

THE HIGH HISTORY OF
GOOD SIR PALAMEDES
THE SARACEN KNIGHT
AND OF HIS FOLLOWING
OF THE QUESTING BEAST
BY ALEISTER CROWLEY
RIGHTLY SET FORTH IN RIME

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TO ALLAN BENNETT

“ Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya ”

my good knight comrade in the Quest, I dedicate this
imperfect account of it, in some small recognition of
his suggestion of its form.

MANDALAY, *November* 1905

ARGUMENT

i. Sir Palamede, the Saracen knight, riding on the shore of Syria, findeth his father's corpse, around which an albatross circleth. He approveth the vengeance of his peers.

ii. On the shore of Arabia he findeth his mother in the embrace of a loathly negro beneath blue pavilions. Her he slayeth, and burneth all that encampment.

iii. Sir Palamede is besieged in his castle by Severn mouth, and his wife and son are slain.

iv. Hearing that his fall is to be but the prelude to an attack on Camelot, he maketh a desperate night sortie, and will traverse the wilds of Wales.

v. At the end of his resources among the Welsh mountains, he is compelled to put to death his only remaining child. By this sacrifice he saves the world of chivalry.

vi. He having become an holy hermit, a certain dwarf, splendidly clothed, cometh to Arthur's court, bearing tidings of a Questing Beast. The knights fail to lift him, this being the test of worthiness.

vii. Lancelot findeth him upon Scawfell, clothed in his white beard. He returneth, and, touching the dwarf but with his finger, hurleth him to the heaven.

viii. Sir Palamede, riding forth on the quest, seeth a Druid worship the sun upon Stonehenge. He rideth eastward, and findeth the sun setting in the west. Furious he taketh a Viking ship, and by sword and whip fareth seaward.

ix. Coming to India, he learneth that It glittereth. Vainly fighting the waves, the leaves, and the snows, he is swept in the Himalayas as by an avalanche into a valley where dwell certain ascetics, who pelt him with their eyeballs.

x. Seeking It as Majesty, he chaseth an elephant in the Indian jungle. The elephant escapeth ; but he, led to Trichinopoli by an Indian lad, seeth an elephant forced to dance ungainly before the Mahalingam.

xi. A Scythian sage declareth that It transcendeth Reason. Therefore Sir Palamede unreasonably decapitateth him.

xii. An ancient hag prateth of It as Evangelical. Her he heweth in pieces.

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xiii. At Naples he thinketh of the Beast as author of Evil, because Free of Will. The Beast, starting up, is slain by him with a poisoned arrow ; but at the moment of Its death It is reborn from the knight's own belly.

xiv. At Rome he meeteth a red robber in a Hat, who speaketh nobly of It as of a king-dove-lamb. He chaseth and slayeth it ; it proves but a child's toy.

xv. In a Tuscan grove he findeth, from the antics of a Satyr, that the Gods still dwell with men. Mistaking orgasm for ecstasy, he is found ridiculous.

xvi. Baiting for It with gilded corn in a moonlit vale of Spain, he findeth the bait stolen by vermin.

xvii. In Crete a metaphysician weaveth a labyrinth. Sir Palamede compelleth him to pursue the quarry in this same fashion. Running like hippogriffs, they plunge over the precipice ; and the hermit, dead, appears but a mangy ass. Sir Palamede, sore wounded, is borne by fishers to an hut.

xviii. Sir Palamede noteth the swiftness of the Beast. He therefore climbeth many mountains of the Alps. Yet can he not catch It ; It outrunneth him easily, and at last, stumbling, he falleth.

xix. Among the dunes of Brittany he findeth a witch dancing and conjuring, until she disappeareth in a blaze of light. He then learneth music, from a vile girl, until he is as skilful as Orpheus. In Paris he playeth in a public place. The people, at first throwing him coins, soon desert him to follow a foolish Egyptian wizard. No Beast cometh to his call.

xx. He argueth out that there can be but one Beast. Following single tracks, he at length findeth the quarry, but on pursuit It eludeth him by multiplying itself. This on the wide plains of France.

xxi. He gathereth an army sufficient to chase the whole herd. In England's midst they rush upon them ; but the herd join together, leading on the knights, who at length rush together into a *mêlée*, wherein all but Sir Palamede are slain, while the Beast, as ever, standeth aloof, laughing.

xxii. He argueth Its existence from design of the Cosmos, noting that Its tracks form a geometrical figure. But seeth that this depends upon his sense of geometry ; and is therefore no proof. Meditating upon this likeness to himself—Its subjectivity, in short—he seeth It in the Blue Lake. Thither plunging, all is shattered.

xxiii. Seeking It in shrines he findeth but a money-box ; while they that helped him (as they said) in his search, but robbed him.

xxiv. Arguing Its obscurity, he seeketh It within the bowels of Etna, cutting off all avenues of sense. His own thoughts pursue him into madness.

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xxv. Upon the Pacific Ocean, he, thinking that It is not-Self, throweth himself into the sea. But the Beast setteth him ashore.

xxvi. Rowed by Kanakas to Japan, he praiseth the stability of Fuji-Yama. But, an earthquake arising, the pilgrims are swallowed up.

xxvii. Upon the Yang-tze-kiang he contemplateth immortal change. Yet, perceiving that the changes themselves constitute stability, he is again baulked, and biddeth his men bear him to Egypt.

xxviii. In an Egyptian temple he hath performed the Bloody Sacrifice, and cursed Osiris. Himself suffering that curse, he is still far from the Attainment.

xxix. In the land of Egypt he performeth many miracles. But from the statue of Memnon issueth the questing, and he is recalled from that illusion.

xxx. Upon the plains of Chaldea he descendeth into the bowels of the earth, where he beholdeth the Visible Image of the Soul of Nature for the Beast. Yet Earth belcheth him forth.

xxxi. In a slum city he converseth with a Rationalist. Learning nothing, nor even hearing the Beast, he goeth forth to cleanse himself.

xxxii. Seeking to imitate the Beast, he goeth on all-fours, questing horribly. The townsmen cage him for a lunatic. Nor can he imitate the elusiveness of the Beast. Yet at one note of that questing the prison is shattered, and Sir Palamede rusheth forth free.

xxxiii. Sir Palamede hath gone to the shores of the Middle Sea to restore his health. There he practiseth devotion to the Beast, and becometh maudlin and sentimental. His knaves mocking him, he beateth one sore; from whose belly issueth the questing.

xxxiv. Being retired into an hermitage in Fenland, he traverseth space upon the back of an eagle. He knoweth all things—save only It. And incontinent beseecheth the eagle to set him down again.

xxxv. He lectureth upon metaphysics—for he is now totally insane—to many learned monks of Cantabrig. They applaud him and detain him, though he hath heard the questing and would away. But so feeble is he that he fleeth by night.

xxxvi. It hath often happened to Sir Palamede that he is haunted by a shadow, the which he may not recognise. But at last, in a sunlit wood, this is discovered to be a certain hunchback, who doubteth whether there be at all any Beast or any quest, or if the whole life of Sir Palamede be not a vain illusion. Him, without seeking to conquer with words, he slayeth incontinent.

xxxvii. In a cave by the sea, feeding on limpets and roots, Sir Palamede abideth, sick unto death. Himseemeth the Beast questeth within his own bowels: he is the

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Beast. Standing up, that he may enjoy the reward, he findeth another answer to the riddle. Yet abideth in the quest.

xxxviii. Sir Palamede is confronted by a stranger knight, whose arms are his own, as also his features. This knight mocketh Sir Palamede for an impudent pretender, and impersonator of the chosen knight. Sir Palamede in all humility alloweth that there is no proof possible, and offereth ordeal of battle, in which the stranger is slain. Sir Palamede heweth him into the smallest dust without pity.

xxxix. In a green valley he obtaineth the vision of Pan. Thereby he regaineth all that he had expended of strength and youth ; is gladdened thereat, for he now devoteth again his life to the quest ; yet more utterly cast down than ever, for that this supreme vision is not the Beast.

xl. Upon the loftiest summit of a great mountain he perceiveth Naught. Even this is, however, not the Beast.

xli. Returning to Camelot to announce his failure, he maketh entrance into the King's hall, whence he started out upon the quest. The Beast cometh nestling to him. All the knights attain the quest. The voice of Christ is heard : "Well done." He sayeth that each failure is a step in the Path. The poet prayeth success therein for himself and his readers.

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I

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Rode by the marge of many a sea :
He had slain a thousand evil men
And set a thousand ladies free.

Armed to the teeth, the glittering knight
Galloped along the sounding shore,
His silver arms one lake of light,
Their clash one symphony of war.

How still the blue enamoured sea
Lay in the blaze of Syria's noon!
The eternal roll eternally
Beat out its monotonous tune.

Sir Palamede the Saracen

A dreadful vision here espied,
A sight abhorred of gods and men,
Between the limits of the tide.

The dead man's tongue was torn away ;
The dead man's throat was slit across ;
There flapped upon the putrid prey
A carrion, screaming albatross.

So halted he his horse, and bent
To catch remembrance from the eyes
That stared to God, whose ardour sent
His radiance from the ruthless skies.

Then like a statue still he sate ;
Nor quivered nerve, nor muscle stirred ;
While round them flapped insatiate
The fell, abominable bird.

But coldest horror drave the light
From knightly eyes. How pale thy bloom,
Thy blood, O brow whereon the night
Sits like a serpent on a tomb !

For Palamede those eyes beheld
The iron image of his own ;
On those dead brows a fate he spelled
To strike a Gorgon into stone.

He knew his father. Still he sate,
Nor quivered nerve, nor muscle stirred ;
While round them flapped insatiate
The fell, abominable bird.

The knight approves the justice done,
And pays with that his rowels' debt ;
While yet the forehead of the son
Stands beaded with an icy sweat.

God's angel, standing sinister,
Unfurls this scroll—a sable stain :
“ Who wins the spur shall ply the spur
Upon his proper heart and brain.”

