

# **THE TALE OF BALEN**

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE



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# THE TALE OF BALEN

THE TALE OF BALEN

**ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE**

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## THE TALE OF BALEN

### I

In hawthorn—time the heart grows light,  
The world is sweet in sound and sight,  
Glad thoughts and birds take flower and flight,  
The heather kindles toward the light,  
    The whin is frankincense and flame.  
And be it for strife or be it for love  
The falcon quickens as the dove  
When earth is touched from heaven above  
    With joy that knows no name.

And glad in spirit and sad in soul  
With dream and doubt of days that roll  
As waves that race and find no goal  
Rode on by bush and brake and bole  
    A northern child of earth and sea.  
The pride of life before him lay  
Radiant: the heavens of night and day  
Shone less than shone before his way  
    His ways and days to be.

And all his life of blood and breath  
Sang out within him: time and death  
Were even as words a dreamer saith  
When sleep within him slackeneth,  
    And light and life and spring were one.  
The steed between his knees that sprang,  
The moors and woods that shone and sang,  
The hours wherethrough the spring's breath rang,  
    Seemed ageless as the sun.

But alway through the bounteous bloom  
That earth gives thanks if heaven illumine  
His soul forefelt a shadow of doom,  
His heart foreknew a gloomier gloom  
    Than closes all men's equal ways.  
Albeit the spirit of life's light spring  
With pride of heart upheld him, king  
And lord of hours like snakes that sting  
    And nights that darken days.

And as the strong spring round him grew  
Stronger, and all blithe winds that blew  
Blither, and flowers that flowered anew  
More glad of sun and air and dew,  
    The shadow lightened on his soul  
And brightened into death and died  
Like winter, as the bloom waxed wide

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From woodside on to riverside  
And southward goal to goal.

Along the wandering ways of Tyne,  
By beech and birch and thorn that shine  
And laugh when life's requickening wine  
Makes night and noon and dawn divine  
And stirs in all the veins of spring,  
And past the brightening banks of Tees,  
He rode as one that breathes and sees  
A sun more blithe, a merrier breeze,  
A life that hails him king.

And down the softening south that knows  
No more how glad the heather glows,  
Nor how, when winter's clarion blows  
Across the bright Northumbrian snows,  
Sea-mists from east and westward meet,  
Past Avon senseless yet of song  
And Thames that bore but swans in throng  
He rode elate in heart and strong  
In trust of days as sweet.

So came he through to Camelot,  
Glad, though for shame his heart waxed hot,  
For hope within it withered not  
To see the shaft it dreamed of shot  
Fair toward the glimmering goal of fame.  
And all King Arthur's knightliest there  
Approved him knightly, swift to dare  
And keen to bid their records bear  
Sir Balen's northern name.

Sir Balen of Northumberland  
Gat grace before the king to stand  
High as his heart was, and his hand  
Wrought honour toward the strange north strand  
That sent him south so goodly a knight.  
And envy, sick with sense of sin,  
Began as poisonous herbs begin  
To work in base men's blood, akin  
To men's of nobler might.

And even so fell it that his doom,  
For all his bright life's kindling bloom  
And light that took no thought for gloom,  
Fell as a breath from the opening tomb  
Full on him ere he wist or thought.  
For once a churl of royal seed,  
King Arthur's kinsman, faint in deed  
And loud in word that knew not heed,

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Spake shame where shame was nought.

"What doth one here in Camelot  
Whose birth was northward? Wot we not  
As all his brethren borderers wot  
How blind of heart, how keen and hot,  
The wild north lives and hates the south?  
Men of the narrowing march that knows  
Nought save the strength of storms and snows,  
What would these carles where knighthood blows  
A trump of kinglike mouth?"

Swift from his place leapt Balen, smote  
The liar across his face, and wrote  
His wrath in blood upon the bloat  
Brute cheek that challenged shame for note  
How vile a king-born knave might be.  
Forth sprang their swords, and Balen slew  
The knave ere well one witness knew  
Of all that round them stood or drew  
What sight was there to see.

Then spake the great king's wrathful will  
A doom for six dark months to fill  
Wherein close prison held him, still  
And steadfast-souled for good or ill.  
But when those weary days lay dead  
His lordliest knights and barons spake  
Before the king for Balen's sake  
Good speech and wise, of force to break  
The bonds that bowed his head.

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### II

In linden-time the heart is high  
For pride of summer passing by  
With lordly laughter in her eye;  
A heavy splendour in the sky  
    Uplifts and bows it down again.  
The spring had waned from wood and wold  
Since Balen left his prison hold  
And lowlier-hearted than of old  
    Beheld it wax and wane.

Though humble heart and poor array  
Kept not from spirit and sense away  
Their noble nature, nor could slay  
The pride they bade but pause and stay  
    Till time should bring its trust to flower,  
Yet even for noble shame's sake, born  
Of hope that smiled on hate and scorn,  
He held him still as earth ere morn  
    Ring forth her rapturous hour.

But even as earth when dawn takes flight  
And beats her wings of dewy light  
Full in the faltering face of night,  
His soul awoke to claim by right  
    The life and death of deed and doom,  
When once before the king there came  
A maiden clad with grief and shame  
And anguish burning her like flame  
    That feeds on flowers in bloom.

Beneath a royal mantle, fair  
With goodly work of lustrous vair,  
Girt fast against her side she bare  
A sword whose weight bade all men there  
    Quail to behold her face again.  
Save of a passing perfect knight  
Not great alone in force and fight  
It might not be for any might  
    Drawn forth, and end her pain.

So said she: then King Arthur spake:  
"Albeit indeed I dare not take  
Such praise on me, for knighthood's sake  
And love of ladies will I make  
    Assay if better none may be."  
By girdle and by sheath he caught  
The sheathed and girded sword, and wrought

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With strength whose force availed him nought  
To save and set her free.

Again she spake: "No need to set  
The might that man has matched not yet  
Against it; he whose hand shall get  
Grace to release the bonds that fret  
My bosom and my girdlestead  
With little strain of strength or strife  
Shall bring me as from death to life  
And win to sister or to wife  
Fame that outlives men dead."

Then bade the king his knights assay  
This mystery that before him lay  
And mocked his might of manhood. "Nay,"  
Quoth she, "the man that takes away  
This burden laid on me must be  
A knight of record clean and fair  
As sunlight and the flowerful air,  
By sire and mother born to bear  
A name to shame not me."

Then forth strode Launcelot, and laid  
The mighty—moulded hand that made  
Strong knights reel back like birds affrayed  
By storm that smote them as they strayed  
Against the hilt that yeilded not.  
Then Tristram, bright and sad and kind  
As one that bore in noble mind  
Love that made light as darkness blind,  
Fared even as Launcelot.

Then Lamoracke, with hardier cheer,  
As one that held all hope and fear  
Wherethrough the spirit of man may steer  
In life and death less dark or dear,  
Laid hand thereon, and fared as they.  
With half a smile his hand he drew  
Back from the spell—bound thing, and threw  
With half a glance his heart anew  
Toward no such blameless may.

Between Iseult and Guenevere  
Sat one of name as high to hear,  
But darklier doomed than they whose cheer  
Foreshowed not yet the deadlier year  
That bids the queenliest head bow down,  
The queen Morgause of Orkney: they  
With scarce a flash of the eye could say  
The very word of dawn, when day

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Gives earth and heaven their crown.

But bright and dark as night or noon  
And lowering as a storm-flushed moon  
When clouds and thwarting winds distune  
The music of the midnight, soon  
    To die from darkening star to star  
And leave a silence in the skies  
That yearns till dawn find voice and rise,  
Shone strange as fate Morgause, with eyes  
    That dwelt on days afar.

A glance that shot on Lamoracke  
As from a storm-cloud bright and black  
Fire swift and blind as death's own track  
Turned fleet as flame on Arthur back  
    From him whose hand forsook the hilt:  
And one in blood and one in sin  
Their hearts caught fire of pain within  
And knew no goal for them to win  
    But death that guerdons guilt.

Then Gawain, sweet of soul and gay  
As April ere he dreams of May,  
Strove, and prevailed not; then Sir Kay,  
The snake-souled envier, vile as they  
    That fawn and foam and lurk and lie,  
Sire of the bastard band whose brood  
Was alway found at servile feud  
With honour, faint and false and lewd,  
    Scarce grasped and put it by.

Then wept for woe the damsel bound  
With iron and with anguish round,  
That none to help her grief was found  
Or loose the inextricably inwound  
    Grim curse that girt her life with grief  
And made a burden of her breath,  
Harsh as the bitterness of death.  
Then spake the king as one that saith  
    Words bitterer even than brief.

"Methought the wide round world could bring  
Before the face of queen or king  
No knights more fit for fame to sing  
Than fill this full Round Table's ring  
    With honour higher than pride of place:  
But now my heart is wrung to know,  
Damsel, that none whom fame can show  
Finds grace to heal or help thy woe:  
    God gives them not the grace."

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Then from the lowliest place thereby,  
With heart-enkindled cheek and eye  
Most like the star and kindling sky  
That say the sundawn's hour is high  
    When rapture trembles through the sea,  
Strode Balen in his poor array  
Forth, and took heart of grace to pray  
The damsel suffer even him to assay  
    His power to set her free.

Nay, how should he avail, she said,  
Averse with scorn-averted head,  
Where these availed not? none had sped  
Of all these mightier men that led  
    The lists wherein he might not ride,  
And how should less men speed? But he,  
With lordlier pride of courtesy,  
Put forth his hand and set her free  
    From pain and humbled pride.

But on the sword he gazed elate  
With hope set higher than fear or fate,  
Or doubt of darkling days in wait;  
And when her thankful praise waxed great  
    And craved of him the sword again,  
He would not give it. "Nay, for mine  
It is till force may make it thine."  
A smile that shone as death may shine  
    Spake toward him bale and bane.

Strange lightning flickered from her eyes.  
"Gentle and good in knightliest guise  
And meet for quest of strange emprise  
Thou hast here approved thee: yet not wise  
    To keep the sword from me, I wis.  
For with it thou shalt surely slay  
Of all that look upon the day  
The man best loved of thee, and lay  
    Thine own life down for his."

