

# Idylls of the King

(Volume III)

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

Idylls of the King ( Volume III ) / 杨丹主编 飞天电子音像出版社  
2004

ISBN 7-900363-43-2

I. 监… II. 王…

出版发行: 飞天电子音像出版社

责任编辑: 杨丹

经销: 全国各地新华书店

印刷: 北京施园印刷厂

版次: 2004 年 6 月第 1 版

书号: ISBN 7-900363-43-2

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## **Pelleas and Ettarre**

King Arthur made new knights to fill the gap  
Left by the Holy Quest; and as he sat  
In hall at old Caerleon, the high doors  
Were softly sundered, and through these a youth,  
Pelleas, and the sweet smell of the fields  
Past, and the sunshine came along with him.

'Make me thy knight, because I know, Sir King,  
All that belongs to knighthood, and I love.'  
Such was his cry: for having heard the King  
Had let proclaim a tournament the prize  
A golden circlet and a knightly sword,  
Full fain had Pelleas for his lady won  
The golden circlet, for himself the sword:  
And there were those who knew him near the King,  
And promised for him: and Arthur made him knight.

And this new knight, Sir Pelleas of the isles  
But lately come to his inheritance,  
And lord of many a barren isle was he  
Riding at noon, a day or twain before,  
Across the forest called of Dean, to find  
Caerleon and the King, had felt the sun  
Beat like a strong knight on his helm, and reeled  
Almost to falling from his horse; but saw  
Near him a mound of even sloping side,  
Whereon a hundred stately beeches grew,  
And here and there great hollies under them;  
But for a mile all round was open space,  
And fern and heath: and slowly Pelleas drew  
To that dim day, then binding his good horse  
To a tree, cast himself down; and as he lay  
At random looking over the brown earth  
Through that green glooming twilight of the grove,  
It seemed to Pelleas that the fern without

Burnt as a living fire of emeralds,  
So that his eyes were dazzled looking at it.  
Then o'er it crost the dimness of a cloud  
Floating, and once the shadow of a bird  
Flying, and then a fawn; and his eyes closed.  
And since he loved all maidens, but no maid  
In special, half awake he whispered, 'Where?  
O where? I love thee, though I know thee not.  
For fair thou art and pure as Guinevere,  
And I will make thee with my spear and sword  
As famous O my Queen, my Guinevere,  
For I will be thine Arthur when we meet.'

Suddenly wakened with a sound of talk  
And laughter at the limit of the wood,  
And glancing through the hoary boles, he saw,  
Strange as to some old prophet might have seemed  
A vision hovering on a sea of fire,  
Damsels in divers colours like the cloud

Of sunset and sunrise, and all of them  
On horses, and the horses richly trapt  
Breast high in that bright line of bracken stood:  
And all the damsels talked confusedly,  
And one was pointing this way, and one that,  
Because the way was lost.

And Pelleas rose,  
And loosed his horse, and led him to the light.  
There she that seemed the chief among them said,  
'In happy time behold our pilot star!  
Youth, we are damsels errant, and we ride,  
Armed as ye see, to tilt against the knights  
There at Caerleon, but have lost our way:  
To right? to left? straight forward? back again?  
Which? tell us quickly.'

Pelleas gazing thought,  
'Is Guinevere herself so beautiful?'

For large her violet eyes looked, and her bloom  
A rosy dawn kindled in stainless heavens,  
And round her limbs, mature in womanhood;  
And slender was her hand and small her shape;  
And but for those large eyes, the haunts of scorn,  
She might have seemed a toy to trifle with,  
And pass and care no more. But while he gazed  
The beauty of her flesh abashed the boy,  
As though it were the beauty of her soul:  
For as the base man, judging of the good,  
Puts his own baseness in him by default  
Of will and nature, so did Pelleas lend  
All the young beauty of his own soul to hers,  
Believing her; and when she spake to him,  
Stammered, and could not make her a reply.  
For out of the waste islands had he come,  
Where saving his own sisters he had known  
Scarce any but the women of his isles,  
Rough wives, that laughed and screamed against the



gulls,

Makers of nets, and living from the sea.

Then with a slow smile turned the lady round

And looked upon her people; and as when

A stone is flung into some sleeping tarn,

The circle widens till it lip the marge,

Spread the slow smile through all her company.

Three knights were thereamong; and they too smiled,

Scorning him; for the lady was Ettarre,

And she was a great lady in her land.

Again she said, 'O wild and of the woods,

Knowest thou not the fashion of our speech?

Or have the Heavens but given thee a fair face,

Lacking a tongue?'

'O damsel,' answered he,

'I woke from dreams; and coming out of gloom

Was dazzled by the sudden light, and crave

Pardon: but will ye to Caerleon? I

Go likewise: shall I lead you to the King?"

'Lead then,' she said; and through the woods they went.

And while they rode, the meaning in his eyes,

His tenderness of manner, and chaste awe,

His broken utterances and bashfulness,

Were all a burthen to her, and in her heart

She muttered, 'I have lighted on a fool,

Raw, yet so stale!' But since her mind was bent

On hearing, after trumpet blown, her name

And title, 'Queen of Beauty,' in the lists

Cried and beholding him so strong, she thought

That peradventure he will fight for me,

And win the circlet: therefore flattered him,

Being so gracious, that he wellnigh deemed

His wish by hers was echoed; and her knights

And all her damsels too were gracious to him,  
For she was a great lady.

And when they reached  
Caerleon, ere they past to lodging, she,  
Taking his hand, 'O the strong hand,' she said,  
'See! look at mine! but wilt thou fight for me,  
And win me this fine circlet, Pelleas,  
That I may love thee?'

Then his helpless heart  
Leapt, and he cried, 'Ay! wilt thou if I win?'  
'Ay, that will I,' she answered, and she laughed,  
And straitly nipt the hand, and flung it from her;  
Then glanced askew at those three knights of hers,  
Till all her ladies laughed along with her.

'O happy world,' thought Pelleas, 'all, meseems,  
Are happy; I the happiest of them all.'

Nor slept that night for pleasure in his blood,  
And green wood ways, and eyes among the leaves;  
Then being on the morrow knighted, sware  
To love one only. And as he came away,  
The men who met him rounded on their heels  
And wondered after him, because his face  
Shone like the countenance of a priest of old  
Against the flame about a sacrifice  
Kindled by fire from heaven: so glad was he.

Then Arthur made vast banquets, and strange knights  
From the four winds came in: and each one sat,  
Though served with choice from air, land, stream, and  
sea,

Oft in mid banquet measuring with his eyes  
His neighbour's make and might: and Pelleas looked  
Noble among the noble, for he dreamed  
His lady loved him, and he knew himself  
Loved of the King: and him his new made knight

Worshipt, whose lightest whisper moved him more  
Than all the ranged reasons of the world.

Then blushed and brake the morning of the jousts,  
And this was called 'The Tournament of Youth:'  
For Arthur, loving his young knight, withheld  
His older and his mightier from the lists,  
That Pelleas might obtain his lady's love,  
According to her promise, and remain  
Lord of the tourney. And Arthur had the jousts  
Down in the flat field by the shore of Usk  
Holden: the gilded parapets were crowned  
With faces, and the great tower filled with eyes  
Up to the summit, and the trumpets blew.  
There all day long Sir Pelleas kept the field  
With honour: so by that strong hand of his  
The sword and golden circlet were achieved.

Then rang the shout his lady loved: the heat

Of pride and glory fired her face; her eye  
Sparkled; she caught the circlet from his lance,  
And there before the people crowned herself:  
So for the last time she was gracious to him.

Then at Caerleon for a space her look  
Bright for all others, cloudier on her knight  
Lingered Ettarre: and seeing Pelleas droop,  
Said Guinevere, 'We marvel at thee much,  
O damsel, wearing this unsunny face  
To him who won thee glory!' And she said,  
'Had ye not held your Lancelot in your bower,  
My Queen, he had not won.' Whereat the Queen,  
As one whose foot is bitten by an ant,  
Glanced down upon her, turned and went her way.

But after, when her damsels, and herself,  
And those three knights all set their faces home,  
Sir Pelleas followed. She that saw him cried,

'Damsels and yet I should be shamed to say it  
I cannot bide Sir Baby. Keep him back  
Among yourselves. Would rather that we had  
Some rough old knight who knew the worldly way,  
Albeit grizzlier than a bear, to ride  
And jest with: take him to you, keep him off,  
And pamper him with papmeat, if ye will,  
Old milky fables of the wolf and sheep,  
Such as the wholesome mothers tell their boys.  
Nay, should ye try him with a merry one  
To find his mettle, good: and if he fly us,  
Small matter! let him.' This her damsels heard,  
And mindful of her small and cruel hand,  
They, closing round him through the journey home,  
Acted her hest, and always from her side  
Restrained him with all manner of device,  
So that he could not come to speech with her.  
And when she gained her castle, upsprang the bridge,  
Down rang the grate of iron through the groove,

And he was left alone in open field.

'These be the ways of ladies,' Pelleas thought,

'To those who love them, trials of our faith.

Yea, let her prove me to the uttermost,

For loyal to the uttermost am I.'

So made his moan; and darkness falling, sought

A priory not far off, there lodged, but rose

With morning every day, and, moist or dry,

Full armed upon his charger all day long

Sat by the walls, and no one opened to him.

And this persistence turned her scorn to wrath.

Then calling her three knights, she charged them, 'Out!

And drive him from the walls.' And out they came

But Pelleas overthrew them as they dashed

Against him one by one; and these returned,

But still he kept his watch beneath the wall.



Thereon her wrath became a hate; and once,  
A week beyond, while walking on the walls  
With her three knights, she pointed downward, 'Look,  
He haunts me I cannot breathe besieges me;  
Down! strike him! put my hate into your strokes,  
And drive him from my walls.' And down they went,  
And Pelleas overthrew them one by one;  
And from the tower above him cried Ettarre,  
'Bind him, and bring him in.'

He heard her voice;  
Then let the strong hand, which had overthrown  
Her minion knights, by those he overthrew  
Be bounden straight, and so they brought him in.

Then when he came before Ettarre, the sight  
Of her rich beauty made him at one glance  
More bondsman in his heart than in his bonds.  
Yet with good cheer he spake, 'Behold me, Lady,

A prisoner, and the vassal of thy will;  
And if thou keep me in thy donjon here,  
Content am I so that I see thy face  
But once a day: for I have sworn my vows,  
And thou hast given thy promise, and I know  
That all these pains are trials of my faith,  
And that thyself, when thou hast seen me strained  
And sifted to the utmost, wilt at length  
Yield me thy love and know me for thy knight.'

Then she began to rail so bitterly,  
With all her damsels, he was stricken mute;  
But when she mocked his vows and the great King,  
Lighted on words: 'For pity of thine own self,  
Peace, Lady, peace: is he not thine and mine?'  
'Thou fool,' she said, 'I never heard his voice  
But longed to break away. Unbind him now,  
And thrust him out of doors; for save he be  
Fool to the midmost marrow of his bones,

He will return no more.' And those, her three,  
Laughed, and unbound, and thrust him from the gate.

And after this, a week beyond, again  
She called them, saying, 'There he watches yet,  
There like a dog before his master's door!  
Kicked, he returns: do ye not hate him, ye?  
Ye know yourselves: how can ye bide at peace,  
Affronted with his fulsome innocence?  
Are ye but creatures of the board and bed,  
No men to strike? Fall on him all at once,  
And if ye slay him I reckon not: if ye fail,  
Give ye the slave mine order to be bound,  
Bind him as heretofore, and bring him in:  
It may be ye shall slay him in his bonds.'

She spake; and at her will they couched their spears,  
Three against one: and Gawain passing by,  
Bound upon solitary adventure, saw

Low down beneath the shadow of those towers  
A villainy, three to one: and through his heart  
The fire of honour and all noble deeds  
Flashed, and he called, 'I strike upon thy side  
The caitiffs!' 'Nay,' said Pelleas, 'but forbear;  
He needs no aid who doth his lady's will.'

So Gawain, looking at the villainy done,  
Forbore, but in his heat and eagerness  
Trembled and quivered, as the dog, withheld  
A moment from the vermin that he sees  
Before him, shivers, ere he springs and kills.

And Pelleas overthrew them, one to three;  
And they rose up, and bound, and brought him in.  
Then first her anger, leaving Pelleas, burned  
Full on her knights in many an evil name  
Of craven, weakling, and thrice beaten hound:  
'Yet, take him, ye that scarce are fit to touch,

Far less to bind, your victor, and thrust him out,  
And let who will release him from his bonds.  
And if he comes again' there she brake short;  
And Pelleas answered, 'Lady, for indeed  
I loved you and I deemed you beautiful,  
I cannot brook to see your beauty marred  
Through evil spite: and if ye love me not,  
I cannot bear to dream you so forsworn:  
I had liefer ye were worthy of my love,  
Than to be loved again of you farewell;  
And though ye kill my hope, not yet my love,  
Vex not yourself: ye will not see me more.'

While thus he spake, she gazed upon the man  
Of princely bearing, though in bonds, and thought,  
'Why have I pushed him from me? this man loves,  
If love there be: yet him I loved not. Why?  
I deemed him fool? yea, so? or that in him  
A something was it nobler than myself?

