

## GROUP VIII.

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*KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS.*  
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AMONG the purely English legends that constantly meet us in our literature, those of the Celtic King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table are of permanent interest. We have chosen from Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" the one of the legends that appeals to us most strongly as Christians, "The Holy Grail." The student should read James Russell Lowell's "Vision of Sir Launfal" for comparison. We give Tennyson's "Sir Galahad," another version of the same story, first published in 1842, and his "Morte d'Arthur," which appeared in the same volume, to show the fascination these stories must have had for him from his very youth, and also that the student may compare these early fruits of his genius with those of later growth; for it was thirty years after the publication of these two poems before the completion of the "Idylls."

"Morte d'Arthur," as given here, will be found under another title, "The Passing of Arthur," in the "Idylls."

The student should compare the monologue of "Sir Galahad" with the form of the later poem, "The Holy

Grail," and endeavor to find the merits of each; also to decide which is the more impressive.

### SIR GALAHAD.

TENNYSON.

My good blade carves the casques of men,  
My tough lance thrusteth sure,  
My strength is as the strength of ten,  
Because my heart is pure.  
The shattering trumpet shrilleth high,  
The hard brands shiver on the steel,  
The splinter'd spear-shafts crack and fly,  
And horse and rider reel :  
They reel, they roll in clanging lists,  
And when the tide of combat stands,  
Perfume and flowers fall in showers  
That lightly rain from ladies' hands.  
How sweet are looks that ladies bend  
On whom their favors fall !  
For them I battle till the end,  
To save from shame and thrall :  
But all my heart is drawn above,  
My knees are bowed in crypt and shrine :  
I never felt the kiss of love,  
Nor maiden's hand in mine.  
More bounteous aspects on me beam,  
Me mightier transports move and thrill ;  
So keep I fair thro' faith and prayer  
A virgin heart in work and will.  
When down the stormy crescent goes,  
A light before me swims,  
Between dark stems the forest glows,  
I hear a noise of hymns :

Then by some secret shrine I ride ;  
 I hear a voice, but none are there ;  
 The stalls are void, the doors are wide,  
 The tapers burning fair.  
 Fair gleams the snowy altar-cloth,  
 The silver vessels sparkle clean,  
 The shrill bell rings, the censer swings,  
 And solemn chants resound between.

Sometimes on lonely mountain-meres  
 I find a magic bark ;  
 I leap on board : no helmsman steers :  
 I float till all is dark.

A gentle sound, an awful light !  
 Three angels bear the holy Grail,  
 With folded feet, in stoles of white,  
 On sleeping wings they sail.  
 Ah, blessed vision ! blood of God !  
 My spirit beats her mortal bars,  
 As down dark tides the glory slides,  
 And star-like mingles with the stars.

When on my goodly charger borne  
 Thro' dreaming towns I go,  
 The cock crows ere the Christmas morn,  
 The streets are dumb with snow.  
 The tempest crackles on the leads,<sup>1</sup>  
 And, ringing, springs from brand and mail ;  
 But o'er the dark a glory spreads,  
 And gilds the driving hail.  
 I leave the plain, I climb the height ;  
 No branchy thicket shelter yields ;  
 But blessed forms in whistling storms  
 Fly o'er waste fens and windy fields.

<sup>1</sup> Leads : roofs covered with lead.

A maiden knight — to me is given  
 Such hope, I know not fear ;  
 I yearn to breathe the airs of heaven  
 That often meet me here.  
 I muse on joy that will not cease,  
 Pure spaces clothed in living beams,  
 Pure lilies of eternal peace  
 Whose odors haunt my dreams ;  
 And, stricken by an angel's hand,  
 This mortal armor that I wear,  
 This weight and size, this heart and eyes,  
 Are touch'd, are turn'd to finest air.

The clouds are broken in the sky,  
 And thro' the mountain walls  
 A rolling organ-harmony  
 Swells up, and shakes and falls.  
 Then move the trees, the copse nod,  
 Wings flutter, voices hover clear :  
 "O just and faithful knight of God !  
 Ride on ! the prize is near."  
 So pass I hostel, hall, and grange ;  
 By bridge and ford, by park and pale,  
 All arm'd I ride, what'er betide,  
 Until I find the holy Grail.

#### THE HOLY GRAIL.

TENNYSON'S "IDYLLS OF THE KING."

