

Yet, if he love, and his love hold, we two
 May meet at court hereafter: there, I think,
 So ye will learn the courtesies of the court, 695
 We two shall know each other."

Then he gave,
 And slightly kiss'd the hand to which he gave,
 The diamond, and all wearied of the quest
 Leapt on his horse, and carolling as he went
 A true-love ballad, lightly rode away. 700

Thence to the court he past; there told the King
 What the King knew, "Sir Lancelot is the knight."
 And added, "Sire, my liege, so much I learnt;
 But fail'd to find him, tho' I rode all round
 The region: but I lighted on the maid 705
 Whose sleeve he wore; she loves him; and to her,
 Deeming our courtesy is the truest law,
 I gave the diamond: she will render it;
 For by mine head she knows his hiding-place."

The seldom-frowning King frown'd, and replied: 710
 "Too courteous truly! ye shall go no more
 On quest of mine, seeing that ye forget
 Obedience is the courtesy due to kings."

He spake and parted. Wroth, but all in awe,
 For twenty strokes of the blood, without a word, 715
 Linger'd that other, staring after him;
 Then shook his hair, strode off, and buzz'd abroad
 About the maid of Astolat, and her love.
 All ears were prick'd at once, all tongues were loosed:
 "The maid of Astolat loves Sir Lancelot, 720
 Sir Lancelot loves the maid of Astolat."
 Some read the King's face, some the Queen's, and all

Had marvel what the maid might be, but most
 Predoom'd her as unworthy. One old dame
 Came suddenly on the Queen with the sharp news 725
 She, that had heard the noise of it before,
 But sorrowing Lancelot should have stoop'd so low,
 Marr'd her friend's aim with pale tranquillity.
 So ran the tale like fire about the court,
 Fire in dry stubble a nine-days' wonder flared: 730
 Till even the knights at banquet twice or thrice
 Forgot to drink to Lancelot and the Queen,
 And pledging Lancelot and the lily maid
 Smiled at each other, while the Queen, who sat
 With lips severely placid, felt the knot 735
 Climb in her throat, and with her feet unseen
 Crush'd the wild passion out against the floor
 Beneath the banquet, where the meats became
 As wormwood and she hated all who pledged.

But far away the maid in Astolat, 740
 Her guiltless rival, she that ever kept
 The one-day-seen Sir Lancelot in her heart,
 Crept to her father, while he mused alone,
 Sat on his knee, stroked his gray face and said:
 "Father, you call me wilful, and the fault 745
 Is yours who let me have my will, and now,
 Sweet father, will you let me lose my wits?"
 "Nay," said he, "surely." "Wherefore, let me hence,"
 She answer'd, "and find out our dear Lavaine."
 "Ye will not lose your wits for dear Lavaine: 750
 Bide," answer'd he: "we needs must hear anon
 Of him, and of that other." "Ay," she said,
 "And of that other, for I needs must hence
 And find that other, whereso'er he be,
 And with mine own hand give his diamond to him, 755
 Lest I be found as faithless in the quest

As yon proud prince who left the quest to me.
 Sweet father, I behold him in my dreams
 Gaunt as it were the skeleton of himself,
 Death-pale, for the lack of gentle maiden's aid. 760
 The gentler-born the maiden, the more bound,
 My father, to be sweet and serviceable
 To noble knights in sickness, as ye know,
 When these have worn their tokens: let me hence,
 I pray you." Then her father nodding said: 765
 "Ay, ay, the diamond: wit ye well, my child,
 Right fain were I to learn this knight were whole,
 Being our greatest: yea, and you must give it —
 And sure I think this fruit is hung too high
 For any mouth to gape for save a queen's — 770
 Nay, I mean nothing: so then, get you gone,
 Being so very wilful you must go."

