

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

HENRY NEWBOLT

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MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

HENRY NEWBOLT

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"The fate of...is tragic in the essential sense, and not merely that superficial sense of the word according to which every misfortune is called 'tragic.'...In truth innocent suffering of that sort is merely pathetic, not tragic, inasmuch as it is not within the sphere of reason. Now suffering misfortune comes within the sphere of reason only if it is brought about by the free will of the subject, who must be entirely moral and justifiable; as must be also the power against which that subject proceeds. This power must be no merely natural one, nor the mere will of a tyrant: because it is only in such case that the man is himself, so to speak, guilty of his misfortune.

"In genuine tragedy, then, they must be powers both alike moral and justifiable, which from this side and from that come into collision. Two opposed Rights come forth: the one breaks itself to pieces against the other: in this way both alike loss: while both alike are justified, the one towards the other: not as if this were right, that other wrong."

HEGEL. (*Translated by W. Pater*)

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Persons Represented

ARTHUR, *King of Britain.*
SIR KAY, *The Seneschal.*
SIR LANCELOT DU LAKE.
SIR LAMORAK DE GALIS.
SIR TRISTRAM DE LIONES.
SIR BEDIVERE.
SIR LUCAN.
SIR GERAINT.
SIR PELLEAS OF THE ISLES.

Princes of Orkney, Sons of King Lot and Queen Morgance.

SIR GARETH
SIR GAWAINE
SIR GAHERIS
SIR AGRAVAINE

SIR MORDRED, *Prince of Orkney, son of Arthur and Morgance.*
GUINEVERE, *Queen of Britain.*

Ladies in attendance on Guinevere.

ENID
LIONORS
LINET
LAUREL

A HERALD.

A TRUMPETER.

KNIGHTS, SQUIRES, YEOMEN, GUARDS, LADIES, NUNS, *The buildings, armour, and dresses are in the style of the early part of the XVth century.*

ACT I

SCENE I.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

The Lists at Caerleon—on—Usk. Upon a daïs GUINEVERE with her four ladies, and ARTHUR, with KAY and a herald at his right hand. A little below them LANCELOT, TRISTRAM, LAMORAK, GAWAINE, and many other knights in armour; PELLEAS, MORDRED, squires, yeomen, and a crowd of folk beyond.

Arthur. Lancelot, the Queen with all men's loud acclaim
Hath named thee victor, and doth summon thee
To kneel before her Grace.

[LANCELOT kneels.]

Guinevere (laying a wreath upon his head). Sir Lancelot, here
I give thee but a wisp of worthless leaves
For honour's sake: the prize thou hast already,
Knowing thyself unmatched.

Lancelot. A prize, my Queen,
Or this or that, was never in my thought;
But one word's praise, if any toil might win it,
From the most gracious lips in Christendom.

Arthur. A knightly answer, fitly rounding off
A noble contest: for in all the years
Since Britain crowned me with Pendragon's crown
Here at Caerleon, never have I beheld
So great a press of splendid chivalry
Gathered within one lists, nor ever known
Challenge so keen, defence so strenuous,
Valour and courtesy so justly blent.
Thou, Lancelot, claim'st of right the victor's wreath,
Having surpassed even thine own renown;
Yet let me say, did'st thou not wear it better
There are a hundred here would wear it well.

(*To KAY.*) But come, 'tis ended: bid the trumpet sound,
And let the herald cry before we part
Our wonted proclamation.

Kay. Sir, he is ready
Ho! the king's herald!

[*Trumpet.*]

Herald. Oyez! oyez! oyez!
And first if there be any in presence here
Knight of the Table Round, that hath received
Commission of the king for quest or war,
And therein laboured and therefrom returned
Now let him render up his due account
And bide the judgment of our lord the king
Oyez! Who comes?

Lamorak. I, Lamorak de Galis.

Arthur. Lamorak? Our Order knows no greater name:
Did I not match it with a charge as great?

Lamorak. My Lord, the charge was great: no less indeed
Than kingship: for the full space of a year
To rule the outland by the Northern Sea,
Deal peace or war to the king's enemies

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And justice to his people; to command
With Arthur's voice of thunder, and to strike
With the swift lightning flash of Arthur's sword.

Arthur. I do remember well, yet all this year
I have not so much as dreamed of my wild North,
Knowing it guarded by a hand of iron
And golden counsels: yet for custom's sake
Recount thy service, Lamorak.

Lamorak. Sir, briefly summed,
'Tis war—built peace, that will not quickly crumble.

Arthur. Thou hast our thanks: we'll question thee anon
Of all in order; meanwhile, peace or war,
Thou'rt welcome, Lamorak: and since thy wars
Have wrought our peace, twice welcome! So there come not
Some need more pressing than the times portend,
We'll keep thee near us.

Lamorak. Good my lord, you heap
Reward on praise and honour on reward.

Arthur. Herald, again thy trumpet.

[*Trumpet.*]

Herald. Oyez! oyez! oyez!
And next if there be any in presence here,
Gentle or simple, woman, child, or man,
That wishing well to live at peace with all
Nathless hath suffered or doth suffer wrong,
Now let the weak and poor forget their fears
And crave the justice of our lord the king.
Oyez! who comes?

[*A pause.*]

Arthur. (*To KAY.*) None? let him sound again.

Kay. My lord, 'tis needless; up and down the realm
The Table Round have quested year by year,
Till there is none perverse or bold enough
To dare the instant forfeit.

Arthur. How say'st thou, none?
Are there no ladies held against their will,
No poor down—trodden, no man done to death
By craft unknighly, no blaspheming heard
Against our holy faith? The Golden Age
Is come again then! Yet, why marvel I,
Knowing my strength, whose arm is truly braced
With triple steel, Lancelot and Lamorak
And Tristram, betwixt whom, as all men say,
The knighthood of the world is parted fair.
But now to make an end, there's yet, meseems,
One proclamation, herald.

[*Trumpet.*]

Herald. Oyez! oyez! oyez!
And last, if there be any in presence here
Who being but squire, yet true withal and strong,
Doth covet knighthood, and would bind himself

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

By the strait vows of Arthur's Table Round,
Now let him come, with warrant of his worth,
And make request unto our lord the king.
Oyez! who comes?

Lancelot. I, Lancelot, make request
For my squire, Pelleas: I have proved him brave,
Enduring, emulous, sudden and sure at need,
And in the courtesy of service, perfect.
Thereto his birth is princely; yet I look
To see his life out-lustre it.

Arthur. Enough!
Thy suit is granted, Lancelot: and for thee
Pelleas, that hearest of thyself such words
From such a mouth, remember all thy days
That Lancelot praised the promise of thy youth,
And thou shalt surely come to more than fame.
Gawaine. My lord, I, Gawaine, also beg thy favour
For a young kinsman.

Arthur. Nay, Gawaine, thou art late.
It doth repent me, but the Table Round
Hath but one siege unfilled, and that thou hear'st
Is pledged to Pelleas. Thou shalt ask again
At some more happy season.

(*To GUINEVERE*) Come, my queen,
Shall we go homeward?

Mordred. Ah! my lord! my lord!
Hear me one moment's space!

[*He kneels and grasps the king's mantle.*]

Arthur (his robe falling as he turns). And who art thou,
So wilful-urgent that thou darest thus
From a king's shoulder pluck his kingly robe?

Mordred (looking fixedly at him). Mordred, the son of Morgance.

Arthur. Ha! thou sayest?

Mordred. Mordred, the son of Morgance.

Arthur. Nay, I hear thee,
And for the name's sake pardon. What's thy plaint?
What wilt thou?

Mordred. Knighthood of the Table Round.

Arthur. Thou too? Hast thou not heard even now

Mordred. Ay, my lord,
It was for me that Gawaine made request.

Arthur. And thereto had his answer. What? is there more?

Mordred. Ay, this my lord:
Morgance, the queen, my mother, sending me
Her youngest hither, bade me boldly ask
This boon of knighthood, saying, "And if he doubt,
Thou shalt entreat him by the memory
Of his own youth, when I from Orkney came
On a far embassy, and made with him
That lasting treaty."

[*ARTHUR looks hard on MORDRED and is silent.*]

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Guinevere (aside to LANCELOT). Mark how the king is moved!
Anger and policy divide his mind
With more than common tumult.

Lancelot. 'Tis no wonder:
The habit of command so long ingrained
Brooks not a suit urged by any mouth
Save one, my queen.

Guinevere (smiling). Listen!
Arthur (half to himself). That lasting treaty!
(aloud) Ay, Mordred, partly for that treaty's sake,
And partly too, that something in thy face
Stirs me with presage of a name for thee
Beyond thy fellows, thou shalt have thy will,
Though how, I know not yet.

[He turns to go.]

Kay. Sir

Arthur. Stay me not;
I know thy scruples, Kay; but I have sworn
He shall be knight, knight of our Table Round,
Though I myself must yield my place to him.

*[GUINEVERE and ARTHUR go out followed by
ladies, knights, squires, and men-at-arms.]*

SCENE II.

Caerleon: the Queen's Bower.

Enter GUINEVERE, with Ladies attending her.

Guinevere. Thanks, ye may leave me now; for some short space
I shall not need you. Enid, go not thou.

[The others go out.]

Enid. Madam, you are tired.

Guinevere. Ay, 'twas a weary day.

Enid. Weary? Oh! madam, now you jest with me!
Think you I saw not, up on the dais there
How your eyes kindled when the trumpets rang,
And every time those two great glittering waves
Thundered along to the shock, you clenched your hands
And leaned a little forward, and your breath

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Caught, while the mellay clashed and clung and broke
And clashed again; and when the warder fell
And you, the Queen of Tourney, rose to crown
Our noblest knight think you I marked not then
The happy pride that gave your quivering voice
That deep-strung note of challenge? Dearest madam,
Was it not so?

Guinevere. Nay, Enid, yea and nay,
Proud was I yea, and who would not be proud?
But happy! Yea, and I was happy too,
While he was there before me, and my thought
A moment slumbered but to wake to think
To see the one thing I have lacked in life,
The one thing worth possession ah! thou knowest
That I was wed while I was half a child,
And found not this till I had signed away
My right to grasp it and the slow years bring
Nought but endurance bitterer still, there come
Days like to-day, poignant with needless proof
Of loss immeasurable, and rack my heart
With a vain longing to unravel life
And weave the pattern fresh and then thou sayest
It was not weary, Enid!

Enid. Oh! dear lady,
Forgive me, I was blind, I should have seen
And I remember I have sometimes thought
Why did you never tell me?

Guinevere. Only I think
Because I never yet have felt so weak
As to-day left me

Hark! a foot without!
Let no one enter give me a moment yet
Now open Well? Who is it?

Enid. Madam, his page
He craves an audience of the queen.

Guinevere. Why gladly
Tell him is it done? and, Enid, when he comes,
Wait thou without, dear child, and see that none
Break in upon our conference.

Enid. Oh! madam,
Not not alone! not now! you are not yourself,
Let me stay with you I am true and secret.

Guinevere. Nay, Enid, trust me, 'tis the queen he seeks,
And he shall find her!

There's his step without,
I am ready.

Enid (kissing her hand). Dearest lady!

Guinevere. Bring him in.

Enter LANCELOT hurriedly: ENID goes out.

Lancelot. My Queen, I am come (*He stops abruptly.*)

Guinevere. Surely Sir Lancelot knows

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Come for what cause he may, he is welcome here.

Lancelot. Oh! say not that, not that; for I am come
To take farewell.

Guinevere. Farewell? I cannot stay
What wert thou saying? My head is tired to-night,
And thou wert strange and sudden.

Lancelot. Yea, I am strange
Even to myself, most strange; and suddenness
Befits my purpose, that must do the deed
Before repentance wakes.

Guinevere. Why, thou art distressed:
We'll sit awhile, and talk of this more calmly.
Come, let me guess; the king, it may be, needs
That his right hand should strike some distant wrong.
Is it so far distant?

Lancelot. I must part to-night
For Joyous Gard.

Guinevere. Ah, 'tis trouble calls thee home,
Not the king's service? Then some rebel knight,
Grudging thine overlordship, thinks it easy
To brave an absent prince; but thou'lt be gone
How long at most?

Lancelot. I shall be gone the rest
Of all my life-days.