From noiseful arms, and acts of prowess done  
 In tournament or tilt, Sir Percivale,  
 Whom Arthur and his knighthood called the Pure,  
 Had passed into the silent life of prayer,  
 Praise, fast, and alms ; and leaving for the cowl  
 The helmet, in an abbey far away .

From Camelot, there, and not long after, died.  
 And one, a fellow-monk among the rest,  
 Ambrosius, loved him much beyond the rest,  
 And honored him, and wrought into his heart  
 A way by love that wakened love within,  
 To answer that which came: and as they sat  
 Beneath a world-old yew-tree darkening half  
 The cloisters, on a gustful April morn  
 That puff'd the swaying branches into smoke,  
 Above them, ere the summer when he died,  
 The monk Ambrosius questioned Percivale:

"O brother, I have seen this yew-tree smoke  
 Spring after spring for half a hundred years:  
 For never have I known the world without,  
 Nor ever strayed beyond the pale: but thee,  
 When first thou camest — such a courtesy  
 Spake thro' the limbs and in the voice — I knew  
 For one of those who eat in Arthur's hall;  
 For good ye are and bad, and like to coins,  
 Some true, some light, but every one of you  
 Stamp'd with the image of the King; and now  
 Tell me, what drove thee from the Table Round,  
 My brother? was it earthly passion crost?"

"Nay," said the knight; "for no such passion mine.  
 But the sweet vision of the Holy Grail  
 Drove me from all vainglories, rivalries,  
 And earthly heats that spring and sparkle out  
 Among us in the jousts, while women watch  
 Who wins, who falls; and waste the spiritual strength  
 Within us, better offered up to Heaven."

To whom the monk: "The Holy Grail! I trust  
 We are green in Heaven's eyes; but here too much  
 We moulder — as to things without I mean —

Yet one of your own knights, a guest of ours,  
 Told us of this in our refectory;  
 But spake with such a sadness and so low  
 We heard not half of what he said. What is it?  
 The phantom of a cup that comes and goes?"

"Nay, Monk! what phantom?" answer'd Percivale.  
 "The cup, the cup itself, from which our Lord  
 Drank at the last sad supper with his own.  
 This, from the blessed land of Aromat —  
 After the day of darkness, when the dead  
 Went wandering o'er Moriah — the good saint  
 Arimathæan Joseph, journeying brought  
 To Glastonbury, where the winter thorn  
 Blossoms at Christmas, mindful of our Lord.  
 And there awhile it bode; and if a man  
 Could touch or see it, he was heal'd at once,  
 By faith, of all his ills. But then the times  
 Grew to such evil that the holy cup  
 Was caught away to Heaven, and disappeared."

To whom the monk: "From our old books I know  
 That Joseph came of old to Glastonbury,  
 And there the heathen Prince, Arviragus,  
 Gave him an isle of marsh whereon to build;  
 And there he built with wattles from the marsh  
 A little lonely church in days of yore,  
 For so they say, these books of ours, but seem  
 Mute of this miracle, far as I have read.  
 But who first saw the holy thing to-day?"

"A woman," answer'd Percivale, "a nun,  
 And one no further off in blood from me  
 Than sister; and if ever holy maid  
 With knees of adoration wore the stone,  
 A holy maid; tho' never maiden glowed,

But that was in her earlier maidenhood,  
 With such a fervent flame of human love,  
 Which being rudely blunted, glanced and shot  
 Only to holy things ; to prayer and praise  
 She gave herself, to fast and alms. And yet,  
 Nun as she was, the scandal of the Court,  
 Sin against Arthur and the Table Round,  
 Across the iron grating of her cell  
 Beat, and she pray'd and fasted all the more.

“ And he to whom she told her sins, or what  
 Her all but utter whiteness held for sin,  
 A man well-nigh a hundred winters old,  
 Spake often with her of the Holy Grail,  
 A legend handed down thro' five or six,  
 And each of these a-hundred winters old,  
 From our Lord's time. And when King Arthur made  
 His Table Round, and all men's hearts became  
 Clean for a season, surely he had thought  
 That now the Holy Grail would come again ;  
 But sin broke out. Ah, Christ, that it would come  
 And heal the world of all their wickedness !  
 ‘ O Father !’ asked the maiden, ‘ might it come  
 To me by prayer and fasting ?’ ‘ Nay,’ said he,  
 ‘ I know not, for thy heart is pure as snow.’  
 And so she pray'd and fasted till the sun  
 Shone, and the wind blew thro' her and I thought  
 She might have risen and floated when I saw her.