Lightly, her suit allow'd, she slipt away,
 And while she made her ready for her ride
 Her father's latest word humm'd in her ear, 775
 "Being so very wilful you must go,"
 And changed itself and echo'd in her heart,
 "Being so very wilful you must die."
 But she was happy enough and shook it off,
 As we shake off the bee that buzzes at us; 780
 And in her heart she answer'd it and said,
 "What matter, so I help him back to life?"
 Then far away with good Sir Torre for guide
 Rode o'er the long backs of the bushless downs
 To Camelot, and before the city-gates 785
 Came on her brother with a happy face,
 Making a roan horse caper and curvet
 For pleasure all about a field of flowers;
 Whom when she saw, "Lavaine," she cried, "Lavaine,
 How fares my lord Sir Lancelot?" He amazed, 790

"Torre and Elaine! why here? Sir Lancelot!
 How know ye my lord's name is Lancelot?"
 But when the maid had told him all her tale,
 Then turn'd Sir Torre, and being in his moods
 Left them, and under the strange-statued gate, 795
 Where Arthur's wars were render'd mystically,
 Past up the still rich city to his kin,
 His own far blood, which dwelt at Camelot;
 And her, Lavaine across the poplar grove
 Led to the caves: there first she saw the casque 800
 Of Lancelot on the wall: her scarlet sleeve,
 Tho' carved and cut, and half the pearls away,
 Stream'd from it still; and in her heart she laughed,
 Because he had not loosed it from his helm,
 But meant once more perchance to tourney in it. 805
 And when they gain'd the cell wherein he slept,
 His battle-writhen arms and mighty hands
 Lay naked on the wolf-skin, and a dream
 Of dragging down his enemy made them move.
 Then she that saw him lying unsleek, unshorn, 810
 Gaunt as it were the skeleton of himself,
 Utter'd a little tender dolorous cry.
 The sound not wonted in a place so still
 Woke the sick knight, and while he roll'd his eyes
 Yet blank from sleep, she started to him, saying, 815
 "Your prize, the diamond sent you by the King."
 His eyes glisten'd: she fancied, "Is it for me?"
 And when the maid had told him all the tale
 Of king and prince, the diamond sent, the quest
 Assign'd to her not worthy of it, she knelt 820
 Full lowly by the corners of his bed,
 And laid the diamond in his open hand.
 Her face was near, and as we kiss the child
 That does the task assign'd, he kiss'd her face.
 At once she slipt like water to the floor. 825

"Alas," he said, "your ride hath wearied you.
 Rest must you have." "No rest for me," she said;
 "Nay, for near you, fair lord, I am at rest."
 What might she mean by that? his large black eyes,
 Yet larger thro' his leanness, dwelt upon her, 830
 Till all her heart's sad secret blazed itself
 In the heart's colors on her simple face;
 And Lancelot look'd and was perplexed in mind,
 And being weak in body said no more,
 But did not love the color; woman's love, 835
 Save one, he not regarded, and so turn'd
 Sighing, and feign'd a sleep until he slept.

Then rose Elaine and glided thro' the fields,
 And past beneath the weirdly-sculptured gates
 Far up the dim rich city to her kin; 840
 There bode the night: but woke with dawn, and past
 Down thro' the dim rich city to the fields,
 Thence to the cave. So day by day she past
 In either twilight ghost-like to and fro
 Gliding, and every day she tended him, 845
 And likewise many a night; and Lancelot
 Would, tho' he call'd his wound a little hurt
 Whereof he should be quickly whole, at times
 Brain-feverous in his heat and agony, seem
 Uncourteous, even he: but the meek maid 850
 Sweetly forbore him ever, being to him
 Meeker than any child to a rough nurse,
 Milder than any mother to a sick child,
 And never woman yet, since man's first fall,
 Did kindlier unto man, but her deep love 855
 Upbore her; till the hermit, skill'd in all
 The simples and the science of that time,
 Told him that her fine care had saved his life.
 And the sick man forgot her simple blush,

Would call her friend and sister, sweet Elaine, 860
 Would listen for her coming and regret
 Her parting step, and held her tenderly,
 And loved her with all love except the love
 Of man and woman when they love their best,
 Closest and sweetest, and had died the death 865
 In any knightly fashion for her sake.
 And peradventure had he seen her first
 She might have made this and that other world
 Another world for the sick man; but now
 The shackles of an old love straiten'd him, 870
 His honor rooted in dishonor stood,
 And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.

