

# KING ARTHUR'S TOMB

Hot August noon—already on that day  
 Since sunrise through the Wiltshire downs, most sad  
 Of mouth and eye, he had gone leagues of way;  
 Ay and by night, till whether good or bad

He was, he knew not, though he knew perchance 5  
That he was Launcelot, the bravest knight  
Of all who since the world was, have borne lance,  
Or swung their swords in wrong cause or in right.

Nay, he knew nothing now, except that where  
 The Glastonbury gilded towers shine, 10  
 A lady dwelt, whose name was Guenevere;  
 This he knew also; that some fingers twine,

Not only in a man's hair, even his heart,  
 (Making him good or bad I mean,) but in his life,  
 Skies, earth, men's looks and deeds, all that has part,  
 Not being ourselves, in that half-sleep, half-strife,

15

(Strange sleep, strange strife,) that men call living; so  
Was Launcelot most glad when the moon rose,  
Because it brought new memories of her. "Lo,  
Between the trees a large moon, the wind lows

"Not loud, but as a cow begins to low,  
Wishing for strength to make the herdsman hear:  
The ripe corn gathereth dew; yea, long ago,  
In the old garden life, my Guenevere

"Loved to sit still among the flowers, till night                      25

Had quite come on, hair loosen'd, for she said,  
Smiling like heaven, that its fairness might  
Draw up the wind sooner to cool her head.

"Now while I ride how quick the moon gets small,

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As it did then—I tell myself a tale 30  
That will not last beyond the whitewashed wall,  
Thoughts of some joust must help me through the vale,

"Keep this till after—How Sir Gareth ran  
A good course that day under my Queen's eyes,  
And how she sway'd laughing at Dinadan— 35  
No—back again, the other thoughts will rise,

"And yet I think so fast 'twill end right soon—  
Verily then I think, that Guenevere,  
Made sad by dew and wind, and tree-barred moon,  
Did love me more than ever, was more dear 40

"To me than ever, she would let me lie  
And kiss her feet, or, if I sat behind,  
Would drop her hand and arm most tenderly,  
And touch my mouth. And she would let me wind

"Her hair around my neck, so that it fell 45  
Upon my red robe, strange in the twilight  
With many unnamed colours, till the bell  
Of her mouth on my cheek sent a delight

"Through all my ways of being; like the stroke  
Wherewith God threw all men upon the face 50  
When he took Enoch, and when Enoch woke  
With a changed body in the happy place.

"Once, I remember, as I sat beside,  
She turn'd a little, and laid back her head,  
And slept upon my breast: I almost died  
In those night-watches with my love and dread,

55

"There lily-like she bow'd her head and slept,  
And I breathed low, and did not dare to move,  
But sat and quiver'd inwardly, thoughts crept,  
And frighten'd me with pulses of my Love.

60

"The stars shone out above the doubtful green  
Of her bodice, in the green sky overhead;  
Pale in the green sky were the stars I ween,  
Because the moon shone like a star she shed

"When she dwelt up in heaven a while ago,

65

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And ruled all things but God: the night went on,  
The wind grew cold, and the white moon grew low,  
One hand had fallen down, and now lay on

"My cold stiff palm; there were no colours then  
For near an hour, and I fell asleep  
In spite of all my striving, even when  
I held her whose name-letters make me leap.

70

"I did not sleep long, feeling that in sleep  
I did some loved one wrong, so that the sun  
Had only just arisen from the deep  
Still land of colours, when before me one

75

"Stood whom I knew, but scarcely dared to touch,  
She seemed to have changed so in the night;  
Moreover she held scarlet lilies, such  
As Maiden Margaret bears upon the light

80

"Of the great church walls, natheless did I walk  
Through the fresh wet woods, and the wheat that morn,  
Touching her hair and hand and mouth, and talk  
Of love we held, nigh hid among the corn.

"Back to the palace, ere the sun grew high, 85  
We went, and in a cool green room all day  
I gazed upon the arras giddily,  
Where the wind set the silken kings a-sway.

"I could not hold her hand, or see her face;  
For which may God forgive me! but I think, 90  
Howsoever, that she was not in that place."  
These memories Launcelot was quick to drink;

And when these fell, some paces past the wall,  
There rose yet others, but they wearied more,  
And tasted not so sweet; they did not fall 95  
So soon, but vaguely wrenched his strained heart sore

In shadowy slipping from his grasp; these gone,  
A longing followed; if he might but touch  
That Guenevere at once! Still night, the lone  
Grey horse's head before him vex'd him much, 100

In steady nodding over the grey road—  
Still night, and night, and night, and emptied heart  
Of any stories; what a dismal load  
Time grew at last, yea, when the night did part,

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And let the sun flame over all, still there 105  
The horse's grey ears turn'd this way and that,  
And still he watch'd them twitching in the glare  
Of the morning sun, behind them still he sat,

Quite wearied out with all the wretched night,  
    Until about the dustiest of the day, 110  
On the last down's brow he drew his rein in sight  
    Of the Glastonbury roofs that choke the way.

