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by Algernon Charles Swinburne

April, 2000 [Etext #2136]

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from the 1896 Chatto & Windus edition.

THE TALE OF BALEN

by Algernon Charles Swinburne

DEDICATION

TO MY MOTHER

Love that holds life and death in fee,

Deep as the clear unsounded sea

And sweet as life or death can be,

Lays here my hope, my heart, and me

Before you, silent, in a song.

Since the old wild tale, made new, found grace,

When half sung through, before your face,

It needs must live a springtide space,

While April suns grow strong.

March 24, 1896.

THE TALE OF BALEN

In hawthorn-time the heart grows light,

The world is sweet in sound and sight,

Glad thoughts and birds take flower and flight,

The heather kindles toward the light,

The whin is frankincense and flame.

And be it for strife or be it for love

The falcon quickens as the dove

When earth is touched from heaven above

With joy that knows no name.

And glad in spirit and sad in soul

With dream and doubt of days that roll

As waves that race and find no goal

Rode on by bush and brake and bole

A northern child of earth and sea.

The pride of life before him lay

Radiant: the heavens of night and day

Shone less than shone before his way

His ways and days to be.

And all his life of blood and breath

Sang out within him: time and death

Were even as words a dreamer saith

When sleep within him slackeneth,

And light and life and spring were one.

The steed between his knees that sprang,

The moors and woods that shone and sang,

The hours where through the spring's breath rang,

Seemed ageless as the sun.

But alway through the bounteous bloom

That earth gives thanks if heaven illume

His soul forefelt a shadow of doom,

His heart foreknew a gloomier gloom

Than closes all men's equal ways,

Albeit the spirit of life's light spring

With pride of heart upheld him, king

And lord of hours like snakes that sting

And nights that darken days.

And as the strong spring round him grew

Stronger, and all blithe winds that blew

Blither, and flowers that flowered anew

More glad of sun and air and dew,

The shadow lightened on his soul

And brightened into death and died

Like winter, as the bloom waxed wide

From woodside on to riverside

And southward goal to goal.

Along the wandering ways of Tyne,

By beech and birch and thorn that shine

And laugh when life's requickening wine

Makes night and noon and dawn divine

And stirs in all the veins of spring,

And past the brightening banks of Tees,

He rode as one that breathes and sees

A sun more blithe, a merrier breeze,

A life that hails him king.

And down the softening south that knows

No more how glad the heather glows,

Nor how, when winter's clarion blows

Across the bright Northumbrian snows,

Sea-mists from east and westward meet,

Past Avon senseless yet of song

And Thames that bore but swans in throng

He rode elate in heart and strong

In trust of days as sweet.

So came he through to Camelot,

Glad, though for shame his heart waxed hot,

For hope within it withered not

To see the shaft it dreamed of shot

Fair toward the glimmering goal of fame,

And all King Arthur's knightliest there

Approved him knightly, swift to dare

And keen to bid their records bear

Sir Balen's northern name.

Sir Balen of Northumberland

Gat grace before the king to stand

High as his heart was, and his hand

Wrought honour toward the strange north strand

That sent him south so goodly a knight.

And envy, sick with sense of sin,

Began as poisonous herbs begin

To work in base men's blood, akin

To men's of nobler might.

And even so fell it that his doom,

For all his bright life's kindling bloom

And light that took no thought for gloom,

Fell as a breath from the opening tomb

Full on him ere he wist or thought.

For once a churl of royal seed,

King Arthur's kinsman, faint in deed

And loud in word that knew not heed,

Spake shame where shame was nought.

"What doth one here in Camelot

Whose birth was northward? Wot we not

As all his brethren borderers wot

How blind of heart, how keen and hot,

The wild north lives and hates the south?

Men of the narrowing march that knows

Nought save the strength of storms and snows,

What would these carles where knighthood blows

A trump of kinglike mouth?"

Swift from his place leapt Balen, smote

The liar across his face, and wrote

His wrath in blood upon the bloat

Brute cheek that challenged shame for note

How vile a king-born knave might be.

Forth sprang their swords, and Balen slew

The knave ere well one witness knew

Of all that round them stood or drew

What sight was there to see.

Then spake the great king's wrathful will

A doom for six dark months to fill

Wherein close prison held him, still

And steadfast-souled for good or ill.

But when those weary days lay dead

His lordliest knights and barons spake

Before the king for Balen's sake

Good speech and wise, of force to break

The bonds that bowed his head.

II

In linden-time the heart is high

For pride of summer passing by

With lordly laughter in her eye;

A heavy splendour in the sky

Uplifts and bows it down again.

The spring had waned from wood and wold

Since Balen left his prison hold

And lowlier-hearted than of old

Beheld it wax and wane.

Though humble heart and poor array

Kept not from spirit and sense away

Their noble nature, nor could slay

The pride they bade but pause and stay

Till time should bring its trust to flower,

Yet even for noble shame's sake, born

Of hope that smiled on hate and scorn,

He held him still as earth ere morn

Ring forth her rapturous hour.

But even as earth when dawn takes flight

And beats her wings of dewy light

Full in the faltering face of night,

His soul awoke to claim by right

The life and death of deed and doom,

When once before the king there came

A maiden clad with grief and shame

And anguish burning her like flame

That feeds on flowers in bloom.

Beneath a royal mantle, fair

With goodly work of lustrous vair,

Girt fast against her side she bare

A sword whose weight bade all men there

Quail to behold her face again.

Save of a passing perfect knight

Not great alone in force and fight

It might not be for any might

Drawn forth, and end her pain.

So said she: then King Arthur spake:

"Albeit indeed I dare not take

Such praise on me, for knighthood's sake

And love of ladies will I make

Assay if better none may be."

By girdle and by sheath he caught

The sheathed and girded sword, and wrought

With strength whose force availed him nought

To save and set her free.

Again she spake: "No need to set

The might that man has matched not yet

Against it: he whose hand shall get

Grace to release the bonds that fret

My bosom and my girdlestead

With little strain of strength or strife

Shall bring me as from death to life

And win to sister or to wife

Fame that outlives men dead."

Then bade the king his knights assay

This mystery that before him lay

And mocked his might of manhood. "Nay,"

Quoth she, "the man that takes away

This burden laid on me must be

A knight of record clean and fair

As sunlight and the flowerful air,

By sire and mother born to bear

A name to shame not me."

Then forth strode Launcelot, and laid

The mighty-moulded hand that made

Strong knights reel back like birds affrayed

By storm that smote them as they strayed

Against the hilt that yielded not.

Then Tristram, bright and sad and kind

As one that bore in noble mind

Love that made light as darkness blind,

Fared even as Launcelot.

Then Lamoracke, with hardier cheer,

As one that held all hope and fear

Wherethrough the spirit of man may steer

In life and death less dark or dear,

Laid hand thereon, and fared as they.

With half a smile his hand he drew

Back from the spell-bound thing, and threw

With half a glance his heart anew

Toward no such blameless may.

Between Iseult and Guenevere

Sat one of name as high to hear,

But darklier doomed than they whose cheer

Foreshowed not yet the deadlier year

That bids the queenliest head bow down,

The queen Morgause of Orkney: they

With scarce a flash of the eye could say

The very word of dawn, when day

Gives earth and heaven their crown.

But bright and dark as night or noon

And lowering as a storm-flushed moon

When clouds and thwarting winds distune

The music of the midnight, soon

To die from darkening star to star

And leave a silence in the skies

That yearns till dawn find voice and rise,

Shone strange as fate Morgause, with eyes

That dwelt on days afar.

A glance that shot on Lamoracke

As from a storm-cloud bright and black.

Fire swift and blind as death's own track

Turned fleet as flame on Arthur back

From him whose hand forsook the hilt:

And one in blood and one in sin

Their hearts caught fire of pain within

And knew no goal for them to win

But death that guerdons guilt.

Then Gawain, sweet of soul and gay

As April ere he dreams of May,

Strove, and prevailed not: then Sir Kay,

The snake-souled envier, vile as they

That fawn and foam and lurk and lie,

Sire of the bastard band whose brood

Was alway found at servile feud

With honour, faint and false and lewd,

Scarce grasped and put it by.

Then wept for woe the damsel bound

With iron and with anguish round,

That none to help her grief was found

Or loose the inextricably inwound

Grim curse that girt her life with grief

And made a burden of her breath,

Harsh as the bitterness of death.

Then spake the king as one that saith

Words bitterer even than brief.

"Methought the wide round world could bring

Before the face of queen or king

No knights more fit for fame to sing

Than fill this full Round Table's ring

With honour higher than pride of place:

But now my heart is wrung to know,

Damsel, that none whom fame can show

Finds grace to heal or help thy woe:

God gives them not the grace."

Then from the lowliest place thereby,

With heart-enkindled cheek and eye

Most like the star and kindling sky

That say the sundawn's hour is high

When rapture trembles through the sea,

Strode Balen in his poor array

Forth, and took heart of grace to pray

The damsel suffer even him to assay

His power to set her free.

Nay, how should he avail, she said,

Averse with scorn-averted head,

Where these availed not? none had sped

Of all these mightier men that led

The lists wherein he might not ride,

And how should less men speed? But he,

With lordlier pride of courtesy,

Put forth his hand and set her free

From pain and humbled pride.

But on the sword he gazed elate

With hope set higher than fear or fate,

Or doubt of darkling days in wait;

And when her thankful praise waxed great

And craved of him the sword again,

He would not give it. "Nay, for mine

It is till force may make it thine."

