

## Morte d'Arthur

(from *Idylls of the King* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

### THE EPIC

At Francis Allen's on the Christmas-eve,—  
The game of forfeits done—the girls all kiss'd  
Beneath the sacred bush and past away—  
The parson Holmes, the poet Everard Hall,  
The host, and I sat round the wassail-bowl,                   5  
Then half-way ebb'd: and there we held a talk,  
How all the old honour had from Christmas gone,  
Or gone, or dwindled down to some odd games  
In some odd nooks like this; till I, tired out  
With cutting eights that day upon the pond,                   10  
Where, three times slipping from the outer edge,  
I bump'd the ice into three several stars,  
Fell in a doze; and half-awake I heard  
The parson taking wide and wider sweeps,  
Now harping on the church-commissioners,                   15  
Now hawking at Geology and schism,  
Until I woke, and found him settled down  
Upon the general decay of faith  
Right thro' the world, 'at home was little left,  
And none abroad: there was no anchor, none;                   20  
To hold by.' Francis, laughing, clapt his hand  
On Everard's shoulder, with 'I hold by him.'  
'And I,' quoth Everard, 'by the wassail-bowl.'  
'Why yes,' I said, 'we knew your gift that way  
At college: but another which you had,                   25  
I mean of verse (for so we held it then),  
What came of that?' 'You know,' said Frank, 'he burnt  
His epic, his King Arthur, some twelve books'—  
And then to me demanding why? 'Oh, sir,  
He thought that nothing new was said, or else                   30  
Something so said 'twas nothing—that a truth  
Looks freshest in the fashion of the day:  
God knows: he has a mint of reasons: ask.  
It pleased *me* well enough,' 'Nay, nay,' said Hall,  
'Why take the style of those heroic times?                   35  
For nature brings not back the Mastodon,  
Nor we those times; and why should any man  
Remodel models? these twelve books of mine  
Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth,  
Mere chaff and draff, much better burnt.' 'But I,'                   40  
Said Francis, 'pick'd the eleventh from this hearth'  
And have it: keep a thing, its use will come.  
I hoard it as a sugar-plum for Holmes.'  
He laugh'd, and I, tho' sleepy, like a horse  
That hears the corn-bin open, prick'd my ears;                   45  
For I remember'd Everard's college fame  
When we were Freshmen: then at my request

He brought it; and the poet little urged,  
But with some prelude of disparagement,  
Read, mouthing out his hollow o's and a's,      50  
Deep-chested music, and to this result.

### MORTE D'ARTHUR

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd  
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,      55  
The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,  
Sir Bedivere, the last of all his knights,  
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.      60  
On one side lay the Ocean, and on one  
Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:  
The sequel of to-day unsolders all  
The goodliest fellowship of famous knights      65  
Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep  
They sleep—the men I loved. I think that we  
Shall never more, at any future time,  
Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,  
Walking about the gardens and the halls      70  
Of Camelot, as in the days that were.  
I perish by this people which I made,—  
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      75  
That without help I cannot last till morn.  
Thou therefore take my brand Excalibur,  
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,      80  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful,  
Holding the sword—and how I row'd across  
And took it, and have worn it, like a king:  
And, wheresoever I am sung or told  
In aftertime, this also shall be known:      85  
But now delay not: take Excalibur,  
And fling him far into the middle mere:  
Watch what thou seest, and lightly bring me word.'

To him replied the bold Sir Bedivere:      90  
'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.  
Yet I thy hest will all perform at full,  
Watch what I see, and lightly bring thee word.'      95

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,  
Old knights, and over them the sea-wind sang  
Shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He, stepping down 100  
By zig-zag paths and juts of pointed rock,  
Came on the shining levels of the lake.

There drew he forth the brand Excalibur,  
And o'er him, drawing it, the winter moon,  
Brightening the skirts of a long cloud, ran forth 105  
And sparkled keen with frost against the hilt:  
For all the haft twinkled with diamond sparks,  
Myriads of topaz-lights and jacinth-work  
Of subtlest jewelry. He gazed so long  
That both his eyes were dazzled, as he stood, 110  
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  
There in the many-knotted waterflags,  
That whistled stiff and dry about the marge. 115  
So strode he back slow to the wounded King

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:  
'Hast thou performed my mission which I gave?  
What is it thou hast seen? or what hast heard?'

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere: 120  
'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 125  
Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight:  
For surer sign had follow'd, either hand,  
Or voice, or else a motion of the mere.  
This is a shameful thing for men to lie.  
Yet now, I charge thee, quickly go again 130  
As thou art lief and dear, and do the thing  
I bad thee, watch, and lightly bring me word.'

Then went Sir Bedivere the second time  
Across the ridge, and paced beside the mere,  
Counting the dewy pebbles, fix'd in thought; 135  
But when he saw the wonder of the hilt,  
How curiously and strangely chased, he smote  
His palms together, and he cried aloud,

'And if indeed I cast the brand away,  
Surely a precious thing, one worthy note, 140  
Should thus be lost for ever from the earth,  
Which might have pleased the eyes of many men.  
What good should follow this, if this were done?

What harm, undone? deep harm to disobey,  
Seeing obedience is the bond of rule. 145  
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.  
What record, or what relic of my lord  
Should be to aftertime, but empty breath 150  
And rumours 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,  
Saying, "King Arthur's sword, Excalibur,  
Wrought by the lonely maiden of the Lake. 155  
Nine years she wrought it, sitting in the deeps  
Upon the hidden bases of the hills."  
So might some old man speak in the after-time  
To all the people, winning reverence.  
But now much honour and much fame were lost.' 160

So spake he, clouded with his own conceit,  
And hid Excalibur the second time,  
And so strode back slow to the wounded King.