He gave the sign of malison
On traitor knights and perjured men ;
And ever by the sea rode on
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

II

BEHOLD! Arabia's burning shore
Rings to the hoofs of many a steed.
Lord of a legion rides to war
The indomitable Palamede.

The Paynim fly ; his troops delight
In murder of many a myriad men,
Following exultant into fight
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

Now when a year and day are done
Sir Palamedes is aware
Of blue pavilions in the sun,
And bannerets fluttering in the air.

Forward he spurs ; his armour gleams ;
Then on his haunches rears the steed ;
Above the lordly silk there streams
The pennon of Sir Palamede !

Aflame, a bridegroom to his spouse,
He rides to meet with galliard grace
Some scion of his holy house,
Or germane to his royal race.

But oh! the eyes of shame! Beneath
The tall pavilion's sapphire shade
There sport a band with wand and wreath,
Languorous boy and laughing maid.

And in the centre is a sight
Of hateful love and shameless shame:
A recreant Abyssinian knight
Sports grossly with a wanton dame.

How black and swinish is the knave!
His hellish grunt, his bestial grin;
Her trilling laugh, her gesture suave,
The cool sweat swimming on her skin!

She looks and laughs upon the knight,
Then turns to buss the blubber mouth,
Draining the dregs of that black blight
Of wine to ease their double drouth!

God! what a glance! Sir Palamede
Is stricken by the sword of fate:
His mother it is in very deed
That gleeful goes the goatish gait.

His mother it his, that pure and pale
Cried in the pangs that gave him birth;
The holy image he would veil
From aught the tiniest taint of earth.

She knows him, and black fears bedim
Those eyes ; she offers to his gaze
The blue-veined breasts that suckled him
In childhood's sweet and solemn days.

Weeping she bares the holy womb !
Shrieks out the mother's last appeal :
And reads irrevocable doom
In those dread eyes of ice and steel.

He winds his horn : his warriors pour
In thousands on the fenceless foe ;
The sunset stains their hideous war
With crimson bars of after-glow.

He winds his horn : the night-stars leap
To light ; upspring the sisters seven ;
While answering flames illumine the deep,
The blue pavilions blaze to heaven.

Silent and stern the northward way
They ride ; alone before his men
Staggers through black to rose and grey
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

III

THERE is a rock by Severn mouth
Whereon a mighty castle stands,
Fronting the blue impassive South
And looking over lordly lands.

Oh ! high above the envious sea
This fortress dominates the tides ;
There, ill at heart, the chivalry
Of strong Sir Palamede abides.

Now comes irruption from the folk
That live by murder : day by day
The good knight strikes his deadly stroke ;
The vultures claw the attended prey.

But day by day the heathen hordes
Gather from dreadful lands afar,
A myriad myriad bows and swords,
As clouds that blot the morning star.

Soon by an arrow from the sea
The Lady of Palamede is slain ;
His son, in sally fighting free,
Is struck through burgonet and brain.

But day by day the foes increase,
 Though day by day their thousands fall :
Laughs the unshaken fortalice ;
 The good knights laugh no more at all.

Grimmer than heathen hordes can scowl,
 The spectre hunger rages there ;
He passes like a midnight owl,
 Hooting his heraldry, despair.

The knights and squires of Palamede
 Stalk pale and lean through court and hall ;
Though sharp and swift the archers speed
 Their yardlong arrows from the wall.

Their numbers thin ; their strength decays ;
 Their fate is written plain to read.
These are the dread deciduous days
 Of iron-souled Sir Palamede.

He hears the horrid laugh that rings
 From camp to camp at night ; he hears
The cruel mouths of murderous kings
 Laugh out one menace that he fears.

No sooner shall the heroes die
 Than, ere their flesh begin to rot,
The heathen turns his raving eye
 To Caerlon and Camelot.

King Arthur in ignoble sloth
Is sunk, and dalliance with his dame,
Forgetful of his knightly oath,
And careless of his kingly name.

Befooled and cuckolded, the king
Is yet the king, the king most high ;
And on his life the hinges swing
That close the door of chivalry.

'Sblood ! shall it sink, and rise no more,
That blaze of Time, when men were men ?
That is thy question, warrior
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

IV

Now, with two score of men in life
And one fair babe, Sir Palamede
Resolves one last heroic strife,
Attempts forlorn a desperate deed.

At dead of night, a moonless night,
A night of winter storm, they sail
In dancing dragons to the fight
With man and sea, with ghoul and gale.

Whom God shall spare, ride, ride ! (so springs
The iron order). Let him fly
On honour's steed with honour's wings
To warn the king, lest honour die !

Then to the fury of the blast
Their fury adds a dreadful sting :
The fatal die is surely cast.
To save the king—to save the king !

Hail ! horror of the midnight surge !
The storms of death, the lashing gust,
The doubtful gleam of swords that urge
Hot laughter with high-leaping lust !

Though one by one the heroes fall,
Their desperate way they slowly win,
And knightly cry and comrade-call
Rise high above the savage din.

Now, now they land, a dwindling crew ;
Now, now fresh armies hem them round.
They cleave their blood-bought avenue,
And cluster on the upper ground.

Ah ! but dawn's dreadful front uprears !
The tall towers blaze, to illumine the fight ;
While many a myriad heathen spears
March northward at the earliest light.

Falls thy last comrade at thy feet,
O lordly-souled Sir Palamede ?
Tearing the savage from his seat,
He leaps upon a coal-black steed.

He gallops raging through the press :
The affrighted heathen fear his eye.
There madness gleams, there masterless
The whirling sword shrieks shrill and high.

They shrink, he gallops. Closely clings
The child slung at his waist ; and he
Heeds nought, but gallops wide, and sings
Wild war-songs, chants of gramarye !

Sir Palamede the Saracen

Rides like a centaur mad with war ;
He sabres many a million men,
And tramples many a million more !

Before him lies the untravelled land
Where never a human soul is known,
A desert by a wizard banned,
A soulless wilderness of stone.

Nor grass, nor corn, delight the vales ;
Nor beast, nor bird, span space. Immense,
Black rain, grey mist, white wrath of gales,
Fill the dread armoury of sense.

Nor shines the sun ; nor moon, nor star
Their subtle light at all display ;
Nor day, nor night, dispute the scaur :
All's one intolerable grey.

Black llyns, grey rocks, white hills of snow !
No flower, no colour : life is not.
This is no way for men to go
From Severn-mouth to Camelot.

Despair, the world upon his speed,
Drive (like a lion from his den
Whom hunger hunts) the man at need,
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

V

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Hath cast his sword and arms aside.
To save the world of goodly men,
He sets his teeth to ride—to ride!

Three days : the black horse drops and dies.
The trappings furnish them a fire,
The beast a meal. With dreadful eyes
Stare into death the child, the sire.

Six days : the gaunt and gallant knight
Sees hateful visions in the day.
Where are the antient speed and might
Were wont to animate that clay?

Nine days ; they stumble on ; no more
His strength avails to bear the child.
Still hangs the mist, and still before
Yawns the immeasurable wild.

Twelve days : the end. Afar he spies
The mountains stooping to the plain ;
A little splash of sunlight lies
Beyond the everlasting rain.

His strength is done ; he cannot stir.
The child complains—how feebly now !
His eyes are blank ; he looks at her ;
The cold sweat gathers on his brow.

To save the world—three days away !
His life in knighthood's life is furled,
And knighthood's life in his—to-day !—
His darling staked against the world !

Will he die there, his task undone ?
Or dare he live, at such a cost ?
He cries against the impassive sun :
The world is dim, is all but lost.

Then, with the bitterness of death
Cutting his soul, his fingers clench
The piteous passage of her breath.
The dews of horror rise and drench

Sir Palamede the Saracen.
Then, rising from the hideous meal,
He plunges to the land of men
With nerves renewed and limbs of steel.

Who is the naked man that rides
Yon tameless stallion on the plain,
His face like Hell's? What fury guides
The maniac beast without a rein ?

Who is the naked man that spurs
A charger into Camelot,
His face like Christ's? What glory stirs
The air around him, do ye wot?

Sir Arthur arms him, makes array
Of seven times ten thousand men,
And bids them follow and obey
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

VI

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

The earth from murder hath released,
Is hidden from the eyes of men.

Sir Arthur sits again at feast.

The holy order burns with zeal :
Its fame revives from west to east.

Now, following Fortune's whirling wheel,

There comes a dwarf to Arthur's hall,
All cased in damascenèd steel.

A sceptre and a golden ball

He bears, and on his head a crown ;
But on his shoulders drapes a pall

Of velvet flowing sably down

Above his vest of cramoisie.
Now doth the king of high renown

Demand him of his dignity.

Whereat the dwarf begins to tell
A quest of loftiest chivalry.

Quod he : “ By Goddes holy spell,
So high a venture was not known,
Nor so divine a miracle.

A certain beast there runs alone,
That ever in his belly sounds
A hugeous cry, a monster moan,

As if a thirty couple hounds
Quested within him. Now God saith
(I swear it by His holy wounds

And by His lamentable death,
And by His holy Mother’s face !)
That he shall know the Beauteous Breath

And taste the Goodly Gift of Grace
Who shall achieve this marvel quest.”
Then Arthur sterte up from his place,

And sterte up boldly all the rest,
And sware to seek this goodly thing.
But now the dwarf doth beat his breast,

And speak on this wise to the king,
That he should worthy knight be found
Who with his hands the dwarf should bring

By might one span from off the ground.
Whereat they jeer, the dwarf so small,
The knights so strong : the walls resound

With laughter rattling round the hall.

But Arthur first essays the deed,
And may not budge the dwarf at all.