A smile that shone as death may shine

Spake toward him bale and bane.

Strange lightning flickered from her eyes.

"Gentle and good in knightliest guise

And meet for quest of strange emprise

Thou hast here approved thee: yet not wise

To keep the sword from me, I wis.

For with it thou shalt surely slay

Of all that look upon the day

The man best loved of thee, and lay

Thine own life down for his."

"What chance God sends, that chance I take,"

He said. Then soft and still she spake;

"I would but for thine only sake

Have back the sword of thee, and break

The links of doom that bind thee round.

But seeing thou wilt not have it so,

My heart for thine is wrung with woe."

"God's will," quoth he, "it is, we know,

Wherewith our lives are bound."

"Repent it must thou soon," she said,

"Who wouldst not hear the rede I read

For thine and not for my sake, sped

In vain as waters heavenward shed

From springs that falter and depart

Earthward. God bids not thee believe

Truth, and the web thy life must weave

For even this sword to close and cleave

Hangs heavy round my heart."

So passed she mourning forth. But he,

With heart of springing hope set free

As birds that breast and brave the sea,

Bade horse and arms and armour be

Made straightway ready toward the fray.

Nor even might Arthur's royal prayer

Withhold him, but with frank and fair

Thanksgiving and leave-taking there

He turned him thence away.

III

As the east wind, when the morning's breast

Gleams like a bird's that leaves the nest,

A fledgeling halcyon's bound on quest,

Drives wave on wave on wave to west

Till all the sea be life and light,

So time's mute breath, that brings to bloom

All flowers that strew the dead spring's tomb,

Drives day on day on day to doom

Till all man's day be night.

Brief as the breaking of a wave

That hurls on man his thunderous grave

Ere fear find breath to cry or crave

Life that no chance may spare or save,

The light of joy and glory shone

Even as in dreams where death seems dead

Round Balen's hope-exalted head,

Shone, passed, and lightened as it fled

The shadow of doom thereon.

For as he bound him thence to fare,

Before the stately presence there

A lady like a windflower fair,

Girt on with raiment strange and rare

That rippled whispering round her, came.

Her clear cold eyes, all glassy grey,

Seemed lit not with the light of day

But touched with gleams that waned away

Of quelled and fading flame.

Before the king she bowed and spake:

"King, for thine old faith's plighted sake

To me the lady of the lake,

I come in trust of thee to take

The guerdon of the gift I gave,

Thy sword Excalibur." And he

Made answer: "Be it whate'er it be,

If mine to give, I give it thee,

Nor need is thine to crave."

As when a gleam of wicked light

Turns half a low-lying water bright

That moans beneath the shivering night

With sense of evil sound and sight

And whispering witchcraft's bated breath,

Her wan face quickened as she said:

"This knight that won the sword--his head

I crave or hers that brought it. Dead,

Let these be one in death."

"Not with mine honour this may be;

Ask all save this thou wilt," quoth he,

"And have thy full desire." But she

Made answer: "Nought will I of thee,

Nought if not this." Then Balen turned,

And saw the sorceress hard beside

By whose fell craft his mother died:

Three years he had sought her, and here espied

His heart against her yearned.

"Ill be thou met," he said, "whose ire

Would slake with blood thy soul's desire:

By thee my mother died in fire;

Die thou by me a death less dire."

Sharp flashed his sword forth, fleet as flame,

And shore away her sorcerous head.

"Alas for shame," the high king said,

"That one found once my friend lies dead;

Alas for all our shame!

"Thou shouldst have here forborne her; yea,

Were all the wrongs that bid men slay

Thine, heaped too high for wrath to weigh,

Not here before my face today

Was thine the right to wreak thy wrong."

Still stood he then as one that found

His rose of hope by storm discrowned,

And all the joy that girt him round

Brief as a broken song.

Yet ere he passed he turned and spake:

"King, only for thy nobler sake

Than aught of power man's power may take

Or pride of place that pride may break

I bid the lordlier man in thee,

That lives within the king, give ear.

This justice done before thee here

On one that hell's own heart holds dear,

Needs might not this but be.

"Albeit, for all that pride would prove,

My heart be wrung to lose thy love,

It yet repents me not hereof:

So many an eagle and many a dove,

So many a knight, so many a may,

This water-snake of poisonous tongue

To death by words and wiles hath stung,

That her their slayer, from hell's lake sprung,

I did not ill to slay."

"Yea," said the king, "too high of heart

To stand before a king thou art;

Yet irks it me to bid thee part

And take thy penance for thy part,

That God may put upon thy pride."

Then Balen took the severed head

And toward his hostry turned and sped

As one that knew not quick from dead

Nor good from evil tide.

He bade his squire before him stand

And take that sanguine spoil in hand

And bear it far by shore and strand

Till all in glad Northumberland

That loved him, seeing it, all might know

His deadliest foe was dead, and hear

How free from prison as from fear

He dwelt in trust of the answering year

To bring him weal for woe.

"And tell them, now I take my way

To meet in battle, if I may,

King Ryons of North Wales, and slay

That king of kernes whose fiery sway

Doth all the marches dire despite

That serve King Arthur: so shall he

Again be gracious lord to me,

And I that leave thee meet with thee

Once more in Arthur's sight."

So spake he ere they parted, nor

Took shame or fear to counsellor,

As one whom none laid ambush for;

And wist not how Sir Launceor,

The wild king's son of Ireland, hot

And high in wrath to know that one

Stood higher in fame before the sun,

Even Balen, since the sword was won,

Drew nigh from Camelot.

For thence, in heat of hate and pride,

As one that man might bid not bide,

He craved the high king's grace to ride

On quest of Balen far and wide

And wreak the wrong his wrath had wrought.

"Yea," Arthur said, "for such despite

Was done me never in my sight

As this thine hand shall now requite

If trust avail us aught."

But ere he passed, in eager mood

To feed his hate with bitter food,

Before the king's face Merlin stood

And heard his tale of ill and good,

Of Balen, and the sword achieved,

And whence it smote as heaven's red ire

That direful dame of doom as dire;

And how the king's wrath turned to fire

The grief wherewith he grieved.

And darkening as he gave it ear,

The still face of the sacred seer

Waxed wan with wrath and not with fear,

And ever changed its cloudier cheer

Till all his face was very night.

"This damosel that brought the sword,"

He said, "before the king my lord,

And all these knights about his board,

Hath done them all despite.

"The falsest damosel she is

That works men ill on earth, I wis,

And all her mind is toward but this,

To kill as with a lying kiss

Truth, and the life of noble trust.

A brother hath she,--see but now

The flame of shame that brands her brow! -

A true man, pure as faith's own vow,

Whose honour knows not rust.

"This good knight found within her bower

A felon and her paramour,

And slew him in his shameful hour,

As right gave might and righteous power

To hands that wreaked so foul a wrong.

Then, for the hate her heart put on,

She sought by ways where death had gone

The lady Lyle of Avalon,

Whose crafts are strange and strong.

"The sorceress, one with her in thought,

Gave her that sword of magic, wrought

By charms whereof sweet heaven sees nought,

That hither girt on her she brought

To be by doom her brother's bane.

And grief it is to think how he

That won it, being of heart so free

And perfect found in chivalry,

Shall by that sword lie slain.

Great pity it is and strange despite

That one whose eyes are stars to light

Honour, and shine as heaven's own height,

Should perish, being the goodliest knight

That even the all-glorious north has borne.

Nor shall my lord the king behold

A lordlier friend of mightier mould

Than Balen, though his tale be told

Ere noon fulfil his morn."

IV

As morning hears before it run

The music of the mounting sun,

And laughs to watch his trophies won

From darkness, and her hosts undone,

And all the night become a breath,

Nor dreams that fear should hear and flee

The summer menace of the sea,

So hears our hope what life may be,

And knows it not for death.

Each day that slays its hours and dies

Weeps, laughs, and lightens on our eyes,

And sees and hears not: smiles and sighs

As flowers ephemeral fall and rise

About its birth, about its way,

And pass as love and sorrow pass,

As shadows flashing down a glass,

As dew-flowers blowing in flowerless grass,

As hope from yesterday.

The blossom of the sunny dew

That now the stronger sun strikes through

Fades off the blade whereon it blew

No fleetlier than the flowers that grew

On hope's green stem in life's fierce light.

Nor might the glory soon to sit

Awhile on Balen's crest alit

Outshine the shadow of doom on it

Or stay death's wings from flight.

Dawn on a golden moorland side

By holt and heath saw Balen ride

And Launceor after, pricked with pride

And stung with spurring envy: wide

And far he had ridden athwart strange lands

And sought amiss the man he found

And cried on, till the stormy sound

Rang as a rallying trumpet round

That fires men's hearts and hands.

Abide he bade him: nor was need

To bid when Balen wheeled his steed

Fiercely, less fain by word than deed

To bid his envier evil speed,

And cried, "What wilt thou with me?" Loud

Rang Launceor's vehement answer: "Knight,

To avenge on thee the dire despite

Thou hast done us all in Arthur's sight

I stand toward Arthur vowed."

"Ay?" Balen said: "albeit I see

I needs must deal in strife with thee,

Light is the wyte thou layest on me;

For her I slew and sinned not, she

Was dire in all men's eyes as death,

Or none were lother found than I

By me to bid a woman die:

As lief were loyal men to lie,

Or scorn what honour saith."

