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THE WORKS OF TENNYSON  
IN THIRTEEN VOLUMES  
VOL. VI.



THE WORKS OF  
ALFRED TENNYSON

POET LAUREATE

IDYLLS OF THE KING. VOL. III.



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**GUINEVERE.**







## 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 burn'd

Blurr'd 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 chill'd the popular praises of the King  
With silent smiles of slow disparagement ;  
And tamper'd 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 sharpen'd by strong hate for Lancelot.

For thus it chanced one morn when all the  
court,  
Green-suited, but with plumes that mock'd the may,

Had been, their wont, a-maying and return'd,  
That Modred still in green, all ear and eye,  
Climb'd 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 couch'd, 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 pluck'd him by the heel,  
And cast him as a worm upon the way ;  
But when he knew the Prince tho' marr'd 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 hunch'd, in him  
By those whom God had made full-limb'd and tall,  
Scorn was allow'd as part of his defect,  
And he was answer'd softly by the King  
And all his Table. So Sir Lancelot help  
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 laugh'd  
Lightly, to think of Modred's dusty fall,  
Then shudder'd, as the village wife who cries  
"I shudder, some one steps across my grave ;"  
Then laugh'd 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 dream'd  
An awful dream ; for then she seem'd 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 touch'd her, and she turn'd—  
When lo ! her own, that broadening from her feet,  
And blackening, swallow'd 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 ev'n 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 remain'd,  
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. 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 hurl’d him headlong, and he  
fell  
Stunn’d, 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 answer'd "Lancelot, wilt thou hold me so?

Nay friend, for we have taken our farewells.

Would God, that thou could'st hide me from my  
self!

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 kiss'd, 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 moan'd "too late, too late!"

Till in the cold wind that foreruns the morn,

A blot in heaven, the Raven, flying high,

Croak'd, 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 mix’d, 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 bow'd down upon her hands  
Silent, until the little maid, who brook'd  
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 look'd 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, tho’ 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 mutter'd the Queen.



“Will the child kill me with her innocent talk?”

But openly she answer'd “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 thro' 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 wheel'd and broke

Flying, and link'd again, and wheel'd 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 dream'd ; for every knight  
Had whatsoever meat he long'd for served  
By hands unseen ; and even as he said  
Down in the cellars merry bloated things'  
Shoulder'd 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 fall'n 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,  
Ev'n 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 well-nigh more than man, and rail'd at those

Who call'd 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 foster'd 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 falter'd, and his hand fell from the harp,

And pale he turn'd, and reel'd, and would have  
fall'n,

But that they stay'd 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 bow'd her head nor spake.  
Whereat the novice crying, with clasp'd 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, check me too :  
Nor let me shame my father's memory, one  
Of noblest manners, tho' himself would say  
Sir Lancelot had the noblest ; and he died,  
Kill'd 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 look'd up and answer'd 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 knewest 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, who 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 harm'd 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  
Sigh'd, 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 ev'n 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 ev'n 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 dream'd,)  
Rode under groves that look'd a paradise  
Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth  
That seem'd the heavens upbreking thro' 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 crown'd 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 thro' the past unconsciously,  
Came to that point where first she saw the King  
Ride toward her from the city, sigh'd to find  
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought him  
    cold,  
High, self-contain'd, 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 thro' the nunnery ran,  
Then on a sudden a cry, "the King." She sat  
Stiff-stricken, listening ; but when armed feet  
Thro' the long gallery from the outer doors  
Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell,  
And grovell'd 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 tho' changed the  
King's.

“ Liest thou here so low, the child of one  
I honour'd, 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 harm'd.  
Fear not : thou shalt be guarded till my death.  
Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies  
Have err'd 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,  
Ev'n for thy sake, the sin which thou hast sinn'd.  
For when the Roman left us, and their law  
Relax'd its hold upon us, and the ways  
Were fill'd with rapine, here and there a deed  
Of prowess done redress'd 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 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 until 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,  
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite  
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,

And all thro' 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, tho' thou would'st not love thy lord,

Thy lord has 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 thro' his cowardice allow'd  
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 neigh'd  
As 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 weigh'd 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 sinn'd, 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 came 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 sinn'd ; 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 thro' 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.  
Thro' 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 grovelling 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 lower'd,  
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 turn'd; and more and more  
The moony vapour rolling round the King,  
Who seem'd 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 stretch'd 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 thro' my sin to slay and to be slain !  
And he forgave me, and I could not speak.  
Farewell ? I should have answer'd 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,  
Call'd 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 mock'd me when he spake of hope;  
His hope he call'd 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

*GUINEVERE.*

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 wanted 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 tho' 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

Grasp'd, made her vail her eyes : she look'd 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 pray'd 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 ransom'd us, and haler 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.



## THE PASSING OF ARTHUR.



HAT 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.

Before that last weird battle in the west

There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain kill'd

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 ! to-morrow 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  
Shrill'd ; but in going mingled with dim cries  
Far in the moonlit haze among the hills,  
As of some lonely city sack'd by night,  
When all is lost, and wife and child with wail  
Pass to new lords ; and Arthur woke and call'd,  
" 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 thrust the heathen from the Roman wall,  
And shook him thro' 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  
Thro' 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 push'd 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  
Burn'd 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 ev'n 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 shatter'd 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, insult, 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 thro' 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 shiver'd 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 tho’ they had not died for me?—  
O Bedivere, for on my heart hath fall’n  
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, unharm'd, 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 sware my vows,  
Yea, even while they brake them, own'd me king.  
And well for thee, saying in my dark hour,

When all the purport of my throne hath fail'd,  
That quick or dead thou holdest me for king.  
King am I, whatsoever be their cry;  
And one last act of kinghood 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 roll'd  
Among the mountains by the winter sea;  
Until King Arthur's Table, man by man,  
Had fall'n 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 to-day 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,—  
Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again  
To rule once more; but let what will be, be.  
I am so deeply smitten thro' 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 row'd 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 thro' 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 ruin'd 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 zig-zag 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 jewelry. 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 seem'd  
Better to leave Excalibur conceal'd  
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 perform’d 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 betray’d thy nature and thy name,

Not rendering true answer, as beseeem’d

Thy féalty, nor like a noble knight :

For surer sign had follow’d, 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, fix'd 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 widow'd of the power in his eye  
That bow'd 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 clutch'd the sword,  
And strongly wheel'd and threw it. The great  
brand  
Made lightnings in the splendour of the moon,  
And flashing round and round, and whirl'd 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 flash'd 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 brandish'd 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 tho' 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 look'd again, behold an arm,  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,  
That caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd 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 thro’ 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 thro’ the place of tombs.

But, as he walk'd, King Arthur panted hard,  
Like one that feels a nightmare on his bed  
When all the house is mute. So sigh'd 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  
walk'd,

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 clash'd his harness in the icy caves

And barren chasms, and all to left and right

The bare black cliff clang'd 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 shiver'd 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 murmur'd 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 shatter'd casque, and chafed his  
hands,

And call'd him by his name, complaining loud,

And dropping bitter tears against his brow

Striped with dark blood : for all his face was  
white

And colourless, and like the wither'd moon  
Smote by the fresh beam of the springing east ;  
And all his greaves and cuisses dash'd with drops  
Of onset ; and the light and lustrous curls—  
That made his forehead like a rising sun  
High from the dais-throne—were parch'd with  
dust ;  
Or, clotted into points and hanging loose,  
Mix'd with the knightly growth that fringed his  
lips.  
So nke a shatter'd column lay the King ;  
Not like that Arthur who, with lance in rest,  
From spur to plume a star of tournament,  
Shot thro' 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-meadow'd, happy, fair with orchard-lawns  
And bowery hollows crown'd 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  
Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,  
And on the mere the wailing died away.

At length he groan'd, and turning slowly clomb  
The last hard footstep of that iron crag ;  
Thence mark'd 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 shriek'd and wail'd, 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 seem'd 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  
E'en 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

*OF ARTHUR.*

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.





GARETH AND LYNETTE.





## GARETH AND LYNETTE.



HE last tall son of Lot and Bellicent,  
And tallest, Gareth, in a showerful  
spring

Stared at the spate. A slender-shafted Pine  
Lost footing, fell, and so was whirl'd away.  
'How he went down,' said Gareth, 'as a false  
knight

Or evil king before my lance if lance  
Were mine to use—O senseless cataract,  
Bearing all down in thy precipitancy—  
And yet thou art but swollen with cold snows,  
And mine is living blood : thou dost His will,



The Maker's, and not knowest, and I that know,  
Have strength and wit, in my good mother's hall  
Linger with vacillating obedience,  
Prison'd, and kept and coax'd and whistled to—  
Since the good mother holds me still a child—  
Good mother is bad mother unto me !  
A worse were better ; yet no worse would I.  
Heaven yield her for it, but in me put force  
To weary her ears with one continuous prayer,  
Until she let me fly discaged to sweep  
In ever-highering eagle-circles up  
To the great Sun of Glory, and thence swoop  
Down upon all things base, and dash them dead,  
A knight of Arthur, working out his will,  
To cleanse the world. Why, Gawain, when he came  
With Modred hither in the summertime,  
Ask'd me to tilt with him, the proven knight.  
Modred for want of worthier was the judge.  
Then I so shook him in the saddle, he said,

“Thou hast half prevail’d against me,” said so—  
he—

Tho’ Modred biting his thin lips was mute,  
For he is alway sullen : what care I ?

And Gareth went, and hovering round her chair  
Ask’d, ‘ Mother, tho’ ye count me still the child,  
Sweet mother, do ye love the child ? ’ She laugh’d,  
‘ Thou art but a wild-goose to question it.’  
‘ Then, mother, an ye love the child,’ he said,  
‘ Being a goose and rather tame than wild,  
Hear the child’s story.’ ‘ Yea, my well-beloved,  
An ’twere but of the goose and golden eggs.’