Yet the great knight in his mid-sickness made
 Full many a holy vow and pure resolve.
 These, as but born of sickness, could not live; 875
 For when the blood ran lustier in him again,
 Full often the bright image of one face,
 Making a treacherous quiet in his heart,
 Dispersed his resolution like a cloud.
 Then if the maiden, while that ghostly grace 880
 Beam'd on his fancy, spoke, he answer'd not,
 Or short and coldly, and she knew right well
 What the rough sickness meant, but what this meant
 She knew not, and the sorrow dimm'd her sight,
 And drave her ere her time across the fields 885
 Far into the rich city, where alone
 She murmur'd, "Vain, in vain: it cannot be.
 He will not love me: how then? must I die?"
 Then as a little helpless innocent bird,
 That has but one plain passage of few notes, 890
 Will sing the simple passage o'er and o'er
 For all an April morning, till the ear
 Wearies to hear it, so the simple maid

Went half the night repeating, "Must I die?"
 And now to right she turn'd, and now to left,
 And found no ease in turning or in rest;
 And "Him or death," she mutter'd, "death or him,"
 Again and like a burthen, "Him or death."

But when Sir Lancelot's deadly hurt was whole,
 To Astolat returning rode the three.
 There morn by morn, arraying her sweet self
 In that wherein she deem'd she look'd her best,
 She came before Sir Lancelot, for she thought,
 "If I be loved, these are my festal robes,
 If not, the victim's flowers before he fall."
 And Lancelot ever prest upon the maid
 That she should ask some goodly gift of him
 For her own self or hers: "and do not shun
 To speak the wish most near to your true heart;
 Such service have ye done me that I make
 My will of yours, and prince and lord am I
 In mine own land, and what I will I can."
 Then like a ghost she lifted up her face,
 But like a ghost without the power to speak.
 And Lancelot saw that she withheld her wish,
 And bode among them yet a little space
 Till he should learn it; and one morn it chanced
 He found her in among the garden yews,
 And said, "Delay no longer, speak your wish,
 Seeing I go to-day:" then out she brake:
 "Going? and we shall never see you more.
 And I must die for want of one bold word."
 "Speak: that I live to hear," he said, "is yours."
 Then suddenly and passionately she spoke:
 "I have gone mad. I love you: let me die."
 "Ah, sister," answer'd Lancelot, "what is this?"
 And innocently extending her white arms,

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"Your love," she said, "your love — to be your wife."
 And Lancelot answer'd, "Had I chosen to wed,
 I had been wedded earlier, sweet Elaine;
 But now there never will be wife of mine."
 "No, no," she cried, "I care not to be wife,
 But to be with you still, to see your face,
 To serve you, and to follow you thro' the world."
 And Lancelot answer'd: "Nay, the world, the world,
 All ear and eye, with such a stupid heart
 To interpret ear and eye, and such a tongue
 To blare its own interpretation — nay,
 Full ill then should I quit your brother's love,
 And your good father's kindness." And she said,
 "Not to be with you, not to see your face —
 Alas for me then, my good days are done!"
 "Nay, noble maid," he answer'd, "ten times nay!
 This is not love, but love's first flash in youth,
 Most common: yea, I know it of mine own self;
 And you yourself will smile at your own self
 Hereafter, when you yield your flower of life
 To one more fitly yours, not thrice your age.
 And then will I, for true you are and sweet
 Beyond mine old belief in womanhood,
 More specially should your good knight be poor,
 Endow you with broad land and territory
 Even to the half my realm beyond the seas,
 So that would make you happy: furthermore,
 Even to the death, as tho' ye were my blood,
 In all your quarrels will I be your knight,
 This will I do, dear damsel, for your sake,
 And more than this I cannot."

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While he spoke
 She neither blush'd nor shook, but deathly-pale
 Stood grasping what was nearest, then replied,

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"Of all this will I nothing;" and so fell,
And thus they bore her swooning to her tower.

Then spake, to whom thro' those black walls of yew
Their talk had pierced, her father: "Ay, a flash,
I fear me, that will strike my blossom dead. 965
Too courteous are ye, fair Lord Lancelot.
I pray you, use some rough discourtesy
To blunt or break her passion."