As the arched wave's weight against the reef

Hurls, and is hurled back like a leaf

Storm-shrivelled, and its rage of grief

Speaks all the loud broad sea in brief,

And quells the hearkening hearts of men,

Or as the crash of overfalls

Down under blue smooth water brawls

Like jarring steel on ruining walls,

So rang their meeting then.

As wave on wave shocks, and confounds

The bounding bulk whereon it bounds

And breaks and shattering seaward sounds

As crying of the old sea's wolves and hounds

That moan and ravin and rage and wail,

So steed on steed encountering sheer

Shocked, and the strength of Launceor's spear

Shivered on Balen's shield, and fear

Bade hope within him quail.

But Balen's spear through Launceor's shield

Clove as a ploughshare cleaves the field

And pierced the hauberk triple-steeled,

That horse with horseman stricken reeled,

And as a storm-breached rock falls, fell.

And Balen turned his horse again

And wist not yet his foe lay slain,

And saw him dead that sought his bane

And wrought and fared not well.

Suddenly, while he gazed and stood,

And mused in many-minded mood

If life or death were evil or good,

Forth of a covert of a wood

That skirted half the moorland lea

Fast rode a maiden flower-like white

Full toward that fair wild place of fight,

Anhungered of the woful sight

God gave her there to see.

And seeing the man there fallen and dead,

She cried against the sun that shed

Light on the living world, and said,

"O Balen, slayer whose hand is red,

Two bodies and one heart thou hast slain,

Two hearts within one body: aye,

Two souls thou hast lost; by thee they die,

Cast out of sight of earth and sky

And all that made them fain."

And from the dead his sword she caught,

And fell in trance that wist of nought,

Swooning: but softly Balen sought

To win from her the sword she thought

To die on, dying by Launceor's side.

Again her wakening wail outbroke

As wildly, sword in hand, she woke

And struck one swift and bitter stroke

That healed her, and she died.

And sorrowing for their strange love's sake

Rode Balen forth by lawn and lake,

By moor and moss and briar and brake,

And in his heart their sorrow spake

Whose lips were dumb as death, and said

Mute words of presage blind and vain

As rain-stars blurred and marred by rain

To wanderers on a moonless main

Where night and day seem dead.

Then toward a sunbright wildwood side

He looked and saw beneath it ride

A knight whose arms afar espied

By note of name and proof of pride

Bare witness of his brother born,

His brother Balan, hard at hand,

Twin flower of bright Northumberland,

Twin sea-bird of their loud sea-strand,

Twin song-bird of their morn.

Ah then from Balen passed away

All dread of night, all doubt of day,

All care what life or death might say,

All thought of all worse months than May:

Only the might of joy in love

Brake forth within him as a fire,

And deep delight in deep desire

Of far-flown days whose full-souled quire

Rang round from the air above.

From choral earth and quiring air

Rang memories winged like songs that bear

Sweet gifts for spirit and sense to share:

For no man's life knows love more fair

And fruitful of memorial things

Than this the deep dear love that breaks

With sense of life on life, and makes

The sundawn sunnier as it wakes

Where morning round it rings.

"O brother, O my brother!" cried

Each upon each, and cast aside

Their helms unbraced that might not hide

From sight of memory single-eyed

The likeness graven of face and face,

And kissed and wept upon each other

For joy and pity of either brother,

And love engrafted by sire and mother,

God's natural gift of grace.

And each with each took counsel meet

For comfort, making sorrow sweet,

And grief a goodly thing to greet:

And word from word leapt light and fleet

Till all the venturous tale was told,

And how in Balen's hope it lay

To meet the wild Welsh king and slay,

And win from Arthur back for pay

The grace he gave of old.

"And thither will not thou with me

And win as great a grace for thee?"

"That will I well," quoth Balan: "we

Will cleave together, bound and free,

As brethren should, being twain and one."

But ere they parted thence there came

A creature withered as with flame,

A dwarf mismade in nature's shame,

Between them and the sun.

And riding fleet as fire may glide

He found the dead lie side by side,

And wailed and rent his hair and cried,

"Who hath done this deed?" And Balen eyed

The strange thing loathfully, and said,

"The knight I slew, who found him fain

And keen to slay me: seeing him slain,

The maid I sought to save in vain,

Self-stricken, here lies dead.

"Sore grief was mine to see her die,

And for her true faith's sake shall I

Love, and with love of heart more high,

All women better till I die."

"Alas," the dwarf said, "ill for thee

In evil hour this deed was done:

For now the quest shall be begun

Against thee, from the dawning sun

Even to the sunset sea.

"From shore to mountain, dawn to night,

The kinsfolk of this great dead knight

Will chase thee to thy death." A light

Of swift blithe scorn flashed answer bright

As fire from Balen's eye. "For that,

Small fear shall fret my heart," quoth he:

"But that my lord the king should be

For this dead man's sake wroth with me,

Weep might it well thereat."

Then murmuring passed the dwarf away,

And toward the knights in fair array

Came riding eastward up the way

From where the flower-soft lowlands lay

A king whose name the sweet south-west

Held high in honour, and the land

That bowed beneath his gentle hand

Wore on its wild bright northern strand

Tintagel for a crest.

And Balen hailed with homage due

King Mark of Cornwall, when he knew

The pennon that before him flew:

And for those lovers dead and true

The king made moan to hear their doom;

And for their sorrow's sake he sware

To seek in all the marches there

The church that man might find most fair

And build therein their tomb.

V

As thought from thought takes wing and flies,

As month on month with sunlit eyes

Tramples and triumphs in its rise,

As wave smites wave to death and dies,

So chance on hurtling chance like steel

Strikes, flashes, and is quenched, ere fear

Can whisper hope, or hope can hear,

If sorrow or joy be far or near

For time to hurt or heal.

Swift as a shadow and strange as light

That cleaves in twain the shadow of night

Before the wide-winged word takes flight

That thunder speaks to depth and height

And quells the quiet hour with sound,

There came before King Mark and stood

Between the moorside and the wood

The man whose word God's will made good,

Nor guile was in it found.

And Merlin said to Balen: "Lo,

Thou hast wrought thyself a grievous woe

To let this lady die, and know

Thou mightst have stayed her deadly blow."

And Balen answered him and said,

"Nay, by my truth to faith, not I,

So fiercely fain she was to die;

Ere well her sword had flashed on high,

Self-slain she lay there dead."

Again and sadly Merlin spake:

"My heart is wrung for this deed's sake,

To know thee therefore doomed to take

Upon thine hand a curse, and make

Three kingdoms pine through twelve years' change,

In want and woe: for thou shalt smite

The man most noble and truest knight

That looks upon the live world's light

A dolorous stroke and strange.

"And not till years shall round their goal

May this man's wound thou hast given be whole."

And Balen, stricken through the soul

By dark-winged words of doom and dole,

Made answer: "If I wist it were

No lie but sooth thou sayest of me,

Then even to make a liar of thee

Would I too slay myself, and see

How death bids dead men fare."

And Merlin took his leave and passed

And was not: and the shadow as fast

Went with him that his word had cast,

Too fleet for thought thereof to last:

And there those brethren bade King Mark

Farewell: but fain would Mark have known

The strong knight's name who had overthrown

The pride of Launceor, when it shone

Bright as it now lay dark.

And Balan for his brother spake,

Saying: "Sir, albeit him list not break

The seal of secret time, nor shake

Night off him ere his morning wake,

By these two swords he is girt withal

May men that praise him, knights and lords,

Call him the knight that bears two swords,

And all the praise his fame accords

Make answer when they call."

So parted they toward eventide;

And tender twilight, heavy-eyed,

Saw deep down glimmering woodlands ride

Balen and Balan side by side,

Till where the leaves grew dense and dim

Again they spied from far draw near

The presence of the sacred seer,

But so disguised and strange of cheer

That seeing they knew not him.

"Now whither ride ye," Merlin said,

"Through shadows that the sun strikes red,

Ere night be born or day be dead?"

But they, for doubt half touched with dread,

Would say not where their goal might lie.

"And thou," said Balen, "what art thou,

To walk with shrouded eye and brow?"

He said: "Me lists not show thee now

By name what man am I."

"Ill seen is this of thee," said they,

"That thou art true in word and way

Nor fain to fear the face of day,

Who wilt not as a true man say

The name it shames not him to bear."

He answered: "Be it or be it not so,

Yet why ye ride this way I know,

To meet King Ryons as a foe,

And how your hope shall fare.

"Well, if ye hearken toward my rede,

Ill, if ye hear not, shall ye speed."

"Ah, now," they cried, "thou art ours at need

What Merlin saith we are fain to heed."

"Great worship shall ye win," said he,

"And look that ye do knightly now,

For great shall be your need, I trow."

And Balen smiled: "By knighthood's vow,

The best we may will we."

Then Merlin bade them turn and take

Rest, for their good steeds' weary sake,

Between the highway and the brake,

Till starry midnight bade them wake:

Then "Rise," he said, "the king is nigh,

Who hath stolen from all his host away

With threescore horse in armed array,

The goodliest knights that bear his sway

And hold his kingdom high.

"And twenty ride of them before

To bear his errand, ere the door

Turn of the night, sealed fast no more,

And sundawn bid the stars wax hoar;

For by the starshine of to-night

He seeks a leman where she waits

His coming, dark and swift as fate's,

And hearkens toward the unopening gates

That yield not him to sight.

Then through the glimmering gloom around

A shadowy sense of light and sound

Made, ere the proof thereof were found,

The brave blithe hearts within them bound,

And "Where," quoth Balen, "rides the king?"

But softer spake the seer: "Abide,

Till hither toward your spears he ride,

Where all the narrowing woodland side

Grows dense with boughs that cling."