"What chance God sends, that chance I take,"  
He said. Then soft and still she spake;  
"I would but for thine only sake  
Have back the sword of thee, and break  
    The links of doom that bind thee round.  
But seeing thou wilt not have it so,  
My heart for thine is wrung with woe."  
"God's will," quoth he, "it is, we know,  
    Wherewith our lives are bound."

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"Repent it must thou soon," she said,  
"Who wouldst not hear the rede I read  
For thine and not for my sake, sped  
In vain as waters heavenward shed  
From springs that falter and depart  
Earthward. God bids not thee believe  
Truth, and the web thy life must weave  
For even this sword to close and cleave  
Hangs heavy round my heart."

So passed she mourning forth. But he,  
With heart of springing hope set free  
As birds that breast and brave the sea,  
Bade horse and arms and armour be  
Made straightway ready toward the fray.  
Nor even might Arthur's royal prayer  
Withhold him, but with frank and fair  
Thanksgiving and leave-taking there  
He turned him thence away.

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### III

As the east wind, when the morning's breast  
Gleams like a bird's that leaves the nest,  
A fledgeling halcyon's bound on quest,  
Drives wave on wave on wave to west  
    Till all the sea be life and light,  
So time's mute breath, that brings to bloom  
All flowers that strew the dead spring's tomb,  
Drives day on day on day to doom  
    Till all man's day be night.

Brief as the breaking of a wave  
That hurls on man his thunderous grave  
Ere fear find breath to cry or crave  
Life that no chance may spare or save,  
    The light of joy and glory shone  
Even as in dreams where death seems dead  
Round Balen's hope-exalted head,  
Shone, passed, and lightened as it fled  
    The shadow of doom thereon.

For as he bound him thence to fare,  
Before the stately presence there  
A lady like a windflower fair,  
Girt on with raiment strange and rare  
    That rippled whispering round her, came.  
Her clear cold eyes, all glassy grey,  
Seemed lit not with the light of day  
But touched with gleams that waned away  
    Of quelled and fading flame.

Before the king she bowed and spake:  
"King, for thine old faith's plighted sake  
To me the lady of the lake,  
I come in trust of thee to take  
    The guerdon of the gift I gave,  
Thy sword Excalibur." And he  
Made answer: "Be it whate'er it be,  
If mine to give, I give it thee,  
    Nor need is thine to crave."

As when a gleam of wicked light  
Turns half a low-lying water bright  
That moans beneath the shivering night  
With sense of evil sound and sight  
    And whispering witchcraft's bated breath  
Her wan face quickened as she said:  
"This knight that won the sword—his head

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I crave or hers that brought it. Dead,  
Let these be one in death."

"Not with mine honour this may be;  
Ask all save this thou wilt," quoth he,  
"And have thy full desire." But she  
Made answer: "Nought will I of thee,  
Nought if not this." Then Balen turned,  
And saw the sorceress hard beside  
By whose fell craft his mother died:  
Three years he had sought her, and here espied  
His heart against her yearned.

"Ill be thou met," he said, "whose ire  
Would slake with blood thy soul's desire:  
By thee my mother died in fire;  
Die thou by me a death less dire."  
Sharp flashed his sword forth, fleet as flame,  
And shore away her sorcerous head.  
"Alas for shame," the high king said,  
"That one found once my friend lies dead;  
Alas for all our shame!

"Thou shouldst have here forborne her; yea,  
Were all the wrongs that bid men slay  
Thine, heaped too high for wrath to weigh,  
Not here before my face to-day  
Was thine the right to wreak thy wrong."  
Still stood he then as one that found  
His rose of hope by storm discrowned,  
And all the joy that girt him round  
Brief as a broken song.

Yet ere he passed he turned and spake:  
"King, only for thy nobler sake  
Than aught of power man's power may take  
Or pride of place that pride may break  
I bid the lordlier man in thee,  
That lives within the king, give ear.  
This justice done before thee here  
On one that hell's own heart holds dear,  
Needs might not this but be.

"Albeit, for all that pride would prove,  
My heart be wrung to lose thy love,  
It yet repents me not hereof:  
So many an eagle and many a dove,  
So many a knight, so many a may,  
This water-snake of poisonous tongue  
To death by words and wiles hath stung,  
That her their slayer, from hell's lake sprung,

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I did not ill to slay."

"Yea," said the king, "too high of heart  
To stand before a king thou art;  
Yet irks it me to bid thee part  
And take thy penance for thy part,  
That God may put upon thy pride."  
Then Balen took the severed head  
And toward his hostry turned and sped  
As one that knew not quick from dead  
Nor good from evil tide.

He bade his squire before him stand  
And take that sanguine spoil in hand  
And bear it far by shore and strand  
Till all in glad Northumberland  
That loved him, seeing it, all might know  
His deadliest foe was dead, and hear  
How free from prison as from fear  
He dwelt in trust of the answering year  
To bring him weal for woe.

"And tell them, now I take my way  
To meet in battle, if I may,  
King Ryons of North Wales, and slay  
That king of kernes whose fiery sway  
Doth all the marches dire despite  
That serve King Arthur: so shall he  
Again be gracious lord to me,  
And I that leave thee meet with thee  
Once more in Arthur's sight."

So spake he ere they parted, nor  
Took shame or fear to counsellor,  
As one whom none laid ambush for;  
And wist not how Sir Launceor,  
The wild king's son of Ireland, hot  
And high in wrath to know that one  
Stood higher in fame before the sun,  
Even Balen, since the sword was won,  
Drew nigh from Camelot.

For thence, in heat of hate and pride,  
As one that man might bid not bide,  
He craved the high king's grace to ride  
On quest of Balen far and wide  
And wreak the wrong his wrath had wrought.  
"Yea," Arthur said, "for such despite  
Was done me never in my sight  
As this thine hand shall now requite  
If trust avail us aught."

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But ere he passed, in eager mood  
To feed his hate with bitter food,  
Before the king's face Merlin stood  
And heard his tale of ill and good,  
Of Balen, and the sword achieved.  
And whence it smote as heaven's red ire  
That direful dame of doom as dire;  
And how the king's wrath turned to fire  
The grief wherewith he grieved.

And darkening as he gave it ear,  
The still face of the sacred seer  
Waxed wan with wrath and not with fear.  
And ever changed its cloudier cheer  
Till all his face was very night.  
"This damosel that brought the sword,"  
He said, "before the king my lord,  
And all these knights about his board,  
Hath done them all despite.

"The falsest damosel she is  
That works men ill on earth, I wis,  
And all her mind is toward but this,  
To kill as with a lying kiss  
Truth, and the life of noble trust.  
A brother hath she, —see but now  
The flame of shame that brands her brow!—  
A true man, pure as faith's own vow,  
Whose honour knows not rust.

"This good knight found within her bower  
A felon and her paramour,  
And slew him in his shameful hour,  
As right gave might and righteous power  
To hands that wreaked so foul a wrong.  
Then, for the hate her heart put on,  
She sought by ways where death had gone  
The lady Lyle of Avalon,  
Whose crafts are strange and strong.

"The sorceress, one with her in thought,  
Gave her that sword of magic, wrought  
By charms whereof sweet heaven sees nought,  
That hither girt on her she brought  
To be by doom her brother's bane.  
And grief it is to think how he  
That won it, being of heart so free  
And perfect found in chivalry,  
Shall by that sword lie slain.

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"Great pity it is and strange despite  
That one whose eyes are stars to light  
Honour, and shine as heaven's own height,  
Should perish, being the goodliest knight  
    That even the all-glorious north had borne.  
Nor shall my lord the king behold  
A lordlier friend of mightier mould  
Than Balen, though his tale be told  
    Ere noon fulfil his morn."

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### IV

As morning hears before it run  
The music of the mounting sun,  
And laughs to watch his trophies won  
From darkness, and her hosts undone,  
    And all the night become a breath,  
Nor dreams that fear should hear and flee  
The summer menace of the sea,  
So hears our hope what life may be,  
    And knows it not for death.

Each day that slays its hours and dies  
Weeps, laughs, and lightens on our eyes,  
And sees and hears not: smiles and sighs  
As flowers ephemeral fall and rise  
    About its birth, about its way,  
And pass as love and sorrow pass,  
As shadows flashing down a glass,  
As dew-flowers blowing in flowerless grass,  
    As hope from yesterday.

The blossom of the sunny dew  
That now the stronger sun strikes through  
Fades off the blade whereon it blew  
No fleetlier than the flowers that grew  
    On hope's green stem in life's fierce light.  
Nor might the glory soon to sit  
Awhile on Balen's crest alit  
Outshine the shadow of doom on it  
    Or stay death's wings from flight.

Dawn on a golden moorland side  
By holt and heath saw Balen ride  
And Launceor after, pricked with pride  
And stung with spurring envy: wide  
    And far he had ridden athwart strange lands  
And sought amiss the man he found  
And cried on, till the stormy sound  
Rang as a rallying trumpet round  
    That fires men's hearts and hands.

Abide he bade him: nor was need  
To bid when Balen wheeled his steed  
Fiercely, less fain by word than deed  
To bid his envier evil speed,  
    And cried, "What wilt thou with me?" Loud  
Rang Launceor's vehement answer: "Knight,  
To avenge on thee the dire despite

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Thou hast done us all in Arthur's sight  
I stand toward Arthur vowed."

"Ay?" Balen said: "albeit I see  
I needs must deal in strife with thee,  
Light is thy wyte thou layest on me;  
For her I slew and sinned not, she  
Was dire in all men's eyes as death,  
Or none were lother found than I  
By me to bid a woman die:  
As lief were loyal men to lie,  
Or scorn what honour saith."

As the arched wave's weight against the reef  
Hurls, and is hurled back like a leaf  
Storm-shrivelled, and its rage of grief  
Speaks all the loud broad sea in brief,  
And quells the hearkening hearts of men,  
Or as the crash of overfalls  
Down under blue smooth water brawls  
Like jarring steel on ruining walls,  
So rang their meeting then.

