

THE PASSING OF ARTHUR.



That 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.

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For on their march to westward, Bedivere,
Who slowly paced among the slumbering host,
Heard in his tent the moanings of the King:

“I found Him in the shining of the stars,
I mark’d Him in the flowering of His fields,
But in His ways with men I find Him not.
I waged His wars, and now I pass and die.
O me! for why is all around us here
As if some lesser god had made the world,
But had not force to shape it as he would,
Till the High God behold it from beyond,
And enter it, and make it beautiful?
Or else as if the world were wholly fair,
But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
And have not power to see it as it is:
Perchance, because we see not to the close;—
For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
And have but stricken with the sword in vain:
And all whereon I lean’d in wife and friend
Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
Reels back into the beast, and is no more.

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My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death:
Nay — God my Christ — I pass but shall not die.”

Then, ere 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
Forever: 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 brake the petty kings, and fought with Rome,
Or 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 death-white mist slept over sand and sea, 95
 Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
 Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
 With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell
 Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.
 For friend and foe were shadows in the mist, 100
 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, 105
 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 battle-axes on shatter'd helms, and shrieks 110
 After the Christ, of those who falling down
 Look'd 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, laboring of the lungs 115
 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 death-like swoon, thus over all that shore, 120
 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 125
 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 130
 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. 135

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, 140
 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 fallen
 Confusion, till I know not what I am,
 Nor whence I am, nor whether I be king; 145
 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 150
 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 155
 Who hath but dwelt beneath one roof with me.
 My house are rather they who swear 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, 160
 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 165
 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 170
 Among the mountains by the winter sea;
 Until King Arthur's Table, man by man,
 Had fallen in Lyonesse about their lord,
 King Arthur. Then, because his wound was deep,
 The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him, 175
 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. 180

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 185
 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, — 190

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, 195
 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 200
 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; 205
 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; 210
 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, 215
 Old knights, and over them the sea-wind sang
 Shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He, stepping down
 By zigzag paths and juts of pointed rock,
 Came on the shining levels of the lake.

There drew he forth the brand Excalibur, 220
 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 225
 Of subtlest jewellery. 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 230
 There in the many-knotted water-flags,
 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?" 235

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 beseem'd
 Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight;
 For surer sign had follow'd, either hand,
 Or voice, or else a motion of the mere. 245
 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 250
 Across the ridge, and paced beside the mere,
 Counting the dewy pebbles, fixt 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: 255

"And if indeed I cast the brand away,
 Surely a precious thing, one worthy note,
 Should thus be lost forever from the earth,
 Which might have pleased the eyes of many men.
 What good should follow this, if this were done? 260
 What harm, undone? Deep harm to disobey,
 Seeing obédience 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 265
 What record or what relic of my lord
 Should be to aftertime, but empty breath
 And rumors 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, 270
 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 275
 To all the people, winning reverence.
 But now much honor 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. 280

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." 285

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 290
 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 295
 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." 300

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 splendor of the moon, 305
 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; 310
 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. 315

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 320
 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; 325
 But when I look'd again, beheld 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: 330
 "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, 335
 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; 340
 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 345
 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, 350

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 355
 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 ! 360

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 365
 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, 370
 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 375
 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 a brow
 Striped with dark blood : for all his face was white 380
 And colorless, 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 385
 High from the dais-throne — were parch'd with dust,
 Or, clotted into points and hanging loose,
 Mixt with the knightly growth that fringed his lips.
 So like a shatter'd column lay the King ;
 Not like that Arthur who, with lance in rest, 390
 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 ? 395
 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 400
 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, 405
 Among new men, strange faces, other minds."

And slowly answer'd 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. 410
 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 415
 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 420
 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 — 425
 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 430
 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, 435
 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. 440

But when that moan had past for evermore,
 The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn
 Amazed him, and he groan'd, "The King is gone."
 And therewithal came on him the weird rhyme,
 "From the great deep to the great deep he goes." 445

Whereat he slowly turn'd and 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 450
 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 455
 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 460
 Around a king returning from his wars.

Thereat once more he moved about, and clomb
 Even 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, 465
 Down that long water opening on the deep
 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.