



The Band of Gideon and Other Lyrics
Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr. (1918)

Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr. was an African American poet and playwright from Kentucky. He attended Fisk University, in Tennessee, but had to withdraw after contracting tuberculosis. He succumbed to the disease and died several years later, in his early 20s. He published one collection of poems during his lifetime, from which these selections are taken; other works of his were published posthumously.

1. And What Shall You Say?

Brother, come!
and let us go unto our God.
And when we stand before Him
I shall say—
“Lord, I do not hate,
I am hated.
I scourge no one,
I am scourged.
I covet no lands,
my lands are coveted.
I mock no peoples,
my people are mocked.”
And, brother, what shall you say?

* * *

2. O Little David, Play on Your Harp

O Little David, play on your harp,
that ivory harp with the golden strings,
and sing, as you did in Jewry Land,
of the Prince of Peace and the God of Love
and the Coming Christ Immanuel.
O Little David, play on your harp.

A seething world is gone stark mad
and is drunk with the blood,
gorged with the flesh,
blinded with the ashes
of her millions of dead.
From out it all and over all
there stands, years old and fully grown,
a monster in the guise of man.
He is of war and not of war;
born in peace,

nurtured in arrogant pride and greed,
 world-creature is he and native to no land.
 And war itself is merciful
 when measured by his deeds.
 Beneath the Crescent
 lie a people maimed;
 their only sin—
 that they worship God.
 On Russia's steppes
 is a race in tears;
 their one offense—
 that they would be themselves.
 On Flanders plains
 is a nation raped;
 a bleeding gift
 of "Kultur's" conquering creed.
 And in every land
 are black folk scourged;
 their only crime—
 that they dare to be men.

O Little David, play on your harp,
 that ivory harp with the golden strings,
 and psalm anew your songs of Peace,
 of the soothing calm of a Brotherly Love,
 and the saving grace of a Mighty God.
 O Little David, play on your harp.

* * *

3. **Sonnet to Negro Soldiers^a**

They shall go down unto Life's Borderland,
 walk unafraid within that Living Hell
 nor heed the driving rain of shot and shell
 that 'round them falls; but with uplifted hand
 be one with mighty hosts, an armed band
 against man's wrong to wrong—for such full well
 they know. And from their trembling lips shall swell
 a song of hope the world can understand.
 All this to them shall be a glorious sign,
 a glimmer of that resurrection morn

^a During World War I, soldiers of black African ancestry fought for the British empire, the French empire, and the United States. Cotter himself did not go to war, having already contracted tuberculosis by the time the United States entered the conflict.

when age-long Faith, crowned with a grace benign,
shall rise and from their brows cast down the thorn
of prejudice. E'en though through blood it be,
there breaks this day their dawn of Liberty.

Source: Joseph S. Cotter, Jr., *The Band of Gideon and Other Lyrics* (Boston: Cornhill Co., 1918), 13, 15-17, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/loc.ark:/13960/t0jt04s2z>. Public domain.

Edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Punctuation emended for readability. Also for readability, capital letters at the beginning of lines converted to lowercase, but other uses of capitalization (*Little David*, *Jewry Land*, *Life's Borderland*, *Living Hell*, etc.) replicate the source publication, in deference to Cotter's poetic choices. The absence of an apostrophe in *Flanders plains* likewise replicates the source; that same usage appears in the famous 1915 poem "In Flanders Fields," by white Canadian John McCrae.

This edited presentation of poems by Cotter is intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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