And he was now quite giddy as before,  
    When she slept by him, tired out and her hair  
Was mingled with the rushes on the floor, 115  
    And he, being tired too, was scarce aware

Of her presence; yet as he sat and gazed,  
    A shiver ran throughout him, and his breath  
Came slower, he seem'd suddenly amazed,  
    As though he had not heard of Arthur's death. 120

This for a moment only, presently  
    He rode on giddy still, until he reach'd  
A place of apple-trees, by the thorn-tree  
    Wherefrom St. Joseph in the days past preached.

Dazed there he laid his head upon a tomb, 125  
    Not knowing it was Arthur's, at which sight  
One of her maidens told her, "he is come,"  
    And she went forth to meet him; yet a blight

Had settled on her, all her robes were black,  
    With a long white veil only; she went slow, 130  
As one walks to be slain, her eyes did lack  
    Half her old glory, yea, alas! the glow

Had left her face and hands; this was because  
    As she lay last night on her purple bed,  
lissing for morning, grudging every pause 135  
    Of the palace clocks, until that Launcelot's head

Should lie on her breast, with all her golden hair  
    Each side—when suddenly the thing grew drear,  
In morning twilight, when the grey downs bare

Grew into lumps of sin to Guenevere.

140

At first she said no word, but lay quite still,  
Only her mouth was open, and her eyes  
Gazed wretchedly about from hill to hill;

[p. 58]

As though she asked, not with so much surprise

As tired disgust, what made them stand up there  
So cold and grey. After, a spasm took  
Her face, and all her frame, she caught her hair,  
All her hair, in both hands, terribly she shook,

145

And rose till she was sitting in the bed,  
Set her teeth hard, and shut her eyes and seem'd  
As though she would have torn it from her head,  
Natheless she dropp'd it, lay down, as she deem'd

150

It matter'd not whatever she might do —  
O Lord Christ! pity on her ghastly face!  
Those dismal hours while the cloudless blue  
Drew the sun higher—He did give her grace;

155

Because at last she rose up from her bed,  
And put her raiment on, and knelt before  
The blessed rood, and with her dry lips said,  
Muttering the words against the marble floor:

160

“Unless you pardon, what shall I do, Lord,  
But go to hell? and there see day by day  
Foul deed on deed, hear foulest word on word.  
For ever and ever, such as on the way

“To Camelot I heard once from a churl,  
That curled me up upon my jennet's neck

165

With bitter shame; how then, Lord, should I curl  
For ages and for ages? dost thou reckon

“That I am beautiful, Lord, even as you  
And your dear Mother? why did I forget  
You were so beautiful, and good, and true,  
That you loved me so, Guenevere? O yet

170

“If even I go to hell, I cannot choose  
But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep  
From loving Launcelot; O Christ! must I lose  
My own heart’s love? see, though I cannot weep,

175

“Yet am I very sorry for my sin;  
Moreover, Christ, I cannot bear that hell,  
I am most fain to love you, and to win  
A place in heaven some time—I cannot tell—

180

“Speak to me, Christ! I kiss, kiss, kiss your feet;

[p. 59]

Ah! now I weep!” — The maid said, “By the tomb  
He waiteth for you, lady,” coming fleet,  
Not knowing what woe filled up all the room.

So Guenevere rose and went to meet him there,  
He did not hear her coming, as he lay  
On Arthur’s head, till some of her long hair  
Brush’d on the new-cut stone — “Well done! to pray

185

“For Arthur, my dear lord, the greatest king  
That ever lived.” “Guenevere! Guenevere!  
Do you not know me, are you gone mad? fling  
Your arms and hair about me, lest I fear

190

“Your are not Guenevere, but some other thing.”

“Pray you forgive me, fair lord Launcelot!  
I am not mad, but I am sick; they cling, 195  
God’s curses, unto such as I am; not

“Ever again shall we twine arms and lips.”  
“Yea, she is mad: thy heavy law, O Lord,  
Is very tight about her now, and grips  
Her poor heart, so that no right word 200

“Can reach her mouth; so, Lord, forgive her now,  
That she not knowing what she does, being mad,  
Kills me in this way — Guenevere, bend low  
And kiss me once! for God’s love kiss me! sad

“Though your face is, you look much kinder now; 205  
Yea once, once far the last time kiss me, lest I die.”  
“Christ! my hot lips are very near his brow,  
Help me to save his soul! — Yea, verily,

“Across my husband’s head, fair Launcelot!  
Fair serpent mark’d with V upon the head! 210  
This thing we did while yet he was alive,  
Why not, O twisting knight, now he is dead?