Guinevere. Now may God defend thee!
But 'tis not like thy high victorious heart
To brood on danger.

Lancelot. Alas! you know me not!
I have brooded long, too long, and now must fly
Lest worse befall than danger.

Guinevere. Thou must fly?
When has thou fled? But stay 'tis hence thou goest;
The peril's here, then?

Lancelot. Ay, most truly here,
Imminent here and now! farewell, my Queen,
Farewell, I dare not linger.

Guinevere (in a low voice). Peril here?
I know not what thou sayest

Lancelot. You shall not know:
Only what's weakest in me could desire
That you should know: farewell!

Guinevere. Stay, art thou not
Perchance too sudden, Lancelot, too resigned
To thine own weakness, when with patient craft
Or help of strong alliance, even yet
Thou might'st endure, and by enduring break
The onset of thy foes?

Lancelot. Oh, stay me not!
God knows I have endured! What is there left,
What patience, what alliance?

Guinevere. Mine! the queen's!

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Lancelot. Oh, mockery! most unguarded stroke of all!
Thy words against their merciful intent
Drive the steel deeper.

Guinevere. Nay, Lancelot, hear me yet,
What if this secret enemy of thine
Threatened me too? What if my life with thine
Lay strangling in the toils, the self-same toils,
Wild with one hope and dumb with one despair?

Lancelot. Guinevere! Guinevere! What hast thou said ?
I dare not understand thee!

Guinevere. Must my tongue
Cry it more loudly than my beating heart?
Can'st thou not read a woman's eyes?

Lancelot. O Death!
Remember not my blind and faithless prayers,
Let not the end be yet!

Guinevere. Ah, reckless heart!
How long before thou wilt repent again,
And crave Death's mercy-stroke? Forget thou not
Because a sudden gleam hath touched the world,
That 'tis but lightning, born of the storm itself,
And for a moment only cleaves the gloom
That deepens round us. Canst thou still endure
To grope in darkness, doubtful of the end,
With but a voice to guide thy faltering feet?

Lancelot. My Queen let storm-clouds gather as they will
Why should we stay to brave them? Far away
Lies Joyous Gard: there sleeps the windless sky,
There dreams the sunlit summer of our life.
Come, let us seek it: art thou silent still?
Why are thine eyes so rapt and so forlorn,
My Guinevere?

Guinevere. Oh! Lancelot, call me not
By a false name: since I am Guinevere
I am not thine: if I were thine indeed
I were myself no more: which would'st thou have me,
Thine, or the woman thou hast known and loved?

Lancelot. Nay, being mine thou shalt be most thyself.
How could'st thou truly live, when all these years
Thy will hath been another's? Not a rose
In all the forest comes to bud and bloom
Her veriest life and being till she 'scapes
The cold embrace of earth, and stretches forth
Free arms to the free air. I offer thee
Nay, on my knees I humbly pray thee take
The life thou owest to thy truer self,
The life thy soul desireth.

Guinevere. Lancelot! Lancelot!
I am the king's nay, hear me to the end,
I know thy thought 'tis true I was a child,
'Tis true that with a child's consent I gave

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I knew not what, for that I did not need:
Yet did I pledge my troth; and therewithal
Took in return a true man's single faith,
And in my keeping ever since have held
His welfare and his peace.

Lancelot. The bargain's nought!
'Twas blindfold: no man's bound by such a pact.
He, when he made it, thereby made it void
And took thee at his peril.

Guinevere. Yet am I bound,
Not by my promise, if thou wilt, but still
By that which followed: how can I escape
The memory of his bounty?

Lancelot. Oh, bethink thee,
Hast thou not said even now, he gave thee nought
But that thou did'st not need?

Guinevere. Ah! but he gave!
And I accepted gladly: day by day,
Year after year, I have taken countless gifts
His throne, the splendour of his name, a life
All-honoured, all-befriended and secure,
The constant service of his silent care,
And, greater still, to share his kingly thought
For the land's weal: thou canst not say that these,
These that I took, and learned at last to need,
Deserve no payment.

Lancelot. They were more than paid
By grace of mere acceptance: thou hast given
Day after day, thou say'st, and year by year,
Gold for his silver

Guinevere. Lancelot, if 'twere so,
Yet is there more between the king and me
Than such exchange can ransom: when we wedded,
Ay, from the day when first he saw my face
And shrined it in his thought, he has kept for me
In sacred dedication, the one gift
That none can offer twice, the crown of love,
The undivided faith of body and soul.
Thou'rt silent nay, I love thee but the more;
Some challenges no man may answer to
And not be tarnished. Oh! my peerless knight
Enforce my will with thine, and we'll contest
This praise with Arthur: Love's a noble name,
But Faith's a nobler: how can thou and I
Endure to lack it? What! Shall he be pure
And Guinevere break troth? Shall he be strong
And Lancelot falter? Nay, while Arthur's king,
King of himself, no less will I be queen,
And thou, his prince of comrades.

Lancelot. Ha! by my life
There's more of knighthood in a woman's heart

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Than the Round Table musters! Thou hast wrought
Passion itself to such a generous heat
That Love for Love's sake hath surrendered him
Exulting into thrall.

Guinevere. There Lancelot spoke!
There rang the flawless shield! O lover mine,
Since we must part, I bless thee for the word
That makes the parting easier! Fare thee well:
I have crowned thee twice to-day: let me not live
To see thee less victorious.

Lancelot. Fear it not!
My thought is as thy thought, and all my mind
Set to the measure of thy will. Farewell!

[He goes out and ENID returns.]

Enid. Oh, do not weep! What is it? rest you here.
Was it so hard then?

Guinevere. Hard? Oh Enid! Enid!

ACT II

SCENE I.

Camelot: a terrace below the Great Hall. MORDRED alone. AGRAVAINE enters presently through a gateway, but is at first unseen.

Mordred. It shall be! it shall be! but this waiting
Will fret my heart—strings through!

Agravaine (aside). Ha! my brother Mordred,
Making confession to himself and me.

[He withdraws under the gateway.]
Pity the sinner's young, and bears a shield
So unbesmirched: I might have gathered else
Something of import.

[A silence.]

Well, if that's the sum,
'Tis time for absolution.

[He steps forward.]

(Aloud) How now, Mordred?

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Alone, man? Yet I thought a moment since
I heard the sound of voices.

Mordred. Ay, very likely.

Voices there were, but all of them were mine.
I am a very tumult, Agravaine,
Of clamorous voices: Youth and Youth's desires,
Hope and ambition and indignant strength
Cry from within me, "How shall life be life
Thus thwarted and fore-ordered?"

Agravaine. "Thus?" If I take thee
There's treason there.

Mordred. What then? to tyrants' ears
Truth may be treason.

Agravaine. Well, 'tis truth; we are
Somewhat o'er-harnessed with these vows of ours;
He's wise who takes discretion when there's need,
Softly to slip or break them.

Mordred. Break? Never!
I would destroy them!

Agravaine. Well, destroy or break,
There's but the difference of a word between us.

Mordred. Not so! not so! for what thou counsell'st
I deem dishonour misconceive me not
As censuring thee I know thy words were born
Of tenderness towards my suspected fault,
Not of self-sparing baseness but these vows
These laws of the Table Round themselves indeed
Enjoining nought of act or abstinence
That is not noble and most justly dear
To the soul of knighthood in despite of that
Are by their mere existence tyrannous,
Unnatural, hateful!

Agravaine. I long have held them hateful,
But have not bent so keen a glance as thine
To spy the wherefore.

Mordred. Wherefore? Is it not plain?
Life's not a mummer's dance, that we should walk it
Stiffly composed and following one by one
The same set figure: 'tis most orderly
When ordered least, and only then secure
From waywardness when each man's acts are flowers
Of his own rooted will.

Agravaine. Certes, my brother,
If thou wert gardener here, the Court would yield
A pretty posy of somewhat diverse hues!

Mordred. There, Agravaine, thou speak'st the common word
Of priests and princes: but I will not hear it:
Look wide into the world, and mark how nature
Guides every living thing, and never one
But keeps the age-long customs of his kind
By inborn virtue: is it to be believed

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That men alone come of a lawless stock
And know not their own good? No! cease to warp
Their free intent by covenant or command
And thou shalt see them spring like forest trees,
Straight, tall, and comely.

Agravaine. Woodman and gardener too!
But come, thou'rt in the right, I'll not dispute:
Men are alike all human, at the best.

Mordred. Nay, at the worst.

Agravaine. So be it, at the worst.
We are agreed: what then?

Mordred. Why then, would to God
All Camelot, all Britain, all the world
Were of one mind with us!

Agravaine. Ay, but they are not:
And casting nets too wide is like to mean
Drawing them empty: Britain and the world
Are nought to thee: bethink thee, man, 'tis here
Thou standest, here amidst of Arthur's Court,
Standest alone against the general voice
And the king's ordinance.

Mordred. Ha! the general voice!
I have ever noted that what all men say
Few think, and fewer still have thought upon.
Mine is a reasoned faith, and soon or late
They'll hear and hold it.

Agravaine. Some might come to hold it
If they would hear: but I have warned thee, Mordred,
Thy faith is treason.

Mordred. It shall not be for long.
I will be wary, and begin to speak
With none but such as owe me some regard:
My brothers first: our kindred: here and there
A trusted comrade; so by one and one
I'll build myself a secret fellowship
That may defy impeachment: what is treason
Muttered by one mouth, earns another name
When many shout it.

Agravaine. True: then 'tis called rebellion.

Mordred. I care not if it were: since time began
Freedom hath been rebellion.

Agravaine. Since our time began
The end of treason hath been banishment,
And of rebellion, death.

Mordred. For me, neither!
Some may betray my counsel, some turn back
When battle's joined, but tide what will betide,
No man may judge me, save the king himself.

Agravaine. Judgment enough, God wot!

Mordred. Yea, for all men else:
But I and mine stand not within his doom.

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Agravaine. Prithee how's that?

Mordred. I will not tell thee now.

Agravaine. No! nor this year, nor this hundred years!

So 'tis with youth some slight indulgence given,
He struts on air, and thinks to stand henceforth
Above the law: 'tis a vain confidence,
And will undo thee.

Mordred. Now on my knightly honour
I swear it is not vain!

Agravaine. I'll trust my life
To no man's knightly honour: mark thou! if I
If we, thy kindred, band ourselves with thee
To challenge odds, and ride a desperate tilt
Against unblunted spears, we must be told,
In the last peril, what's this vaunted ransom
Of price beyond refusal, to buy back
Our forfeit lives.

Mordred. Thou know'st our House of Orkney
Shares the blood of Pendragon

Agravaine. Out! child, out!
Back to thy toys! meddle no more with men.

Mordred. I will not so be scorned

Agravaine. Our House of Orkney!
Blood of Pendragon! Why, wert thou Arthur's son

Mordred. I am Arthur's son!

[A silence.]

Agravaine. Thou! who hath told thee so?

Mordred. My mother.

Agravaine. What mother?

Mordred. Nay, I would not would thee
She is mine too, remember.

Agravaine. Tush! she's woman,
And woman's frail, and frailty courts reproach.
Who spoke of blame? But hear me tell thee, Mordred,
Thou hast devised this infamous report,
Coveting lordship thou the last and least
Over thine elder brethren.

Mordred. Get thee to Orkney,
And ask of Morgance, if thou dar'st, the name
Of Mordred's father!

Agravaine. Nay, my dearest brother,
I did but try thee, for thy news was sudden
And full of wonder; trust me I doubt thee not;
There's Arthur in thy face. We'll speak of this
With Gaheris and Gawaine: Gareth too:
We are all thy brethren still; we'll bear aloft
The banner of thy right, and stand hereafter
Four-square about thy throne, to lift from thee
The weight of kingship.

Mordred. For thy good will I thank thee.
Yet I could almost wish but thou'lt be close

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

We'll have more conference: for an hour or twain
I am promised now: meanwhile speak not with any
Till after counsel taken.

[MORDRED *goes out.*

Agravaine. Nothing of import!
Fool! to forget that even sinless youth
May be a sin incarnate, damned from birth
With him that fathered it.

SCENE II.

The Great Hall at Camelot. ARTHUR, GUINEVERE, and the Round Table assembled, except GAWAINE and PELLEAS.