Then Lancelot sware by Goddes reed,
And pulled so strong his muscle burst,
His nose and mouth brake out a-bleed ;

Nor moved he thus the dwarf. From first
To last the envious knights essayed,
And all their malice had the worst,

Till strong Sir Bors his prowess played—
And all his might availèd nought.
Now once Sir Bors had been betrayed

To Paynim ; him in traitrise caught,
They bound to four strong stallion steers,
To tear asunder, as they thought,

The paladin of Arthur's peers.
But he, a-bending, breaks the spine
Of three, and on the fourth he rears

His bulk, and rides away. Divine
The wonder when the giant fails
To stir the fatuous dwarf, malign

Who smiles ! But Bors on Arthur rails
That never a knight is worth but one.
“ By Goddes death ” (quod he), “ what ails

Us marsh-lights to forget the sun?

There is one man of mortal men
Worthy to win this benison,

Sir Palamede the Saracen.”

Then went the applauding murmur round :
Sir Lancelot girt him there and then

To ride to that enchanted ground

Where amid timeless snows the den
Of Palamedes might be found.

VII

BEHOLD Sir Lancelot of the Lake
Breasting the stony screes : behold
How breath must fail and muscle ache

Before he reach the icy fold
That Palamede the Saracen
Within its hermitage may hold.

At last he cometh to a den
Perched high upon the savage scaur,
Remote from every haunt of men,

From every haunt of life afar.
There doth he find Sir Palamede
Sitting as steadfast as a star.

Scarcely he knew the knight indeed,
For he was compassed in a beard
White as the streams of snow that feed

The lake of Gods and men revered
That sitteth upon Caucasus.
So muttered he a darkling weird,

And smote his bosom murderous.

His nails like eagles' claws were grown ;
His eyes were wild and dull ; but thus

Sir Lancelot spake : “ Thy deeds atone
By knightly devoir ! ” He returned
That “ While the land was overgrown

With giant, fiend, and ogre burned
My sword ; but now the Paynim bars
Are broke, and men to virtue turned :

Therefore I sit upon the scars
Amid my beard, even as the sun
Sits in the company of the stars ! ”

Then Lancelot bade this deed be done,
The achievement of the Questing Beast.
Which when he spake that holy one

Rose up, and gat him to the east
With Lancelot ; when as they drew
Unto the palace and the feast

He put his littlest finger to
The dwarf, who rose to upper air,
Piercing the far eternal blue

Beyond the reach of song or prayer.
Then did Sir Palamede amend
His nakedness, his horrent hair,

His nails, and made his penance end,
Clothing himself in steel and gold,
Arming himself, his life to spend

In vigil cold and wandering bold,
Disdaining song and dalliance soft,
Seeking one purpose to behold,

And holding ever that aloft,
Nor fearing God, nor heeding men.
So thus his hermit habit doffed
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

VIII

KNOW ye where Druid dolmens rise
In Wessex on the widow plain?
Thither Sir Palamedes plies

The spur, and shakes the rattling rein.
He questions all men of the Beast.
None answer. Is the quest in vain?

With oaken crown there comes a priest
In samite robes, with hazel wand,
And worships at the gilded East.

Ay! thither ride! The dawn beyond
Must run the quarry of his quest.
He rode as he were wood or fond,

Until at night behoves him rest.
—He saw the gilding far behind
Out on the hills toward the West!

With aimless fury hot and blind
He flung himon a Viking ship.
He slew the rover, and inclined

The seamen to his stinging whip.
 Accurs'd of God, despising men,
Thy reckless oars in ocean dip,
 Sir Palamede the Saracen !

IX

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Sailed ever with a favouring wind
Unto the smooth and swarthy men

That haunt the evil shore of Hind :

He queried eager of the quest.

“ Ay! Ay!” their cunning sages grinned :

“ It shines! It shines! Guess thou the rest!

For naught but this our Rishis know.”

Sir Palamede his way addressed

Unto the woods : they blaze and glow ;

His lance stabs many a shining blade,

His sword lays many a flower low

That glittering gladdened in the glade.

He wrote himself a wanton ass,

And to the sea his traces laid,

Where many a wavelet on the glass

His prowess knows. But deep and deep

His futile feet in fury pass,

Until one billow curls to leap,
And flings him breathless on the shore
Half drowned. O fool! his God's asleep,

His armour in illusion's war
Itself illusion, all his might
And courage vain. Yet ardours pour

Through every artery. The knight
Scales the Himalaya's frozen sides,
Crowned with illimitable light,

And there in constant war abides,
Smiting the spangles of the snow ;
Smiting until the vernal tides

Of earth leap high ; the steady flow
Of sunlight splits the icy walls :
They slide, they hurl the knight below.

Sir Palamede the mighty falls
Into an hollow where there dwelt
A bearded crew of monachals

Asleep in various visions spelt
By mystic symbols unto men.
But when a foreigner they smelt

They drive him from their holy den,
And with their glittering eyeballs pelt
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

X

Now findeth he, as all alone
He moves about the burning East,
The mighty trail of some unknown,
But surely some majestic beast.

So followeth he the forest ways,
Remembering his knightly oath,
And through the hot and dripping days
Ploughs through the tangled undergrowth.

Sir Palamede the Saracen
Came on a forest pool at length,
Remote from any mart of men,
Where there disported in his strength

The lone and lordly elephant.
Sir Palamede his forehead beat.
“O amorous! O militant!
O lord of this arboreal seat!”

Thus worshipped he, and stalking stole
Into the Presence: he emerged.
The scent awakes the uneasy soul
Of that Majestic One: upsurged

The monster from the oozy bed,
And bounded through the crashing glades.
—But now a staring savage head
Lurks at him through the forest shades.

This was a naked Indian,
Who led within the city gate
The fooled and disappointed man,
Already broken by his fate.

Here were the brazen towers, and here
The sculptured rocks, the marble shrine
Where to a tall black stone they rear
The altars due to the divine.

The God they deem in sensual joy
Absorbed, and silken dalliance :
To please his leisure hours a boy
Compels an elephant to dance.

So majesty to ridicule
Is turned. To other climes and men
Makes off that strong, persistent fool
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

XI

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen
Hath hied him to an holy man,
Sith he alone of mortal men

Can help him, if a mortal can.
(So tell him all the Scythian folk.)
Wherefore he makes a caravan,

And finds him. When his prayers invoke
The holy knowledge, saith the sage :
“ This Beast is he of whom there spoke

The prophets of the Golden Age :
‘ Mark ! all that mind is, he is not.’ ”
Sir Palamede in bitter rage

Sterne up : “ Is this the fool, ’Od wot,
To see the like of whom I came
From castellated Camelot ? ”

The sage with eyes of burning flame
Cried : “ Is it not a miracle ?
Ay ! for with folly travellest shame,

And thereto at the end is Hell.
Believe! And why believe? Because
It is a thing impossible.”

Sir Palamede his pulses pause.
“It is not possible” (quod he)
“That Palamede is wroth, and draws

His sword, decapitating thee.
By parity of argument
This deed of blood must surely be.”

With that he suddenly besprent
All Scythia with the sage’s blood,
And laughing in his woe he went

Unto a further field and flood,
Aye guided by that wizard’s head,
That like a windy moon did scud

Before him, winking eyes of red
And snapping jaws of white: but then
What cared for living or for dead
Sir Palamede the Saracen?

XII

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen
Follows the Head to gloomy halls
Of sterile hate, with icy walls.
A woman clucking like a hen
Answers his lordly bugle-calls.

She rees him an ungainly rede
Of ghosts and virgins, doves and wombs,
Of roods and prophecies and tombs—
Old pagan fables run to seed !
Sir Palamede with fury fumes.

So doth the Head that jabbars fast
Against that woman's tangled tale.
(God's patience at the end must fail !)
Out sweeps the sword—the blade hath passed
Through all her scraggy farthingale.

“ This chatter lends to Thought a zest ”
(Quod he), “ but I am all for Act.
Sit here, until your Talk hath cracked
The addled egg in Nature's nest ! ”
With that he fled the dismal tract.

He was so sick and ill at ease
And hot against his fellow men,
He thought to end his purpose then—
Nay! let him seek new lands and seas,
Sir Palamede the Saracen!

XIII

SIR PALAMEDE is come anon
 Into a blue delicious bay.
A mountain towers thereupon,
Wherein some fiend of ages gone

Is whelmed by God, yet from his breast
 Spits up the flame, and ashes grey.
Hereby Sir Palamede his quest
Pursues withouten let or rest.

Seeing the evil mountain be,
 Remembering all his evil years,
He knows the Questing Beast runs free—
Author of Evil, then, is he !

Whereat immediate resounds
 The noise he hath sought so long : appears
There quest a thirty couple hounds
Within its belly as it bounds.

Lifting his eyes, he sees at last
 The beast he seeks : 'tis like an hart.
Ever it courseth far and fast.
Sir Palamede is sore aghast,

But plucking up his will, doth launch
A mighty poison-dippèd dart :
It fareth ever sure and staunch,
And smiteth him upon the haunch.

Then as Sir Palamede overhauls
The stricken quarry, slack it droops,
Staggers, and final down it falls.
Triumph! Gape wide, ye golden walls!

Lift up your everlasting doors,
O gates of Camelot! See, he swoops
Down on the prey! The life-blood pours :
The poison works : the breath implores

Its livelong debt from heart and brain.
Alas! poor stag, thy day is done!
The gallant lungs gasp loud in vain :
Thy life is spilt upon the plain.

Sir Palamede is stricken numb
As one who, gazing on the sun,
Sees blackness gather. Blank and dumb,
The good knight sees a thin breath come

Out of his proper mouth, and dart
Over the plain : he seeth it
Sure by some black magician art
Shape ever closer like an hart :

While such a questing there resounds
As God had loosed the very Pit,
Or as a thirty couple hounds
Are in its belly as it bounds !

Full sick at heart, I ween, was then
The loyal knight, the weak of wit,
The butt of lewd and puny men,
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

XIV

NORTHWARD the good knight gallops fast,
Resolved to seek his foe at home,
When rose that Vision of the past,
The royal battlements of Rome,
A ruined city, and a dome.

