

**Sceptre and Crown
Must Tumble Down**

The Passing of King Arthur

by

Alfred Lord Tennyson

THE PASSING OF ARTHUR

That story which the bold Sir Bedivere,
First made and latest left of all the knights,
Told when the man was no more than a voice
in the white winter of his age, to those
With whom he dwelt, new faces, other minds.

For on their march to westward, Bedivere,
Who slowly paced among the slumbering host,
Heard in his tent the moanings of the King:

I found Him in the shining of the stars,
I mark'd Him in the flowering of His fields,
But in His ways with men I find Him not,
I waged His wars, and now I pass and die

O me! for why is all around us here
As if some lesser god had made the world,
But had not force to shape it as he would,

Till the High God behold it from beyond,
And enter it, and make it beautiful?
Or else as if the world were wholly fair,

But that these eyes of men are dense and dim,
And have not power to see it as it is:
Perchance, because we see not to the close;

For I, being simple, thought to work His will,
And have but stricken with the sword in vain;
And all whereon I lean'd in wife and friend
Is traitor to my peace, and all my realm
Reels back into the beast, and is no more.
My God, thou hast forgotten me in my death:
Nay—God my Christ—I pass but shall not die.'

Then, ere that last weird battle in the west,
There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain kill'd
In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain blown
Along a wandering wind, and past his ear
Went shrilling, 'Hollow, hollow all delight!

Hail, King! to-morrow thou shalt pass away.
Farewell! there is an isle of rest for thee.
And I am blown along a wandering wind,
And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight.'

And fainter onward, like wild birds that change
Their season in the night and wail their way
From cloud to cloud, down the long wind the dream
Shrill'd; but in going mingled with dim cries

Far in the moonlight haze among the hills,
As of some lonely city sack'd by night,
When all is lost, and wife and child with wail
Pass to new lords; and Arthur woke and call'd,
'Who spake? A dream. O light upon the wind,
Thine, Gawain, was the voice—are these dim cries
Thine? or doth all that haunts the waste and wild
Mourn, knowing it will go along with me?'

This heard the bold Sir Bedivere and spake:
'O me, my King, let pass whatever will,
Elves, and the harmless glamour of the field;
But in their stead thy name and glory cling
To all high places like a golden cloud
For ever: but as yet thou shalt not pass.
Light was Gawain in life, and light in death
Is Gawain, for the ghost is as the man;

And care not thou for dreams from him, but rise—
I hear the steps of Modred in the west,
And with him many of thy people, and knights
Once thine, whom thou hast loved, but grosser grown
Than heathen, spitting at their wows and thee.
Right well in heart they know thee for the King.
Arise, go forth and conquer as of old.'

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:
'Far other is this battle in the west

Whereto we move, than when we strove in youth,
And brake the petty kings, and fought with Rome,
Or thrust the heathen from the Roman wall
And shook him thro' the north. Ill doom is mine
To war against my people and my knights.
The king who fights his people fights himself,
And they my knights, who loved me once, the stroke
That strikes them dead is as my death to me.
Yet let us hence, and find or feel a way
Thro' this blind haze, which ever since I saw
One lying in the dust at Almesbury,
Hath folded in the passes of the world.

Then rose the King and moved his host by night,
And ever push'd Sir Modred, league by league,
Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse—
A land of old upheaven from the abyss
By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
And ever fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
And the long mountains ended in a coast
Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
The phantom circle of a moaning sea.
There the pursuer could pursue no more,
And he that fled no further fly the King;
And there, that day when the great light of heaven
Burn'd at his lowest in the rolling year,
On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.

Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight
 Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.
 A deathwhite mist slept over sand and sea:
 Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
 Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
 With formless fear; and ev'n on Arthur fell
 Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.
 For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,
 And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;
 And some had visions out of golden youth,
 And some beheld the faces of old ghosts
 Look in upon the battle; and in the mist
 Was many a noble deed, many a base,
 And chance and craft and strength in single fights,
 And ever and anon with host to host
 Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,
 Shield-breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash
 Of battleaxes on shatter'd helms, and shrieks
 After the Christ, of those who falling down
 Look'd up for heaven, and only saw the mist;
 And shouts of heathen and the traitor knights
 Oaths, insult, filth, and monstrous blasphemies,
 Sweat, writhings, anguish, labouring of the lungs
 In that close mist, and cryings for the light,
 Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.
 Last, as by some one deathbed after wail

Of suffering, silence follows, or thro' death
 Or deathlike swoon, thus over all that shore,
 Save for some whisper of the seething seas,
 A dead hush fell; but when the dolorous day
 Grew drearier toward twilight falling came
 A bitter wind, clear from the North, and blew
 The mist aside, and wind the tide
 Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field
 Of battle: but no man was moving there;
 Nor any cry of Christian heard thereon,
 Nor yet of heathen; only the wan wave
 Brake in among dead faces, to and fro
 Swaying the helpless hands, and up and down
 Tumbling the hollow helmets of the fallen,
 And shiver'd brands that once had fought with Rome,
 And rolling far along the gloomy shores
 The voice of days of old and days to be.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere
 And whiter than the mist that all day long
 Had held the field of battle was the King:
 'Hearest thou this great voice that shakes the world,
 And wastes the narrow realm whereon we move,
 And beats upon the faces of the dead,
 My dead, as tho, they had not died for me?—
 O Bedivere, for on my heart hath fall'n
 Confusion, till I know not what I am,

Nor whence I am, nor whether I be King;
 Behold, I seem but King among the dead.

Then spake the bold Sir Bedivere:
 'My King,
 King everywhere! and so the dead have kings,
 There also will I worship thee as King.
 Yet still thy life is whole, and still I live
 Who love thee; but who hates thee, he that brought
 The heathen back among us, yonder stands,
 Modred, unharm'd, the traitor of thine house.'

Then spake the King: 'My house hath been my doom.
 But call not thou this traitor of my house
 Who hath but dwelt beneath one roof with me.
 My house are rather they who swear my vows,
 Yea, even while they brake them, own'd me King.
 And well for thee, saying in my dark hour,
 When all the purport of my throne hath fail'd.
 That quick or dead thou holdest me for King.
 King am I, whatsoever be their cry;
 And one last act of kingdom shalt thou see
 Yet, ere I pass.' And uttering this the King
 Made at the man: then Modred smote his liege

Hard on that helm which many a heathen sword
 Had beaten thin; while Arthur at one blow,
 Striking the last stroke with Excalibur,
 Slew him, and all but slain himself, he fell.

So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
 Among the mountains by the winter sea;
 Until King Arthur's Table, man by man,
 Had fall'n in Lyonnesse about their lord,
 King Arthur: Then, because his wound was deep.
 The bold Sir Bedivere uplifted him,
 And bore him to a chapel nigh the field,
 A broken chancel with a broken cross,
 That stood on a dark strait of barren land:
 On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
 Lay a great water, and the moon was full.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedivere:
 'The sequel of to-day unsolders all
 The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
 Whereof this world holds record. Such a sleep
 They sleep—the men I loved. I think that we
 Shall never more, at any future time,
 Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,
 Walking about the gardens and the halls
 Of Camelot, as in the days that were.
 I perish by this people which I made,—
 Tho' Merlin swear that I should come again
 To rule once more; but, let what will be, be,
 I am so deeply smitten thro' the helm
 That without help I cannot last till morn.
 Thou therefore take my brand Excalibur,
 Which was my pride: for thou rememberest how
 In those old days, one summer noon,
 an arm

Rose up from out the bosom of the
Lake.
Clothed in white samite, mystic, won-
derful.

Holding the sword—and how I row'd
across
And took it, and have worn it, like a
king;

And, wheresoever I am sung or told
In aftertime, this also shall be known:
But now delay not: take Excalibur
And fling him far into the middle
mere:

Watch what thou seest, and lightly
bring me word'.