There in that straitening way they met

The wild Welsh host against them set,

And smote their strong king down, ere yet

His hurrying horde of spears might get

Fierce vantage of them. Then the fight

Grew great and joyous as it grew,

For left and right those brethren slew,

Till all the lawn waxed red with dew

More deep than dews of night.

And ere the full fierce tale was read

Full forty lay before them dead,

And fast the hurtling remnant fled

And wist not whither fear had led:

And toward the king they went again,

And would have slain him: but he bowed

Before them, crying in fear aloud

For grace they gave him, seeing the proud

Wild king brought lowest of men.

And ere the wildwood leaves were stirred

With song or wing of wakening bird,

In Camelot was Merlin's word

With joy in joyous wonder heard

That told of Arthur's bitterest foe

Diskingdomed and discomfited.

"By whom?" the high king smiled and said.

He answered: "Ere the dawn wax red,

To-morrow bids you know.

"Two knights whose heart and hope are one

And fain to win your grace have done

This work whereby if grace be won

Their hearts shall hail the enkindling sun

With joy more keen and deep than day."

And ere the sundawn drank the dew

Those brethren with their prisoner drew

To the outer guard they gave him to

And passed again away.

And Arthur came as toward his guest

To greet his foe, and bade him rest

As one returned from nobler quest

And welcome from the stormbright west,

But by what chance he fain would hear.

"The chance was hard and strange, sir king,"

Quoth Ryons, bowed in thanksgiving.

"Who won you?" Arthur said: "the thing

Is worth a warrior's ear."

The wild king flushed with pride and shame,

Answering: "I know not either name

Of those that there against us came

And withered all our strength like flame:

The knight that bears two swords is one,

And one his brother: not on earth

May men meet men of knightlier worth

Nor mightier born of mortal birth

That hail the sovereign sun."

And Arthur said: "I know them not

But much am I for this, God wet,

Beholden to them: Launcelot

Nor Tristram, when the war waxed hot

Along the marches east and west,

Wrought ever nobler work than this."

"Ah," Merlin said, "sore pity it is

And strange mischance of doom, I wis,

That death should mar their quest.

"Balen, the perfect knight that won

The sword whose name is malison,

And made his deed his doom, is one:

Nor hath his brother Balan done

Less royal service: not on earth

Lives there a nobler knight, more strong

Of soul to win men's praise in song,

Albeit the light abide not long

That lightened round his birth.

"Yea, and of all sad things I know

The heaviest and the highest in woe

Is this, the doom whose date brings low

Too soon in timeless overthrow

A head so high, a hope so sure.

The greatest moan for any knight

That ever won fair fame in fight

Shall be for Balen, seeing his might

Must now not long endure."

"Alas," King Arthur said, "he hath shown

Such love to me-ward that the moan

Made of him should be mine alone

Above all other, knowing it known

I have ill deserved it of him." "Nay,"

Said Merlin, "he shall do for you

Much more, when time shall be anew,

Than time hath given him chance to do

Or hope may think to say.

"But now must be your powers purveyed

To meet, ere noon of morn be made

To-morrow, all the host arrayed

Of this wild foe's wild brother, laid

Around against you: see to it well,

For now I part from you." And soon,

When sundawn slew the withering moon,

Two hosts were met to win the boon

Whose tale is death's to tell.

A lordly tale of knights and lords

For death to tell by count of swords

When war's wild harp in all its chords

Rang royal triumph, and the hordes

Of hurtling foemen rocked and reeled

As waves wind-thwarted on the sea,

Was told of all that there might be,

Till scarce might battle hear or see

The fortune of the field.

And many a knight won fame that day

When even the serpent soul of Kay

Was kindled toward the fiery play

As might a lion's be for prey,

And won him fame that might not die

With passing of his rancorous breath

But clung about his life and death

As fire that speaks in cloud, and saith

What strong men hear and fly.

And glorious works were Arthur's there,

That lit the battle-darkened air:

But when they saw before them fare

Like stars of storm the knight that bare

Two swords about him girt for fray,

Balen, and Balan with him, then

Strong wonder smote the souls of men

If heaven's own host or hell's deep den

Had sent them forth to slay.

So keen they rode across the fight,

So sharp they smote to left and right,

And made of hurtling darkness light

With lightning of their swords, till flight

And fear before them flew like flame,

That Arthur's self had never known,

He said, since first his blast was blown,

Such lords of war as these alone

That whence he knew not came.

But while the fire of war waxed hot

The wild king hearkened, hearing not,

Through storm of spears and arrow-shot,

For succour toward him from King Lot

And all his host of sea-born men,

Strong as the strong storm-baffling bird

Whose cry round Orkney's headlands heard

Is as the sea's own sovereign word

That mocks our mortal ken.

For Merlin's craft of prophecy,

Who wist that one of twain must die,

Put might in him to say thereby

Which head should lose its crown, and lie

Stricken, though loth he were to know

That either life should wane and fail;

Yet most might Arthur's love avail,

And still with subtly tempered tale

His wile held fast the foe.

With woven words of magic might

Wherein the subtle shadow and light

Changed hope and fear till fear took flight,

He stayed King Lot's fierce lust of fight

Till all the wild Welsh war was driven

As foam before the wind that wakes

With the all-awakening sun, and breaks

Strong ships that rue the mirth it makes

When grace to slay is given.

And ever hotter lit and higher,

As fire that meets encountering fire,

Waxed in King Lot his keen desire

To bid revenge within him tire

On Arthur's ravaged fame and life:

Across the waves of war between

Floated and flashed, unseen and seen,

The lustrous likeness of the queen

Whom shame had sealed his wife.

But when the woful word was brought

That while he tarried, doubting nought,

The hope was lost whose goal he sought

And all the fight he yearned for fought,

His heart was rent for grief and shame,

And half his hope was set on flight

Till word was given him of a knight

Who said: "They are weary and worn with fight,

And we more fresh than flame."

And bright and dark as night and day

Ere either find the unopening way

Clear, and forego the unaltering sway,

The sad king's face shone, frowning: "Yea,

I would that every knight of mine

Would do his part as I shall do,"

He said, "till death or life anew

Shall judge between us as is due

With wiser doom than thine."

Then thundered all the awakening field

With crash of hosts that clashed and reeled,

Banner to banner, shield to shield,

And spear to splintering spear-shaft, steeled

As heart against high heart of man,

As hope against high hope of knight

To pluck the crest and crown of fight

From war's clenched hand by storm's wild light,

For blessing given or ban.

All hearts of hearkening men that heard

The ban twin-born with blessing, stirred

Like springtide waters, knew the word

Whereby the steeds of storm are spurred

With ravenous rapture to destroy,

And laughed for love of battle, pierced

With passion of tempestuous thirst

And hungering hope to assuage it first

With draughts of stormy joy.

But sheer ahead of the iron tide

That rocked and roared from side to side

Rode as the lightning's lord might ride

King Lot, whose heart was set to abide

All peril of the raging hour,

And all his host of warriors born

Where lands by warring seas are worn

Was only by his hands upborne

Who gave them pride and power.

But as the sea's hand smites the shore

And shatters all the strengths that bore

The ravage earth may bear no more,

So smote the hand of Pellinore

Charging, a knight of Arthur's chief,

And clove his strong steed's neck in twain,

And smote him sheer through brow and brain,

Falling: and there King Lot lay slain,

And knew not wrath or grief.

And all the host of Orkney fled,

And many a mother's son lay dead:

But when they raised the stricken head

Whence pride and power and shame were fled

And rage and anguish now cast out,

And bore it toward a kingly tomb,

The wife whose love had wrought his doom

Came thither, fair as morning's bloom

And dark as twilight's doubt.

And there her four strong sons and his,

Gawain and Gareth, Gaherys

And Agravain, whose sword's sharp kiss

With sound of hell's own serpent's hiss

Should one day turn her life to death,

Stood mourning with her: but by these

Seeing Mordred as a seer that sees,

Anguish of terror bent her knees

And caught her shuddering breath.

The splendour of her sovereign eyes

Flashed darkness deeper than the skies

Feel or fear when the sunset dies

On his that felt as midnight rise

Their doom upon them, there undone

By faith in fear ere thought could yield

A shadowy sense of days revealed,

The ravin of the final field,

The terror of their son.

For Arthur's, as they caught the light

That sought and durst not seek his sight,

Darkened, and all his spirit's might

Withered within him even as night

Withers when sunrise thrills the sea.

But Mordred's lightened as with fire

That smote his mother and his sire

With darkling doom and deep desire

That bade its darkness be.

And heavier on their hearts the weight

Sank of the fear that brings forth fate,

The bitter doubt whose womb is great

With all the grief and love and hate

That turn to fire men's days on earth.

And glorious was the funeral made,

And dark the deepening dread that swayed

Their darkening souls whose light grew shade

With sense of death in birth.

VI

In autumn, when the wind and sea

Rejoice to live and laugh to be,

And scarce the blast that curbs the tree

And bids before it quail and flee

The fiery foliage, where its brand

Is radiant as the seal of spring,

Sounds less delight, and waves a wing

Less lustrous, life's loud thanksgiving

Puts life in sea and land.

High hope in Balen's heart alight

Laughed, as from all that clamorous fight

He passed and sought not Arthur's sight,

Who fain had found his kingliest knight

And made amend for Balen's wrong.

But Merlin gave his soul to see

Fate, rising as a shoreward sea,

And all the sorrow that should be

Ere hope or fear thought long.