There in the broken Forum sat
A red-robed robber in a Hat.
“Whither away, Sir Knight, so fey?”
“Priest, for the dove on Ararat
I could not, nor I will not, stay!”

“I know thy quest. Seek on in vain
A golden hart with silver horns!
Life springeth out of divers pains.
What crown the King of Kings adorns?
A crown of gems? A crown of thorns!”

The Questing Beast is like a king
In face, and hath a pigeon's wing
And claw; its body is one fleece
Of bloody white, a lamb's in spring.
Enough. Sir Knight, I give thee peace.”

The knight spurs on, and soon espies
A monster coursing on the plain.
He hears the horrid questing rise
And thunder in his weary brain.
This time, to slay it or be slain !

Too easy task ! The charger gains
Stride after stride with little pains
Upon the lumbering, flapping thing.
He stabs the lamb, and splits the brains
Of that majestic-seeming king.

He clips the wing and pares the claw—
What turns to laughter all his joy,
To wondering ribaldry his awe ?
The beast's a mere mechanic toy,
Fit to amuse an idle boy !

XV

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Hath come to an umbrageous land
Where nymphs abide, and Pagan men.

The Gods are nigh, say they, at hand.
How warm a throb from Venus stirs
The pulses of her worshippers !

Nor shall the Tuscan God be found

Reluctant from the altar-stone :
His perfume shall delight the ground,
His presence to his folk be known
In darkling grove and glimmering shrine—
O ply the kiss and pour the wine !

Sir Palamede is fairly come

Into a place of glowing bowers,
Where all the Voice of Time is dumb :
Before an altar crowned with flowers
He seeth a satyr fondly dote
And languish on a swan-soft goat.

Then he in mid-caress desires

The ear of strong Sir Palamede.

“ We burn,” quoth he, “ no futile fires,
Nor play upon an idle reed,
Nor penance vain, nor fatuous prayers—
The Gods are ours, and we are theirs.”

Sir Palamedes plucks the pipe
The satyr tends, and blows a trill
So soft and warm, so red and ripe,
That echo answers from the hill
In eager and voluptuous strain,
While grows upon the sounding plain

A gallop, and a questing turned
To one profound melodious bay.
Sir Palamede with pleasure burned,
And bowed him to the idol grey
That on the altar sneered and leered
With loose red lips behind his beard.

Sir Palamedes and the Beast
Are woven in a web of gold
Until the gilding of the East
Burns on the wanton-smiling wold :
And still Sir Palamede believed
His holy quest to be achieved !

But now the dawn from glowing gates
Floods all the land : with snarling lip
The Beast stands off and cachinnates.
That stings the good knight like a whip,

As suddenly Hell's own disgust
Eats up the joy he had of lust.

The brutal glee his folly took
For holy joy breaks down his brain.
Off bolts the Beast : the earth is shook
As out a questing roars again,
As if a thirty couple hounds
Are in its belly as it bounds !

The peasants gather to deride
The knight : creation joins in mirth.
Ashamed and scorned on every side,
There gallops, hateful to the earth,
The laughing-stock of beasts and men,
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

XVI

WHERE shafts of moonlight splash the vale,
Beside a stream there sits and strains
Sir Palamede, with passion pale,

And haggard from his broken brains.
Yet eagerly he watches still
A mossy mound where dainty grains

Of gilded corn their beauty spill
To tempt the quarry to the range
Of Palamede his archer skill.

All night he sits, with ardour strange
And hope new-fledged. A gambler born
Aye thinks the luck one day must change,

Though sense and skill he laughs to scorn.
So now there rush a thousand rats
In sable silence on the corn.

They sport their square or shovel hats,
A squeaking, tooth-bare brotherhood,
Innumerable as summer gnats

Buzzing some streamlet through a wood.

Sir Palamede grows mighty wroth,
And mutters maledictions rude,

Seeing his quarry far and loth

And thieves despoiling all the bait.
Now, careless of the knightly oath,

The sun pours down his eastern gate.

The chase is over : see ye then,
Coursing afar, afoam at fate,
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

XVII

SIR PALAMEDE hath told the tale
Of this misfortune to a sage,
How all his ventures nought avail,

And all his hopes dissolve in rage.
“Now by thine holy beard,” quoth he,
“And by thy venerable age

I charge thee this my riddle ree.”
Then said that gentle eremite:
“This task is easy unto me!

Know then the Questing Beast aright!
One is the Beast, the Questing one:
And one with one is two, Sir Knight!

Yet these are one in two, and none
Disjoins their substance (mark me well!),
Confounds their persons. Rightly run

Their attributes: immeasurable,
Incomprehensibundable,
Unspeakable, inaudible,

Intangible, ingustable,
 Insensitive to human smell,
Invariable, implacable,

Invincible, insciable,
 Irrationapsychicable,
Inequilegijurable,

Immamemimomummable.
 Such is its nature : without parts,
Places, or persons, plumes, or pell,

Having nor lungs nor lights nor hearts,
 But two in one and one in two.
Be he accursèd that disparts

Them now, or seemeth so to do !
 Him will I pile the curses on ;
Him will I hang, or saw him through,

Or burn with fire, who doubts upon
 This doctrine, hotototon spells
The holy word otototon.”

The poor Sir Palamedes quells
 His rising spleen ; he doubts his ears.
“How may I catch the Beast?” he yells.

The smiling sage rebukes his fears :
 “’Tis easier than all, Sir Knight!
By simple faith the Beast appears.

By simple faith, not heathen might,
Catch him, and thus achieve the quest!"
Then quoth that melancholy wight :

"I will believe!" The hermit blessed
His convert : on the horizon
Appears the Beast. "To thee the rest!"

He cries, to urge the good knight on.
But no! Sir Palamedes grips
The hermit by the woebegone

Beard of him ; then away he rips,
Wood as a maniac, to the West,
Where down the sun in splendour slips,

And where the quarry of the quest
Canters. They run like hippogriffs!
Like men pursued, or swine possessed,

Over the dizzy Cretan cliffs
They smash. And lo! it comes to pass
He sees in no dim hieroglyphs,

In knowledge easy to amass,
This hermit (while he drew his breath)
Once dead is like a mangy ass.

Bruised, broken, but not bound to death,
He calls some passing fishermen
To bear him. Presently he saith :

“ Bear me to some remotest den
To heal me of my ills immense ;
For now hath neither might nor sense
Sir Palamede the Saracen.”

XVIII

SIR PALAMEDES for a space
Deliberates on his rustic bed.
“ I lack the quarry’s awful pace ”

(Quod he); “ my limbs are slack as lead.”
So, as he gets his strength, he seeks
The castles where the pennons red

Of dawn illumine their dreadful peaks.
There dragons stretch their horrid coils
Adown the winding clefts and creeks :

From hideous mouths their venom boils.
But Palamede their fury ’scapes,
Their malice by his valour foils,

Climbing aloft by bays and capes
Of rock and ice, encounters oft
The loathly sprites, the misty shapes

Of monster brutes that lurk aloft.
O! well he works : his youth returns,
His heart revives : despair is doffed

And eager hope in brilliance burns
 Within the circle of his brows
As fast he flies, the snow he spurns.

Ah! what a youth and strength he vows
 To the achievement of the quest!
And now the horrid height allows

His mastery: day by day from crest
 To crest he hastens: faster fly
His feet: his body knows not rest,

Until with magic speed they ply
 Like oars the snowy waves, surpass
In one day's march the galaxy

Of Europe's starry mountain mass.
 "Now," quoth he, "let me find the quest!"
The Beast sterte up. Sir Knight, alas!

Day after day they race, nor rest
 Till seven days were fairly done.
Then doth the Questing Marvel crest

The ridge: the knight is well outrun.
 Now, adding laughter to its din,
Like some lewd comet at the sun,

Around the panting paladin
 It runs with all its splendid speed.
Yet, knowing that he may not win,

He strains and strives in very deed,
So that at last a boulder trips
The hero, that he bursts a-bleed,

And sanguine from his bearded lips
The torrent of his being breaks.
The Beast is gone : the hero slips

Down to the valley : he forsakes
The fond idea (every bone
In all his body burns and aches)

By speed to attain the dear Unknown,
By force to achieve the great Beyond.
Yet from that brain may spring full-grown
Another folly just as fond.

XIX

THE knight hath found a naked girl
Among the dunes of Breton sand.
She spinneth in a mystic whirl,

And hath a bagpipe in her hand,
Wherefrom she draweth dismal groans
The while her maddening saraband

She plies, and with discordant tones
Desires a certain devil-grace.
She gathers wreckage-wood, and bones

Of seamen, jetsam of the place,
And builds therewith a fire, wherein
She dances, bounding into space

Like an inflated ass's skin.
She raves, and reels, and yells, and whirls
So that the tears of toil begin

To dew her breasts with ardent pearls.
Nor doth she mitigate her dance,
The bagpipe ever louder skirls,

Until the shapes of death advance
And gather round her, shrieking loud
And wailing o'er the wide expanse

Of sand, the gibbering, mewling crowd.
Like cats, and apes, they gather close,
Till, like the horror of a cloud

Wrapping the flaming sun with rose,
They hide her from the hero's sight.
Then doth he muse thereat morose,

When in one wild cascade of light
The pageant breaks, and thunder roars :
Down flaps the loathly wing of night.

He sees the lonely Breton shores
Lapped in the levin : then his eyes
See how she shrieking soars and soars

Into the starless, stormy skies.
Well ! well ! this lesson will he learn,
How music's mellowing artifice

May bid the breast of nature burn
And call the gods from star and shrine.
So now his sounding courses turn

To find an instrument divine
Whereon he may pursue his quest.
How glitter green his gleeful eyne

When, where the mice and lice infest
A filthy hovel, lies a wench
Bearing a baby at her breast,

Drunk and debauched, one solid stench,
But carrying a silver lute.
'Boardeth her, nor doth baulk nor blench,

And long abideth brute by brute
Amid the unsavoury denizens,
Until his melodies uproot

The oaks, lure lions from their dens,
Turn rivers back, and still the spleen
Of serpents and of Saracens.

