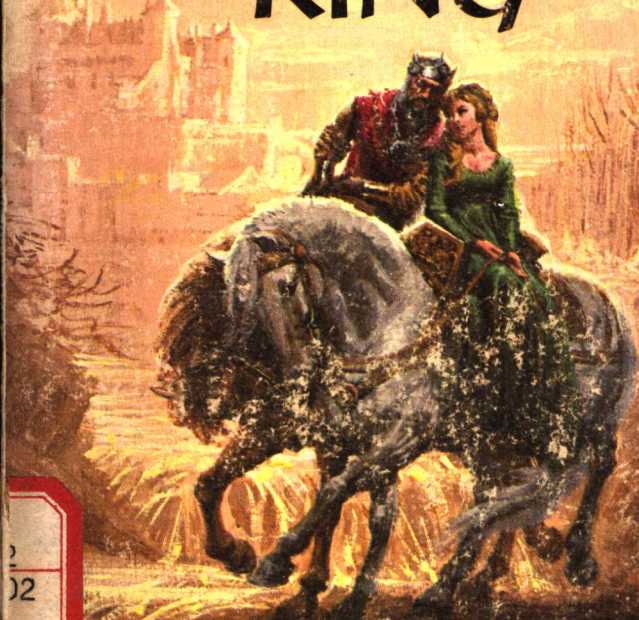


ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

IDYLLS OF THE KING



Introduction by Clarence Andrews

Complete and Unabridged

IDYLLS OF THE KING

Alfred, LORD TENNYSON



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INTRODUCTION

Camelot—the “city built to music” that we know because we have read T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, or because we have seen or heard Broadway’s musical adaption of the book, *Camelot*. But Camelot, the knights and their ladies, have long been a part of English tradition. The legend of King Arthur goes back to the beginning of English history when the Romans were pulling their Legions back from the far reaches of the Empire to defend Rome itself, and when barons and earls of Germanic origin were streaming across the English Channel to fall upon the defenseless tribes of the British Isles. Historians cannot determine whether or not there was a real Arthur, but that matter need not concern us.

What is of concern is that a body of legend began to collect around the name of Arthur; poets and troubadors gave structure to this material and began to spread it far and wide. To indicate the popularity of these stories, scholars have noted, for example, that in the Middle Ages the very un-Italian name of Arthur (Arturo) was given to many Italian boys. The most important spreader of the stories seems to have been Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Britonum* (1137). Additional interest in the material developed as the result of the Arthurian romances of the French, Chretien de Troyes (1160-1190), and of the German writers, Wolfram von Eschenbach and Godfried von Strassburg. It was de Troyes who first used with

the Arthur material the literary pattern that Tennyson follows—the avoidance of an overall narrative and the use instead of single episodes or a group of closely related episodes built around the life of a main character. This method is not original with Chretien de Troyes. One excellent, well-known example of this style is the New Testament and the recording of the life of Jesus. Like the Biblical accounts, the Arthurian material as recounted by Chretien and later by Tennyson tells of the miraculous birth of a child, the question of his paternity, the accomplishments of his manhood and the final passing of the hero. Other similarities may easily be found between the life of Jesus and the life of Arthur.

There were other writers who preserved and added to the legend, but there is one ancient writer who worked with the material who is of greatest importance to the modern reader, for his account is still widely read. He is Sir Thomas Malory whose *Le Morte d'Arthur* was first in 1476. All later developments of the Arthurian material rely heavily on Malory and Tennyson uses him as his authority on many points.

Tennyson became interested quite early in Arthur and his court as a subject of poetry. His 1832 volume, *Poems*, has two poems on the theme. By 1835 he seems to have completed that part of "The Passing of Arthur" contained in lines 170-440. This section was first published in 1842 ("The Epic") within a framework of verses which described a mythical twelve book composition by a young poet, of which these 270 lines were reputedly the remaining fragment:

. . . You know . . . he burnt
His epic, his King Arthur, some twelve books—
. . . Nay, nay, . . .
Why take the style of those heroic times?
For nature brings not back the mastodon
. . . and why should any man
Remodel models? These twelve books of mine
Were faint Homeric models, nothing worth,
Mere chaff and draff . . .
. . . where yet in sleep I seem'd
To sail with Arthur under looming shores
. . . Arthur is come again: he cannot die . . .

Of this fragment Walter Savage Landor, the English critic wrote: "It is more Homeric than any poem of our time, and rivals some of the noblest parts of the *Odyssey*." Such com-

ments must have encouraged Tennyson to continue thinking it might be worthwhile to "remodel models."

