

The New King Arthur

EDGAR FAWCETT

Table of Contents

<u>The New King Arthur</u>	1
<u>EDGAR FAWCETT</u>	2
<u>THE NEW KING ARTHUR: AN OPERA WITHOUT MUSIC</u>	3
<u>by</u>	4
<u>DEDICATION TO ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON</u>	5
<u>ACT I</u>	6
<u>ACT II</u>	50

The New King Arthur

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- DEDICATION TO ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON
- ACT I.
- ACT II.

**THE NEW KING ARTHUR:
AN OPERA WITHOUT MUSIC**

by

DEDICATION TO ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

Take, Alfred, this mellifluous verse of mine,
Nor rank too high the honor I bestow,
Howe'er it thrill thy soul with grateful pride.
For thou hast sung of Arthur and his knights,
And thou hast told of deeds that they have done,
And thou hast told of loves that they have loved,
And thou hast told of sins that they have sinned,
And I have sung in my way, thou in thine.
I think my way superior to thine,
Yes, Alfred, yes, in loyal faith I do;
But if I do I may be right or wrong;
And whether right or wrong, what matters it?
For shall not swans be swans, though geese are geese?
And if our swans be geese yet swans are deemed,
The merrier for ourselves that deem them swans.
So, take my verses, Alfred, nor with shame
Too deeply blush, as when we gain a boon
So precious that we know 'tis undeserved.
For thou has very creditably sung
Of Arthur, if we judge thee all-in-all;
And I, if I more creditably sing,
Can help it not; but let us live our lives.
For now o'er tilth and wold, o'er waste and weald,
Full summer broods, the linnet warbles peace,
The red kine stray, and butter has gone down!

*Damna tamen celeres reparant cælestia lunæ;
Nos, ubi decidimus
Quo pater Aeneas, quo Tullus, dives et Ancus,
Pulvis et umbra sumus.*
Hor., Lib. IV., Ode VII.

The New King Arthur

ACT I.

SCENE: *Courtyard of King Arthur's castle in Camelot. Troops appear, marching under command of Sir Bedivere, Sir Galahad, Sir Geraint, and other Knights of the Round Table, with banners, trophies, and all the pomp of a brilliant pageant.*

TROOPS:

It is not a pleasant matter
To endure the idle chatter
Sentimentalists who flatter
 Will continually breed,
All about the battle gory,
With its legendary glory
And its fame in song or story
 As the centuries proceed.
For we long ago decided
That the honor is divided
By the leaders who have guided
 Not the men who urged the strife;
That the captains get the measure
Of all military treasure,
And the soldier's only pleasure
 Is escaping with his life.

We are sensible of duty
And its highly moral beauty,
Though we've all an eye to booty
 While we tread the martial plain;
Yet the monarch of our nation
Disapproves of spoliation,
And to win his approbation
 We must quell the greed of gain.
Still, the history of Britain,
Howsoever it is written,
With the foes that we have smitten
 Will in future time be rife.
And we think that our employment
Should be rid of more annoyance,
Since the soldier's one enjoyment
 Is escaping with his life.

The New King Arthur

While the battle-axe is crashing
And the cavalry are dashing
And the mighty swords are flashing
And the deadly arrow shoots,
We remember with dejection
(Though it smells of insurrection)
That we're simply a collection
Of compulsory recruits.
When the chances look most narrow,
'Tis a memory to harrow
That our grave may be a barrow
Far away from child and wife;
And we feel, without aspersion,
After every new exertion,
That the soldier's one diversion
Is escaping with his life!

SIR BEDIVERE:

You hear, loved Galahad, this thankless plaint
From warriors we have led to victory?

SIR GALAHAD:

I hear it, good Sir Bedivere. Forgive
Their strange dissent, since they have borne them true,
Even as the stanch legs of our Table Round.

SIR GERAINT:

Myself, I would bring scourges for their dole,
Not being as meek and excellent as thou.

SIR GALAHAD:

Nay, let them cry their cry, since well they fought
For Cross and King with those wild heathen hordes.
Chide not the fleet steed if he toss his mane,
Nor the brave lion if he at whiles may roar.

SIR BEDIVERE:

Too lenient art thou, Galahad. Harangue
This carping soldiery ere comes our King.
Speak; thou art rich in oratoric tact,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Nor bluff and rude of tongue, like half thy mates.

SIR GERAINT:

True, Bedivere; though best the surly knaves
Were taught to rule their spleen with lusty whips.
When dogs like these break leash it is the sting
Of discipline that proves the wiser curb.
Still, Galahad, speak forth; thy gentle art
Hath silver fluencies past common phrase.

SIR GALAHAD:

It is not with foolish arrogance
That I publicly report
I'm the paragon of paragons
To be found in Arthur's court.
I may tell with calm security
What a stainless life I lead,
For to paint my perfect purity
Would be difficult indeed.

It is true that once a pal I had—
An irreverential pal—
Who replaced my name, Sir Galahad,
By the name Sir Had-a-gal.
But the wag whose cruel witticism
Would have soiled this dove's white wing,
Overwhelmed with angry criticism,
Has been exiled by the King!

At the seventh anniversary
Of my spotless birth and growth,
I had fainted in my nursery
When my nurse let fall an oath.
But at nine years old, humanity
Had impressed me as so weak
That I lectured on profanity
In the purest Attic Greek.

As a boy of ten, so heatedly
I had yearned to soar the sky
That I bruised myself repeatedly

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

In the vain attempt to fly;
And the saintliest proclivities
Were so ardent in my soul,
That I went to all festivities
With a pasteboard aureole.

Notwithstanding such firm tendency
To preserve unsoiled my heart,
I developed an ascendancy
In the military art;
But as time with new vitality
Has endowed this noble frame,
My astonishing morality
Has continued just the same.

And it now is no surprise to me,
Being wrought of such fine clay,
That the maidens all make eyes to me
In a matrimonial way.
For the charms that I disseminate
Are of manly sort, though mild,
And I'm not at all effeminate,
Though a lily undefiled.

SIR GERAINT:

Now, Galahad, by every martyred saint,
Call you this vaunt of self a fit reproach
For insubordination in our troops?

SIR GALAHAD:

Past doubt I call it so, my fair Geraint.

SIR BEDIVERE:

Not with good reason, Galahad, I vow.
Thy sinless character we all concede;
Thou never yet hast killed a foe in fight,
Save that thine eye let fall the briny tear.

SIR GERAINT:

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Especially we all do venerate
That briny tear of thine; 'tis national
And representative, that briny tear.
We honor it as emblematical
Of our most gentlemanly Table Round;
Nor less we place thine other virtues high
As civilizing standards of our realm.
But when we summon thee to chide our troops,
What profit may these grumblers hope to win
From hearing that thy soul is free of fault?

SIR GALAHAD:

Ye do me grievous wrong! . . .
 These erring sons of earth,
Reminded but in song
 Of my surpassing worth,
Will cherish the reminder,
Will calmer grow and kinder,
Will feel what bonds belong
 To their inferior birth.

TROOPS:

Already this is true; . . .
 For since we cannot fail
To recognize in you
 A knightly nonpareil,
With keen humiliation
We grant our lowly station,
And swear from further view
 Our discontents to veil.

SIR GALAHAD:

How sensible you are
 I scarcely need affirm.
The worm would be a star,
 Yet still remains a worm.
For one the pain of pining,
While one is sure of shining;
One brightly beams afar,
 While one must meanly squirm.

TROOPS:

In just this hatful wise

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Does caste her laws dispense,
However we surmise
The wherefore and the whence!
Your simile is bitter—
'Tis even a shoulder-hitter;
Yet we philosophize
And own its common-sense.

SIR BEDIVERE, SIR GERAINT, AND OTHER KNIGHTS:

To Galahad we pay
Respect for having filled
With penitent dismay
These churls of brawny build,
Who bow in due submission
To their depraved position,
And meekly from to-day
Will let themselves be killed.