Seemed my reproach? He is not of my kind.  
He could not love me, did he know me well.  
Nay, let him go and quickly.' And her knights  
Laughed not, but thrust him bounden out of door.

Forth sprang Gawain, and loosed him from his bonds,  
And flung them o'er the walls; and afterward,  
Shaking his hands, as from a lazar's rag,  
'Faith of my body,' he said, 'and art thou not

Yea thou art he, whom late our Arthur made  
Knight of his table; yea and he that won  
The circlet? wherefore hast thou so defamed  
Thy brotherhood in me and all the rest,  
As let these caitiffs on thee work their will?'

And Pelleas answered, 'O, their wills are hers  
For whom I won the circlet; and mine, hers,  
Thus to be bounden, so to see her face,

Marred though it be with spite and mockery now,  
Other than when I found her in the woods;  
And though she hath me bounden but in spite,  
And all to flout me, when they bring me in,  
Let me be bounden, I shall see her face;  
Else must I die through mine unhappiness.'

And Gawain answered kindly though in scorn,  
'Why, let my lady bind me if she will,  
And let my lady beat me if she will:  
But an she send her delegate to thrall  
These fighting hands of mine Christ kill me then  
But I will slice him handless by the wrist,  
And let my lady sear the stump for him,  
Howl as he may. But hold me for your friend:  
Come, ye know nothing: here I pledge my troth,  
Yea, by the honour of the Table Round,  
I will be leal to thee and work thy work,  
And tame thy jailing princess to thine hand.

Lend me thine horse and arms, and I will say  
That I have slain thee. She will let me in  
To hear the manner of thy fight and fall;  
Then, when I come within her counsels, then  
From prime to vespers will I chant thy praise  
As prowtest knight and truest lover, more  
Than any have sung thee living, till she long  
To have thee back in lusty life again,  
Not to be bound, save by white bonds and warm,  
Dearer than freedom. Wherefore now thy horse  
And armour: let me go: be comforted:  
Give me three days to melt her fancy, and hope  
The third night hence will bring thee news of gold.'

Then Pelleas lent his horse and all his arms,  
Saving the goodly sword, his prize, and took  
Gawain's, and said, 'Betray me not, but help  
Art thou not he whom men call light of love?'



'Ay,' said Gawain, 'for women be so light.'

Then bounded forward to the castle walls,

And raised a bugle hanging from his neck,

And winded it, and that so musically

That all the old echoes hidden in the wall

Rang out like hollow woods at hunting tide.

Up ran a score of damsels to the tower;

'Avaunt,' they cried, 'our lady loves thee not.'

But Gawain lifting up his vizor said,

'Gawain am I, Gawain of Arthur's court,

And I have slain this Pelleas whom ye hate:

Behold his horse and armour. Open gates,

And I will make you merry.'

And down they ran,

Her damsels, crying to their lady, 'Lo!

Pelleas is dead he told us he that hath

His horse and armour: will ye let him in?

He slew him! Gawain, Gawain of the court,  
Sir Gawain there he waits below the wall,  
Blowing his bugle as who should say him nay.'

And so, leave given, straight on through open door  
Rode Gawain, whom she greeted courteously.  
'Dead, is it so?' she asked. 'Ay, ay,' said he,  
'And oft in dying cried upon your name.'  
'Pity on him,' she answered, 'a good knight,  
But never let me bide one hour at peace.'  
'Ay,' thought Gawain, 'and you be fair enow:  
But I to your dead man have given my troth,  
That whom ye loathe, him will I make you love.'

So those three days, aimless about the land,  
Lost in a doubt, Pelleas wandering  
Waited, until the third night brought a moon  
With promise of large light on woods and ways.

Hot was the night and silent; but a sound  
Of Gawain ever coming, and this lay  
Which Pelleas had heard sung before the Queen,  
And seen her sadden listening vext his heart,  
And marred his rest 'A worm within the rose.'

'A rose, but one, none other rose had I,  
A rose, one rose, and this was wondrous fair,  
One rose, a rose that gladdened earth and sky,  
One rose, my rose, that sweetened all mine air  
I cared not for the thorns; the thorns were there.

'One rose, a rose to gather by and by,  
One rose, a rose, to gather and to wear,  
No rose but one what other rose had I?  
One rose, my rose; a rose that will not die,  
He dies who loves it, if the worm be there.'

This tender rhyme, and evermore the doubt,

'Why lingers Gawain with his golden news?'  
So shook him that he could not rest, but rode  
Ere midnight to her walls, and bound his horse  
Hard by the gates. Wide open were the gates,  
And no watch kept; and in through these he past,  
And heard but his own steps, and his own heart  
Beating, for nothing moved but his own self,  
And his own shadow. Then he crost the court,  
And spied not any light in hall or bower,  
But saw the postern portal also wide  
Yawning; and up a slope of garden, all  
Of roses white and red, and brambles mixt  
And overgrowing them, went on, and found,  
Here too, all hushed below the mellow moon,  
Save that one rivulet from a tiny cave  
Came lightening downward, and so spilt itself  
Among the roses, and was lost again.

Then was he ware of three pavilions reared

Above the bushes, gilden peakt: in one,  
Red after revel, droned her lurdane knights  
Slumbering, and their three squires across their feet:  
In one, their malice on the placid lip  
Frozen by sweet sleep, four of her damsels lay:  
And in the third, the circlet of the jousts  
Bound on her brow, were Gawain and Ettarre.

Back, as a hand that pushes through the leaf  
To find a nest and feels a snake, he drew:  
Back, as a coward slinks from what he fears  
To cope with, or a traitor proven, or hound  
Beaten, did Pelleas in an utter shame  
Creep with his shadow through the court again,  
Fingering at his sword handle until he stood  
There on the castle bridge once more, and thought,  
'I will go back, and slay them where they lie.'

And so went back, and seeing them yet in sleep

Said, 'Ye, that so dishallow the holy sleep,  
Your sleep is death,' and drew the sword, and thought,  
'What! slay a sleeping knight? the King hath bound  
And sworn me to this brotherhood;' again,  
'Alas that ever a knight should be so false.'  
Then turned, and so returned, and groaning laid  
The naked sword athwart their naked throats,  
There left it, and them sleeping; and she lay,  
The circlet of her tourney round her brows,  
And the sword of the tourney across her throat.

And forth he past, and mounting on his horse  
Stared at her towers that, larger than themselves  
In their own darkness, thronged into the moon.  
Then crushed the saddle with his thighs, and clenched  
His hands, and maddened with himself and moaned:

'Would they have risen against me in their blood  
At the last day? I might have answered them

Even before high God. O towers so strong,  
Huge, solid, would that even while I gaze  
The crack of earthquake shivering to your base  
Split you, and Hell burst up your harlot roofs  
Bellowing, and charred you through and through within,  
Black as the harlot's heart hollow as a skull!  
Let the fierce east scream through your eyelet holes,  
And whirl the dust of harlots round and round  
In dung and nettles! hiss, snake I saw him there  
Let the fox bark, let the wolf yell. Who yells  
Here in the still sweet summer night, but I  
I, the poor Pelleas whom she called her fool?  
Fool, beast he, she, or I? myself most fool;  
Beast too, as lacking human wit disgraced,  
Dishonoured all for trial of true love  
Love? we be all alike: only the King  
Hath made us fools and liars. O noble vows!  
O great and sane and simple race of brutes  
That own no lust because they have no law!

For why should I have loved her to my shame?

I loathe her, as I loved her to my shame.

I never loved her, I but lusted for her

Away '

He dashed the rowel into his horse,

And bounded forth and vanished through the night.

Then she, that felt the cold touch on her throat,

Awaking knew the sword, and turned herself

To Gawain: 'Liar, for thou hast not slain

This Pelleas! here he stood, and might have slain

Me and thyself.' And he that tells the tale

Says that her ever veering fancy turned

To Pelleas, as the one true knight on earth,

And only lover; and through her love her life

Wasted and pined, desiring him in vain.

But he by wild and way, for half the night,

And over hard and soft, striking the sod



From out the soft, the spark from off the hard,  
Rode till the star above the wakening sun,  
Beside that tower where Percivale was cowed,  
Glanced from the rosy forehead of the dawn.  
For so the words were flashed into his heart  
He knew not whence or wherefore: 'O sweet star,  
Pure on the virgin forehead of the dawn!'  
And there he would have wept, but felt his eyes  
Harder and drier than a fountain bed  
In summer: thither came the village girls  
And lingered talking, and they come no more  
Till the sweet heavens have filled it from the heights  
Again with living waters in the change  
Of seasons: hard his eyes; harder his heart  
Seemed; but so weary were his limbs, that he,  
Gasping, 'Of Arthur's hall am I, but here,  
Here let me rest and die,' cast himself down,  
And gulfed his griefs in inmost sleep; so lay,  
Till shaken by a dream, that Gawain fired

The hall of Merlin, and the morning star  
Reeled in the smoke, brake into flame, and fell.

He woke, and being ware of some one nigh,  
Sent hands upon him, as to tear him, crying,  
'False! and I held thee pure as Guinevere.'

But Percivale stood near him and replied,  
'Am I but false as Guinevere is pure?  
Or art thou mazed with dreams? or being one  
Of our free spoken Table hast not heard  
That Lancelot' there he checked himself and paused.

Then fared it with Sir Pelleas as with one  
Who gets a wound in battle, and the sword  
That made it plunges through the wound again,  
And pricks it deeper: and he shrank and wailed,  
'Is the Queen false?' and Percivale was mute.

'Have any of our Round Table held their vows?'

And Percivale made answer not a word.

'Is the King true?' 'The King!' said Percivale.

'Why then let men couple at once with wolves.

What! art thou mad?'

But Pelleas, leaping up,

Ran through the doors and vaulted on his horse

And fled: small pity upon his horse had he,

Or on himself, or any, and when he met

A cripple, one that held a hand for alms

Hunched as he was, and like an old dwarf elm

That turns its back upon the salt blast, the boy

Paused not, but overrode him, shouting, 'False,

And false with Gawain!' and so left him bruised

And battered, and fled on, and hill and wood

Went ever streaming by him till the gloom,

That follows on the turning of the world,

Darkened the common path: he twitched the reins,

And made his beast that better knew it, swerve

Now off it and now on; but when he saw  
High up in heaven the hall that Merlin built,  
Blackening against the dead green stripes of even,  
'Black nest of rats,' he groaned, 'ye build too high.'

Not long thereafter from the city gates  
Issued Sir Lancelot riding airily,  
Warm with a gracious parting from the Queen,  
Peace at his heart, and gazing at a star  
And marvelling what it was: on whom the boy,  
Across the silent seeded meadow grass  
Borne, clashed: and Lancelot, saying, 'What name hast  
thou

That ridest here so blindly and so hard?'  
'No name, no name,' he shouted, 'a scourge am I  
To lash the treasons of the Table Round.'  
'Yea, but thy name?' 'I have many names,' he cried:  
'I am wrath and shame and hate and evil fame,  
And like a poisonous wind I pass to blast

And blaze the crime of Lancelot and the Queen.'  
'First over me,' said Lancelot, 'shalt thou pass.'  
'Fight therefore,' yelled the youth, and either knight  
Drew back a space, and when they closed, at once  
The weary steed of Pelleas floundering flung  
His rider, who called out from the dark field,  
'Thou art as false as Hell: slay me: I have no sword.'  
Then Lancelot, 'Yea, between thy lips and sharp;  
But here I will disedge it by thy death.'  
'Slay then,' he shrieked, 'my will is to be slain,'  
And Lancelot, with his heel upon the fallen,  
Rolling his eyes, a moment stood, then spake:  
'Rise, weakling; I am Lancelot; say thy say.'

And Lancelot slowly rode his warhorse back  
To Camelot, and Sir Pelleas in brief while  
Caught his unbroken limbs from the dark field,  
And followed to the city. It chanced that both  
Brake into hall together, worn and pale.

There with her knights and dames was Guinevere.  
Full wonderingly she gazed on Lancelot  
So soon returned, and then on Pelleas, him  
Who had not greeted her, but cast himself  
Down on a bench, hard breathing. 'Have ye fought?'  
She asked of Lancelot. 'Ay, my Queen,' he said.  
'And hast thou overthrown him?' 'Ay, my Queen.'  
Then she, turning to Pelleas, 'O young knight,  
Hath the great heart of knighthood in thee failed  
So far thou canst not bide, unfrowardly,  
A fall from him?' Then, for he answered not,  
'Or hast thou other griefs? If I, the Queen,  
May help them, loose thy tongue, and let me know.'  
But Pelleas lifted up an eye so fierce  
She quailed; and he, hissing 'I have no sword,'  
Sprang from the door into the dark. The Queen  
Looked hard upon her lover, he on her;  
And each foresaw the dolorous day to be:  
And all talk died, as in a grove all song

Beneath the shadow of some bird of prey;  
Then a long silence came upon the hall,  
And Modred thought, 'The time is hard at hand.'

