

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

this Idyll the simplifying process goes on, serving to heighten the dignity and impressiveness of the scene. "The flood of poetry which seemed to run shallower in some of the earlier poems, being spread over a wide area and divided into numerous rills, is now gathered up into a single stream, which is so much the more effective as it is deeper and more powerful."

The Final Act of the Drama. — "The Passing of Arthur" tells of the last battle and the end of Arthur's earthly career. Bereft of all who are dear to him, the king leads his forces to the west in pursuit of the traitor, Modred, and his followers. The two opposing hosts meet on the plains of Lyonesse, and a great battle ensues. Arthur slays Modred with his own hand, and is himself mortally wounded. He is taken to a small chapel near by, and thence is carried to the island valley of Avilion. Though harassed by the failure of all his cherished hopes, and racked by pangs of doubt that almost conquer faith, he does not despair. He can still say

"Nay — God my Christ — I pass but shall not die.

* * * * *

King am I, whatsoever be their cry ;"

and his last act in striking down the traitor of his house fitly crowns a life of kingly and knightly achievement.

"The Passing of Arthur" is in many ways the grandest of the Idylls. The story is taken, with some changes, from the twenty-first book of Malory. Lines 170-440 form the original fragment, "Morte d'Arthur," published in 1842, which, although written so many years before the rest

of the Idylls, is in the best Tennysonian vein. It is, as the poet himself classed it, "a Homeric echo." In its mastery of language, simplicity of diction, fine descriptive power, harmonious rhythm, and sustained dignity of tone, it reaches the highest rank of poetry. In "The Passing of Arthur" Tennyson has kept close to his original, both in his choice of incident and in the wording of many passages. But in addition to this he seems to have caught the spirit of weirdness, so characteristic of Keltic literature, which throws around the story a charm unique in itself. The style of the poem is purposely archaic; its whole tone is dignified and impressive; it contains many of the most picturesque passages to be found in the Idylls; it is replete with lofty sentiments that could come only from a great soul. It is the fitting close of a grand epic.