Arthur. Is it not hard on noon? I thought to-day
Should bring us messengers from Constantine.

Kay. Sir, they are come, and will be present here
In briefest space.

Bedivere. My lord, you did command me
To stir your memory touching certain plaints
From the South Marches.

Arthur. Say on, Bedivere,
What time is left we grant thee.

PELLEAS *enters hastily.*

Pelleas. Where is the king?
Justice! the king's justice on a traitor!
Vengeance sudden and sharp! or give my sword
Into my hand again!

Lancelot. Pelleas?

Kay. What noise is this,
And whence these manners, sirrah? The king but now
Hath opened conference with Sir Bedivere:
Wait thou thy turn.

Pelleas. (*To ARTHUR.*) Oh! bid me not wait, my lord,
I cannot, I have been waiting all these years
Since daybreak yea! since daybreak!

Lancelot. Alas! he is mad.
I pray you, sir, forbear him.

[*He speaks with PELLEAS aside.*

Guinevere. Oh! call not madness
This anguish of the heart that forces grief

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

From lips unwitting! I beseech you, sir,
Let not the poison longer work in him,
Lest he be mad in truth. Sir Bedivere,
As thou art courteous, stand not on thy rights
Yield him thy place.

Bedivere. Madam, with all my heart,
So that the king forbid not.

Arthur. To-morrow then
We'll hear thee, Bedivere, nor shall thy cause
Lose by delay.

Come, Pelleas, stand thou forth.
What is the justice thou hast claimed of us?
Who is it hath wronged thee?

Nay, I hear thee not:
Thy lips move without sound: fear not to name
Thy foe: if there be justice under heaven
So that thy quarrel's righteous, thou shalt find it.

Pelleas. Gawaine! Gawaine! My lord, I slew him not,
He's of the Table Round oh, traitorous heart!
All vows together broken!

Mordred. Gawaine? Thou darest
My lord, hear not this madman.

Arthur. Silence, Mordred.
This must be heard.

Sir Pelleas of the Isles,
Remember where thou standest; with what vows
Bound to our order, and to this thy foe:
Weigh well thy words, and even as thou hopest
To answer thine accuser at the Doom,
Now without malice or addition bring
Thy charge against thy fellow.

Pelleas. Nay, my lord,
Indeed this passion that hath marred my speech
Knows nought of malice: nor could very malice
Devise addition here.

I think 'tis known
Of all men present, how that many a day
I loved and wooed a lady passing fair,
With unrequited service.

Guinevere. Yea, Sir Pelleas,
And there's no gentle heart in Camelot
But wished thee speed, and held her all too proud
To scorn such honour.

Pelleas. Ah! madam, of gentle hearts
Yours is the queen, and well may speak for such.
But hers was hard: she took my one poor gift,
My prize of tourney tossed it to her squires,
Mocked my despair, and parted from the Court.
I following to her castle found the gates
Thrice barred against me, that I might not gain
Even her disdainful presence. Then there came

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

This Gawaine: heard my tale, and lightly laughed,
"I know this kind," he said, "Lend me thine arms,
I'll say I conquered thee, and once within
I'll draw her on to pity, thence to love thee,
And with the second morning, come again
To bring thee to thy triumph."

Oh! I was fooled!

I clutched the shadow of hope, gave him my arms
Save my sword only hid me, and watched him forth.
He passed; I heard him parley at the gates,
And the bridge ring beneath him: since that hour
I have heard no more his footfall or his voice.

Mordred. Why this is nought!

Arthur. Let be! Sir Pelleas,
Thus far thou hast but justified thy pain,
Not thy impeachment: nothing there is shown
Against Sir Gawaine's honour.

Pelleas. Sir, hear to the end.

Day passed, and night: the second day came round,
The day of promise: I waited hour by hour:
He came not: yet I waited: evening fell:
I waited still: at midnight, being on fire,
I wandered to those gates, and found them wide,
The courtyard empty, all the castle dark,
Its chambers void: a garden lay beyond
Wherein were three pavilions Ah! my lord
I cannot tell the end!

Lancelot. Sir, give me leave,
He hath told it in mine ear: he found them there
In sleep together, pride by treachery:
So turned and left them, turned and came again
And found them sleeping, and in his heart he longed
To slay them both: yet would not so destroy
The High Order of Knighthood as to strike
A sleeping man, no! though he came on him
At the very midnight of his thievish lust.
This is the end he laid his naked sword
Athwart their throats, and left them there to sleep
Unto a dawn of shame.

[*A silence.*]

Guinevere. Sir, will you not
Give him such instant comfort as you may?

Arthur. I will do justice.

Mordred. My lord, my brother Gawaine
Being absent, cannot dash this slander down
As yet he will: but even now the tale
Shows like a rotten garment backed and pieced
With unmatched colours: marked you Gawaine here
Proffering a service no man ever owed
To his most cherished friend, here rendering less
Than his mere duty to a comrade: now

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

He founds deliberate schemes of deepest craft
On chance, and wayward impulse; now, supine
At the very moment of foreseen pursuit,
He bares in guilty sleep his forfeit life
To the stroke of vengeance!

Who can justly weigh
What an eavesdropper sees through eyes inflamed
With starved and jealous passion? 'Tis well said,
Suspicion, like the prowling beasts of prey,
Sees most in darkness.

Arthur. Mordred, envenom not
With angry countercharge this sore debate.
Start not: I know thee full of knightly pride
And high-strung courage, and I praise in thee
The love thou bear'st thy brother: yet by hot words
Thou wrong'st a cause that only truth can save,
And not defiance.

Pelleas. What should he make with truth?
Where is my sword? Never before came truth
So near his traitor's throat!

Lancelot. Peace, friend! hear the king.

Arthur. For thee too, Pelleas, it were wiselier done
To leave with us thy quarrel: the third day hence
Thou shalt be heard again, and face to face
Challenge Sir Gawaine to the proof, nor lack
Thine utmost right. 'Tis true thou dost accuse
One who is kin, and hath been friend, to us,
And for our Order's sake his spotless fame
Is dear past utterance yet stablsh half
Of this thy charge, and by my kingly faith
And honour of knighthood, I will cast him forth
To herd among his kind, and feed on husks
In the outer desert of brute heathendom.

SCENE III.

Camelot. The King's Chamber. ARTHUR, KAY.

Arthur. What would'st thou, Kay, with me?

Kay. Your pardon, sir,

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I would not vex your study, but yourself
Gave me command to bring young Mordred hither;
He hath been pleased to come, and for the time
Awaits your summons.

Arthur. 'Tis well: bid him within.

And leave us, Kay; I know thou lov'st him not.

Kay. Nay, sir, indeed, my quarrel's not with him,
But with his youth: as though the world were made
For boys to whip their toys in!

Arthur. Well, no matter now.

[KAY goes out: ARTHUR leans his head on his hand.

Enter MORDRED.

Mordred. Sir, I am here.

Arthur (looking up). Mordred, that which I must speak
I have pondered long: remember if with pain
Thou hearest it, I too have borne this grief,
And bear it twice in wounding thine and thee.
Gawaine hath been with me.

Mordred. Sir, I perceive
He has not prospered: let me then be bold
To plead for him; to urge his old repute,
His tried obedience and untarnished faith,
Such as when Justice holds the balance, must
Bear weight, and fling the oaths of unproved men
High to the beam.

Arthur. Nay, Mordred, I would not have it
That Gawaine's word should fail of due account
By a straw's reckoning: more, I have cast therewith
The makeweight of my trust: but voice on voice
Of unbought witness heaps the opposing scale
So that no arm of friendship or of faith
Can lift it longer.

Mordred. What witness and what voices?

Arthur. The holy prior, whose woodland cloister gave
Sir Pelleas lodging, unto whom he bared
His nest of hopes yet warm with fluttering life:
The folk of yonder castle, dames and squires
Who saw that shameful wooing: my own knights
Who summoned Gawaine forth and bore him hither
Still dight in Pelleas' armour, blazoned still
With Pelleas' colours all in fatal sequence
Tell forth one tale.

Mordred. A truncheon for their tale!
Why, fifty such would splinter in the shock
Of Gawaine's full denial!

Arthur. I would to Heaven
He had denied: he gave me never once
A forthright "nay," but foiled me warily
With question parrying question. No! past hope
He is guilty guilty and to-morrow's noon
Must hear the word that bans him.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Mordred (with a violent gesture). Must?

Arthur. 'Twas for this

I called thee hither: tho' his sin be gross
And but to think on it my indignant heart
Hisses and glows fire-hardened yet I cannot
Endure to watch with just relentless eyes
My sentence branding shame into his face
Upturned to mine.

Mordred. Well?

Arthur. Mordred, as thou art liege

To me the king, and lov'st thy brother still,
See that to-morrow find him fled, beyond
The sight and voice of justice: if he have sinned
Is it not enough to suffer lifelong death?

Mordred. If he have sinned! but that is yet to be prove.

There's nought in all their witness: nought in the lack
Of clear denial: not the act itself,
But the act mistimed, mismannered, or misaimed,
Makes up the crime: let all be granted true,
True that he promised, true that he set forth
To woo in Pelleas' colours, true that he won
The lady for himself; is that to say
He promised not in faith, or set not forth
With honour? laboured not till hope was past
In Pelleas' cause, before he urged his own?
Was not this prize a prize for all the world,
Not Pelleas only? Nay, for all the world
Save Pelleas only! And shall he claim to keep
From all men else that which himself must lack,
Or failing, cry for vengeance?

Arthur. I too have leaned

Upon that reed, and found it all too frail.
What though it were not, what though Pelleas' wrongs
Vanish in merest envy, there remains
A blacker treason: he hath sold himself,
Betrayed a woman's trust, and broke the chier
Of the high vows wherewith we sought to bind
This kingdom's weakness into sheaves of strength:
The vow of a chaste life.

Mordred. Never word of mine

Glance lightly on that sin! Yet so the more
Do I esteem it far beyond the force
Of vows to conquer. If I could believe
What I'll deny till seeing strike me dumb
That Gawaine so hath fallen, then, even then,
I would entreat you leave him to the voice
Of his own soul, that shall require of him
Her murdered peace.

Arthur. Alas! I must believe;

God knows how sadly! and for all my will
To pardon Gawaine for our kinship's sake

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

And the old-time love between us, I am the king,
And dare not in my kingly office fail
The common welfare.

Mordred. I am not driven to plead
Against the common welfare: Gawaine's cause
Is but of private note, entangling none
Beside himself and Pelleas.

Arthur. I would it were so,
But such a challenge cried in open hall
Rings ever loud and louder, till the realm
Through every fibre of its corporate life
Aches with the scandal.

No! my mind is fixed.
I have heard thee, Mordred, with an ear that longed
To bear persuasion's message: none hath reached
The inner chamber where my conscience waits
Enthroned in steadfast anguish. Leave me now:
Let this vain striving end.

Mordred. By the light of heaven!
And I will end it! There's a shaft unsped
Within my quiver yet, that shall not miss
To cleave this coil; though, save for life and death,
I had not drawn it. Scandal? Wit you well
The doom that falls on Gawaine shall not spare
With the same stroke to hurl a greater name
In more tremendous ruin!

Arthur. Hold! thy words
Are wild, without respect: for thy grief's sake
They shall not be remembered.

Mordred. Forgive my speech
If it have slipped beneath so great a load.
I rave not: hear me: Gawaine's called unchaste,
But what far fouler name shall hiss the deed
Of him that, honouring not his chosen bride,
Held it not shame to rob his kinsman's crown
Of its most treasured splendour?

Arthur. Now in good truth
But thou dost rave.

Mordred. Then I am not the first
Hath raved so in good truth nor yet the last
That in good truth shall reckon Gawaine's fault
White to the blackness of the hand that smites him.

[*He points to Arthur's hand.*]

Arthur. Blackness? I know not how thou darest

[*A pause.*]

Nay!

Enough! I will no longer fence with thee
In this false twilight: thou hast struck thy point
Upon my life's one flaw: I do confess it.
What then? What then? Shall I not have my will?
Not dare do justice? Why, in all my days

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

No man, no thing, no thought hath yet prevailed
To turn me from my path, and dost thou hope
To bear me backward with thy stripling hand?

Mordred. Nay, I have done with hoping: by your leave
I'll quit you now.