And Gareth answer’d her with kindling eyes,  
‘ Nay, nay, good mother, but this egg of mine  
Was finer gold than any goose can lay ;  
For this an Eagle, a royal Eagle, laid  
Almost beyond eye-reach, on such a palm

As glitters gilded in thy Book of Hours.  
And there was ever haunting round the palm  
A lusty youth, but poor, who often saw  
The splendour sparkling from aloft, and thought  
“An I could climb and lay my hand upon it,  
Then were I wealthier than a lea h of kings.”  
But ever when he reach'd a hand to climb,  
One, that had loved him from his childhood, caught  
And stay'd him, “Climb not lest thou break thy  
neck,  
I charge thee by my love,” and so the boy,  
Sweet mother, neither clomb, nor brake his neck,  
But brake his very heart in pining for it,  
And past away.'

To whom the mother said,  
'True love, sweet son, had risk'd himself and  
climb'd,  
And handed down the golden treasure to him.'

And Gareth answer'd her with kindling eyes,  
 'Gold? said I gold?—ay then, why he, or she,  
 Or whosoe'er it was, or half the world  
 Had ventured—*had* the thing I spake of been  
 Mere gold—but this was all of that true steel,  
 Whereof they forged the brand Excalibur,  
 And lightnings play'd about it in the storm,  
 And all the little fowl were flurried at it,  
 And there were cries and clashing in the nest.  
 That sent him from his senses: let me go.'

Then Bellicent bemoan'd herself and said,  
 'Hast thou no pity upon my loneliness?  
 Lo, where thy father Lot beside the hearth  
 Lies like a log, and all but smoulder'd out!  
 For ever since when traitor to the King  
 He fought against him in the Barons' war,  
 And Arthur gave him back his territory,  
 His age hath slowly droopt, and now lies there

A yet-warm corpse, and yet unburiable,  
No more ; nor sees, nor hears, nor speaks, nor  
knows.

And both thy brethren are in Arthur's hall,  
Albeit neither loved with that full love  
I feel for thee, nor worthy such a love :  
Stay therefore thou ; red berries charm the bird,  
And thee, mine innocent, the jousts, the wars,  
Who never knewest finger-ache, nor pang  
Of wrench'd or broken limb—an often chance  
In those brain-stunning shocks, and tourney-  
falls,

Frights to my heart ; but stay : follow the deer  
By these tall firs and our fast-falling burns ;  
So make thy manhood mightier day by day ;  
Sweet is the chase : and I will seek thee out  
Some comfortable bride and fair, to grace  
Thy climbing life, and cherish my prone year,  
Till falling into Lot's forgetfulness

I know not thee, myself, nor anything.

Stay, my best son ! ye are yet more boy than man.'

Then Gareth, ' An ye hold me yet for child,  
Hear yet once more the story of the child.  
For, mother, there was once a King, like ours.  
The prince his heir, when tall and marriageable,  
Ask'd for a bride ; and thereupon the King  
Set two before him. One was fair, strong, arm'd—  
But to be won by force—and many men  
Desired her ; one, good lack, no man desired.  
And these were the conditions of the King :  
That save he won the first by force, he needs  
Must wed that other, whom no man desired,  
A red-faced bride who knew herself so vile,  
That evermore she long'd to hide herself,  
Nor fronted man or woman, eye to eye—  
Yea—some she cleaved to, but they died of her.  
And one—they call'd her Fame ; and one, O  
Mother,

How can ye keep me tether'd to you—Shame!  
Man am I grown, a man's work must I do.  
Follow the deer? follow the Christ, the King,  
Live pure, speak true, right wrong, follow the  
King—  
Else, wherefore born?'

To whom the mother said,  
' Sweet son, for there be many who deem him not,  
Or will not deem him, wholly proven King—  
Albeit in mine own heart I knew him King,  
When I was frequent with him in my youth,  
And heard him Kingly speak, and doubted him  
No more than he, himself; but felt him mine,  
Of closest kin to me: yet—wilt thou leave  
Thine easeful bidding here, and risk thine all,  
Life, limbs, for one that is not proven King?  
Stay, till the cloud that settles round his birth  
Hath lifted but a little. Stay, sweet son.'

And Gareth answer'd quickly, 'Not an hour,  
So that ye yield me—I will walk thro' fire,  
Mother, to gain it—your full leave to go.  
Not proven, who swept the dust of ruin'd Rome  
From off the threshold of the realm, and crush'd  
The Idolaters, and made the people free?  
Who should be King save him who makes us free?'

So when the Queen, who long had sought in  
vain  
To break him from the intent to which he grew,  
Found her son's will unwaveringly one,  
She answer'd craftily, 'Will ye walk thro' fire?  
Who walks thro' fire will hardly heed the smoke.  
Ay, go then, an ye must: only one proof,  
Before thou ask the King to make thee knight,  
Of thine obedience and thy love to me,  
Thy mother,—I demand.'

And Gareth cried,



‘A hard one, or a hundred, so I go.

Nay—quick ! the proof to prove me to the quick !’

But slowly spake the mother looking at him,  
‘Prince, thou shalt go disguised to Arthur’s hall,  
And hire thyself to serve for meats and drinks  
Among the scullions and the kitchen-knaves.  
And those that hand the dish across the bar.  
Nor shalt thou tell thy name to anyone.  
And thou shalt serve a twelvemonth and a day.’

For so the Queen believed that when her son  
Beheld his only way to glory lead  
Low down thro’ villain kitchen-vassalage,  
Her own true Gareth was too princely-proud  
To pass thereby ; so should he rest with her,  
Closed in her castle from the sound of arms.

Silent awhile was Gareth, then replied,  
‘The thrall in person may be free in soul,

And I shall see the jousts. Thy son am I,  
And since thou art my mother, must obey.  
I therefore yield me freely to thy will ;  
For hence will I, disguised, and hire myself  
To serve with scullions and with kitchen-knaves ;  
Nor tell my name to any—no, not the King.'

Gareth awhile linger'd. The mother's eye  
Full of the wistful fear that he would go,  
And turning toward him wheresoe'er he turn'd,  
Perplexed his outward purpose, till an hour,  
When waken'd by the wind which with full voice  
Swept bellowing thro' the darkness on to dawn,  
He rose, and out of slumber calling two  
That still had tended on him from his birth,  
Before the wakeful mother heard him, went.

The three were clad like tillers of the soil.  
Southward they set their faces. The birds made

Melody on branch; and melody in mid air.  
The damp hill-slopes were quicken'd into green,  
And the live green had kindled into flowers,  
For it was past the time of Easterday.

So, when their feet were planted on the plain  
That broaden'd toward the base of Camelot,  
Far off they saw the silver-misty morn  
Rolling her smoke about the Royal mount,  
That rose between the forest and the field.  
At times the summit of the high city flash'd ;  
At times the spires and turrets half-way down  
Prick'd thro' the mist; at times the great gate  
shone  
Only, that open'd on the field below :  
Anon, the whole fair city had disappear'd.

Then those who went with Gareth were amazed,  
One crying, ' Let us go no further, lord.

Here is a city of Enchanters, built  
By fairy Kings.' The second echo'd him,  
'Lord, we have heard from our wise men at home  
To Northward, that this King is not the King,  
But only changeling out of Fairyland,  
Who drave the heathen hence by sorcery  
And Merlin's glamour.' Then the first again,  
'Lord, there is no such city anywhere,  
But all a vision.'

Gareth answer'd them

With laughter, swearing he had glamour enow  
In his own blood, his pryncedom, youth and hopes  
To plunge old Merlin in the Arabian sea ;  
So push'd them all unwilling toward the gate.  
And there was no gate like it under heaven.  
For barefoot on the keystone, which was lined  
And rippled like an ever-fleeting wave,  
The Lady of the Lake stood : all her dress

Wept from her sides as water flowing away ;  
But like the cross her great and goodly arms  
Stretch'd under all the cornice and upheld :  
And drops of water fell from either hand ;  
And down from one a sword was hung, from one  
A censer, either worn with wind and storm ;  
And o'er her breast floated the sacred fish ;  
And in the space to left of her, and right,  
Were Arthur's wars in weird devices done,  
New things and old co-twisted, as if Time  
Were nothing, so inveterately, that men  
Were giddy gazing there ; and over all  
High on the top were those three Queens, the  
    friends  
Of Arthur, who should help him at his need.

Then those with Gareth for so long a space  
Stared at the figures, that at last it seem'd  
The dragon-boughts and elvish emblemings

Began to move, seethe, twine and curl: **they**  
call'd

To Gareth, 'Lord, the gateway is alive.'

And Gareth likewise on them fixt his eyes  
So long, that ev'n to him they seem'd to move.  
Out of the city a blast of music peal'd.  
Back from the gate started the three, to whom  
From out thereunder came an ancient man,  
Long-bearded, saying, 'Who be ye, my sons ?

Then Gareth, 'We be tillers of the soil,  
Who leaving share in furrow come to see  
The glories of our King : but these, my men,  
(Your city moved so weirdly in the mist)  
Doubt if the King be King at all, or come  
From fairyland ; and whether this be built  
By magic, and by fairy Kings and Queens ;  
Or whether there be any city at all,

Or all a vision : and this music now  
Hath scared them both, but tell thou these the  
truth.'

Then that old Seer made answer playing on him  
And saying, ' Son, I have seen the good ship sail  
Keel upward and mast downward in the heavens,  
And solid turrets topsy-turvy in air :  
And here is truth ; but an it please thee not,  
'Take thou the truth as thou hast told it me.  
For truly, as thou sayest, a Fairy King  
And Fairy Queens have built the city, son ;  
They came from out a sacred mountain-cleft  
Toward the sunrise, each with harp in hand,  
And built it to the music of their harps.  
And as thou sayest it is enchanted, son,  
For there is nothing in it as it seems  
Saving the King ; tho' some there be that hold  
The King a shadow, and the city real :

Yet take thou heed of him, for, so thou pass  
Beneath this archway, then wilt thou become  
A thrall to his enchantments, for the King  
Will bind thee by such vows, as is a shame  
A man should not be bound by, yet the which  
No man can keep ; but, so thou dread to swear,  
Pass not beneath this gateway, but abide  
Without, among the cattle of the field.  
For, an ye heard a music, like enow  
They are building still, seeing the city is built  
To music, therefore never built at all,  
And therefore built for ever.'

Gareth spake

Anger'd, ' Old Master, reverence thine own beard  
That looks as white as utter truth, and seems  
Wellnigh as long as thou art statured tall !  
Why mockest thou the stranger that hath been  
To thee fair-spoken ?'



