The Tale of Balen

by Algernon Charles Swinburne

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by ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

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DEDICATION

TO MY MOTHER

Love that holds life and death in fee, Deep as the clear unsounded sea And sweet as life or death can be, Lays here my hope, my heart, and me Before you, silent, in a song. Since the old wild tale, made new, found grace, When half sung through, before your face, It needs must live a springtide space, While April suns grow strong.

March 24, 1896.

THE TALE OF BALEN

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 where through the spring's breath rang, Seemed ageless as the sun.

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

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

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

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

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

Sir Balen of Northumberland Gat grace before the king to stand High as his heart

was, and his hand Wrought honour toward the strange north strand That sent him south so goodly a knight. And envy, sick with sense of sin, Began as poisonous herbs begin To work in base men’s blood, akin To men’s of nobler might.

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

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

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

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

II

In linden-time the heart is high For pride of summer passing by With lordly laughter in her eye; A heavy splendour in the sky Uplifts and bows it down again. The spring

had waned from wood and wold Since Balen left his prison hold And lowlier-hearted than of old Beheld it wax and wane.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then forth strode Launcelot, and laid The mighty-moulded hand that made Strong

knights reel back like birds affrayed By storm that smote them as they strayed Against the hilt that yielded not. Then Tristram, bright and sad and kind As one that bore in noble mind Love that made light as darkness blind, Fared even as Launcelot.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then spake the king as one that saith Words bitterer even than brief.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III

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

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

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

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

As when a gleam of wicked light Turns half a low-lying water bright That moans beneath the shivering night With sense of evil sound and sight And whispering witchcraft's bated breath, Her wan face quickened as she said: "This knight that won the sword—his head I crave or hers that brought it. Dead, Let these be one in death."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yea," said the king, "too high of heart To stand before a king thou art; Yet irks it

me to bid thee part And take thy penance for thy part, That God may put upon thy pride." Then Balen took the severed head And toward his hostry turned and sped As one that knew not quick from dead Nor good from evil tide.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

IV

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

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

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

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

Abide he bade him: nor was need To bid when Balen wheeled his steed Fiercely, less fain by word than deed To bid his envier evil speed, And cried, "What wilt thou with me?" Loud Rang Launceor's vehement answer: "Knight, To avenge on thee the dire despite Thou hast done us all in Arthur's sight I stand toward Arthur vowed."

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

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

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

But Balen's spear through Launceor's shield Clove as a ploughshare cleaves the field And pierced the hauberk triple-steeled, That horse with horseman stricken

reeled, And as a storm-breached rock falls, fell. And Balen turned his horse again And wist not yet his foe lay slain, And saw him dead that sought his bane And wrought and fared not well.

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

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

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

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

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

Ah then from Balen passed away All dread of night, all doubt of day, All care what

life or death might say, All thought of all worse months than May: Only the might of joy in love Brake forth within him as a fire, And deep delight in deep desire Of far-flown days whose full-souled quire Rang round from the air above.

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

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

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

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

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

"Sore grief was mine to see her die, And for her true faith's sake shall I Love, and with love of heart more high, All women better till I die." "Alas," the dwarf said, "ill for thee In evil hour this deed was done: For now the quest shall be begun Against

thee, from the dawning sun Even to the sunset sea.

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

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

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

V

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

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

And Merlin said to Balen: “Lo, Thou hast wrought thyself a grievous woe To let this

lady die, and know Thou mightst have stayed her deadly blow." And Balen answered him and said, "Nay, by my truth to faith, not I, So fiercely fain she was to die; Ere well her sword had flashed on high, Self-slain she lay there dead."

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

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

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

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

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

"Now whither ride ye," Merlin said, "Through shadows that the sun strikes red, Ere

night be born or day be dead?” But they, for doubt half touched with dread, Would say not where their goal might lie. “And thou,” said Balen, “what art thou, To walk with shrouded eye and brow?” He said: “Me lists not show thee now By name what man am I.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

sovereign sun.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

And many a knight won fame that day When even the serpent soul of Kay Was kindled toward the fiery play As might a lion’s be for prey, And won him fame that

might not die With passing of his rancorous breath But clung about his life and death As fire that speaks in cloud, and saith What strong men hear and fly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

lustrous likeness of the queen Whom shame had sealed his wife.

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

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

Then thundered all the awakening field With crash of hosts that clashed and reeled, Banner to banner, shield to shield, And spear to splintering spear-shaft, steeled As heart against high heart of man, As hope against high hope of knight To pluck the crest and crown of fight From war’s clenched hand by storm’s wild light, For blessing given or ban.

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

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

But as the sea’s hand smites the shore And shatters all the strengths that bore The ravage earth may bear no more, So smote the hand of Pellinore Charging, a knight of Arthur’s chief, And clove his strong steed’s neck in twain, And smote him sheer

through brow and brain, Falling: and there King Lot lay slain, And knew not wrath or grief.