SIR GALAHAD:

I wonder, mates, that ye should marvel thus
At my unfailing power to thrill with shame
All creatures on whose grosser lives I turn
The quiet splendor of my sinless gaze.
When will ye value at its mighty claim
The awful rectitude and probity
That men have named Sir Galahad? Ah! when?

A HERALD:

The King approaches.

SIR GERAINT:

Galahad, beware;
It ill beseems thee so to laud thy worth
In presence of our blameless liege, the King.

(Enter King Arthur, in glittering armor. He wears the golden dragon of the Pendragonship on his jewelled helm, and is followed by Sir Modred, with other retainers.)

The New King Arthur

KING ARTHUR:

In spite of my authority as England's chief executive,
In spite of those who compass me with service or salaam,
I can't repeat the list of my progenitors consecutive,
Explaining with lucidity exactly who I am.
For while it would be folly to declare me a nonentity,
Considering the hardihood and prowess all applaud,
It still is understood that there are flaws in my identity,
And that by certain skeptics I am feared to be a fraud.

'Tis argued I was this, and it's asserted I another was;

My places of nativity for number might appall;
'Tis doubted who my father and distrusted who my mother was;
It even is denied that I was ever born at all.
But I, with eager wishes in my subjects' brains to germinate
A rational solution of my origin as man,
Have found that all my memories poetically terminate
In visionary shadows on the Ossianic plan.

My own secure impression, I will say without apology,

Is that the times were favoring and summoned me from far,
A person who was picturesquely loaned you by mythology,
As persons of my prominence occasionally are.
However, if my lineage be earthly or ethereal,
If sprung from human parents or from spiritual hosts,
It strikes me I'm at present very palpably material,
With nothing in my biceps that would indicate a ghost's.

I give delightful dinners, with the motive to propitiate

Believers and supporters who are grouped about my throne;
And frankly I exhibit there, whenever I officiate,
An Early-English elegance essentially my own!
In council I am clever, and in battle where the banners are
My trusty knights, my Table Round, will swear I lead them well;
But all agree in thinking how magnificent my manners are,
Since born however oddly I was born a perfect swell!

The worst of evil tongues may neither whisper nor ejaculate

About my name as royal spouse a word that hints a sneer;
Connubially looked upon, my record is immaculate,
As also is the record of my consort, Guinevere.
I give the Queen's affections all the necessary twining-room,
Allow her to adore me as her wifehood may elect,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Approve of her appearance in my parlor or my dining-room,
And praise her taste in dressing, which is notably correct.
That I have deigned to wed her Guinevere is duly sensible,
Because, although she traces from a line of kings and queens,
There isn't any question that her race was reprehensible
In making ancient history by very shabby means.
And all, without exception, since the day when we were wed agree
That I, whose genealogy is lost in magic haze,
Decidedly surpass her with my mythologic pedigree,
And merit the fidelity she dutifully pays!

HERALD:

The Queen, my liege, approaches.

KING ARTHUR:

Joy! the Queen!

(Queen Guinevere enters, attended by the ladies Enid and Vivien, with other dames of her Court. Sir Lancelot soon afterward follows. Merlin appears later.)

GUINEVERE:

Welcome, Lord Arthur, fresh from victory!
Is it your gracious wish we should embrace?

KING ARTHUR:

Considerate wife! Thou understandest well
The difficulty that these mailed arms
Would meet in properly embracing thee.

GUINEVERE:

Most true, my liege. And then this gown I wear,
My medieval milliner's last work,
Would surely suffer from thy clasp of steel.
How like you it? Sir Lancelot likes it well.
He—

KING ARTHUR:

How? Sir Lancelot greeted thee ere I?

The New King Arthur

LANCELOT (*bowing humbly*):

My lord, by merest accident—no more.
The soil of march had stained these doughty hands,
And fearing lest our Queen should chance on us
Ere seemly cleansing helped them, I repaired
With haste to yonder moat and dipped them there.
Thy pardon, King.

KING ARTHUR:

'Tis granted easily.

GUINEVERE:

Greeting to all! This day is framed in gold
Forevermore within my memory!
Now is the last great battle fought and won!
Our castle here at Camelot shall to-night
So blaze with revel that the envying stars
Will wish their light the cressets of our feast.

ENID:

A hundred happy preparations wait
The gay return of our victorious kin.

VIVIEN:

Already the great oxen roast in hall;
The tawny wassail tempts the unsparing hand;
Fair garlands, wreathed o'er many a lintel, glow;
And all is prophecy of mirthful peace.

(The populace, male and female, now appear, joining the troops and warmly saluting them.)

THE POPULACE:

While you abroad were daring
The foemen's fatal spears,
Our hearts at home were bearing
The burden of our fears.
No cheerful news could brighten
Our sorrow, nor assuage;
No telegrams enlighten

ACT I.

This unprogressive age.

One consolation served us,

More dear than you can guess,
And fortunately nerved us
To deal with our distress.
It was that war's dimension
Is yet of meagre span,
While powder's vile invention
Remains unknown to man.

With all its rush and riot,

The worst of war to-day
Is comfortably quiet
Beside the future's fray.
No clamorous bangs displeasing
Now vex your valiant lives,
With smoke to set you sneezing,
If still your nose survives.

Nor was it half a trifle

To thankfully recall
That no malicious rifle
Had bored you with its ball.
And well we recollected
Your risk was less extreme,
With bomb-shells unexpected
And dynamite a dream.

To hear the javelin whistle,

To shun the hurtling dart,
To dodge the desperate missile,
Will try the stoutest heart.
But would the thought not thrill you
More fearfully by far,
Of cannons that could kill you
Three miles from where you are?

Your fate were much inferior

If lumps of lead or zinc
Could wander your interior

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Before you'd time to wink;
While dread that seldom ceases
Would bid you curse your lots,
Going up in little pieces
And coming down in spots!

O tenfold more terrific

Your danger, to a man's,
If war were scientific
In working out her plans!
And therefore, warriors plucky,
Appreciate the boon
Of having been so lucky
In being born so soon!
(The populace and troops retire, singing.)

KING ARTHUR:

Since wine and feast shall blithely hail us home,
You, Lancelot, lead the dance in hall to-night
With our loved Queen . . . What, Merlin, it is you?

MERLIN *(who has shown great agitation):*

My lord, 'tis I, even I, who thankfully
Greet your return from hazard in the field.

KING ARTHUR:

Nay, kiss not thus our hand, astrologer,
Magician, seer, and all things mystical.
We reverence too much thy wealth of lore,
King as we are, to blush not while we take
Obsequious welcome from thy wizard lips.

MERLIN *(in aside to Arthur):*

Sir King, let not Lord Lancelot dance to-night
With Guinevere. The stars themselves forbid.

KING ARTHUR:

Nay, Merlin, art thou tricked with fantasies,
Bluff imps that make the goblin residue

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

From spells and incantations of thy past,
Nor leave thee yet, but haunt thy moods of rest,
As moths a blown-out candle's flameless wick?

MERLIN:

Not so, my lord; thou art in error there.
'Twere seemlier that the Queen should lead the dance
With her true spouse, as courtly etiquette
By right demands; and therefore do I speak.

KING ARTHUR:

Shrewd Merlin! and thy stars have told thee this?
Considerate and accommodating stars!
Have they no weightier counsel for thine ears?
Nay, pardon if I wag my beard in mirth,
Dread augur, since thy potent oracles
Grasp truths of such large import to our realm.

MERLIN:

Sire, dost thou laugh at me?

KING ARTHUR (*with much laughter*):

No, by the Rood!