Tennyson called the twelve book poem based on Arthurian legend an "English idyll." An idyll might be viewed as a literary version of the medieval tapestry. Like individual scenes on a tapestry, each episode stands apart, but is related to the whole and the episodes are, like tapestry art, highly compressed and dependent upon myth and symbol. The beginning and closing books focus on the coming and the passing of Arthur. These books, Tennyson said, "are simpler and more severe in style, as dealing with the awfulness of Birth and Death." You will undoubtedly notice some of the archaic language used: words such as "foughten," "none other" for "no other," "brake" for "broke," "help" for "helped."

The intermediate books focus on the adventures which befall the knights and ladies of Camelot. Of this much of the poem's form, a friend of Tennyson's wrote: "Birth is a mystery, and death is a mystery, and in the midst lies the tableland of life, and its struggle and performance."

The story begins on "the night of the new year" when Arthur is born and closes "as the new sun [rises] bringing the new year." Some correspondence may therefore be seen between the twelve books and the twelve months of the year. This correspondence is reinforced by the slow roll of the seasons; the winter of Arthur's birth gives way to that glorious season when Arthur weds:

Far shone the fields of May thro' open door,
The sacred altar blossom'd white with May,
The sun of May descended on their King;

and early summer gives way to high summer:

. . . thro' the casement standing wide for heat,

and then to fall:

. then one low roll
of autumn thunder . . .
And ever the wind blew, and yellowing leaf . . .
Went down it,

and as Arthur dies, winter comes, bringing with it:

. . . the long glories of the winter moon . . .
The stillness of the dead world's winter dawn . . .

The changing seasons are graphic symbols of the birth, growth, flowering, and final death of Arthur and his dream.

In the poem about the "city built to music" music becomes a *leitmotif*. Compare and contrast the brave song sung by the "knighthood" of Arthur as the Round Table is organized to the:

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 . . .

or the "riddling triplets" of Merlin with that cynical song which Vivien sings to the great magician; or the song of love with which Lynette twits Gareth to "The Song of Love and Death" which the "lily maid" Elaine sings to herself; or with any of the other songs in the poem. Note those occasions when:

all the world

Made music and he felt his being move
In music with his Order and the King.

The thematic importance of music in the poem is made plainer when we realize that the first whispers of adultery between Guinevere and Lancelot are:

The little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute
And ever widening slowly silence all.

One other major theme—the wasteland theme—needs to be mentioned. Camelot is:

the royal mount

That rose between the forest and the field,
and beyond:

The damp hill-slopes were quicken'd into green,
And the live green had kindled into flowers,

for Camelot is at the warm center of the world. Beyond it:

The land of Cameliard was waste;
In Yniol's castle:

all was ruinous

Here stood a shatter'd archway plumed with fern;
And here had fallen a great part of a tower;

similarly, the hall of the Earl of Doorm and its earldom, and the castle of Pellam are wastelands. In the end as Arthur fights:

On the waste sand by the waste sea

Camelot itself has become:

 heaps of ruin, hornless unicorns
Crack'd basilisks, and splinter'd cockatrices,
And shattered talbots, which had left the stones
Raw that they fell from.

There is a strong temptation in a poem such as this to look for allegories and symbols. For example in Tennyson's own time, critics saw the three queens as Faith, Hope and Charity. To which Tennyson replied that the critics were right and not right. "They mean that and they do not." They are "those three Graces, but they are much more." And Tennyson concluded as we must: "The thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation."

When Tennyson presented this poem to his Queen, Victoria was ruler over the world's greatest empire, an empire upon which the sun never set. There is implicit in the poem a warning that even the perfect King and the perfect Kingdom cannot survive the loss of faith. The unity of the Round Table broke down under the evil influence of Mordred and Arthur lived to see the end of his dream. Perhaps an analogy of sorts may be drawn between the kingdoms of legend and the kingdoms of reality. This century has witnessed the passing of one great power. England's place in the center of world affairs has passed to another kingdom—the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, European countries looked toward America as a country that might fulfill the dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and countless thousands of immigrants streamed through the New York harbor into the country that held forth the promise of accepting "the huddled masses yearning to be free." But the clarity of the original vision has dimmed and the country stands confused as to its purposes and goals, both here and abroad. Yet our ideals still rise to the great society.

Do we dare hope for a Camelot as a reality?

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DEDICATION

'Flos Regum Arthurus.'—JOSEPH OF EXETER

These to His Memory—since he held them dear,
Perchance as finding there unconsciously
Some image of himself—I dedicate,
I dedicate, I consecrate with tears—
These Idylls.

