

THE OLD CHARTIST



Written by George Meredith

Once A Week was a British weekly illustrated literary magazine published by Bradbury & Evans from 1859 to 1880.[1] According to John Sutherland, "Historically the magazine's main achievement was to provide an outlet for [an] innovative group of illustrators [in] the 1860s." Artists included John Tenniel of Alice in Wonderland fame, PreRaphaelites, William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais and Frederick Sandys. The Old Chartist Poem appeared in 1860.

The Old Chartist
By George Meredith (1828-1909)

I

Whate'er I be, old England is my dam!
So there's my answer to the judges, clear.

III

They shipp'd me of for it; I'm here again.
Old England is my dam, whate'er I be!
Says I, I'll tramp it home, and see the grain:
If you see well, you're king of what you see:
Eyesight is having,
If you're not given, I said, to gluttony.
Such talk to ignorance sounds as raving.

IV

You dear old brook, that from his Grace's park
Come bounding! on you run near my old town:
My lord can't lock the water; nor the lark,
Unless he kills him, can my lord keep down.
Up, is the song-note!
I've tried it, too:- for comfort and renown,
I rather pitch'd upon the wrong note.

V

I'm not ashamed: Not beaten's still my boast:
Again I'll rouse the people up to strike.
But home's where different politics jar most.
Respectability the women like.
This form, or that form, -
The Government may be hungry pike,
But don't you mount a Chartist platform!

VI

Well, well! Not beaten—spite of them, I shout;
And my estate is suffering for the Cause. -
No,—what is yon brown water-rat about,
Who washes his old poll with busy paws?
What does he mean by't?
It's like defying all our natural laws,
For him to hope that he'll get clean by't.

VII

His seat is on a mud-bank, and his trade
Is dirt:- he's quite contemptible; and yet
The fellow's all as anxious as a maid
To show a decent dress, and dry the wet.
Now it's his whisker,
And now his nose, and ear: he seems to get
Each moment at the motion brisker!

VIII

To see him squat like little chaps at school,
I could let fly a laugh with all my might.
He peers, hangs both his fore-paws:- bless that fool,
He's bobbing at his frill now!—what a sight!
Licking the dish up,
As if he thought to pass from black to white,
Like parson into lawny bishop.

IX

The elms and yellow reed-flags in the sun,
Look on quite grave:- the sunlight flecks his side;
And links of bindweed-flowers round him run,
And shine up doubled with him in the tide.
I'M nearly splitting,
But nature seems like seconding his pride,
And thinks that his behaviour's fitting.

X

That isle o' mud looks baking dry with gold.
His needle-muzzle still works out and in.
It really is a wonder to behold,
And makes me feel the bristles of my chin.
Judged by appearance,
I fancy of the two I'm nearer Sin,
And might as well commence a clearance.

XI

And that's what my fine daughter said:- she meant:
Pray, hold your tongue, and wear a Sunday face.
Her husband, the young linendraper, spent
Much argument thereon:- I'm their disgrace.
Bother the couple!
I feel superior to a chap whose place
Commands him to be neat and supple.

XII

But if I go and say to my old hen:
I'll mend the gentry's boots, and keep discreet,
Until they grow TOO violent,—why, then,
A warmer welcome I might chance to meet:
Warmer and better.
And if she fancies her old cock is beat,
And drops upon her knees—so let her!

XIII

She suffered for me:- women, you'll observe,
Don't suffer for a Cause, but for a man.
When I was in the dock she show'd her nerve:

I saw beneath her shawl my old tea-can
Trembling . . . she brought it
To screw me for my work: she loath'd my plan,
And therefore doubly kind I thought it.

XIV

I've never lost the taste of that same tea:
That liquor on my logic floats like oil,
When I state facts, and fellows disagree.
For human creatures all are in a coil;
All may want pardon.
I see a day when every pot will boil
Harmonious in one great Tea-garden!

XV

We wait the setting of the Dandy's day,
Before that time!—He's furbishing his dress, -
He WILL be ready for it!—and I say,
That you old dandy rat amid the cress, -
Thanks to hard labour! -
If cleanliness is next to godliness,
The old fat fellow's heaven's neighbour!

XVI

You teach me a fine lesson, my old boy!
I've looked on my superiors far too long,
And small has been my profit as my joy.
You've done the right while I've denounced the wrong.
Prosper me later!
Like you I will despise the sniggering throng,
And please myself and my Creator.

XVII

I'll bring the linendraper and his wife
Some day to see you; taking off my hat.
Should they ask why, I'll answer: in my life
I never found so true a democrat.
Base occupation
Can't rob you of your own esteem, old rat!
I'll preach you to the British nation.