I weep, good Merlin, though I grant these tears
Less kin to grief than sources pleasanter.
Hail, Master of Etiquette at Arthur's court!
Wouldst clip thy robes to match a doublet's length,
Curl jauntily thy locks of snow, and don
Sword, plume and broidered hose? Why, so thou shalt,
If so thy choice, and that first knight who smiles
At seeing the awful Merlin grown a fop,
Shall forfeit straight our countenance and grace . . .
Look ye, my lords and gentlewomen; here
Doth age put forth a flower of youth to shame
Your lustier vigor! Merlin, mark him well,
Seeks new renown, and—

MERLIN:

Pause, I do beseech!

(I dare not speak and tell him all I know!)
Ah, flout me not with raillery, since I warn

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

As eager friend and guardian of thy peace!

KING ARTHUR:

Thy rapid tongue and that wild stress of gaze
Convince me thou art serious.

MERLIN:

O my lord,
Bear with me but a little while till chance
Unloose my speech and I may name the fear
It irks me now to hide! . . . No more . . . we are watched!

GUINEVERE (*aside to Lancelot*):

Didst thou note well how Merlin eyed the King?
I quake with terror lest the seer hath guessed
What treacherous truth lies hid between us twain.

SIR LANCELOT:

These are but idle terrors, Guinevere.
Suspicion harms no man of my repute.
Great deeds of evil fit the great alone,
Who leap on them as they that mount a steed
Untamable to feebler hands than theirs.

GUINEVERE:

The deed thou hast in mind is horrible;
It plucks the sleep from off my lids o' nights,
And steals, a ghost of guilt, to haunt the gloom.

SIR LANCELOT

The face-wash that shall lend those blooming cheeks
A pearlier beauty than of mortal tint—
The hair-dye that shall stain each silken strand
Of those rich tresses into sunnier sheen—
He has the secret of them, Guinevere,
He, Merlin, arch-enchanter, sorcerer, sage.

GUINEVERE:

I know. Yet Arthur deems me fair enough . . .
I am his Queen. Oh, Lancelot, tempt me not!

SIR LANCELOT:

The face-wash and the hair-dye—magic boons,
Whose baffling whereabouts alone he knows.
Men say that in the dusk of days remote
A daughter of the stars who reigned as queen
O'er an immortal race, loved foolishly
A mortal, and her subjects, wroth at this,
Fired up and slew her in her palace walls.

GUINEVERE:

I know the tale . . . And afterward 'twas told . . .

SIR LANCELOT:

That he, even Merlin, who has lived ten spans
Of usual life, and dies but when he wills,
Then being a wizard in that weird queen's court,
Snatched from her piteous eyes the dropping tears,
And from her piteous wounds the rushing blood,
In separate flasks of crystal hoarding each.
And these he yet retains, from that wild hour
Holding them sealed and hidden, and knowing well
Their marvellous uses . . . And they shall be thine!

GUINEVERE:

Mine at what cost? If I will filch for thee
The sacred sword, Excalibur, the King's
Unconquerable blade, his pride and joy.

SIR LANCELOT:

Even so, my Queen. Excalibur once mine,
Its fairy brand makes Merlin do my hest.
And I, securing it, will straightway force
Delivery of the flasks to thy fair hands.

VIVIEN (*covertly listening*):

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

'Tis of the face–wash and the hair–dye, sure,
That these twain parley thus in whispers fleet.

GUINEVERE:

But if I steal it for thee, Lancelot,
Our realm will topple into anarchy.
Unkinged will Arthur be, and I disqueened,
Our Table Round a ruin, and all our fame
The jest of babblers in far future times.

SIR LANCELOT:

Not so, my Queen. Possessing that famed sword,
I shall not linger here in Camelot.
Hence will I fare, with my own people reign,
Nor push my empery one jealous inch
Beyond the earldom fated me at birth.

GUINEVERE:

But this were wanton treason in itself . . .
Hast thou not sworn to aid and serve the King?

SIR LANCELOT:

Thee will I serve instead. The precious flasks
Made thine, irrevocably thine, perchance
Thou wilt become *my* Queen in place of *his*!

GUINEVERE:

Elope with thee! O monstrous impudence!

(She sings:)

My father was King Leodogran,
An exceedingly meritorious man,
With a realm that the heathen over–ran
 In a most distracting way.
There was never a king so hard–beset;
He was full of the cares that irk and fret;
He was head–over–ears in horrid debt
 That he hadn't the means to pay.
But he brought me up in a style austere,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

And he always advised me, "Guinevere,
If you ever fall in with a cavalier
Who should hint of an impropriety, dear,
There is only one thing to say:
'Very, very witty—but I don't see the wit of it;
Awfully obliged—but no, not a bit of it;
Many, many thanks—good day!'"

CHORUS OF KING, KNIGHTS AND LADIES:

Her father was King Leodogran,
An unfortunate impecunious man,
Who was neither a prince of plot and plan,
Nor a tyrant of brutal sway.
It is all very well to record his debt,
But his creditors and his foes had met,
And the first had perished without regret,
While the last made him still their prey.
Yet he reared his child in a mode austere,
And he often remarked to her, "Guinevere,
If you ever fall in with a knight, my dear,
Whose deportment strikes you as insincere,
Be polite but firm while you say:
'Very, very clever—but I don't see the wit of it;
Awfully obliged—but no, not a bit of it;
Many, many thanks—good day!'"

GUINEVERE:

My father was King Leodogran,
An aristocratic indigent man,
With an army at best a ragged clan
And a navy in sad decay.
He had only one or two courtiers left;
Of a parliament he was quite bereft;
His crown had been carried off by theft;
His exchequer had gone astray.
But he still admonished me, "Guinevere,
Be discreet in your feminine career,
And if wily charmers would dupe you, dear,
So arrange that with conscience truly clear
You can lift up your head and say:
'Very, very pretty—but I don't see the wit of it;
Awfully obliged—but no, not a bit of it;
Many, many thanks—good-day!'"

CHORUS OF KING, KNIGHTS AND LADIES:

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Her father was King Leodogran,
A peculiarly disappointed man,
Whose reign with a flourish of drums began,
 Though it ended in disarray.
Corruption and bribery made him ill:
His Lord High Chancellor robbed the till;
When the Royal Grocer sent in a bill,
 Its amount he could not defray.
Yet the records and annals all cohere
That he counselled his daughter, Guinevere—
"If you ever receive the suggestion, dear,
To behave like a moral mutineer,
 Be decisive, and promptly say:
'Very, very pleasant—but I don't see the wit of it;
Awfully obliged—but no, not a bit of it;
 Many, many thanks—good-day!"

KING ARTHUR:

Come, Guinevere. Let us fare palaceward.
Thy lyric candor hath less prudence in it
Than lightsome truth . . . You, Lancelot, go with us?

SIR LANCELOT:

Your Grace, one word with Merlin, I beseech.

(Omnes retire toward the palace, except Merlin and Sir Lancelot.)

MERLIN:

Wouldst converse hold with me, Sir Lancelot?

SIR LANCELOT:

Nay, Merlin, art thou angered? Speak, I pray.

MERLIN:

Thou hast sent missives from the seat of war.

SIR LANCELOT:

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

To whom?

MERLIN:

Whom me no whoms. The Queen.

SIR LANCELOT:

And thou hast read these missives, Merlin—thou!

MERLIN:

Never! But if by magic art I learned
Their import, canst thou blame me that I did?

SIR LANCELOT:

I see. Thy magic art is over-bold.
Wax melts in flame; my letter writ the Queen
Were slyly intercepted of thyself!

MERLIN:

Mere son of earth, presume not on my rights,
Nor scoff them, lest thou writhe in punishment.

SIR LANCELOT:

Enough. Thou hast read those missives. Then thou know'st
I would possess Excalibur for mine.

MERLIN:

Conspirator! Dost thou dare tell me this?

SIR LANCELOT:

Hark, Merlin. Once that mystic sword my own,
I rule instead of Arthur. For thyself,
Thou shalt, I swear, become Prime Minister
Where thou art now mere vassal to the king.