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

And there her four strong sons and his, Gawain and Gareth, Gaherys And Agravain, whose sword's sharp kiss With sound of hell's own serpent's hiss Should one day turn her life to death, Stood mourning with her: but by these Seeing Mordred as a seer that sees, Anguish of terror bent her knees And caught her shuddering breath.

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

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

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

VI

In autumn, when the wind and sea Rejoice to live and laugh to be, And scarce the

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

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

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

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

For there had Merlin shown the king The doom that songs unborn should sing, The gifts that time should rise and bring Of blithe and bitter days to spring As weeds and flowers against the sun. And on the king for fear's sake fell Sickness, and sorrow deep as hell, Nor even might sleep bid fear farewell If grace to sleep were won.

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

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

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

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

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

“But even for fear’s and pity’s sake Fain were I thou shouldst overtake And fetch again this knight that spake No word of answering grace to make Reply to mine that hailed him: thou, By force or by goodwill, shalt bring His face before me.” “Yea, my king,” Quoth Balen, “and a greater thing Were less than is my vow.

“I would the task required and heard Were heavier than your sovereign word Hath laid on me:” and thence he spurred Elate at heart as youth, and stirred With hope as blithe as fires a boy: And many a mile he rode, and found Far in a forest’s glimmering bound The man he sought afar around And seeing took fire for joy.

And with him went a maiden, fair As flowers aflush with April air. And Balen bade him turn him there To tell the king what woes they were That bowed him down so sore: and he Made woeful answer: “This should do Great scathe to me, with nought for you Of help that hope might hearken to For boot that may not be.”

And Balen answered: “I were loth To fight as one perforce made wroth With one that owes by knighthood’s oath One love, one service, and one troth With me to him

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

The strange knight gazed on him, and spake: "Will you, for Arthur's royal sake, Be warrant for me that I take No scathe from strife that man may make? Then will I go with you." And he Made joyous answer: "Yea, for I Will be your warrant or will die." And thence they rode with hearts as high As men's that search the sea.

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

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

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

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

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

morning heard.

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

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

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

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

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

Above it seemed the sun at noon Sad as a wintry withering moon That shudders while the waste wind's tune Craves ever none may guess what boon, But all may know the boon for dire. And evening on its darkness fell More dark than very

death’s farewell, And night about it hung like hell, Whose fume the dawn made fire.

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

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

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

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

No hurt nor harm to her it were If she should yield a sister there Some tribute of her blood, and fare Forth with this joy at heart to bear, That all unhurt and unafraid This grace she had here by God’s grace wrought. And kindling all with kindly thought And love that saw save love’s self nought, Shone, smiled, and spake the maid.

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

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

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

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

"Invisible as the spirit of night That heaven and earth in depth and height May see not by the mild moon's light Nor even when stars would grant them sight, He walks and slays as plague's blind breath Slays: and my son, whose anguish here Makes moan perforce that mars our cheer, He wounded, even ere love might fear That hate were strong as death.

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

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

All would I laugh to give."

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

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

"Forth will we fare to-morrow," said His host: and forth, as sunrise led, They rode; and fifteen days were fled Ere toward their goal their steeds had sped. And there alighting might they find For Balen's host no place to rest, Who came without a gentler guest Beside him: and that household's hest Bade leave his sword behind.

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

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

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

Then Balen gazed upon him long, And thought, "If here I wreak my wrong, Alive I

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

And Garlon, seeing how Balen's eye Dwelt on him as his heart waxed high With joy in wrath to see him nigh, Rose wolf-like with a wolfish cry And crossed and smote him on the face, Saying, "Knight, what wouldst thou with me? Eat, For shame, and gaze not: eat thy meat Do that thou art come for: stands thy seat Next ours of royal race?"

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

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

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

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

him shalt die."

"Ay?" Balen laughed him answer. "Well, Do it then thyself." And the answer fell Fierce as a blast of hate from hell, "No man of mine that with me dwell Shall strike at thee but I their lord For love of this my brother slain." And Pellam caught and grasped amain A grim great weapon, fierce and fain To feed his hungering sword.

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

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

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

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

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

And there for three days' silent space Balen and Pellam face to face Lay dead or

deathlike, and the place Was death's blind kingdom, till the grace That God had given the sacred seer For counsel or for comfort led His Merlin thither, and he said, Standing between the quick and dead, "Rise up, and rest not here."

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

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

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

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

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

VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

And Balen, gazing on him, heard Again his master’s woful word Sound sorrow

through the calm unstirred By fluttering wind or flickering bird, Thus: “Ah, fair lady and faithless, why Break thy pledged faith to meet me? soon An hour beyond thy trothplight noon Shall strike my death-bell, and thy boon Is this, that here I die.