[He turns as if to go.]

Arthur. Stay, Mordred: wherefore this haste?
I fear we are not yet so wholly at one,
As my endeavour purposed.

Mordred. Indeed, I think,
We are agreed: I pray you let me go.

Arthur. Whither?

Mordred. To Gawaine, first.

Arthur. Well, as thou wilt.
But in thy counsels be deliberate still:
Let him not part to-night.

Mordred. No, not to-night.

[He goes out.]

SCENE IV.

Camelot: a guard-room at night. AGRAVAINE in the outer chamber alone: guard within.

Enter Lancelot with Bedivere.

Lancelot. What said the king to Mordred?

Bedivere. I heard not that.

Here's Agravaire; if it be known to any
He'll surely tell us.

Lancelot. Nay, do not trouble him:
Gawaine's his brother still; I could not bear
To gain the tidings of our rich content
From him that's beggared by it. Yonder's the guard,
We'll gather something.

[They pass in and speak with the guard.]

Agravaire (looking after them). Lancelot! I heard enough,
I know his errand! Unbred cock of the yard!
He would be sure his foes are maimed and spurless
Before he crows his spite. Ha! for this once
We'll pluck some of his plumage!

LANCELOT and BEDIVERE return.

Lancelot. Still with the king?

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I marvel wherefore. Let us walk without
And shortly come again.

Bedivere. That would I gladly,
But the time fails me; I am called elsewhere.

[They go out.]

Enter MORDRED from within.

Agravaine. Mordred! at last!
(*Coming quickly to meet him.*) The issue, man, the issue?

Mordred. Nought hath been promised: I have told the king
That Gawaine's innocent.

Agravaine. What! no more?

Mordred. Be patient.
He would not be convinced.

Agravaine. Ha! ha!

Mordred. 'I granted him
Some part of the accusation, and besought
That Gawaine's sin might only be avenged
By Gawaine's conscience.

Agravaine. Oh! prate no more of Gawaine,
What of thy secret, man? How sped thy threat?
Is it true? Was Arthur shaken? Have we found
A gag to stifle judgment in his throat?

Mordred. Be not so violent, Agravaine; thy spirit,
For all it runs the self-same way with mine,
Jostles and jars me still. I'll answer all,
So thou'lt but listen. Arthur's not the man
To stoop his pride beneath an outright threat;
Nor did the occasion call me to declare
The secret of my birth.

Agravaine. What! thou hast not threatened?
Thou hast not told him?

Mordred. Patience! that's for a time
When all our lives hang clutching at the brink
Of the last sheer abyss; it was not needed
To stay one foot from exile. Never doubt
I told enough; beneath my visor'd helm
The king hath seen the face of buried sin
Glaring with dreadful eyes.

Agravaine. If thou hast told so much
Thou hast told him all: 'tis but a step from this
To stumble on thy birth.

Mordred. Nay, but he's barred
From that one step: my mother sent him word
Long since, his child was lost on stormy seas.

Agravaine. Well, we shall see.

Mordred. Ay, to-morrow thou shalt see
I have won the game with half my stake in hand,
And threefold profit added Gawaine saved,
The king half mastered, and my kindred all
Bound to my cause.

Only I grieve to war

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

With Lancelot: out of all to cross the one
Most knightly and most noble.

Agravaine. Most sure, thou meanest,
To prop the tottering king against our thrust.

Mordred. For that, too, I am sorry.

Agravaine. What say'st thou then,
Can we not cleave between their sundered feet
Some gulf of mortal hatred? There's a name
We know that both

Mordred. Silence! I know it not!
But this I know, that carrion-baited snares
Trap not the sunward eagle.

Agravaine. Hist! who comes here?
Lancelot again? This time we've news for him.
Whither now, Mordred?

Mordred. I cannot stay to seem
Insolent, heartless: prithee come thou too.

Agravaine. But one word and I'll follow.

MORDRED goes out: LANCELOT re-enters alone.

Agravaine (greeting LANCELOT). I perceive
Sir Lancelot comes to glean what's cast abroad
Of the king's purpose.

Lancelot. I know, Sir Agravaine,
Where thine affection's pledged, and so the more
Esteem thy greeting courteous: be sure
Were not this matter sharp with two-edged pain
I would not part so soon. Good-night.

Agravaine. Stay, Sir Lancelot!
The worst I fain would spare thee; that's to hear
Ill news from lips indifferent or unkind.
Grief loves a sudden onset; be forewarned
Against his ambush, front thy heart with steel,
And thank the friend that warned thee.

Lancelot. What! Is there more
Than Pelleas told me?

Agravaine. Ay, there is more indeed,
And harsher for thy hearing. Gawaine's guilty;
So much is old: to-morrow thou shalt learn
That Gawaine's free: but as thou lovest peace
Ask me not wherefore.

Lancelot. Guilty, thou say'st, and free?
Then Pelleas hath forgiven? Oh! that's to gain
More than revenge!

Agravaine. Nay! that Pelleas may forgive
We all must hope: but that's no matter here.
The king will pardon Gawaine.

Lancelot. Now God forbid!
I am not hard, but oft 'tis giant Injustice
That, crouched in Mercy's cloak, robs all the world
To spare one lawful debt.

Agravaine. I am Gawaine's brother:

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

What saves him must content me: yet in truth
Even I could wish the well-spring of this grace
Were something purer.

Lancelot. I cannot grasp thy clue;
Prithee, be plainer yet.

Agravaine. Then I must utter
What a less generous hearer might impeach
For sland'rous treason.

Lancelot. Hold! I have no right to hear
What's perilous in the speaking.

Agravaine. Nay, tis thy right
If but for Pelleas' sake: but thou'lt withhold it
From all the Table Round?

Lancelot. Ay.

Agravaine. How to begin
So black a tale! Thou knowest we are not wont
To hate whom we resemble, nor to chide
The act whose common use ourselves pursue?
So 'tis with Arthur.

Lancelot. I hope thou dost not dare
To jest with me! What's thy excuse to link
the king with Gawaine?

Agravaine. Merely that their deeds
Are much alike: as like as brothers are.
But Arthur's is the elder, and, to choose,
The far more hideous.

Lancelot (suddenly). Aha! "While Arthur's king
King of himself so long oh! we'll contest
This praise with Arthur." Out, it is not true!
Where is the proof?

Agravaine. Thou hast seen within the hour,
And even where thou stand'st, the living proof.

Lancelot. Mordred?

Agravaine. The son of Arthur, and the son
Of Morgance, Queen of Orkney.

Lancelot. Oh! I am rent!
God help us all! Can it be true?

Agravaine. Thou doubttest?
To-morrow shall persuade thee: if thou hear'st
True judgment portioned out in yonder hall
To Gawaine's treason, then cry out upon me
There, before all: but if the king shall find
Some dark and twisted bye-way to avoid
The path of Justice, thou shalt own me right,
And, doubtless, grieve as I do.

So, good-night.

[*He goes out.*]

Lancelot. To-morrow?

God in Heaven!

Ah! Guinevere!

SCENE V.

Camelot: the Great Hall. Enter GUINEVERE and ENID.

Guinevere. At last! at last!

But, Enid, what should this mean?

The hall is empty: have we missed the hour
Or is there some fresh order?

Enid. Nay, madam, I think

We are not here in fault; 'tis Time himself
Hath broken tryst: when did his laggard flight
Keep pace with beating hearts?

Guinevere. Why should my heart beat
More than another's? What have I to do
With Gawaine and his sentence?

Enid. Why, surely surely

Sir Pelleas

Guinevere. Well, Sir Pelleas ?

Enid. He hath been wronged;

He is loved of all: besides, his cause is seen
To be Sir Lancelot's own.

Guinevere. Is it so? In faith

Whose should it be? Lancelot's? I would it were
And fear it is not or I fear it should be
And would it were not.

Have I not had good game

At thy bewilderment!

Oh! what am I saying,

Why come they not?

Enid. Hush! they are here!

Enter Lancelot.

Guinevere. Not now!

Lancelot, not now! I pray thee, not one word,
Or I shall hate thee as I hate the rest.
Where is the king?

Lancelot. I know not, 'tis scarcely yet
The hour appointed.

Guinevere. Lancelot, I am distraught,

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I know not dream from daylight. Was it in sleep
I heard the king's voice, sharp with agony
Outcrying, "I have slain her," and thy voice
That echoed, "I have slain her; yea, and I
Have sunk her, earth in earth?"

Lancelot. Dearest lady mine,
Forget these midnight fears: here are no voices
But one high fluttering song that greets the dawn.
Is not the past well buried?

Guinevere. I thought it so
A short hour since: that, too, was while I dreamed:
Now I am waking.

Lancelot. Ay, waking to find
Thy best dreams true.

Guinevere. No, lull me not with hope,
Let me have truth and rue it. What's their tale
Of Arthur's guilt? The yelp of Gawaine's pack
That see the lash descending! What's thy promise
Of love and freedom? Gold from fairyland,
Scattered at sunrise with the whirling leaves!

Lancelot. How canst thou say so? Let me tell thee again
Even as I heard it

Guinevere. No! no! tell me nought
But how to win back peace, and the old dull pain
That I had learned to live with. Let me go
Before my strength break!

Lancelot. Guinevere! dear heart,
'Tis but an hour, one hour. Ha! they are coming!

PELLEAS and other Knights enter.
Madam, your siege is here; if it please your Grace,
I'll bring you to it.

Pelleas. Lancelot! Lancelot! Stay!
A word in haste!

Lancelot. Forgive me, seest thou not
Another service claims me?

Guinevere(aside to LANCELOT). Ah! thou'rt cruel.
Go back to him.

Lancelot. I cannot: though my tongue
Bade him good-speed, mine eyes would rede him death.
I am base enough, God knows I am base enough!
But I am not yet practised.

*Enter Gawaine with Mordred and Agravaire;
then Gareth, Lamorak, Geraint, and others. A great bell
strikes twelve. Silence follows.*

Gawaine (loudly). Where is the king?

Geraint (aside). Mark that!

Lamorak. Ay, the snake dies hissing; but he dies.

Geraint. I am not sure: there's something in that voice
Chimes not with mere defiance.

Lamorak. Why, where hast thou been
These two good days? 'Tis proved upon him, proved

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Past doubt or dispensation.

Herald. Silence! The King!

Enter ARTHUR with KAY, BEDIVERE, and men—at—arms.

He takes his seat and looks moodily before him.

Arthur. It seems, Sir Pelleas

Kay. Sir, were it not best

To follow ancient usage? Let the herald

Summon the accuser and accused.

Arthur. Kay! Kay!

What's ancient usage to a heart on fire?

Well, have it so then!

Kay. Herald!

Herald. In the king's name,

Stand forth Sir Pelleas of the Isles! Stand forth

Sir Gawaine, Prince of Orkney!

Dost thou still,

Sir Pelleas, charge against thy fellow—knight

The crimes of treachery and unchastity?

Pelleas. Still? When a score of voices echo mine!

Still? Ay, then! Ay!

Herald. Sir Gawaine, thou hast heard.

What is thine answer?

Arthur. Hold! no more of this!

We have had Sir Gawaine's answer: he denies.

Kay. Yet for the form's sake

Arthur. Is it for the form's sake

Thou'rt bent to thwart me, Kay? Gawaine denies.

Pelleas. That too was in his part. So be it, my lord;

But I have tendered witness.

Arthur. What, Sir Pelleas!

Art thou forgetful, or so newly come

Thou hast not yet been taught, that in this hall

The word of one man, one, so that he be

Knight of our Order, drowns the federate noise

Of all the crowd intruding?

Pelleas. But these were brought

By the king's own command

Lamorak (aside). Pelleas, art thou mad?

Anger him not!

Pelleas. Nay, then; I'll urge but this:

Let the rest go; let his word bear it off

Against a hundred; yet, my lord, forget not

I too am knight, the fellow and the peer

Of all men now in presence.

Arthur. Well, sir, well!

What follows?

Guinevere. Sir, your pardon if I stay you

At an unfitting moment, but meseems

That's something tangled here, that a friend's hand,

Being cooler, might unravel.

Arthur. Madam, what friend?

SCENE V.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Agravaine (mocking). As brothers most are wont!

Mordred. Peace! Agravaine.