Then spoke King Arthur, breathing heavily:  
'What is it thou hast seen? or what hast heard?' 165

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:  
'I heard the water lapping on the crag,  
And the long ripple washing in the reeds.'

To whom replied King Arthur, much in wrath:  
'Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue, 170  
Unknightly, traitor-hearted! Woe is me!  
Authority forgets a dying king,  
Laid widow'd of the power in his eye  
That bow'd the will. I see thee what thou art,  
For thou, the latest-left of all my knights, 175  
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  
Valuing the giddy pleasure of the eyes.  
Yet, for a man may fail in duty twice, 180  
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.'

Then quickly rose Sir Bedivere, and ran,  
And, leaping down the ridges lightly, plunged 185  
Among the bulrush-beds, and clutch'd the sword,  
And strongly wheel'd and threw it. The great brand  
Made lightnings in the splendour of the moon,  
And flashing round and round, and whirl'd in an arch,  
Shot like a streamer of the northern morn, 190  
Seen where the moving isles of winter shock  
By night, with noises of the northern sea.

So flash'd and fell the brand Excalibur:  
But ere he dipt the surface, rose an arm  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, 195  
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.

Then spoke King-Arthur, drawing thicker breath:  
'Now see I by thine eyes that this is done. 200  
Speak out: what is it thou has heard, or seen?'

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:  
'Sir King, I closed mine eyelids, lest the gems  
Should blind my purpose, for I never saw,  
Nor shall see, here or elsewhere, till I die, 205  
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;  
But when I look'd again, behold an arm,  
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful, 210  
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:  
'My end draws nigh; 'tis time that I were gone.  
Make broad thy shoulders to receive my weight, 215  
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,  
Slowly, with pain, reclining on his arm,  
And looking wistfully with wide blue eyes 220  
As in a picture. Him Sir Bedivere  
Remorsefully regarded thro' his tears,  
And would have spoken, but he found not words,  
Then took with care, and kneeling on one knee,  
O'er both his shoulders drew the languid hands, 225  
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  
When all the house is mute. So sigh'd the King,  
Muttering and murmuring at his ear, 'Quick, quick! 230  
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,  
Larger than human on the frozen hills.  
He heard the deep behind him, and a cry 235  
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  
The bare black cliff clang'd round him, as he based  
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang 240

Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels—  
And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,  
And the long glories of the winter moon.

Then saw they how there hove a dusky barge,  
Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern, 245  
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  
Three Queens with crowns of gold—and from them rose  
A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars, 250  
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,  
Or hath come, since the making of the world,  
Then murmur'd Arthur, 'Place me in the barge.' 255  
And 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  
And fairest, laid his head upon her lap,  
And loosed the shatter'd casque, and chafed his hands, 260  
And call'd him by his name, complaining loud,  
And dropping bitter tears against his brow  
Striped with dark blood: for all his face was white  
And colourless, and like the wither'd moon  
Smote by the fresh beam of the springing east; 265  
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  
High from the daïs-throne—were parch'd with dust;  
Or, clotted into points and hanging loose, 270  
Mix'd 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,  
From spur to plume a star of tournament,  
Shot thro' the lists at Camelot, and charged 275  
Before the eyes of ladies and of kings.

Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere,  
'Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?  
Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?  
For now I see the true old times are dead, 280  
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  
The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.  
But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved 285  
Which was an image of the mighty world;  
And I, the last, go forth companionless,  
And the days darken round me, and the years,  
Among new men, strange faces, other minds.'

And slowly answered Arthur from the barge: 290  
'The old order changeth, yielding place to new,

And God fulfils Himself in many ways,  
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.  
 Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?  
 I have lived my life, and that which I have done 295  
 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  
 Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice  
 Rise like a fountain for me night and day. 300  
 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  
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?  
 For so the whole round earth is every way 305  
 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—  
 (For all my mind is clouded with a doubt)  
 To the island-valley of Avilion; 310  
 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  
 And bowery hollows crown'd with summer sea,  
 Where I will heal me of my grievous wound.' 315

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,  
 Ruffles her pure cold plume, and takes the flood  
 With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir Bedivere 320  
 Revolving many memories, till the hull  
 Look'd one black dot against the verge of dawn,  
 And on the mere the wailing died away.

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Here ended Hall, and our last light, that long  
 Had wink'd and threatened darkness, flared and fell: 325  
 At which the Parson, sent to sleep with sound,  
 And waked with silence, grunted 'Good!' but we  
 Sat rapt: it was the tone with which he read—  
 Perhaps some modern touches here and there  
 Redeem'd it from the charge of nothingness— 330  
 Or else we loved the man, and prized his work;  
 I know not: but we sitting, as I said,  
 The cock crew loud; as at that time of year  
 The lusty bird takes every hour for dawn:  
 Then Francis, muttering, like a man ill-used, 335  
 'There now—that's nothing!' drew a little back,  
 And drove his heel into the smoulder'd log,  
 That sent a blast of sparkles up the flue:  
 And so to bed; where yet in sleep I seem'd  
 To sail with Arthur under looming shores, 340  
 Point after point; till on to dawn, when dreams

Begin to feel the truth and stir of day,  
To me, methought, who waited with a crowd,  
There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore  
King Arthur, like a modern gentleman 345  
Of stateliest port; and all the people cried,  
'Arthur is come again: he cannot die.'  
Then those that stood upon the hills behind  
Repeated—'Come again, and thrice as fair;'  
And, further inland, voices echo'd—'Come 350  
With all good things, and war shall be no more.'  
At this a hundred bells began to peal,  
That with the sound I woke, and heard indeed  
The clear church-bells ring in the Christmas-morn.