"O where are they whose hands upbore

My battle," Arthur said, "before

The wild Welsh host's wide rage and roar?

Balen and Balan, Pellinore,

Where are they?" Merlin answered him:

"Balen shall be not long away

From sight of you, but night nor day

Shall bring his brother back to say

If life burn bright or dim."

"Now, by my faith," said Arthur then,

"Two marvellous knights are they, whose ken

Toward battle makes the twain as ten,

And Balen most of all born men

Passeth of prowess all I know

Or ever found or sought to see:

Would God he would abide with me,

To face the times foretold of thee

And all the latter woe."

For there had Merlin shown the king

The doom that songs unborn should sing,

The gifts that time should rise and bring

Of blithe and bitter days to spring

As weeds and flowers against the sun.

And on the king for fear's sake fell

Sickness, and sorrow deep as hell,

Nor even might sleep bid fear farewell

If grace to sleep were won.

Down in a meadow green and still

He bade the folk that wrought his will

Pitch his pavilion, where the chill

Soft night would let not rest fulfil

His heart wherein dark fears lay deep.

And sharp against his hearing cast

Came a sound as of horsehoofs fast

Passing, that ere their sound were past

Aroused him as from sleep.

And forth he looked along the grass

And saw before his portal pass

A knight that wailed aloud, "Alas

That life should find this dolorous pass

And find no shield from doom and dole!"

And hearing all his moan, "Abide,

Fair sir," the king arose and cried,

"And say what sorrow bids you ride

So sorrowful of soul."

"My hurt may no man heal, God wot,

And help of man may speed me not,"

The sad knight said, "nor change my lot."

And toward the castle of Melyot

Whose towers arose a league away

He passed forth sorrowing: and anon,

Ere well the woful sight were gone,

Came Balen down the meads that shone,

Strong, bright, and brave as day.

And seeing the king there stand, the knight

Drew rein before his face to alight

In reverence made for love's sake bright

With joy that set his face alight

As theirs who see, alive, above,

The sovereign of their souls, whose name

To them is even as love's own flame

To enkindle hope that heeds not fame

And knows no lord but love.

And Arthur smiled on him, and said,

"Right welcome be thou: by my head,

I would not wish me better sped.

For even but now there came and fled

Before me like a cloud that flies

A knight that made most heavy cheer,

I know not wherefore; nor may fear

Or pity give my heart to hear

Or lighten on mine eyes.

"But even for fear's and pity's sake

Fain were I thou shouldst overtake

And fetch again this knight that spake

No word of answering grace to make

Reply to mine that hailed him: thou,

By force or by goodwill, shalt bring

His face before me." "Yea, my king,"

Quoth Balen, "and a greater thing

Were less than is my vow.

"I would the task required and heard

Were heavier than your sovereign word

Hath laid on me:" and thence he spurred

Elate at heart as youth, and stirred

With hope as blithe as fires a boy:

And many a mile he rode, and found

Far in a forest's glimmering bound

The man he sought afar around

And seeing took fire for joy.

And with him went a maiden, fair

As flowers aflush with April air.

And Balen bade him turn him there

To tell the king what woes they were

That bowed him down so sore: and he

Made woeful answer: "This should do

Great scathe to me, with nought for you

Of help that hope might hearken to

For boot that may not be."

And Balen answered: "I were loth

To fight as one perforce made wroth

With one that owes by knighthood's oath

One love, one service, and one troth

With me to him whose gracious hand

Holds fast the helm of knighthood here

Whereby man's hope and heart may steer:

I pray you let not sorrow or fear

Against his bidding stand."

The strange knight gazed on him, and spake:

"Will you, for Arthur's royal sake,

Be warrant for me that I take

No scathe from strife that man may make?

Then will I go with you." And he

Made joyous answer: "Yea, for I

Will be your warrant or will die."

And thence they rode with hearts as high

As men's that search the sea.

And as by noon's large light the twain

Before the tented hall drew rein,

Suddenly fell the strange knight, slain

By one that came and went again

And none might see him; but his spear

Clove through the body, swift as fire,

The man whose doom, forefelt as dire,

Had darkened all his life's desire,

As one that death held dear.

And dying he turned his face and said,

"Lo now thy warrant that my head

Should fall not, following forth where led

A knight whose pledge hath left me dead.

This darkling manslayer hath to name

Garlon: take thou my goodlier steed,

Seeing thine is less of strength and speed,

And ride, if thou be knight indeed,

Even thither whence we came.

"And as the maiden's fair behest

Shall bid you follow on my quest,

Follow: and when God's will sees best,

Revenge my death, and let me rest

As one that lived and died a knight,

Unstained of shame alive or dead."

And Balen, wrung with sorrow, said,

"That shall I do: my hand and head

I pledge to do you right."

And thence with sorrowing heart and cheer

He rode, in grief that cast out fear

Lest death in darkness yet were near,

And bore the truncheon of the spear

Wherewith the woful knight lay slain

To her with whom he rode, and she

Still bare it with her, fain to see

What righteous doom of God's might be

The darkling manslayer's bane.

And down a dim deep woodland way

They rode between the boughs asway

With flickering winds whose flash and play

Made sunlight sunnier where the day

Laughed, leapt, and fluttered like a bird

Caught in a light loose leafy net

That earth for amorous heaven had set

To hold and see the sundawn yet

And hear what morning heard.

There in the sweet soft shifting light

Across their passage rode a knight

Flushed hot from hunting as from fight,

And seeing the sorrow-stricken sight

Made question of them why they rode

As mourners sick at heart and sad,

When all alive about them bade

Sweet earth for heaven's sweet sake be glad

As heaven for earth's love glowed.

"Me lists not tell you," Balen said.

The strange knight's face grew keen and red

"Now, might my hand but keep my head,

Even here should one of twain lie dead

Were he no better armed than I."

And Balen spake with smiling speed,

Where scorn and courtesy kept heed

Of either: "That should little need:

Not here shall either die."

And all the cause he told him through

As one that feared not though he knew

All: and the strange knight spake anew,

Saying: "I will part no more from you

While life shall last me." So they went

Where he might arm himself to ride,

And rode across wild ways and wide

To where against a churchyard side

A hermit's harbour leant.

And there against them riding came

Fleet as the lightning's laugh and flame

The invisible evil, even the same

They sought and might not curse by name

As hell's foul child on earth set free,

And smote the strange knight through, and fled,

And left the mourners by the dead.

"Alas, again," Sir Balen said,

"This wrong he hath done to me."

And there they laid their dead to sleep

Royally, lying where wild winds keep

Keen watch and wail more soft and deep

Than where men's choirs bid music weep

And song like incense heave and swell.

And forth again they rode, and found

Before them, dire in sight and sound,

A castle girt about and bound

With sorrow like a spell.

Above it seemed the sun at noon

Sad as a wintry withering moon

That shudders while the waste wind's tune

Craves ever none may guess what boon,

But all may know the boon for dire.

And evening on its darkness fell

More dark than very death's farewell,

And night about it hung like hell,

Whose fume the dawn made fire.

And Balen lighted down and passed

Within the gateway, whence no blast

Rang as the sheer portcullis, cast

Suddenly down, fell, and made fast

The gate behind him, whence he spied

A sudden rage of men without

And ravin of a murderous rout

That girt the maiden hard about

With death on either side.

And seeing that shame and peril, fear

Bade wrath and grief awake and hear

What shame should say in fame's wide ear

If she, by sorrow sealed more dear

Than joy might make her, so should die:

And up the tower's curled stair he sprang

As one that flies death's deadliest fang,

And leapt right out amid their gang

As fire from heaven on high.

And they thereunder seeing the knight

Unhurt among their press alight

And bare his sword for chance of fight

Stood from him, loth to strive or smite,

And bade him hear their woful word,

That not the maiden's death they sought;

But there through years too dire for thought

Had lain their lady stricken, and nought

Might heal her: and he heard.

For there a maiden clean and whole

In virgin body and virgin soul,

Whose name was writ on royal roll,

That would but stain a silver bowl

With offering of her stainless blood,

Therewith might heal her: so they stayed

For hope's sad sake each blameless maid

There journeying in that dolorous shade

Whose bloom was bright in bud.

No hurt nor harm to her it were

If she should yield a sister there

Some tribute of her blood, and fare

Forth with this joy at heart to bear,

That all unhurt and unafraid

This grace she had here by God's grace wrought.

And kindling all with kindly thought

And love that saw save love's self nought,

Shone, smiled, and spake the maid.

"Good knight of mine, good will have I

To help this healing though I die."

"Nay," Balen said, "but love may try

What help in living love may lie.

- I will not lose the life of her

While my life lasteth." So she gave

The tribute love was fain to crave,

But might not heal though fain to save,

Were God's grace helpfuller.

Another maid in later Mays

Won with her life that woful praise,

And died. But they, when surging day's

Deep tide fulfilled the dawn's wide ways,

Rode forth, and found by day or night

No chance to cross their wayfaring

Till when they saw the fourth day spring

A knight's hall gave them harbouring

Rich as a king's house might.

And while they sat at meat and spake

Words bright and kind as grace might make

Sweet for true knighthood's kindly sake,

They heard a cry beside them break

The still-souled joy of blameless rest.

"What noise is this?" quoth Balen. "Nay,"

His knightly host made answer, "may

Our grief not grieve you though I say

How here I dwell unblest.