Thus then equipped, he quits the quean,
And in a city fair and wide
Calls up with music wild and keen

The Questing Marvel to his side.
Then do the sportful city folk
About his lonely stance abide :

Making their holiday, they joke
The melancholy ass : they throw
Their clattering coppers in his poke.

So day and night they come and go,
But never comes the Questing Beast,
Nor doth that laughing people know

How agony's unleavening yeast
Stirs Palamede. Anon they tire,
And follow an Egyptian priest

Who boasts him master of the fire
To draw down lightning, and invoke
The gods upon a sandal pyre,

And bring up devils in the smoke.
Sir Palamede is all alone,
Wrapped in his misery like a cloak,

Despairing now to charm the Unknown.
So arms and horse he takes again.
Sir Palamede hath overthrown

The jesters. Now the country men,
Stupidly staring, see at noon
Sir Palamede the Saracen

A-riding like an harvest moon
In silver arms, with glittering lance,
With plumèd helm, and wingèd shoon,
Athwart the admiring land of France.

XX

SIR PALAMEDE hath reasoned out
Beyond the shadow of a doubt
That this his Questing Beast is one ;
For were it Beasts, he must suppose
An earlier Beast to father those.

So all the tracks of herds that run

Into the forest he discards,
And only turns his dark regards
On single prints, on marks unique.
Sir Palamede doth now attain
Unto a wide and grassy plain,
Whereon he spies the thing to seek.

Thereat he putteth spur to horse
And runneth him a random course,
The Beast a-questing aye before.
But praise to good Sir Palamede !
'Hath gotten him a fairy steed
Alike for venery and for war,

So that in little drawing near
The quarry, lifteth up his spear
To run him of his malice through.

With that the Beast hopes no escape,
Dissolveth all his lordly shape,
Splitteth him sudden into two.

Sir Palamede in fury runs
Unto the nearer beast, that shuns
The shock, and splits, and splits again,
Until the baffled warrior sees
A myriad myriad swarms of these
A-questing over all the plain.

The good knight reins his charger in.
“ Now, by the faith of Paladin !
The subtle quest at last I ken.”
Rides off to Camelot to plight
The faith of many a noble knight,
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

XXI

Now doth Sir Palamede advance
The lord of many a sword and lance.

In merrie England's summer sun
Their shields and arms a-glittering glance

And laugh upon the mossy mead.
Now winds the horn of Palamede,
As far upon the horizon
He spies the Questing Beast a-feed.

With loyal craft and honest guile
They spread their ranks for many a mile.
For when the Beast hath heard the horn
He practiseth his ancient wile,

And many a myriad beasts invade
The stillness of that armèd glade.
Now every knight to rest hath borne
His lance, and given the accolade,

And run upon a beast : but they
Slip from the fatal point away
And course about, confusing all
That gallant concourse all the day,

Leading them ever to a vale
With hugeous cry and monster wail.

Then suddenly their voices fall,
And in the park's resounding pale

Only the clamour of the chase
Is heard : oh ! to the centre race

The unsuspecting knights : but he
The Questing Beast his former face

Of unity resumes : the course
Of warriors shocks with man and horse.

In mutual madness swift to see
They shatter with unbridled force

One on another : down they go
Swift in stupendous overthrow.

Out sword ! out lance ! Cuirass and helm
Splinter beneath the knightly blow.

They storm, they charge, they hack and hew,
They rush and wheel the press athrough.

The weight, the murder, overwhelm
One, two, and all. Nor silence knew

His empire till Sir Palamede
(The last) upon his fairy steed

Struck down his brother ; then at once
Fell silence on the bloody mead,

Until the questing rose again.
For there, on that ensanguine plain
 Standeth a-laughing at the dunce
The single Beast they had not slain.

There, with his friends and followers dead,
His brother smitten through the head,
 Himself sore wounded in the thigh,
Weepeth upon the deed of dread,

Alone among his murdered men,
The champion fool, as fools were then,
 Utterly broken, like to die,
Sir Palamede the Saracen.

XXII

SIR PALAMEDE his wits doth rally,
Nursing his wound beside a lake
Within an admirable valley,

Whose walls their thirst on heaven slake,
And in the moonlight mystical
Their countless spears of silver shake.

Thus reasons he : " In each and all
Fyttes of this quest the quarry's track
Is wondrous geometrical.

In spire and whorl twists out and back
The hart with fair symmetric line.
And lo ! the grain of wit I lack—

This Beast is Master of Design.
So studying each twisted print
In this mirific mind of mine,

My heart may happen on a hint."
Thus as the seeker after gold
Eagerly chases grain or glint,

The knight at last wins to behold
The full conception. Breathless-blue
The fair lake's mirror crystal-cold

Wherein he gazes, keen to view
The vast Design therein, to chase
The Beast to his last avenue.

Then—O thou gosling scant of grace!
The dream breaks, and Sir Palamede
Wakes to the glass of his fool's face!

“ Ah, 'sdeath! ” (quod he), “ by thought and deed
This brute for ever mocketh me.
The lance is made a broken reed,

The brain is but a barren tree—
For all the beautiful Design
Is but mine own geometry! ”

With that his wrath brake out like wine.
He plunged his body in, and shattered
The whole delusion asinine.

All the false water-nymphs that flattered
He killed with his resounding curse—
O fool of God! as if it mattered!

So, nothing better, rather worse,
Out of the blue bliss of the pool
Came dripping that inveterate fool!

XXIII

Now still he holdeth argument :

“ So grand a Beast must house him well ;
Hence, now beseemeth me frequent
Cathedral, palace, citadel.”

So, riding fast among the flowers
Far off, a Gothic spire he spies,
That like a gladiator towers
Its spear-sharp splendour to the skies.

The people cluster round, acclaim :
“ Sir Knight, good knight, thy quest is won.
Here dwells the Beast in orient flame,
Spring-sweet, and swifter than the sun ! ”

Sir Palamede the Saracen
Spurs to the shrine, afire to win
The end ; and all the urgent men
Throng with him eloquently in.

Sir Palamede his vizor drops ;
He lays his loyal lance in rest ;
He drives the rowels home—he stops !
Faugh ! but a black-mouthed money-chest !

He turns—the friendly folk are gone,
Gone with his sumpter-mules and train
Beyond the infinite horizon
Of all he hopes to see again !

His brain befooled, his pocket picked—
How the Beast cachinnated then,
Far from that doleful derelict
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

XXIV

“ ONE thing at least ” (quoth Palamede),
“ Beyond dispute my soul can see :
This Questing Beast that mocks my need
Dwelleth in deep obscurity.”

So delveth he a darksome hole
Within the bowels of Etna dense,
Closing the harbour of his soul
To all the pirate-ships of sense.

And now the questing of the Beast
Rolls in his very self, and high
Leaps his whole heart in fiery feast
On the expected ecstasy.

But echoing from the central roar
Reverberates many a mournful moan,
And shapes more mystic than before
Baffle its formless monotone !

Ah ! mocks him many a myriad vision,
Warring within him masterless,
Turning devotion to derision,
Beatitude to beastliness.

They swarm, they grow, they multiply ;
The strong knight's brain goes all a-swim,
Paced by that maddening minstrelsy,
Those dog-like demons hunting him.

The last bar breaks ; the steel will snaps ;
The black hordes riot in his brain ;
A thousand threatening thunder-claps
Smite him—insane—insane—insane !

His muscles roar with senseless rage ;
The pale knight staggers, deathly sick ;
Reels to the light that sorry sage,
Sir Palamede the Lunatick.

XXV

A SAVAGE sea without a sail,
Grey gulphs and green a-glittering,
Rare snow that floats—a vestal veil
Upon the forehead of the spring.

Here in a plunging galleon
Sir Palamede, a listless drone,
Drifts desperately on—and on—
And on—with heart and eyes of stone.

The deep-scarred brain of him is healed
With wind and sea and star and sun,
The assoiling grace that God revealed
For gree and bounteous benison.

Ah! still he trusts the recreant brain,
Thrown in a thousand tourney-justs;
Still he raves on in reason-strain
With senseless “oughts” and fatuous “musts.”

“All the delusions” (argueth
The ass), “all uproars, surely rise
From that curst Me whose name is Death,
Whereas the Questing Beast belieis

The Me with Thou ; then swift the quest
To slay the Me should hook the Thou.”
With that he crossed him, brow and breast,
And flung his body from the prow.

An end? Alas! on silver sand
Open his eyes ; the surf-rings roar.
What snorts there, swimming from the land?
The Beast that brought him to the shore!

“ O Beast ! ” quoth purple Palamede,
“ A monster strange as Thou am I.
I could not live before, indeed ;
And now I cannot even die !

Who chose me, of the Table Round
By miracle acclaimed the chief?
Here, waterlogged and muscle-bound,
Marooned upon a coral reef ! ”

XXVI

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Hath gotten him a swift canoe,
Paddled by stalwart South Sea men.

They cleave the oily breasts of blue,
Straining toward the westering disk
Of the tall sun ; they battle through

Those weary days ; the wind is brisk ;
The stars are clear ; the moon is high.
Now, even as a white basilisk

That slayeth all men with his eye,
Stands up before them tapering
The cone of speechless sanctity.

Up, up its slopes the pilgrims swing,
Chanting their pagan gramarye
Unto the dread volcano-king.

“ Now, then, by Goddes reed ! ” quod he,
“ Behold the secret of my quest
In this far-famed stability ! ”

For all these Paynim knights may rest
In the black bliss they struggle to."
But from the earth's full-flowered breast

Brake the blind roar of earthquake through,
Tearing the belly of its mother,
Engulphing all that heathen crew,

That cried and cursed on one another.
Aghast he standeth, Palamede !
For twinned with Earthquake laughs her brother

The Questing Beast. As Goddes reed
Sweats blood for sin, so now the heart
Of the good knight begins to bleed.