And indeed He seems to me
Scarce other than my king's ideal knight,
'Who revered his conscience as his king;
Whose glory was, redressing human wrong;
Who spake no slander, no, nor listen'd to it;
Who loved one only and who clave to her—'
Her—over all whose realms to their last isle,
Commingled with the gloom of imminent war,
The shadow of His loss drew like eclipse,
Darkening the world. We have lost him: he is gone:
We know him now: all narrow jealousies
Are silent; and we see him as he moved,
How modest, kindly, all-accomplish'd wise,
With what sublime repression of himself,
And in what limits, and how tenderly;
Not swaying to this faction or to that;
Not making his high place the lawless perch
Of wing'd ambitions, nor a vantage-ground
For pleasure; but thro' all this tract of years
Wearing the white flower of a blameless life,
Before a thousand peering littlenesses,

In that fierce light which beats upon a throne,
And blackens every blot; for where is he,
Who dares foreshadow for an only son
A lovelier life, a more unstain'd, than his?
Or how should England dreaming of *his* sons
Hope more for these than some inheritance
Of such a life, a heart, a mind as thine,
Thou noble Father of her Kings to be,
Laborious for her people and her poor—
Voice in the rich dawn of an ampler day—
Far-sighted summoner of War and Waste
To fruitful strifes and rivalries of peace—
Sweet nature gilded by the gracious gleam
Of letters, dear to Science, dear to Art,
Dear to thy land and ours, a Prince indeed,
Beyond all titles, and a household name,
Hereafter, thro' all times, Albert the Good.

Break not, O woman's-heart, but still endure;
Break not, for thou art Royal, but endure,
Remembering all the beauty of that star
Which shone so close beside Thee that ye made
One light together, but has past and leaves
The Crown a lonely splendour.

May all love,
His love, unseen but felt, o'ershadow Thee,
The love of all Thy sons encompass Thee,
The love of all Thy daughters cherish Thee,
The love of of all Thy people comfort Thee,
Till God's love set Thee at his side again!

THE COMING OF ARTHUR

Leodogran the King of Cameliard,
Had one fair daughter, and none other child;
And she was fairest of all flesh on earth,
Guinevere, and in her his one delight.

For many a petty king ere Arthur came
Ruled in this isle, and ever waging war
Each upon other, wasted all the land;
And still from time to time the heathen host
Swarm'd overseas, and harried what was left.
And so there grew great tracts of wilderness,
Wherein the beast was ever more and more,
But man was less and less, till Arthur came.
For first Aurelius lived and fought and died,
And after him King Uther fought and died,
But either fail'd to make the kingdom one.
And after these King Arthur for a space,
And thro' the puissance of his Table Round,
Drew all their petty princedoms under him,
Their king and head, and made a realm, and reign'd.

And thus the land of Cameliard was waste,
Thick with wet woods, and many a beast therein,
And none or few to scare or chase the beast;
So that wild dog, and wolf and boar and bear
Came night and day, and rooted in the fields,

And wallow'd in the gardens of the King,
And ever and anon the wolf would steal
The children and devour, but now and then,
Her own brood lost or dead, lent her fierce teat
To human sucklings; and the children, housed
In her foul den, there at their meat would growl,
And mock their foster-mother on four feet,
Till, straighten'd, they grew up to wolf-like men,
Worse than the wolves. And King Leodogran
Groan'd for the Roman legions here again,
And Cæsar's eagle: then his brother king,
Urien, assail'd him: last a heathen horde,
Reddening the sun with smoke and earth with blood,
And on the spike that split the mother's heart
Spitting the child, brake on him, till, amazed,
He knew not whither he should turn for aid.

But—for he heard of Arthur newly crown'd,
Tho' not without an uproar made by those
Who cried, 'He is not Uther's son'—the King
Sent to him, saying, 'Arise, and help us thoul
For here between the man and beast we die.'

And Arthur yet had done no deed of arms,
But heard the call, and came: and Guinevere
Stood by the castle walls to watch him pass;
But since he neither wore on helm or shield
The golden symbol of his kinglihood,
But rode a simple knight among his knights,
And many of these in richer arms than he,
She saw him not, or mark'd not, if she saw,
One among many, tho' his face was bare.
But Arthur, looking downward as he past,
Felt the light of her eyes into his life
Smite on the sudden, yet rode on, and pitch'd
His tents beside the forest. Then he drave
The heathen; after, slew the beast, and fell'd

The forest, letting in the sun, and made
Broad pathways for the hunter and the knight
And so return'd.

For while he linger'd there,
A doubt that ever smoulder'd in the hearts
Of those great Lords and Barons of his realm
Flash'd forth and into war: for most of these,
Colleaguings with a score of petty kings,
Made head against him, crying, 'Who is he
That he should rule us? who hath proven him
King Uther's son? for lo! we look at him,
And find nor face nor bearing, limbs nor voice,
Are like to those of Uther whom we knew.
This is the son of Gorlois, not the King;
This is the son of Anton, not the King.'