Lancelot said,

"That were against me: what I can I will;" 970
And there that day remain'd, and toward even
Sent for his shield: full meekly rose the maid,
Stript off the case, and gave the naked shield;
Then, when she heard his horse upon the stones,
Unclasping flung the casement back, and look'd
Down on his helm, from which her sleeve had gone. 975
And Lancelot knew the little clinking sound;
And she by tact of love was well aware
That Lancelot knew that she was looking at him.
And yet he glanced not up, nor waved his hand,
Nor bade farewell, but sadly rode away. 980
This was the one discourtesy that he used.

So in her tower alone the maiden sat:
His very shield was gone; only the case,
Her own poor work, her empty labor, left. 985
But still she heard him, still his picture form'd
And grew between her and the pictured wall.
Then came her father, saying in low tones,
"Have comfort," whom she greeted quietly.
Then came her brethren saying, "Peace to thee,
Sweet sister," whom she answer'd with all calm. 990
But when they left her to herself again,

Death, like a friend's voice from a distant field
Approaching thro' the darkness, call'd; the owls
Wailing had power upon her, and she mixt
Her fancies with the sallow-rifted glooms 995
Of evening and the moanings of the wind.

And in those days she made a little song,
And call'd her song "The Song of Love and Death,"
And sang it: sweetly could she make and sing.

"Sweet is true love tho' given in vain, in vain; 1000
And sweet is death who puts an end to pain:
I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.

"Love, art thou sweet? then bitter death must be:
Love, thou art bitter; sweet is death to me. 1005
O Love, if death be sweeter, let me die.

"Sweet love, that seems not made to fade away;
Sweet death, that seems to make us loveless clay:
I know not which is sweeter, no, not I.

"I fain would follow love, if that could be;
I needs must follow death, who calls for me; 1010
Call and I follow, I follow! let me die."

High with the last line scaled her voice, and this,
All in a fiery dawning wild with wind
That shook her tower, the brothers heard, and thought
With shuddering, "Hark the Phantom of the house 1015
That ever shrieks before a death," and call'd
The father, and all three in hurry and fear
Ran to her, and lo! the red-blood light of dawn
Flared on her face, she shrilling, "Let me die!"

As when we dwell upon a word we know,
 Repeating, till the word we know so well
 Becomes a wonder, and we know not why,
 So dwelt the father on her face, and thought,
 "Is this Elaine?" till back the maiden fell,
 Then gave a languid hand to each, and lay,
 Speaking a still good-morrow with her eyes.
 At last she said: "Sweet brothers, yesternight
 I seem'd a curious little maid again,
 As happy as when we dwelt among the woods,
 And when ye used to take me with the flood
 Up the great river in the boatman's boat.
 Only ye would not pass beyond the cape
 That has the poplar on it: there ye fixt
 Your limit, oft returning with the tide.
 And yet I cried because ye would not pass
 Beyond it, and far up the shining flood
 Until we found the palace of the King.
 And yet ye would not; but this night I dream'd
 That I was all alone upon the flood,
 And then I said, 'Now shall I have my will:'
 And there I woke, but still the wish remain'd.
 So let me hence that I may pass at last
 Beyond the poplar and far up the flood,
 Until I find the palace of the King.
 There will I enter in among them all,
 And no man there will dare to mock at me;
 But there the fine Gawain will wonder at me,
 But there the great Sir Lancelot muse at me;
 Gawain, who bade a thousand farewells to me,
 Lancelot, who coldly went, nor bade me one:
 And there the King will know me and my love,
 And there the Queen herself will pity me,
 And all the gentle court will welcome me,
 And after my long voyage I shall rest!"

"Peace," said her father, "O my child, ye seem
 Light-headed, for what force is yours to go
 So far, being sick? and wherefore would ye look
 On this proud fellow again, who scorns us all?"

Then the rough Torre began to heave and move,
 And pluster into stormy sobs and say:
 "I never loved him: an I meet with him,
 I care not howsoever great he be,
 Then will I strike at him and strike him down;
 Give me good fortune, I will strike him dead,
 For this discomfort he hath done the house."

To whom the gentle sister made reply:
 "Fret not yourself, dear brother, nor be wroth,
 Seeing it is no more Sir Lancelot's fault
 Not to love me than it is mine to love
 Him of all men who seems to me the highest."