But the Seer replied,  
‘Know ye not then the Riddling of the Bards ?  
“Confusion, and illusion, and relation,  
Elusion, and occasion, and evasion” ?  
I mock thee not but as thou mockest me,  
And all that see thee, for thou art not who  
Thou seemest, but I know thee who thou art.  
And now thou goest up to mock the King,  
Who cannot brook the shadow of any lie.’

Unmockingly the mocker ending here  
Turn’d to the right, and past along the plain ;  
Whom Gareth looking after said, ‘ My men,  
Our one white lie sits like a little ghost  
Here on the threshold of our enterprise.  
Let love be blamed for it, not she, nor I :  
Well, we will make amends.’

With all good cheer

He spake and laugh'd, then enter'd with his twain  
Camelot, a city of shadowy palaces  
And stately, rich in emblem and the work  
Of ancient kings who did their days in stone ;  
Which Merlin's hand, the Mage at Arthur's court,  
Knowing all arts, had touch'd, and everywhere  
At Arthur's ordinance, tipt with lessening peak  
And pinnacle, and had made it spire to heaven.  
And ever and anon a knight would pass  
Outward, or inward to the hall : his arms  
Clash'd ; and the sound was good to Gareth's ear  
And out of bower and casement shyly glanced  
Eyes of pure women, wholesome stars of love ;  
And all about a healthful people stept  
As in the presence of a gracious king.

Then into hall Gareth ascending heard  
A voice, the voice of Arthur, and beheld  
Far over heads in that long-vaulted hall

The splendour of the presence of the King  
Throned, and delivering doom—and look'd no  
more—

But felt his young heart hammering in his ears,  
And thought, 'For this half-shadow of a lie  
The truthful King will doom me when I speak.'  
Yet pressing on, tho' all in fear to find  
Sir Gawain or Sir Modred, saw nor one  
Nor other, but in all the listening eyes  
Of those tall knights, that ranged about the throne,  
Clear honour shining like the dewy star  
Of dawn, and faith in their great King, with pure  
Affection, and the light of victory,  
And glory gain'd, and evermore to gain.

Then came a widow crying to the King,  
'A boon, Sir King! Thy father, Uther, reft  
From my dead lord a field with violence:  
For howsoe'er at first he proffer'd gold,

Yet, for the field was pleasant in our eyes,  
We yielded not ; and then he reft us of it  
Perforce, and left us neither gold nor field.'

Said Arthur, ' Whether would ye ? gold or  
field ?'

To whom the woman weeping, ' Nay, my lord,  
The field was pleasant in my husband's eye.'

And Arthur, ' Have thy pleasant field again,  
And thrice the gold for Uther's use thereof,  
According to the years. No boon is here,  
But justice, so thy say be proven true.  
Accursed, who from the wrongs his father did  
Would shape himself a right !'

And while she past,  
Came yet another widow crying to him,  
' A boon, Sir King ! Thine enemy, King, am I.  
With thine own hand thou slewest my dear lord,

A knight of Uther in the Barons' war,  
When Lot and many another rose and fought  
Against thee, saying thou wert basely born.  
I held with these, and loathe to ask thee aught.  
Yet lo ! my husband's brother had my son  
Thrall'd in his castle, and hath starved him dead  
And standeth seized of that inheritance  
Which thou that slewest the sire hast left the son.  
So tho' I scarce can ask it thee for hate,  
Grant me some knight to do the battle for me,  
Kill the foul thief, and wreak me for my son.'

Then strode a good knight forward, crying to  
him

'A boon, Sir King ! I am her kinsman, I.  
Give me to right her wrong, and slay the man.'

Then came Sir Kay, the seneschal, and cried,  
A boon, Sir King ! ev'n that thou grant her none,

This railer, that hath mock'd thee in full hall—  
None ; or the wholesome boon of gyve and gag.'

But Arthur, 'We sit, King, to help the wrong'd  
Thro' all our realm. The woman loves her lord.  
Peace to thee, woman, with thy loves and hates !  
The kings of old had doom'd thee to the flames,  
Aurelius Emrys would have scourged thee dead,  
And Uther slit thy tongue : but get thee hence—  
Lest that rough humour of the kings of old  
Return upon me ! Thou that art her kin,  
Go likewise ; lay him low and slay him not,  
But bring him here, that I may judge the right,  
According to the justice of the King :  
Then, be he guilty, by that deathless King  
Who lived and died for men, the man shall die.'

Then came in hall the messenger of Mark,  
A name of evil savour in the land,

The Cornish king. In either hand he bore  
What dazzled all, and shone far-off as shines  
A field of charlock in the sudden sun  
Between two showers, a cloth of palest gold,  
Which down he laid before the throne, and knelt,  
Delivering, that his lord, the vassal king,  
Was ev'n upon his way to Camelot ;  
For having heard that Arthur of his grace  
Had made his goodly cousin, Tristram, knight,  
And, for himself was of the greater state,  
Being a king, he trusted his liege-lord  
Would yield him this large honour all the more ;  
So pray'd him well to accept this cloth of gold,  
In token of true heart and fealty.

Then Arthur cried to rend the cloth, to rend  
In pieces, and so cast it on the hearth.  
An oak-tree smoulder'd there. 'The goodly  
knight !

What! shall the shield of Mark stand among these?  
For, midway down the side of that long hall  
A stately pile,—whereof along the front,  
Some blazon'd, some but carven, and some blank,  
There ran a treble range of stony shields,—  
Rose, and high-arching overbrow'd the hearth.  
And under every shield a knight was named:  
For this was Arthur's custom in his hall;  
When some good knight had done one noble deed,  
His arms were carven only; but if twain  
His arms were blazon'd also; but if none  
The shield was blank and bare without a sign  
Saving the name beneath; and Gareth saw  
The shield of Gawain blazon'd rich and bright,  
And Modred's blank as death; and Arthur cried  
To rend the cloth and cast it on the hearth.

‘More like are we to reave him of his crown  
Than make him knight because men call him king.



The kings we found, ye know we stay'd their hands  
From war among themselves, but left them kings;  
Of whom were any bounteous, merciful,  
Truth-speaking, brave, good livers, them we enroll'd  
Among us, and they sit within our hall.  
But Mark hath tarnish'd the great name of king,  
As Mark would sully the low state of churl :  
And, seeing he hath sent us cloth of gold,  
Return, and meet, and hold him from our eyes,  
Lest we should lap him up in cloth of lead,  
Silenced for ever—craven—a man of plots,  
Craft, poisonous counsels, wayside ambushings—  
No fault of thine : let Kay the seneschal  
Look to thy wants, and send thee satisfied—  
Accursed, who strikes nor lets the hand be seen !'

And many another suppliant crying came  
With noise of ravage wrought by beast and man,  
And evermore a knight would ride away.

Last Gareth leaning both hands heavily  
Down on the shoulders of the twain, his men,  
Approach'd between them toward the King, and  
ask'd,  
' A boon, Sir King (his voice was all ashamed),  
For see ye not how weak and hungerworn  
I seem—leaning on these ? grant me to serve  
For meat and drink among thy kitchen-knaves  
A twelvemonth and a day, nor seek my name.  
Hereafter I will fight.'

To him the King,  
' A goodly youth and worth a goodlier boon !  
But an thou wilt no goodlier, then must Kay,  
The master of the meats and drinks, be thine.'

He rose and past ; then Kay, a man of mien  
Wan-sallow as the plant that feels itself  
Root-bitten by white lichen,

‘Lo ye now :

This fellow hath broken from some Abbey, where,  
God wot, he had not beef and brewis enow,  
However that might chance ! but an he work  
Like any pigeon will I cram his crop,  
And sleeker shall he shine than any hog.’

Then Lancelot standing near, ‘ Sir Seneschal,  
Sleuth-hound thou knowest, and gray, and all the  
hounds ;

A horse thou knowest, a man thou dost not  
know :

Broad brows and fair, a fluent hair and fine,  
High nose, a nostril large and fine, and hands  
Large, fair and fine !—Some young lad’s mystery—  
But, or from sheepcot or king’s hall, the boy  
Is noble-natured. Treat him with all grace,  
Lest he should come to shame thy judging of  
him.’

Then Kay, ' What murmurest thou of mystery ?  
Think ye this fellow will poison the King's dish ?  
Nay, for he spake too fool-like : mystery !  
Tut, an the lad were noble, he had ask'd  
For horse and armour : fair and fine, forsooth !  
Sir Fine-face, Sir Fair-hands ? but see thou to it  
That thine own fineness, Lancelot, some fine day  
Undo thee not—and leave my man to me.'

So Gareth all for glory underwent  
The sooty yoke of kitchen-vassalage ;  
Ate with young lads his portion by the door,  
And couch'd at night with grimy kitchen-knaves.  
And Lancelot ever spake him pleasantly,  
But Kay the seneschal who loved him not  
Would hustle and harry him, and labour him  
Beyond his comrade of the hearth, and set  
To turn the broach, draw water, or hew wood,  
Or grosser tasks ; and Gareth bow'd himself

With all obedience to the King, and wrought  
All kind of service with a noble ease  
That graced the lowliest act in doing it.  
And when the thralls had talk among themselves,  
And one would praise the love that linkt the King  
And Lancelot—how the King had saved his life  
In battle twice, and Lancelot once the King's—  
For Lancelot was the first in Tournament,  
But Arthur mightiest on the battle-field—  
Gareth was glad. Or if some other told,  
How once the wandering forester at dawn,  
Far over the blue tarns and hazy seas,  
On *Caer-Eryri's* highest found the King,  
A naked babe, of whom the Prophet spake,  
'He passes to the Isle Avilion,  
He passes and is heal'd and cannot die'—  
Gareth was glad. But if their talk were foul,  
Then would he whistle rapid as any lark,  
Or carol some old roundelay, and so loud

That first they mock'd, but, after, revered him.  
Or Gareth telling some prodigious tale  
Of knights, who sliced a red life-bubbling way  
Thro' twenty folds of twisted dragon, held  
All in a gap-mouth'd circle his good mates  
Lying or sitting round him, idle hands,  
Charm'd ; till Sir Kay, the seneschal, would come  
Blustering upon them, like a sudden wind  
Among dead leaves, and drive them all apart.  
Or when the thralls had sport among themselves,  
So there were any trial of mastery,  
He, by two yards in casting bar or stone  
Was counted best ; and if there chanced a joust,  
So that Sir Kay nodded him leave to go,  
Would hurry thither, and when he saw the knights  
Clash like the coming and retiring wave,  
And the spear spring, and good horse reel, the  
boy  
Was half beyond himself for ecstasy.