And Arthur, passing thence to battle, felt
Travail, and throes and agonies of the life,
Desiring to be join'd with Guinevere;
And thinking as he rode, 'Her father said
That there between the man and beast they die.
Shall I not lift her from this land of beasts
Up to my throne, and side by side with me?
What happiness to reign a lonely king,
Vext—O ye stars that shudder over me,
O earth that soundest hollow under me,
Vext with waste dreams? for saving I be join'd
To her that is the fairest under heaven,
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,
And cannot will my will, nor work my work
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,
Then might we live together as one life,
And reigning with one will in everything
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,
And power on this dead world to make it live.'

Thereafter—as he speaks who tells the tale—
When Arthur reach'd a field-of-battle bright
With pitch'd pavilions of his foe, the world
Was all so clear about him, that he saw
The smallest rock far on the faintest hill,
And even in high day the morning star.
So when the King had set his banner broad,
At once from either side, with trumpet-blast,
And shouts, and clarions shrilling unto blood,
The long-lanced battle let their horses run.
And now the barons and the kings prevail'd,
And now the King, as here and there that war
Went swaying; but the Powers who walk the world
Made lightnings and great thunders over him,
And dazed all eyes, till Arthur by main might,
And mightier of his hands with every blow,
And leading all his knighthood threw the kings
Carádos, Urien, Cradlemon of Wales,
Claudius, and Clariance of Northumberland,
The King Brandagoras of Latangor,
With Anguisant of Erin, Morganore,
And Lot of Orkney. Then, before a voice
As dreadful as the shout of one who sees
To one who sins, and deems himself alone
And all the world asleep, they swerved and brake
Flying, and Arthur call'd to stay the brands
That hack'd among the fliers, 'Hol they yield!'
So like a painted battle the war stood
Silenced, the living quiet as the dead,
And in the heart of Arthur joy was lord.
He laugh'd upon his warrior whom he loved
And honour'd most. 'Thou dost not doubt me King,
So well thine arm hath wrought for me to-day.'
'Sir and my liege,' he cried, 'the fire of God
Descends upon thee in the battle-field:
I know thee for my King!' Whereat the two,
For each had warder either in the fight,

Sware on the field of death a deathless love.
And Arthur said, 'Man's word is God in man:
Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death.'

Then quickly from the foughten field he sent
Ulfius, and Brastias, and Bedivere,
His new-made knights, to King Leodogran,
Saying, 'If I in aught have served thee well,
Give me thy daughter Guinevere to wife.'

Whom when he heard, Leodogran in heart
Debating—'How should I that am a king,
However much he help me at my need,
Give me one daughter saving to a king,
And a king's son?'—lifted his voice, and call'd
A hoary man, his chamberlain, to whom
He trusted all things, and of him required
His counsel: 'Knowest thou aught of Arthur's birth?'

Then spake the hoary chamberlain and said,
'Sir King, there be but two old men that know:
And each is twice as old as I; and one
Is Merlin, the wise man that ever served
King Uther thro' his magic art; and one
Is Merlin's master (so they call him) Bleys,
Who taught him magic; but the scholar ran
Before the master, and so far, that Bleys
Laid magic by, and sat him down, and wrote
All things and whatsoever Merlin did
In one great annal-book, where after-years
Will learn the secret of our Arthur's birth.'

To whom the King Leodogran replied,
'O friend, had I been holpen half as well
By this King Arthur as by thee to-day,
Then beast and man had had their share of me:
But summon here before us yet once more
Ulfius, and Brastias, and Bedivere.'

Then, when they came before him, the King said,
I have seen the cuckoo chased by lesser fowl,
And reason in the chase: but wherefore now
Do these your lords stir up the heat of war,
Some calling Arthur born of Gorlois,
Others of Anton? Tell me, ye yourselves,
Hold ye this Arthur for King Uther's son?

And Ulfius and Brastias answer'd, 'Ay.'
Then Bedivere, the first of all his knights
Knighted by Arthur at his crowning, spake—
For gold in heart and act and word was he,
Whenever slander breathed against the King—

'Sir, there be many rumours on this head:
For there be those who hate him in their hearts,
Call him baseborn, and since his ways are sweet,
And theirs are bestial, hold him less than man:
And there be those who deem him more than man,
And dream he dropt from heaven: but my belief
In all this matter—so ye care to learn—
Sir, for ye know that in King Uther's time
The prince and warrior Gorlois, he that held
Tintagil castle by the Cornish sea,
Was wedded with a winsome wife, Ygerne:
And daughters had she borne him,—one whereof,
Lot's wife, the Queen of Orkney, Bellicent,
Hath ever like a loyal sister cleaved
To Arthur,—but a son she had not borne.
And Uther cast upon her eyes of love:
But she, a stainless wife to Gorlois,
So loathed the bright dishonour of his love,
That Gorlois and King Uther went to war:
And overthrown was Gorlois and slain.
Then Uther in his wrath and heat besieged
Ygerne within Tintagil, where her men,
Seeing the mighty swarm about their walls,