"Not many a day has lived and died

Since at a tournay late I tried

My strength to smite and turn and ride

Against a knight of kinglike pride,

King Pellam's brother: twice I smote

The splendour of his strength to dust:

And he, fulfilled of hate's fierce lust,

Swore vengeance, pledged for hell to trust,

And keen as hell's wide throat.

"Invisible as the spirit of night

That heaven and earth in depth and height

May see not by the mild moon's light

Nor even when stars would grant them sight,

He walks and slays as plague's blind breath

Slays: and my son, whose anguish here

Makes moan perforce that mars our cheer,

He wounded, even ere love might fear

That hate were strong as death.

"Nor may my son be whole till he

Whose stroke through him hath stricken me

Shall give again his blood to be

Our healing: yet may no man see

This felon, clothed with darkness round

And keen as lightning's life." Thereon

Spake Balen, and his presence shone

Even as the sun's when stars are gone

That hear dawn's trumpet sound.

"That knight I know: two knights of mine,

Two comrades, sealed by faith's bright sign,

Whose eyes as ours that live should shine,

And drink the golden sunlight's wine

With joy's thanksgiving that they live,

He hath slain in even the same blind wise:

Were all wide wealth beneath the skies

Mine, might I meet him, eyes on eyes,

All would I laugh to give."

His host made answer, and his gaze

Grew bright with trust as dawn's moist maze

With fire: "Within these twenty days,

King Pellam, lord of Lystenayse,

Holds feast through all this country cried,

And there before the knightly king

May no knight come except he bring

For witness of his wayfaring

His paramour or bride.

"And there that day, so soon to shine,

This knight, your felon foe and mine,

Shall show, full-flushed with bloodred wine,

The fierce false face whereon we pine

To wreak the wrong he hath wrought us, bare

As shame should see and brand it." "Then,"

Said Balen, "shall he give again

His blood to heal your son, and men

Shall see death blind him there."

"Forth will we fare to-morrow," said

His host: and forth, as sunrise led,

They rode; and fifteen days were fled

Ere toward their goal their steeds had sped.

And there alighting might they find

For Balen's host no place to rest,

Who came without a gentler guest

Beside him: and that household's hest

Bade leave his sword behind.

"Nay," Balen said, "that do I not:

My country's custom stands, God wot,

That none whose lot is knighthood's lot,

To ride where chance as fire is hot

With hope or promise given of fight,

Shall fail to keep, for knighthood's part,

His weapon with him as his heart;

And as I came will I depart,

Or hold herein my right."

Then gat he leave to wear his sword

Beside the strange king's festal board

Where feasted many a knight and lord

In seemliness of fair accord:

And Balen asked of one beside,

"Is there not in this court, if fame

Keep faith, a knight that hath to name

Garlon?" and saying that word of shame,

He scanned that place of pride.

"Yonder he goeth against the light,

He with the face as swart as night,"

Quoth the other: "but he rides to fight

Hid round by charms from all men's sight,

And many a noble knight he hath slain,

Being wrapt in darkness deep as hell

And silence dark as shame." "Ah, well,"

Said Balen, "is that he? the spell

May be the sorcerer's bane."

Then Balen gazed upon him long,

And thought, "If here I wreak my wrong,

Alive I may not scape, so strong

The felon's friends about him throng;

And if I leave him here alive,

This chance perchance may life not give

Again: much evil, if he live,

He needs must do, should fear forgive

When wrongs bid strike and strive."

And Garlon, seeing how Balen's eye

Dwelt on him as his heart waxed high

With joy in wrath to see him nigh,

Rose wolf-like with a wolfish cry

And crossed and smote him on the face,

Saying, "Knight, what wouldst thou with me? Eat,

For shame, and gaze not: eat thy meat

Do that thou art come for: stands thy seat

Next ours of royal race?"

"Well hast thou said: thy rede rings true;

That which I came for will I do,"

Quoth Balen: forth his fleet sword flew,

And clove the head of Garlon through

Clean to the shoulders. Then he cried

Loud to his lady, "Give me here

The truncheon of the shameful spear

Wherewith he slew your knight, when fear

Bade hate in darkness ride."

And gladly, bright with grief made glad,

She gave the truncheon as he bade,

For still she bare it with her, sad

And strong in hopeless hope she had,

Through all dark days of thwarting fear,

To see if doom should fall aright

And as God's fire-fraught thunder smite

That head, clothed round with hell-faced night,

Bare now before her here.

And Balen smote therewith the dead

Dark felon's body through, and said

Aloud, "With even this truncheon, red

With baser blood than brave men bled

Whom in thy shameful hand it slew,

Thou hast slain a nobler knight, and now

It clings and cleaves thy body: thou

Shall cleave again no brave man's brow,

Though hell would aid anew."

And toward his host he turned and spake;

"Now for your son's long-suffering sake

Blood ye may fetch enough, and take

Wherewith to heal his hurt, and make

Death warm as life." Then rose a cry

Loud as the wind's when stormy spring

Makes all the woodland rage and ring:

"Thou hast slain my brother," said the king,

"And here with him shalt die."

"Ay?" Balen laughed him answer. "Well,

Do it then thyself." And the answer fell

Fierce as a blast of hate from hell,

"No man of mine that with me dwell

Shall strike at thee but I their lord

For love of this my brother slain."

And Pellam caught and grasped amain

A grim great weapon, fierce and fain

To feed his hungering sword.

And eagerly he smote, and sped

Not well: for Balen's blade, yet red

With lifeblood of the murderous dead,

Between the swordstroke and his head

Shone, and the strength of the eager stroke

Shore it in sunder: then the knight,

Naked and weaponless for fight,

Ran seeking him a sword to smite

As hope within him woke.

And so their flight for deathward fast

From chamber forth to chamber passed

Where lay no weapon, till the last

Whose doors made way for Balen cast

Upon him as a sudden spell

Wonder that even as lightning leapt

Across his heart and eyes, and swept

As storm across his soul that kept

Wild watch, and watched not well.

For there the deed he did, being near

Death's danger, breathless as the deer

Driven hard to bay, but void of fear,

Brought sorrow down for many a year

On many a man in many a land.

All glorious shone that chamber, bright

As burns at sunrise heaven's own height:

With cloth of gold the bed was dight,

That flamed on either hand.

And one he saw within it lie:

A table of all clear gold thereby

Stood stately, fair as morning's eye,

With four strong silver pillars, high

And firm as faith and hope may be:

And on it shone the gift he sought,

A spear most marvellously wrought,

That when his eye and handgrip caught

Small fear at heart had he.

Right on King Pellam then, as fire

Turns when the thwarting winds wax higher,

He turned, and smote him down. So dire

The stroke was, when his heart's desire

Struck, and had all its fill of hate,

That as the king fell swooning down

Fell the walls, rent from base to crown,

Prone as prone seas that break and drown

Ships fraught with doom for freight.

And there for three days' silent space

Balen and Pellam face to face

Lay dead or deathlike, and the place

Was death's blind kingdom, till the grace

That God had given the sacred seer

For counsel or for comfort led

His Merlin thither, and he said,

Standing between the quick and dead,

"Rise up, and rest not here."

And Balen rose and set his eyes

Against the seer's as one that tries

His heart against the sea's and sky's

And fears not if he lives or dies,

Saying, "I would have my damosel,

Ere I fare forth, to fare with me."

And sadly Merlin answered, "See

Where now she lies; death knows if she

Shall now fare ill or well.

"And in this world we meet no more,

Balen." And Balen, sorrowing sore,

Though fearless yet the heart he bore

Beat toward the life that lay before,

Rode forth through many a wild waste land

Where men cried out against him, mad

With grievous faith in fear that bade

Their wrath make moan for doubt they had

Lest hell had armed his hand.

For in that chamber's wondrous shrine

Was part of Christ's own blood, the wine

Shed of the true triumphal vine

Whose growth bids earth's deep darkness shine

As heaven's deep light through the air and sea;

That mystery toward our northern shore

Arimathean Joseph bore

For healing of our sins of yore,

That grace even there might be.

And with that spear there shrined apart

Was Christ's side smitten to the heart.

And fiercer than the lightning's dart

The stroke was, and the deathlike smart

Wherewith, nigh drained of blood and breath,

The king lay stricken as one long dead:

And Joseph's was the blood there shed,

For near akin was he that bled,

Near even as life to death.

And therefore fell on all that land

Sorrow: for still on either hand,

As Balen rode alone and scanned

Bright fields and cities built to stand

Till time should break them, dead men lay;

And loud and long from all their folk

Living, one cry that cursed him broke;

Three countries had his dolorous stroke

Slain, or should surely slay.

VII

In winter, when the year burns low

As fire wherein no firebrands glow,

And winds dishevel as they blow

The lovely stormy wings of snow,

The hearts of northern men burn bright

With joy that mocks the joy of spring

To hear all heaven's keen clarions ring

Music that bids the spirit sing

And day give thanks for night.

Aloud and dark as hell or hate

Round Balen's head the wind of fate

Blew storm and cloud from death's wide gate:

But joy as grief in him was great

To face God's doom and live or die,

Sorrowing for ill wrought unaware,

Rejoicing in desire to dare

All ill that innocence might bear

With changeless heart and eye.

Yet passing fain he was when past

Those lands and woes at length and last.

Eight times, as thence he fared forth fast,

Dawn rose and even was overcast

With starry darkness dear as day,

Before his venturous quest might meet

Adventure, seeing within a sweet

Green low-lying forest, hushed in heat,

A tower that barred his way.