“ For on a day she sent to speak with me.  
 And when she came to speak, behold her eyes  
 Beyond my knowing of them, beautiful  
 Beyond all knowing of them, wonderful,  
 Beautiful in the light of holiness.  
 And ‘ O my brother, Percivale,’ she said,

‘ Sweet brother, I have seen the Holy Grail :  
 For, waked at dead of night, I heard a sound  
 As of a silver horn from o'er the hills  
 Blown, and I thought, “ It is not Arthur's use  
 To hunt by moonlight ;” and the slender sound  
 As from a distance beyond distance grew  
 Coming upon me — O never harp nor horn  
 Nor aught we blow with breath, or touch with hand,  
 Was like that music as it came ; and then  
 Stream'd thro' my cell a cold and silver beam,  
 And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail,  
 Rose-red with beatings in it, as if alive,  
 Till all the white walls of my cell were dyed  
 With rosy colors leaping on the wall ;  
 And then the music faded, and the Grail pass'd,  
 And the beam decay'd, and from the walls  
 The rosy quiverings died into the night.  
 And now the Holy Thing is here again  
 Among us, brother, fast thou, too, and pray,  
 And tell thy brother knights to fast and pray,  
 That so perchance the vision may be seen  
 By thee and those, and all the world be heal'd.’

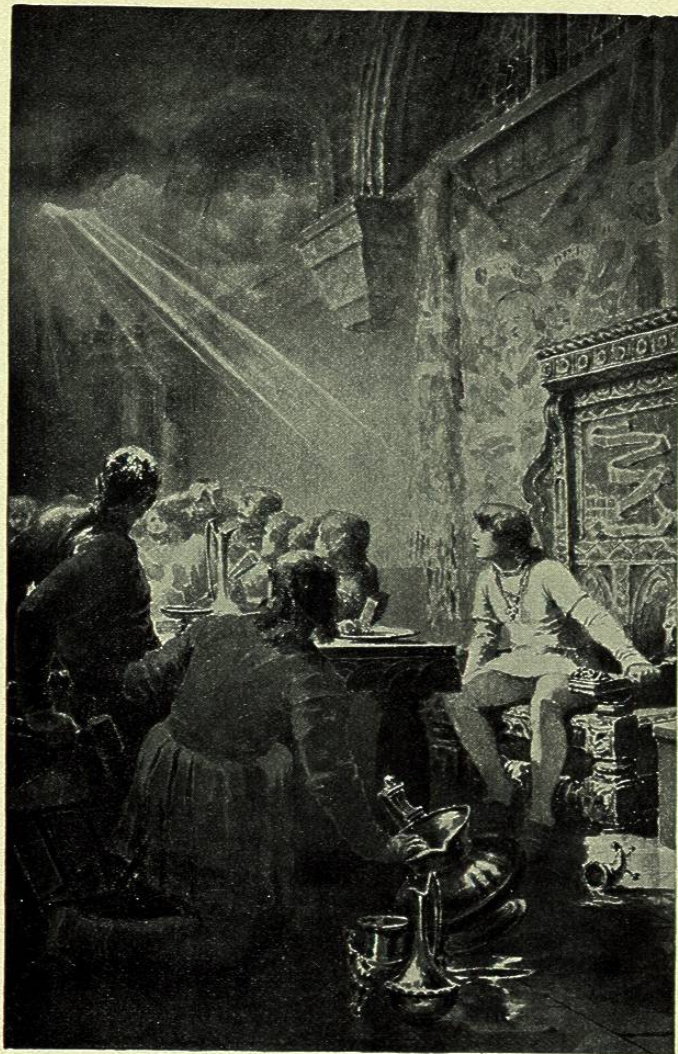
“ Then leaving the pale nun, I spake of this  
 To all men ; and myself fasted and prayed  
 Always, and many among us many a week  
 Fasted and pray'd even to the uttermost,  
 Expectant of the wonder that would be.  
 And one there was among us, ever moved  
 Among us in white armor, Galahad.  
 ‘ God made thee good as thou art beautiful,’  
 Said Arthur, when he dubbed him knight ; and none,  
 In so young youth, was ever made a knight  
 Till Galahad ; and this Galahad, when he heard  
 My sister's vision, fill'd me with amaze ;

His eyes became so like her own, they seem'd  
Hers, and himself her brother more than I.