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

MERLIN:

Prime Minister? . . . What madness moves thy speech?
The sword from him who wields it may not pass,
Except the Queen herself, at midnight hour,
Will steal it with her own fair hands. Even then
The earth would quake, hot lightnings rend the sky,
And she, its guardian Lady of the Lake,
Would rise in wrath, and bid the Table Round
Slay the fell traitor who had urged this act.

SIR LANCELOT:

Meanwhile the sword were mine. And, Merlin, thou
Wouldst be Prime Minister in my new realm.
Does Arthur value thee at thy fit worth?
To-day thou scarcely hast his jester's rank.
As mountebank, even charlatan, he holds
Thy reverend self. Reflect ere thou refuse.

MERLIN:

It was ages and ages and ages ago,
In an antediluvian time,
When my beard could as now patriarchally flow,
And my gaze had the same supernatural glow
Which at present is thought so sublime,
That I served with a monarch whose glory was great,
As his trusted Secretary of State.

SIR LANCELOT:

I am far from objecting that then as that now
You extended six feet in your hose,
And that none could with honesty dare disallow
Your remarkably intellectual brow
And your magisterial nose,
When the King who is pre-historical dust
So distinguished you by a prominent trust.

MERLIN:

To resume my remarks where you cut them so short,
I was not, as a statesman, exempt
From the fell office-hunter's insidious court,
From the perils and snares of malicious report,
Or from bribery's evil attempt;

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

But approaches like these I would straightway subdue
By the withering glance that I now bend on you.

SIR LANCELOT:

If I own that your glance has a singular stress
Which reacts on my chief spinal nerve,
I shall fail to make manifest, nevertheless,
How you equally mortify as you impress
By the probity that you preserve;
Yet I beg very earnestly still to insist
That you deal with no common corruptionist.

MERLIN:

I remember that once when a knave had presumed
His perfidious views to expound,
Though of social distinction he blustered and fumed,
I arranged that alive in the earth he was tombed,
With his head poking out above ground;
And while slowly of thirst and of hunger he died,
I assure you I laughed till I really cried.

SIR LANCELOT:

So unpleasant are vivid accounts like to these
When embellished with your dainty skill,
That I beg you will bear it in mind, if you please,
How my terrified marrow commences to freeze
And the roots of my being to thrill;
Yet I cannot deny, notwithstanding alarm,
That my villainy wears an exceptional charm.

MERLIN:

Oh, if then you had shown me these poisonous plums
Which the branches of treason contain,
I perhaps would have had you hung up by your thumbs,
Or have put red-hot pins in your eyelids and gums,
While I gloated with glee on your pain;
For the impulse of gloating I seldom repress,
And I always have gloated with striking success.

SIR LANCELOT:

That you gloat with a grace altogether your own,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

You are wasting your words to denote,
And indeed a sincere admiration alone
Now impels me to have my depravity known,
For the purpose of seeing you gloat;
Yet an ominous feeling my bosom has crost
That you hesitate and are in consequence lost.

MERLIN:

I regard your assumption as wholly unfair,
And conveyed with unmerited scorn,
Since the proud reputation I handsomely bear
I for ages and ages of much wear and tear
Have with noteworthy rectitude borne;
Yet the place of Prime Minister, all will admit,
Is a place that my talents would capably fit.

SIR LANCELOT:

Strike hands, good necromancer. Thou at last
Consentest. Big the risk, yet big the prize.

MERLIN:

My qualms of conscience still abide the same.
I feel myself provisionally bad,
And that alone. You tempted, and I fell;
But then you tempted fatly.

SIR LANCELOT:

So I did.

MERLIN:

Enough. My expiation may require
Perchance a thousand years. A trifle, that,
To me, the immortal Merlin, it is true.

SIR LANCELOT:

A trifle weightless as blown thistledown.
Had I your same deep funds of earthly life,
By fits I would be virtuous and by fits
The bacchanal opposite. One century

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

The dusk of cloisters and the garb of serge,
The chill high-windowed cell, with loaf and jug,
The sandalled feet and prayer-worn rosary-beads.
Next century, mirth and revel, dance and dice,
Lights, music, diamond eyes amid the dark
Of velvet masks, with folly a gilded toy
And grim sin painted all of rainbow hues.
Monotony is pleasure's bane and curse,
Change and variety are its meat and wine!

MERLIN:

Hollow philosophy, I fear, my lord;
Yet hollow things, like wine-cups, oft hold cheer.
Does the Queen will to steal this magic brand?

SIR LANCELOT:

To-night, if thou wilt aid her in the act.

MERLIN:

At set of sun with solemn pomp I bless
The sword for this great victory fought and gained,
While all our people voice their hymn of thanks.

SIR LANCELOT:

Piously singing somewhat out of tune—
I know the ceremony; it has made me yawn
Eleven good times already. Afterward?

MERLIN:

I bear the sword away and lock it up
In the huge vault below the castle-moat,
To symbolize its ancient years of rest
Deep in the bosom of the lake whence rose
An arm that held it forth as Arthur's boon,
Clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful.

SIR LANCELOT:

Thy pardon, mage, but were not those last words
Quoted from some bard who has framed this theme

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

In verse? I fancy I recall the line.

MERLIN:

Sir Lancelot, you are grievously at fault;
Whatever else I am or may become,
I am and always grandly will remain
Original.

SIR LANCELOT:

Again thy pardon, seer.
Tell more, I pray.

MERLIN:

The vault whereof I spoke
Hath seven huge iron doors, and each of these
Is opened by a separate massive key.
At end of all a flight of seven stone steps,
Thick-filmed with dank ooze and deceptive slime,
Leads to an iron chest whose every nail
Juts like the clenched fist of a giant knight
From ponderous bands of steel. The Queen's own strength
Must lift the lid and draw Excalibur
Out from the chest. If there she chance to fail,
The brand itself shall rise and smite her dead,
While thou and I, her arch-accomplices,
In half the thinking of a thought, are hurled
With hideous ruin and combustion down
To bottomless perdition.

SIR LANCELOT:

Grace again . . .
Thy last fine phrase—was that original?

MERLIN:

Completely so, Sir Lancelot. Plagiarism
Has never soiled my native eloquence.

SIR LANCELOT:

And must the Queen this dangerous journey take

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

In utter darkness? May she not have light?

MERLIN:

None, save the light of her intelligence,
Never a torch of brilliance at its best.

SIR LANCELOT:

You wrong her. She will put her wit to proof
This night, and if I err not, test as well
Her courage; I will answer you for both.

MERLIN:

'Tis as clear to my mind as the commonest rule
Mathematical teachings beget,
That the Queen is a fool, and that you are a fool,
And that I am a worse fool yet.
There are thousands of people who envy our lot,
But we can't keep along at a moderate trot;
We've a devilish fancy to see how it feels
When you break in a gallop and kick up your heels!

SIR LANCELOT:

That is true not alone of the Queen, you and me,
But of all humankind, I am sure;
There is always one apple high up on the tree
That we'd tear our best clothes to secure.
Though in life, as it often occurs, we have got
All the tidbits we need floating round in our pot,
Spite of prudence and tact we must see how it feels
To kick over the pot while we kick up our heels!

MERLIN:

You're a knight with a record for brain and for brawn—
Guinevere's royal rank who'll deny?—
As the great court-magician I weekly have drawn
From my monarch a salary high;
Yet although our life's leaves are without the least blot,
We've a strange inclination to wish they were not;
On the nice clean white paper, to see how it feels,
We must spill half the ink while we kick up our heels!

The New King Arthur

SIR LANCELOT:

To obtain a king's throne fortune's favor I sue;
Guinevere wants a handsomer lord;
The portfolio of a Prime Minister you
Have a long time in secret adored.
Very likely 'twere best we should alter no jot
From the stations whose changes we privately plot,
Yet we've all a temptation to see how it feels
When at last you've concluded to kick up your heels!

MERLIN:

What further speech hath issue on this head
We fitlier should hold otherwhere than here.