### **The Last Tournament**

Dagonet, the fool, whom Gawain in his mood  
Had made mock knight of Arthur's Table Round,  
At Camelot, high above the yellowing woods,  
Danced like a withered leaf before the hall.  
And toward him from the hall, with harp in hand,  
And from the crown thereof a carcanet  
Of ruby swaying to and fro, the prize  
Of Tristram in the jousts of yesterday,  
Came Tristram, saying, 'Why skip ye so, Sir Fool?'

For Arthur and Sir Lancelot riding once  
Far down beneath a winding wall of rock  
Heard a child wail. A stump of oak half dead,

From roots like some black coil of carven snakes,  
Clutched at the crag, and started through mid air  
Bearing an eagle's nest: and through the tree  
Rushed ever a rainy wind, and through the wind  
Pierced ever a child's cry: and crag and tree  
Scaling, Sir Lancelot from the perilous nest,  
This ruby necklace thrice around her neck,  
And all unscarred from beak or talon, brought  
A maiden babe; which Arthur pitying took,  
Then gave it to his Queen to rear: the Queen  
But coldly acquiescing, in her white arms  
Received, and after loved it tenderly,  
And named it Nestling; so forgot herself  
A moment, and her cares; till that young life  
Being smitten in mid heaven with mortal cold  
Past from her; and in time the carcanet  
Vext her with plaintive memories of the child:  
So she, delivering it to Arthur, said,  
'Take thou the jewels of this dead innocence,



And make them, an thou wilt, a tourney prize.'

To whom the King, 'Peace to thine eagle borne  
Dead nestling, and this honour after death,  
Following thy will! but, O my Queen, I muse  
Why ye not wear on arm, or neck, or zone  
Those diamonds that I rescued from the tarn,  
And Lancelot won, methought, for thee to wear.'

'Would rather you had let them fall,' she cried,  
'Plunge and be lost ill fated as they were,  
A bitterness to me! ye look amazed,  
Not knowing they were lost as soon as given  
Slid from my hands, when I was leaning out  
Above the river that unhappy child  
Past in her barge: but rosier luck will go  
With these rich jewels, seeing that they came  
Not from the skeleton of a brother slayer,  
But the sweet body of a maiden babe.

Perchance who knows? the purest of thy knights  
May win them for the purest of my maids.'

She ended, and the cry of a great jousts  
With trumpet blowings ran on all the ways  
From Camelot in among the faded fields  
To furthest towers; and everywhere the knights  
Armed for a day of glory before the King.

But on the hither side of that loud morn  
Into the hall staggered, his visage ribbed  
From ear to ear with dogwhip weals, his nose  
Bridge broken, one eye out, and one hand off,  
And one with shattered fingers dangling lame,  
A churl, to whom indignantly the King,

'My churl, for whom Christ died, what evil beast  
Hath drawn his claws athwart thy face? or fiend?  
Man was it who marred heaven's image in thee thus?'

Then, sputtering through the hedge of splintered teeth,  
Yet strangers to the tongue, and with blunt stump  
Pitch blackened sawing the air, said the maimed churl,

'He took them and he drave them to his tower  
Some hold he was a table knight of thine  
A hundred goodly ones the Red Knight, he  
Lord, I was tending swine, and the Red Knight  
Brake in upon me and drave them to his tower;  
And when I called upon thy name as one  
That doest right by gentle and by churl,  
Maimed me and mauled, and would outright have slain,  
Save that he sware me to a message, saying,  
"Tell thou the King and all his liars, that I  
Have founded my Round Table in the North,  
And whatsoever his own knights have sworn  
My knights have sworn the counter to it and say  
My tower is full of harlots, like his court,

But mine are worthier, seeing they profess  
To be none other than themselves and say  
My knights are all adulterers like his own,  
But mine are truer, seeing they profess  
To be none other; and say his hour is come,  
The heathen are upon him, his long lance  
Broken, and his Excalibur a straw."

Then Arthur turned to Kay the seneschal,  
'Take thou my churl, and tend him curiously  
Like a king's heir, till all his hurts be whole.  
The heathen but that ever climbing wave,  
Hurled back again so often in empty foam,  
Hath lain for years at rest and renegades,  
Thieves, bandits, leavings of confusion, whom  
The wholesome realm is purged of elsewhere,  
Friends, through your manhood and your fealty, now  
Make their last head like Satan in the North.  
My younger knights, new made, in whom your flower

Waits to be solid fruit of golden deeds,  
Move with me toward their quelling, which achieved,  
The loneliest ways are safe from shore to shore.  
But thou, Sir Lancelot, sitting in my place  
Enchained tomorrow, arbitrate the field;  
For wherefore shouldst thou care to mingle with it,  
Only to yield my Queen her own again?  
Speak, Lancelot, thou art silent: is it well?

Thereto Sir Lancelot answered, 'It is well:  
Yet better if the King abide, and leave  
The leading of his younger knights to me.  
Else, for the King has willed it, it is well.'

Then Arthur rose and Lancelot followed him,  
And while they stood without the doors, the King  
Turned to him saying, 'Is it then so well?  
Or mine the blame that oft I seem as he  
Of whom was written, "A sound is in his ears"?

The foot that loiters, bidden go, the glance  
That only seems half loyal to command,  
A manner somewhat fallen from reverence  
Or have I dreamed the bearing of our knights  
Tells of a manhood ever less and lower?  
Or whence the fear lest this my realm, upreared,  
By noble deeds at one with noble vows,  
From flat confusion and brute violences,  
Reel back into the beast, and be no more?'

He spoke, and taking all his younger knights,  
Down the slope city rode, and sharply turned  
North by the gate. In her high bower the Queen,  
Working a tapestry, lifted up her head,  
Watched her lord pass, and knew not that she sighed.  
Then ran across her memory the strange rhyme  
Of bygone Merlin, 'Where is he who knows?  
From the great deep to the great deep he goes.'

But when the morning of a tournament,  
By these in earnest those in mockery called  
The Tournament of the Dead Innocence,  
Brake with a wet wind blowing, Lancelot,  
Round whose sick head all night, like birds of prey,  
The words of Arthur flying shrieked, arose,  
And down a streetway hung with folds of pure  
White samite, and by fountains running wine,  
Where children sat in white with cups of gold,  
Moved to the lists, and there, with slow sad steps  
Ascending, filled his double dragoned chair.

He glanced and saw the stately galleries,  
Dame, damsel, each through worship of their Queen  
White robed in honour of the stainless child,  
And some with scattered jewels, like a bank  
Of maiden snow mingled with sparks of fire.  
He looked but once, and vailed his eyes again.

The sudden trumpet sounded as in a dream  
To ears but half awaked, then one low roll  
Of Autumn thunder, and the jousts began:  
And ever the wind blew, and yellowing leaf  
And gloom and gleam, and shower and shorn plume  
Went down it. Sighing weariedly, as one  
Who sits and gazes on a faded fire,  
When all the goodlier guests are past away,  
Sat their great umpire, looking o'er the lists.  
He saw the laws that ruled the tournament  
Broken, but spake not; once, a knight cast down  
Before his throne of arbitration cursed  
The dead babe and the follies of the King;  
And once the laces of a helmet cracked,  
And showed him, like a vermin in its hole,  
Modred, a narrow face: anon he heard  
The voice that billowed round the barriers roar  
An ocean sounding welcome to one knight,  
But newly entered, taller than the rest,



And armoured all in forest green, whereon  
There tript a hundred tiny silver deer,  
And wearing but a holly spray for crest,  
With ever scattering berries, and on shield  
A spear, a harp, a bugle Tristram late  
From overseas in Brittany returned,  
And marriage with a princess of that realm,  
Isolt the White Sir Tristram of the Woods  
Whom Lancelot knew, had held sometime with pain

His own against him, and now yearned to shake  
The burthen off his heart in one full shock  
With Tristram even to death: his strong hands gript  
And dinted the gilt dragons right and left,  
Until he groaned for wrath so many of those,  
That ware their ladies' colours on the casque,  
Drew from before Sir Tristram to the bounds,  
And there with gibes and flickering mockeries  
Stood, while he muttered, 'Craven crests! O shame!

What faith have these in whom they swear to love?

The glory of our Round Table is no more.'

So Tristram won, and Lancelot gave, the gems,

Not speaking other word than 'Hast thou won?

Art thou the purest, brother? See, the hand

Wherewith thou takest this, is red!' to whom

Tristram, half plagued by Lancelot's languorous mood,

Made answer, 'Ay, but wherefore toss me this

Like a dry bone cast to some hungry hound?

Lest be thy fair Queen's fantasy. Strength of heart

And might of limb, but mainly use and skill,

Are winners in this pastime of our King.

My hand belike the lance hath dript upon it

No blood of mine, I trow; but O chief knight,

Right arm of Arthur in the battlefield,

Great brother, thou nor I have made the world;

Be happy in thy fair Queen as I in mine.'

And Tristram round the gallery made his horse  
Caracole; then bowed his homage, bluntly saying,  
'Fair damsels, each to him who worships each  
Sole Queen of Beauty and of love, behold  
This day my Queen of Beauty is not here.'  
And most of these were mute, some angered, one  
Murmuring, 'All courtesy is dead,' and one,  
'The glory of our Round Table is no more.'

Then fell thick rain, plume droopt and mantle clung,  
And pettish cries awoke, and the wan day  
Went glooming down in wet and weariness:  
But under her black brows a swarthy one  
Laughed shrilly, crying, 'Praise the patient saints,  
Our one white day of Innocence hath past,  
Though somewhat draggled at the skirt. So be it.  
The snowdrop only, flowering through the year,  
Would make the world as blank as Winter tide.  
Come let us gladden their sad eyes, our Queen's

And Lancelot's, at this night's solemnity  
With all the kindlier colours of the field.'

So dame and damsel glittered at the feast  
Variously gay: for he that tells the tale  
Likened them, saying, as when an hour of cold  
Falls on the mountain in midsummer snows,  
And all the purple slopes of mountain flowers  
Pass under white, till the warm hour returns  
With veer of wind, and all are flowers again;  
So dame and damsel cast the simple white,  
And glowing in all colours, the live grass,  
Rose campion, bluebell, kingcup, poppy, glanced  
About the revels, and with mirth so loud  
Beyond all use, that, half amazed, the Queen,  
And wroth at Tristram and the lawless jousts,  
Brake up their sports, then slowly to her bower  
Parted, and in her bosom pain was lord.

And little Dagonet on the morrow morn,  
High over all the yellowing Autumn tide,  
Danced like a withered leaf before the hall.  
Then Tristram saying, 'Why skip ye so, Sir Fool?'  
Wheeled round on either heel, Dagonet replied,  
'Belike for lack of wiser company;  
Or being fool, and seeing too much wit  
Makes the world rotten, why, belike I skip  
To know myself the wisest knight of all.'  
'Ay, fool,' said Tristram, 'but 'tis eating dry  
To dance without a catch, a roundelay  
To dance to.' Then he twangled on his harp,  
And while he twangled little Dagonet stood  
Quiet as any water sodden log  
Stayed in the wandering warble of a brook;  
But when the twangling ended, skipt again;  
And being asked, 'Why skipt ye not, Sir Fool?'  
Made answer, 'I had liefer twenty years  
Skip to the broken music of my brains

Than any broken music thou canst make.'

Then Tristram, waiting for the quip to come,  
'Good now, what music have I broken, fool?'

And little Dagonet, skipping, 'Arthur, the King's;  
For when thou playest that air with Queen Isolt,  
Thou makest broken music with thy bride,  
Her daintier namesake down in Brittany  
And so thou breakest Arthur's music too.'

'Save for that broken music in thy brains,  
Sir Fool,' said Tristram, 'I would break thy head.  
Fool, I came too late, the heathen wars were o'er,  
The life had flown, we sware but by the shell  
I am but a fool to reason with a fool  
Come, thou art crabbed and sour: but lean me down,  
Sir Dagonet, one of thy long asses' ears,  
And harken if my music be not true.

"Free love free field we love but while we may:

The woods are hushed, their music is no more:

The leaf is dead, the yearning past away:  
New leaf, new life the days of frost are o'er:  
New life, new love, to suit the newer day:  
New loves are sweet as those that went before:  
Free love free field we love but while we may."

'Ye might have moved slow measure to my tune,  
Not stood stockstill. I made it in the woods,  
And heard it ring as true as tested gold.'

But Dagonet with one foot poised in his hand,  
'Friend, did ye mark that fountain yesterday  
Made to run wine? but this had run itself  
All out like a long life to a sour end  
And them that round it sat with golden cups  
To hand the wine to whosoever came  
The twelve small damosels white as Innocence,  
In honour of poor Innocence the babe,  
Who left the gems which Innocence the Queen

Lent to the King, and Innocence the King  
Gave for a prize and one of those white slips  
Handed her cup and piped, the pretty one,  
"Drink, drink, Sir Fool," and thereupon I drank,  
Spat pish the cup was gold, the draught was mud.'

And Tristram, 'Was it muddier than thy gibes?  
Is all the laughter gone dead out of thee?  
Not marking how the knighthood mock thee, fool  
"Fear God: honour the King his one true knight  
Sole follower of the vows" for here be they  
Who knew thee swine enow before I came,  
Smuttier than blasted grain: but when the King  
Had made thee fool, thy vanity so shot up  
It frightened all free fool from out thy heart;  
Which left thee less than fool, and less than swine,  
A naked aught yet swine I hold thee still,  
For I have flung thee pearls and find thee swine.'