As wave on wave shocks, and confounds  
The bounding bulk whereon it bounds  
And breaks and shattering seaward sounds  
As crying of the old sea's wolves and hounds  
That moan and ravin and rage and wail,  
So steed on steed encountering sheer  
Shocked, and the strength of Launceor's spear  
Shivered on Balen's shield, and fear  
Bade hope within him quail.

But Balen's spear through Launceor's shield  
Clove as a ploughshare cleaves the field  
And pierced the hauberk triple-steed,  
That horse with horseman stricken reeled,  
And as a storm-breached rock falls, fell,  
And Balen turned his horse again  
And wist not yet his foe lay slain,  
And saw him dead that sought his bane  
And wrought and fared not well.

Suddenly, while he gazed and stood,  
And mused in many-minded mood  
If life or death were evil or good,  
Forth of a covert of a wood  
That skirted half the moorland lea  
Fast rode a maiden flower-like white  
Full toward that fair wild place of fight,  
Anhungered of the woful sight

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God gave her there to see.

And seeing the man there fallen and dead,  
She cried against the sun that shed  
Light on the living world, and said,  
"O Balen, slayer whose hand is red,  
Two bodies and one heart thou hast slain,  
Two hearts within one body: aye,  
Two souls thou hast lost; by thee they die,  
Cast out of sight of earth and sky  
And all that made them fain."

And from the dead his sword she caught,  
And fell in trance that wist of nought,  
Swooning: but softly Balen sought  
To win from her the sword she thought  
To die on, dying by Launceor's side.  
Again her wakening wail outbroke  
As wildly, sword in hand, she woke  
And struck one swift and bitter stroke  
That healed her, and she died.

And sorrowing for their strange love's sake  
Rode Balen forth by lawn and lake,  
By moor and moss and briar and brake,  
And in his heart their sorrow spake  
Whose lips were dumb as death, and said  
Mute words of presage blind and vain  
As rain—stars blurred and marred by rain  
To wanderers on a moonless main  
Where night and day seem dead.

Then toward a sunbright wildwood side  
He looked and saw beneath it ride  
A knight whose arms afar espied  
By note of name and proof of pride  
Bare witness of his brother born,  
His brother Balan, hard at hand,  
Twin flower of bright Northumberland,  
Twin sea—bird of their loud sea—strand,  
Twin song—bird of their morn.

Ah then from Balen passed away  
All dread of night, all doubt of day,  
All care what life or death might say,  
All thought of all worse months than May:  
Only the might of joy in love  
Broke forth within him as a fire,  
And deep delight in deep desire  
Of far—flown days whose full—souled quire  
Rang round from the air above.

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From choral earth and quiring air  
Rang memories winged like songs that bear  
Sweet gifts for spirit and sense to share:  
For no man's life knows love more fair  
    And fruitful of memorial things  
Than this the deep dear love that breaks  
With sense of life on life, and makes  
The sundawn sunnier as it wakes  
    Where morning round it rings.

"O brother, O my brother!" cried  
Each upon each, and cast aside  
Their helms unbraced that might not hide  
From sight of memory single-eyed  
    The likeness graven of face and face,  
And kissed and wept upon each other  
For joy and pity of either brother,  
And love engrafted by sire and mother,  
    God's natural gift of grace.

And each with each took counsel meet  
For comfort, making sorrow sweet,  
And grief a goodly thing to greet:  
And word from word leapt light and fleet  
    Till all the venturous tale was told,  
And how in Balen's hope it lay  
To meet the wild Welsh king and slay,  
And win from Arthur back for pay  
    The grace he gave of old.

"And thither wilt not thou with me  
And win as great a grace for thee?"  
"That will I well," quoth Balan: "we  
Will cleave together, bound and free,  
    As brethren should, being twain and one."  
But ere they parted thence there came  
A creature withered as with flame,  
A dwarf mismade in nature's shame,  
    Between them and the sun.

And riding fleet as fire may glide  
He found the dead lie side by side,  
And wailed and rent his hair and cried,  
"Who hath done this deed?" And Balen eyed  
    The strange thing loathfully, and said,  
"The knight I slew, who found him fain  
And keen to slay me: seeing him slain,  
The maid I sought to save in vain,  
    Self-stricken, here lies dead.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

"Sore grief was mine to see her die,  
And for her true faith's sake shall I  
Love, and with love of heart more high,  
All women better till I die."

"Alas," the dwarf said, "ill for thee  
In evil hour this deed was done:  
For now the quest shall be begun  
Against thee, from the dawning sun  
Even to the sunset sea.

"From shore to mountain, dawn to night,  
The kinsfolk of this great dead knight  
Will chase thee to thy death." A light  
Of swift blithe scorn flashed answer bright  
As fire from Balen's eye. "For that,  
Small fear shall fret my heart," quoth he:  
"But that my lord the king should be  
For this dead man's sake wroth with me,  
Weep might it well thereat."

Then murmuring passed the dwarf away,  
And toward the knights in fair array  
Came riding eastward up the way  
From where the flower-soft lowlands lay  
A king whose name the sweet south-west  
Held high in honour, and the land  
That bowed beneath his gentle hand  
Wore on its wild bright northern strand  
Tintagel for a crest.

And Balen hailed with homage due  
King Mark of Cornwall, when he knew  
The pennon that before him flew:  
And for those lovers dead and true  
The king made moan to hear their doom;  
And for their sorrow's sake he sware  
To seek in all the marches there  
The church that man might find most fair  
And build therein their tomb.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

### V

As thought from thought takes wing and flies,  
As month on month with sunlit eyes  
Tramples and triumphs in its rise,  
As wave smites wave to death and dies,  
    So chance on hurtling chance like steel  
Strikes, flashes, and is quenched, ere fear  
Can whisper hope, or hope can hear,  
If sorrow or joy be far or near  
    For time to hurt or heal.

Swift as a shadow and strange as light  
That cleaves in twain the shadow of night  
Before the wide-winged word takes flight  
That thunder speaks to depth and height  
    And quells the quiet hour with sound,  
That came before King Mark and stood  
Between the moorside and the wood  
The man whose word God's will made good,  
    Nor guile was in it found.

And Merlin said to Balen: "Lo,  
Thou hast wrought thyself a grievous woe  
To let this lady die, and know  
Thou mightst have stayed her deadly blow."  
    And Balen answered him and said,  
"Nay, by my truth to faith, not I,  
So fiercely fain she was to die;  
Ere well her sword had flashed on high,  
    Self-slain she lay there dead."

Again and sadly Merlin spake:  
"My heart is wrung for this deed's sake,  
To know thee therefore doomed to take  
Upon thine hand a curse, and make  
    Three kingdoms pine through twelve years' change,  
In want and woe: for thou shalt smite  
The man most noble and truest knight  
That looks upon the live world's light  
    A dolorous stroke and strange.

"And not till years shall round their goal  
May this man's wound thou hast given be whole."  
And Balen, stricken through the soul  
By dark-winged words of doom and dole,  
    Made answer: "If I wist it were  
No lie but sooth thou sayest of me,  
Then even to make a liar of thee

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Would I too slay myself, and see  
How death bids dead men fare."

And Merlin took his leave and passed  
And was not: and the shadow as fast  
Went with him that his word had cast,  
Too fleet for thought thereof to last:  
And there those brethren bade King Mark  
Farewell: but fain would Mark have known  
The strong knight's name who had overthrown  
The pride of Launceor, when it shone  
Bright as it now lay dark.

And Balan for his brother spake,  
Saying: "Sir, albeit him list not break  
The seal of secret time, nor shake  
Night off him ere his morning wake,  
By these two swords he is girt withal  
May men that praise him, knights and lords,  
Call him the knight that bears two swords,  
And all the praise his fame accords  
Make answer when they call."

So parted they toward eventide;  
And tender twilight, heavy-eyed,  
Saw deep down glimmering woodlands ride  
Balen and Balan side by side,  
Till where the leaves grew dense and dim  
Again they spied from far draw near  
The presence of the sacred seer,  
But so disguised and strange of cheer  
That seeing they knew not him.

"Now whither ride ye," Merlin said,  
"Through shadows that the sun strikes red,  
Ere night be born or day be dead?"  
But they, for doubt half touched with dread,  
Would say not where their goal might lie.  
"And thou," said Balen, "what art thou,  
To walk with shrouded eye and brow?"  
He said: "Me lists not show thee now  
By name what man am I."

"Ill seen is this of thee," said they,  
"That thou art true in word and way  
Nor fain to fear the face of day,  
Who wilt not as a true man say  
The name it shames not him to bear."  
He answered: "Be it or be it not so,  
Yet why ye ride this way I know,  
To meet King Ryons as a foe,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And how your hope shall fare.

"Well, if ye hearken toward my rede,  
Ill, if ye hear not, shall ye speed."  
"Ah, now," they cried, "thou art ours at need:  
What Merlin saith we are fain to heed."  
"Great worship shall ye win," said he,  
"And look that ye do knightly now,  
For great shall be your need, I trow."  
And Balen smiled: "By knighthood's vow,  
The best we may will we."

Then Merlin bade them turn and take  
Rest, for their good steeds' weary sake,  
Between the highway and the brake,  
Till starry midnight bade them wake:  
Then "Rise," he said, "the king is nigh,  
Who hath stolen from all his host away  
With threescore horse in armed array,  
The goodliest knights that bear his sway  
And hold his kingdom high.

"And twenty ride of them before  
To bear his errand, ere the door  
Turn of the night, sealed fast no more,  
And sundawn bid the stars wax hoar;  
For by the starshine of to-night  
He seeks a leman where she waits  
His coming, dark and swift as fate's,  
And hearkens toward the unopening gates  
That yield not him to sight."

Then through the glimmering gloom around  
A shadowy sense of light and sound  
Made, ere the proof thereof were found,  
The brave blithe hearts within them bound,  
And "Where," quoth Balen, "rides the king?"  
But softer spake the seer: "Abide,  
Till hither toward your spears he ride,  
Where all the narrowing woodland side  
Grows dense with boughs that cling."