Agravaine. Oh! my lord Mordred's here!

I had forgotten. Will it please your Grace

To grant us private audience? Gawaine, come,

Let us all away: we too will follow truth

Since that's the phrase but at convenient distance!

[*They go out, leaving GUINEVERE, ENID and LANCELOT.*

GUINEVERE'S face is buried in her hands. ENID

looks at her, and moves towards the door. LANCELOT

comes nearer to GUINEVERE.

Lancelot. Wilt thou come, Guinevere?

Guinevere (rising suddenly). Yea! to the world's end.

ACT III

SCENE I.

Camelot: the Queen's Bower. LAUREL and LINET.

Linet. What, still unready, Laurel, not yet cloaked?

The horses will be waiting.

Laurel. Waiting for whom?

Not for us, Linet.

Linet. Truly, not for me!

Thou know'st me better; when the hunt is up

He must be early who's to wait for me.

But what's thy meaning?

Laurel. Hast thou not been told?

I heard an hour ago: 'tis brief enough

Our service is not needed.

Linet. Ha! that's to say

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

We are supplanted: what's a promise worth
When favourites plead?

Laurel. Well, for this time thou'rt wrong:
If we must stay, so too must all the rest.

Linet. And Enid?

Laurel. Even Enid!

Linet. Then I'm content,
Or half content but prithee, what's her whim
To go two days abroad two days and nights
Without attendance? Or is he perchance
To take our places too?

Laurel. Truly none dare vouch
That lies not in the future! But to-day
There's no such pleasant news merely her Grace
Is pleased to change her Grace's mind, and leave
The king to his own sport.

Linet. So that the king
May leave the queen hers: which is not his;
No, nor hath been this merry year and more!
Well, one man's loss, they say, is other's gain,
So none need lack for comfort.

Laurel. Thou'rt in wit,
Fair fall the day! I would some greater folk
Had half thy spirit, and something less than half
Their own chill humour.

Linet. Is she sighing still?
Where, Laurel?

Laurel. Within there, closeted with Enid
And that dull thing, thy sister.

Linet. Poor Lionors!
She was not always dull: I can remember
Before she wedded Gareth, how her blood
Danced to a quicker tune than well beseemed
A maiden's pulses; but the times are changed.

Laurel. Why so they are, for I remember too
It was thy hand, thy chaste considerate hand,
That locked the same young pair of crooning doves
So long in separate cages.

Linet. Alas! 'tis true,
In the old days I was cruel, but I trust
I have made atonement.

Laurel. If thou hast not yet,
Thou shalt; there's matter for thy charity
New come to hearing; worth the hearing too.
Iseult Iseult of Cornwall

Linet. Oh! I know it!
But tell me!

Laurel. I hear them coming.

Linet. Quick then, quick!
Oh! tell me, Laurel!

Laurel. Wait, and fare the better.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Help me in this: we'll hold a mirror up,
And startle eyes that only look to see
Another's picture. Ware! and mark her well!

Enter GUINEVERE.

Guinevere. Linet, hath Laurel told thee, we have thought
This late October–tide, for all its brightness,
Too cold to lie abroad in? It repents me
That you should lose what little pleasure comes
In the way of service; prompt me that I stay not
Long in your debt for this.

Linet. I thank you, madam.

[GUINEVERE *sits musing*, LAUREL *signs to Linet*.

Well, Laurel, thou hast made a grave beginning,
I scarce dare ask the end.

Laurel. No, no, not now.

We should be heard, and such heart–searching news
Is not for weary moments.

Linet. Shall we go out then?

Guinevere. No, do not: audience so gently asked
Should yet be granted, were I weary indeed;
As now I am not; this my mood is nought
But a faint pang of autumn at the heart:
Maybe thy tale will stir me.

Laurel. I think it will,
For this poor lady too was once a queen
Iseult of Cornwall.

Guinevere. Once? Tell me not she is dead?
Laurel, not dead?

Laurel. Nay, nor is Tristram dead,
Save to his faith and greatness.

Guinevere. What hast thou heard?

Laurel. Is it not black? The king hath been betrayed
These many months, by his most valiant knight
And by his queen and wife.

Guinevere. No! no!

Laurel. The sequel proves
What hath been long suspected: all such tales
Have the same ending. He was taken at last,
[GUINEVERE *makes a gesture of entreaty*.

But broke his prison, and now they are fled by sea:
'Tis said, to Joyous Gard.

Guinevere. Oh! thou hast been told
A wild and cruel slander! Joyous Gard?
What shelter thinkest thou hath Joyous Gard
For such as they are?

Linet. Oh! Madam, wit you well
The castle's fair, and garnished for the need
Of the most noble, fit for Lancelot's self,
Yea, even for a queen royal.

Guinevere. Ah! thou art young,
And thy light thought is bouyed above the deep

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Where mine sinks anguished.

Enid! where is Enid?

Pray you, go call her.

[LAUREL goes out and returns immediately.

Laurel. Madam, the king desires to see your Grace.

Guinevere. The king? Where?

(aside) Let him not hear this news to-day.

Enter ARTHUR, BEDIVERE, and LANCELOT. LAUREL holds aside the curtain of the door.

Arthur. Our thanks, fair lady.

Guinevere, I am come

To learn thy last resolve: if 'tis for staying,

To take my leave, but if thou'lt ride with us,

Then to entreat thee hasten, while the air

Still bears the softness of the noonday sun.

Shall it be so?

Guinevere. Indeed I would be excused:

The year grows late: I fear to lie afield.

But if 'tis urgent

Arthur. Nay, I plead not that,

It was but for our pleasure. Well, I am sorry.

Since then we part, the merrier cheer be yours

Whilst we are roving.

Guinevere. The wish is kind, farewell.

[ARTHUR and BEDIVERE take leave, and go out, talking with LAUREL and LINET. LANCELOT follows as far as the door and then returns to GUINEVERE.

Lancelot. Oh! could'st thou think it? to-day of all fair days?

Guinevere. Art thou not bounden to them?

Lancelot. Ay, for the going,

Not the returning: time's my own for that.

They mean no further journey for to-day

Than to the king's pavilion: four long hours

Should bring us thither, less than two will serve

For spurring home: I'll find some clear excuse

And be with thee by midnight.

Guinevere. Canst thou do it?

Is it not perilous, with the king so near?

Lancelot. Wherefore, dear heart? These fears of thine are new:

Ere now, he has been nearer.

Guinevere. I never told thee,

But oft before 'tis shame to be so weak

When I have been most happy, and known myself

Twice safe with thee, I yet have felt the darkness

Pulsing around me with the hard-held breath

Of stealthy vengeance.

Lancelot. Dearest, thou'rt not thyself,

Thy present dread throws back upon the past

These vain and monstrous shadows. Could'st thou have trembled,

And I not know it?

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Guinevere. Can I love thee, Lancelot,
And not forbode the end yea! at all times,
And most when most I love thee?

Lancelot. Fear not the end,
At worst 'tis Joyous Gard.

Guinevere. Never! ah! never!
She lied to say it must!

Lancelot. Nay, be not distressed;
As my Queen will.

But I must part in haste.
Sweet, bear me in thy heart these tedious hours.

Guinevere. Farewell, beloved and if it be not safe
Lancelot thou wilt not

Lancelot. Dear Prudence, but I will!
I must be rash for both.

Come, let me go.
Why! thou'rt all cold and shivering!

Guinevere. Wherefore not?
'Tis long past summer.

Well, if it be time
I will not stay thee.

Lancelot. Farewell.

Guinevere. Bid Enid come.
Bid them all come.

[LANCELOT *goes out.*
I will not think of it.

SCENE II.

The King's Pavilion: on a moor: bright moonlight. ARTHUR, KAY, BEDIVERE, GERAINT, MORDRED, *and others.*

Arthur (standing apart and speaking half to himself).
'Tis wondrous light: I did not think the moon
Had waxed so near her greatest: how serene,
With what unquestioned sovranty she walks
Her wide ærial palace! The bright host
Of stars, her courtiers, blink their myriad eyes
Before her full calm gaze, and not a cloud

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Dares with rebellious darkness to usurp
A hand's-breadth of her vast and tranquil realm.

Bedivere. The king is sad to-night; marked you his voice
At supper-time?

Geraint. Ay, and yet 'twas not one voice:
Sometimes it rose in scorn, sometimes it sank
Weighed low with hidden meaning: now and then
'Twas strangely gentle, as in times of grief
A grown man speaks with children, his own pain
Subdued to a great tenderness.

Bedivere. Finely noted!
That was the sound of it; and all unlike
Our old imperious Arthur.

Kay. Sirs, heed it not,
All men must have their humours; his will pass
With the first mot of the horn.

Geraint. Well, Heaven send it so,
And bless us from ill tidings!

Arthur (rousing himself). Come, my friends!
We should be elsewhere, dreaming of the game.
Once more, all's ready? Are the tufters come?

Geraint. Sir, two good hours ago, and kennelled yonder
Within a stone's throw.

Arthur. What says the harbourer?

Bedivere. I spoke with him even now: a hopeful rogue!
To hear him talk, the forest's all alive
With warrantable deer: bay, tray, and ten,
The meanest head among them!

Arthur. Good!

Mordred. 'Tis a fair wind,
Light, with a tingle of the frosty North.

Arthur. Yet 'twas a lowering sunset.

Mordred. Ay, but the clouds
Followed the sun and sank close after him.
Trust me, to-morrow we shall wake to a sky
As clear as this above us.

Arthur. So we'll hope.
Till then, God keep us!

All. Good-night, my lord.

Arthur. Good-night.

[They go out, leaving the KING alone.]

Arthur. I could not tell them: these two days at least
Are something saved from the relentless fangs
That gape to grip us. Two days! why, 'twill seem
An age of peace hereafter. There's nought I have,
But I would barter it to ride to-morrow
Free-hearted one more chase. Oh! Laurel, Laurel!
Why must she run to pour into mine ear
Such news red-hot? Did she not love him then,
Tristram, whom all men loved?

Nay, she was right!

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I'll hate him too. Thank God! he falls alone.

Enter KAY.

Kay. Sir, if I set aside your strict command
And come at this late hour to trouble you,
Be sure the cause is grave.

Arthur. Why, so am I:
The matter fits the time then.

Kay. Nay, sir, the matter
Is such as fits no moment in the life
Of an all-puissant king: so full it is
Of bold disorder.

Arthur. a! she has told thee, too?
What ails the woman, that with reckless hand
She spreads contagion broadcast?

Kay. Sir, 'twas no woman
But one of the rangers told me this even now,
And most discreetly, so that I am to seek
Whence your own knowledge comes.

Arthur. Thou'rt right: I perceive
Our thoughts have crossed: there's something more then: come!
I'll hear it.

Kay. Your pardon, sir, if I begin
To leave my resolution; at first indeed
I thought this could not wait: but now I am fearful
Seeing you wounded, lest another thrust
May hurt you past endurance.

Arthur. Delay does more!
Fear not, be short! always my strength rebounds
To front a second blow.

Kay. My judgment bows.
This is the dolorous tale then: yester-eve
Sir Lamorak, riding home towards Camelot,
Was in the forest yonder held to bay,
Half-armed and helpless, by three caitiff knights
Who pulled him from his horse, and bound him there
To bear their heaped reproaches. At the last
Each miscreant stabbed him with a several wound
And fled: the ranger found him, life and sense
Faint, but not wholly ebb'd: stanch'd the last flow,
And for his ghostly comfort brought the priest
To shrive and housel him.

Arthur. Kay, hold me not strained
Upon the gradual rack of thy slow speech:
In one word, all!

Kay. Sir, at the hour of tierce
Sir Lamorak, after full confession made
And absolution taken, yielded up
His sinful spirit.

Arthur. Thou might'st have kept that word
For who deserve it. When they dared reproach him
Lamorak they dared no lesser villainy

SCENE II.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Than when they stabbed his body. By what vile names
Shall they be infamous so much he told
Before he parted?

Kay. No, he named them not,
But owned their quarrel righteous he confessed
They were the kindred of a lady one
Whose life he had corrupted.

Arthur (grasping KAY'S hand and turning away his face).

Kay, Kay, my father!
Go, pray for me. The living and the dead!
Go, stay not!