SIR LANCELOT:

True, Merlin. These rude bastions, nooks and towers,
Were facile ambush for some envious ear.

MERLIN:

And such an one is Modred's.

SIR LANCELOT:

Fearest thou
Sir Modred, that sly cousin to the King?
Him of the uneasy eye, unechoing tread
And bright prompt smile? Myself, I like him not.

MERLIN:

If covert foe we have, that foe is he.
Come, let us hence. Time fleets, and colloquy
Must further shape this dark wild plan for use.

(Merlin and Sir Lancelot retire through an archway of the castle. From another egress Modred cautiously enters, followed by Vivien.)

MODRED:

Their plot is mine! Now, Vivien, if the Queen

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Shall get from Merlin's hand the seven great keys
And tread the slippery stairs until she clutch
The subterranean sword, Excalibur,
Returning safe with it to upper air,
Why, then, what easier than to crouch in wait
And seize it from her grasp ere Lancelot dream?

VIVIEN:

O wily Modred, wilt thou dare this thing?

MODRED:

Sweet Vivien, for thy sake I would dare more.

VIVIEN:

Thou darest nothing. Flatter not thy soul
With fantasy of courage for thy spur.
Deceit alone is pith and kernel here;
All else is vaunt, ambition, treachery!

MODRED:

Hast thou forgot love, too, or canst thou rate
Such love as mine a toy to toss and lose?
Vivien, dost thou remember when we played,
Mere boy and girl, together on sea-sands,
In sight of those gray beetling walls where dwelt
Our kinsman, that bluff Earl who loved us both?

VIVIEN:

Yes, I recall. We shaped amid the sands
Full many a castle, drawbridge, gate and moat;
But all were thine, or so thy mood would claim.

MODRED:

All those pretty palaces of sand,
Swept afar so long by ocean's pride,
Were but meant, if thou couldst understand,
For the little maiden at my side.
She it was whose tender eyes and lips
All the mimic realm should sweetly sway,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

When my fairy gold in fairy ships
From enchanted isles had found its way!

While her dimpled face, in childish thought,

Watched my eager fingers as they plied,
Happy was the toil with which I wrought
For the little maiden at my side
Every tiny chamber should possess
Riches past all value and compare—
Pearls that beam amid the mermaid's tress,
Corals that the rosy sea-caves bear!

Since those idle moments, many a year,

Filled with shade or sun, has dawned and died.
Mightier now the palace I would rear
For the statelier maiden at my side.
Here at last, in honor and renown,
She may dwell my treasured wife and true,
Wearing on her brows the queenly crown
That by dower of beauty is her due!

VIVIEN:

Modred, I wonder that thou trustest me
With this dread secret of thy coming guilt.
What earnest hast thou (nay, let go my hand)
That I will clamor not, with wrathful speed,
Thy full intent where those who learn its ill
May crush it dead by dungeon, chain or block?

MODRED:

Pah, Vivien, well thou knowest that if I hold
Excalibur, the power I wield with it
Makes Merlin serve me then as Arthur now.

VIVIEN:

What import to myself if he so serve?

MODRED:

Nay, large, my subtle Vivien, I can prove.

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

The face-wash and the hair-dye Merlin holds
He would surrender if I held the sword.

VIVIEN:

The face-wash and the hair-dye? Thou in sooth
Hast heard of these long-hoarded talismans?

MODRED:

Who here at Camelot has not heard of them?
The little dusk-haired page that trips through hall,
Bearing the flagon in his lifted clasp,
Wots of the charms and longs to test their worth.

VIVIEN:

And dost thou think that I, Sir Modred, I,
Would trifle with such witcheries? . . . Thou hast called
Full many a time the Lady Vivien fair.
Would I be fairer, then, if tress and tint
Were fair indeed, as wrought so by these arts?

MODRED:

No silkier could one strand of thy dear hair
Gleam to these eyes, my Vivien, if so steeped
In sun its gay gold matched the daffodil's!
No tenderer would the curve of that soft cheek
Seem to my sense if now its olive tinge
Were pinker than the frail wild-rose's leaf!
I love thee seeing that what I love no change
Of face-wash or of hair-dye may annul!
Thy smile—the beam of thy deep roguish gaze—
The sorcery of thy dewy lips—the arch
Of nostril or of brow—would bide the same!
And more, the intelligence—

VIVIEN:

Enough. 'Tis plain
Thou wouldst prefer me were I not brunette.

MODRED:

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

(How sweet to rouse her dainty jealousy!)

VIVIEN:

(He does not dream the wherefore of my wish!
Yet once the face—wash and the hair—dye mine,
That languid saint, Sir Galahad, whom I love,
Might melt and thrill where now his mien is ice!)

MODRED:

Hast thou forgot, sweet Vivien, that spring day
Scarce one year hence, when wandering the dark belt
Of beechwood nigh to Camelot's green domain,
I chanced upon thyself and heard thee sing,
Dreaming none heard save some stray thrush or merle,
That pensive song beside a shaded pool?
The limpid pool was mirror for thy face,
And as a maiden to her mirror sings,
Thou to the shining mere didst pour thy plaint.

VIVIEN:

I have forgot. (No lie was gliblier told!)

MODRED:

Nay, thou rememberest. Sing the song once more.

VIVIEN:

What were the gist and lilt of that same song?

MODRED:

The gist I know; the lilt hath lost itself
In revery of the love it roused that day.
But this I keep as record of the song:
Thou didst deplore thou wert not born a blonde.

VIVIEN:

Tell me, tell me, tell me,
Quiet pool and clear,

ACT I.

Why it thus befell me
To be mourning here!
Why with unabated
Woe do I regret
That I was created
A confirmed brunette!
Why does hope expel me,
Like a child from school?
Tell me, tell me, tell me,
Sleepy little pool!

Enid's locks are sunny

As the wheat's ripe stores;
Golden as new honey
Lynette's, Lyonors';
Here alone I linger,
Full of yearnings fond,
I, who'd give a finger
To have been a blonde!
Why so far excel me
Maud, Yseult, Gudule,
Tell me, tell me, tell me,
Placid little pool!

Heavy is the tax on

Patience when I see
That it is un-Saxon
To be dark like me.
Were I queen anointed,
Still my heart would fret,
As a disappointed
And aggrieved brunette!
Why despair should quell me,
Destiny o'errule,
Tell me, tell me, tell me,
Lazy little pool!

In my deep dejection,

Pool so pure to view,
Cast me my reflection,
Clad with brighter hue!
Weave the sunbeams in it,
While I thus despond;
Let me dream a minute
I was born a blonde!

The New King Arthur

Why should fate repel me,
Why should chance befool,
Tell me, tell me, tell me,
Silent little pool!

MODRED:

The song's true self; thou hast not missed a word.

VIVIEN:

(No hint of Galahad slept within the strain;
'Twas therefore safe to sing it as I did.)

(Sir Galahad now appears from the castle, with bowed head, as of one who muses while he walks.)

MODRED:

Look where that smooth male vaunt of saintliness
Moves like the animate statue of himself,
Paid for ere death in charge to his leal heirs.

VIVIEN:

I see . . . I would a word with Galahad.

MODRED:

So would not I . . . Dear Vivien, ere I go,
Thou wilt swear help and secrecy to-night?

VIVIEN:

Stanch help and secrecy . . . Why should I not
So swear? Alas! I was not born a blonde!

MODRED:

Enough. I kiss thy hand in faith and troth.
Farewell, my blonde Queen that may shortly be!
Shalt dally long with that white peacock, love?

The New King Arthur

VIVIEN:

Nay, briefly . . . I would question him by stealth,
Lest he dream aught of damage to our plan.

MODRED:

Right, Vivien. Let me read those lucid eyes . . .
And so thou lov'st me now I may be King?
Ah, woman, woman, weak as thou wert made,
What strength is in thy love for worldly power!
Well, if thou love the place I lift thee to,
I'll dream thou still dost prize the hand that lifts!