There in that straitening way they met  
The wild Welsh host against them set,  
And smote their strong king down, ere yet  
His hurrying horde of spears might get  
Fierce vantage of them. Then the fight  
Grew great and joyous as it grew,  
For left and right those brethren slew,  
Till all the lawn waxed red with dew  
More deep than dews of night.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And ere the full fierce tale was read  
Full forty lay before them dead,  
And fast the hurtling remnant fled  
And wist not whither fear had led:  
    And toward the king they went again,  
And would have slain him: but he bowed  
Before them, crying in fear aloud  
For grace they gave him, seeing the proud  
    Wild king brought lowest of men.

And ere the wildwood leaves were stirred  
With song or wing of wakening bird,  
In Camelot was Merlin's word  
With joy in joyous wonder heard  
    That told of Arthur's bitterest foe  
Diskingdomed and discomfited.  
"By whom?" the high king smiled and said.  
He answered: "Ere the dawn wax red,  
    To-morrow bids you know.

"Two knights whose heart and hope are one  
And fain to win your grace have done  
This work whereby if grace be won  
Their hearts shall hail the enkindling sun  
    With joy more keen and deep than day."  
And ere the sundawn drank the dew  
Those brethren with their prisoner drew  
To the outer guard they gave him to  
    And passed again away.

And Arthur came as toward his guest  
To greet his foe, and bade him rest  
As one returned from nobler quest  
And welcome from the stormbright west,  
    But by what chance he fain would hear.  
"The chance was hard and strange, sir king,"  
Quoth Ryons, bowed in thanksgiving.  
"Who won you?" Arthur said: "the thing  
    Is worth a warrior's ear."

The wild king flushed with pride and shame,  
Answering: "I know not either name  
Of those that there against us came  
And withered all our strength like flame:  
    The knight that bears two swords is one,  
And one his brother: not on earth  
May men meet men of knightlier worth  
Nor mightier born of mortal birth  
    That hail the sovereign sun."

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And Arthur said: "I know them not;  
But much am I for this, God wot,  
Beholden to them: Launcelot  
Nor Tristram, when the war waxed hot  
    Along the marches east and west,  
Wrought ever nobler work than this."  
"Ah," Merlin said, "sore pity it is  
And strange mischance of doom, I wis,  
    That death should mar their quest.

"Balén, the perfect knight that won  
The sword whose name is malison,  
And made his deed his doom, is one:  
Nor hath his brother Balan done  
    Less royal service: not on earth  
Lives there a nobler knight, more strong  
Of soul to win men's praise in song,  
Albeit the light abide not long  
    That lightened round his birth.

"Yea, and of all sad things I know  
The heaviest and the highest in woe  
Is this, the doom whose date brings low  
Too soon in timeless overthrow  
    A head so high, a hope so sure.  
The greatest moan for any knight  
That ever won fair fame in fight  
Shall be for Balén, seeing his might  
    Must now not long endure."

"Alas," King Arthur said, "he hath shown  
Such love to me—ward that the moan  
Made of him should be mine alone  
Above all other, knowing it known  
    I have ill deserved it of him." "Nay,"  
Said Merlin, "he shall do for you  
Much more, when time shall be anew,  
Than time hath given him chance to do  
    Or hope may think to say.

"But now must be your powers purveyed  
To meet, ere noon of morn be made  
To—morrow, all the host arrayed  
Of this wild foe's wild brother, laid  
    Around against you: see to it well,  
For now I part from you." And soon,  
When sundawn slew the withering moon,  
Two hosts were met to win the boon  
    Whose tale is death's to tell.

A lordly tale of knights and lords

## THE TALE OF BALEN

For death to tell by count of swords  
When war's wild harp in all its chords  
Rang royal triumph, and the hordes  
    Of hurtling foemen rocked and reeled  
As waves wind-thwarted on the sea,  
Was told of all that there might be,  
Till scarce might battle hear or see  
    The fortune of the field.

And many a knight won fame that day  
When even the serpent soul of Kay  
Was kindled toward the fiery play  
As might a lion's be for prey,  
    And won him fame that might not die  
With passing of his rancorous breath  
But clung about his life and death  
As fire that speaks in cloud, and saith  
    What strong men hear and fly.

And glorious works were Arthur's there,  
That lit the battle-darkened air:  
But when they saw before them fare  
Like stars of storm the knight that bare  
    Two swords about him girt for fray,  
Balén, and Balan with him, then  
Strong wonder smote the souls of men  
If heaven's own host or hell's deep den  
    Had sent them forth to slay.

So keen they rode across the fight,  
So sharp they smote to left and right,  
And made of hurtling darkness light  
With lightning of their swords, till flight  
    And fear before them flew like flame,  
That Arthur's self had never known,  
He said, since first his blast was blown,  
Such lords of war as these alone  
    That whence he knew not came.

But while the fire of war waxed hot  
The wild king hearkened, hearing not,  
Through storm of spears and arrow-shot,  
For succour toward him from King Lot  
    And all his host of sea-born men,  
Strong as the strong storm-baffling bird  
Whose cry round Orkney's headlands heard  
Is as the sea's own sovereign word  
    That mocks our mortal ken.

For Merlin's craft of prophecy,  
Who wist that one of twain must die,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Put might in him to say thereby  
Which head should lose its crown, and lie  
    Stricken, though loth he were to know  
That either life should wane and fail;  
Yet most might Arthur's love avail,  
And still with subtly tempered tale  
    His wile held fast the foe.

With woven words of magic might  
Wherein the subtle shadow and light  
Changed hope and fear till fear took flight,  
He stayed King Lot's fierce lust of fight  
    Till all the wild Welsh war was driven  
As foam before the wind that wakes  
With the all-awakening sun, and breaks  
Strong ships that rue the mirth it makes  
    When grace to slay is given.

And ever hotter lit and higher,  
As fire that meets encountering fire,  
Waxed in King Lot his keen desire  
To bid revenge within him tire  
    On Arthur's ravaged fame and life:  
Across the waves of war between  
Floated and flashed, unseen and seen,  
The lustrous likeness of the queen  
    Whom shame had sealed his wife.

But when the woful word was brought  
That while he tarried, doubting nought,  
The hope was lost whose goal he sought  
And all the fight he yearned for fought,  
    His heart was rent for grief and shame,  
And half his hope was set on flight  
Till word was given him of a knight  
Who said: "They are weary and worn with fight.  
    And we more fresh than flame."

And bright and dark as night and day  
Ere either find the unopening way  
Clear, and forego the unaltering sway,  
The sad king's face shone, frowning: "Yea,  
    I would that every knight of mine  
Would do his part as I shall do,"  
He said, "till death or life anew  
Shall judge between us as is due  
    With wiser doom than thine."

Then thundered all the awakening field  
With crash of hosts that clashed and reeled,  
Banner to banner, shield to shield,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And spear to splintering spear—shaft, steeled  
As heart against high heart of man,  
As hope against high hope of knight  
To pluck the crest and crown of fight  
From war's clenched hand by storm's wild light,  
For blessing given or ban.

All hearts of hearkening men that heard  
The ban twin—born with blessing, stirred  
Like springtide waters, knew the word  
Whereby the steeds of storm are spurred  
With ravenous rapture to destroy,  
And laughed for love of battle, pierced  
With passion of tempestuous thirst  
And hungering hope to assuage it first  
With draughts of stormy joy.

But sheer ahead of the iron tide  
That rocked and roared from side to side  
Rode as the lightning's lord might ride  
King Lot, whose heart was set to abide  
All peril of the raging hour,  
And all his host of warriors born  
Where lands by warring seas are worn  
Was only by his hands upborne  
Who gave them pride and power.

But as the sea's hand smites the shore  
And shatters all the strengths that bore  
The ravage earth may bear no more,  
So smote the hand of Pellinore  
Charging, a knight of Arthur's chief,  
And clove his strong steed's neck in twain,  
And smote him sheer through brow and brain,  
Falling: and there King Lot lay slain,  
And knew not wrath or grief.

And all the host of Orkney fled,  
And many a mother's son lay dead:  
But when they raised the stricken head  
Whence pride and power and shame were fled  
And rage and anguish now cast out,  
And bore it toward a kingly tomb,  
The wife whose love had wrought his doom  
Came thither, fair as morning's bloom  
And dark as twilight's doubt.

And there her four strong sons and his,  
Gawain and Gareth, Gaherys  
And Agravain, whose sword's sharp kiss  
With sound of hell's own serpent's hiss

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Should one day turn her life to death,  
Stood mourning with her: but by these  
Seeing Mordred as a seer that sees,  
Anguish of terror bent her knees  
And caught her shuddering breath.

The splendour of her sovereign eyes  
Flashed darkness deeper than the skies  
Feel or fear when the sunset dies  
On his that felt as midnight rise  
Their doom upon them, there undone  
By faith in fear ere thought could yield  
A shadowy sense of days revealed,  
The ravin of the final field,  
The terror of their son.

For Arthur's, as they caught the light  
That sought and durst not seek his sight,  
Darkened, and all his spirit's might  
Withered within him even as night  
Withers when sunrise thrills the sea.  
But Mordred's lightened as with fire  
That smote his mother and his sire  
With darkling doom and deep desire  
That bade its darkness be.

And heavier on their hearts the weight  
Sank of the fear that brings forth fate,  
With all the grief and love and hate  
That turn to fire men's days on earth.  
And glorious was the funeral made,  
And dark the deepening dread that swayed  
Their darkening souls whose light grew shade  
With sense of death in birth.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

### VI

In autumn, when the wind and sea  
Rejoice to live and laugh to be,  
And scarce the blast that curbs the tree  
And bids before it quail and flee  
    The fiery foliage, where its brand  
Is radiant as the seal of spring,  
Sounds less delight, and waves a wing  
Less lustrous, life's loud thanksgiving  
    Puts life in sea and land.

High hope in Balen's heart alight  
Laughed, as from all that clamorous fight  
He passed and sought not Arthur's sight,  
Who fain had found his kingliest knight  
    And made amend for Balen's wrong.  
But Merlin gave his soul to see  
Fate, rising as a shoreward sea,  
And all the sorrow that should be  
    Ere hope or fear thought long.