Strong summer, dumb with rapture, bound

With golden calm the woodlands round

Wherethrough the knight forth faring found

A knight that on the greenwood ground

Sat mourning: fair he was to see,

And moulded as for love or fight

A maiden's dreams might frame her knight;

But sad in joy's far-flowering sight

As grief's blind thrall might be.

"God save you," Balen softly said,

"What grief bows down your heart and head

Thus, as one sorrowing for his dead?

Tell me, if haply I may stead

In aught your sorrow, that I may."

"Sir knight," that other said, "thy word

Makes my grief heavier that I heard."

And pity and wonder inly stirred

Drew Balen thence away.

And so withdrawn with silent speed

He saw the sad knight's stately steed,

A war-horse meet for warrior's need,

That none who passed might choose but heed,

So strong he stood, so great, so fair,

With eyes afire for flight or fight,

A joy to look on, mild in might,

And swift and keen and kind as light,

And all as clear of care.

And Balen, gazing on him, heard

Again his master's woful word

Sound sorrow through the calm unstirred

By fluttering wind or flickering bird,

Thus: "Ah, fair lady and faithless, why

Break thy pledged faith to meet me? soon

An hour beyond thy trothplight noon

Shall strike my death-bell, and thy boon

Is this, that here I die.

"My curse for all thy gifts may be

Heavier than death or night on thee;

For now this sword thou gavest me

Shall set me from thy bondage free."

And there the man had died self-slain,

But Balen leapt on him and caught

The blind fierce hand that fain had wrought

Self-murder, stung with fire of thought,

As rage makes anguish fain.

Then, mad for thwarted grief, "Let go

My hand," the fool of wrath and woe

Cried, "or I slay thee." Scarce the glow

In Balen's cheek and eye might show,

As dawn shows day while seas lie chill,

He heard, though pity took not heed,

But smiled and spake, "That shall not need:

What man may do to bid you speed

I, so God speed me, will."

And the other craved his name, beguiled

By hope that made his madness mild.

Again Sir Balen spake and smiled:

"My name is Balen, called the Wild

By knights whom kings and courts make tame

Because I ride alone afar

And follow but my soul for star."

"Ah, sir, I know the knight you are

And all your fiery fame.

"The knight that bears two swords I know,

Most praised of all men, friend and foe,

For prowess of your hands, that show

Dark war the way where balefires glow

And kindle glory like the dawn's."

So spake the sorrowing knight, and stood

As one whose heart fresh hope made good:

And forth they rode by wold and wood

And down the glimmering lawns.

And Balen craved his name who rode

Beside him, where the wild wood glowed

With joy to feel how noontide flowed

Through glade and glen and rough green road

Till earth grew joyful as the sea.

"My name is Garnysshe of the Mount,

A poor man's son of none account,"

He said, "where springs of loftier fount

Laugh loud with pride to be.

"But strength in weakness lives and stands

As rocks that rise through shifting sands;

And for the prowess of my hands

One made me knight and gave me lands,

Duke Hermel, lord from far to near,

Our prince; and she that loved me--she

I love, and deemed she loved but me,

His daughter, pledged her faith to be

Ere now beside me here."

And Balen, brief of speech as light

Whose word, beheld of depth and height,

Strikes silence through the stars of night,

Spake, and his face as dawn's grew bright,

For hope to help a happier man,

"How far then lies she hence?" "By this,"

Her lover sighed and said, "I wis,

Not six fleet miles the passage is,

And straight as thought could span."

So rode they swift and sure, and found

A castle walled and dyked around:

And Balen, as a warrior bound

On search where hope might fear to sound

The darkness of the deeps of doubt,

Made entrance through the guardless gate

As life, while hope in life grows great,

Makes way between the doors of fate

That death may pass thereout.

Through many a glorious chamber, wrought

For all delight that love's own thought

Might dream or dwell in, Balen sought

And found of all he looked for nought,

For like a shining shell her bed

Shone void and vacant of her: thence

Through devious wonders bright and dense

He passed and saw with shame-struck sense

Where shame and faith lay dead.

Down in a sweet small garden, fair

With flowerful joy in the ardent air,

He saw, and raged with loathing, where

She lay with love-dishevelled hair

Beneath a broad bright laurel tree

And clasped in amorous arms a knight,

The unloveliest that his scornful sight

Had dwelt on yet; a shame the bright

Broad noon might shrink to see.

And thence in wrathful hope he turned,

Hot as the heart within him burned,

To meet the knight whose love, so spurned

And spat on and made nought of, yearned

And dreamed and hoped and lived in vain,

And said, "I have found her sleeping fast,"

And led him where the shadows cast

From leaves wherethrough light winds ran past

Screened her from sun and rain.

But Garnysshe, seeing, reeled as he stood

Like a tree, kingliest of the wood,

Half hewn through: and the burning blood

Through lips and nostrils burst aflood:

And gathering back his rage and might

As broken breakers rally and roar

The loud wind down that drives off shore,

He smote their heads off: there no more

Their life might shame the light.

Then turned he back toward Balen, mad

With grief, and said, "The grief I had

Was nought: ere this my life was glad:

Thou hast done this deed: I was but sad

And fearful how my hope might fare:

I had lived my sorrow down, hadst thou

Not shown me what I saw but now."

The sorrow and scorn on Balen's brow

Bade silence curb him there.

And Balen answered: "What I did

I did to hearten thee and bid

Thy courage know that shame should rid

A man's high heart of love that hid

Blind shame within its core: God knows,

I did, to set a bondman free,

But as I would thou hadst done by me,

That seeing what love must die to see

Love's end might well be woe's."

"Alas," the woful weakling said,

"I have slain what most I loved: I have shed

The blood most near my heart: the head

Lies cold as earth, defiled and dead,

That all my life was lighted by,

That all my soul bowed down before,

And now may bear with life no more:

For now my sorrow that I bore

Is twofold, and I die."

Then with his red wet sword he rove

His breast in sunder, where it clove

Life, and no pulse against it strove,

So sure and strong the deep stroke drove

Deathward: and Balen, seeing him dead,

Rode thence, lest folk would say he had slain

Those three; and ere three days again

Had seen the sun's might wax and wane,

Far forth he had spurred and sped.

And riding past a cross whereon

Broad golden letters written shone,

Saying, "No knight born may ride alone

Forth toward this castle," and all the stone

Glowed in the sun's glare even as though

Blood stained it from the crucified

Dead burden of one that there had died,

An old hoar man he saw beside

Whose face was wan as woe.

"Balen the Wild," he said, "this way

Thy way lies not: thou hast passed to-day

Thy bands: but turn again, and stay

Thy passage, while thy soul hath sway

Within thee, and through God's good power

It will avail thee:" and anon

His likeness as a cloud was gone,

And Balen's heart within him shone

Clear as the cloudless hour.

Nor fate nor fear might overcast

The soul now near its peace at last.

Suddenly, thence as forth he past,

A mighty and a deadly blast

Blown of a hunting-horn he heard,

As when the chase hath nobly sped.

"That blast is blown for me," he said,

"The prize am I who am yet not dead,"

And smiled upon the word.

As toward a royal hart's death rang

That note, whence all the loud wood sang

With winged and living sound that sprang

Like fire, and keen as fire's own fang

Pierced the sweet silence that it slew.

But nought like death or strife was here:

Fair semblance and most goodly cheer

They made him, they whose troop drew near

As death among them drew.

A hundred ladies well arrayed

And many a knight well weaponed made

That kindly show of cheer: the glade

Shone round them till its very shade

Lightened and laughed from grove to lawn

To hear and see them: so they brought

Within a castle fair as thought

Could dream that wizard hands had wrought

The guest among them drawn.

All manner of glorious joy was there:

Harping and dancing, loud and fair,

And minstrelsy that made of air

Fire, so like fire its raptures were.

Then the chief lady spake on high:

"Knight with the two swords, one of two

Must help you here or fall from you:

For needs you now must have ado

And joust with one hereby.

"A good knight guards an island here

Against all swords that chance brings near,

And there with stroke of sword and spear

Must all for whom these halls make cheer

Fight, and redeem or yield up life."

"An evil custom," Balen said,

"Is this, that none whom chance hath led

Hither, if knighthood crown his head,

May pass unstirred to strife."

"You shall not have ado to fight

Here save against one only knight,"

She said, and all her face grew bright

As hell-fire, lit with hungry light

That wicked laughter touched with flame.

"Well, since I shall thereto," said he,

"I am ready at heart as death for me:

Fain would I be where death should be

And life should lose its name.

"But travelling men whose goal afar

Shines as a cloud-constraining star

Are often weary, and wearier are

Their steeds that feel each fret and jar

Wherewith the wild ways wound them: yet,

Albeit my horse be weary, still

My heart is nowise weary; will

Sustains it even till death fulfil

My trust upon him set."

"Sir," said a knight thereby that stood,

"Meseems your shield is now not good

But worn with warrior work, nor could

Sustain in strife the strokes it would:

A larger will I lend you." "Ay,

Thereof I thank you," Balen said,

Being single of heart as one that read

No face aright whence faith had fled,

Nor dreamed that faith could fly.

And so he took that shield unknown

And left for treason's touch his own,

And toward that island rode alone,

Nor heard the blast against him blown

Sound in the wind's and water's sound,

But hearkening toward the stream's edge heard

Nought save the soft stream's rippling word,

Glad with the gladness of a bird,

That sang to the air around.

And there against the water-side

He saw, fast moored to rock and ride,

A fair great boat anear abide

Like one that waits the turning tide,

Wherein embarked his horse and he

Passed over toward no kindly strand:

And where they stood again on land

There stood a maiden hard at hand

Who seeing them wept to see.