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“ But she, the wan sweet maiden shore away  
Clean from her forehead all that wealth of hair  
Which made a silken mat-work for her feet ;  
And out of this she plaited broad and long  
A strong sword-belt, and wove with silver thread  
And crimson in the belt a strange device,  
A crimson grail within a silver beam ;  
And saw the bright boy-knight, and bound it on him,  
Saying, ‘ My knight, my love, my knight of heaven,  
O thou, my love, whose love is one with mine,  
I, maiden, round thee, maiden, bind my belt.  
Go forth, for thou shalt see what I have seen,  
And break thro’ all, till one will crown thee king  
Far in the spiritual city ’ : and as she spake  
She sent the deathless passion in her eyes  
Thro’ him, and made him hers, and laid her mind  
On him, and he believed in her belief.

“ Then came a year of miracle : O brother,  
In our great hall there stood a vacant chair,  
Fashioned by Merlin ere he past away,  
And carven with strange figures ; and in and out  
The figures, like a serpent, ran a scroll  
Of letters in a tongue no man could read.  
And Merlin called it ‘ The Siege perilous,’  
Perilous for good and ill ; ‘ for there,’ he said,  
‘ No man could sit but he should lose himself ’ :  
And once by misadventence Merlin sat  
In his own chair, and so was lost ; but he,  
Galahad, when he heard of Merlin’s doom,  
Cried, ‘ If I lose myself I save myself !’



“ And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail  
All over covered with a luminous cloud.”

“Then on a summer night it came to pass,  
While the great banquet lay along the hall,  
That Galahad would sit down in Merlin’s chair.  
And all at once, as there we sat, we heard  
A cracking and a riving of the roofs,  
And rending, and a blast, and overhead  
Thunder, and in the thunder was a cry.  
And in the blast there smote along the hall  
A beam of light seven times more clear than day:  
And down the long beam stole the Holy Grail  
All over cover’d with a luminous cloud,  
And none might see who bare it, and it past.  
But every knight beheld his fellow’s face  
As in a glory, and all the knights arose,  
And staring each at other like dumb men  
Stood, till I found a voice and sware a vow.

“I sware a vow before them all, that I,  
Because I had not seen the Grail, would ride  
A twelvemonth and a day in quest of it,  
Until I found and saw it, as the nun  
My sister saw it; and Galahad sware the vow,  
And good Sir Bors, our Launcelot’s cousin, sware  
And Launcelot sware, and many among the knights,  
And Gawain sware, and louder than the rest.”

Then spake the monk Ambrosius, asking him  
“What said the King? Did Arthur take the vow?”

“Nay, for my lord, the King,” said Percivale,  
“Was not in hall: for early that same day,  
’Scaped thro’ a cavern from a bandit hold,  
An outraged maiden sprang into the hall  
Crying on help: for all her shining hair  
Was smear’d with earth, and either milky arm

Red-rent with hooks of bramble, and all she wore  
 Torn as a sail that leaves the rope is torn  
 In tempest: so the King arose and went  
 To smoke the scandalous hive of those wild bees  
 That made such honey in his realm. Howbeit  
 Some little of this marvel he too saw,  
 Returning o'er the plain that then began  
 To darken under Camelot; whence the King  
 Look'd up, calling aloud, 'Lo there! the roofs  
 Of our great hall are roll'd in thunder-smoke!  
 Pray Heaven they be not smitten by the bolt.'  
 For dear to Arthur was that hall of ours,  
 As having there so oft with all his knights  
 Feasted, and as the stateliest under heaven.

"O brother, had you known our mighty hall,  
 Which Merlin built for Arthur long ago!  
 For all the sacred mount of Camelot,  
 And all the dim rich city, roof by roof,  
 Tower after tower, spire beyond spire,  
 By grove and garden-lawn, and rushing brook,  
 Climbs to the mighty hall that Merlin built.  
 And four great zones of sculpture, set betwixt  
 With many a mystic symbol, gird the hall:  
 And in the lowest beasts are slaying men,  
 And in the second men are slaying beasts,  
 And on the third are warriors, perfect men,  
 And on the fourth are men with growing wings,  
 And over all one statue in the mould  
 Of Arthur, made by Merlin, with a crown,  
 And peak'd wings pointed to the Northern Star.  
 And eastward fronts the statue, and the crown  
 And both the wings are made of gold, and flame  
 At sunrise till the people in far fields,  
 Wasted so often by the heathen hordes,  
 Behold it, crying, 'We have still a King.'