VIVIEN:

In that hand's grip thou hast a mighty faith.

MODRED:

Why not? If I can seize Excalibur,
Much of the soldiery, this warrant seen,
Will join me in revolt, since I am held
As one of Arthur's family by near
Relationship—or shall I rather say
Pendragonship?—to our sworn liege, the King.
Ah, yes, that brand, once flourished, will convince
These dolts that Heaven with Arthur is at odds,
And that to me, his kinsman, Modred, falls
The right to lead and rule them how I list.
But Lancelot as an alien they would hold,
Nor pay his hest a shred of courtesy,
He being of other than the princely line . . .
Note well this grade of difference in our states,
My Vivien, and so hug ambition close . . .
Again farewell, my Queen that soon shall be!
Grant me one kiss . . .

VIVIEN:

Nay, not till I am Queen.

MODRED:

Unpitying girl! . . . Well, be it thus indeed!
Ere the great pomp is holden we shall meet,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

And in the dance thy white hand shall I claim . . .
I trust thee with that self-swamped Galahad!
Again, remember—and again, farewell!

(Modred disappears into the castle, scornfully watched by Vivien.)

VIVIEN:

I mate with thee, thou soul packed thick with spites!
And thou hast trusted me! Even so we trust
The wave that drowns us or the drug that slays!

SIR GALAHAD:

What voice was that? Ah, Lady Vivien, thine?

VIVIEN:

Yes, mine. Did I hold converse with myself
Unwittingly? If so, I crave thy grace.

SIR GALAHAD:

Sure none were easier rendered than mine own.

VIVIEN:

Thou, too, wert lost in musing. May I seek
To learn what drooped thy head so sombrely?

SIR GALAHAD:

Sweet Vivien, if I mused it must have been
On mine own superhuman purity.

VIVIEN:

Ah, true. Bur purity and coldness wed . . .
Sir Galahad, art thou cold as thou art pure?

SIR GALAHAD:

Meseems I am peculiarly cold . . .
I know not . . . Were I grosser I might tell
The measure of mine own frigidity
In way more accurate. Yet I do think
I am exceeding cold. What thinkest thou?

VIVIEN:

What think I? No bare northland berg that lifts
A glassy spire in arctic air is more
Cold to its clime's dim heaven than thou to love!

SIR GALAHAD:

Love? What is love? I oft have heard it named,
And oft have fancied that I lack it not.
Myself I love, and virtue—which are one . . .
And nicety of deportment . . .

VIVIEN:

Well, what more?

SIR GALAHAD:

And meats or fish in season, deftly cooked,
Especially with sauce of proper spice.

VIVIEN:

Thou questionest what love is . . . I will tell!

SIR GALAHAD:

Pray, tell; and I with zest of heed shall hark.

VIVIEN:

Love is a temple all alone,
Pure—white and small of scope,
Not built of wood, not built of stone,
But built of something that is known
To human hearts as hope.

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

And here the lover's foot will steal,
And here the lover oft will kneel,
Perchance when no one cares,
His love in secret to reveal,
With tender tears and prayers!

SIR GALAHAD:

If love the soul endue
With loyalty so true,
Then surely love must be above
All joys I ever knew!

VIVIEN:

Love is a garden whose delights
May lovers only know;
A garden that is always night's,
Where westward from her starry heights
A summer moon drops low;
Where urns of glossy myrtles beam,
Where statues from the terrace gleam,
Where pale cool fountains pour,
And lovers in delicious dream
Go wandering evermore!

SIR GALAHAD:

If love may so invite
King Arthur's virgin knight,
Then love indeed must far exceed
The rhymes that poets write!

VIVIEN:

Love is a forest in whose deep
A stream's clear waters glide;
And many a mortal here doth creep,
His thirsting lips to lean and steep
Amid the crystal tide.
But soon, with hearts that sadly sink,
They linger by that river's brink,
And feel its waves accurst;
For ah, the longer that they drink
The deadlier grows their thirst!

SIR GALAHAD:

If love to such excess
May ban as well as bless,
Then love must hide a seamy side
Of curious ugliness!

VIVIEN:

Love is a land where dead leaves fall
And wild-flowers droop their blooms;
A land that ever feels the thrall
Of sorrowing winds that moan and call
Like voices out of tombs.
And here wan lovers roam forlorn,
Each with a rose-crown he has worn
In merrier moods than now;
For every rose has turned a thorn
That wounds its wearer's brow!

SIR GALAHAD:

If love through storm and sun
So strange a course can run,
Then love's a bane that any sane
Philosopher should shun!

VIVIEN:

Love keeps a joy to match its worst of woe,
And worst its woe when we have loved where lies
A blank of dead indifference . . . like thine own! . . .
Thou sighest, Galahad; wherefore dost thou sigh?

SIR GALAHAD:

I sigh to think how many maids there be
On whom my dead indifference must have wrought
This woe thou paintest in such dreary phrase.

VIVIEN:

Nay, thou art wrong. Thy comeliness perchance
Allures full many a maid, or touches her
With spleen of slighted vanity. But this
Means not the grief of loving without hope.

ACT I.

SIR GALAHAD:

Then no maids love me? Ah, how glad I am!
I merely rouse their wish that I would woo?
'Tis well; I hate to even account myself
As irresponsibly responsible
For broken hearts I had no aim to break.

VIVIEN:

Nay, Galahad, 'tis not entirely so!
I know one maid whose heart is bent for thee—
Bent cruelly, if not yet quite broke in twain.

SIR GALAHAD:

Pray, tell me of this maid. 'Twould pleasure me
To know her and console her if I could.

VIVIEN:

What balm of consolation wouldst thou bring
The sharp distemper of her troubled soul?

SIR GALAHAD:

I should advise her with due haste to seek
A nunnery, since having loved myself,
She could not stoop to lower than myself,
And therefore must win recompense alone
In pious raptures taught by holy deeds.

VIVIEN:

But if she were too worldly for this task
Of self-abasement?—if men deemed her fair,
And by the power of beauty, wit and grace
She dreamed of kindling from thy lethargy
A leap of flame as vital as her own?

SIR GALAHAD:

I should deplore her motive, were it seen,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

And recommend a nunnery, all the same.

VIVIEN:

O pitiless! has fancy never shaped
From shadow a life whose love thou couldst hold dear?

SIR GALAHAD:

No, never . . . Stay, thy question doth recall
A vision which at times hath haunted me.
It looked so pure and beautiful, I thought
At first it was my own similitude.
But later it convinced me that I erred,
And that the sex it bore was feminine.

VIVIEN:

And thou didst love this vision, Galahad?
Oh, tell me more! . . . What color were its eyes?

SIR GALAHAD:

Strange, Vivien, that while closer scanning thee
I do remember, past a gleam of doubt,
That it had eyes both hued and lit like thine.

VIVIEN:

(O Heaven! Wild heart, thy riot pulses curb!)
Yes, Galahad—and what more? Pray, had it wings?

SIR GALAHAD:

It did not necessarily have wings;
I think wings were not indispensable
To its angelical anatomy.
But ah, its hair! . . . a glory of living gold,
An aureole of splendor, like a saint's!

VIVIEN:

I mark thee well. This vision was a blonde.

ACT I.

SIR GALAHAD:

It was. An English, Early-English blonde.

VIVIEN:

And I, whose mortal eyes thou late hast called
Like to thy vision's—*I am a brunette!*
And yet, O Galahad, if my hair were hers—
If by some trick of magic change these locks
Took radiance vivid as thy vision's owned,
Wouldst thou, or couldst thou, Galahad—O my star
Of knightly sanctity and manful worth!—
Wouldst thou, or couldst thou—?

SIR GALAHAD:

Lady, I could not!

VIVIEN:

At last the truth is clear to thee—at last!

