

the mythic history of the past, enveloping their characters in a haze of fancy and fable to suit the caprice of their hearers. In their hands Arthur becomes the son of Uther Pendragon. He is a king, the chief of battles. Nothing can resist his valor. He holds his court at Caerleon. He undertakes great expeditions, subdues great tracts of country, and finally falls in the battle of Camlan. We find, however, no trace of knight-errantry or of the high ideas of love and honor, or of that chivalry which breathes through the later romances, and lends such a charm to them. For these we must look to another source.

**The Breton Bards and Geoffrey's History.** — It seems highly probable that the Arthur of *romance* is to a great extent the creation of the Breton bards. In their songs he becomes a poetic character, based on historic tradition. From being simply the warrior hero of song, he becomes an epic hero. Stragglings tales, oral traditions, and unwritten songs were collected and remodelled to suit the fancies of later bards. In sympathy with the age of knight-errantry and chivalry which was dawning, the more advanced notions of chivalric heroism and Christian virtue were introduced and attributed to Arthur and his courtiers. This collection was thrown into a fictional whole, called "Brut-y-Brenhined," or "History of the Kings." In the first part of the twelfth century this manuscript came into the hands of Geoffrey of Monmouth, a priest of the Anglican Church, who made a Latin translation of the work, incorporating therein his own fund of Welsh legends and traditions of the day. Here we find the Arthur of the Breton bards, who retains but little of the warrior chieftain

of the old Welsh stories. His thoughts, his words, his deeds are those of a knightly king. He is in the flush of vigorous youth, perfect in form, handsome in features, and noble in character. He is a Christian, with high ideas of the Christian virtues. He is the centre of the world of chivalry, surrounded by courteous knights. He succors the oppressed and redresses wrongs. He is as brave as the Charlemagne of story. His reputation is world-wide. He is led by love of glory and adventure beyond the limits of his own kingdom. He chooses a queen, Guinevere, daughter of Leodegraunce, the superior of all the ladies of the world, and carries her likeness with him into combat as a sure token of victory. In the "History of Geoffrey," then, the germ of history blossoms forth into the Arthur of romance, "an ideal of the purest chivalry, and surrounded by all the pomp and circumstance of knight-errantry."

**Other Histories of the Romances.** — The "History of Geoffrey," with its weird Kymric legends, its scraps of authentic history, and its fully developed romance, all mingled together under the guise of history, was received with delight by nobility and commoners. It gained immediate popularity, and produced a sensation beyond all parallel. At this time all Europe was seized with an intense passion for narrative or romantic literature, and nowhere was this passion stronger than in Britain. The "History" supplied the need. People of all ranks read it with avidity. But its popularity did not stop here. The Norman *trouvères*, or minstrels, found in the book a veritable storehouse of romantic stories, which, versified, and embellished with their own fancies, never failed to

fascinate their hearers. Robert Wace translated the "History" into Norman-French verse, adding here and there a popular tradition. He it is who first makes mention of the Round Table, which he dismisses with a mere allusion. Fifty years later, Layamon, a Welsh priest, wrote a "History" in English, recapitulating the main points of Geoffrey's "History" with some important additions. Here we find the first mention of the fairies at Arthur's birth, and of his voyage, when dying, to the Isle of Avalon. Here, too, the legend of the Round Table undergoes development.

**A Summary.**—Such was the development of the Arthurian romances up to the beginning of the thirteenth century. It is worthy of note that they consisted of little more than a condensation of preëxisting poems, legends, and tales. As we come to the beginning of the thirteenth century, however, a marvellous transformation takes place, and the fully developed modern romances of Arthur begin to assume definite shape.