"Highest?" the father answer'd, echoing "highest?" —
 He meant to break the passion in her — "nay,
 Daughter, I know not what you call the highest;
 But this I know, for all the people know it,
 He loves the Queen, and in an open shame:
 And she returns his love in open shame;
 If this be high, what is it to be low?"

Then spake the lily maid of Astolat:
 "Sweet father, all too faint and sick am I
 For anger: these are slanders; never yet
 Was noble man but made ignoble talk.
 He makes no friend who never made a foe.
 But now it is my glory to have loved
 One peerless, without stain: so let me pass,
 My father, howsoe'er I seem to you,

Not all unhappy, having loved God's best
 And greatest, tho' my love had no return :
 Yet, seeing you desire your child to live,
 Thanks, but you work against your own desire ;
 For if I could believe the things you say 1090
 I should but die the sooner ; wherefore cease,
 Sweet father, and bid call the ghostly man
 Hither, and let me shrive me clean and die."

So when the ghostly man had come and gone,
 She, with a face bright as for sin forgiven, 1095
 Besought Lavaine to write as she devised
 A letter, word for word ; and when he ask'd,
 " Is it for Lancelot, is it for my dear lord ?
 Then will I bear it gladly ;" she replied,
 " For Lancelot and the Queen and all the world, 1100
 But I myself must bear it." Then he wrote
 The letter she devised ; which being writ
 And folded, " O sweet father, tender and true,
 Deny me not," she said — " ye never yet
 Denied my fancies — this, however strange, 1105
 My latest : lay the letter in my hand
 A little ere I die, and close the hand
 Upon it ; I shall guard it even in death.
 And when the heat has gone from out my heart,
 Then take the little bed on which I died 1110
 For Lancelot's love, and deck it like the Queen's
 For richness, and me also like the Queen
 In all I have of rich, and lay me on it.
 And let there be prepared a chariot-bier
 To take me to the river, and a barge 1115
 Be ready on the river, clothed in black.
 I go in state to court, to meet the Queen.
 There surely I shall speak for mine own self,
 And none of you can speak for me so well.

And therefore let our dumb old man alone 1120
 Go with me ; he can steer and row, and he
 Will guide me to that palace, to the doors."

She ceased : her father promised ; whereupon
 She grew so cheerful that they deem'd her death
 Was rather in the fantasy than the blood. 1125
 But ten slow mornings past, and on the eleventh
 Her father laid the letter in her hand,
 And closed the hand upon it, and she died.
 So that day there was dole in Astolat.

But when the next sun brake from underground, 1130
 Then, those two brethren slowly with bent brows
 Accompanying, the sad chariot-bier
 Past like a shadow thro' the field, that shone
 Full-summer, to that stream whereon the barge,
 Pall'd all its length in blackest samite, lay. 1135
 There sat the lifelong creature of the house,
 Loyal, the dumb old servitor, on deck,
 Winking his eyes, and twisted all his face.
 So those two brethren from the chariot took
 And on the black decks laid her in her bed, 1140
 Set in her hand a lily, o'er her hung
 The silken case with braided blazonings,
 And kiss'd her quiet brows, and saying to her,
 " Sister, farewell forever," and again,
 " Farewell, sweet sister," parted all in tears. 1145
 Then rose the dumb old servitor, and the dead,
 Oar'd by the dumb, went upward with the flood —
 In her right hand the lily, in her left
 The letter — all her bright hair streaming down —
 And all the coverlid was cloth of gold 1150
 Drawn to her waist, and she herself in white
 All but her face, and that clear-featured face

Was lovely, for she did not seem as dead,
But fast asleep, and lay as tho' she smiled.

That day Sir Lancelot at the palace craved 1155
Audience of Guinevere, to give at last
The price of half a realm, his costly gift,
Hard-won and hardly won with bruise and blow,
With deaths of others, and almost his own,
The nine-years-fought-for diamonds; for he saw 1160
One of her house, and sent him to the Queen
Bearing his wish, whereto the Queen agreed
With such and so unmoved a majesty
She might have seem'd her statue, but that he,
Low-drooping till he wellnigh kiss'd her feet 1165
For loyal awe, saw with a sidelong eye
The shadow of some piece of pointed lace,
In the Queen's shadow, vibrate on the walls,
And parted, laughing in his courtly heart.