So for a month he wrought among the thralls ;  
But in the weeks that follow'd, the good Queen,  
Repentant of the word she made him swear,  
And saddening in her childless castle, sent,  
Between the in-crescent and de-crescent moon,  
**Arms** for her son, and loosed him from his vow.

This, Gareth hearing from a squire of Lot  
With whom he used to play at tourney once,  
When both were children, and in lonely haunts  
Would scratch a ragged oval on the sand,  
And each at either dash from either end—  
Shame never made girl redder than Gareth joy.  
He laugh'd ; he sprang. ' Out of the smoke, at once  
I leap from Satan's foot to Peter's knee—  
These news be mine, none other's—nay, the  
King's—

Descend into the city : ' whereon he sought  
The King alone, and found, and told him all.

‘I have stagger’d thy strong Gawain in a tilt  
For pastime ; yea, he said it : joust can I.  
Make me thy knight—in secret ! let my name  
Be hidd’n, and give me the first quest, I spring  
Like flame from ashes.’

Here the King’s calm eye  
Fell on, and check’d, and made him flush, and bow  
Lowly, to kiss his hand, who answer’d him,  
‘ Son, the good mother let me know thee here,  
And sent her wish that I would yield thee thine.  
Make thee my knight ? my knights are sworn to  
vows

Of utter hardihood, utter gentleness,  
And, loving, utter faithfulness in love,  
And uttermost obedience to the King.’

Then Gareth, lightly springing from his knees,  
‘My King, for hardihood I can promise thee.



For uttermost **obedience** make demand  
Of whom ye gave me to, the Seneschal,  
No mellow master of the meats and drinks !  
And as for love, God wot, I love not yet,  
But love I shall, God willing.'

And the King—

'Make thee my knight in secret ? yea, but he,  
Our noblest brother, and our truest man,  
And one with me in ail, he needs must know.'

'Let Lancelot know, my King, let Lancelot  
know,  
Thy noblest and thy truest !'

And the King—

But wherefore would ye men should wonder at  
you ?  
Nay, rather for the sake of me, their King,

And the deed's sake my knighthood do the deed,  
Than to be noised of.'

Merrily Gareth ask'd,  
'Have I not earn'd my cake in baking of it?  
Let be my name until I make my name!  
My deeds will speak : it is but for a day.'  
So with a kindly hand on Gareth's arm  
Smiled the great King, and half-unwillingly  
Loving his lusty youthhood yielded to him.  
Then, after summoning Lancelot privily,  
'I have given him the first quest : he is not proven  
Look therefore when he calls for this in hall,  
Thou get to horse and follow him far away.  
Cover the lions on thy shield, and see  
Far as thou mayest, he be nor ta'en nor slain.'

Then that same day there past into the hall  
A damsel of high lineage, and a brow

May-blossom, and a cheek of apple-blossom,  
Hawk-eyes ; and lightly was her slender nose  
Tip-tilted like the petal of a flower ;  
She into hall past with her page and cried,

‘ O King, for thou hast driven the foe without,  
See to the foe within ! bridge, ford, beset  
By bandits, everyone that owns a tower  
The Lord for half a league. Why sit ye there ?  
Rest would I not, Sir King, an I were king,  
Till ev’n the lonest hold were all as free  
From cursed bloodshed, as thine altar-cloth  
From that blest blood it is a sin to spill.’

‘ Comfort thyself,’ said Arthur, ‘ I nor mine  
Rest : so my knighthood keep the vows they swore,  
The wastest moorland of our realm shall be  
Safe, damsel, as the centre of this hall.  
What is thy name ? thy need ?’

‘My name?’ she said—

‘Lynette my name ; noble ; my need, a knight  
To combat for my sister, Lyonors,  
A lady of high lineage, of great lands,  
And comely, yea, and comelier than myself.  
She lives in Castle Perilous : a river  
Runs in three loops about her living-place ;  
And o’er it are three passings, and three knights  
Defend the passings, brethren, and a fourth  
And of that four the mightiest, holds her stay’d  
In her own castle and so besieges her  
To break her will, and make her wed with  
him :  
And but delays his purport till thou send  
To do the battle with him, thy chief man  
Sir Lancelot whom he trusts to overthrow,  
Then wed, with glory ; but she will not wed  
Save whom she loveth, or a holy life.  
Now therefore have I come for Lancelot.’

Then Arthur mindful of Sir Gareth ask'd,  
'Damsel, ye know this Order lives to crush  
All wrongers of the Realm. But say, these four,  
Who be they? What the fashion of the men?'

'They be of foolish fashion, O Sir King,  
The fashion of that old knight-errantry  
Who ride abroad and do but what they will;  
Courteous or bestial from the moment, such  
As have nor law nor king; and three of these  
Proud in their fantasy call themselves the Day,  
Morning-Star, and Noon-Sun, and Evening-Star,  
Being strong fools; and never a whit more wise  
The fourth, who always rideth arm'd in black,  
A huge man-beast of boundless savagery.  
He names himself the Night and oftener Death,  
And wears a helmet mounted with a skull,  
And bears a skeleton figured on his arms,  
To show that who may slay or scape the three

Slain by himself shall enter endless night.  
And all these four be fools, but mighty men,  
And therefore am I come for Lancelot.'

Hereat Sir Gareth call'd from where he rose,  
A head with kindling eyes above the throng,  
'A boon, Sir King—this quest!' then—for he  
mark'd  
Kay near him groaning like a wounded bull—  
'Yea, King, thou knowest thy kitchen-knave  
am I,  
And mighty thro' thy meats and drinks am I,  
And I can topple over a hundred such.  
Thy promise, King,' and Arthur glancing at  
him,  
Brought down a momentary brow. 'Rough,  
sudden,  
And pardonable, worthy to be knight—  
Go therefore,' and all hearers were amazed.

But on the damsel's forehead shame, pride,  
wrath

Slew the May-white : she lifted either arm,  
'Fie on thee, King ! I ask'd for thy chief knight,  
And thou hast given me but a kitchen-knave.'  
Then ere a man in hall could stay her, turn'd,  
Fled down the lane of access to the King,  
Took horse, descended the slope street, and past  
The weird white gate, and paused without, beside  
The field of tourney, murmuring 'kitchen-knave.'

Now two great entries open'd from the hall,  
At one end one, that gave upon a range  
Of level pavement where the King would pace  
At sunrise, gazing over plain and wood.  
And down from this a lordly stairway sloped  
Till lost in blowing trees and tops of towers.  
And out by this main doorway past the King.  
But one was counter to the hearth, and rose

High that the highest-crested helm could ride  
Therethro' nor graze : and by this entry fled  
The damsel in her wrath, and on to this  
Sir Gareth strode, and saw without the door  
King Arthur's gift, the worth of half a town,  
A warhorse of the best, and near it stood  
The two that out of north had follow'd him :  
This bare a maiden shield, a casque ; that held  
The horse, the spear ; whereat Sir Gareth loosed  
A cloak that dropt from collar-bone to heel,  
A cloth of roughest web, and cast it down,  
And from it like a fuel-smother'd fire,  
That lookt half-dead, brake bright, and flash'd as  
those

Dull-coated things, that making slide apart  
Their dusk wing-cases, all beneath there burns  
A jewell'd harness, ere they pass and fly.  
So Gareth ere he parted flash'd in arms.  
Then while he donn'd the helm, and took the shield



And mounted horse and graspt a spear, of grain  
Storm-strengthen'd on a windy site, and tipt  
With trenchant steel, around him slowly prest  
The people, and from out of kitchen came  
The thralls in throng, and seeing who had work'd  
Lustier than any, and whom they could but  
love,

Mounted in arms, threw up their caps and cried,  
' God bless the King, and all his fellowship !'  
And on thro' lanes of shouting Gareth rode  
Down the slope street, and past without the gate.

So Gareth past with joy ; but as the cur  
Pluckt from the cur he fights with, ere his cause  
Be cool'd by fighting, follows, being named,  
His owner, but remembers all, and growls  
Remembering, so Sir Kay beside the door  
Mutter'd in scorn of Gareth whom he used  
To harry and hustle.

‘Bound upon a quest  
With horse and arms—the King hath past his  
time—

My scullion knave ! Thralls to your work again,  
For an your fire be low ye kindle mine !

Will there be dawn in West and eve in East ?

Begone !—my knave !—belike and like enow

Some old head-blow not heeded in his youth

So shook his wits they wander in his prime—

Crazed ! How the villain lifted up his voice,

Nor shamed to bawl himself a kitchen-knave.

Tut : he was tame and meek enow with me,

Till peacock’d up with Lancelot’s noticing.

Well—I will after my loud knave, and learn

Whether he know me for his master yet.

Out of the smoke he came, and so my lance

Hold, by God’s grace, he shall into the mire—

Thence, if the King awaken from his craze,

Into the smoke again.’

But Lancelot said,  
‘Kay, wherefore will ye go against the King,  
For that did never he whereon ye rail,  
But ever meekly served the King in thee ?  
Abide : take counsel ; for this lad is great  
And lusty, and knowing both of lance and sword.’  
‘Tut, tell not me,’ said Kay, ‘ye are overfine  
To mar stout knaves with foolish courtesies.’  
Then mounted, on thro’ silent faces rode  
Down the slope city, and out beyond the gate.

But by the field of tourney lingering yet  
Mutter’d the damsel, ‘Wherefore did the King  
Scorn me ? for, were Sir Lancelot lackt, at  
least  
He might have yielded to me one of those  
Who tilt for lady’s love and glory here,  
Rather than—O sweet heaven ! O fie upon him—  
His kitchen-knave ’

To whom Sir Gareth drew  
(And there were none but few goodlier than he)  
Shining in arms, 'Damsel, the quest is mine  
Lead, and I follow.' She thereat, as one  
That smells a foul-flesh'd agaric in the holt,  
And deems it carrion of some woodland thing,  
Or shrew, or weasel, nipt her slender nose  
With petulant thumb and finger, shrilling, 'Hence!  
Avoid, thou smelllest all of kitchen-grease.  
And look who comes behind,' for there was Kay.  
'Knowest thou not me? thy master? I am  
Kay.  
We lack thee by the hearth.'