**The Work of Walter Map.**—It is to the genius of one man that we are indebted for the greater part of all that is artistic and imperishable in the Arthurian romance. In the early part of the thirteenth century, Walter Map, a chaplain to Henry II., and, later, Archdeacon of Oxford, a man of undoubted genius and vast learning, and of high repute at court, impressed with the popularity of the Arthurian tales, conceived the idea of spiritualizing them by blending with them the legend of the Holy Graal, and thus making them a medium of instruction in the recognized theology of the day. The Holy Graal, or Grail,

was a cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, and subsequently by Joseph of Arimathea to receive the blood that flowed from the wounds of Christ as he was hanging on the cross. There was a tradition that Joseph came to England, bringing with him the sacred vessel. Here it was lost. The search for it, the Quest of the Holy Graal, was undertaken by many of the Knights of the Round Table. Such was the legend that Map skilfully blended with the Arthurian tales, and so successfully did he accomplish his object that his works obtained an instantaneous popularity, not only in England but in all Europe. The trouvères, or romancers, reproduced the chaste fantasies of Map, and invented additional romances, based on existing legends. It is here that the Arthur of romance bursts into view, surrounded by a brilliant pageant of knightly heroes and heroines. But before all is the introduction of a grand unifying theme, which serves as a central idea to bind the detached legends, tales, and poems into a grand cyclus of Romance, conforming in some respects to an epic. This theme is the Quest of the Holy Graal. It is the one point towards which every incident tends. Its achievement is the culminating point of the whole story. By it Map has spiritualized the tales, and changed essentially their whole scope and aim. In his hands the Legend of the Holy Graal becomes an allegory of man's striving after a perfect knowledge of Truth and of God, to be gained only by a life of ideal purity. Into the popular adventures of the knights he has incorporated a series of sermons on the Quest for Eternal Life. It is a reflection of the highest spiritual

aspirations of man, and of his mortal conflict with the powers of evil.

**The Romances Developed.**—In the romances, Arthur's Court, held at Caerleon-on-Usk, or perhaps at Camelot, becomes the centre of all that is imperial in empire and knightly in knighthood. Valiant knights from other lands, allured by the splendor of his court, are drawn as by magic to his side. Here we find Lancelot du Lac, Tristram, Galahad, Percival, and Bors. The Order of the Round Table is instituted. The Round Table had thirty-two seats, including the "*siege perillous*," which was wrought by magic art, and reserved for the best knight in the whole world, until whose appearance it was to remain vacant, but which was filled at last by Galahad. At this point, Arthur retires somewhat into the background. As he took no part in the Quest of the Holy Graal, the narrative is more especially occupied with the deeds of those who acquired celebrity by participating in that noble quest.

**Malory's Work.**—Finally we come to the true source of the Tennysonian Idylls, Malory's "Morte Darthur." In 1470, Sir Thomas Malory made a compilation of the preëxisting tales and legends which he found in "many noble volumes," for the making of his "book of King Arthur, and of his noble knights of the Round Table." This book was published by Caxton, in 1485, and was entitled "Morte Darthur." For the Arthurian legends, Malory's work is the most accessible to the modern reader. It is not an artistic production. It contains no well-conceived plot, and there is an evident lack of

system in it. It makes no pretence to chronological truth. The setting of the stories belongs to Malory's own time rather than to the times he tells of, to the age of chivalry rather than to the crude era of Arthur. No such state of society as depicted by Malory ever existed. His picture is only a fantastic and exaggerated idealization of the feudal chivalry of the Middle Ages. Still, the book has a magnetic charm that is irresistible. It early made a deep impression on Tennyson, and to it he had recourse for much of the material of the Idylls.

#### THE IDYLLS OF THE KING.

Ever since the first appearance of the Idylls, in 1859, there has been no end of controversy as to Tennyson's real purpose in the production of this work. Happily many of the existing doubts have been dispelled, and the poet's own idea is made clear in the "Memoir" recently issued by his son. From this treatise we learn that the Arthurian romances made a deep impression on Tennyson at an early age. When a boy he chanced upon a copy of Malory's work, and became fascinated with its stories of chivalry and knightly prowess. From his earliest years he had written out in prose various histories of Arthur. In 1832 the first of his Arthurian poems appeared in the form of a lyric, "The Lady of Shalott," another version of the story of "Lancelot and Elaine." This was followed ten years later by the other lyrics, "Lancelot and Guinevere" (partly, if not wholly, written in 1830) and "Sir Galahad." In the 1842 edition also

appeared "Morte d'Arthur," which was represented to be the fragment of a long epic, the rest of which the author had destroyed. Thus it appeared that the poet was already meditating a freer treatment of the Arthurian romances than he had given them. Later, Tennyson himself said to his son, "At twenty-four I meant to write an epic or a drama of King Arthur, and I thought that I should take twenty years about the work." A fragment of an epic in prose, and a rough draft, written in 1833, were found among Tennyson's MSS. His son tells us that after 1840 Tennyson began to study the epical King Arthur in earnest. He thought, read, and talked about King Arthur. What he called "the greatest of all poetical subjects" perpetually haunted him, and in 1855 he determined upon the final shape of the poem.