All in an oriel on the summer side, 1170
Vine-clad, of Arthur's palace toward the stream,
They met, and Lancelot kneeling utter'd: "Queen,
Lady, my liege, in whom I have my joy,
Take, what I had not won except for you,
These jewels, and make me happy, making them 1175
An armet for the roundest arm on earth,
Or necklace for a neck to which the swan's
Is tawnier than her cygnet's: these are words;
Your beauty is your beauty, and I sin
In speaking, yet O, grant my worship of it 1180
Words, as we grant grief tears. Such sin in words,
Perchance, we both can pardon; but, my Queen,
I hear of rumors flying thro' your court.
Our bond, as not the bond of man and wife,
Should have in it an absoluter trust 1185

To make up that defect: let rumors be:
When did not rumors fly? these, as I trust
That you trust me in your own nobleness,
I may not well believe that you believe."

While thus he spoke, half turn'd away, the Queen 1190
Brake from the vast oriel-embowering vine
Leaf after leaf, and tore, and cast them off,
Till all the place whereon she stood was green;
Then, when he ceased, in one cold passive hand
Received at once and laid aside the gems 1195
There on a table near her, and replied:

"It may be I am quicker of belief
Than you believe me, Lancelot of the Lake.
Our bond is not the bond of man and wife.
This good is in it, whatsoever of ill, 1200
It can be broken easier. I for you
This many a year have done despite and wrong
To one whom ever in my heart of hearts
I did acknowledge nobler. What are these?
Diamonds for me! they had been thrice their worth 1205
Being your gift, had you not lost your own.
To loyal hearts the value of all gifts
Must vary as the giver's. Not for me!
For her! for your new fancy. Only this
Grant me, I pray you: have your joys apart. 1210
I doubt not that, however changed, you keep
So much of what is graceful: and myself
Would shun to break those bounds of courtesy
In which as Arthur's Queen I move and rule;
So cannot speak my mind. An end to this! 1215
A strange one! yet I take it with Amen.
So pray you, add my diamonds to her pearls;
Deck her with these; tell her, she shines me down:

An armlet for an arm to which the Queen's
Is haggard, or a necklace for a neck 1220
O, as much fairer — as a faith once fair
Was richer than these diamonds — hers, not mine —
Nay, by the mother of our Lord himself,
Or hers or mine, mine now to work my will —
She shall not have them."

Saying which she seized, 1225

And, thro' the casement standing wide for heat,
Flung them, and down they flash'd, and smote the stream.
Then from the smitten surface flash'd, as it were,
Diamonds to meet them, and they passed away.
Then while Sir Lancelot leant, in half disdain 1230
At love, life, all things, on the window ledge,
Close underneath his eyes, and right across
Where these had fallen, slowly past the barge
Whereon the lily maid of Astolat
Lay smiling, like a star in blackest night. 1235

But the wild Queen, who saw not, burst away
To weep and wail in secret; and the barge,
On to the palace-doorway sliding, paused.
There two stood arm'd, and kept the door; to whom,
All up the marble stair, tier over tier, 1240
Were added mouths that gaped, and eyes that ask'd,
"What is it?" but that oarsman's haggard face,
As hard and still as is the face that men
Shape to their fancy's eye from broken rocks
On some cliff-side, appall'd them, and they said: 1245
"He is enchanted, cannot speak — and see,
Look how she sleeps — the Fairy Queen, so fair!
Yea, but how pale! what are they? flesh and blood?
Or come to take the King to Fairyland?"

For some do hold our Arthur cannot die, 1250
But that he passes into Fairyland."