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

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

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

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

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

“But strength in weakness lives and stands As rocks that rise through shifting sands;

And for the prowess of my hands One made me knight and gave me lands, Duke Hermel, lord from far to near, Our prince; and she that loved me—she I love, and deemed she loved but me, His daughter, pledged her faith to be Ere now beside me here.”

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

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

Through many a glorious chamber, wrought For all delight that love’s own thought Might dream or dwell in, Balen sought And found of all he looked for nought, For like a shining shell her bed Shone void and vacant of her: thence Through devious wonders bright and dense He passed and saw with shame-struck sense Where shame and faith lay dead.

Down in a sweet small garden, fair With flowerful joy in the ardent air, He saw, and raged with loathing, where She lay with love-dishevelled hair Beneath a broad bright laurel tree And clasped in amorous arms a knight, The unloveliest that his scornful sight Had dwelt on yet; a shame the bright Broad noon might shrink to see.

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

Screened her from sun and rain.

But Garnysshe, seeing, reeled as he stood Like a tree, kingliest of the wood, Half hewn through: and the burning blood Through lips and nostrils burst aflood: And gathering back his rage and might As broken breakers rally and roar The loud wind down that drives off shore, He smote their heads off: there no more Their life might shame the light.

Then turned he back toward Balen, mad With grief, and said, “The grief I had Was nought: ere this my life was glad: Thou hast done this deed: I was but sad And fearful how my hope might fare: I had lived my sorrow down, hadst thou Not shown me what I saw but now.” The sorrow and scorn on Balen’s brow Bade silence curb him there.

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

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

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

And riding past a cross whereon Broad golden letters written shone, Saying, “No knight born may ride alone Forth toward this castle,” and all the stone Glowed in the sun’s glare even as though Blood stained it from the crucified Dead burden of one

that there had died, An old hoar man he saw beside Whose face was wan as woe.

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

Nor fate nor fear might overcast The soul now near its peace at last. Suddenly, thence as forth he past, A mighty and a deadly blast Blown of a hunting-horn he heard, As when the chase hath nobly sped. “That blast is blown for me,” he said, “The prize am I who am yet not dead,” And smiled upon the word.

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

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

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

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

“You shall not have ado to fight Here save against one only knight,” She said, and all her face grew bright As hell-fire, lit with hungry light That wicked laughter touched with flame. “Well, since I shall thereto,” said he, “I am ready at heart as death for me: Fain would I be where death should be And life should lose its name.

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

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

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

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

And “O knight Balen,” was her cry, “Why have ye left your own shield? why Come hither out of time to die? For had ye kept your shield, thereby Ye had yet been known, and died not here. Great pity it is of you this day As ever was of knight, or may Be ever, seeing in war’s bright way Praise knows not Balen’s peer.”

And Balen said, “Thou hast heard my name Right: it repenteth me, though shame May tax me not with base men’s blame, That ever, hap what will, I came Within this

country; yet, being come, For shame I may not turn again Now, that myself and nobler men May scorn me: now is more than then, And faith bids fear be dumb.

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

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

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

So mighty was the course they ran With spear to spear so great of span, Each fell back stricken, man by man, Horse by horse, borne down: so the ban That wrought by doom against them wrought: But Balen by his falling steed Was bruised the sorer, being indeed Way-weary, like a rain-bruised reed, With travel ere he fought.

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

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

away.

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

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

With blood that either spilt and bled Was all the ground they fought on red, And each knight's hauberk hewn and shred Left each unmailed and naked, shed From off them even as mantles cast: And oft they breathed, and drew but breath Brief as the word strong sorrow saith, And poured and drank the draught of death, Till fate was full at last.

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

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

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

lets anguish pass.

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

Then, gathering strength up for a space, From off his brother's dying face With dying hands that wrought apace While death and life would grant them grace He loosed his helm and knew not him, So scored with blood it was, and hewn Athwart with darkening wounds: but soon Life strove and shuddered through the swoon Wherein its light lay dim.

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

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

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

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

“No more shouldst thou, for all the might Of heart and hand that seals thee knight Most noble of all that see the light, Brother, hadst thou but slain in fight Me, and arisen unscathed and whole, As would to God thou hadst risen! though here Light is as darkness, hope as fear, And love as hate: and none draws near Save toward a mortal goal.”

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

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

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

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

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

“And no good knight and no good man Whose eye shall ever come to scan The record of the imperious ban That made our life so sad a span Shall read or hear, who

shall not pray For us for ever.” Then anon Died Balan; but the sun was gone, And deep the stars of midnight shone, Ere Balen passed away.

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

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

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

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

“Alas,” King Arthur said, “this day I have heard the worst that woe might say: For in this world that wanes away I know not two such knights as they.” This is the tale that memory writes Of men whose names like stars shall stand, Balen and Balan, sure of hand, Two brethren of Northumberland, In life and death good knights.

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