"O where are they whose hands upbore  
My battle," Arthur said, "before  
The wild Welsh host's wide rage and roar?  
Balen and Balan, Pellinore  
    Where are they?" Merlin answered him:  
"Balen shall be not long away  
From sight of you, but night nor day  
Shall bring his brother back to say  
    If life burn bright or dim."

"Now, by my faith," said Arthur then,  
"Two marvellous knights are they, whose ken  
Toward battle makes the twain as ten,  
And Balen most of all born men  
    Passest of prowess all I know  
Or ever found or sought to see:  
Would God he would abide with me  
To face the times foretold of thee  
    And all the latter woe."

For there had Merlin shown the king  
The doom that songs unborn should sing,  
The gifts that time should rise and bring  
Of blithe and bitter days to spring  
    As weeds and flowers against the sun.  
And on the king for fear's sake fell  
Sickness, and sorrow deep as hell,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Nor even might sleep bid fear farewell  
If grace to sleep were won.

Down in a meadow green and still  
He bade the folk that wrought his will  
Pitch his pavilion, where the chill  
Soft night would let not rest fulfil  
His heart wherein dark fears lay deep.  
And sharp against his hearing cast  
Came a sound as of horsehoofs fast  
Passing, that ere their sound were past  
Aroused him as from sleep.

And forth he looked along the grass  
And saw before his portal pass  
A knight that wailed aloud, "Alas  
That life should find this dolorous pass  
And find no shield from doom and dole!"  
And hearing all his moan, "Abide,  
Fair sir," the king arose and cried,  
"And say what sorrow bids you ride  
So sorrowful of soul."

"My hurt may no man heal, God wot,  
And help of man may speed me not,"  
The sad knight said, "nor change my lot."  
And toward the castle of Melyot  
Whose towers arose a league away  
He passed forth sorrowing: and anon,  
Ere well the woful sight were gone,  
Came Balen down the meads that shone,  
Strong, bright, and brave as day.

And seeing the king there stand, the knight  
Drew rein before his face to alight  
In reverence made for love's sake bright  
With joy that set his face alight  
As theirs who see, alive, above,  
The sovereign of their souls, whose name  
To them is even as love's own flame  
To enkindle hope that heeds not fame  
And knows no lord but love.

And Arthur smiled on him, and said,  
"Right welcome be thou: by my head,  
I would not wish me better sped.  
For even but now there came and fled  
Before me like a cloud that flies  
A knight that made most heavy cheer,  
I know not wherefore; nor may fear  
Or pity give my heart to hear

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Or lighten on mine eyes.

"But even for fear's and pity's sake  
Fain were I thou shouldst overtake  
And fetch again this knight that spake  
No word of answering grace to make

Reply to mine that hailed him: thou,  
By force or by goodwill, shalt bring  
His face before me." "Yea, my king,"  
Quoth Balen, "and a greater thing  
Were less than is my vow.

"I would the task required and heard  
Were heavier than your sovereign word  
Hath laid on me:" and thence he spurred  
Elate at heart as youth, and stirred

With hope as blithe as fires a boy:  
And many a mile he rode, and found  
Far in a forest's glimmering bound  
The man he sought afar around  
And seeing took fire for joy.

And with him went a maiden, fair  
As flowers aflush with April air.  
And Balen bade him turn him there  
To tell the king what woes they were

That bowed him down so sore: and he  
Made woful answer: "This should do  
Great scathe to me, with nought for you  
Of help that hope might hearken to  
For boot that may not be."

And Balen answered: "I were loth  
To fight as one perforce made wroth  
With one that owes by knighthood's oath  
One love, one service, and one troth

With me to him whose gracious hand  
Holds fast the helm of knighthood here  
Whereby man's hope and heart may steer:  
I pray you let not sorrow or fear  
Against his bidding stand."

The strange knight gazed on him, and spake:

"Will you, for Arthur's royal sake,  
Be warrant for me that I take  
No scathe from strife that man may make?

Then will I go with you." And he  
Made joyous answer: "Yea, for I  
Will be your warrant or will die."  
And thence they rode with hearts as high  
As men's that search the sea.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And as by noon's large light the twain  
Before the tented hall drew rein,  
Suddenly fell the strange knight, slain  
By one that came and went again  
And none might see him; but his spear  
Clove through the body, swift as fire,  
The man whose doom, forefelt as dire,  
Had darkened all his life's desire,  
As one that death held dear.

And dying he turned his face and said,  
"Lo now thy warrant that my head  
Should fall not, following forth where led  
A knight whose pledge hath left me dead.  
This darkling manslayer hath to name  
Garlon: take thou my goodlier steed,  
Seeing thine is less of strength and speed,  
And ride, if thou be knight indeed,  
Even thither whence we came.

"And as the maiden's fair behest  
Shall bid you follow on my quest,  
Follow: and when God's will sees best,  
Revenge my death, and let me rest  
As one that lived and died a knight,  
Unstained of shame alive or dead."  
And Balen, wrung with sorrow, said,  
"That shall I do: my hand and head  
I pledge to do you right."

And thence with sorrowing heart and cheer  
He rode, in grief that cast out fear  
Lest death in darkness yet were near,  
And bore the truncheon of the spear  
Wherewith the woful knight lay slain  
To her with whom he rode, and she  
Still bare it with her, fain to see  
What righteous doom of God's might be  
The darkling manslayer's bane.

And down a dim deep woodland way  
They rode between the boughs asway  
With flickering winds whose flash and play  
Made sunlight sunnier where the day  
Laughed, leapt, and fluttered like a bird  
Caught in a light loose leafy net  
That earth for amorous heaven had set  
To hold and see the sundawn yet  
And hear what morning heard.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

There in the sweet soft shifting light  
Across their passage rode a knight  
Flushed hot from hunting as from fight,  
And seeing the sorrow-stricken sight  
    Made question of them why they rode  
As mourners sick at heart and sad,  
When all alive about them bade  
Sweet earth for heaven's sweet sake be glad  
    As heaven for earth's love glowed.

"Me lists not tell you," Balen said.  
The strange knight's face grew keen and red;  
"Now, might my hand but keep my head,  
Even here should one of twain lie dead  
    Were he no better armed than I."  
And Balen spake with smiling speed,  
Where scorn and courtesy kept heed  
Of either: "That should little need:  
    Not here shall either die."

And all the cause he told him through  
As one that feared not though he knew  
All: and the strange knight spake anew,  
Saying: "I will part no more from you  
    While life shall last me." So they went  
Where he might arm himself to ride,  
And rode across wild ways and wide  
To where against a churchyard side  
    A hermit's harbour leant.

And there against them riding came  
Fleet as the lightning's laugh and flame  
The invisible evil, even the same  
They sought and might not curse by name  
    As hell's foul child on earth set free,  
And smote the strange knight through, and fled,  
And left the mourners by the dead.  
"Alas, again," Sir Balen said,  
    "This wrong he hath done to me."

And there they laid their dead to sleep  
Royally, lying where wild winds keep  
Keen watch and wail more soft and deep  
Than where men's choirs bid music weep  
    And song like incense heave and swell.  
And forth again they rode, and found  
Before them, dire in sight and sound,  
A castle girt about and bound  
    With sorrow like a spell.

Above it seemed the sun at noon

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Sad as a wintry withering moon  
That shudders while the waste wind's tune  
Craves ever none may guess what boon,  
    But all may know the boon for dire.  
And evening on its darkness fell  
More dark than very death's farewell,  
And night about it hung like hell,  
    Whose fume the dawn made fire.

And Balen lighted down and passed  
Within the gateway, whence no blast  
Rang as the sheer portcullis, cast  
Suddenly down, fell, and made fast  
    The gate behind him, whence he spied  
A sudden rage of men without  
And ravin of a murderous rout  
That girt the maiden hard about  
    With death on either side.

And seeing that shame and peril, fear  
Bade wrath and grief awake and hear  
What shame should say in fame's wide ear  
If she, by sorrow sealed more dear  
    Than joy might make her, so should die:  
And up the tower's curled stair he sprang  
As one that flies death's deadliest fang,  
And leapt right out amid their gang  
    As fire from heaven on high.

And they thereunder seeing the knight  
Unhurt among their press alight  
And bare his sword for chance of fight  
Stood from him, loth to strive or smite,  
    And bade him hear their woful word,  
That not the maiden's death they sought;  
But there through years too dire for thought  
Had lain their lady stricken, and nought  
    Might heal her: and he heard.

For there a maiden clean and whole  
In virgin body and virgin soul,  
Whose name was writ on royal roll,  
That would but stain a silver bowl  
    With offering of her stainless blood,  
Therewith might heal her: so they stayed  
For hope's sad sake each blameless maid  
There journeying in that dolorous shade  
    Whose bloom was bright in bud.

No hurt nor harm to her it were  
If she should yield a sister there

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Some tribute of her blood, and fare  
Forth with this joy at heart to bear,  
That all unhurt and unafraid  
This grace she had here by God's grace wrought.  
And kindling all with kindly thought  
And love that saw save love's self nought,  
Shone, smiled, and spake the maid.

"Good knight of mine, good will have I  
To help this healing though I die."  
"Nay," Balen said, "but love may try  
What help in living love may lie.  
—I will not lose the life of her  
While my life lasteth." So she gave  
The tribute love was fain to crave,  
But might not heal though fain to save,  
Were God's grace helpfuller.

Another maid in later Mays  
Won with her life that woful praise,  
And died. But they, when surging day's  
Deep tide fulfilled the dawn's wide ways,  
Rode forth, and found by day or night  
No chance to cross their wayfaring  
Till when they saw the fourth day spring  
A knight's hall gave them harbouring  
Rich as a king's house might.

And while they sat at meat and spake  
Words bright and kind as grace might make  
Sweet for true knighthood's kindly sake,  
They heard a cry beside them break  
The still-souled joy of blameless rest.  
"What noise is this?" quoth Balen. "Nay,"  
His knightly host made answer, "may  
Our grief not grieve you though I say  
How here I dwell unblest.

"Not many a day has lived and died  
Since at a tournay late I tried  
My strength to smite and turn and ride  
Against a knight of kinglike pride,  
King Pellam's brother: twice I smote  
The splendour of his strength to dust:  
And he, fulfilled of hate's fierce lust,  
Swore vengeance, pledged for hell to trust,  
And keen as hell's wide throat.