SIR GALAHAD:

It is, at last, and thou hast made it so.

VIVIEN:

And all thine answer is thy silent scorn!

SIR GALAHAD:

Scorn? Nay, I recommend a nunnery.

(He sings.)

I consider you, let me candidly to your face respond,
Not as perfectly satisfactory as I would a blonde.
Yet in ranking me as a personage who to wed were fain,
You have totally misinterpreted, I must here maintain.
Not to Galahad, as to Percivale, Bedivere, Geraint,
May the argument matrimonial its allurements paint;
For the solitude of a celibate I prefer—d so,
To a nunnery, to a nunnery—, go, go!

VIVIEN:

An indifference more contemptuous you could scarcely reach,
And the magnitude of my misery is beyond all speech.
I am confident you'd reciprocate the regard I bear,
Could I possibly make it manifest in my head of hair;
The affinity you have told me of would in mist abscond,
Opportunity being given me to become a blonde;
And you'd say to me self-reproachfully, with your heart aglow,
"To a nunnery? to a nunnery?—, no, no!"

SIR GALAHAD:

'Twould be difficult to exaggerate the sensation strange
That I certainly should experience at so great a change;
But it seems to me that the quality of my pure repute
Should reveal to you how unpractical is your present suit;
For so thoroughly unconnubial are the views I hold,
Their solidity would be permanent if your hair turned gold.
And in consequence I reiterate the remark you know—
"To a nunnery, to a nunnery—, go, go!"

VIVIEN:

I am obstinate in the attitude which I now assume—
That a physical incapacity has pronounced my doom;
I insist upon being positive that my hair's dark tint
Is accountable for the prejudice that you more than hint;
And I prophesy, O my Galahad, that the hour draws near
When the evidence of your sympathy will at last appear,
And you'll say to me, self-accusingly, while your eyes o'erflow—
"To a nunnery? to a nunnery?—, no, no!"

(Vivien now disappears into the castle.)

SIR GALAHAD *(alone):*

What meant she by that mood of prophecy?
Poor maid! can she have dreamed her locks and face
Will feel the touch of those weird lotions hid
By Merlin through so many a century?
I dare be sworn the girl hath some pet scheme
To win these flasks of the great seer by trick
Of flattery, or mock love's insidious guile.
Ah, doubly foiled, if such indeed her aim,

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

Since one as well might hope that yonder towers
Would push from battlement or barbican
A growth of living leaves, as Merlin thrill
To blandishments her smiles could whelm him with.
Age hath made pale the ruby in his blood,
As virtue long hath tamed the ripple in mine.

(King Arthur and all his knights, ladies, etc., appear from the castle, the populace also following. Lastly enters Merlin, clad in priestly robes, holding aloft the magic sword, Excalibur.)

KING ARTHUR:

Now for the rites that will simply and totally
Mighty Excalibur's praises attest,
Ere he is once again put sacerdotally
Down underground in his magical chest.
Never was blade that excelled by comparison
This one in temper or finish at all,
Fit to extinguish the Turk or the Saracen,
Fit to eradicate Roman or Gaul.

Nothing could vex curiosity crueller

Than to determine the source of his craft . . .
Who was the antediluvian jeweller
Able to shape that magnificent haft?
Yet should my fancy endeavor to speculate
How such a marvellous weapon was made,
I should be tempted by falsehood to peculate,
Since, like myself, he's a fabulous blade!

Still, when we gaze on his exquisite mystery—

Steel, silver, jewels and gold interblent—
Something we guess of his actual history
From the appearance we see him present.
Much of him seems to conclusively indicate
That he resulted from some sort of queer
Silversmith–blacksmith–and jeweller syndicate,
Gone out of partnership many a year!

If he could speak, what a record of victory

Would there be found in the words he would say,
Causing so often, without valedictory,
Many a hero to vanish away!

ACT I.

The New King Arthur

He, of our commonweal chief representative,
Makes opposition disclose its weak joint,
And if inclined to become argumentative,
Doesn't beg questions, but forces his point!

Though at his doings (I mention with jollity)

Many the critics who cavil and carp,
Dulness at least is by no means his quality,
All guaranteeing him notably sharp.
Justice, moreover, should say with sincerity,
Ere its account of him properly ends,
That while he treats all his foes with asperity,
No one can charge him with cutting his friends!

Persons whose peaceable souls would abolish him,

As the rude symbol of rapine and fray,
Rude as he is, must allow they could polish him
Not any more than he's polished to-day.
Nay, while his coarseness and lack of gentility
Haters of war with invective would flood,
Who can refuse him the right and ability,
Odd though it seems, to be proud of his blood?

CHORUS OF KNIGHTS, LADIES AND POPULACE:

No more thy strokes we need,
Our foes in flight to stir.
Farewell, thou friend indeed,
Farewell, thou famous magic brand, Excalibur!

Into thy vault below

The castle's moat, O sword,
To slumber dost thou go,
Desired no longer by our leader and our lord!

Let Merlin bear thee hence,

Unlock the seven huge gates,
And drop with reverence
Thy stalwart body where its mystic chest awaits!

Oh, down the seven steep stairs

Heed lest thou tumble not;
Firm be the hand that bears
Excalibur to his dark resting-spot!

O Merlin, let no rat

Thy foot too quickly curb,
No surreptitious bat,
No grim clandestine mouse thine equipoise disturb!

Be brave as thou art wise;

The stairs are slimed with ooze,
And therefore we advise,
O Merlin, that thou shalt put on thine over-shoes!

O think how shame would crush

Thy soul if thou shouldst wash
That sacred sword in slush,
Because thou didst not wear the requisite galosh!

The Lady of the Lake

With terrible dispatch
Her stern revenge would take
If thou shouldst even employ a single sulphur-match!

Thy journey must be free

From any guiding spark;
By absolute decree
Excalibur must go to bed quite in the dark.

O noble sword, thy might

In happiness we shelve,
Since thou hast come to fight
The last great battle of the fated twelve.

Farewell, secure from fray;

And shouldst thou crave, instead,

The New King Arthur

For further foes to slay,
We should reply, "Not any, thank thee— to bed."

Superbly canst thou strike,

As we in memory keep,
Yet we confess we like
Thee best, Excalibur, when thou art fast asleep.

Of course on moor or fen

Thy prowess all aver,
But we've observed that then
The orphans and the widows frequently occur. . . .

And so farewell, farewell, farewell, Excalibur!

In slumber's holy spell
Long may thy grandeur dwell,—
Yes, even till Doomsday's knell,
Farewell, farewell, farewell,
Our glorious and victorious sword, Excalibur!

(Merlin moves toward the castle, bearing the sword aloft, followed reverently by King Arthur, the knights, ladies and populace.)

END OF ACT I.

The New King Arthur

ACT II.

SCENE: A garden, with stately adornments, opening back upon the main hallway of King Arthur's castle. On one hand are the towers of the castle, crowding high up into a moonlit heaven. On the other hand we have a glimpse of the moonlit moat, and beneath it an iron door, closed. Defensive battlements are visible still farther on, at this side of the royal demesne. The time is a little before midnight. Distant music is heard, and the lights of a revel are seen, beyond the archway at back.

Enter Sir Galahad, musing pensively.

SIR GALAHAD:

With mercy I was harsh to Vivien.
Best shatter as I did by one stout blow
The breadth and height of her infatuate hope!
I think, in spite of what her speech averred,
That she is only one of many maids
Who bear me this devout idolatry.
Why should not many another worship me?
And is it vanity to deem they should?
I am not sure if modesty at all
Concern a being as perfect as myself . . .
Now, am I wrong to argue in this wise?
If I esteemed it wrong I straight should fast—
As I do fast if any speck of blame
Seem like to mar the unblemished life I live.
That is, I would abstain from ale at lunch,
And were my slice of capon dressed to taste,
I would with pious rigor shake my head
At thought of second helping. Praise of self,
In one so superexcellently pure
As I were mad to claim that I were not,
Would scarce be more than common sense of worth.
We would not chide the lily if her white lips
Found voice one day to tell the passing breeze,
"I am a lily and sweetly free from stain."
Why, therefore, when I say that Galahad
Is quite exceptionally void of sin,
Should I be held to boast by faultier minds?
No, on mature reflection, I will take
My usual share of capon when I lunch,
Or even my pasty (should a pasty tempt),
Or even two cups of ale (if thirst be keen),
and relish all with humble appetite

And holy veneration of myself.