And "O knight Balen," was her cry,

"Why have ye left your own shield? why

Come hither out of time to die?

For had ye kept your shield, thereby

Ye had yet been known, and died not here.

Great pity it is of you this day

As ever was of knight, or may

Be ever, seeing in war's bright way

Praise knows not Balen's peer."

And Balen said, "Thou hast heard my name

Right: it repenteth me, though shame

May tax me not with base men's blame,

That ever, hap what will, I came

Within this country; yet, being come,

For shame I may not turn again

Now, that myself and nobler men

May scorn me: now is more than then,

And faith bids fear be dumb.

"Be it life or death, my chance I take,

Be it life's to build or death's to break:

And fall what may, me lists not make

Moan for sad life's or death's sad sake."

Then looked he on his armour, glad

And high of heart, and found it strong:

And all his soul became a song

And soared in prayer that soared not long,

For all the hope it had.

Then saw he whence against him came

A steed whose trappings shone like flame,

And he that rode him showed the same

Fierce colour, bright as fire or fame,

But dark the visors were as night

That hid from Balen Balan's face,

And his from Balan: God's own grace

Forsook them for a shadowy space

Where darkness cast out light.

The two swords girt that Balen bare

Gave Balan for a breath's while there

Pause, wondering if indeed it were

Balen his brother, bound to dare

The chance of that unhappy quest:

But seeing not as he thought to see

His shield, he deemed it was not he,

And so, as fate bade sorrow be,

They laid their spears in rest.

So mighty was the course they ran

With spear to spear so great of span,

Each fell back stricken, man by man,

Horse by horse, borne down: so the ban

That wrought by doom against them wrought:

But Balen by his falling steed

Was bruised the sorer, being indeed

Way-weary, like a rain-bruised reed,

With travel ere he fought.

And Balen rose again from swoon

First, and went toward him: all too soon

He too then rose, and the evil boon

Of strength came back, and the evil tune

Of battle unnatural made again

Mad music as for death's wide ear

Listening and hungering toward the near

Last sigh that life or death might hear

At last from dying men.

Balan smote Balen first, and clove

His lifted shield that rose and strove

In vain against the stroke that drove

Down: as the web that morning wove

Of glimmering pearl from spray to spray

Dies when the strong sun strikes it, so

Shrank the steel, tempered thrice to show

Strength, as the mad might of the blow

Shore Balen's helm away.

Then turning as a turning wave

Against the land-wind, blind and brave

In hope that dreams despair may save,

With even the unhappy sword that gave

The gifts of fame and fate in one

He smote his brother, and there had nigh

Felled him: and while they breathed, his eye

Glanced up, and saw beneath the sky

Sights fairer than the sun.

The towers of all the castle there

Stood full of ladies, blithe and fair

As the earth beneath and the amorous air

About them and above them were:

So toward the blind and fateful fight

Again those brethren went, and sore

Were all the strokes they smote and bore,

And breathed again, and fell once more

To battle in their sight.

With blood that either spilt and bled

Was all the ground they fought on red,

And each knight's hauberk hewn and shred

Left each unmailed and naked, shed

From off them even as mantles cast:

And oft they breathed, and drew but breath

Brief as the word strong sorrow saith,

And poured and drank the draught of death,

Till fate was full at last.

And Balan, younger born than he

Whom darkness bade him slay, and be

Slain, as in mist where none may see

If aught abide or fall or flee,

Drew back a little and laid him down,

Dying: but Balen stood, and said,

As one between the quick and dead

Might stand and speak, "What good knight's head

Hath won this mortal crown?

"What knight art thou? for never I

Who now beside thee dead shall die

Found yet the knight afar or nigh

That matched me." Then his brother's eye

Flashed pride and love; he spake and smiled

And felt in death life's quickening flame,

And answered: "Balan is my name,

The good knight Balen's brother; fame

Calls and miscalls him wild."

The cry from Balen's lips that sprang

Sprang sharper than his sword's stroke rang.

More keen than death's or memory's fang,

Through sense and soul the shuddering pang

Shivered: and scarce he had cried, "Alas

That ever I should see this day,"

When sorrow swooned from him away

As blindly back he fell, and lay

Where sleep lets anguish pass.

But Balan rose on hands and knees

And crawled by childlike dim degrees

Up toward his brother, as a breeze

Creeps wingless over sluggard seas

When all the wind's heart fails it: so

Beneath their mother's eyes had he,

A babe that laughed with joy to be,

Made toward him standing by her knee

For love's sake long ago.

Then, gathering strength up for a space,

From off his brother's dying face

With dying hands that wrought apace

While death and life would grant them grace

He loosed his helm and knew not him,

So scored with blood it was, and hewn

Athwart with darkening wounds: but soon

Life strove and shuddered through the swoon

Wherein its light lay dim.

And sorrow set these chained words free:

"O Balan, O my brother! me

Thou hast slain, and I, my brother, thee

And now far hence, on shore and sea,

Shall all the wide world speak of us."

"Alas," said Balan, "that I might

Not know you, seeing two swords were dight

About you; now the unanswering sight

Hath here found answer thus.

"Because you bore another shield

Than yours, that even ere youth could wield

Like arms with manhood's tried and steeled

Shone as my star of battle-field,

I deemed it surely might not be

My brother." Then his brother spake

Fiercely: "Would God, for thy sole sake,

I had my life again, to take

Revenge for only thee!

"For all this deadly work was wrought

Of one false knight's false word and thought,

Whose mortal craft and counsel caught

And snared my faith who doubted nought,

And made me put my shield away.

Ah, might I live, I would destroy

That castle for its customs: joy

There makes of grief a deadly toy,

And death makes night of day."

"Well done were that, if aught were done

Well ever here beneath the sun,"

Said Balan: "better work were none:

For hither since I came and won

A woful honour born of death,

When here my hap it was to slay

A knight who kept this island way,

I might not pass by night or day

Hence, as this token saith.

"No more shouldst thou, for all the might

Of heart and hand that seals thee knight

Most noble of all that see the light,

Brother, hadst thou but slain in fight

Me, and arisen unscathed and whole,

As would to God thou hadst risen! though here

Light is as darkness, hope as fear,

And love as hate: and none draws near

Save toward a mortal goal."

Then, fair as any poison-flower

Whose blossom blights the withering bower

Whereon its blasting breath has power,

Forth fared the lady of the tower

With many a lady and many a knight,

And came across the water-way

Even where on death's dim border lay

Those brethren sent of her to slay

And die in kindless fight.

And all those hard light hearts were swayed

With pity passing like a shade

That stays not, and may be not stayed,

To hear the mutual moan they made,

Each to behold his brother die,

Saying, "Both we came out of one tomb,

One star-crossed mother's woful womb,

And so within one grave-pit's gloom

Untimely shall we lie."

And Balan prayed, as God should bless

That lady for her gentleness,

That where the battle's mortal stress

Had made for them perforce to press

The bed whence never man may rise

They twain, free now from hopes and fears,

Might sleep; and she, as one that hears,

Bowed her bright head: and very tears

Fell from her cold fierce eyes.

Then Balen prayed her send a priest

To housel them, that ere they ceased

The hansel of the heavenly feast

That fills with light from the answering east

The sunset of the life of man

Might bless them, and their lips be kissed

With death's requickening eucharist,

And death's and life's dim sunlit mist

Pass as a stream that ran.

And so their dying rites were done:

And Balen, seeing the death-struck sun

Sink, spake as he whose goal is won:

"Now, when our trophied tomb is one,

And over us our tale is writ,

How two that loved each other, two

Born and begotten brethren, slew

Each other, none that reads anew

Shall choose but weep for it.

"And no good knight and no good man

Whose eye shall ever come to scan

The record of the imperious ban

That made our life so sad a span

Shall read or hear, who shall not pray

For us for ever." Then anon

Died Balan; but the sun was gone,

And deep the stars of midnight shone,

Ere Balen passed away.

And there low lying, as hour on hour

Fled, all his life in all its flower

Came back as in a sunlit shower

Of dreams, when sweet-souled sleep has power

On life less sweet and glad to be.

He drank the draught of life's first wine

Again: he saw the moorland shine,

The rioting rapids of the Tyne,

The woods, the cliffs, the sea.

The joy that lives at heart and home,

The joy to rest, the joy to roam,

The joy of crags and scaurs he clomb,

The rapture of the encountering foam

Embraced and breasted of the boy,

The first good steed his knees bestrode,

The first wild sound of songs that flowed

Through ears that thrilled and heart that glowed,

Fulfilled his death with joy.

So, dying not as a coward that dies

And dares not look in death's dim eyes

Straight as the stars on seas and skies

Whence moon and sun recoil and rise,

He looked on life and death, and slept.

And there with morning Merlin came,

And on the tomb that told their fame

He wrote by Balan's Balen's name,

And gazed thereon, and wept.

For all his heart within him yearned

With pity like as fire that burned.

The fate his fateful eye discerned

Far off now dimmed it, ere he turned

His face toward Camelot, to tell

Arthur of all the storms that woke

Round Balen, and the dolorous stroke,

And how that last blind battle broke

The consummated spell.

"Alas," King Arthur said, "this day

I have heard the worst that woe might say:

For in this world that wanes away

I know not two such knights as they."

This is the tale that memory writes

Of men whose names like stars shall stand,

Balen and Balan, sure of hand,

Two brethren of Northumberland,

In life and death good knights.

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