And little Dagonet mincing with his feet,  
'Knight, an ye fling those rubies round my neck  
In lieu of hers, I'll hold thou hast some touch  
Of music, since I care not for thy pearls.  
Swine? I have wallowed, I have washed the world  
Is flesh and shadow I have had my day.  
The dirty nurse, Experience, in her kind  
Hath fouled me an I wallowed, then I washed  
I have had my day and my philosophies  
And thank the Lord I am King Arthur's fool.  
Swine, say ye? swine, goats, asses, rams and geese  
Trooped round a Paynim harper once, who thrummed  
On such a wire as musically as thou  
Some such fine song but never a king's fool.'

And Tristram, 'Then were swine, goats, asses, geese  
The wiser fools, seeing thy Paynim bard  
Had such a mastery of his mystery  
That he could harp his wife up out of hell.'

Then Dagonet, turning on the ball of his foot,  
'And whither harp'st thou thine? down! and thyself  
Down! and two more: a helpful harper thou,  
That harpest downward! Dost thou know the star  
We call the harp of Arthur up in heaven?'

And Tristram, 'Ay, Sir Fool, for when our King  
Was victor wellnigh day by day, the knights,  
Glorying in each new glory, set his name  
High on all hills, and in the signs of heaven.'

And Dagonet answered, 'Ay, and when the land  
Was freed, and the Queen false, ye set yourself  
To babble about him, all to show your wit  
And whether he were King by courtesy,  
Or King by right and so went harping down  
The black king's highway, got so far, and grew  
So witty that ye played at ducks and drakes

With Arthur's vows on the great lake of fire.

Tuwhoo! do ye see it? do ye see the star?'

'Nay, fool,' said Tristram, 'not in open day.'

And Dagonet, 'Nay, nor will: I see it and hear.

It makes a silent music up in heaven,

And I, and Arthur and the angels hear,

And then we skip.' 'Lo, fool,' he said, 'ye talk

Fool's treason: is the King thy brother fool?'

Then little Dagonet clapt his hands and shrilled,

'Ay, ay, my brother fool, the king of fools!

Conceits himself as God that he can make

Figs out of thistles, silk from bristles, milk

From burning spurge, honey from hornet combs,

And men from beasts Long live the king of fools!'

And down the city Dagonet danced away;

But through the slowly mellowing avenues

And solitary passes of the wood

Rode Tristram toward Lyonesse and the west.  
Before him fled the face of Queen Isolt  
With ruby circled neck, but evermore  
Past, as a rustle or twitter in the wood  
Made dull his inner, keen his outer eye  
For all that walked, or crept, or perched, or flew.  
Anon the face, as, when a gust hath blown,  
Unruffling waters re collect the shape  
Of one that in them sees himself, returned;  
But at the slot or fewmets of a deer,  
Or even a fallen feather, vanished again.

So on for all that day from lawn to lawn  
Through many a league long bower he rode. At length  
A lodge of intertwined beechen boughs  
Furze crammed, and bracken rooft, the which himself  
Built for a summer day with Queen Isolt  
Against a shower, dark in the golden grove  
Appearing, sent his fancy back to where

She lived a moon in that low lodge with him:  
Till Mark her lord had past, the Cornish King,  
With six or seven, when Tristram was away,  
And snatched her thence; yet dreading worse than  
shame

Her warrior Tristram, spake not any word,  
But bode his hour, devising wretchedness.

And now that desert lodge to Tristram lookt  
So sweet, that halting, in he past, and sank  
Down on a drift of foliage random blown;  
But could not rest for musing how to smoothe  
And sleek his marriage over to the Queen.  
Perchance in lone Tintagil far from all  
The tonguesters of the court she had not heard.  
But then what folly had sent him overseas  
After she left him lonely here? a name?  
Was it the name of one in Brittany,  
Isolt, the daughter of the King? 'Isolt

Of the white hands' they called her: the sweet name  
Allured him first, and then the maid herself,  
Who served him well with those white hands of hers,  
And loved him well, until himself had thought  
He loved her also, wedded easily,  
But left her all as easily, and returned.  
The black blue Irish hair and Irish eyes  
Had drawn him home what marvel? then he laid  
His brows upon the drifted leaf and dreamed.

He seemed to pace the strand of Brittany  
Between Isolt of Britain and his bride,  
And showed them both the ruby chain, and both  
Began to struggle for it, till his Queen  
Graspt it so hard, that all her hand was red.  
Then cried the Breton, 'Look, her hand is red!  
These be no rubies, this is frozen blood,  
And melts within her hand her hand is hot  
With ill desires, but this I gave thee, look,

Is all as cool and white as any flower.'

Followed a rush of eagle's wings, and then

A whimpering of the spirit of the child,

Because the twain had spoiled her carcanet.

He dreamed; but Arthur with a hundred spears

Rode far, till o'er the illimitable reed,

And many a glancing splash and sallowy isle,

The wide winged sunset of the misty marsh

Glared on a huge machicolated tower

That stood with open doors, whereout was rolled

A roar of riot, as from men secure

Amid their marshes, ruffians at their ease

Among their harlot brides, an evil song.

'Lo there,' said one of Arthur's youth, for there,

High on a grim dead tree before the tower,

A goodly brother of the Table Round

Swung by the neck: and on the boughs a shield

Showing a shower of blood in a field noir,

And therebeside a horn, inflamed the knights  
At that dishonour done the gilded spur,  
Till each would clash the shield, and blow the horn.  
But Arthur waved them back. Alone he rode.  
Then at the dry harsh roar of the great horn,  
That sent the face of all the marsh aloft  
An ever upward rushing storm and cloud  
Of shriek and plume, the Red Knight heard, and all,  
Even to tipmost lance and topmost helm,  
In blood red armour sallying, howled to the King,

'The teeth of Hell flay bare and gnash thee flat!  
Lo! art thou not that eunuch hearted King  
Who fain had clipt free manhood from the world  
The woman worshipper? Yea, God's curse, and I!  
Slain was the brother of my paramour  
By a knight of thine, and I that heard her whine  
And snivel, being eunuch hearted too,  
Sware by the scorpion worm that twists in hell,



And stings itself to everlasting death,  
To hang whatever knight of thine I fought  
And tumbled. Art thou King? Look to thy life!

He ended: Arthur knew the voice; the face  
Wellnigh was helmet hidden, and the name  
Went wandering somewhere darkling in his mind.  
And Arthur deigned not use of word or sword,  
But let the drunkard, as he stretched from horse  
To strike him, overbalancing his bulk,  
Down from the causeway heavily to the swamp  
Fall, as the crest of some slow arching wave,  
Heard in dead night along that table shore,  
Drops flat, and after the great waters break  
Whitening for half a league, and thin themselves,  
Far over sands marbled with moon and cloud,  
From less and less to nothing; thus he fell  
Head heavy; then the knights, who watched him, roared  
And shouted and leapt down upon the fallen;

There trampled out his face from being known,  
And sank his head in mire, and slimed themselves:  
Nor heard the King for their own cries, but sprang  
Through open doors, and swording right and left  
Men, women, on their sodden faces, hurled  
The tables over and the wines, and slew  
Till all the rafters rang with woman yells,  
And all the pavement streamed with massacre:  
Then, echoing yell with yell, they fired the tower,  
Which half that autumn night, like the live North,  
Red pulsing up through Alioth and Alcor,  
Made all above it, and a hundred meres  
About it, as the water Moab saw  
Came round by the East, and out beyond them flushed  
The long low dune, and lazy plunging sea.

So all the ways were safe from shore to shore,  
But in the heart of Arthur pain was lord.

Then, out of Tristram waking, the red dream  
Fled with a shout, and that low lodge returned,  
Mid forest, and the wind among the boughs.  
He whistled his good warhorse left to graze  
Among the forest greens, vaulted upon him,  
And rode beneath an ever showering leaf,  
Till one lone woman, weeping near a cross,  
Stayed him. 'Why weep ye?' 'Lord,' she said, 'my man  
Hath left me or is dead;' whereon he thought  
'What, if she hate me now? I would not this.  
What, if she love me still? I would not that.  
I know not what I would' but said to her,  
'Yet weep not thou, lest, if thy mate return,  
He find thy favour changed and love thee not'  
Then pressing day by day through Lyonesse  
Last in a roky hollow, belling, heard  
The hounds of Mark, and felt the goodly hounds  
Yelp at his heart, but turning, past and gained  
Tintagil, half in sea, and high on land,

A crown of towers.

Down in a casement sat,

A low sea sunset glorying round her hair

And glossy throated grace, Isolt the Queen.

And when she heard the feet of Tristram grind

The spiring stone that scaled about her tower,

Flushed, started, met him at the doors, and there

Belted his body with her white embrace,

Crying aloud, 'Not Mark not Mark, my soul!

The footstep fluttered me at first: not he:

Catlike through his own castle steals my Mark,

But warrior wise thou stridest through his halls

Who hates thee, as I him even to the death.

My soul, I felt my hatred for my Mark

Quicken within me, and knew that thou wert nigh.'

To whom Sir Tristram smiling, 'I am here.

Let be thy Mark, seeing he is not thine.'

And drawing somewhat backward she replied,  
'Can he be wronged who is not even his own,  
But save for dread of thee had beaten me,  
Scratched, bitten, blinded, marred me somehow Mark?  
What rights are his that dare not strike for them?  
Not lift a hand not, though he found me thus!  
But harken! have ye met him? hence he went  
Today for three days' hunting as he said  
And so returns belike within an hour.  
Mark's way, my soul! but eat not thou with Mark,  
Because he hates thee even more than fears;  
Nor drink: and when thou passest any wood  
Close vizard, lest an arrow from the bush  
Should leave me all alone with Mark and hell.  
My God, the measure of my hate for Mark  
Is as the measure of my love for thee.'

So, plucked one way by hate and one by love,  
Drained of her force, again she sat, and spake

To Tristram, as he knelt before her, saying,  
'O hunter, and O blower of the horn,  
Harper, and thou hast been a rover too,  
For, ere I mated with my shambling king,  
Ye twain had fallen out about the bride  
Of one his name is out of me the prize,  
If prize she were (what marvel she could see)  
Thine, friend; and ever since my craven seeks  
To wreck thee villainously: but, O Sir Knight,  
What dame or damsel have ye kneeled to last?'

And Tristram, 'Last to my Queen Paramount,  
Here now to my Queen Paramount of love  
And loveliness ay, lovelier than when first  
Her light feet fell on our rough Lyonesse,  
Sailing from Ireland.'

Softly laughed Isolt;

'Flatter me not, for hath not our great Queen

My dole of beauty trebled?' and he said,  
'Her beauty is her beauty, and thine thine,  
And thine is more to me soft, gracious, kind  
Save when thy Mark is kindled on thy lips  
Most gracious; but she, haughty, even to him,  
Lancelot; for I have seen him wan enow  
To make one doubt if ever the great Queen  
Have yielded him her love.'

To whom Isolt,  
'Ah then, false hunter and false harper, thou  
Who brakest through the scruple of my bond,  
Calling me thy white hind, and saying to me  
That Guinevere had sinned against the highest,  
And I misyoked with such a want of man  
That I could hardly sin against the lowest.'

He answered, 'O my soul, be comforted!  
If this be sweet, to sin in leading strings,

If here be comfort, and if ours be sin,  
Crowned warrant had we for the crowning sin  
That made us happy: but how ye greet me fear  
And fault and doubt no word of that fond tale  
Thy deep heart yearnings, thy sweet memories  
Of Tristram in that year he was away.'

And, saddening on the sudden, spake Isolt,  
'I had forgotten all in my strong joy  
To see thee yearnings? ay! for, hour by hour,  
Here in the never ended afternoon,  
O sweeter than all memories of thee,  
Deeper than any yearnings after thee  
Seemed those far rolling, westward smiling seas,  
Watched from this tower. Isolt of Britain dashed  
Before Isolt of Brittany on the strand,  
Would that have chilled her bride kiss? Wedded her?  
Fought in her father's battles? wounded there?  
The King was all fulfilled with gratefulness,



And she, my namesake of the hands, that healed  
Thy hurt and heart with unguent and caress  
Well can I wish her any huger wrong  
Than having known thee? her too hast thou left  
To pine and waste in those sweet memories.  
O were I not my Mark's, by whom all men  
Are noble, I should hate thee more than love.'

And Tristram, fondling her light hands, replied,  
'Grace, Queen, for being loved: she loved me well.  
Did I love her? the name at least I loved.  
Isolt? I fought his battles, for Isolt!  
The night was dark; the true star set. Isolt!  
The name was ruler of the dark Isolt?  
Care not for her! patient, and prayerful, meek,  
Pale blooded, she will yield herself to God.'