To him replied the bold Sir Bedivere:
'It is not meet, Sir King, to leave thee
thus,

Aidless, alone, and smitten thro' the
helm—
A little thing may harm a wounded
man;

Yet I thy hest will perform at full,
Watch what I see, and lightly bring
thee word.'

So saying, from the ruin'd shrine he
stept,
And in the moon athwart the place of
tombs,

Where lay the mighty bones of ancient
men,
Old knights, and over them the sea-
wind sang

Shrill, chill, with flakes of foam. He,
stepping down
By zigzag paths and juts of pointed —
rock,

Came on the shining levels of the lake.

There drew he forth the brand Excali-
bur,
And o'er him, drawing it, the winter
moon,

Brightening the skirts of a long cloud,
ran forth

And sparkled keen with frost against
the hilt:

For all the halt twinkled with diamond
sparks,

Myriads of topaz-lights, and jacinth-
work

Of subtilst jewellery. He gazed so long
That both his eyes were dazzled as he
stood,

This way and that dividing the swift
mind,

In act to throw: but at the last it seem'd
Better to leave Excalibur conceal'd

There in the many-knotted water-
flags.

That whistled stiff and dry about the
marge.

So strode he back slow to the wound-
ed King.

Then spake King Arthur to Sir Bedi-
vere:

'Hast thou perform'd my mission
which I gave?

What is it thou hast seen? or what
hast heard?

And answer made the bold Sir Bedi-
vere:

'I heard the ripple washing in the
reefs,

And the wild water lapping on the
crag.

To whom replied King Arthur, faint
and pale:

'Thou hast betray'd thy nature and thy
name,

Not rendering true answer, as besem'd
Thy fealty, nor like a noble knight:

For surer sign had follow'd, either
hand,

Or voice, or else a motion of the mere.
This is a shameful thing for men to lie.

Yet now, I charge thee, quickly go
again,

As thou art lief and dear, and do the
thing

I bade thee, watch, and lightly bring
me word.'

Then went Sir Bedivere the second
time

Across the ridge, and paced beside the
mere,

Counting the dewy pebbles, fix'd in
thought;

But when he saw the wonder of the
hilt,

How curiously and strangely chased,
he smote

His palms together, and he cried aloud:

'And if indeed I cast the brand away,
Surely a precious thing, one worthy
note,

Should thus be lost for ever from the
earth,

Which might have pleased the eyes of
many men.

What good should follow this, if this
were done?

What harm, undone? Deep harm to
disobey,

Seeing obedience is the bond of rule.
Were it well to obey then, if a king

demand
An act unprofitable, against himself?

The King is sick, and knows not what
he does.

What record, or what relic of my lord
Should be to aftertime, but empty
breath

And rumours of a doubt? But were
this kept,

Stored in some treasure-house of
mighty kings,

Some one might show it at a joust of
arms

Saying "King Arthur's sword, Excali-
bur,

Wrought by the lonely maiden of
the Lake.

Nine years she wrought it, sitting in
the deeps

Upon the hidden bases of the hills."
So might some old man speak in the
aftertime

To all the people, winning reverence.
But now much honour and much
fame were lost.'

So spake he, clouded with his own
conceit,

And hid Excalibur the second time,
And so strode back slow to the
wounded King.

Then spoke King Arthur, breathing
heavily:

'What is it thou hast seen? or what
hast heard?'

And answer made the bold Sir Bedi-
vere:

'I heard the water lapping on the
crag,

And the long ripple washing in the
reefs.'

To whom replied King Arthur, much
in wrath:

'Ah, miserable and unkind, untrue,
Unknightly, traitor-hearted! Woe is
me!

Authority forgets a dying king,
Laid widow'd of the power in his
eye

That bow'd the will. I see thee what
thou art,

For thou, the latest-left of all my
knights,

In whom should meet the offices of
all,

Thou wouldst betray me for the
precious hilt;

Either from lust of gold, or like a girl
Valuing the giddy pleasure of the eyes.