The seemingly random and desultory manner in which the Idylls were brought out mystified scholars and critics. The first issue, comprising only four Idylls, — "Enid," "Vivien," "Elaine," and "Guinevere," — appeared in 1859. They bore little evidence of any epic design. They were regarded as four character studies of womanhood, two forming lights in the general picture, and the other two being the contrasted shadows. Vivien, crafty and wicked, was set over against the tender innocence of Elaine. Enid, the true wife, was opposed to Guinevere, the untrue. They were what their names implied, *Idylls*, picturesque poems, not pastoral, of a lofty and noble strain, each presenting a separate picture with one leading sentiment for its motive. The remaining Idylls appeared at intervals between 1869 and 1885, as follows, — in 1869,

"The Holy Grail," "The Coming of Arthur," "Pellias and Ettarre," and "The Passing of Arthur"; in 1871, "The Last Tournament"; in 1872, "Gareth and Lynette"; in 1885, "Balin and Balan." Subsequently "Enid" was divided into "The Marriage of Geraint" and "Geraint and Enid," making twelve poems in all, conforming to the number hinted at in the "Morte d'Arthur" of 1842. To these Tennyson prefixed a prologue, dedicating the Idylls to Prince Albert, and added an epilogue "To the Queen."

With the appearance of the 1869 Idylls, the real intention of the whole work seemed to be changed. It was apparent that the Idylls were not simply pictorial fancies involving character studies, but that each filled its place in a connected series grouped round a central figure; that the "Idylls of the King" formed one great poem, characterized by epic unity of design and grandeur of tone. Moreover, a spiritual significance was seen to be deeply interfused through these great poems, and Tennyson himself, in his epilogue "To the Queen," disclosed his grand moral purpose, which is now recognized as consistently running through the whole series. He there describes the work as an 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  
Touched by the adulterous finger of a time  
That hover'd between war and wantonness,  
And crownings and dethronements,"

This allegorical significance is rarely obtruded by the poet, and, indeed, apart from such significance, the lover of poetry will always find a charm both in the form and substance of these tales of love, chivalry, and celestial vision. It is for the story and the style that the *Idylls* should be read by the pupils of secondary schools. The allegory, the moral, may be left for more mature study and consideration. Beneath the surface the poem is an allegory of the soul of man warring with sense, of the spiritual struggling against the sensual element in our nature, of the passing of the soul through life to death and through death to resurrection. "The intellect, the conscience, the will, the imagination, and the divine spirit in man are shadowed forth in mystic personages." And this spiritual significance, as well as the epic unity of design, we now know to have been determined upon by the poet as early as 1855.

Too much importance has been attached to the allegorical element in the *Idylls*. Arthur and his knights and the ladies of his court are not abstractions of ideal qualities; they are real men and women, with human feelings and trials and conflicts; they do represent and embody certain virtues and vices, but these qualities work and live in their actions and in their lives. Of two reviews of the *Idylls*, which Tennyson himself considered the best, he often said: "They [the authors] have taken my hobby and ridden it too hard, and have explained some things too allegorically, although there is an allegorical, or perhaps rather a parabolic, drift in the poem. . . . Yet there is no single fact or incident in the

*Idylls*, however seemingly mystical, which cannot be explained as without any mystery or allegory whatever." Again, when asked as to the interpretation of a passage in the *Idylls*, he answered: "They mean that, and they do not. I hate to be tied down to say, '*This means that*,' because the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation." "Poetry," he affirmed, "is like shot-silk, with many glancing colors. Every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability and according to his sympathy with the poet." Of the general drift of the *Idylls*, he said: "The whole is the dream of man coming into practical life and ruined by one sin. Birth is a mystery and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the table-land of life and its struggles and performances. It is not the history of one man or of one generation, but of a whole cycle of generations." According to the author himself, the three lines (912-915) at the close of Arthur's speech in "The Holy Grail" are the (spiritually) central lines of the *Idylls*:—

"In moments when he feels he cannot die,  
And knows himself no vision to himself,  
Nor the High God a vision."