And Isolt answered, 'Yea, and why not I?  
Mine is the larger need, who am not meek,

Pale blooded, prayerful. Let me tell thee now.  
Here one black, mute midsummer night I sat,  
Lonely, but musing on thee, wondering where,  
Murmuring a light song I had heard thee sing,  
And once or twice I spake thy name aloud.  
Then flashed a levin brand; and near me stood,  
In fuming sulphur blue and green, a fiend  
Mark's way to steal behind one in the dark  
For there was Mark: "He has wedded her," he said,  
Not said, but hissed it: then this crown of towers  
So shook to such a roar of all the sky,  
That here in utter dark I swooned away,  
And woke again in utter dark, and cried,  
"I will flee hence and give myself to God"  
And thou wert lying in thy new leman's arms.'

Then Tristram, ever dallying with her hand,  
'May God be with thee, sweet, when old and gray,  
And past desire!' a saying that angered her.

"May God be with thee, sweet, when thou art old,  
And sweet no more to me!" I need Him now.  
For when had Lancelot uttered aught so gross  
Even to the swineherd's malkin in the mast?  
The greater man, the greater courtesy.  
Far other was the Tristram, Arthur's knight!  
But thou, through ever harrying thy wild beasts  
Save that to touch a harp, tilt with a lance  
Becomes thee well art grown wild beast thyself.  
How darest thou, if lover, push me even  
In fancy from thy side, and set me far  
In the gray distance, half a life away,  
Her to be loved no more? Unsay it, unswear!  
Flatter me rather, seeing me so weak,  
Broken with Mark and hate and solitude,  
Thy marriage and mine own, that I should suck  
Lies like sweet wines: lie to me: I believe.  
Will ye not lie? not swear, as there ye kneel,  
And solemnly as when ye sware to him,

The man of men, our King My God, the power  
Was once in vows when men believed the King!  
They lied not then, who sware, and through their vows  
The King prevailing made his realm: I say,  
Swear to me thou wilt love me even when old,  
Gray haired, and past desire, and in despair.'

Then Tristram, pacing moodily up and down,  
'Vows! did you keep the vow you made to Mark  
More than I mine? Lied, say ye? Nay, but learnt,  
The vow that binds too strictly snaps itself  
My knighthood taught me this ay, being snapt  
We run more counter to the soul thereof  
Than had we never sworn. I swear no more.  
I swore to the great King, and am forsworn.  
For once even to the height I honoured him.  
"Man, is he man at all?" methought, when first  
I rode from our rough Lyonesse, and beheld  
That victor of the Pagan throned in hall

His hair, a sun that rayed from off a brow  
Like hillsnow high in heaven, the steel blue eyes,  
The golden beard that clothed his lips with light  
Moreover, that weird legend of his birth,  
With Merlin's mystic babble about his end  
Amazed me; then, his foot was on a stool  
Shaped as a dragon; he seemed to me no man,  
But Michael trampling Satan; so I swear,  
Being amazed: but this went by The vows!  
O ay the wholesome madness of an hour  
They served their use, their time; for every knight  
Believed himself a greater than himself,  
And every follower eyed him as a God;  
Till he, being lifted up beyond himself,  
Did mightier deeds than otherwise he had done,  
And so the realm was made; but then their vows  
First mainly through that sullyng of our Queen  
Began to gall the knighthood, asking whence  
Had Arthur right to bind them to himself?

Dropt down from heaven? washed up from out the  
deep?

They failed to trace him through the flesh and blood

Of our old kings: whence then? a doubtful lord

To bind them by inviolable vows,

Which flesh and blood perforce would violate:

For feel this arm of mine the tide within

Red with free chase and heather scented air,

Pulsing full man; can Arthur make me pure

As any maiden child? lock up my tongue

From uttering freely what I freely hear?

Bind me to one? The wide world laughs at it.

And worldling of the world am I, and know

The ptarmigan that whitens ere his hour

Woos his own end; we are not angels here

Nor shall be: vows I am woodman of the woods,

And hear the garnet headed yaffingale

Mock them: my soul, we love but while we may;

And therefore is my love so large for thee,

Seeing it is not bounded save by love.'

Here ending, he moved toward her, and she said,

'Good: an I turned away my love for thee

To some one thrice as courteous as thyself

For courtesy wins woman all as well

As valour may, but he that closes both

Is perfect, he is Lancelot taller indeed,

Rosier and comelier, thou but say I loved

This knightliest of all knights, and cast thee back

Thine own small saw, "We love but while we may,"

Well then, what answer?'

He that while she spake,

Mindful of what he brought to adorn her with,

The jewels, had let one finger lightly touch

The warm white apple of her throat, replied,

'Press this a little closer, sweet, until

Come, I am hungered and half angered meat,

Wine, wine and I will love thee to the death,  
And out beyond into the dream to come.'

So then, when both were brought to full accord,  
She rose, and set before him all he willed;  
And after these had comforted the blood  
With meats and wines, and satiated their hearts  
Now talking of their woodland paradise,  
The deer, the dews, the fern, the founts, the lawns;  
Now mocking at the much ungainliness,  
And craven shifts, and long crane legs of Mark  
Then Tristram laughing caught the harp, and sang:

'Ay, ay, O ay the winds that bend the brier!  
A star in heaven, a star within the mere!  
Ay, ay, O ay a star was my desire,  
And one was far apart, and one was near:  
Ay, ay, O ay the winds that bow the grass!  
And one was water and one star was fire,



And one will ever shine and one will pass.

Ay, ay, O ay the winds that move the mere.'

Then in the light's last glimmer Tristram showed

And swung the ruby carcanet. She cried,

'The collar of some Order, which our King

Hath newly founded, all for thee, my soul,

For thee, to yield thee grace beyond thy peers.'

'Not so, my Queen,' he said, 'but the red fruit

Grown on a magic oak tree in mid heaven,

And won by Tristram as a tourney prize,

And hither brought by Tristram for his last

Love offering and peace offering unto thee.'

He spoke, he turned, then, flinging round her neck,

Claspt it, and cried, 'Thine Order, O my Queen!'

But, while he bowed to kiss the jewelled throat,

Out of the dark, just as the lips had touched,

Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek  
    'Mark's way,' said Mark, and clove him through the  
brain.

That night came Arthur home, and while he climbed,  
All in a death dumb autumn dripping gloom,  
The stairway to the hall, and looked and saw  
The great Queen's bower was dark, about his feet  
A voice clung sobbing till he questioned it,  
    'What art thou?' and the voice about his feet  
Sent up an answer, sobbing, 'I am thy fool,  
And I shall never make thee smile again.'

### **Guinevere**

Queen Guinevere had fled the court, and sat  
There in the holy house at Almesbury  
Weeping, none with her save a little maid,  
A novice: one low light betwixt them burned

Blurred by the creeping mist, for all abroad,  
Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,  
The white mist, like a face cloth to the face,  
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was still.

For hither had she fled, her cause of flight  
Sir Modred; he that like a subtle beast  
Lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne,  
Ready to spring, waiting a chance: for this  
He chilled the popular praises of the King  
With silent smiles of slow disparagement;  
And tampered with the Lords of the White Horse,  
Heathen, the brood by Hengist left; and sought  
To make disruption in the Table Round

Of Arthur, and to splinter it into feuds  
Serving his traitorous end; and all his aims  
Were sharpened by strong hate for Lancelot.

For thus it chanced one morn when all the court,  
Green suited, but with plumes that mocked the may,  
Had been, their wont, a maying and returned,  
That Modred still in green, all ear and eye,  
Climbed to the high top of the garden wall  
To spy some secret scandal if he might,  
And saw the Queen who sat betwixt her best  
Enid, and lissome Vivien, of her court  
The wiliest and the worst; and more than this  
He saw not, for Sir Lancelot passing by  
Spied where he couched, and as the gardener's hand  
Picks from the colewort a green caterpillar,  
So from the high wall and the flowering grove  
  
Of grasses Lancelot plucked him by the heel,  
And cast him as a worm upon the way;  
But when he knew the Prince though marred with dust,  
He, reverencing king's blood in a bad man,  
Made such excuses as he might, and these

Full knightly without scorn; for in those days  
No knight of Arthur's noblest dealt in scorn;  
But, if a man were halt or hunched, in him  
By those whom God had made full limbed and tall,  
Scorn was allowed as part of his defect,  
And he was answered softly by the King  
And all his Table. So Sir Lancelot holp  
To raise the Prince, who rising twice or thrice  
Full sharply smote his knees, and smiled, and went:  
But, ever after, the small violence done  
Rankled in him and ruffled all his heart,  
As the sharp wind that ruffles all day long  
A little bitter pool about a stone  
On the bare coast.

But when Sir Lancelot told  
This matter to the Queen, at first she laughed  
Lightly, to think of Modred's dusty fall,  
Then shuddered, as the village wife who cries

'I shudder, some one steps across my grave;'  
Then laughed again, but faintlier, for indeed  
She half foresaw that he, the subtle beast,  
Would track her guilt until he found, and hers  
Would be for evermore a name of scorn.  
Henceforward rarely could she front in hall,  
Or elsewhere, Modred's narrow foxy face,  
Heart hiding smile, and gray persistent eye:  
Henceforward too, the Powers that tend the soul,  
To help it from the death that cannot die,  
And save it even in extremes, began  
To vex and plague her. Many a time for hours,  
Beside the placid breathings of the King,  
In the dead night, grim faces came and went  
Before her, or a vague spiritual fear  
Like to some doubtful noise of creaking doors,  
Heard by the watcher in a haunted house,  
That keeps the rust of murder on the walls  
Held her awake: or if she slept, she dreamed

An awful dream; for then she seemed to stand  
On some vast plain before a setting sun,  
And from the sun there swiftly made at her  
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew  
Before it, till it touched her, and she turned  
When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,  
And blackening, swallowed all the land, and in it  
Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke.  
And all this trouble did not pass but grew;  
Till even the clear face of the guileless King,  
And trustful courtesies of household life,  
Became her bane; and at the last she said,  
'O Lancelot, get thee hence to thine own land,  
For if thou tarry we shall meet again,  
And if we meet again, some evil chance  
Will make the smouldering scandal break and blaze  
Before the people, and our lord the King.'  
And Lancelot ever promised, but remained,  
And still they met and met. Again she said,

'O Lancelot, if thou love me get thee hence.'

And then they were agreed upon a night

(When the good King should not be there) to meet

And part for ever. Vivien, lurking, heard.

She told Sir Modred. Passion pale they met

And greeted. Hands in hands, and eye to eye,

Low on the border of her couch they sat

Stammering and staring. It was their last hour,

A madness of farewells. And Modred brought

His creatures to the basement of the tower

For testimony; and crying with full voice

'Traitor, come out, ye are trapt at last,' aroused

Lancelot, who rushing outward lionlike

Leapt on him, and hurled him headlong, and he fell

Stunned, and his creatures took and bare him off,

And all was still: then she, 'The end is come,

And I am shamed for ever;' and he said,

'Mine be the shame; mine was the sin: but rise,

And fly to my strong castle overseas:



There will I hide thee, till my life shall end,  
There hold thee with my life against the world.'  
She answered, 'Lancelot, wilt thou hold me so?  
Nay, friend, for we have taken our farewells.  
Would God that thou couldst hide me from myself!  
Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou  
Unwedded: yet rise now, and let us fly,  
For I will draw me into sanctuary,  
And bide my doom.' So Lancelot got her horse,  
Set her thereon, and mounted on his own,  
And then they rode to the divided way,  
There kissed, and parted weeping: for he past,  
Love loyal to the least wish of the Queen,  
Back to his land; but she to Almesbury  
Fled all night long by glimmering waste and weald,  
And heard the Spirits of the waste and weald  
Moan as she fled, or thought she heard them moan:  
And in herself she moaned 'Too late, too late!'  
Till in the cold wind that foreruns the morn,

A blot in heaven, the Raven, flying high,  
Croaked, and she thought, 'He spies a field of death;  
For now the Heathen of the Northern Sea,  
Lured by the crimes and frailties of the court,  
Begin to slay the folk, and spoil the land.'

And when she came to Almesbury she spake  
There to the nuns, and said, 'Mine enemies  
Pursue me, but, O peaceful Sisterhood,  
Receive, and yield me sanctuary, nor ask  
Her name to whom ye yield it, till her time  
To tell you:' and her beauty, grace and power,  
Wrought as a charm upon them, and they spared  
To ask it.

So the stately Queen abode  
For many a week, unknown, among the nuns;  
Nor with them mixed, nor told her name, nor sought,  
Wrapt in her grief, for housel or for shrift,

But communed only with the little maid,  
Who pleased her with a babbling heedlessness  
Which often lured her from herself; but now,  
This night, a rumour wildly blown about  
Came, that Sir Modred had usurped the realm,  
And leagued him with the heathen, while the King  
Was waging war on Lancelot: then she thought,  
'With what a hate the people and the King  
Must hate me,' and bowed down upon her hands  
Silent, until the little maid, who brooked  
No silence, brake it, uttering, 'Late! so late!  
What hour, I wonder, now?' and when she drew  
No answer, by and by began to hum  
An air the nuns had taught her; 'Late, so late!'   
Which when she heard, the Queen looked up, and said,  
'O maiden, if indeed ye list to sing,  
Sing, and unbind my heart that I may weep.'  
Whereat full willingly sang the little maid.