Yet, for a man may fail in duty twice,
And the third time may prosper, get
thee hence:

But, if thou spare to fling Excalibur,
I will arise and slay thee with my
hands.'

Then quickly rose Sir Bedivere, and
ran,

And, leaping down the ridges lightly,
plunged

Among the bulrush beds, and clutch'd
the sword,

And strongly wheel'd and threw it.

The great brand
 Made lightnings in the splendour of
 the moon
 And flashing round and round, and
 whir'd in an arch,
 Shot like a streamer of the northern
 morn,
 Seen where the moving isles of winter
 shock
 By night, with noises of the Northern
 Sea.
 So flash'd and fell the brand Excalibur:
 But ere he dip't the surface, rose an
 arm
 Clothed in white samite, mystic, won-
 derful,
 And caught him by the hilt, and brandish'd him
 Three times, and drew him under in
 the mere.
 And lightly went the other to the
 King.

Then spoke King Arthur, drawing
 thicker breath:
 'Now see I by thine eyes that this is
 done.
 Speak out: what is it thou hast heard,
 or seen?

And answer made the bold Sir Bedivere:
 'Sir King, I closed mine eyelids, lest
 the gems
 Should blind my purpose, for I never
 saw,
 Nor shall see, here or elsewhere, till I
 die,
 Not tho' I live three lives of mortal
 men,
 So great a miracle as yonder hilt.
 Then with both hands I flung him,
 wheeling him;
 But when I look'd again, behold an
 arm,
 Clothed in white samite, mystic, won-
 derful,
 That caught him by the hilt, and
 brandish'd him

Three times, and drew him under in
 the mere.'

And answer made King Arthur, breath-
 ing hard:
 'My end draws nigh; 'tis time that I
 were gone.
 Make broad thy shoulders to receive
 my weight,
 And bear me to the margin; yet I fear
 My wound hath taken cold, and I
 shall die.'

So saying, from the pavement he
 half rose,
 Slowly, with pain, reclining on his
 arm,
 And looking wistfully with wide blue
 eyes

As in a picture. Him Sir Bedivere
 Remorsefully regarded thro' his tears,
 And would have spoken, but he found
 not words,

Then took with care, and kneeling
 on one knee,
 O'er both his shoulders drew the
 languid hands,
 And rising bore him thro' the place-
 of tombs.

But, as he walk'd, King Arthur pant-
 ed hard,
 Like one that feels a nightmare on
 his bed
 When all the house is mute. So sigh'd
 the King,
 Muttering and murmuring at his ear,
 'Quick, quick!
 I fear it is too late, and I shall die.'
 But the other swiftly strode from
 ridge to ridge,
 Clothed with his breath, and looking,
 as he walk'd;
 Larger than human on the frozen hills
 He heard the deep behind him, and a
 cry
 Before. His own thought drove him
 like a goad.
 Dry clash'd his harness in the icy
 caves

And barren chasms, and all to left
 and right
 The bare black cliff clang'd round
 him, as he bas'd
 His feet on juts of slippery crag that
 rang
 Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed
 heels—
 And on a sudden, lol the level lake,
 And the long glories of the winter
 moon.

Then saw they how there hove a
 dusky barge,
 Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to
 stern,
 Beneath them, and descending they
 were ware

That all the decks were dense with
 stately forms,
 Black-stoled, black-hooded, like a
 dream—by these

Three Queens with crowns of gold:
 and from their rose
 A cry that shiver'd to the tingling
 stars,

And, as it were one voice, an agony
 Of lamentation, like a wind that
 shrills

All night in a wast land, where no one
 comes,
 Or hath come, since the making of
 the world.

Then murmur'd Arthur, 'Place me in
 the barge.'

So to the barge they came. There
 those three Queens
 Put forth their hands, and took the
 King, and wept.