"Invisible as the spirit of night  
That heaven and earth in depth and height  
May see not by the mild moon's light

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Nor even when stars would grant them sight,  
He walks and slays as plague's blind breath  
Slays: and my son, whose anguish here  
Makes moan perforce that mars our cheer,  
He wounded, even ere love might fear  
That hate were strong as death.

"Nor may my son be whole till he  
Whose stroke through him hath stricken me  
Shall give again his blood to be  
Our healing: yet may no man see  
This felon, clothed with darkness round  
And keen as lightning's life." Thereon  
Spake Balen, and his presence shone  
Even as the sun's when stars are gone  
That hear dawn's trumpet sound.

"That knight I know: two knights of mine,  
Two comrades, sealed by faith's bright sign,  
Whose eyes as ours that live should shine,  
And drink the golden sunlight's wine  
With joy's thanksgiving that they live,  
He hath slain in even the same blind wise:  
Were all wide wealth beneath the skies  
Mine, might I meet him, eyes on eyes,  
All would I laugh to give."

His host made answer, and his gaze  
Grew bright with trust as dawn's moist maze  
With fire: "Within these twenty days,  
King Pellam, lord of Lystenayse,  
Holds feast through all this country cried,  
And there before the knightly king  
May no knight come except he bring  
For witness of his wayfaring  
His paramour or bride.

"And there that day, so soon to shine,  
This knight, your felon foe and mine,  
Shall show, full-flushed with bloodred wine,  
The fierce false face whereon we pine  
To wreak the wrong he hath wrought us, bare  
As shame should see and brand it." "Then,"  
Said Balen, "shall he give again  
His blood to heal your son, and men  
Shall see death blind him there."

"Forth will we fare to-morrow," said  
His host: and forth, as sunrise led,  
They rode; and fifteen days were fled  
Ere toward their goal their steeds had sped.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And there alighting might they find  
For Balen's host no place to rest,  
Who came without a gentler guest  
Beside him: and that household's hest  
Bade leave his sword behind.

"Nay," Balen said, "that do I not:  
My country's custom stands, God wot,  
That none whose lot is knighthood's lot,  
To ride where chance as fire is hot  
With hope or promise given of fight,  
Shall fail to keep, for knighthood's part,  
His weapon with him as his heart;  
And as I came will I depart,  
Or hold herein my right."

Then gat he leave to wear his sword  
Beside the strange king's festal board  
Where feasted many a knight and lord  
In seemliness of fair accord:  
And Balen asked of one beside,  
"Is there not in this court, if fame  
Keep faith, a knight that hath to name  
Garlon?" and saying that word of shame,  
He scanned that place of pride.

"Yonder he goeth against the light,  
He with the face as swart as night,"  
Quoth the other: "but he rides to fight  
Hid round by charms from all men's sight,  
And many a noble knight he hath slain,  
Being wrapt in darkness deep as hell  
And silence dark as shame." "Ah, well,"  
Said Balen, "is that he? the spell  
May be the sorcerer's bane."

Then Balen gazed upon him long,  
And thought, "If here I wreak my wrong,  
Alive I may not scape, so strong  
The felon's friends about him throng;  
And if I leave him here alive,  
This chance perchance may life not give  
Again: much evil, if he live,  
He needs must do, should fear forgive  
When wrongs bid strike and strive."

And Garlon, seeing how Balen's eye  
Dwelt on him as his heart waxed high  
With joy in wrath to see him nigh,  
Rose wolf-like with a wolfish cry  
And crossed and smote him on the face,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Saying, "Knight, what wouldst thou with me? Eat,  
For shame, and gaze not: eat thy meat:  
Do that thou art come for: stands thy seat  
Next ours of royal race?"

"Well hast thou said: thy rede rings true;  
That which I came for will I do,"  
Quoth Balen: forth his fleet sword flew,  
And clove the head of Garlon through  
Clean to the shoulders. Then he cried  
Loud to his lady, "Give me here  
The truncheon of the shameful spear  
Wherewith he slew your knight, when fear  
Bade hate in darkness ride."

And gladly, bright with grief made glad,  
She gave the truncheon as he bade,  
For still she bare it with her, sad  
And strong in hopeless hope she had,  
Through all dark days of thwarting fear,  
To see if doom should fall aright  
And as God's fire-fraught thunder smite  
That head, clothed round with hell-faced night,  
Bare now before her here.

And Balen smote therewith the dead  
Dark felon's body through, and said  
Aloud, "With even this truncheon, red  
With baser blood than brave men bled  
Whom in thy shameful hand it slew,  
Thou hast slain a nobler knight, and now  
It clings and cleaves thy body: thou  
Shalt cleave again no brave man's brow,  
Though hell would aid anew."

And toward his host he turned and spake;  
"Now for your son's long-suffering sake  
Blood ye may fetch enough, and take  
Wherewith to heal his hurt, and make  
Death warm as life." Then rose a cry  
Loud as the wind's when stormy spring  
Makes all the woodland rage and ring:  
"Thou hast slain my brother," said the king,  
"And here with him shalt die."

"Ay?" Balen laughed him answer. "Well,  
Do it then thyself." And the answer fell  
Fierce as a blast of hate from hell,  
"No man of mine that with me dwell  
Shall strike at thee but I their lord  
For love of this my brother slain."

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And Pellam caught and grasped amain  
A grim great weapon, fierce and fain  
To feed his hungering sword.

And eagerly he smote, and sped  
Not well: for Balen's blade, yet red  
With lifeblood of the murderous dead,  
Between the swordstroke and his head  
Shone, and the strength of the eager stroke  
Shore it in sunder: then the knight,  
Naked and weaponless for fight,  
Ran seeking him a sword to smite  
As hope within him woke.

And so their flight for deathward fast  
From chamber forth to chamber passed  
Where lay no weapon, till the last  
Whose doors made way for Balen cast  
Upon him as a sudden spell  
Wonder that even as lightning leapt  
Across his heart and eyes, and swept  
As storm across his soul that kept  
Wild watch, and watched not well.

For there the deed he did, being near  
Death's danger, breathless as the deer  
Driven hard to bay, but void of fear,  
Brought sorrow down for many a year  
On many a man in many a land.  
All glorious shone that chamber, bright  
As burns at sunrise heaven's own height:  
With cloth of gold the bed was dight,  
That flamed on either hand.

And one he saw within it lie:  
A table of all clear gold thereby  
Stood stately, fair as morning's eye,  
With four strong silver pillars, high  
And firm as faith and hope may be:  
And on it shone the gift he sought,  
A spear most marvellously wrought,  
That when his eye and handgrip caught  
Small fear at heart had he.

Right on King Pellam then, as fire  
Turns when the thwarting winds wax higher,  
He turned, and smote him down. So dire  
The stroke was, when his heart's desire  
Struck, and had all its fill of hate,  
That as the king fell swooning down  
Fell the walls, rent from base to crown,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Prone as prone seas that break and drown  
Ships fraught with doom for freight.

And there for three days' silent space  
Balén and Pellam face to face  
Lay dead or deathlike, and the place  
Was death's blind kingdom, till the grace  
That God had given the sacred seer  
For counsel or for comfort led  
His Merlin thither, and he said,  
Standing between the quick and dead,  
"Rise up, and rest not here."

And Balén rose and set his eyes  
Against the seer's as one that tries  
His heart against the sea's and sky's  
And fears not if he lives or dies,  
Saying, "I would have my damosel,  
Ere I fare forth, to fare with me."  
And sadly Merlin answered, "See  
Where now she lies; death knows if she  
Shall now fare ill or well.

"And in this world we meet no more,  
Balén." And Balén, sorrowing sore,  
Though fearless yet the heart he bore  
Beat toward the life that lay before,  
Rode forth through many a wild waste land  
Where men cried out against him, mad  
With grievous faith in fear that bade  
Their wrath make moan for doubt they had  
Lest hell had armed his hand.

For in that chamber's wondrous shrine  
Was part of Christ's own blood, the wine  
Shed of the true triumphal vine  
Whose growth bids earth's deep darkness shine  
As heaven's deep light through the air and sea;  
That mystery toward our northern shore  
Arimathean Joseph bore  
For healing of our sins of yore,  
That grace even there might be.

And with that spear there shrined apart  
Was Christ's side smitten to the heart.  
And fiercer than the lightning's dart  
The stroke was, and the deathlike smart  
Wherewith, nigh drained of blood and breath,  
The king lay stricken as one long dead:  
And Joseph's was the blood there shed,  
For near akin was he that bled,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Near even as life to death.

And therefore fell on all that land  
Sorrow: for still on either hand,  
As Balen rode alone and scanned  
Bright fields and cities built to stand  
Till time should break them, dead men lay;  
And loud and long from all their folk  
Living, one cry that cursed him broke;  
Three countries had his dolorous stroke  
Slain, or should surely slay.

VII

In winter, when the year burns low  
As fire wherein no firebrands glow,  
And winds dishevel as they blow  
The lovely stormy wings of snow,  
    The hearts of northern men burn bright  
With joy that mocks the joy of spring  
To hear all heaven's keen clarions ring  
Music that bids the spirit sing  
    And day give thanks for night.

Aloud and dark as hell or hate  
Round Balen's head the wind of fate  
Blew storm and cloud from death's wide gate:  
But joy as grief in him was great  
    To face God's doom and live or die,  
Sorrowing for ill wrought unaware,  
Rejoicing in desire to dare  
All ill that innocence might bear  
    With changeless heart and eye.

Yet passing fain he was when past  
Those lands and woes at length and last.  
Eight times, as thence he fared forth fast,  
Dawn rose and even was overcast  
    With starry darkness dear as day,  
Before his venturous quest might meet  
Adventure, seeing within a sweet  
Green low-lying forest, hushed in heat,  
    A tower that barred his way.

Strong summer, dumb with rapture, bound  
With golden calm the woodlands round  
Wherethrough the knight forth faring found  
A knight that on the greenwood ground  
    Sat mourning: fair he was to see,  
And moulded as for love or fight  
A maiden's dreams might frame her knight;  
But sad in joy's far-flowering sight  
    As grief's blind thrall might be.