While thus they babbled of the King, the King
Came girt with knights: then turn'd the tongueless man
From the half-face to the full eye, and rose
And pointed to the damsel and the doors. 1255
So Arthur bade the meek Sir Percivale
And pure Sir Galahad to uplift the maid;
And reverently they bore her into hall.
Then came the fine Gawain and wonder'd at her,
And Lancelot later came and mused at her, 1260
And last the Queen herself, and pitied her;
But Arthur spied the letter in her hand,
Stoopt, took, brake seal, and read it; this was all:

"Most noble lord, Sir Lancelot of the Lake,
I, sometime call'd the maid of Astolat, 1265
Come, for you left me taking no farewell,
Hither, to take my last farewell of you.
I loved you, and my love had no return,
And therefore my true love has been my death.
And therefore to our Lady Guinevere, 1270
And to all other ladies, I make moan:
Pray for my soul, and yield me burial.
Pray for my soul thou, too, Sir Lancelot,
As thou art a knight peerless."

Thus he read;

And ever in the reading lords and dames 1275
Wept, looking often from his face who read
To hers which lay so silent, and at times,
So touch'd were they, half-thinking that her lips
Who had devised the letter moved again.

Then freely spoke Sir Lancelot to them all: 1280
 "My lord liege Arthur, and all ye that hear,
 Know that for this most gentle maiden's death
 Right heavy am I; for good she was and true,
 But loved me with a love beyond all love
 In women, whomsoever I have known. 1285
 Yet to be loved makes not to love again;
 Not at my years, however it hold in youth.
 I swear by truth and knighthood that I gave
 No cause, not willingly, for such a love.
 To this I call my friends in testimony, 1290
 Her brethren, and her father, who himself
 Besought me to be plain and blunt, and use,
 To break her passion, some discourtesy
 Against my nature: what I could, I did.
 I left her and I bade her no farewell; 1295
 Tho', had I dreamt the damsel would have died,
 I might have put my wits to some rough use,
 And help'd her from herself."

Then said the Queen —
 Sea was her wrath, yet working after storm:
 "Ye might at least have done her so much grace, 1300
 Fair lord, as would have help'd her from her death."
 He raised his head, their eyes met and hers fell,
 He adding:
 "Queen, she would not be content
 Save that I wedded her, which could not be.
 Then might she follow me thro' the world, she ask'd; 1305
 It could not be. I told her that her love
 Was but the flash of youth, would darken down,
 To rise hereafter in a stiller flame
 Toward one more worthy of her — then would I,
 More specially were he she wedded poor, 1310
 Estate them with large land and territory

In mine own realm beyond the narrow seas,
 To keep them in all joyance: more than this
 I could not; this she would not, and she died."

He pausing, Arthur answer'd: "O my knight, 1315
 It will be to thy worship, as my knight,
 And mine, as head of all our Table Round,
 To see that she be buried worshipfully."

So toward that shrine which then in all the realm
 Was richest, Arthur leading, slowly went 1320
 The marshal'd Order of their Table Round,
 And Lancelot sad beyond his wont, to see
 The maiden buried, not as one unknown,
 Nor meanly, but with gorgeous obsequies, 1325
 And mass, and rolling music, like a queen.
 And when the knights had laid her comely head
 Low in the dust of half-forgotten kings,
 Then Arthur spake among them: "Let her tomb
 Be costly, and her image thereupon,
 And let the shield of Lancelot at her feet 1330
 Be carven, and her lily in her hand.
 And let the story of her dolorous voyage
 For all true hearts be blazon'd on her tomb
 In letters gold and azure!" which was wrought
 Thereafter; but when now the lords and dames 1335
 And people, from the high door streaming, brake
 Disorderly, as homeward each, the Queen,
 Who mark'd Sir Lancelot where he moved apart,
 Drew near, and sigh'd in passing, "Lancelot,
 Forgive me; mine was jealousy in love." 1340
 He answer'd with his eyes upon the ground,
 "That is love's curse; pass on, my Queen, forgiven."
 But Arthur, who beheld his cloudy brows,
 Approach'd him, and with full affection said:

"Lancelot, my Lancelot, thou in whom I have 1345
 Most joy and most affianced, for I know
 What thou hast been in battle by my side,
 And many a time have watch'd thee at the tilt
 Strike down the lusty and long practised knight
 And let the younger and unskill'd go by 1350
 To win his honor and to make his name,
 And loved thy courtesies and thee, a man
 Made to be loved; but now I would to God,
 Seeing the homeless trouble in thine eyes,
 Thou couldst have loved this maiden, shaped, it seems, 1355
 By God for thee alone, and from her face,
 If one may judge the living by the dead,
 Delicately pure and marvellously fair,
 Who might have brought thee, now a lonely man
 Wifeless and heirless, noble issue, sons 1360
 Born to the glory of thy name and fame,
 My knight, the great Sir Lancelot of the Lake."

