The stars were weary of routine: The trees in the plantation Were growing
every fruit at once, In search of a sensation.

The moon went for a moonlight stroll, And tried to be a bard, And gazed
enraptured at itself: I left it trying hard.

The sea had nothing but a mood Of 'vague ironic gloom,' With which
t'explain its presence in My upstairs drawing-room.

The sun had read a little book That struck him with a notion: He drowned himself and all his fires Deep in the hissing ocean.

Then all was dark, lawless, and lost: I heard great devilish wings: I knew that Art had won, and snapt The Covenant of Things.

I cried aloud, and I awoke, New labours in my head. I set my teeth, and manfully Began to lie in bed.

Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing, So I my life conduct. Each morning see some task begun, Each evening see it chucked.

But still, in sudden moods of dusk, I hear those great weird wings, Feel vaguely thankful to the vast Stupidity of things.

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ENVOY.

Clear was the night: the moon was young: The larkspurs in the plots
Mingled their orange with the gold Of the forget-me-nots.

The poppies seemed a silver mist: So darkly fell the gloom.

You scarce had guessed yon crimson streaks Were buttercups in bloom.

But one thing moved: a little child Crashed through the flower and fern: And
all my soul rose up to greet The sage of whom I learn.

I looked into his awful eyes: I waited his decree: I made ingenious attempts
To sit upon his knee.

The babe upraised his wondering eyes, And timidly he said, "A trend
towards experiment In modern minds is bred.

"I feel the will to roam, to learn By test, experience, nous, That fire is hot
and ocean deep, And wolves carnivorous.

"My brain demands complexity." The lisping cherub cried. I looked at him,
and only said, "Go on. The world is wide."

A tear rolled down his pinafore, "Yet from my life must pass The simple love
of sun and moon, The old games in the grass;

"Now that my back is to my home Could these again be found?" I looked on
him, and only said, "Go on. The world is round."