"God save you," Balen softly said,  
"What grief bows down your heart and head  
Thus, as one sorrowing for his dead?  
Tell me, if haply I may stead  
    In aught your sorrow, that I may."  
"Sir knight," that other said, "thy word  
Makes my grief heavier that I heard."

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And pity and wonder inly stirred  
Drew Balen thence away.

And so withdrawn with silent speed  
He saw the sad knight's stately steed,  
A war-horse meet for warrior's need,  
That none who passed might choose but heed,  
So strong he stood, so great, so fair,  
With eyes afire for flight or fight,  
A joy to look on, mild in might,  
And swift and keen and kind as light,  
And all as clear of care.

And Balen, gazing on him, heard  
Again his master's woful word  
Sound sorrow through the calm unstirred  
By fluttering wind or flickering bird,  
Thus: "Ah, fair lady and faithless, why  
Break thy pledged faith to meet me? soon  
An hour beyond thy trothplight noon  
Shall strike my death-bell, and thy boon  
Is this, that here I die.

"My curse for all thy gifts may be  
Heavier than death or night on thee;  
For now this sword thou gavest me  
Shall set me from thy bondage free."  
And there the man had died self-slain,  
But Balen leapt on him and caught  
The blind fierce hand that fain had wrought  
Self-murder, stung with fire of thought,  
As rage makes anguish fain.

Then, mad for thwarted grief, "Let go  
My hand," the fool of wrath and woe  
Cried, "or I slay thee." Scarce the glow  
In Balen's cheek and eye might show,  
As dawn shows day while seas lie chill,  
He heard, though pity took not heed,  
But smiled and spake, "That shall not need:  
What man may do to bid you speed  
I, so God speed me, will."

And the other craved his name, beguiled  
By hope that made his madness mild.  
Again Sir Balen spake and smiled:  
"My name is Balen, called the Wild  
By knights whom kings and courts make tame,  
Because I ride alone afar  
And follow but my soul for star."  
"Ah, sir, I know the knight you are

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And all your fiery fame.

"The knight that bears two swords I know,  
Most praised of all men, friend and foe,  
For prowess of your hands, that show  
Dark war the way where balefires glow  
And kindle glory like the dawn's."  
So spake the sorrowing knight, and stood  
As one whose heart fresh hope made good:  
And forth they rode by wold and wood  
And down the glimmering lawns.

And Balen craved his name who rode  
Beside him, where the wild wood glowed  
With joy to feel how noontide flowed  
Through glade and glen and rough green road  
Till earth grew joyful as the sea.  
"My name is Garnysshe of the Mount,  
A poor man's son of none account,"  
He said, "where springs of loftier fount  
Laugh loud with pride to be.

"But strength in weakness lives and stands  
As rocks that rise through shifting sands;  
And for the prowess of my hands  
One made me knight and gave me lands,  
Duke Hermel, lord from far to near,  
Our prince; and she that loved me—she  
I love, and deemed she loved but me,  
His daughter, pledged her faith to be  
Ere now beside me here."

And Balen, brief of speech as light  
Whose word, beheld of depth and height,  
Strikes silence through the stars of night,  
Spake, and his face as dawn's grew bright,  
For hope to help a happier man,  
"How far then lies she hence?" "By this,"  
Her lover sighed and said, "I wis,  
Not six fleet miles the passage is,  
And straight as thought could span."

So rode they swift and sure, and found  
A castle walled and dyked around:  
And Balen, as a warrior bound  
On search where hope might fear to sound  
The darkness of the deeps of doubt,  
Made entrance through the guardless gate  
As life, while hope in life grows great,  
Makes way between the doors of fate  
That death may pass thereout.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Through many a glorious chamber, wrought  
For all delight that love's own thought  
Might dream or dwell in, Balen sought  
And found of all he looked for nought,

For like a shining shell her bed  
Shone void and vacant of her: thence  
Through devious wonders bright and dense  
He passed and saw with shame—struck sense  
Where shame and faith lay dead.

Down in a sweet small garden, fair  
With flowerful joy in the ardent air,  
He saw, and raged with loathing, where  
She lay with love—dishevelled hair

Beneath a broad bright laurel tree  
And clasped in amorous arms a knight,  
The unloveliest that his scornful sight  
Had dwelt on yet; a shame the bright  
Broad noon might shrink to see.

And thence in wrathful hope he turned,  
Hot as the heart within him burned,  
To meet the knight whose love, so spurned  
And spat on and made nought of, yearned  
And dreamed and hoped and lived in vain,  
And said, "I have found her sleeping fast,"  
And led him where the shadows cast  
From leaves wherethrough light winds ran past  
Screened her from sun and rain.

But Garnysshe, seeing, reeled as he stood  
Like a tree, kingliest of the wood,  
Half hewn through: and the burning blood  
Through lips and nostrils burst aflood:

And gathering back his rage and might  
As broken breakers rally and roar  
The loud wind down that drives off shore,  
He smote their heads off: there no more  
Their life might shame the light.

Then turned he back toward Balen, mad  
With grief, and said, "The grief I had  
Was nought: ere this my life was glad:  
Thou hast done this deed: I was but sad

And fearful how my hope might fare:  
I had lived my sorrow down, hadst thou  
Not shown me what I saw but now."  
The sorrow and scorn on Balen's brow  
Bade silence curb him there.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And Balen answered: "What I did  
I did to hearten thee and bid  
Thy courage know that shame should rid  
A man's high heart of love that hid  
Blind shame within its core: God knows,  
I did, to set a bondman free,  
But as I would thou hadst done by me,  
That seeing what love must die to see  
Love's end might well be woe's."

"Alas," the woful weakling said,  
"I have slain what most I loved: I have shed  
The blood most near my heart: the head  
Lies cold as earth, defiled and dead,  
That all my life was lighted by,  
That all my soul bowed down before,  
And now may bear with life no more:  
For now my sorrow that I bore  
Is twofold, and I die."

Then with his red wet sword he rove  
His breast in sunder, where it clove  
Life, and no pulse against it strove,  
So sure and strong the deep stroke drove  
Deathward: and Balen, seeing him dead,  
Rode thence, lest folk would say he had slain  
Those three: and ere three days again  
Had seen the sun's might wax and wane,  
Far forth he had spurred and sped.

And riding past a cross whereon  
Broad golden letters written shone,  
Saying, "No knight born may ride alone  
Forth toward this castle," and all the stone  
Glowed in the sun's glare even as though  
Blood stained it from the crucified  
Dead burden of one that there had died,  
An old hoar man he saw beside  
Whose face was wan as woe.

"Balen the Wild," he said, "this way  
Thy way lies not: thou hast passed to-day  
Thy bands: but turn again, and stay  
Thy passage, while thy soul hath sway  
Within thee, and through God's good power  
It will avail thee:" and anon  
His likeness as a cloud was gone,  
And Balen's heart within him shone  
Clear as the cloudless hour.

Nor fate nor fear might overcast

## THE TALE OF BALEN

The soul now near its peace at last.  
Suddenly, thence as forth he past,  
A mighty and a deadly blast  
    Blown of a hunting-horn he heard,  
As when the chase hath nobly sped.  
"That blast is blown for me," he said,  
"The prize am I who am yet not dead,"  
    And smiled upon the word.

As toward a royal hart's death rang  
That note, whence all the loud wood sang  
With winged and living sound that sprang  
Like fire, and keen as fire's own fang  
    Pierced the sweet silence that it slew.  
But nought like death or strife was here:  
Fair semblance and most goodly cheer  
They made him, they whose troop drew near  
    As death among them drew.

A hundred ladies well arrayed  
And many a knight well weaponed made  
That kindly show of cheer: the glade  
Shone round them till its very shade  
    Lightened and laughed from grove to lawn  
To hear and see them: so they brought  
Within a castle fair as thought  
Could dream that wizard hands had wrought  
    The guest among them drawn.

All manner of glorious joy was there:  
Harping and dancing, loud and fair,  
And minstrelsy that made of air  
Fire, so like fire its raptures were.  
    Then the chief lady spake on high:  
"Knight with the two swords, one of two  
Must help you here or fall from you:  
For needs you now must have ado  
    And joust with one hereby.

"A good knight guards an island here  
Against all swords that chance brings near,  
And there with stroke of sword and spear  
Must all for whom these halls make cheer  
    Fight, and redeem or yield up life."  
"An evil custom," Balen said,  
"Is this, that none whom chance hath led  
Hither, if knighthood crown his head,  
    May pass unstirred to strife."

"You shall not have ado to fight  
Here save against one only knight,"

## THE TALE OF BALEN

She said, and all her face grew bright  
As hell-fire, lit with hungry light  
That wicked laughter touched with flame.  
"Well, since I shall thereto," said he,  
"I am ready at heart as death for me:  
Fain would I be where death should be  
And life should lose its name.

"But travelling men whose goal afar  
Shines as a cloud-constraining star  
Are often weary, and wearier are  
Their steeds that feel each fret and jar  
Wherewith the wild ways wound them: yet,  
Albeit my horse be weary, still  
My heart is nowise weary; will  
Sustains it even till death fulfil  
My trust upon him set."

"Sir," said a knight thereby that stood,  
"Meseems your shield is now not good  
But worn with warrior work, nor could  
Sustain in strife the strokes it would:  
A larger will I lend you." "Ay,  
Thereof I thank you," Balen said,  
Being single of heart as one that read  
No face aright whence faith had fled,  
Nor dreamed that faith could fly.

And so he took that shield unknown  
And left for treason's touch his own,  
And toward that island rode alone,  
Nor heard the blast against him blown  
Sound in the wind's and water's sound,  
But hearkening toward the stream's edge heard  
Nought save the soft stream's rippling word,  
Glad with the gladness of a bird,  
That sang to the air around.

And there against the water-side  
He saw, fast moored to rock and ride,  
A fair great boat anear abide  
Like one that waits the turning tide,  
Wherein embarked his horse and he  
Passed over toward no kindly strand:  
And where they stood again on land  
There stood a maiden hard at hand  
Who seeing them wept to see.