But she, that rose the tallest of them
 all
 And fairest, laid his head upon her
 lap,

And loos'd the shatter'd casque, and
 chafed his hands,
 And call'd him by his name, complain-
 ing loud,
 And dropping bitter tears against a

brow
 Striped with dark blood: for all his
 face was white
 And colourless, and like the wither'd
 moon
 Smote by the fresh beam of the spring-
 ing east;
 And all his greaves and cuisses dash'd
 with drops
 Of onset; and the light and lustrous
 curls—
 That made his forehead like a rising
 sun
 High from the dais-throne—were
 parch'd with dust;
 Or, clotted into points and hanging
 loose,
 Mix'd with the knightly growth that
 fringed his lips.
 So like a shatter'd column lay the
 King;
 Not like that Arthur who, with lance
 in rest,
 From spur to plume a star of tour-
 nament,
 Shot thro' the lists at Camelot, and
 charged
 Before the eyes of ladies and of kings.
 Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedi-
 vere:
 'Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall
 I go?
 Where shall I hide my forehead and
 my eyes?
 For now I see the true old times are
 dead,
 When every morning brought a noble
 chance,
 And every chance brought out a noble
 knight.
 Such times have been not since the
 light that led
 The holy Elders with the gift of
 myrrh.
 But now the whole Round Table is
 dissolved
 Which was an image of the mighty
 world,
 And I, the last, go forth companion-

less,
And the days darken round me, and
the years,
Among new men, strange faces, other
minds.'

And slowly answer'd Arthur from the
barge:

'The old order changeth, yielding
place to new,

And God fulfils himself in many
ways,

Lest one good custom should corrupt
the world.

Comfort thyself: what comfort is in
me?

I have lived my life, and that which
I have done

May He within himself make pure! But
thou,

If thou shouldst never see my face
again,

Pray for my soul. More things are
wrought by prayer

Than this world dreams of. Wherefore,
let the voice

Rise like a fountain for me night and
day.

For what are men better than sheep
or goats

That nourish a blind life within the
brain,

If knowing God, they lift not hands
of prayer

Both for themselves and those who
call them friend?

For so the whole round earth is every
way

Bound by gold chains about the feet
of God.

But now farewell. I am going a long
way

With these thou seest—if indeed I go
(For all my mind is clouded with a
doubt)—

To the island-valley of Avilion;

Where falls not hail, or rain, or any
snow,

Nor ever wind blows loudly; but it
lies

Deep-meadow'd, happy, fair with
orchard lawns

And bowery hollows crown'd with
summer sea,

Where I will heal me of my grievous
wound.'

So said he, and the barge with oar
and sail

Moved from the brink, like some full-
breasted swan

That, fluting a wild carol ere her
death,,

Ruffles her pure cold plume, and
takes the flood

With swarthy webs. Long stood Sir
Bedivere

Revolving many memories, till the
hull

Look'd one black dot against the
verge of dawn,

And on the mere the wailing died
away.

But when that moan had past for
ever-more,

The stillness of the dead world's
winter dawn

Amazed him, and he groan'd, 'The-
King is gone.'

And therewithal came on him the
weird rhyme,

'From the great deep to the great
deep he goes.'

Whereat he slowly turn'd and slowly
clomb

The last hard footstep of that iron
crag;

Thence mark'd the black hull moving
yet, and cried,

'He passes to be King among the

dead,
And after healing of his grievous
wound

He comes again; but—if he come no
more—

O me, be yon dark Queens in yon
black boat,

Who shriek'd and wail'd, the three
whereat we gazed

On that high day, when, clothed with
living light,

They stood before his throne in silen-
ce, friends

Of Arthur, who should help him at
his need?

Then from the dawn it seem'd there
came, but faint

As from beyond the limit of the
world,

Like the last echo born of a great cry,

Sounds, as if some fair city were one
voice

Around a king returning from his
wars.

Threat once more he moved about,
and clomb

Ev'n to the highest he could climb,
and saw,

Straining his eyes beneath an arch of
hand,

Or thought he saw, the speck that
bare the King,

Down that long water opening on the
deep

Somewhere far off, pass on and on,
and go

From less to less and vanish into light.
And the new sun rose bringing the
new year.

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