'Late, late, so late! and dark the night and chill!

Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.

Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

'No light had we: for that we do repent;

And learning this, the bridegroom will relent.

Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

'No light: so late! and dark and chill the night!

O let us in, that we may find the light!

Too late, too late: ye cannot enter now.

'Have we not heard the bridegroom is so sweet?

O let us in, though late, to kiss his feet!

No, no, too late! ye cannot enter now.'

So sang the novice, while full passionately,

Her head upon her hands, remembering

Her thought when first she came, wept the sad Queen.

Then said the little novice prattling to her,  
'O pray you, noble lady, weep no more;  
But let my words, the words of one so small,  
Who knowing nothing knows but to obey,  
And if I do not there is penance given  
Comfort your sorrows; for they do not flow  
From evil done; right sure am I of that,  
Who see your tender grace and stateliness.  
But weigh your sorrows with our lord the King's,  
And weighing find them less; for gone is he  
To wage grim war against Sir Lancelot there,  
Round that strong castle where he holds the Queen;  
And Modred whom he left in charge of all,  
The traitor Ah sweet lady, the King's grief  
For his own self, and his own Queen, and realm,  
Must needs be thrice as great as any of ours.  
For me, I thank the saints, I am not great.  
For if there ever come a grief to me  
I cry my cry in silence, and have done.

None knows it, and my tears have brought me good:

But even were the griefs of little ones

As great as those of great ones, yet this grief

Is added to the griefs the great must bear,

That howsoever much they may desire

Silence, they cannot weep behind a cloud:

As even here they talk at Almesbury

About the good King and his wicked Queen,

And were I such a King with such a Queen,

Well might I wish to veil her wickedness,

But were I such a King, it could not be.'

Then to her own sad heart muttered the Queen,

'Will the child kill me with her innocent talk?'

But openly she answered, 'Must not I,

If this false traitor have displaced his lord,

Grieve with the common grief of all the realm?'

'Yea,' said the maid, 'this is all woman's grief,

That she is woman, whose disloyal life  
Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round  
Which good King Arthur founded, years ago,  
With signs and miracles and wonders, there  
At Camelot, ere the coming of the Queen.'

Then thought the Queen within herself again,  
'Will the child kill me with her foolish prate?'  
But openly she spake and said to her,  
'O little maid, shut in by nunnery walls,  
What canst thou know of Kings and Tables Round,  
Or what of signs and wonders, but the signs  
And simple miracles of thy nunnery?'

To whom the little novice garrulously,  
'Yea, but I know: the land was full of signs  
And wonders ere the coming of the Queen.  
So said my father, and himself was knight  
Of the great Table at the founding of it;

And rode thereto from Lyonesse, and he said  
That as he rode, an hour or maybe twain  
After the sunset, down the coast, he heard  
Strange music, and he paused, and turning there,  
All down the lonely coast of Lyonesse,  
Each with a beacon star upon his head,  
And with a wild sea light about his feet,  
He saw them headland after headland flame  
Far on into the rich heart of the west:  
And in the light the white mermaiden swam,  
And strong man breasted things stood from the sea,  
And sent a deep sea voice through all the land,  
To which the little elves of chasm and cleft  
Made answer, sounding like a distant horn.  
So said my father yea, and furthermore,  
Next morning, while he past the dim lit woods,  
Himself beheld three spirits mad with joy  
Come dashing down on a tall wayside flower,  
That shook beneath them, as the thistle shakes



When three gray linnets wrangle for the seed:  
And still at evenings on before his horse  
The flickering fairy circle wheeled and broke  
Flying, and linked again, and wheeled and broke  
Flying, for all the land was full of life.  
And when at last he came to Camelot,  
A wreath of airy dancers hand in hand  
Swung round the lighted lantern of the hall;  
And in the hall itself was such a feast  
As never man had dreamed; for every knight  
Had whatsoever meat he longed for served  
By hands unseen; and even as he said  
Down in the cellars merry bloated things  
Shouldered the spigot, straddling on the butts  
While the wine ran: so glad were spirits and men  
Before the coming of the sinful Queen.'

Then spake the Queen and somewhat bitterly,  
'Were they so glad? ill prophets were they all,

Spirits and men: could none of them foresee,  
Not even thy wise father with his signs  
And wonders, what has fallen upon the realm?'

To whom the novice garrulously again,  
'Yea, one, a bard; of whom my father said,  
Full many a noble war song had he sung,  
Even in the presence of an enemy's fleet,  
Between the steep cliff and the coming wave;  
And many a mystic lay of life and death  
Had chanted on the smoky mountain tops,  
When round him bent the spirits of the hills  
With all their dewy hair blown back like flame:  
So said my father and that night the bard  
Sang Arthur's glorious wars, and sang the King  
As wellnigh more than man, and railed at those  
Who called him the false son of Gorlois:  
For there was no man knew from whence he came;  
But after tempest, when the long wave broke

All down the thundering shores of Bude and Bos,  
There came a day as still as heaven, and then  
They found a naked child upon the sands  
Of dark Tintagil by the Cornish sea;  
And that was Arthur; and they fostered him  
Till he by miracle was approven King:  
And that his grave should be a mystery  
From all men, like his birth; and could he find  
A woman in her womanhood as great  
As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,  
The twain together well might change the world.  
But even in the middle of his song  
He faltered, and his hand fell from the harp,  
And pale he turned, and reeled, and would have fallen,  
But that they stayed him up; nor would he tell  
His vision; but what doubt that he foresaw  
This evil work of Lancelot and the Queen?

Then thought the Queen, 'Lo! they have set her on,

Our simple seeming Abbess and her nuns,  
To play upon me,' and bowed her head nor spake.  
Whereat the novice crying, with clasped hands,  
Shame on her own garrulity garrulously,  
Said the good nuns would check her gadding tongue  
Full often, 'and, sweet lady, if I seem  
To vex an ear too sad to listen to me,  
Unmannerly, with prattling and the tales  
Which my good father told me, check me too  
Nor let me shame my father's memory, one  
Of noblest manners, though himself would say  
Sir Lancelot had the noblest; and he died,  
Killed in a tilt, come next, five summers back,  
And left me; but of others who remain,  
And of the two first famed for courtesy  
And pray you check me if I ask amiss  
But pray you, which had noblest, while you moved  
Among them, Lancelot or our lord the King?'

Then the pale Queen looked up and answered her,  
'Sir Lancelot, as became a noble knight,  
Was gracious to all ladies, and the same  
In open battle or the tilting field  
Forbore his own advantage, and the King  
In open battle or the tilting field  
Forbore his own advantage, and these two  
Were the most nobly mannered men of all;  
For manners are not idle, but the fruit  
Of loyal nature, and of noble mind.'

'Yea,' said the maid, 'be manners such fair fruit?'  
Then Lancelot's needs must be a thousand fold  
Less noble, being, as all rumour runs,  
The most disloyal friend in all the world.'

To which a mournful answer made the Queen:  
'O closed about by narrowing nunnery walls,  
What knowest thou of the world, and all its lights

And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?

If ever Lancelot, that most noble knight,

Were for one hour less noble than himself,

Pray for him that he scape the doom of fire,

And weep for her that drew him to his doom.'

'Yea,' said the little novice, 'I pray for both;

But I should all as soon believe that his,

Sir Lancelot's, were as noble as the King's,

As I could think, sweet lady, yours would be

Such as they are, were you the sinful Queen.'

So she, like many another babbler, hurt

Whom she would soothe, and harmed where she would  
heal;

For here a sudden flush of wrathful heat

Fired all the pale face of the Queen, who cried,

'Such as thou art be never maiden more

For ever! thou their tool, set on to plague

And play upon, and harry me, petty spy  
And traitress.' When that storm of anger brake  
From Guinevere, aghast the maiden rose,  
White as her veil, and stood before the Queen  
As tremulously as foam upon the beach  
Stands in a wind, ready to break and fly,  
And when the Queen had added 'Get thee hence,'  
Fled frightened. Then that other left alone  
Sighed, and began to gather heart again,  
Saying in herself, 'The simple, fearful child  
Meant nothing, but my own too fearful guilt,  
Simpler than any child, betrays itself.  
But help me, heaven, for surely I repent.  
For what is true repentance but in thought  
Not even in inmost thought to think again  
The sins that made the past so pleasant to us:  
And I have sworn never to see him more,  
To see him more.'

And even in saying this,  
Her memory from old habit of the mind  
Went slipping back upon the golden days  
In which she saw him first, when Lancelot came,  
Reputed the best knight and goodliest man,  
Ambassador, to lead her to his lord  
Arthur, and led her forth, and far ahead  
Of his and her retinue moving, they,  
Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love  
And sport and tilts and pleasure, (for the time  
Was maytime, and as yet no sin was dreamed,)  
Rode under groves that looked a paradise  
Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth  
That seemed the heavens upbreaking through the earth,  
And on from hill to hill, and every day  
Beheld at noon in some delicious dale  
The silk pavilions of King Arthur raised  
For brief repast or afternoon repose  
By couriers gone before; and on again,



Till yet once more ere set of sun they saw  
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship,  
That crowned the state pavilion of the King,  
Blaze by the rushing brook or silent well.

But when the Queen immersed in such a trance,  
And moving through the past unconsciously,  
Came to that point where first she saw the King  
Ride toward her from the city, sighed to find  
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought him cold,  
High, self contained, and passionless, not like him,  
'Not like my Lancelot' while she brooded thus  
And grew half guilty in her thoughts again,  
There rode an armed warrior to the doors.  
A murmuring whisper through the nunnery ran,  
Then on a sudden a cry, 'The King.' She sat  
Stiff stricken, listening; but when armed feet  
Through the long gallery from the outer doors  
Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell,

And grovelled with her face against the floor:  
There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy hair  
She made her face a darkness from the King:  
And in the darkness heard his armed feet  
Pause by her; then came silence, then a voice,  
Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost's  
Denouncing judgment, but though changed, the King's:  
  
'Liest thou here so low, the child of one  
I honoured, happy, dead before thy shame?  
Well is it that no child is born of thee.  
The children born of thee are sword and fire,  
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,  
The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts  
Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea;  
Whom I, while yet Sir Lancelot, my right arm,  
The mightiest of my knights, abode with me,  
Have everywhere about this land of Christ  
In twelve great battles ruining overthrown.

And knowest thou now from whence I come from him  
From waging bitter war with him: and he,  
That did not shun to smite me in worse way,  
Had yet that grace of courtesy in him left,  
He spared to lift his hand against the King  
Who made him knight: but many a knight was slain;  
And many more, and all his kith and kin  
Clave to him, and abode in his own land.  
And many more when Modred raised revolt,  
Forgetful of their troth and fealty, clave  
To Modred, and a remnant stays with me.  
And of this remnant will I leave a part,  
True men who love me still, for whom I live,  
To guard thee in the wild hour coming on,  
Lest but a hair of this low head be harmed.  
Fear not: thou shalt be guarded till my death.  
Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies  
Have erred not, that I march to meet my doom.  
Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me,

That I the King should greatly care to live;  
For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life.  
Bear with me for the last time while I show,  
Even for thy sake, the sin which thou hast sinned.  
For when the Roman left us, and their law  
Relaxed its hold upon us, and the ways  
Were filled with rapine, here and there a deed  
Of prowess done redressed a random wrong.  
But I was first of all the kings who drew  
The knighthood errant of this realm and all  
The realms together under me, their Head,  
In that fair Order of my Table Round,  
A glorious company, the flower of men,  
To serve as model for the mighty world,  
And be the fair beginning of a time.  
I made them lay their hands in mine and swear  
To reverence the King, as if he were  
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,  
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,

To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,  
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,  
To honour his own word as if his God's,  
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,  
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,  
And worship her by years of noble deeds,  
Until they won her; for indeed I knew  
Of no more subtle master under heaven  
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,  
Not only to keep down the base in man,  
But teach high thought, and amiable words  
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,  
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.  
And all this throve before I wedded thee,  
Believing, "lo mine helpmate, one to feel  
My purpose and rejoicing in my joy."  
Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot;  
Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt;  
Then others, following these my mightiest knights,

And drawing foul ensample from fair names,  
Sinned also, till the loathsome opposite  
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,  
And all through thee! so that this life of mine  
I guard as God's high gift from scathe and wrong,  
Not greatly care to lose; but rather think  
How sad it were for Arthur, should he live,  
To sit once more within his lonely hall,  
And miss the wonted number of my knights,  
And miss to hear high talk of noble deeds  
As in the golden days before thy sin.  
For which of us, who might be left, could speak  
Of the pure heart, nor seem to glance at thee?  
And in thy bowers of Camelot or of Usk  
Thy shadow still would glide from room to room,  
And I should evermore be vexed with thee  
In hanging robe or vacant ornament,  
Or ghostly footfall echoing on the stair.  
For think not, though thou wouldst not love thy lord,

Thy lord hast wholly lost his love for thee.  
I am not made of so slight elements.  
Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.  
I hold that man the worst of public foes  
Who either for his own or children's sake,  
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife  
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house:  
For being through his cowardice allowed  
Her station, taken everywhere for pure,  
She like a new disease, unknown to men,  
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,  
Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and saps  
The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse  
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young.  
Worst of the worst were that man he that reigns!  
Better the King's waste hearth and aching heart  
Than thou reseated in thy place of light,  
The mockery of my people, and their bane.'