“Yea, shake! shake now and shiver! if you can  
Remember anything for agony,  
Pray you remember how when the wind ran 215  
One cool spring evening through fair aspen-tree,

“And elm and oak about the palace there,  
The king came back from battle, and I stood  
To meet him, with my ladies, on the stair,  
My face made beautiful with my young blood.” 220

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"Will she lie now, Lord God?" "Remember too,  
Wrung heart, how first before the knights there came



A royal bier, hung round with green and blue,  
About it shone great tapers with sick flame.

"And thereupon Lucius, the Emperor, 225  
Lay royal-robed, but stone-cold now and dead,  
Not able to hold sword or sceptre more,  
But not quite grim; because his cloven head

"Bore no marks now of Launcelot's bitter sword,  
Being by embalmers deftly solder'd up; 230  
So still it seem'd the face of a great lord,  
Being mended as a craftsman mends a cup.

"Also the heralds sung rejoicingly  
To their long trumpets; 'Fallen under shield,  
Here lieth Lucius, King of Italy, 235  
Slain by Lord Launcelot in open field.'

"Thereat the people shouted 'Launcelot!'  
And through the spears I saw you drawing nigh,  
You and Lord Arthur—nay, I saw you not,  
But rather Arthur, God would not let die, 240

"I hoped, these many years, he should grow great,  
And in his great arms still encircle me,  
Kissing my face, half blinded with the heat  
Of king's love for the queen I used to be.

"Launcelot, Launcelot, why did he take your hand, 245  
When he had kissed me in his kingly way?  
Saying, 'This is the knight whom all the land  
Calls Arthur's banner, sword, and shield to-day;

"'Cherish him, love.' Why did your long lips cleave  
In such strange way unto my fingers then? 250  
So eagerly glad to kiss, so loath to leave  
When you rose up? Why among helmed men

"Could I always tell you by your long strong arms,  
And sway like an angel's in your saddle there?  
Why sicken'd I so often with alarms  
Over the tilt-yard? Why were you more fair

255

"Than aspens in the autumn at their best?  
Why did you fill all lands with your great fame,  
So that Breuse even, as he rode, fear'd lest

[p. 61]

At turning of the way your shield should flame?

260

"Was it nought then, my agony and strife?  
When as day passed by day, year after year,  
I found I could not live a righteous life?  
Didst ever think queens held their truth for dear?

"O, but your lips say, 'Yea, but she was cold  
Sometimes, always uncertain as the spring;  
When I was sad she would be overbold,  
Longing for kisses;' when war-bells did ring,

265

"The back-toll'd bells of noisy Camelot" —  
"Now, Lord God, listen! listen, Guenevere,  
Though I am weak just now, I think there's not  
A man who dares to say, 'You hated her,

270

"And left her moaning while you fought your fill  
In the daisied meadows;' lo you her thin hand,  
That on the carven stone can not keep still,  
Because she loves me against God's command,

275

"Has often been quite wet with tear on tear,  
Tears Launcelot keeps somewhere, surely not  
In his own heart, perhaps in Heaven, where  
He will not be these ages" — "Launcelot!

280

"Loud lips, wrung heart! I say, when the bells rang,  
The noisy back-toll'd bells of Camelot,  
There were two spots on earth, the thrushes sang  
In the lonely gardens where my love was not,

"Where I was almost weeping; I dared not  
Weep quite in those days, lest one maid should say,  
In tittering whispers; 'Where is Launcelot  
To wipe with some kerchief those tears away?' 285

"Another answer sharply with brows knit,  
And warning hand up, scarcely lower though, 290  
'You speak too loud, see you, she heareth it,  
This tigress fair has claws, as I well know,

"As Launcelot knows too, the poor knight! well-a-day!  
Why met he not with Iseult from the West,  
Or, better still, Iseult of Brittany, 295

[p. 62]

Perchance indeed quite ladyless were best.'

Alas, my maids, you loved not overmuch  
Queen Guenevere, uncertain as sunshine  
In March; forgive me! for my sin being such,  
About my whole life, all my deeds did twine, 300

"Made me quite wicked; as I found out then,  
I think; in the lonely palace where each morn  
We went, my maids and I, to say prayers when  
They sang mass in the chapel on the lawn.