And Gareth to him,  
'Master no more! too well I know thee, ay—  
The most ungentle knight in Arthur's hall.'  
'Have at thee then,' said Kay: they shock'd, and  
Kay

Fell shoulder-slipt, and Gareth cried again,  
'Lead, and I follow,' and fast away she fled.

But after sod and shingle ceased to fly  
Behind her, and the heart of her good horse  
Was nigh to burst with violence of the beat,  
Perforce she stay'd, and overtaken spoke.

'What doest thou, scullion, in my fellowship?  
Deem'st thou that I accept thee aught the more  
Or love thee better, that by some device  
Full cowardly, or by mere unhappiness,  
Thou hast overthrown and slain thy master -  
thou!—

Dish-washer and broach-turner, loon!—to me  
Thou smellest all of kitchen as before.'

'Damsel,' Sir Gareth answer'd gently, 'say  
Whate'er ye will, but whatsoe'er ye say,

I leave not till I finish this fair quest.  
Or die therefore.'

    ' Ay, wilt thou finish it ?  
Sweet lord, how like a noble knight he talks !  
The listening rogue hath caught the manner of it.  
But, knave, anon thou shalt be met with, knave,  
And then by such a one that thou for all  
The kitchen brewis that was ever supt  
Shalt not once dare to look him in the face.'

    ' I shall assay,' said Gareth with a smile  
That madden'd her, and away she flash'd again  
Down the long avenues of a boundless wood,  
And Gareth following was again beknaved.

    ' Sir Kitchen-knave, I have miss'd the only way  
Where Arthur's men are set along the wood ;  
The wood is nigh as full of thieves as leaves :

If both be slain, I am rid of thee ; but yet,  
Sir Scullion, canst thou use that spit of thine ?  
Fight, an thou canst : I have miss'd the only way.

So till the dusk that follow'd evensong  
Rode on the two, reviler and reviled ;  
Then after one long slope was mounted, saw,  
Bowl-shaped, thro' tops of many thousand pines  
A gloomy-gladed hollow slowly sink  
To westward—in the deeps whereof a mere,  
Round as the red eye of an Eagle-owl,  
Under the half-dead sunset glared ; and shouts  
Ascended, and there brake a servingman  
Flying from out of the black wood, and crying,  
' They have bound my lord to cast him in the mere.'  
Then Gareth, ' Bound am I to right the wrong'd,  
But straitlier bound am I to bide with thee.'  
And when the damsel spake contemptuously,  
' Lead, and I follow,' Gareth cried again,

‘ Follow, I lead ! ’ so down among the pines  
He plunged ; and there, blackshadow’d nigh the  
    mere,  
And mid-thigh-deep in bulrushes and reed,  
Saw six tall men haling a seventh along,  
A stone about his neck to drown him in it.  
Three with good blows he quieted, but three  
Fled thro’ the pines ; and Gareth loosed the stone  
From off his neck, then in the mere beside  
Tumbled it ; oilily bubbled up the mere.  
Last, Gareth loosed his bonds and on free feet  
Set him, a stalwart Baron, Arthur’s friend.

‘ Well that ye came, or else these caitiff rogues  
Had wreak’d themselves on me ; good cause is theirs  
To hate me, for my wont hath ever been  
To catch my thief, and then like vermin here  
Drown him, and with a stone about his neck ;  
And under this wan water many of them



Lie rotting, but at night let go the stone,  
And rise, and flickering in a grimly light  
Dance on the mere. Good now, ye have saved a life  
Worth somewhat as the cleanser of this wood.  
And fain would I reward thee worshipfully.  
What guerdon will ye ? ’

Gareth sharply spake,  
‘ None ! for the deed’s sake have I done the deed,  
In uttermost obedience to the King.  
But will ye yield this damsel harbourage ?

Whereat the Baron saying, ‘ I well believe  
Ye be of Arthur’s Table,’ a light laugh  
Broke from Lynette, ‘ Ay, truly of a truth,  
And in a sort, being Arthur’s kitchen-knave !—  
But deem not I accept thee aught the more,  
Scullion, for running sharply with thy spit  
Down on a rout of craven foresters.

A thresher with his flail had scatter'd them.  
Nay—for thou smellest of the kitchen still.  
But an this lord will yield us harbourage,  
Well.'

So she spake. A league beyond the wood,  
All in a full-fair manor and a rich,  
His towers where that day a feast had been  
Held in high hall, and many a viand left,  
And many a costly cate, received the three.  
And there they placed a peacock in his pride  
Before the damsel, and the Baron set  
Gareth beside her, but at once she rose.

'Meseems, that here is much discourtesy,  
Setting this knave, Lord Baron, at my side.  
Hear me—this morn I stood in Arthur's hall,  
And pray'd the King would grant me Lancelot  
To fight the brotherhood of Day and Night—

The last a monster unsubduable  
Of any save of him for whom I call'd—  
Suddenly bawls this frontless kitchen-knave,  
“The quest is mine ; thy kitchen-knave am I,  
And mighty thro' thy meats and drinks am I.”  
Then Arthur all at once gone mad replies,  
“Go therefore,” and so gives the quest to him—  
Him—here—a villain fitter to stick swine  
Than ride abroad redressing women's wrong,  
Or sit beside a noble gentlewoman.'

Then half-ashamed and part-amazed, the lord  
Now look'd at one and now at other, left  
The damsel by the peacock in his pride,  
And, seating Gareth at another board,  
Sat down beside him, ate and then began.

‘Friend, whether ye be kitchen-knave, or not,  
Or whether it be the maiden's fantasy,

And whether she be mad, or else the King,  
Or both or neither, or thyself be mad,  
I ask not : but thou strikest a strong stroke,  
For strong thou art and goodly therewithal,  
And savor of my life ; and therefore now,  
For here be mighty men to joust with, weigh  
Whether thou wilt not with thy damsel back  
To crave again Sir Lancelot of the King.  
Thy pardon ; I but speak for thine avail,  
The savor of my life.'

And Gareth said,  
' Full pardon, but I follow up the quest,  
Despite of Day and Night and Death and Hell.'

So when, next morn, the lord whose life he  
saved  
Had, some brief space, convey'd them on their  
way

And left them with God-speed, Sir Gareth  
spake,

‘Lead, and I follow.’ Haughtily she replied,

‘I fly no more : I allow thee for an hour.

Lion and stoat have isled together, knave,  
In time of flood. Nay, furthermore, methinks  
Some ruth is mine for thee. Back wilt thou,  
fool ?

For hard by here is one will overthrow  
And slay thee : then I will to court again,  
And shame the King for only yielding me  
My champion from the ashes of his hearth.’

To whom Sir Gareth answer’d courteously,  
‘Say thou thy say, and I will do my deed.  
Allow me for mine hour, and thou wilt find  
My fortunes all as fair as hers, who lay  
Among the ashes and wedded the King’s son.’

Then to the shore of one of those long loops-  
Wherethro' the serpent river coil'd, they came.  
Rough-thicketed were the banks and steep ; the  
stream

Full, narrow ; this a bridge of single arc  
Took at a leap ; and on the further side  
Arose a silk pavilion, gay with gold  
In streaks and rays, and all Lent-lily in hue,  
Save that the dome was purple, and above,  
Crimson, a slender banneret fluttering.  
And therefore the lawless warrior paced  
Unarm'd, and calling, 'Damsel, is this he,  
The champion ye have brought from Arthur's  
hall,

For whom we let thee pass ?' 'Nay, nay,' she  
said,

' Sir Morning-Star. The King in utter scorn  
Of thee and thy much folly hath sent thee here  
His kitchen-knave : and look thou to thyself :

See that he fall not on thee suddenly,  
And slay thee unarm'd : he is not knight but  
knave.'

Then at his call, 'O daughters of the Dawn,  
And servants of the Morning-Star, approach,  
Arm me,' from out the silken curtain-folds  
Bare-footed and bare-headed three fair girls  
In gilt and rosy raiment came : their feet  
In dewy grasses glisten'd ; and the hair  
All over glanced with dewdrop or with gem  
Like sparkles in the stone Avanturine.  
These arm'd him in blue arms, and gave a  
shield

Blue also, and thereon the morning star.  
And Gareth silent gazed upon the knight,  
Who stood a moment, ere his horse was brought,  
Glorying ; and in the stream beneath him, shone,  
Immingled with Heaven's azure waveringly,

The gay pavilion and the naked feet,  
His arms, the rosy raiment, and the star.

Then she that watch'd him, 'Wherefore stare  
ye so?

Thou shakest in thy fear : there yet is time :  
Flee down the valley before he get to horse.  
Who will cry shame ? Thou art not knight but  
knave.'

Said Gareth, 'Damsel, whether knave or knight,  
Far liefer had I fight a score of times  
Than hear thee so missay me and revile.  
Fair words were best for him who fights for thee ;  
But truly foul are better, for they send  
That strength of anger thro' mine arms, I know  
That I shall overthrow him.'

And he that bore



The star, being mounted, cried from o'er the  
bridge,

‘ A kitchen-knave, and sent in scorn of me !  
Such fight not I, but answer scorn with scorn  
For this were shame to do him further wrong  
Than set him on his feet, and take his horse  
And arms, and so return him to the King.  
Come, therefore, leave thy lady lightly, knave.  
Avoid : for it beseemeth not a knave  
To ride with such a lady.’

‘ Dog, thou liest.

I spring from loftier lineage than thine own.’  
He spake ; and all at fiery speed the two  
Shock’d on the central bridge, and either spear  
Bent but not brake, and either knight at once,  
Hurl’d as a stone from out of a catapult  
Beyond his horse’s crupper and the bridge,  
Fell, as if dead ; but quickly rose and drew,

And Gareth lash'd so fiercely with his brand  
He drave his enemy backward down the bridge,  
The damsel crying, 'Well stricken, kitchen-  
knave !'