He paused, and in the pause she crept an inch  
Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet.  
Far off a solitary trumpet blew.  
Then waiting by the doors the warhorse neighed  
At a friend's voice, and he spake again:

'Yet think not that I come to urge thy crimes,  
I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,  
I, whose vast pity almost makes me die  
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,  
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.  
The wrath which forced my thoughts on that fierce law,  
The doom of treason and the flaming death,  
(When first I learnt thee hidden here) is past.  
The pang which while I weighed thy heart with one  
Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee,  
Made my tears burn is also past in part.  
And all is past, the sin is sinned, and I,  
Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God



Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the rest.

But how to take last leave of all I loved?

O golden hair, with which I used to play

Not knowing! O imperial moulded form,

And beauty such as never woman wore,

Until it became a kingdom's curse with thee

I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine,

But Lancelot's: nay, they never were the King's.

I cannot take thy hand: that too is flesh,

And in the flesh thou hast sinned; and mine own flesh,

Here looking down on thine polluted, cries

"I loathe thee:" yet not less, O Guinevere,

For I was ever virgin save for thee,

My love through flesh hath wrought into my life

So far, that my doom is, I love thee still.

Let no man dream but that I love thee still.

Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,

And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,

Hereafter in that world where all are pure

We two may meet before high God, and thou  
Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and know  
I am thine husband not a smaller soul,  
Nor Lancelot, nor another. Leave me that,  
I charge thee, my last hope. Now must I hence.  
Through the thick night I hear the trumpet blow:  
They summon me their King to lead mine hosts  
Far down to that great battle in the west,  
Where I must strike against the man they call  
My sister's son no kin of mine, who leagues  
With Lords of the White Horse, heathen, and knights,  
Traitors and strike him dead, and meet myself  
Death, or I know not what mysterious doom.  
And thou remaining here wilt learn the event;  
But hither shall I never come again,  
Never lie by thy side; see thee no more  
Farewell!"

And while she grovelled at his feet,

She felt the King's breath wander o'er her neck,  
And in the darkness o'er her fallen head,  
Perceived the waving of his hands that blest.

Then, listening till those armed steps were gone,  
Rose the pale Queen, and in her anguish found  
The casement: 'peradventure,' so she thought,  
'If I might see his face, and not be seen.'  
And lo, he sat on horseback at the door!  
And near him the sad nuns with each a light  
Stood, and he gave them charge about the Queen,  
To guard and foster her for evermore.  
And while he spake to these his helm was lowered,  
To which for crest the golden dragon clung  
Of Britain; so she did not see the face,  
Which then was as an angel's, but she saw,  
Wet with the mists and smitten by the lights,  
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship  
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.

And even then he turned; and more and more  
The moony vapour rolling round the King,  
Who seemed the phantom of a Giant in it,  
Enwound him fold by fold, and made him gray  
And grayer, till himself became as mist  
Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom.

Then she stretched out her arms and cried aloud  
'Oh Arthur!' there her voice brake suddenly,  
Then as a stream that spouting from a cliff  
Fails in mid air, but gathering at the base  
Re makes itself, and flashes down the vale  
Went on in passionate utterance:

'Gone my lord!  
Gone through my sin to slay and to be slain!  
And he forgave me, and I could not speak.  
Farewell? I should have answered his farewell.

His mercy choked me. Gone, my lord the King,  
My own true lord! how dare I call him mine?  
The shadow of another cleaves to me,  
And makes me one pollution: he, the King,  
Called me polluted: shall I kill myself?  
What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,  
If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame;  
No, nor by living can I live it down.  
The days will grow to weeks, the weeks to months  
The months will add themselves and make the years,  
The years will roll into the centuries,  
And mine will ever be a name of scorn.  
I must not dwell on that defeat of fame.  
Let the world be; that is but of the world.  
What else? what hope? I think there was a hope,  
Except he mocked me when he spake of hope;  
His hope he called it; but he never mocks,  
For mockery is the fume of little hearts.  
And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven

My wickedness to him, and left me hope  
That in mine own heart I can live down sin  
And be his mate hereafter in the heavens  
Before high God. Ah great and gentle lord,  
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint  
Among his warring senses, to thy knights  
To whom my false voluptuous pride, that took  
Full easily all impressions from below,  
Would not look up, or half despised the height  
To which I would not or I could not climb  
I thought I could not breathe in that fine air  
That pure severity of perfect light  
I yearned for warmth and colour which I found  
In Lancelot now I see thee what thou art,  
Thou art the highest and most human too,  
Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none  
Will tell the King I love him though so late?  
Now ere he goes to the great Battle? none:  
Myself must tell him in that purer life,

But now it were too daring. Ah my God,  
What might I not have made of thy fair world,  
Had I but loved thy highest creature here?  
It was my duty to have loved the highest:  
It surely was my profit had I known:  
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.  
We needs must love the highest when we see it,  
Not Lancelot, nor another.'

Here her hand  
Grasped, made her vail her eyes: she looked and saw  
The novice, weeping, suppliant, and said to her,  
'Yea, little maid, for am I not forgiven?'  
Then glancing up beheld the holy nuns  
All round her, weeping; and her heart was loosed  
Within her, and she wept with these and said,  
  
'Ye know me then, that wicked one, who broke  
The vast design and purpose of the King.

O shut me round with narrowing nunnery walls,  
Meek maidens, from the voices crying "shame."  
I must not scorn myself: he loves me still.  
Let no one dream but that he loves me still.  
So let me, if you do not shudder at me,  
Nor shun to call me sister, dwell with you;  
Wear black and white, and be a nun like you,  
Fast with your fasts, not feasting with your feasts;  
Grieve with your griefs, not grieving at your joys,  
But not rejoicing; mingle with your rites;  
Pray and be prayed for; lie before your shrines;  
Do each low office of your holy house;  
Walk your dim cloister, and distribute dole  
To poor sick people, richer in His eyes  
Who ransomed us, and halier too than I;  
And treat their loathsome hurts and heal mine own;  
And so wear out in almsdeed and in prayer  
The sombre close of that voluptuous day,  
Which wrought the ruin of my lord the King.'



She said: they took her to themselves; and she  
Still hoping, fearing 'is it yet too late?'  
Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess died.  
Then she, for her good deeds and her pure life,  
And for the power of ministration in her,  
And likewise for the high rank she had borne,  
Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived  
For three brief years, and there, an Abbess, past  
To where beyond these voices there is peace.

### **The Passing of Arthur**

That story which the bold Sir Bedivere,  
First made and latest left of all the knights,  
Told, when the man was no more than a voice  
In the white winter of his age, to those  
With whom he dwelt, new faces, other minds.

For on their march to westward, Bedivere,  
Who slowly paced among the slumbering host,  
Heard in his tent the moanings of the King:

'I found Him in the shining of the stars,  
I marked Him in the flowering of His fields,  
But in His ways with men I find Him not.  
I waged His wars, and now I pass and die.  
O me! for why is all around us here  
As if some lesser god had made the world,  
But had not force to shape it as he would,  
Till the High God behold it from beyond,  
And enter it, and make it beautiful?  
Or else as if the world were wholly fair,  
But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,  
And have not power to see it as it is:  
Perchance, because we see not to the close;  
For I, being simple, thought to work His will,  
And have but stricken with the sword in vain;

And all whereon I leaned in wife and friend  
Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm  
Reels back into the beast, and is no more.  
My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death;  
Nay God my Christ I pass but shall not die.'

Then, ere that last weird battle in the west,  
There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain killed  
In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain blown  
Along a wandering wind, and past his ear  
Went shrilling, 'Hollow, hollow all delight!  
Hail, King! tomorrow thou shalt pass away.  
Farewell! there is an isle of rest for thee.  
And I am blown along a wandering wind,  
And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight.'  
And fainter onward, like wild birds that change  
Their season in the night and wail their way  
From cloud to cloud, down the long wind the dream  
Shrilled; but in going mingled with dim cries

Far in the moonlit haze among the hills,  
As of some lonely city sacked by night,  
When all is lost, and wife and child with wail  
Pass to new lords; and Arthur woke and called,  
'Who spake? A dream. O light upon the wind,  
Thine, Gawain, was the voice are these dim cries  
Thine? or doth all that haunts the waste and wild  
Mourn, knowing it will go along with me?'

This heard the bold Sir Bedivere and spake:  
'O me, my King, let pass whatever will,  
Elves, and the harmless glamour of the field;  
But in their stead thy name and glory cling  
To all high places like a golden cloud  
For ever: but as yet thou shalt not pass.  
Light was Gawain in life, and light in death  
Is Gawain, for the ghost is as the man;  
And care not thou for dreams from him, but rise  
I hear the steps of Modred in the west,

And with him many of thy people, and knights  
Once thine, whom thou hast loved, but grosser grown  
Than heathen, spitting at their vows and thee.  
Right well in heart they know thee for the King.  
Arise, go forth and conquer as of old.'

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:  
'Far other is this battle in the west  
Whereto we move, than when we strove in youth,  
And brake the petty kings, and fought with Rome,  
Or thrust the heathen from the Roman wall,  
And shook him through the north. Ill doom is mine  
To war against my people and my knights.  
The king who fights his people fights himself.  
And they my knights, who loved me once, the stroke  
That strikes them dead is as my death to me.  
Yet let us hence, and find or feel a way  
Through this blind haze, which ever since I saw  
One lying in the dust at Almesbury,

Hath folded in the passes of the world.'

Then rose the King and moved his host by night,

And ever pushed Sir Modred, league by league,

Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse

A land of old upheaven from the abyss

By fire, to sink into the abyss again;

Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,

And the long mountains ended in a coast

Of ever shifting sand, and far away

The phantom circle of a moaning sea.

There the pursuer could pursue no more,

And he that fled no further fly the King;

And there, that day when the great light of heaven

Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,

On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.

Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight

Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.

A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea:

Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew  
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell  
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.  
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;  
And some had visions out of golden youth,  
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts  
Look in upon the battle; and in the mist  
Was many a noble deed, many a base,  
And chance and craft and strength in single fights,  
And ever and anon with host to host  
Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,  
Shield breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash  
Of battleaxes on shattered helms, and shrieks  
After the Christ, of those who falling down  
Looked up for heaven, and only saw the mist;  
And shouts of heathen and the traitor knights,  
Oaths, insults, filth, and monstrous blasphemies,

Sweat, writhings, anguish, labouring of the lungs  
In that close mist, and cryings for the light,  
Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.

Last, as by some one deathbed after wail  
Of suffering, silence follows, or through death  
Or deathlike swoon, thus over all that shore,  
Save for some whisper of the seething seas,  
A dead hush fell; but when the dolorous day  
Grew drearier toward twilight falling, came  
A bitter wind, clear from the North, and blew  
The mist aside, and with that wind the tide  
Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field  
Of battle: but no man was moving there;  
Nor any cry of Christian heard thereon,  
Nor yet of heathen; only the wan wave  
Brake in among dead faces, to and fro  
Swaying the helpless hands, and up and down  
Tumbling the hollow helmets of the fallen,



And shivered brands that once had fought with Rome,  
And rolling far along the gloomy shores  
The voice of days of old and days to be.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere,

And whiter than the mist that all day long  
Had held the field of battle was the King:

'Hearest thou this great voice that shakes the world,  
And wastes the narrow realm whereon we move,  
And beats upon the faces of the dead,  
My dead, as though they had not died for me?  
O Bedivere, for on my heart hath fallen  
Confusion, till I know not what I am,  
Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King.  
Behold, I seem but King among the dead.'

Then spake the bold Sir Bedivere: 'My King,

King everywhere! and so the dead have kings,  
There also will I worship thee as King.  
Yet still thy life is whole, and still I live  
Who love thee; but who hates thee, he that brought  
The heathen back among us, yonder stands,  
Modred, unharmed, the traitor of thine house.'

Then spake the King: 'My house hath been my doom.  
But call not thou this traitor of my house  
Who hath but dwelt beneath one roof with me.  
My house are rather they who swear my vows,  
Yea, even while they brake them, owned me King.  
And well for thee, saying in my dark hour,  
When all the purport of my throne hath failed,  
That quick or dead thou holdest me for King.  
King am I, whatsoever be their cry;  
And one last act of kingdom shalt thou see  
Yet, ere I pass.' And uttering this the King

Made at the man: then Modred smote his liege  
Hard on that helm which many a heathen sword  
Had beaten thin; while Arthur at one blow,  
Striking the last stroke with Excalibur,  
Slew him, and all but slain himself, he fell.