Kay. I feared that I was wrong to speak,
Yet the time presses: there is need of counsel,
And order to be taken.

Arthur. Order that none
Come near me! For thyself get thee to sleep.

[KAY goes out.]

I cannot think; the freightage of my mind
Is tossed and broken on a shoreless flood
Of weltering passions. I have been betrayed
By those whom most I cherished. Came there not
Upon their hearts, even in that dark hour
Of faith's eclipse, some grace of memory,
Some tenderness up-smouldering at the last
On the old altars that we built long since
In life's most sacred places?

Oh! 'tis false!

They never loved me: I have been their scorn,
Humoured and duped. Lamorak, thou art a coward,
Thou durst not face my vengeance; thou hast forsaken
Thy fellow traitor! ha! but Tristram Tristram
Is mine! I'll fell him with a toppling stroke
Shall make this kingdom echo!

God pardon me!

I had forgot: the realm's in peril here,
While I sit brooding on the angry smart
Of my own wrongs. What must I do to stay
The creeping of this sin, that like a worm
Eats out the heart of every tallest shaft
Whereon my kingdom's pillared? One more snapped,
And Britain, like a palace undermined,
Crumbles to Chaos. Death! that I should crouch
Dully foreboding which of my high hopes
Shall fail me next I that a year ago
Laughed in my heart "My days indeed must pass,
But I have built this Order, that shall keep
My purpose after me, and stand unshaken
Through all the changeful ages of the world."
Shall it not stand? Was it not well devised?
Will God not lend me counsel how to save
A thing so noble? If I knew but whence

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

This evil had its birth: the first to fall
Was Gawaine I was weak but no man guessed,
Or more than guessed, the fulness of his guilt:
None knew that Mordred forced me, none could know
With what fell weapon. No, beyond all doubt
The mischief sprang not thence: and long ago
I have forgiven Mordred.

Who dare say
It is not so? How should I not forgive
Whom I have found so passionately pure,
So swift to ring the armoured heel of scorn
On every creeping thought and the whole brood
Of venomous sayings?

Yet I have not plumbed
The secret of this Mordred. True he is,
High-minded, clean of heart: yet ever seems
To choose my way because it is his own
And not from sworn obedience.

'Tis strange,
But 'tis a thought that like an April cloud
Hath often chilled the sunshine of my mind
Gone with a shiver that till Mordred came
No, no, I will not think it! How could he,
Whose only fault is too impetuous youth
And unripe counsel folly! I must be
More weary than I knew. I'll pray awhile,
And sleep perchance thereafter: being but man
I dare not hope with blind and selfish cry
To turn aside the ordering of the world
From God's eternal purpose, yet I know
Something divine stirs in us while we pray,
Transforming thought to will.

[*He kneels.*]

Enter KAY and MORDRED hurriedly.

Kay. Back, sirrah, back!

Mordred. I will not.

Kay. There can be nothing
So grave to warrant

Mordred. Warrant? there's that should bend
once for all.

(*To ARTHUR, who has risen.*) Sir, a messenger
Is come from Camelot: spur never yet
Dripped red with direr haste: let me not tell it
If you can save me with a leap at truth.

Arthur. Whose messenger?

Mordred. My brother Agravaine's.
He came not with us; for some private cause
He had exchanged his turn, and keeps to-night
The inner guard of the palace.

[*He pauses.*]

Arthur. Make an end:

SCENE II.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I am ready, Mordred.

Mordred. He hath sent me word
By his most trusted squire, who bears for token
This signet ring, that when the moon was high
Sir Lancelot came alone to Camelot,
And passed within the palace.

[*The King starts: MORDRED looks hard at him for
a space, and goes on.*

Agravaine
Setting the watch at midnight, saw him there
There he returned not even now perchance
He is there.

[*A silence.*]

Arthur (in a low voice). Where, Mordred?

Mordred. With the Queen.

[*A silence.*]

Arthur (quietly). Ay, let us go.
Farewell, Kay; if I have been harsh with thee,
I crave thy pardon: we will speak again
Of Lamorak's burying.

Kay. Sir, if you will
God send you peace to-morrow.

Arthur (half to himself). Ay, to-morrow.
That's in another life.

Kay. Pray you, forgive me,
I am an old man: I have served you long:
Put not such force upon your grief.

Arthur. My friend,
Thou hast misread me: I have striven to-night
With the dread angel of my destiny:
Henceforth I am halt for ever: but I know
That I shall save my people.

Mordred, come!

ACT IV

SCENE I.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Open country near Almesbury. MORDRED alone; behind, squires and yeomen resting. Enter GAWAINE.

Mordred. Gawaine! already? But so far from folk
I knew thine errand hopeless.

Gawaine. A hundred times
It might have been so, but to-day by fortune
Here at the hand I chanced on all I sought
And something more.

Mordred. They have been seen then?

Gawaine. Where is the king?

Mordred. He was beside me but a moment since,
Pacing and pacing like a sentinel,
To keep his thoughts imprisoned.

Gawaine. Ay, when I parted
I saw how 'twas: the speed of this pursuit
Holds sorrow breathless: when the chase is stayed
He cannot choose but hear the instant voice
Of that which rides behind him.

Mordred. There thou'rt wide:
I do not think him so much grieved as eager,
At grip with strong resolves that will not wait
The time for utterance.

But let that pass,
Tell me thy news.

Gawaine. I scarce had gone a mile
Beyond the cross-roads, when I met a dwarf
Mounted upon a pack-mule.

Mordred. Oh! keep thy mule,
Pack, dwarf and all! be brief, man!

Gawaine. Well, well! to-day
At the hour of tierce a lady and two knights
Came to the nunnery at Almesbury
Not seven miles hence: Lancelot and Pelleas
(He all but told their names) tarried an hour
To break their fast and ease their lagging steeds,
Then took the forest southward: they're for France,
I'll warrant it: and when we see them next
Their faces will be turned this way, and backed
With a rare dust of onset.

Mordred. Then the queen
Where is the queen?

Gawaine. Why there in sanctuary
Fordone with flight and terror, left to hang
Day in day out upon the altar steps,
Sighing for rescue.

Mordred. Rescue? Mercy of God!
And she shall have it! Are we not all her men,
Sworn to her service with the self-same oath

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

That made us Arthur's too?

Gawaine. Only so long
As to be hers was still to serve the king.
I am sorry for her, but the time has come
To choose our ways; no man can ride at once
Two roads cross—parted.

Mordred. Gawaine, they are not parted,
They must not be! Ay, wag thy tolerant head,
I say they shall not be! What's Camelot,
When the enchantment of that voice hath ceased
To haunt her chambers? Whom wilt thou call king,
When the four seas of heathendom break in
To beat our tottering bulwark into mounds
Of nameless ruin?

Gawaine. Arthur will rule his own
Without thy help or mine.

Mordred. Not without mine!
I am his son: I look to follow him,
And with my will no man not Arthur's self
Shall waste my heritage. There's Tristram gone,
And Lamorak, and the twelve that died last night
With Agravaine, how think'st thou, is it a time
To whet revenge, and lop the last great branch
With all his leafage?

Gawaine. Ha! Pelleas and the like!

Mordred. Such like we scarce could match them, man for man;
Half the Round Table, and their vanward chief
No delicate ambler, but the sternest knight
Unto his mortal foe that ever yet
Put spear in rest.

Gawaine. Well, Heaven defend the weak!
Since we are the weak: for certes, mortal foes
To all that hold with Lancelot and the queen,
We are and must be

Mordred. Never!

Gawaine. Oh! Thou'rt dull to-day:
Loved I not Lancelot? When have I been heard
To blame the queen for choosing where she would?
Oft—times I warned these meddlers; they are the cause
Of their own death: I follow not revenge,
But kings are hard to oust; and last night's work
Forbids accordance.

Mordred. Then what last night hath done
To—night shall undo: Gawaine, hear my plan,
A plan to end all well: she is there, thou sayest,
And Arthur knows not; let him not know yet;
So, the time's mine: and the place too is mine
The abbey yonder Kay and Bedivere
Have word to meet us there; till darkness fall
Their readiest speed cannot make good the tryst.
He must await them: there's the nick of fortune

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Where the adventure dovetails with the wish.
I'll plot their meeting Arthur and the queen
For soft and pensive twilight: strange it were
Now that the fever's passed and left her blood
To its noble rhythm if she longed not
For silence and forgiveness; passing strange
If Arthur could deny her aught so asked
As she will ask it.

Gawaine. And Lancelot?

Mordred. Time enough:
First let me fly this pitch.

Gawaine. When thou hast stooped
And missed

Mordred. Nay! miss I shall not: Gawaine, mark!
If ah! if he should find it in his heart
To judge her where he hath not judged himself,
And to deny her fault that tenderness
His own more loudly cries for, I'll not stand
To see injustice done, and the fell grip
Of this old tyranny we swore to loose
Clenched tight and tighter on the aching throats
That ask but leave to breathe: I saved thee once
With half the truth; this time I'll venture all,
Ay! and win all!

Gawaine. Well, Mordred, go thy way.
Thou'rt a bold spirit: if the rest of us
Could match the sanguine colour of thy thoughts,
Perchance we too might come to govern kings,
And do the thing we would.

Mordred. Hist! yonder he comes.
Let us go meet him!

Remember, nought of the queen.

SCENE II.

Almesbury: a chapel in the Nunnery. Within the screen the Nuns at evensong: among them GUINEVERE in white clothes and black: without, ARTHUR and MORDRED.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Nuns (chanting).

In covertendo Dominus captivitatem Sion;

Facti sumus sicut somniantes.

Tunc repletum est risu os nostrum;

Et lingua nostra exultatione.

Tunc dicebant inter gentes;

Magnificavit Dominus facere cum istis.

Magnificavit Dominus facere nobiscum:

Facti sumus lætantes.

Converte Domine captivitatem nostram;

Sicut rivos in Austro.

Qui seminant in lacrimis;

In exultatione metent.

Qui ambulans ibat et flebat,

Portans ad seminandum sementem:

Veniens veniet in exultatione,

Portans suos manipulos.

[The nuns go out: GUINEVERE is left kneeling before the altar: ARTHUR and MORDRED in the ante-chapel.

Arthur (to himself). I heard a voice which sang

So sweetly that it seemed none earthly thing.

"He that now goeth weeping on his way

Shall come again: shall doubtless come with joy,

And bring" Ah! fair sweet Father Jesu Christ!

If it might be!

Never, never again.

[MORDRED goes softly out unperceived: GUINEVERE rises and comes through the screen towards ARTHUR.

Arthur. Thou, Guinevere?

Guinevere. Is it not to take me then

That you art come?

Arthur. I know not: I followed thee

I thought I cannot tell thee

Guinevere. Be not at pains

To spare me truth: I know that I am judged;

Yea! but for shelter of this holy place

Doomed to the death by fire.

Arthur. That were the work

Of mere revenge: thou knowest me, thou knowest

That where love is, such anger and such dread

Find but a moment's foothold: seest thou not

My wrath is fallen? Let thy fears go with it

Into the dark abyss from which they sprang.

[He pauses: she is silent.

Doubt not; thou'rt free.

Guinevere. Free! for the hope of that one word

I have given all, honour and peace and name?

And now 'tis but a word; a breath, a sound,

That with a barren echo mocks my cry.

Yea, and the very wish was a fool's wish,

SCENE II.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I know it now; what passionate revolt,
What tears, what prayers, what fierce desire of life
Can wholly blot the past, or sear away
The memory of the soul? Not God Himself
Can make undone that which hath once been done.
Take back thy gift of freedom: were it all
Nay, were it half of that for which I longed,
'Tis not for me: my just reward is death;
I have sinned the twofold sin of them that strive
To better wrong by wrong.

Arthur. Have I not said
True love desires not justice or revenge
But only this, to love and to forgive
And to be loved again.

Ah! Guinevere!
Hast thou then never loved me? Have my years
Been but a dream, and thine a long-drawn lie?
Wilt thou not speak, wilt thou not give me back
The past, my happy past? Take not that too,
Or truth has lost its meaning.

Guinevere. I am not hard
Oh! do not think it! but sometimes "yea" and "nay"
Bear equal falsehood. I would tell thee all
If I could find but words.