Of all the ruinous shafts that dart
Within his liver, this hath plied
The most intolerable smart.

"By Goddes wounds!" the good knight cried,
"What is this quest, grown daily dafter,
Where nothing—nothing—may abide?

Westward!" They fly, but rolling after
Echoes the Beast's unsatisfied
And inextinguishable laughter!

XXVII

SIR PALAMEDE goes aching on
 (Pox of despair's dread interdict !)
Aye to the western horizon,

Still meditating, sharp and strict,
 Upon the changes of the earth,
Its towers and temples derelict,

The ready ruin of its mirth,
 The flowers, the fruits, the leaves that fall,
The joy of life, its growing girth—

And nothing as the end of all.
 Yea, even as the Yang-tze rolled
Its rapids past him, so the wall

Of things brake down ; his eyes behold
 The mighty Beast serenely couched
Upon its breast of burnished gold.

“ Ah ! by Christ's blood ! ” (his soul avouched),
 “ Nothing but change (but change !) abides.
Death lurks, a leopard curled and crouched,

In all the seasons and the tides.

But ah! the more it changed and changed"—
(The good knight laughed to split his sides!)

“What? Is the soul of things deranged?

The more it changed, and rippled through
Its changes, and still changed, and changed,

The liker to itself it grew.

Bear me,” he cried, “to purge my bile
To the old land of Hormakhu,

That I may sit and curse awhile

At all these follies fond that pen
My quest about—on, on to Nile!

Tread tenderly, my merry men!

For nothing is so void and vile
As Palamede the Saracen.”

XXVIII

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen
Hath clad him in a sable robe ;
Hath curses, writ by holy men
From all the gardens of the globe.

He standeth at an altar-stone ;
The blood drips from the slain babe's throat ;
His chant rolls in a magick moan ;
His head bows to the crownèd goat.

His wand makes curves and spires in air ;
The smoke of incense curls and quivers ;
His eyes fix in a glass-cold stare :
The land of Egypt rocks and shivers !

“ Lo! by thy Gods, O God, I vow
To burn the authentic bones and blood
Of curst Osiris even now
To the dark Nile's upsurging flood !

I cast thee down, oh crowned and throned !
To black Amennti's void profane.
Until mine anger be atoned
Thou shalt not ever rise again.”

With firm red lips and square black beard,
Osiris in his strength appeared.

He made the sign that saveth men
On Palamede the Saracen.

'Hath hushed his conjuration grim :
The curse comes back to sleep with him.

'Hath fallen himself to that profane
Whence none might ever rise again.

Dread torture racks him ; all his bones
Get voice to utter forth his groans.

The very poison of his blood
Joins in that cry's soul-shaking flood.

For many a chiliad counted well
His soul stayed in its proper Hell.

Then, when Sir Palamedes came
 Back to himself, the shrine was dark.
Cold was the incense, dead the flame ;
 The slain babe lay there black and stark.

What of the Beast? What of the quest?
 More blind the quest, the Beast more dim.
Even now its laughter is suppressed,
 While his own demons mock at him !

O thou most desperate dupe that Hell's
Malice can make of mortal men !
Meddle no more with magick spells,
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

XXIX

HA! but the good knight, striding forth
From Set's abominable shrine,
Pursues the quest with bitter wrath,
So that his words flow out like wine.

And lo! the soul that heareth them
Is straightway healed of suffering.
His fame runs through the land of Khem:
They flock, the peasant and the king.

There he works many a miracle:
The blind see, and the cripples walk;
Lepers grow clean; sick folk grow well;
The deaf men hear, the dumb men talk.

He casts out devils with a word;
Circleth his wand, and dead men rise.
No such a wonder hath been heard
Since Christ our God's sweet sacrifice.

"Now, by the glad blood of our Lord!"
Quoth Palamede, "my heart is light.
I am the chosen harpsichord
Whereon God playeth; the perfect knight,

The saint of Mary"—there he stayed,
For out of Memnon's singing stone
So fierce a questing barked and brayed,
It turned his laughter to a groan.

His vow forgot, his task undone,
His soul whipped in God's bitter school!
(He moaned a mighty malison!)
The perfect knight? The perfect fool!

"Now, by God's wounds!" quoth he, "my strength
Is burnt out to a pest of pains.
Let me fling off my curse at length
In old Chaldea's starry plains!

Thou blessèd Jesus, foully nailed
Unto the cruel Calvary tree,
Look on my soul's poor fort assailed
By all the hosts of devilry!

Is there no medicine but death
That shall avail me in my place,
That I may know the Beauteous Breath
And taste the Goodly Gift of Grace?

Keep Thou yet firm this trembling leaf
My soul, dear God Who died for men;
Yea! for that sinner-soul the chief,
Sir Palamede the Saracen!"

XXX

STARRED is the blackness of the sky ;
Wide is the sweep of the cold plain
Where good Sir Palamede doth lie,
Keen on the Beast-slot once again.

All day he rode ; all night he lay
With eyes wide open to the stars,
Seeking in many a secret way
The key to unlock his prison bars.

Beneath him, hark ! the marvel sounds !
The Beast that questeth horribly.
As if a thirty couple hounds
Are in his belly questeth he.

Beneath him ? Heareth he aright ?
He leaps to's feet—a wonder shews :
Steep dips a stairway from the light
To what obscurity God knows.

Still never a tremor shakes his soul
(God praise thee, knight of adamant !);
He plunges to that gruesome goal
Firm as an old bull-elephant !

The broad stair winds ; he follows it ;
Dark is the way ; the air is blind ;
Black, black the blackness of the pit,
The light long blotted out behind !

His sword sweeps out ; his keen glance peers
For some shape glimmering through the gloom :
Naught, naught in all that void appears ;
More still, more silent than the tomb !

Yet now the good knight is aware
Of some black force, of some dread throne,
Waiting beneath that awful stair,
Beneath that pit of slippery stone.

Yea ! though he sees not anything,
Nor hears, his subtle sense is 'ware
That, lackeyed by the devil-king,
The Beast—the Questing Beast—is there !

So though his heart beats close with fear,
Though horror grips his throat, he goes,
Goes on to meet it, spear to spear, ;
As good knight should, to face his foes.

Nay ! but the end is come. Black earth
Belches that peerless Paladin
Up from her gulphs—untimely birth !
—Her horror could not hold him in !

White as a corpse, the hero hails
The dawn, that night of fear still shaking
His body. All death's doubt assails
Him. Was it sleep or was it waking?

“By God, I care not, I!” (quod he).
“Or wake or sleep, or live or dead,
I will pursue this mystery.
So help me Grace of Godlihead!”

Ay! with thy wasted limbs pursue
That subtle Beast home to his den!
Who knows but thou mayst win athrough,
Sir Palamede the Saracen?

XXXI

FROM God's sweet air Sir Palamede
Hath come unto a demon bog,
A city where but rats may breed

In sewer-stench and fetid fog.
Within its heart pale phantoms crawl.
Breathless with foolish haste they jog

And jostle, all for naught! They scrawl
Vain things all night that they disown
Ere day. They call and bawl and squall

Hoarse cries; they moan, they groan. A stone
Hath better sense! And these among
A cabbage-headed god they own,

With wandering eye and jabbering tongue.
He, rotting in that grimy sewer
And charnel-house of death and dung,

Shrieks: "How the air is sweet and pure!
Give me the entrails of a frog
And I will teach thee! Lo! the lure

Of light! How lucent is the fog!
How noble is my cabbage-head!
How sweetly fragrant is the bog!"

"God's wounds!" (Sir Palamedes said),
"What have I done to earn this portion?
Must I, the clean knight born and bred,

Sup with this filthy toad-abortion?"
Nathless he stayed with him awhile,
Lest by disdain his mental torsion

Slip back, or miss the serene smile
Should crown his quest; for (as one saith)
The unknown may lurk within the vile.

So he who sought the Beauteous Breath,
Desired the Goodly Gift of Grace,
Went equal into life and death.

But oh! the foulness of his face!
Not here was anything of worth;
He turned his back upon the place,

Sought the blue sky and the green earth,
Ay! and the lustral sea to cleanse
That filth that stank about his girth,

The sores and scabs, the warts and wens,
The nameless vermin he had gathered
In those insufferable dens,

The foul diseases he had fathered.

So now the quest slips from his brain :
“ First (Christ !) let me be clean again ! ”

XXXII

“HA!” cries the knight, “may patient toil
Of brain dissolve this cruel coil!

In Afric they that chase the ostrich
Clothe them with feathers, subtly foil

Its vigilance, come close, then dart
Its death upon it. Brave my heart!

Do thus!” And so the knight disguises
Himself, on hands and knees doth start

His hunt, goes questing up and down.
So in the fields the peasant clown
Flies, shrieking, from that dreadful figure.
But when he came to any town

They caged him for a lunatic.
Quod he: “Would God I had the trick!
The beast escaped from my devices;
I will the same. The bars are thick,

But I am strong.” He wrenched in vain;
Then—what is this? What wild, sharp strain
Smites on the air? The prison smashes.
Hark! ’tis the Questing Beast again!

Then as he rushes forth the note
Roars from that Beast's malignant throat
 With laughter, laughter, laughter, laughter !
The wits of Palamedes float

In ecstasy of shame and rage.
"O Thou!" exclaims the baffled sage ;
 " How should I match Thee? Yet, I will so,
Though Doomisday devour the Age.

Weeping, and beating on his breast,
Gnashing his teeth, he still confessed
 The might of the dread oath that bound him :
He would not yet give up the quest.

" Nay! while I am," quoth he, " though Hell
Engulph me, though God mock me well,
 I follow as I swear ; I follow,
Though it be unattainable.

Nay, more! Because I may not win,
Is't worth man's work to enter in !
 The Infinite with mighty passion
Hath caught my spirit in a gin.