Till Gareth's shield was cloven ; but one stroke  
Laid him that clove it grovelling on the ground.

Then cried the fall'n, 'Take not my life : I  
yield.'

And Gareth, 'So this damsel ask it of me  
Good—I accord it easily as a grace.'

She reddening, 'Insolent scullion : I of thee ?  
I bound to thee for any favour ask'd !'

'Then shall he die.' And Gareth there unlaced  
His helmet as to slay him, but she shriek'd,  
'Be not so hardy, scullion, as to slay  
One nobler than thyself.' 'Damsel, thy charge  
Is an abounding pleasure to me. Knight,  
Thy life is thine at her command. Arise

And quickly pass to Arthur's hall, and say  
His kitchen-knave hath sent thee. See thou crave  
His pardon for thy breaking of his laws.  
Myself, when I return, will plead for thee.  
Thy shield is mine—farewell ; and, damsel, thou,  
Lead, and I follow.'

And fast away she fled.  
Then when he came upon her, spake, ' Methought,  
Knave, when I watch'd thee striking on the bridge  
The savour of thy kitchen came upon me  
A little faintlier : but the wind hath changed :  
I scent it twentyfold.' And then she sang,  
" O morning star " (not that tall felon there  
Whom thou by sorcery or unhappiness  
Or some device, hast foully overthrown),  
" O morning star that smilest in the blue,  
O star, my morning dream hath proven true,  
Smile sweetly, thou ! my love hath smiled on me."

'But thou begone, take counsel, and away,  
For hard by here is one that guards a ford—  
The second brother in their fool's parable—  
Will pay thee all thy wages, and to boot.  
Care not for shame : thou art not knight but knave.'

To whom Sir Gareth answer'd, laughingly,  
'Parables ? Hear a parable of the knave.  
When I was kitchen-knave among the rest  
Fierce was the hearth, and one of my co-mates  
Own'd a rough dog, to whom he cast his coat,  
"Guard it," and there was none to meddle with it.  
And such a coat art thou, and thee the King  
Gave me to guard, and such a dog am I,  
To worry, and not to flee—and—knight or  
knave—  
The knave that doth thee service as full knight  
Is all as good, meseems, as any knight  
Toward thy sister's freeing.'

‘Ay, Sir Knave !

Ay, knave, because thou strikest as a knight,  
Being but knave, I hate thee all the more.’

‘Fair damsel, ye should worship me the more,  
That, being but knave, I throw thine enemies.’

‘Ay, ay,’ she said, ‘but thou shalt meet thy  
match.’

So when they touch’d the second river-loop,  
Huge on a huge red horse, and all in mail  
Burnish’d to blinding, shone the Noonday Sun  
Beyond a raging shallow. As if the flower,  
That blows a globe of after arrowlets,  
Ten thousand-fold had grown, flash’d the fierce  
shield,  
All sun ; and Gareth’s eyes had flying blots  
Before them when he turn’d from watching him.

He from beyond the roaring shallow roar'd,  
'What doest thou, brother, in my marches here?'  
And she athwart the shallow shrill'd again,  
'Here is a kitchen-knave from Arthur's hall  
Hath overthrown thy brother, and hath his arms.'  
'Ugh!' cried the Sun, and vizoring up a red  
And cipher face of rounded foolishness,  
Push'd horse across the foamings of the ford,  
Whom Gareth met midstream : no room was there  
For lance or tourney-skill : four strokes they struck  
With sword, and these were mighty ; the new  
knight  
Had fear he might be shamed ; but as the Sun  
Heaved up a ponderous arm to strike the fifth,  
The hoof of his horse slipt in the stream, the stream  
Descended, and the Sun was wash'd away.

Then Gareth laid his lance athwart the ford ;  
So drew him home ; but he that fought no more,

As being all bone-batter'd on the rock,  
Yielded ; and Gareth sent him to the King.  
'Myself when I return will plead for thee.  
Lead, and I follow.' Quietly she led.  
'Hath not the good wind, damsel, changed again?'  
'Nay, not a point : nor art thou victor here.  
There lies a ridge of slate across the ford ;  
His horse thereon stumbled—ay, for I saw it.

“O Sun” (not this strong fool whom thou,  
Sir Knave,  
Hast overthrown thro' mere unhappiness),  
“O Sun, that wakenest all to bliss or pain,  
O moon, that layest all to sleep again,  
Shine sweetly: twice my love hath smiled on me.”

'What knowest thou of lovesong or of love ?  
Nay, nay, God wot, so thou wert nobly born,  
Thou hast a pleasant presence. Yea, perchance,—

‘“O dewy flowers that open to the sun,  
O dewy flowers that close when day is done,  
Blow sweetly: twice my love hath smiled on me.”

‘What knowest thou of flowers, except, belike,  
To garnish meats with ? hath not our good King  
Who lent me thee, the flower of kitchendom,  
A foolish love for flowers ? what stick ye round  
The pasty ? wherewithal deck the boar’s head ?  
Flowers ? nay, the boar hath rosemaries and bay.

‘“O birds that warble to the morning sky,  
O birds that warble as the day goes by,  
Sing sweetly: twice my love hath smiled on me.”

‘What knowest thou of birds, lark, mavis, merle,  
Linnet ? what dream ye when they utter forth  
May-music growing with the growing light,  
Their sweet sun-worship ? these be for the snare



(So runs thy fancy) these be for the spit,  
Larding and basting. See thou have not now  
Larded thy last, except thou turn and fly.  
There stands the third fool of their allegory.'

For there beyond a bridge of treble bow,  
All in a rose-red from the west, and all  
Naked it seem'd, and glowing in the broad  
Deep-dimpled current underneath, the knight,  
That named himself the Star of Evening, stood.

And Gareth, 'Wherefore waits the madman  
there  
Naked in open dayshine?' 'Nay,' she cried,  
'Not naked, only wrapt in harden'd skins  
That fit him like his own; and so ye cleave  
His armour off him, these will turn the blade.'

Then the third brother shouted o'er the bridge,  
'O brother-star, why shine ye here so low?

Thy ward is higher up : but have ye slain  
‘The damsel’s champion ?’ and the damsel cried,

‘ No star of thine, but shot from Arthur’s heaven  
With all disaster unto thine and thee !  
For both thy younger brethren have gone down  
Before this youth ; and so wilt thou, Sir Star ;  
Art thou not old ? ’

‘ Old, damsel, old and hard  
Old, with the might and breath of twenty boys.’  
Said Gareth, ‘ Old, and over-bold in brag !  
But that same strength which threw the Morning-  
Star  
Can throw the Evening.’

Then that other blew  
A hard and deadly note upon the horn.  
‘ Approach and arm me ! ’ With slow steps from  
out

An old storm-beaten, russet, many-stain'd  
Pavilion, forth a grizzled damsel came,  
And arm'd him in old arms, and brought a helm  
With but a drying evergreen for crest,  
And gave a shield whereon the Star of Even  
Half-tarnish'd and half-bright, his emblem, shone.  
But when it glitter'd o'er the saddle-bow,  
They madly hurl'd together on the bridge ;  
And Gareth overthrew him, lighted, drew,  
There met him drawn, and overthrew him again,  
But up like fire he started : and as oft  
As Gareth brought him grovelling on his knees,  
So many a time he vaulted up again ;  
Till Gareth panted hard, and his great heart,  
Foredooming all his trouble was in vain,  
Labour'd within him, for he seem'd as one  
That all in later, sadder age begins  
To war against ill uses of a life,  
But these from all his life arise, and cry,

‘Thou hast made us lords, and canst not put us  
down!’

He half despairs; so Gareth seem’d to strike  
Vainly, the damsel clamouring all the while,  
‘Well done, knave-knight, well-stricken, O good  
knight-knave—

O knave, as noble as any of all the knights—  
Shame me not, shame me not. I have prophe-  
sied—

Strike, thou art worthy of the Table Round—  
His arms are old, he trusts the harden’d skin—  
Strike—strike—the wind will never change again.’  
And Gareth hearing ever stronglier smote,  
And hew’d great pieces of his armour off him,  
But lash’d in vain against the harden’d skin,  
And could not wholly bring him under, more  
Than loud Southwesterns, rolling ridge on ridge,  
The buoy that rides at sea, and dips and springs  
For ever; till at length Sir Gareth’s brand

Clash'd his, and brake it utterly to the hilt.  
'I have thee now ;' but forth that other sprang,  
And, all unknightlike, writhed his wiry arms  
Around him, till he felt, despite his mail,  
Strangled, but straining ev'n his uttermost  
Cast, and so hurl'd him headlong o'er the bridge  
Down to the river, sink or swim, and cried,  
'Lead, and I follow.'

But the damsel said,  
'I lead no longer ; ride thou at my side ;  
Thou art the kingliest of all kitchen-knaves.

"O trefoil, sparkling on the rainy plain,  
O rainbow with three colours after rain,  
Shine sweetly : thrice my love hath smiled on me."

'Sir,—and, good faith, I fain had added—  
Knight,  
But that I heard thee call thyself a knave,—

Shamed am I that I so rebuked, reviled,  
Missaid thee ; noble I am ; and thought the King  
Scorn'd me and mine ; and now thy pardon,  
friend,

For thou hast ever answer'd courteously,  
And wholly bold thou art, and meek withal  
As any of Arthur's best, but, being knave,  
Hast mazed my wit : I marvel what thou art.'

'Damsel,' he said, 'ye be not all to blame,  
Saving that ye mistrusted our good King  
Would handle scorn, or yield thee, asking, one  
Not fit to cope thy quest. Ye said your say ;  
Mine answer was my deed. Good sooth ! I hold  
He scarce is knight, yea but half-man, nor meet  
To fight for gentle damsel, he, who lets  
His heart be stirr'd with any foolish heat  
At any gentle damsel's waywardness.  
Shamed ? care not ! thy foul sayings fought for me :

And seeing now thy words are fair, methinks,  
There rides no knight, not Lancelot, his great self  
Hath force to quell me.'

Nigh upon that hour

When the lone henn forgets his melancholy,  
Lets down his other leg, and stretching, dreams  
Of goodly supper in the distant pool,  
Then turn'd the noble damsel smiling at him,  
And told him of a cavern hard at hand,  
Where bread and baken meats and good red wine  
Of Southland, which the Lady Lyonors  
Had sent her coming champion, waited him.