"And, brother, had you known our hall within,  
 Broader and higher than any in all the lands!  
 Where twelve great windows blazon Arthur's wars,  
 And all the light that falls upon the board  
 Streams thro' the twelve great battles of our King.  
 Nay, one there is, and at the eastern end,  
 Wealthy with wandering lines of mount and mere,  
 Where Arthur finds the brand, Excalibur.  
 And also one to the west, and counter to it,  
 And blank: and who shall blazon it? when and how?—  
 O there, perchance, when all our wars are done,  
 The brand Excalibur will be cast away.

"So to this hall full quickly rode the King,  
 In horror lest the work by Merlin wrought,  
 Dreamlike, should on the sudden vanish, wrapt  
 In unremorseful folds of rolling fire.  
 And in he rode, and up I glanced, and saw  
 The golden dragon sparkling over all:  
 And many of those who burnt the hold, their arms  
 Hack'd, and their foreheads grimed with smoke, and sear'd,  
 Follow'd, and in among bright faces, ours,  
 Full of the vision, prest: and then the King  
 Spake to me, being nearest, 'Percivale,'  
 (Because the hall was all in tumult — some  
 Vowing, and some protesting), 'what is this?'

"O brother, when I told him what had chanced,  
 My sister's vision, and the rest, his face  
 Darken'd, as I have seen it more than once,  
 When some brave deed seem'd to be done in vain,  
 Darken; and 'Woe is me, my knights,' he cried,  
 'Had I been here ye had not sworn the vow.'  
 Bold was mine answer, 'Had thyself been here,  
 My King, thou wouldst have sworn.' 'Yea, yea,' said he,  
 'Art thou so bold and hast not seen the Grail?'

“ ‘Nay, Lord, I heard the sound, I saw the light,  
But since I did not see the Holy Thing,  
I sware a vow to follow it till I saw.’

“ Then when he asked us, knight by knight, if any  
Had seen it, all their answers were as one :  
‘Nay, Lord, and therefore have we sworn our vows.’  
‘Lo, now,’ said Arthur, ‘have ye seen a cloud?  
What go ye into the wilderness to see?’

“ Then Galahad on a sudden, and in a voice  
Shrilling along the hall to Arthur, call’d,  
‘But I, Sir Arthur, saw the Holy Grail,  
I saw the Holy Grail and heard a cry —  
O Galahad, and O Galahad, follow me.’

“ ‘Ah, Galahad, Galahad,’ said the King, ‘for such  
As thou art is the vision, not for these.  
The holy nun and thou have seen a sign —  
Holier is none, my Percivale, than she —  
A sign to maim this Order which I made.  
But you, that follow but the leader’s bell’  
(Brother, the King was hard upon his knights)  
‘Taliessin is our fullest throat of song,  
And one hath sung and all the dumb will sing.  
Launcelot is Launcelot, and hath overborne  
Five knights at once, and every younger knight  
Unproven, holds himself as Launcelot,  
Till overborne by one he learns — and ye,  
What are ye? Galahads? — no, nor Percivales’  
(For thus it pleased the King to range me close  
After Sir Galahad); ‘nay,’ said he, ‘but men  
With strength and will to right the wronged of power,  
To lay the sudden heads of violence flat,  
Knights that in twelve great battles splash’d and dyed

The strong White Horse in his own heathen blood —  
But one hath seen, and all the blind will see.  
Go, since your vows are sacred, being made :  
Yet — for ye know the cries of all my realm  
Pass thro’ this hall — how often, O my knights,  
Your places being vacant at my side,  
This chance of noble deeds will come and go  
Unchallenged, while you follow wandering fires  
Lost in the quagmire! Many of you, yea most,  
Return no more : yet think I show myself  
Too dark a prophet : come now, let us meet  
The morrow morn once more in one full field  
Of gracious pastime, that once more the King,  
Before ye leave him for this Quest may count  
The yet unbroken strength of all his knights,  
Rejoicing in that Order which he made.’

“ So when the sun broke next from under ground,  
All the great table of our Arthur closed  
And clash’d in such a tourney and so full,  
So many lances broken — never yet  
Had Camelot seen the like, since Arthur came.  
And I myself and Galahad, for a strength  
Was in us from the vision, overthrew  
So many knights that all the people cried,  
And almost burst the barriers in their heat,  
Shouting, ‘Sir Galahad and Sir Percivale!’

“ But when the next day brake from under ground —  
O brother, had you known our Camelot,  
Built by old kings, age after age, so old  
The King himself had fears that it would fall,  
So strange, and rich, and dim; for where the roofs  
Totter’d toward each other in the sky,  
Met foreheads all along the street of those