So all day long the noise of battle rolled  
Among the mountains by the winter sea;  
Until King Arthur's Table, man by man,  
Had fallen in Lyonesse about their lord,  
King Arthur. Then, because his wound was deep,  
The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,  
And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,  
A broken chancel with a broken cross,  
That stood on a dark strait of barren land:  
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one  
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:

'The sequel of today unsolders all  
The goodliest fellowship of famous knights  
Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep  
They sleep the men I loved. I think that we  
Shall never more, at any future time,  
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,  
Walking about the gardens and the halls  
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.  
I perish by this people which I made,  
Though Merlin sware that I should come again  
To rule once more; but, let what will be, be,  
I am so deeply smitten through the helm  
That without help I cannot last till morn.  
Thou therefore take my brand Excalibur,  
Which was my pride: for thou rememberest how  
In those old days, one summer noon, an arm  
Rose up from out the bosom of the lake,  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,  
Holding the sword and how I rowed across

And took it, and have worn it, like a king;  
And, wheresoever I am sung or told  
In aftertime, this also shall be known:  
But now delay not: take Excalibur,  
And fling him far into the middle mere:  
Watch what thou seest, and lightly bring me word.'

To him replied the bold Sir Bedivere:  
'It is not meet, Sir King, to leave thee thus,  
Aidless, alone, and smitten through the helm  
A little thing may harm a wounded man;  
Yet I thy hest will all perform at full,  
Watch what I see, and lightly bring thee word.'

So saying, from the ruined shrine he stept,  
And in the moon athwart the place of tombs,  
Where lay the mighty bones of ancient men,  
Old knights, and over them the sea wind sang

Shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He, stepping down  
By zigzag paths, and juts of pointed rock,  
Came on the shining levels of the lake.

There drew he forth the brand Excalibur,  
And o'er him, drawing it, the winter moon,  
Brightening the skirts of a long cloud, ran forth  
And sparkled keen with frost against the hilt:  
For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,  
Myriads of topaz lights, and jacinth work  
Of subtlest jewellery. He gazed so long  
That both his eyes were dazzled as he stood,  
This way and that dividing the swift mind,  
In act to throw: but at the last it seemed  
Better to leave Excalibur concealed  
There in the many knotted waterflags,  
That whistled stiff and dry about the marge.  
So strode he back slow to the wounded King.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:

'Hast thou performed my mission which I gave?

What is it thou hast seen? or what hast heard?'

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:

'I heard the ripple washing in the reeds,

And the wild water lapping on the crag.'

To whom replied King Arthur, faint and pale:

'Thou hast betrayed thy nature and thy name,

Not rendering true answer, as beseemed

Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight:

For surer sign had followed, either hand,

Or voice, or else a motion of the mere.

This is a shameful thing for men to lie.

Yet now, I charge thee, quickly go again,

As thou art lief and dear, and do the thing

I bade thee, watch, and lightly bring me word.'

Then went Sir Bedivere the second time  
Across the ridge, and paced beside the mere,  
Counting the dewy pebbles, fixed in thought;  
But when he saw the wonder of the hilt,  
How curiously and strangely chased, he smote  
His palms together, and he cried aloud:

'And if indeed I cast the brand away,  
Surely a precious thing, one worthy note,  
Should thus be lost for ever from the earth,  
Which might have pleased the eyes of many men.  
What good should follow this, if this were done?  
What harm, undone? Deep harm to disobey,  
Seeing obedience is the bond of rule.  
Were it well to obey then, if a king demand  
An act unprofitable, against himself?  
The King is sick, and knows not what he does.  
What record, or what relic of my lord



Should be to aftertime, but empty breath  
And rumours of a doubt? But were this kept,  
Stored in some treasure house of mighty kings,  
Some one might show it at a joust of arms,  
Saying, "King Arthur's sword, Excalibur,  
Wrought by the lonely maiden of the Lake.  
Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps  
Upon the hidden bases of the hills."  
So might some old man speak in the aftertime  
To all the people, winning reverence.  
But now much honour and much fame were lost.'

So spake he, clouded with his own conceit,  
And hid Excalibur the second time,  
And so strode back slow to the wounded King.

Then spoke King Arthur, breathing heavily:  
'What is it thou hast seen? or what hast heard?'

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:

'I heard the water lapping on the crag,

And the long ripple washing in the reeds.'

To whom replied King Arthur, much in wrath:

'Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue,

Unknightly, traitor hearted! Woe is me!

Authority forgets a dying king,

Laid widowed of the power in his eye

That bowed the will. I see thee what thou art,

For thou, the latest left of all my knights,

In whom should meet the offices of all,

Thou wouldst betray me for the precious hilt;

Either from lust of gold, or like a girl

Valuing the giddy pleasure of the eyes.

Yet, for a man may fail in duty twice,

And the third time may prosper, get thee hence:

But, if thou spare to fling Excalibur,

I will arise and slay thee with my hands.'

Then quickly rose Sir Bedivere, and ran,  
And, leaping down the ridges lightly, plunged  
Among the bulrush beds, and clutched the sword,  
And strongly wheeled and threw it. The great brand  
Made lightnings in the splendour of the moon,  
And flashing round and round, and whirled in an arch,  
Shot like a streamer of the northern morn,  
Seen where the moving isles of winter shock  
By night, with noises of the Northern Sea.  
So flashed and fell the brand Excalibur:  
But ere he dipt the surface, rose an arm  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,  
And caught him by the hilt, and brandished him  
Three times, and drew him under in the mere.  
And lightly went the other to the King.

Then spoke King Arthur, drawing thicker breath:  
'Now see I by thine eyes that this is done.

Speak out: what is it thou hast heard, or seen?'

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:

'Sir King, I closed mine eyelids, lest the gems

Should blind my purpose, for I never saw,

Nor shall see, here or elsewhere, till I die,

Not though I live three lives of mortal men,

So great a miracle as yonder hilt.

Then with both hands I flung him, wheeling him;

But when I looked again, behold an arm,

Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,

That caught him by the hilt, and brandished him

Three times, and drew him under in the mere.'

And answer made King Arthur, breathing hard:

'My end draws nigh; 'tis time that I were gone.

Make broad thy shoulders to receive my weight,

And bear me to the margin; yet I fear

My wound hath taken cold, and I shall die.'

So saying, from the pavement he half rose,  
Slowly, with pain, reclining on his arm,  
And looking wistfully with wide blue eyes  
As in a picture. Him Sir Bedivere  
Remorsefully regarded through his tears,  
And would have spoken, but he found not words;  
Then took with care, and kneeling on one knee,  
O'er both his shoulders drew the languid hands,  
And rising bore him through the place of tombs.

But, as he walked, King Arthur panted hard,  
Like one that feels a nightmare on his bed  
When all the house is mute. So sighed the King,  
Muttering and murmuring at his ear, 'Quick, quick!  
I fear it is too late, and I shall die.'

But the other swiftly strode from ridge to ridge,

Clothed with his breath, and looking, as he walked,  
Larger than human on the frozen hills.

He heard the deep behind him, and a cry  
Before. His own thought drove him like a goad.

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves  
And barren chasms, and all to left and right  
The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based  
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang  
Sharp smitten with the dint of armed heels  
And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,  
And the long glories of the winter moon.

Then saw they how there hove a dusky barge,  
Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern,  
Beneath them; and descending they were ware  
That all the decks were dense with stately forms,  
Black stoled, black hooded, like a dream by these  
Three Queens with crowns of gold: and from them rose  
A cry that shivered to the tingling stars,

And, as it were one voice, an agony  
Of lamentation, like a wind that shrills  
All night in a waste land, where no one comes,  
Or hath come, since the making of the world.

Then murmured Arthur, 'Place me in the barge.'  
So to the barge they came. There those three Queens  
Put forth their hands, and took the King, and wept.  
But she, that rose the tallest of them all  
And fairest, laid his head upon her lap,  
And loosed the shattered casque, and chafed his hands,  
And called him by his name, complaining loud,  
And dropping bitter tears against a brow  
Striped with dark blood: for all his face was white  
And colourless, and like the withered moon  
Smote by the fresh beam of the springing east;  
And all his greaves and cuisses dashed with drops  
Of onset; and the light and lustrous curls  
That made his forehead like a rising sun

High from the dais throne were parched with dust;  
Or, clotted into points and hanging loose,  
Mixed with the knightly growth that fringed his lips.  
So like a shattered column lay the King;  
Not like that Arthur who, with lance in rest,  
From spur to plume a star of tournament,  
Shot through the lists at Camelot, and charged  
Before the eyes of ladies and of kings.

Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere:  
'Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?  
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?  
For now I see the true old times are dead,  
When every morning brought a noble chance,  
And every chance brought out a noble knight.  
Such times have been not since the light that led  
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.  
But now the whole Round Table is dissolved  
Which was an image of the mighty world,



And I, the last, go forth companionless,  
And the days darken round me, and the years,  
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.'

And slowly answered Arthur from the barge:  
'The old order changeth, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.  
Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?  
I have lived my life, and that which I have done  
May He within himself make pure! but thou,  
If thou shouldst never see my face again,  
Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice  
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.  
For what are men better than sheep or goats  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?

For so the whole round earth is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.  
But now farewell. I am going a long way  
With these thou seest if indeed I go  
(For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)  
To the island valley of Avilion;  
Where falls not hail, or rain, or any snow,  
Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it lies  
Deep meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns  
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,  
Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.'

So said he, and the barge with oar and sail  
Moved from the brink, like some full breasted swan  
That, fluting a wild carol ere her death,  
Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood  
With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere  
Revolving many memories, till the hull  
Looked one black dot against the verge of dawn,

And on the mere the wailing died away.

But when that moan had past for evermore,  
The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn  
Amazed him, and he groaned, 'The King is gone.'  
And therewithal came on him the weird rhyme,  
'From the great deep to the great deep he goes.'

Whereat he slowly turned and slowly clomb  
The last hard footstep of that iron crag;  
Thence marked the black hull moving yet, and cried,  
'He passes to be King among the dead,  
And after healing of his grievous wound  
He comes again; but if he come no more  
O me, be yon dark Queens in yon black boat,  
Who shrieked and wailed, the three whereat we gazed  
On that high day, when, clothed with living light,  
They stood before his throne in silence, friends  
Of Arthur, who should help him at his need?'

Then from the dawn it seemed there came, but faint  
As from beyond the limit of the world,  
Like the last echo born of a great cry,  
Sounds, as if some fair city were one voice  
Around a king returning from his wars.

Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb  
Even to the highest he could climb, and saw,  
Straining his eyes beneath an arch of hand,  
Or thought he saw, the speck that bare the King,  
Down that long water opening on the deep  
Somewhere far off, pass on and on, and go  
From less to less and vanish into light.  
And the new sun rose bringing the new year.

## To the Queen

O loyal to the royal in thyself,  
And loyal to thy land, as this to thee  
Bear witness, that rememberable day,  
When, pale as yet, and fever worn, the Prince  
Who scarce had plucked his flickering life again  
From halfway down the shadow of the grave,  
Past with thee through thy people and their love,  
And London rolled one tide of joy through all  
Her trebled millions, and loud leagues of man  
And welcome! witness, too, the silent cry,  
The prayer of many a race and creed, and clime  
Thunderless lightnings striking under sea  
From sunset and sunrise of all thy realm,  
And that true North, whereof we lately heard  
A strain to shame us 'keep you to yourselves;  
So loyal is too costly! friends your love  
Is but a burthen: loose the bond, and go.'

Is this the tone of empire? here the faith  
That made us rulers? this, indeed, her voice  
And meaning, whom the roar of Hougoumont  
Left mightiest of all peoples under heaven?  
What shock has fooled her since, that she should speak  
So feebly? wealthier wealthier hour by hour!  
The voice of Britain, or a sinking land,  
Some third rate isle half lost among her seas?  
There rang her voice, when the full city pealed  
Thee and thy Prince! The loyal to their crown  
Are loyal to their own far sons, who love  
Our ocean empire with her boundless homes  
For ever broadening England, and her throne  
In our vast Orient, and one isle, one isle,  
That knows not her own greatness: if she knows  
And dreads it we are fallen. But thou, my Queen,  
Not for itself, but through thy living love  
For one to whom I made it o'er his grave  
Sacred, accept this old imperfect tale,

New old, and shadowing Sense at war with Soul,  
Ideal manhood closed in real man,  
Rather than that gray king, whose name, a ghost,  
Streams like a cloud, man shaped, from mountain peak,  
And cleaves to cairn and cromlech still; or him  
Of Geoffrey's book, or him of Malleor's, one  
Touched by the adulterous finger of a time  
That hovered between war and wantonness,  
And crownings and dethronements: take withal  
Thy poet's blessing, and his trust that Heaven  
Will blow the tempest in the distance back  
From thine and ours: for some are sacred, who mark,  
Or wisely or unwisely, signs of storm,  
Waverings of every vane with every wind,  
And wordy trucklings to the transient hour,  
And fierce or careless looseners of the faith,  
And Softness breeding scorn of simple life,  
Or Cowardice, the child of lust for gold,  
Or Labour, with a groan and not a voice,

Or Art with poisonous honey stolen from France,  
And that which knows, but careful for itself,  
And that which knows not, ruling that which knows  
To its own harm: the goal of this great world  
Lies beyond sight: yet if our slowly grown

And crowned Republic's crowning common sense,  
That saved her many times, not fail their fears  
Are morning shadows huger than the shapes  
That cast them, not those gloomier which forego  
The darkness of that battle in the West,  
Where all of high and holy dies away.

• End •