Come! since I may not imitate
The Beast, at least I work and wait.
 We shall discover soon or late
Which is the master—I or Fate ! "

XXXIII

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Hath passed unto the tideless sea,
That the keen whisper of the wind
May bring him that which never men
Knew—on the quest, the quest, rides he!
So long to seek, so far to find!

So weary was the knight, his limbs
Were slack as new-slain dove's; his knees
No longer gripped the charger rude.
Listless, he aches; his purpose swims
Exhausted in the oily seas
Of laxity and lassitude.

The soul subsides; its serious motion
Still throbs; by habit, not by will.
And all his lust to win the quest
Is but a passive-mild devotion.
(Ay! soon the blood shall run right chill
—And is not death the Lord of Rest?)

There as he basks upon the cliff
He yearns toward the Beast; his eyes
Are moist with love; his lips are fain

To breathe fond prayers ; and (marry !) if
Man's soul were measured by his sighs
He need not linger to attain.

Nay ! while the Beast squats there, above
Him, smiling on him ; as he vows
Wonderful deeds and fruitless flowers,
He grows so maudlin in his love
That even the knaves of his own house
Mock at him in their merry hours.

“God's death !” raged Palamede, not wroth
But irritated, “ laugh ye so ?
Am I a jape for scullions ? ”
His curse came in a flaky froth.
He seized a club, with blow on blow
Breaking the knave's unreverent sconce !

“ Thou mock the Questing Beast I chase,
The Questing Beast I love ? 'Od's wounds ! ”
Then sudden from the slave there brake
A cachinnation scant of grace,
As if a thirty couple hounds
Were in his belly ! Knight, awake !

Ah ! well he woke ! His love and scorn
Grapple in death-throe at his throat.
“ Lead me away ” (quoth he), “ my men !
Woe, woe is me was ever born
So blind a bat, so gross a goat,
As Palamede the Saracen ! ”

XXXIV

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen
Hath hid him in an hermit's cell
Upon an island in the fen

Of that lone land where Druids dwell.
There came an eagle from the height
And bade him mount. From dale to dell

They sank and soared. Last to the light
Of the great sun himself they flew,
Piercing the borders of the night,

Passing the irremeable blue.
Far into space beyond the stars
At last they came. And there he knew

All the blind reasonable bars
Broken, and all the emotions stilled,
And all the stains and all the scars

Left him ; so like a child he thrilled
With utmost knowledge ; all his soul,
With perfect sense and sight fulfilled,

Touched the extreme, the giant goal!
Yea! all things in that hour transcended,
All power in his sublime control,

All felt, all thought, all comprehended—
“How is it, then, the quest” (he saith)
“Is not—at last!—achieved and ended?”

Why taste I not the Bounteous Breath,
Receive the Goodly Gift of Grace?
Now, kind king-eagle (by God’s death!),

Restore me to mine ancient place!
I am advantaged nothing then!”
Then swooped he from the Byss of Space,

And set the knight amid the fen.
“God!” quoth Sir Palamede, “that I
Who have won nine should fail at ten!”

I set my all upon the die:
There is no further trick to try.
Call thrice accursèd above men
Sir Palamede the Saracen!”

XXXV

“YEA!” quoth the knight, “I rede the spell.
This Beast is the Unknowable.
I seek in Heaven, I seek in Hell;

Ever he mocks me. Yet, methinks,
I have the riddle of the Sphinx.
For were I keener than the lynx

I should not see within my mind
One thought that is not in its kind
In sooth That Beast that lurks behind:

And in my quest his questing seems
The authentic echo of my dreams,
The proper thesis of my themes!

I know him? Still he answers: No!
I know him not? Maybe—and lo!
He is the one sole thing I know!

Nay! who knows not is different
From him that knows. Then be content;
Thou canst not alter the event!

Ah! what conclusion subtly draws
From out this chaos of mad laws?
Am I, the effect, as I, the cause?

Nay, the brain reels beneath its swell
Of pompous thoughts. Enough to tell
That He is known Unknowable!"

Thus did that knightly Saracen
In Cantabrig's miasmal fen
Lecture to many learned men.

So clamorous was their applause—
"His mind" (said they) "is free of flaws:
The Veil of God is thin as gauze!"—

That almost they had dulled or drowned
The laughter (in its belly bound)
Of that dread Beast he had not found.

Nathless—although he would away—
They forced the lack-luck knight to stay
And lecture many a weary day.

Verily, almost he had caught
The infection of their costive thought,
And brought his loyal quest to naught.

It was by night that Palamede
Ran from that mildewed, mouldy breed,
Moth-eaten dullards run to seed!

How weak Sir Palamedes grows !
We hear no more of bouts and blows !
His weapons are his ten good toes !

He that was Arthur's peer, good knight
Proven in many a foughten fight,
Flees like a felon in the night !

Ay! this thy quest is past the ken
Of thee and of all mortal men,
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

XXXVI

OFT, as Sir Palamedes went
 Upon the quest, he was aware
Of some vast shadow subtly blent
 With his own shadow in the air.

It had no shape, no voice had it
 Wherewith to daunt the eye or ear ;
Yet all the horror of the pit
 Clad it with all the arms of fear.

Moreover, though he sought to scan
 Some feature, though he listened long,
No shape of God or fiend or man,
 No whisper, groan, shriek, scream, or song

Gave him to know it. Now it chanced
 One day Sir Palamedes rode
Through a great wood whose leafage danced
 In the thin sunlight as it flowed

From heaven. He halted in a glade,
 Bade his horse crop the tender grass ;
Put off his armour, softly laid
 Himself to sleep till noon should pass.

He woke. Before him stands and grins
A motley hunchback. "Knavel!" quoth he,
"Hast seen the Beast? The quest that wins
The loftiest prize of chivalry?"

Sir Knight," he answers, "hast thou seen
Aught of that Beast? How knowest thou, then,
That it is ever or hath been,
Sir Palamede the Saracen?"

Sir Palamede was well awake.
"Nay! I deliberate deep and long,
Yet find no answer fit to make
To thee. The weak beats down the strong;

The fool's cap shames the helm. But thou!
I know thee for the shade that haunts
My way, sets shame upon my brow,
My purpose dims, my courage daunts.

Then, since the thinker must be dumb,
At least the knight may knightly act:
The wisest monk in Christendom
May have his skull broke by a fact."

With that, as a snake strikes, his sword
Leapt burning to the burning blue;
And fell, one swift, assured award,
Stabbing that hunchback through and through.

Straight he dissolved, a voiceless shade.

“Or scotched or slain,” the knight said then,
“What odds? Keep bright and sharp thy blade,
Sir Palamede the Saracen!”

XXXVII

SIR PALAMEDE is sick to death!
The staring eyen, the haggard face!
God grant to him the Beauteous Breath!
God send the Goodly Gift of Grace!

There is a white cave by the sea
Wherein the knight is hid away.
Just ere the night falls, spieth he
The sun's last shaft flicker astray.

All day is dark. There, there he mourns
His wasted years, his purpose faint.
A million whips, a million scorns
Make the knight flinch, and stain the saint.

For now! what hath he left? He feeds
On limpets and wild roots. What odds?
There is no need a mortal needs
Who hath loosed man's hope to grasp at God's!

How his head swims! At night what stirs
Above the faint wash of the tide,
And rare sea-birds whose winging whirrs
About the cliffs? Now good betide!

God save thee, woeful Palamede !
The questing of the Beast is loud
Within thy ear. By Goddess reed,
Thou hast won the tilt from all the crowd !

Within thy proper bowels it sounds
Mighty and musical at need,
As if a thirty couple hounds
Quested within thee, Palamede !

Now, then, he grasps the desperate truth
He hath toiled these many years to see,
Hath wasted strength, hath wasted youth—
He was the Beast ; the Beast was he !

He rises from the cave of death,
Runs to the sea with shining face
To know at last the Bounteous Breath,
To taste the Goodly Gift of Grace.

Ah ! Palamede, thou hast mistook !
Thou art the butt of all confusion !
Not to be written in my book
Is this most drastic disillusion !

So weak and ill was he, I doubt
If he might hear the royal feast
Of laughter that came rolling out
Afar from that elusive Beast.

Yet, those white lips were snapped, like steel
 Upon the ankles of a slave!
That body broken on the wheel
 Of Time suppressed the groan it gave!

“Not there, not here, my quest!” he cried.
 “Not thus! Not now! Do how and when
Matter? I am, and I abide,
 Sir Palamede the Saracen!”

XXXVIII

SIR PALAMEDE of great renown
Rode through the land upon the quest,
His sword loose and his vizor down,
His buckler braced, his lance in rest.

Now, then, God save thee, Palamede !
Who courseth yonder on the field ?
Those silver arms, that sable steed,
The sun and rose upon his shield ?

The strange knight spurs to him. Disdain
Curls the proud lip as he uplifts
His vizor. "Come, an end ! In vain,
Sir Fox, thy thousand turns and shifts !"

Sir Palamede was white with fear.
Lord Christ ! those features were his own ;
His own that voice so icy clear
That cuts him, cuts him to the bone.

"False knight ! false knight !" the stranger cried.
"Thou bastard dog, Sir Palamede ?
I am the good knight fain to ride
Upon the Questing Beast at need.

Thief of my arms, my crest, my quest,
My name, now meetest thou thy shame.
See, with this whip I lash thee back,
Back to the kennel whence there came

So false a hound.” “Good knight, in sooth,”
Answered Sir Palamede, “not I
Presume to assert the idlest truth ;
And here, by this good ear and eye,

I grant thou art Sir Palamede.
But—try the first and final test
If thou or I be he. Take heed !”
He backed his horse, covered his breast,

Drove his spurs home, and rode upon
That knight. His lance-head fairly struck
The barred strength of his morion,
And rolled the stranger in the muck.