"And every morn I scarce could pray at all 305  
For Launcelot's red-golden hair would play,  
Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall,  
Mingled with dreams of what the priest did say;

“Grim curses out of Peter and of Paul;  
Judging of strange sins in Leviticus; 310  
Another sort of writing on the wall,  
Scored deep across the painted heads of us.

“Christ sitting with the woman at the well,  
And Mary Magdalen repenting there,  
Her dimmed eyes scorch’d and red at sight of hell 315  
So hardly scaped, no gold light on her hair.

“And if the priest said anything that seem’d  
To touch upon the sin they said we did,—  
(This in their teeth) they look’d as if they deem’d  
That I was spying what thoughts might be hid 320

“Under green-cover’d bosoms, heaving quick  
Beneath quick thoughts; while they grew red with shame,  
And gazed down at their feet — while I felt sick,  
And almost shriek’d if one should call my name.

“The thrushes sang in the lone garden there — 325  
But where you were the birds were scared I trow —  
Clanging of arms about pavilions fair,  
Mixed with the knights’ laughs; there, as I well know,

“Rode Launcelot, the king of all the band,  
And scowling Gauwaine, like the night in day, 330  
And handsome Gareth, with his great white hand

[p. 63]

Curl’d round the helm-crest, ere he join’d the fray;

“And merry Dinadan with sharp dark face,  
All true knights loved to see; and in the fight  
Great Tristram, and though helmed you could trace 335  
In all his bearing the frank noble knight;

“And by him Palomydes; helmet off,  
He fought, his face brush’d by his hair,  
Red heavy swinging hair; he fear’d a scoff  
So overmuch, though what true knight would dare 340

“To mock that face, fretted with useless care,  
And bitter useless striving after love?  
O Palomydes, with much honour bear  
Beast Glatysaunt upon your shield, above

“Your helm that hides the swinging of your hair, 345  
And think of Iseult, as your sword drives through  
Much mail and plate – O God, let me be there  
A little time, as I was long ago!

“Because stout Gareth lets his spear fall low,  
Gauwaine and Launcelot, and Dinadan 350  
Are helm’d and waiting; let the trumpets go!  
Bend over, ladies, to see all you can!

“Clench teeth, dames, yea, clasp hands, for Gareth’s spear  
Throws Kay from out his saddle, like a stone  
From a castle-window when the foe draws near 355  
‘Iseult!’ — Sir Dinadan rolleth overthrown.

“‘Isuelt’ – again – the pieces of each spear  
Fly fathoms up, and both the great steeds reel;  
‘Tristram for Iseult!’ ‘Iseult!’ and ‘Guenevere,’  
The ladies’ names bite verily like steel. 360

“They bite – bite me, Lord God! – I shall go mad,  
Or else die kissing him, he is so pale;  
He thinks me mad already, O bad! bad!  
Let me lie down a little while and wail.”

“No longer so, rise up, I pray you, love, 365  
And slay me really, then we shall be heal’d,  
Perchance, in the aftertime by Goad above.”

“Banner of Arthur—with black-bended shield

“Sinister-wise across the fair gold ground!

[p. 64]

Here let me tell you what a knight you are, 370  
O sword and shield of Arthur! you are found  
A crooked sword, I think, that leaves a scar

"On the bearer's arm, so be he thinks it straight,  
Twisted Malay's crease beautiful blue-grey,  
Poison'd with sweet fruit; as he found too late, 375  
My husband Arthur, on some bitter day!

"O sickle cutting hemlock the day long!  
That the husbandman across his shoulder hangs,  
And, going homeward about evensong,  
Dies the next morning, struck through by the fangs! 380

"Banner, and sword, and shield, you dare not die,  
Lest you meet Arthur in the other world,  
And, knowing who you are, he pass you by,  
Taking short turns that he may watch you curl'd,

"Body and face and limbs in agony, 385  
Lest he weep presently and go away,  
Saying, 'I loved him once,' with a sad sigh—  
Now I have slain him, Lord, let me go too, I pray. [Launcelot  
*falls.*]

"Alas! alas! I know not what to do,  
If I run fast it is perchance that I 390  
May fall and stun myself, much better so,  
Never, never again! not even when I die."

Launcelot, *on awaking.*

"I stretch'd my hands towards her and fell down,  
How long I lay in swoon I cannot tell:  
My head and hands were bleeding from the stone,  
When I rose up, also I heard a bell."

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### Endnotes

62. *bodice*, ] *boddice*, 1858.

264. *Didst ever think that queens held their truth dear*. 1858.

328. *knights'* ] *knight's* 1858.

381. *not die* , ] *not pray to die*, 1858.

384. *curl'd* , ] *curl'd*. 1858.