And "O knight Balen," was her cry,  
"Why have ye left your own shield? why  
Come hither out of time to die?"

## THE TALE OF BALEN

For had ye kept your shield, thereby  
Ye had yet been known, and died not here.  
Great pity it is of you this day  
As ever was of knight, or may  
Be ever, seeing in war's bright way  
Praise knows not Balen's peer."

And Balen said, "Thou hast heard my name  
Right: it repenteth me, though shame  
May tax me not with base men's blame,  
That ever, hap what will, I came  
Within this country; yet, being come,  
For shame I may not turn again  
Now, that myself and nobler men  
May scorn me: now is more than then,  
And faith bids fear be dumb.

"Be it life or death, my chance I take,  
Be it life's to build or death's to break:  
And fall what may, me lists not make  
Moan for sad life's or death's sad sake."  
Then looked he on his armour, glad  
And high of heart, and found it strong:  
And all his soul became a song  
And soared in prayer that soared not long,  
For all the hope it had.

Then saw he whence against him came  
A steed whose trappings shone like flame,  
And he that rode him showed the same  
Fierce colour, bright as fire or fame,  
But dark the visors were as night  
That hid from Balen Balan's face,  
And his from Balan: God's own grace  
Forsook them for a shadowy space  
Where darkness cast out light.

The two swords girt that Balen bare  
Gave Balan for a breath's while there  
Pause, wondering if indeed it were  
Balen his brother, bound to dare  
The chance of that unhappy quest:  
But seeing not as he thought to see  
His shield, he deemed it was not he,  
And so, as fate bade sorrow be,  
They laid their spears in rest.

So mighty was the course they ran  
With spear to spear so great of span,  
Each fell back stricken, man by man,  
Horse by horse, borne down: so the ban

## THE TALE OF BALEN

That wrought by doom against them wrought:  
But Balen by his falling steed  
Was bruised the sorer, being indeed  
Way-weary, like a rain-bruised reed,  
With travel ere he fought.

And Balen rose again from swoon  
First, and went toward him: all too soon  
He too then rose, and the evil boon  
Of strength came back, and the evil tune  
Of battle unnatural made again  
Mad music as for death's wide ear  
Listening and hungering toward the near  
Last sigh that life or death might hear  
At last from dying men.

Balen smote Balen first, and clove  
His lifted shield that rose and strove  
In vain against the stroke that drove  
Down: as the web that morning wove  
Of glimmering pearl from spray to spray  
Dies when the strong sun strikes it, so  
Shrank the steel, tempered thrice to show  
Strength, as the mad might of the blow  
Shore Balen's helm away.

Then turning as a turning wave  
Against the land-wind, blind and brave  
In hope that dreams despair may save,  
With even the unhappy sword that gave  
The gifts of fame and fate in one  
He smote his brother, and there had nigh  
Felled him: and while they breathed, his eye  
Glanced up, and saw beneath the sky  
Sights fairer than the sun.

The towers of all the castle there  
Stood full of ladies, blithe and fair  
As the earth beneath and the amorous air  
About them and above them were:  
So toward the blind and fateful fight  
Again those brethren went, and sore  
Were all the strokes they smote and bore,  
And breathed again, and fell once more  
To battle in their sight.

With blood that either spilt and bled  
Was all the ground they fought on red,  
And each knight's hauberk hewn and shred  
Left each unmailed and naked, shed  
From off them even as mantles cast:

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And oft they breathed, and drew but breath  
Brief as the word strong sorrow saith,  
And poured and drank the draught of death,  
Till fate was full at last.

And Balan, younger born than he  
Whom darkness bade him slay, and be  
Slain, as in mist where none may see  
If aught abide or fall or flee,  
Drew back a little and laid him down,  
Dying; but Balen stood, and said,  
As one between the quick and dead  
Might stand and speak, "What good knight's head  
Hath won this mortal crown?"

"What knight art thou? for never I  
Who now beside thee dead shall die  
Found yet the knight afar or nigh  
That matched me." Then his brother's eye  
Flashed pride and love; he spake and smiled  
And felt in death life's quickening flame,  
And answered: "Balan is my name,  
The good knight Balen's brother; fame  
Calls and miscalls him wild."

The cry from Balen's lips that sprang  
Sprang sharper than his sword's stroke rang.  
More keen than death's or memory's fang,  
Through sense and soul the shuddering pang  
Shivered: and scarce he had cried, "Alas  
That ever I should see this day,"  
When sorrow swooned from him away  
As blindly back he fell, and lay  
Where sleep lets anguish pass.

But Balan rose on hands and knees  
And crawled by childlike dim degrees  
Up toward his brother, as a breeze  
Creeps wingless over sluggard seas  
When all the wind's heart fails it: so  
Beneath their mother's eyes had he,  
A babe that laughed with joy to be,  
Made toward him standing by her knee  
For love's sake long ago.

Then, gathering strength up for a space,  
From off his brother's dying face  
With dying hands that wrought apace  
While death and life would grant them grace  
He loosed his helm and knew not him,  
So scored with blood it was, and hewn

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Athwart with darkening wounds: but soon  
Life strove and shuddered through the swoon  
Wherein its light lay dim.

And sorrow set these chained words free:  
"O Balan, O my brother! me  
Thou hast slain, and I, my brother, thee:  
And now far hence, on shore and sea,  
Shall all the wide world speak of us."  
"Alas," said Balan, "that I might  
Not know you, seeing two swords were dight  
About you; now the unanswering sight  
Hath here found answer thus.

"Because you bore another shield  
Than yours, that even ere youth could wield  
Like arms with manhood's tried and steeled  
Shone as my star of battle-field,  
I deemed it surely might not be  
My brother." Then his brother spake  
Fiercely: "Would God, for thy sole sake,  
I had my life again, to take  
Revenge for only thee!

"For all this deadly work was wrought  
Of one false knight's false word and thought,  
Whose mortal craft and counsel caught  
And snared my faith who doubted nought,  
And made me put my shield away.  
Ah, might I live, I would destroy  
That castle for its customs: joy  
There makes of grief a deadly toy,  
And death makes night of day."

"Well done were that, if aught were done  
Well ever here beneath the sun,"  
Said Balan: "better work were none:  
For hither since I came and won  
A woful honour born of death,  
When here my hap it was to slay  
A knight who kept this island way,  
I might not pass by night or day  
Hence, as this token saith.

"No more shouldst thou, for all the might  
Of heart and hand that seals thee knight  
Most noble of all that see the light,  
Brother, hadst thou but slain in fight  
Me, and arisen unscathed and whole,  
As would to God thou hadst risen! though here  
Light is as darkness, hope as fear,

## THE TALE OF BALEN

And love as hate: and none draws near  
Save toward a mortal goal."

Then, fair as any poison-flower  
Whose blossom blights the withering bower  
Whereon its blasting breath has power,  
Forth fared the lady of the tower  
With many a lady and many a knight,  
And came across the water-way  
Even where on death's dim border lay  
Those brethren sent of her to slay  
And die in kindless fight.

And all those hard light hearts were swayed  
With pity passing like a shade  
That stays not, and may be not stayed,  
To hear the mutual moan they made,  
Each to behold his brother die,  
Saying, "Both we came out of one tomb,  
One star-crossed mother's woful womb,  
And so within one grave-pit's gloom  
Untimely shall we lie."

And Balan prayed, as God should bless  
That lady for her gentleness,  
That where the battle's mortal stress  
Had made for them perforce to press  
The bed whence never man may rise  
They twain, free now from hopes and fears,  
Might sleep; and she, as one that hears,  
Bowed her bright head: and very tears  
Fell from her cold fierce eyes.

Then Balen prayed her send a priest  
To housel them, that ere they ceased  
The hanel of the heavenly feast  
That fills with light from the answering east  
The sunset of the life of man  
Might bless them, and their lips be kissed  
With death's requickening eucharist,  
And death's and life's dim sunlit mist  
Pass as a stream that ran.

And so their dying rites were done:  
And Balen, seeing the death-struck sun  
Sink, spake as he whose goal is won:  
"Now, when our trophied tomb is one,  
And over us our tale is writ,  
How two that loved each other, two  
Born and begotten brethren, slew  
Each other, none that reads anew

## THE TALE OF BALEN

Shall choose but weep for it.

"And no good knight and no good man  
Whose eye shall ever come to scan  
The record of the imperious ban  
That made our life so sad a span  
Shall read or hear, who shall not pray  
For us for ever." Then anon  
Died Balan; but the sun was gone,  
And deep the stars of midnight shone,  
Ere Balen passed away.

And there low lying, as hour on hour  
Fled, all his life in all its flower  
Came back as in a sunlit shower  
Of dreams, when sweet-souled sleep has power  
On life less sweet and glad to be.  
He drank the draught of life's first wine  
Again: he saw the moorland shine,  
The rioting rapids of the Tyne,  
The woods, the cliffs, the sea.

The joy that lives at heart and home,  
The joy to rest, the joy to roam,  
The joy of crags and scaurs he clomb,  
The rapture of the encountering foam  
Embraced and breasted of the boy,  
The first good steed his knees bestrode,  
The first wild sound of songs that flowed  
Through ears that thrilled and heart that glowed,  
Fulfilled his death with joy.

So, dying not as a coward that dies  
And dares not look in death's dim eyes  
Straight as the stars on seas and skies  
Whence moon and sun recoil and rise,  
He looked on life and death, and slept.  
And there with morning Merlin came,  
And on the tomb that told their fame  
He wrote by Balan's Balen's name,  
And gazed thereon, and wept.

For all his heart within him yearned  
With pity like as fire that burned.  
The fate his fateful eye discerned  
Far off now dimmed it, ere he turned  
His face toward Camelot, to tell  
Arthur of all the storms that woke  
Round Balen, and the dolorous stroke,  
And how that last blind battle broke  
The consummated spell.

## THE TALE OF BALEN

"Alas," King Arthur said, "this day  
I have heard the worst that woe might say:  
For in this world that wanes away  
I know not two such knight as they."

This is the tale that memory writes  
Of men whose names like stars shall stand,  
Balén and Balán, sure of hand  
Two brethren of Northumberland,  
In life and death good knights.