The unity of design of the *Idylls* appears not only in the gradual development of the effect of one great sin, but also in incidental features. Thus, the story in its course runs through one complete year, the changes of nature in their succession forming a background for the successive scenes of the poem. Concerning this phase of unity Tennyson made the following manuscript note:

“The Coming of Arthur’ is on the night of the New Year; when he is wedded ‘the world is white with May;’ on a summer night the vision of the Holy Grail appears; and the ‘Last Tournament’ is in the ‘yellowing autumn-tide.’ Guinevere flees through the mists of autumn, and Arthur’s death takes place at midnight in midwinter. The form of ‘The Coming of Arthur’ and of the ‘Passing’ is purposely more archaic than that of the other Idylls.”

With the exception of the two Geraint poems, which were taken from Lady Charlotte Guest’s translation of Welsh legends, called “The Mabinogion,” “The Idylls of the King” follow more or less closely the outlines of Malory. Tennyson omits the preposterous and the more indelicate elements of the romance. His knights and ladies are refined, graceful, noble, and without roughness. Just as Shakespeare never troubled himself to invent the plots of his plays, but had recourse to old stories and ballads, modifying them in detail, and making them to all intents and purposes new dramas, so Tennyson has taken the mediæval books of romance, and constructed from them a poem having a unity of design, imbued with a moral significance, and suited to the aspirations of our own day, while preserving to some extent the archaic color of the feudal world. The reign of Arthur as depicted by him is a sort of Utopia, unreal and visionary. Arthur is a man in whom the spiritual instincts of his nature dominate the sensual. He is, as Guinevere acknowledges, “the highest and most human, too.” He is the ideal man, and his many struggles to uphold the best in

life are but a reflection of the eternal conflict waged in human life between the spirit and the flesh.

Of the merits of the different Idylls there is a diversity of opinion. Elsdale considers “Guinevere” and “The Passing of Arthur” to be the two finest. Following these he would place “Merlin and Vivien” or “Lancelot and Elaine.” The latter, Gurteen considers one of the finest, if not the finest, of the whole series of Tennyson’s Arthurian poems. It seems the most idyllic of the Idylls. Tennyson’s power of drawing the character of a simple and lovable woman is here seen in perfection. The soliloquy of Lancelot at the close is one of the finest passages of the Idylls. Lord Hallam Tennyson in his “Memoir” says, “Of all the ‘Idylls of the King,’ ‘The Holy Grail’ seems to me to express most my father’s highest self.” There is, perhaps, no book of the Idylls so perfect in its scheme, so brilliant and impressive in its imagery, as “The Holy Grail.” The remaining Idylls, although containing many admirable passages and depicting many lovable characters, possess no claim to individual superiority. They are links in the chain of development, tracing the growth of the “one sin” to its ultimate fruition. The Idylls as a whole are the most permanent of Tennyson’s contributions to English literature. They embody the highest poetic achievement of his genius, and belong to the exalted heights of song. On them he lavished all the beauty of his most cultivated art, and their completion marked the fulfilment of his forty years’ hope.

It has been a matter of considerable discussion among commentators whether “The Idylls of the King” meet the

requirements of an epic poem. The consensus of opinion seems to be that the work is entitled to be so classed. We know that Tennyson himself considered the combined series as an epic. Departing somewhat from the conventional epic form by lack of closely continuous narrative, the Idylls yet have the grandeur of tone and the underlying unity of design essential to an epic. One central figure dominates the whole, towards whom all the action and all the personages of the story converge. The events tend towards one important issue through a succession of minor episodes. The twelve books present a full cycle of heroic story. Taken all in all, "The Idylls of the King" seem to possess a rightful claim to be considered what Tennyson intended they should be, "The Epic of Arthur."

## IDYLLS OF THE KING

(SELECTIONS)