The name of love
Is light upon the lips of many a maid
That never knew him truly: such was I
Then, when my father bade me give myself
Unto a man scarce seen, and all unknown
Beyond the common speech of courtesy.
"Love comes," they said, and I was well content
With that which came, as children are content
To cling about their nurses; till they hear
Yea, though it be far off the voice of her
Whose life was one with theirs, and lo! they are fled,
Fled with a reckless rapture past command,
Past reason, past entreaty! Such was I,
When at the last love came and called his own.

Arthur. His own? Did I not love thee, too, then? Ay!
First, longest, best? His own? Oh! stay me not,
I heard of speech so bitter and so bold
I could not miss the purpose thou hast said
My soul through all those wedded nights and days
Called not to thine with the true kindred voice
That quickens passion ah! God knows! but thou,
Loveless or loving, thou hadst sworn to hear
One voice, the voice of honour. If I know thee,
Even then the lingering echoes of that oath
In some far chamber of thine inmost heart
Were ringing still; I marvel passion's self
Could so have drowned them.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Guinevere. Marvel no more! 'tis false!
Thou art the cause: my faith was stayed on thine
And fell when thine had fall'n: thou did'st not know
When all thy mind was fierce with flaming thoughts
That leaped to torture me thou didst not dream
How, long ago, the knowledge of thy sin
Had burned my heart to ashes.

Arthur. Thou too? thou?
Have I not paid that debt, yea! paid it thrice
To the uttermost? Bethink thee, is it just
Because a boy, wilful and passionate,
Drunk with the incense of his fame, and flushed
With the new wine of power, How canst thou say
That I am he? 'Tis half a lifetime since:
He sinned, and went his way; he is become
A thing of dream, a shadow in the glass,
No part of me; is it not enough that I
Still bear his punishment, but thou must add
The burden of thy scorn.

Guinevere. I scorned thee not
For any fault of boyhood, but I heard
A man, midway upon the road of life,
A king, for justice throned, deliberate,
Upholding lust and treason for the sake
Of the old-time fellowship they claimed with him.
I heard thee: love and hate that moment broke
The dungeon—keep of duty.

Arthur. Guinevere,
I am the man: but hear me my soul too
No less than thine, revolted I believed
Yea! by God's light, which may we yet behold,
I thought to save our Order and the realm
From wider ruin.

Guinevere. How should wider be?
Lamorak, Tristram, Lancelot, Guinevere
These and a hundred more, in yonder hall
Cast off their vows for ever.

Arthur. Mordred! Mordred!
What art thou then? God's vengeance upon earth?

Guinevere. Not yet! Did'st thou not know then

Arthur. I know thee now!
Mordred! my son! my very son! the child
Of Youth and Doom, sent to me from the past
With life's young glory in thy wilful eyes
And in thine hand stark death!

Nay, Guinevere,
'Tis I am judged. Think not my spirit unchanged
Because I humble not myself with words
And vain lamenting; but I reap alone
That which my hand hath sowed, and all my strength
Must stoop to bear it homeward.

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Now farewell:

It sets toward dusk; the hour is come to part,
Thou to what earthly rest thy soul may find,
I to the long night's work.

Guinevere. Oh! blinder still!

I knew not Arthur! Thou art king through all!
And I that might have served thee!

Arthur. Guinevere,

Vex not thine heart in vain: the past is mine,
Thy life is yet to come.

Guinevere. Ah! never dream

That I will live it! Here I render up
Into thine hand the remnant of my days
To spare or spend. Thou canst not ask of me
That which I will not school myself to give.

Arthur. If it might be! Nay, this one hour my heart
Endure, endure! this too will pass!

Oh! woman!

God hold from thee the cup thy hand hath mixed!

Guinevere. What have I said? Did I not offer all
To stead thy purpose?

Arthur. Ay, but thou and I

Have drifted far asunder on a tide
That knows no hour of turning. Never sound
Of thy voice and of mine shall meet again
Across that homeless ocean, though we steer
Beneath the same true stars, and win at last
To the same haven of achieved desire.

Guinevere. What haven? What achievement?

Arthur. If by toil,

By battle, by the pangs of dying hope,
By death, by death in life, I yet may save
This Britain from the curse that sprang from me,
Wilt thou not even thou for Britain's sake
Forgive forgive me?

Guinevere. Oh! thou royal heart!

Is not this shame forgiveness? Wilt thou more?

Thine enemies I reckon not what they be!

All! all! God smite them headlong from thy path!

Farewell: forth to thy battle! Even here,

Through these dim aisles of peace, there yet shall come

Some wandering voice to whisper tidings dear

Of Camelot, of Arthur's Table Round,

Of the king, reigning as a noble knight,

And Guinevere forgotten.

*[She passes within the screen and falls on her knees
again before the altar. ARTHUR moves towards her
for a moment: then turns suddenly away.]*

ACT V

SCENE I.

*A down between Camelford and Tintagel ARTHUR and KAY.
A camp is seen behind them.*

Kay. 'Tis not that I esteem my counsel surer;
Nor, so esteeming it, would I be bold
To thrust it on you.

Arthur. And yonder, as thou sayest,
Lies Mordred with his force?

Kay. Ay, my lord, yonder:
But what I venture

Arthur. ell me, how is this known;
I see no sign.

Kay. Sir Bedivere, my lord,
Had sent fore-riders out to skim the country,
Who brought the news even now.

But with your leave
Merely for safe assurance,

Arthur. And Constantine?

Kay. On that side, too, there is a scout-watch set,
But nothing yet reported. Good my lord,
Will you not hear me?

Arthur. Why truly, if I must.
But wit thou well, meseems to hear advice
Being resolved already, suits no more
With wisdom, than the way that children use,
Who dig their gardens up to make them sure
The seeds are sprouting.

Kay. Nay, nay, sir, Heaven forbid
That any word of mine should work upheaval
In the king's mind!

Arthur. Ay, Heaven forbid! and yet

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Let us not be too fearful; for thy peace
I'll even risk my own. Say on.

Kay. Sir, I have said
'Tis merely for assurance none can doubt
You have considered all that could be urged
On this side and on that, yet, my good lord
May I be pardoned you have held aloof
From all of us who serve you, taken counsel
With no man all these days, from the first news
Of Lancelot's flight, to this, but three nights old,
That Mordred sets his teeth to meet rebuke
With unashamed rebellion. 'Tis to-day
He comes for the last time to urge his claim
Pardon for Lancelot, and I know not what
Of licence for himself and those he leads
If that the answer

Arthur. "If" is out of time;
The answer's ready.

Kay. Let it not be thought
I would presume to ply the king with questions,
[*He pauses.*

Or force the privacy of his intent

[*He pauses again: ARTHUR remains silent.*

But how can we be certain that his glance
That any one man's glance hath made survey
Of the whole field, remarked each several gap
Where dangers peep, and reckoned with them all,
If silence
If silence must be kept.

BEDIVERE enters.

Arthur. Nay, content thee, Kay,
For one hour yet. Well, Bedivere?

Bedivere. Sir, time presses:
Mordred's at hand: his terms are known to all,
And there are some who love you ill at ease
That choice so sudden should be forced upon you.

Arthur. It cannot be too sudden.

Bedivere. I know 'tis said
You are resolved: 'tis true you have good right
If right were all in question to repulse
Lancelot and Mordred both: yet there is more
If I dare speak it.

Arthur. Ay, speak it, Bedivere.

Bedivere. Let me be blunt then, too; there's no way left
To deal with Lancelot, save by pardoning him.
We've none to match him: let his force be joined
As 'tis in part even now with Mordred's yonder,
And, save what hope may hang on Constantine,
We are merely lost.

Arthur. But Constantine will come.
He too is close at hand; 'tis three weeks since

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

I sent him urgent summons.

Bedivere. Ay, so urgent
And so long since, that but for some mishap
He had been here ere now.

Arthur. No, no!

Bedivere. Let us not strain
Our eyes so blind with staring at the distance,
They cannot measure the abyss that yawns
One step before us. Mark you king or churl
Down from life to death in a moment's fall
'Tis a sheer plunge, and dark!

Kay. Sir Bedivere! My lord
This is no language for a king to hear
I go not with him there; I but approve
His meaning, not his plainness.

Arthur. Nay, both are honest,
Both have my thanks: in truth, these latter days
Death has been much remembered in my thoughts,
And no less dreaded.

Bedivere. He may well be dreaded
By those who leave their country tossed between
The wind and tide of parties. Sir, forgive me,
This Mordred is your son.

Arthur. That, too, Bedivere,
I have remembered.

Bedivere. Your only son, your heir:
And once this gust of wilfulness were laid
As well it may be there's no voice in Britain
So like a king's. Bend to him now, hereafter
You'll turn him to your will; but if this cloud
Break into storm between you, either way
There's ruin; he who wins, wins but remorse;
Who loses, loses all.

[ARTHUR *turns away*.

Kay (*aside to BEDIVERE*). There I think we touched him.
Hold to it: press him! not too hard, but still
As hard as may be with a due respect.

Bedivere (*aside*). Nay, the hour's struck: God send I was in time!
My lord, Sir Mordred's coming. Mark you now,
There's something courteous and humble mixed
With his high bearing; rebels look not so.

Kay. Humble? Good sooth! But well, 'twas timely said.

MORDRED *enters with* GAWAINE.

Arthur. Good morrow, Mordred.

Mordred. Sir, God give you peace!

Arthur. Gawaine, thou too art welcome.

Gawaine. My lord, I thank you.

Arthur. If ye have other friends at hand, we pray you
Let us not lack their presence.

Mordred. Sir, if it please you,
They are content to wait, whilst I entreat

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

The boon of private audience.

Arthur. Why, surely,
If such a place may serve us. Prithee, Kay,
Go summon all the camp, and while we walk
Apart with Mordred, bid them share thy charge.
That Gawaine and his comrades fall not weary
For lack of entertainment. Bedivere,
Thou shalt attend us yonder within call.

[KAY and BEDIVERE go out with Gawaine.

(To MORDERD.) Thou hast thy wish; we are alone:

What is it

Thou seekest further?

Mordred. Sir, I had thought to speak
Of Lancelot first.

Arthur. Ah! Mordred, think again!
Thou wilt not suffer any man to stand
Between the clasping of thy hand and mine?

Mordred. But this is Lancelot, but for whom long since
The best of all of us had been full cold
At the heart's root.

Arthur. Ay, long since.

Mordred. Oh! he hath sinned,
But say not, past forgiveness: drive him not
To justify his deed: set him again
To climb with stronger and more patient feet
The path he fell from; and to us his pardon
Shall be an earnest of the gentler rule
For which we humbly pray.

Arthur. There thou'rt asking more
Far more than Lancelot's pardon.

Mordred. We do but crave
For freedom; every current of the time
Sets toward a kindly faith and tend'rer laws;
Only these vows oppress us, crying still
"Thou shalt not," in the ear of lusty youth,
To whom no voice should call but Nature's own,
"Desire and dread not; life is all too short,
Too fair, too great, to mar with meaner hopes,
This, this thou shalt, and this!"

Arthur. Ay, but those to whom
Despite of Nature these same meaner hopes
Are still the more endeared?

Mordred. There would be none!
Nay then if such there might be, I would cast them
Into the prison-house of loneliness,
The pit of disfellowed: there to shiver
Till penitence should give them tears enough
To pay their ransom.

Arthur. Thy trust were vain, ay! vain
And perilous: there's evil in our blood
Twin-born with good, and claiming soon or late

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

His destined share of life's inheritance:

Whom tenderness but fosters.

Mordred. Nay, but 'tis not so:

Put it to proof: the event shall bind us all.

Arthur. 'Tis proved already.

Mordred. How so?

Arthur. In all the years

Before thou, Mordred, cam'st,

Mordred. Ha! before I came

None dared

Arthur. Thou sayest well, before thou cam'st

None dared what, since thy coming, all men dare,

What none shall dare again!

Mordred. Then God save Britain,

When freedom may not speak her dearest hope

Above a crouching whisper!

Arthur. Ay! God save Britain!

But that's my prayer, not thine; for what sake else,

When Gawaine fell, should I have thrust my hand

Into the torment of that blackening shame?

For what have I forsworn all peace the peace

That comes of pardoning, the peace that haunts

Old trodden ways, the peace that at the last,

When wife and son bend down to fading eyes,

Lightens the dusk of death? Oh! Mordred, Mordred!