Anon they past a narrow comb wherein  
Were slabs of rock with figures, knights on horse  
Sculptured, and deckt in slowly-waning hues.  
'Sir Knave, my knight, a hermit once was here,  
Whose holy hand hath fashion'd on the rock

The war of Time against the soul of man.  
And yon four fools have suck'd their allegory  
From these damp walls, and taken but the form.  
Know ye not these ?' and Gareth lookt and read—  
In letters like to those the vexillary  
Hath left crag-carven o'er the streaming Gelt—  
' PHOSPHORUS,' then ' MERIDIES '—' HESPE-  
RUS '—  
' NOX '—' MORS,' beneath five figures, armed men.  
Slab after slab, their faces forward all,  
And running down the Soul, a Shape that fled  
With broken wings, torn raiment and loose hair,  
For help and shelter to the hermit's cave.  
' Follow the faces, and we find it. Look,  
Who comes behind ?'

For one—delay'd at first  
Thro' helping back the dislocated Kay  
To Camelot, then by what thereafter chanced,



The damsel's headlong error thro' the wood—  
Sir Lancelot, having swum the river-loops—  
His blue shield-lions cover'd—softly drew  
Behind the twain, and when he saw the star  
Gleam, on Sir Gareth's turning to him, cried,  
'Stay, felon knight, I avenge me for my friend.'  
And Gareth crying prick'd against the cry;  
But when they closed—in a moment—at one touch  
Of that skill'd spear, the wonder of the world—  
Went sliding down so easily, and fell,  
That when he found the grass within his hands  
He laugh'd; the laughter jarr'd upon Lynette:  
Harshly she ask'd him, 'Shamed and overthrown,  
And tumbled back into the kitchen-knave,  
Why laugh ye? that ye blew your boast in vain?  
'Nay, noble damsel, but that I, the son  
Of old King Lot and good Queen Bellicent,  
And victor of the bridges and the ford,  
And knight of Arthur, here lie thrown by whom

I know not all thro' mere unhappiness—  
Device and sorcery and unhappiness—  
Out, sword; we are thrown!' And Lancelot  
    answer'd, ' Prince,  
O Gareth—thro' the mere unhappiness  
Of one who came to help thee, not to harm,  
Lancelot, and all as glad to find thee whole,  
As on the day when Arthur knighted him.'

Then Gareth, ' Thou—Lancelot!—thine the hand  
That threw me ? An some chance to mar the boast  
Thy brethren of thee make—which could not  
    chance—

Had sent thee down before a lesser spear,  
Shamed had I been, and sad—O Lancelot—thou !'

Whereat the maiden, petulant, ' Lancelot,  
Why came ye not, when call'd ? and wherefore now  
Come ye, not call'd ? I gloried in my knave,

Who being still rebuked, would answer still  
Courteous as any knight—but now, if knight,  
The marvel dies, and leaves me fool'd and trick'd,  
And only wondering wherefore play'd upon :  
And doubtful whether I and mine be scorn'd.  
Where should be truth if not in Arthur's hall,  
In Arthur's presence ? Knight, knave, prince and  
fool,  
I hate thee and for ever.'

And Lancelot said,  
'Blessed be thou, Sir Gareth ! knight art thou  
To the King's best wish. O damsel, be ye wise  
To call him shamed, who is but overthrown ?  
Thrown have I been, nor once, but many a time.  
Victor from vanquish'd issues at the last,  
And overthrower from being overthrown.  
With sword we have not striven ; and thy good  
horse

And thou are weary ; yet not less I felt  
Thy manhood thro' that wearied lance of thine.  
Well hast thou done ; for all the stream is freed,  
And thou hast wreak'd his justice on his foes,  
And when reviled, hast answer'd graciously,  
And makest merry, when overthrown. Prince,  
Knight,  
Hail, Knight and Prince, and of our Table Round !'

And then when turning to Lynette he told  
The tale of Gareth, petulantly she said,  
' Ay well—ay well—for worse than being fool'd  
Of others, is to fool one's self. A cave,  
Sir Lancelot, is hard by, with meats and drinks  
And forage for the horse, and flint for fire.  
But all about it flies a honeysuckle.  
Seek, till we find.' And when they sought and  
found,  
Sir Gareth drank and ate, and all his life

Past into sleep ; on whom the maiden gazed.

‘ Sound sleep be thine ! sound cause to sleep hast  
thou.

Wake lusty ! Seem I not as tender to him

As any mother ? Ay, but such a one

As all day long hath rated at her child,

And vext his day, but blesses him asleep—

Good lord, how sweetly smells the honeysuckle

In the hush’d night, as if the world were one

Of utter peace, and love, and gentleness !

O Lancelot, Lancelot ’—and she clapt her hands—

‘ Full merry am I to find my goodly knave

Is knight and noble. See now, sworn have I,

Else yon black felon had not let me pass,

To bring thee back to do the battle with him.

Thus an thou goest, he will fight thee first ;

Who doubts thee victor ? so will my knight-  
knave

Miss the full flower of this accomplishment.’

Said Lancelot, 'Peradventure he, ye name,  
May know my shield. Let Gareth, an he will,  
Change his for mine, and take my charger, fresh,  
Not to be spun'd, loving the battle as well  
As he that rides him.' 'Lancelot-like,' she said,  
'Courteous in this, Lord Lancelot, as in all.'

And Gareth, wakening, fiercely clutch'd the  
shield;  
'Ramp ye lance-splintering lions, on whom all  
spears  
Are rotten sticks! ye seem agape to roar!  
Yea, ramp and roar at leaving of your lord!—  
Care not, good beasts, so well I care for you.  
O noble Lancelot, from my hold on these  
Streams virtue — fire — thro' one that will not  
shame  
Even the shadow of Lancelot under shield.  
Hence: let us go.'

## Silent the silent field

They traversed. Arthur's harp tho' summer-wan,  
In counter motion to the clouds, allured  
The glance of Gareth dreaming on his liege.

A star shot : 'Lo,' said Gareth, 'the foe falls !'  
An owl whoopt : 'Hark the victor pealing there !'  
Suddenly she that rode upon his left

Clung to the shield that Lancelot lent him, crying,  
'Yield, yield him this again : 'tis he must fight :

I curse the tongue that all thro' yesterday  
Reviled thee, and hath wrought on Lancelot now  
To lend thee horse and shield : wonders ye have  
done ;

Miracles ye cannot : here is glory enow  
In having flung the three : I see thee maim'd,  
Mangled : I swear thou canst not fling the fourth.'

'And wherefore, damsel ? tell me all ye know.

Ye cannot scare me ; nor rough face, or voice,

Brute bulk of limb, or boundless savagery  
Appal me from the quest.'

                                  'Nay, Prince,' she cried,  
'God wot, I never look'd upon the face,  
Seeing he never rides abroad by day;  
But watch'd him have I like a phantom pass  
Chilling the night: nor have I heard the voice.  
Always he made his mouthpiece of a page  
Who came and went, and still reported him  
As closing in himself the strength of ten,  
And when his anger tare him, massacring  
Man, woman, lad and girl—yea, the soft babe!  
Some hold that he hath swallow'd infant flesh,  
Monster! O prince, I went for Lancelot first,  
The quest is Lancelot's: give him back the shield.'

Said Gareth laughing, 'An he fight for this,  
Belike he wins it as the better man:  
Thus—and not else?'



But Lancelot on him urged  
All the devisings of their chivalry  
Where one might meet a mightier than himself.  
How best to manage horse, lance, sword and shield,  
And so fill up the gap where force might fail  
With skill and fineness. Instant were his words.

Then Gareth, 'Here be rules. I know but one—  
To dash against mine enemy and to win.  
Yet have I watch'd thee victor in the joust,  
And seen thy way.' 'Heaven help thee,' sigh'd  
Lynette.

Then for a space, and under cloud that grew  
To thunder-gloom palling all stars, they rode  
In converse till she made her palfrey halt,  
Lifted an arm, and softly whisper'd, 'There.'  
And all the three were silent seeing, pitch'd  
Beside the Castle Perilous on flat field,

A huge pavilion like a mountain peak  
Sunder the glooming crimson on the marge,  
Black, with black banner, and a long black horn  
Beside it hanging ; which Sir Gareth graspt,  
And so, before the two could hinder him,  
Sent all his heart and breath thro' all the horn.  
Echo'd the walls ; a light twinkled ; anon  
Came lights and lights, and once again he blew ;  
Whereon were hollow tramlings up and down  
And muffled voices heard, and shadows past ;  
Till high above him, circled with her maids,  
The Lady Lyonors at a window stood,  
Beautiful among lights, and waving to him  
White hands, and courtesy ; but when the Prince  
Three times had blown—after long hush—at last—  
The huge pavilion slowly yielded up,  
Thro' those black foldings, that which housed  
therein.  
High on a nightblack horse, in nightblack arms,

With white breast-bone, and barren ribs of Death,  
And crown'd with fleshless laughter—some ten  
steps—

In the half-light—thro' the dim dawn—advanced  
The monster, and then paused, and spake no  
word.

But Gareth spake and all indignantly,  
'Fool, for thou hast, men say, the strength of ten,  
Canst thou not trust the limbs thy God hath given,  
But must, to make the terror of thee more,  
Trick thyself out in ghastly imageries  
Of that which Life hath done with, and the clod,  
Less dull than thou, will hide with mantling flowers  
As if for pity?' But he spake no word;  
Which set the horror higher: a maiden swoon'd;  
The Lady Lyonors wrung her hands and wept,  
As doom'd to be the bride of Night and Death;  
Sir Gareth's head prickled beneath his helm;

And ev'n Sir Lancelot thro' his warm blood felt  
Ice strike, and all that mark'd him were aghast.

At once Sir Lancelot's charger fiercely neigh'd—  
At once the black horse bounded forward with  
him.