“Now, by God’s death !” quoth Palamede,
His sword at work, “I will not leave
So much of thee as God might feed
His sparrows with. As I believe

The sweet Christ’s mercy shall avail,
So will I not have aught for thee ;
Since every bone of thee may rail
Against me, crying treachery.

Thou hast lied. I am the chosen knight
To slay the Questing Beast for men ;
I am the loyal son of light,
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

Thou wast the subtlest fiend that yet
Hath crossed my path. To say thee nay
I dare not, but my sword is wet
With thy knave's blood, and with thy clay

Fouled! Dost thou think to resurrect?
O sweet Lord Christ that savest men!
From all such fiends do thou protect
Me, Palamede the Saracen !”

XXXIX

GREEN and Grecian is the valley,
Shepherd lads and shepherd lasses
Dancing in a ring
Merrily and musically.
How their happiness surpasses
The mere thrill of spring !

“Come” (they cry), “Sir Knight, put by
All that weight of shining armour !
Here’s a posy, here’s a garland, here’s a chain of daisies !
Here’s a charmer ! There’s a charmer !
Praise the God that crazes men, the God that raises
All our lives to ecstasy !”

Sir Palamedes was too wise
To mock their gentle wooing ;
He smiles into their sparkling eyes
While they his armour are undoing.
“For who” (quoth he) “may say that this
Is not the mystery I miss ?”

Soon he is gathered in the dance,
And smothered in the flowers.

A boy's laugh and a maiden's glance
Are sweet as paramours!
Stay! is there naught some wanton wight
May do to excite the glamoured knight?

Yea! the song takes a sea-wild swell;
The dance moves in a mystic web;
Strange lights abound and terrible;
The life that flowed is out at ebb.

The lights are gone; the night is come;
The lads and lasses sink, awaiting
Some climax—oh, how tense and dumb
The expectant hush intoxicating!
Hush! the heart's beat! Across the moor
Some dreadful god rides fast, be sure!

The listening Palamede bites through
His thin white lips—what hoofs are those?
Are they the Quest? How still and blue
The sky is! Hush—God knows—God knows!

Then on a sudden in the midst of them
Is a swart god, from hoof to girdle a goat,
Upon his brow the twelve-star diadem
And the King's Collar fastened on his throat.

Thrill upon thrill courseth through Palamede.
Life, life, pure life is bubbling in his blood.
All youth comes back, all strength, all joy indeed
Flaming within that throbbing spirit-flood!

Yet was his heart immeasurably sad,
For that no questing in his ear he had.

Nay! he saw all. He saw the Curse
That wrapped in ruin the World primæval.
He saw the unborn Universe,
And all its gods coeval.
He saw, and was, all things at once
In Him that is ; he was the stars,
The moons, the meteors, the suns,
All in one net of triune bars ;
Inextricably one, inevitably one,
Immeasurable, immutable, immense
Beyond all the wonder that his soul had won
By sense, in spite of sense, and beyond sense.
“ Praise God ! ” quoth Palamede, “ by this
I attain the uttermost of bliss. . . .

God’s wounds ! but that I never sought.
The Questing Beast I sware to attain
And all this miracle is naught.
Off on my travels once again !

I keep my youth regained to foil
Old Time that took me in his toil.
I keep my strength regained to chase
The Beast that mocks me now as then
Dear Christ ! I pray Thee of Thy grace
Take pity on the forlorn case
Of Palamede the Saracen ! ”

XL

SIR PALAMEDE the Saracen

Hath seen the All ; his mind is set
To pass beyond that great Amen.

Far hath he wandered ; still to fret
His soul against that Soul. He breaches
The rhododendron forest-net,

His body bloody with its leeches.
Sternly he travelleth the crest
Of a great mountain, far that reaches

Toward the King-snows ; the rains molest
The knight, white wastes updriven of wind
In sheets, in torrents, fiend-possessed,

Up from the steaming plains of Ind.
They cut his flesh, they chill his bones :
Yet he feels naught ; his mind is pinned

To that one point where all the thrones
Join to one lion-head of rock,
Towering above all crests and cones

That crouch like jackals. Stress and shock
Move Palamede no more. Like Fate
He moves with silent speed. They flock,

The Gods, to watch him. Now abate
His pulses ; he threads through the vale,
And turns him to the mighty gate,

The glacier. Oh, the flowers that scale
Those sun-kissed heights ! The snows that crown
The quartz ravines ! The clouds that veil

The awful slopes ! Dear God ! look down
And see this petty man move on,
Relentless as Thine own renown,

Careless of praise or orison,
Simply determined. Wilt Thou launch
(This knight's presumptuous head upon)

The devastating avalanche ?
He knows too much, and cares too little !
His wound is more than Death can staunch.

He can avoid, though by one tittle,
Thy surest shaft ! And now the knight,
Breasting the crags, may laugh and whittle

Away the demon-club whose might
Threatened him. Now he leaves the spur ;
And eager, with a boy's delight,

Treads the impending glacier.

Now, now he strikes the steep black ice
That leads to the last neck. By Her

That bore the Lord, by what device

May he pass there? Yet still he moves,
Ardent and steady, as if the price

Of death were less than life approves,

As if on eagles' wings he mounted,
Or as on angels' wings—or love's!

So, all the journey he discounted,

Holding the goal. Supreme he stood.
Upon the summit; dreams uncounted,

Worlds of sublime beatitude!

He passed beyond. The All he hath touched,
And dropped to vile desuetude.

What lay beyond? What star unsmutched

By being? His poor fingers fumble,
And all the Naught their ardour clutched,

Like all the rest, begins to crumble.

Where is the Beast? His bliss exceeded
All that bards sing of or priests mumble;

No man, no God, hath known what he did.

Only this balked him—that he lacked
Exactly the one thing he needed.

“Faugh!” cried the knight. “Thought, word, and act
Confirm me. I have proved the quest
Impossible. I break the pact.

Back to the gilded halls, confessed
A recreant! Achieved or not,
This task hath earned a foison—rest.

In Caerlon and Camelot
Let me embrace my fellow-men!
To buss the wenches, pass the pot,
Is now the enviable lot
Of Palamede the Saracen!”

XLI

SIR ARTHUR sits again at feast
 Within the high and holy hall
Of Camelot. From West to East

The Table Round hath burst the thrall
 Of Paynimrie. The goodliest gree
Sits on the gay knights, one and all ;

Till Arthur : “ Of your chivalry,
 Knights, let us drink the happiness
Of the one knight we lack ” (quoth he) ;

“ For surely in some sore distress
 May be Sir Palamede.” Then they
Rose as one man in glad liesse

To honour that great health. “ God’s way
 Is not as man’s ” (quoth Lancelot).
“ Yet, may God send him back this day,

His quest achieved, to Camelot ! ”
 “ Amen ! ” they cried, and raised the bowl ;
When—the wind rose, a blast as hot

As the simoom, and forth did roll
 A sudden thunder. Still they stood.
Then came a bugle-blast. The soul

Of each knight stirred. With vigour rude,
 The blast tore down the tapestry
That hid the door. All ashen-hued

The knights laid hand to sword. But he
 (Sir Palamedes) in the gap
Was found—God knoweth—bitterly

Weeping. Cried Arthur: “Strange the hap!
 My knight, my dearest knight, my friend!
What gift had Fortune in her lap

Like thee? Embrace me!” “Rather rend
 Your garments, if you love me, sire!”
(Quod he). “I am come unto the end.

All mine intent and my desire,
 My quest, mine oath—all, all is done.
Burn them with me in fatal fire!

For I have failed. All ways, each one
 I strove in, mocked me. If I quailed
Or shirked, God knows. I have not won:

That and no more I know. I failed.”
 King Arthur fell a-weeping. Then
Merlin uprose, his face unveiled;

Thrice cried he piteously then
Upon our Lord. Then shook his head
Sir Palamede the Saracen,

As knowing nothing might bestead,
When lo! there rose a monster moan,
A hugeous cry, a questing dread,

As if (God's death!) there coursed alone
The Beast, within whose belly sounds
That marvellous music monotone

As if a thirty couple hounds
Quested within him. Now, by Christ
And by His pitiful five wounds!—

Even as a lover to his tryst,
That Beast came questing in the hall,
One flame of gold and amethyst,

Bodily seen then of them all.
Then came he to Sir Palamede,
Nestling to him, as sweet and small

As a young babe clings at its need
To the white bosom of its mother,
As Christ clung to the gibbet-reed!

Then every knight turned to his brother,
Sobbing and sighing for great gladness;
And, as they looked on one another,

Surely there stole a subtle madness
 Into their veins, more strong than death :
For all the roots of sin and sadness

Were plucked. As a flower perisheth,
 So all sin died. And in that place
All they did know the Beauteous Breath

And taste the Goodly Gift of Grace.
 Then fell the night. Above the baying
Of the great Beast, that was the bass

To all the harps of Heaven a-playing,
 There came a solemn voice (not one
But was upon his knees in praying

And glorifying God). The Son
 Of God Himself—men thought—spoke then.
“Arise! brave soldier, thou hast won

The quest not given to mortal men.
 Arise! Sir Palamede Adept,
Christian, and no more Saracen!

On wake or sleeping, wise, inept,
 Still thou didst seek. Those foolish ways
On which thy folly stumbled, leapt,

All led to the one goal. Now praise
 Thy Lord that He hath brought thee through
To win the quest!” The good knight lays

His hand upon the Beast. Then blew
Each angel on his trumpet, then
All Heaven resounded that it knew

Sir Palamede the Saracen
Was master! Through the domes of death,
Through all the mighty realms of men

And spirits breathed the Beauteous Breath :
They taste the Goodly Gift of Grace.
—Now 'tis the chronicler that saith :

Our Saviour grant in little space
That also I, even I, be blest
Thus, though so evil is my case—

Let them that read my rime attest
The same sweet unction in my pen—
That writes in pure blood of my breast ;

For that I figure unto men
The story of my proper quest
As thine, first Eastern in the West,
Sir Palamede the Saracen !