Thou should'st have been in very deed my son!

Mordred. I am thy son, I will be! I will wait;

Reproach me not; thou shalt not be alone;

Thou shalt not lose an hour of peace for me

Henceforward all thy days!

Arthur. And after, Mordred?

Mordred. Nay, all thy days.

Arthur. Ay, and when my days are done?

Mordred. Then I thy son will take this realm in trust
For thy son's son.

Arthur. Ah! Mordred, if I but knew

How thou would'st read that trust when I am dead,

And by what oath be bounden!

Mordred. Oath? Oath again?

More oaths? More dust upon a parching tongue?

Is't not enough for thee whilst thou art here

To gag and fetter me, but thou must seek

To bind my life upon thy tyrant's wheel

With the dead hand? Oath? Yea then, hear my oath!

I swear to rule this kingdom after thee

As thou hast ruled it: that's by my own will

And my own reason, and my own right arm!

Arthur. Said I not? Bedivere!

Mordred. Stay! I have not done,

We have not spoken of the queen.

Arthur. Ho! there! Bedivere!

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

BEDIVERE *enters*.

Bring the knights hither!

Bedivere. All, my lord?

Arthur. All, all!

[BEDIVERE *goes out*.

Mordred. Thou shalt not so escape; alone or thronged
There's that within my grasp shall reach thee yet.
For Lancelot, as thou wilt: with his own hand
He well may keep his head; and for myself
I might have thought on patience: but the queen
No man shall judge, and thou, the fount of wrong,
Thou, least of all men: doom, and thou art doomed;
Be just and live: why wilt thou ride apace
To thy last battle? Seest thou not how Sin
Follows to drag thee down, and at thy side
Death shakes the sand-glass of thy falling hours?
Thou'rt mastered: who can hope to be more strong
Than Fate, that on the instant springs all-armed
From our own deeds?

BEDIVERE *and Knights enter*.

Arthur (to MORDRED). Silence! thy bolt is shot:
Stand thou aside!

(To the others.) Sirs, we have drawn you hither
That ye may share our counsel. Time hath been
When ye have known this kingdom's life to flow
Tranquil and pure, with no more sound of storm
Than a broad river on a windless noon:
But now 'tis changed; its swollen course is fed
By dark and roaring torrents; build we not
Our dykes the stronger, night may hear us yet
Swept down to ruin on a world in flood.
I am resolved: I bid you toil with me:
If we achieve, 'tis noble: though we fail,
'Tis work for kings! How say ye?

Bedivere and Arthur's Knights. Yea!

Mordred's Party. What must we do?

Arthur. Ye must be bound anew to keep the vows
Of our High Order: ye must stand apart
From whoso hath not kept them, leaving such
To justice unappealed; and ye must swear
Upon your hilted swords true faith and service
To him that after me shall work my will
Sir Constantine.

Mordred. What? disinherit me?

Rob me and slay me? Nay, thou canst not do it!
Thou canst not slay thy past! For thy life, back!
Thou goest to the deathward!

Arthur. Wilt thou dare me?

Wilt thou be taught that so his heart be strong
A fallen man may rise, and trample down
The offspring of his rash and evil past?

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Stand from before me!

[MORDRED'S party draw back: one of them treads upon
an adder, and draws his sword to kill it.

Arthur's Herald. Treason, lords! at arms!

Arthur's Knights. At arms! at arms!

[Both sides draw their swords. MORDRED throws
himself between them.

Mordred. Hold!

Gawaine (to MORDRED). Draw man! all's afire!

Cry "Freedom!" and set on!

[All go out fighting in great confusion: a noise of
trumpets and shouting is heard behind.

SCENE II.

Another part of the down. Enter ARTHUR attended by a trumpeter.

Arthur. I'll breathe myself a moment; trumpeter,
Sound me a rally: 'twixt pursuit and flight
The long day through, our bands are too much parted,
Yet, as I think, not broken past recall.

[The trumpet sounds: a pause follows.]

They come not: God defend us! Sound again.
How the mist hangs! I cannot see the field
Save here and there in gaps and shifting gleams
There's one! 'Tis Lucan: wounded, by his gait.
Another, and another!

BEDIVERE enters.

Bedivere!

Well met! 'Tis time we drew our battle in.

What of the southward fighting?

Bedivere. Nay, God knows!

Mine eyes were elsewhere: yet at times I caught,
Between the shocks we brunted, how their fortune
Moment by moment on the razor's edge
Swung in a doubtful scale: forward and back,
Forward and back: a scant hour since, their noise
Still rang between the water and the wood,
Then clattered inland, scattering up the cliff.

Arthur. Inland? They pushed us then? Yet against odds

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

'Twas long and stoutly held: to-night at least
Nought threatens thence: there's silence on the right;
And here, where first the main encounter joined,
Men prowl like fog-blind wolves among the dead
And fight by tens and twenties. Whence art thou?
Hath Kay been seen? We lost him: is he strayed
Beyond the trumpet call?

Bedivere. Ay, beyond call,
God rest him!

Arthur. Kay? Ah! Bedivere, unsay it!
They told thee false!

Bedivere. I bore him in these arms
Back from the vanward mellay; bound his wounds,
And thought to leave him: even while I turned
His voice came strong, "These braggart boys!" he cried,
"Lock on my armour!" but with that he drooped,
And straightway fell on sleep.

Arthur. Such death be mine!
So sudden, so undoubting!

Farewell, Kay!
Thou leav'st a lonely world.

Come, Bedivere,
Tell out thy tale: this was mine oldest friend,
All else is lighter.

Bedivere. Yet I had liefer take
As many blows unshielded, than recall
The hundred partings that to-day hath knelled.
Who is not fallen? Pertilope died first,
Cut off from rescue: like a lonely rock,
Now bare, now hidden by the swinging seas
We marked his crest awhile; then with a roar
The full tide seethed above him. Aglovale,
Gillimer, Driant, Griflet, Priamus,
Fell in one charge: the dead upon their track
Lay thick as wind-laid wheat. Then with the mist
Confusion came: I saw young Tor and Dinas
Hurtle together like two boars in spring,
Till they were blotted from me: when the wind
Brought twilight back, their arms were locked in death.
Segwarides is gone, and Lambegus,
Damas, and Herminde: Brandiles is shriven
And ebbing fast: yonder's my brother Lucan
That scarce can drag him hither.

Arthur. Trumpeter,
Go help Sir Lucan.

Oh, my noble knights,
I am your death!

Hereafter, Bedivere,
There shall be grief beyond all tears for these,
Who now must be forgotten: counsel me,
Which way to fling ourselves upon the flight?

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

Where stand the traitors?

Bedivere. Nowhere; Death is just,
This side and that he reaps with equal stroke:
They too are few and faint.

Arthur. Then 'tis well with us
If aught can yet be well thy fears are like
To find their answer; let this fortune hold
An hour or less, and Mordred's game is lost.
For him stalemate's defeat, and all or nought
His only hazard.

Bedivere. I would it were so.

Arthur. What else?
What is there left?

Bedivere. I know not, yet meseems
His very life's a challenge.

Arthur. Was it not thou
This morning would'st have urged me yield his claim
And make accord with him?

Bedivere. There was yet time:
Now he hath tasted blood, and will not stint
Till he be gorged Arthur or Constantine,
So long as Britain lies within his spring,
He'll reck not.

Arthur. Bedivere, I have sworn an oath
God's mercy keep me from redeeming it!
But Mordred shall not reign.

Enter LUCAN, wounded.

Thou'rt welcome, Lucan.
Where is thy hurt?
What knight was that who climbed
So doubtfully behind thee? Knows he not
Our rallying signal?

Lucan. Nay, he's none of ours.
His visor hides his face, but 'tis the frame
Of a strong knight, and traitor though he be,
He deals a grievous buffet.

Bedivere (looking off). Ay, he's bold,
He means to try us.

Arthur. No, he seeks a parley.
Look ye, he doffs his helm!

MORDRED enters.

Ah! Jesu mercy!

Bedivere. Mordred! thou villain! lace that helm again
And keep thee as thou may'st!

Arthur. Hold! Bedivere,
This is my deed: I could not bear to stand
And see thee slay him.

Mordred, draw thy sword,
And give thy soul into the hands of God,
For thy time hieth fast!

[ARTHUR and MORDRED fight, but neither is wounded:]

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

*they draw apart for a breathing space. ARTHUR
moves forward again.*

Lucan. Sir, let him go:

Bethink you, he's your son: let him but swear
By the five wounds of our sweet Saviour Christ,
To quit this land for ever.

Ah, Sir Mordred.

What's he that strikes against his father's life?
Be sworn, and 'scape the curse!

Mordred (to ARTHUR). I have more right
To take thy life than thou could'st ever claim
To give me mine!

Arthur. I sinned: I will atone.

*[They fight again: MORDRED falls: ARTHUR stands
looking down upon him.]*

Arthur. 'Tis done!

Might I die too!

Mordred. Thou shalt!

*[He raises himself with a last effort and
stabs ARTHUR.]*

O Britain!

Life! life! One year of life untyrannised!

[He falls back dead: ARTHUR kneels beside him.]

Bedivere. My lord, you are sore hurt: come hence!

(A pause.) My lord!

Will you not hence?

[ARTHUR turns and looks at him.]

Arthur. Yea, Bedivere, 'tis time.

[He turns away and covers his face again.]

SCENE III.

*Sea coast near Tintagel. Under the rocks a barge: ARTHUR
therein with ladies tending him. BEDIVERE upon the shore
at hand.*

Arthur. Bedivere

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

For this last office and for all that's gone
Thou hast my loving thanks: little enough
For such true service: but it yet may be
When thou hast crept from off the windy hills
Into the ingle-nook of dreaming eld,
Among the ember-faces my face too
Thou shalt behold, and muse before thou sleepest
With heart contented "Arthur leaned on me,
And his last thanks were mine."

Bedivere. Nay, my dear lord,
Far be the last! You are not yet for death;
Men say you cannot die.

Arthur. 'Tis true, long since
I do remember it was told of me
I should be hurt to death and yet not slain,
But by the will of our Lord Jesu brought
Into another place, and come again
To win the Holy Cross. I cannot tell;
'Tis a dark saying: rather, as I deem,
To-night, after the fashion of this world
My life must change.

Bedivere. To-night? So Britain sinks!
Ah! my Lord Arthur, what shall save us now
A torn and kingless people?

Arthur. Nay, Bedivere,
Not kingless; tide me death betide me life,
The realm rides high through all, with Constantine
To hold the course I pricked. Look forward, forward,
And let the past, with Arthur and his sins,
Fade on the dim horizon far behind!
Yet, even so, meseems I shall not die;
My purpose lives, my will, that which hath been
The life-blood of my spirit, my soul's breath:
What shall a man not suffer and not dare
That this may be? Yea! shall he not for this
Tread out the fire upon his own hearth-stone,
For this draw steel against the child that sprang
Of his own body? Though my name be lost
For ever, and my race with me to-night
Fall into dust, that which I willed remains,
And while that lives I shall not wholly die.
Now make me ere I pass: Sir Constantine
Is King of Britain: see him crowned with speed,
And summon all true men to render him
Such service and such faith as they would own
Towards Arthur come again. Then shalt thou go
Where thou may'st meet with Lancelot: let him wit
I died full fain of him, leaning my trust
Upon his old remembered nobleness
That he will yet repent him. They are fallen
Who brought the realm in peril for his sake;

MORDRED, A TRAGEDY

His penance waits him still: let him pray out
His life in some lone hermitage, or pass
Into the Holy Land where Jesu Christ
Was quick and dead. There may his soul find peace!

Bedivere. All this shall have fulfilment. Ah! would God
I too had fallen first!

Arthur. Nay, for lack of thee
My words were lost: be thankful, work thy work,
And wait God's end for all. My last command
Is this, thou shalt not fail to bring the queen
True tale how all befell: what lies beneath
Let Silence whisper.

Farewell Bedivere.

God dwell with thee. This ring to Constantine,
Bid him be strong, and rule.

[He falls back dying: the barge puts out to sea.]

Finis.

ORCHARDLEIGH, *April 2*, 1893.

KENSINGTON, *July 23*, 1894.