Then those that did not blink the terror, saw  
That Death was cast to ground, and slowly rose.  
But with one stroke Sir Gareth split the skull.  
Half fell to right and half to left and lay.  
Then with a stronger buffet he clove the helm  
As throughly as the skull ; and out from this  
Issued the bright face of a blooming boy  
Fresh as a flower new-born, and crying, ' Knight,  
Slay me not : my three brethren bad me do it,  
To make a horror all about the house,  
And stay the world from Lady Lyonors.  
They never dream'd the passes would be past.'  
Answer'd Sir Gareth graciously to one

Not many a moon his younger, 'My fair child,  
What madness made thee challenge the chief  
knight  
Of Arthur's hall?' 'Fair Sir, they bad me do it.  
They hate the King, and Lancelot, the King's  
friend,  
They hoped to slay him somewhere on the stream,  
They never dream'd the passes could be past.'

Then sprang the happier day from underground;  
And Lady Lyonors and her house, with dance  
And revel and song, made merry over Death,  
As being after all their foolish fears  
And horrors only proven a blooming boy.  
So large nirth lived and Gareth won the quest.

And he that told the tale in older times  
Says that Sir Gareth wedded Lyonors,  
But he, that told it later, says Lynette.

# THE LAST TOURNAMENT.





## THE LAST TOURNAMENT.



AGONET, 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 wither'd 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  
Clutch'd at the crag, and started thro' mid air  
Bearing an eagle's nest : and thro' the tree  
Rush'd ever a rainy wind, and thro' 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 unscarr'd 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 ye 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  
Arm'd for a day of glory before the King.

But on the hither side of that loud morn  
Into the hall stagger'd, his visage ribb'd  
From ear to ear with dog-whip wheals, his nose  
Bridge-broken, one eye out, and one hand off,  
And one with shatter'd 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 marr’d heaven’s image in thee  
thus ?’

Then, sputtering thro’ the hedge of splinter’d  
teeth

Yet strangers to the tongue, and with blunt stump  
Pitch-blacken’d sawing the air, said the maim’d  
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 call’d upon thy name as one  
That doest right by gentle and by churl,  
Maim’d me and maul’d, 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 turn’d 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,  
Hurl’d 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, thro' 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  
Enchair'd to-morrow, 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 answer'd, 'It is well:  
Yet better if the King abide, and leave

The leading of his younger knights to me.  
Else, for the King has will'd it, it is well.'

Then Arthur rose and Lancelot follow'd him,  
And while they stood without the doors, the  
King

Turn'd 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 fall'n from reverence—  
Or have I dream'd the bearing of our knights  
Tells of a manhood ever less and lower?  
Or whence the fear lest this my realm, uprear'd,  
By noble deeds at one with noble vows,  
From flat confusion and brute violences,  
Reel back into the heast, and be no more?'

He spoke, and taking all his younger knights,  
Down the slope city rode, and sharply turn'd  
North by the gate. In her high bower the Queen,  
Working a tapestry, lifted up her head,  
Watch'd her lord pass, and knew not that she  
sigh'd.

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 call'd  
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 shriek'd, 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, fill'd his double-dragon'd chair.

He glanced and saw the stately galleries,  
Dame, damsel, each thro' worship of their Queen  
White-robed in honour of the stainless child,  
And some with scatter'd jewels, like a bank  
Of maiden snow mingled with sparks of fire.  
He look'd but once, and vail'd 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 crack'd,  
And show'd him, like a vermin in its hole,  
Modred, a narrow face ; anon he heard  
The voice that billow'd round the barriers roar  
An ocean-sounding welcome to one knight,  
But newly-enter'd, taller than the rest,  
And armour'd 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 return'd,  
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 yearn'd to shake  
The burthen off his heart in one full shock  
With Tristram ev'n to death : his strong hands  
gript

And dinted the gilt dragons right and left,  
Until he groan'd 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 mutter'd, ' 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 ?  
Let 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 battle-field,  
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 bow'd 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 anger'd, 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  
Laugh'd shrilly, crying, 'Praise the patient saints,  
Our one white day of Innocence hath past,  
Tho' somewhat draggled at the skirt. So be it.  
The snowdrop only, flowering thro' 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 glitter'd at the feast  
Variously gay : for he that tells the tale

Liken'd 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 wither'd leaf before the hall.  
Then Tristram saying, ' Why skip ye so, Sir  
Fool ? '

Wheel'd 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  
Stay'd in the wandering warble of a brook ;  
But when the twangling ended, skipt again ;  
Then being ask'd, '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 ye can 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 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 crabb'd 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 hush'd, 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 wallow'd, I have wash'd—the  
world

Is flesh and shadow—I have had my day.  
The dirty nurse, Experience, in her kind  
Hath foul'd me—an I wallow'd, then I wash'd—  
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

Troop'd round a Paynim harper once, who  
thrumm'd

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 answer'd, '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 play'd 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 shrill'd,  
'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 thro' 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 walk'd, or crept, or perch'd, or  
flew.  
Anon the face, as, when a gust hath blown,

Unruffling waters re-collect the shape  
Of one that in them sees himself, return'd ;  
But at the slot or fewmets of a deer,  
Or ev'n a fall'n feather, vanish'd again.

So on for all that day from lawn to lawn  
Thro' many a league-long bower he rode. At  
length

A lodge of intertwisted beechen-boughs  
Furze-cramm'd, 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 snatch'd 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 smooth  
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 call'd 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 return'd.  
The black-blue Irish hair and Irish eyes  
Had drawn him home—what marvel? then he  
laid  
His brows upon the drifted leaf and dream'd.

He seem'd to pace the strand of Brittany  
Between Isolt of Britain and his bride,  
And show'd 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.'  
Follow'd a rush of eagle's wings, and then

A whimpering of the spirit of the child,  
Because the twain had spoil'd her carcanet.

He dream'd ; but Arthur with a hundred spears  
Rode far, till o'er the illimitable reed,  
And many a glancing splash and sallowy isle,  
The wide-wing'd sunset of the misty marsh  
Glared on a huge machicolated tower  
That stood with open doors, whereout was roll'd  
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, howl'd 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 deign’d not use of word or sword,  
But let the drunkard, as he stretch’d 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, while the knights, who watch’d him,  
    roar’d  
And shouted and leapt down upon the fall’n ;

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  
Thro' open doors, and swording right and left  
Men, women, on their sodden faces, hurl'd  
The tables over and the wines, and slew  
Till all the rafters rang with woman-yells,  
And all the pavement stream'd with massacre :  
Then, yell with yell echoing, they fired the tower,  
Which half that autumn night, like the live North  
Red-pulsing up thro' Alioth and Alcor,  
Made all above it, and a hundred meres  
About it, as the water Moab saw  
Come round by the East, and out beyond them  
flush'd  
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 return'd,  
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,  
Stay'd him. 'Why weep ye?' 'Lord,' she said,  
    'my man  
Hath left me or is dead;' whereon he thought—  
'What, an she hate me now? I would not this.  
What, an 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 thro' 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 gain'd

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,  
Flush'd, 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 flutter'd me at first: not he:  
Catlike thro' his own castle steals my Mark,  
But warrior-wise thou stridest thro' his halls  
Who hates thee, as I him—ev'n to the death.  
My soul, I felt my hatred for my Mark  
Quickened 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 wrong'd who is not ev'n his own,  
But save for dread of thee had beaten me,  
Scratch'd, bitten, blinded, marr'd me somehow—

Mark ?

What rights are his that dare not strike for  
them ?

Not lift a hand—not, tho' he found me thus !  
But harken ! have ye met him ? hence he went  
To-day 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 vizer, 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, pluck'd one way by hate and one by love,  
Drain'd 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,  
It 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 kneel'd 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 laugh'd 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, ev'n 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 thro' the scruple of my bond,  
Calling me thy white hind, and saying to me  
That Guinevere had sinn'd against the highest,  
And I—misyoked with such a want of man—  
That I could hardly sin against the lowest.'

He answer'd, 'O my soul, be comforted!  
If this be sweet, to sin in leading-strings,  
If here be comfort, and if ours be sin,  
Crown'd 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  
Seem'd those far-rolling, westward-smiling seas,  
Watch'd from this tower. Isolt of Britain dash'd  
Before Isolt of Brittany on the strand,

Would that have chill'd her bride-kiss ? Wedded  
her ?

Fought in her father's battles ? wounded there ?  
The King was all fulfill'd with gratefulness,  
And she, my namesake of the hands, that heal'd  
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 answer'd, '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 flash'd 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 hiss'd it : then this crown of towers  
So shook to such a roar of all the sky,  
That here in utter dark I swoon'd 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 anger’d 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 utter’d aught so gross  
Ev’n to the swineherd’s malkin in the mast?  
The greater man, the greater courtesy.  
But thou, thro’ 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 thro' their vows  
The King prevailing made his realm :—I say,  
Swear to me thou wilt love me ev'n when old,  
Gray-hair'd, and past desire, and in despair.'

Then Tristram, pacing moodily up and down,  
' Vows ! did ye keep the vow ye 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—ev'n to the height—I honour'd 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 ray'd 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 seem'd to me no man,  
But Michaël trampling Satan; so I sware,  
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 thro' that sullyng of our Queen—  
Began to gall the knighthood, asking whence  
Had Arthur right to bind them to himself ?  
Dropt down from heaven ? wash'd up from out the  
deep ?

They fail'd to trace him thro' 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 turn'd 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 hunger'd and half-anger'd—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 will'd ;  
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  
show’d  
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 turn’d, then, flinging round her  
neck,  
Claspt it, and cried ‘Thine Order, O my Queen !’  
But, while he bow’d to kiss the jewell’d throat,  
Out of the dark, just as the lips had touch’d,  
Behind him rose a shadow and a shriek—  
‘Mark’s way,’ said Mark, and clove him thro’ the  
brain.

That night came Arthur home, and while he  
climb’d,  
All in a death-dumb autumn-dripping gloom  
The stairway to the hall, and look’d and saw

The great Queen's bower was dark,—about his feet  
A voice clung sobbing till he question'd 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.'





**TO THE QUEEN.**





## TO THE QUEEN.



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 pluck'd his flickering life again  
From halfway down the shadow of the grave,  
Past with thee thro' thy people and their love,  
And London roll'd one tide of joy thro' 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 fool'd 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 peal'd  
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 fall'n. — But thou, my  
    Queen,  
Not for itself, but thro' 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  
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  
Touch'd by the adulterous finger of a time  
That hover'd 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 scared, 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 stol'n 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 crown'd 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.