Then answer'd Lancelot: "Fair she was, my King,
 Pure, as you ever wish your knights to be.
 To doubt her fairness were to want an eye, 1365
 To doubt her pureness were to want a heart —
 Yea, to be loved, if what is worthy love
 Could bind him, but free love will not be bound."

"Free love, so bound, were freest," said the King.
 "Let love be free; free love is for the best: 1370
 And, after heaven, on our dull side of death,
 What should be best, if not so pure a love
 Clothed in so pure a loveliness? yet thee
 She fail'd to bind, tho' being, as I think,
 Unbound as yet, and gentle, as I know." 1375

And Lancelot answer'd nothing, but he went,
 And at the inrunning of a little brook

Sat by the river in a cove, and watch'd
 The high reed wave, and lifted up his eyes
 And saw the barge that brought her moving down, 1380
 Far-off, a blot upon the stream, and said
 Low in himself: "Ah, simple heart and sweet,
 Ye loved me, damsel, surely with a love
 Far tenderer than my Queen's. Pray for thy soul?
 Ay, that will I. Farewell too — now at last — 1385
 Farewell, fair lily. 'Jealousy in love?'
 Not rather dead love's harsh heir, jealous pride?
 Queen, if I grant the jealousy as of love,
 May not your crescent fear for name and fame,
 Speak, as it waxes, of a love that wanes? 1390
 Why did the King dwell on my name to me?
 Mine own name shames me, seeming a reproach,
 Lancelot, whom the Lady of the Lake
 Caught from his mother's arms — the wondrous one
 Who passes thro' the vision of the night — 1395
 She chanted snatches of mysterious hymns
 Heard on the winding waters, eve and morn
 She kiss'd me saying, 'Thou art fair, my child,
 As a king's son,' and often in her arms
 She bare me, pacing on the dusky mere. 1400
 Would she had drown'd me in it, where'er it be!
 For what am I? what profits me my name
 Of greatest knight? I fought for it, and have it:
 Pleasure to have it, none; to lose it, pain:
 Now grown a part of me: but what use in it? 1405
 To make men worse by making my sin known?
 Or sin seem less, the sinner seeming great?
 Alas for Arthur's greatest knight, a man
 Not after Arthur's heart! I needs must break
 These bonds that so defame me: not without 1410
 She wills it: would I, if she will'd it? nay,
 Who knows? but if I would not, then may God,

I pray Him, send a sudden angel down
 To seize me by the hair and bear me far,
 And fling me deep in that forgotten mere,
 Among the tumbled fragments of the hills."

1415

So groan'd Sir Lancelot in remorseful pain,
 Not knowing he should die a holy man.

INTRODUCTION TO "THE PASSING OF ARTHUR."



The Fall of the Round Table and of Arthur's Model Realm. — With "The Passing of Arthur" the story of the Idylls comes to an end. The moral taint engendered by the sin of Lancelot and Guinevere, which first showed itself in "Geraint and Enid," and gathered strength in the succeeding Idylls, has infused its deadly poison throughout the system. The splendid circle of knights which Arthur had gathered around him, bound by vows of utter hardihood, utter gentleness, utter faithfulness in love, and uttermost obedience to the king, has been broken to fragments. The glory of the Round Table is no more, and the Order is split into feuds. The model realm of all that was noble falls in ruins, and with it the hopes of Arthur.

The Simplifying of the Story. — As the story of the Idylls draws to a close, it gradually divests itself of the many minor characters and details which the unfolding of the drama has introduced upon the scene. The throng of knights and ladies and miscellaneous personages has passed out of sight. Guinevere has retired to a nunnery to spend the rest of her days, and even Lancelot is but a memory. The grand central figure who dominates the whole system is left, forlorn and sad, with only one faithful knight, the first and latest, Sir Bedivere. Even in