(He sings.)

And yet what worldly thought hath shed
Its power across my soul?
If Vivien had a golden head,
Could I my love control?
If gold the head of Vivien clad,
Were love so lightly tamed? . . .
O Galahad, O Galahad,
You ought to be ashamed!

I quite detest this feeling new

That wakes my self-contempt;
If Vivien's locks were gold of hue,
Would love my heart exempt?
Ah, truth were best (when turned so sad)
By harmless fibs disclaimed . . .
O Galahad, O Galahad,
You ought to be ashamed!

In high alarm do I resent

This firm but fatal bond
Of unexpected sentiment
For Vivien as a blonde.
Against my will it makes me glad
With happiness unnamed . . .
O Galahad, O Galahad,
You ought to be ashamed!

Can I believe that love would set

Her raptures in my reach,
If Vivien, who is now brunette,
Should ever chance to bleach?
As one who slips from good to bad,
With fear I am inflamed . . .
O Galahad, O Galahad,
You ought to be ashamed!

(Sir Galahad moves mournfully away, while a chorus of revellers begins from within the castle.)

CHORUS OF REVELLERS:

With feast and sport
We now consort,
The merry dames of Arthur's court;
While joys abound
We here are found,
The Knights of Arthur's Table Round.

With nimble feet

We form and fleet,
In many a measure soft and sweet;
With shining eyes,
With happy sighs,
We dance till dawn shall scale the skies!

Oh, dance and sing,

While pages bring
The cups where golden dragons cling;
Oh, dance and drink,
With cups that clink,
And loitering hands that interlink!

Oh, "all is well"

The sentinel
To Camelot's town will shortly tell,
When proudly, soon,
At night's mid-noon,
The towers of Camelot meet the moon!

But we who quaff,

In mirth's behalf
The wine where lustres leap and laugh,
We dance the more
While many a score
Of sleepy burghers toss and snore.

In pomp and pride

The galleries glide,
By mantling banners glorified,
Or glittering tiers
Of chandeliers

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

On helms of glittering halberdiers.

At times we seem

Like shapes of dream
That out from shadowy legends gleam;
At times we throng
As they who long
Were ghosts of story and of song!

At times we hear,

Or faint or clear,
A phantom voice amid our cheer;
A wandering air
The words will bear,
"Ye are not and ye never were!"

Oh, dance with glee,

For what know we
Of things that are and things to be?
Oh, pour anew
The wine, for who
Hath power to part the false from true?

Oh, Merlin sage,

All gray with age,
Dost thou know more than prince or page?
Go, teach thy spells,
Where wisdom dwells,
To Dagonet, with his cap—and—bells!

Thy learning school,

By rote and rule,
With good King Arthur's gaudy fool!
For Dagonet now
Can guess, we vow,
The riddle of life as well as thou!

We all are here,

In festal gear,

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Gawaine, Geraint and Bedivere;
we all are met,
Elaine, Lynette,
And hosts of lovelier ladies yet!

With hest and wile,
With quip and smile,
The hours of banquet we beguile—
With cups that clink,
And blushes pink,
And loitering hands that interlink!

Oh, speed the rout,
And round about,
For life's a dream and death's a doubt!
Oh, pour the wine,
For who shall sign
The bounds of human and divine?

Oh, circle well,
For who can tell
The day that brings the funeral—bell?
Oh, fill the bowls,
And when it tolls,
May Saints have mercy on our souls!

With wines that wink
And cups that clink,
And loitering hands that interlink,
In feast and sport
We now consort,
The knights and dames of Arthur's court!

(Merlin now slowly enters, and pauses in revery.)

MERLIN:
The tenor of their wine—song likes me not.
Modred was right. My old prestige is lost.
They rank me half in jeer with Arthur's fool,

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

That grinning Dagonet, whose wry wit can strike
With random malice, like a smitten snake.
Oh, well it is temptation comes my way;
Had Lancelot failed to tempt, I must have made
Some other shift to work my vengeful spleen.
I wonder, now and then, if dame or lord
Have chanced, by rumor led or by surmise,
On the cold ugly truth that I am not
wholly the same miraculous personage
I rate myself . . . Who's there? 'Tis thou, sir fool?

(Dagonet, the fool, has cautiously entered.)

DAGONET:

Hats off, good Merlin, when the fool draws nigh.
He's king, thou knowest it well, when t'other fool,
His royal master, doth fool otherwhere.
Nay, I miss terms; thou dost not don a hat;
Thou hast but several centuries of hair,
White as the whitest plume the goose can vaunt.

MERLIN:

Peace, peace, thou fool. The seneschals within
Will give thee cakes and comfits of thy fill.
Get hence. I muse.

DAGONET:

Nay, Merlin, so do I.

MERLIN:

Pray, fool, on what large matter dost thou muse?

DAGONET:

On my huge age. That I, last birthday, reached
Three thousand years of life—and live to tell't.

MERLIN:

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Thou mockest me, thou wriggling eel of man.
I think thy head is like the viper's own—
The brains of it pushed out by venom. Go!

DAGONET:

Now, marry, if a man hath skill enough,
I see not why he should lack power to be
Immortal . . . till he dies.

MERLIN:

What saidst thou, knave?

DAGONET:

Nay, never knave, good Merlin—always fool;
A most complaisant fool, withal, and one
That knows to keep a secret jealously,
As magpies keep their spoil.

(He laughs gleefully.)

MERLIN:

What secret, pray?
I warrant 'twas a worse fool than thyself
Who gave thee one.

DAGONET:

What I do know I know!
(He sings.)
At Camelot town,
With staff and gown,
A seer doth dwell in great renown.
Of stars and moon,
His comrades boon,
He chants in many a mystic rune.

He claims to deal,
For woe or weal,

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

In spells and charms that hurt or heal—
To plot and plan,
By curse and ban,
By amulet and by talisman.

Perchance 'tis true,
Howe'er they grew,
His powers of magic are not few;
Beside him here,
I scent a queer
Unsavory brimstone atmosphere.

But when he states
His birthday dates
Beyond the Flood, he—fabricates.
And when he cries
He never dies,
Why, Dagonet, then, declares he lies!

CHORUS OF REVELLERS (*heard within*):
O Merlin sage,
All gray with age,
Dost thou know more than prince or page?
Go teach thy spells,
Where wisdom dwells,
To Dagonet, with his cap—and—bells!

DAGONET (*dancing scornfully*):
O mighty mage,
Believed so sage,
We both are fools, and earn our wage.
O seer most high,
You're young as I;
You say you're not, but you know you lie!

CHORUS OF REVELLERS:
O Merlin, school
By rote and rule
Thy learning with King Arthur's fool;
For Dagonet now
Can guess, we vow,

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

The riddle of life as well as thou!

DAGONET (*dancing before Merlin while he recedes*):

Ah, go to school,
From now till Yule,
to Dagonet, good King Arthur's fool.
For when you cry
You'll never die,
You don't prevaricate—no, you lie!

(Merlin disappears into the castle, Dagonet dancing before him.)

DAGONET (*alone*):

By these white moonbeams folding these gray towers,
It needs not even so apt a fool as I
To note some wild work is abroad to-night.
Thrice did I see Sir Modred scowl by stealth
At our brave king, while subtle Vivien
Stood at his arm and whispered in his ear.
Then, too, the Queen . . . her pallor while she went
Between the tapestries of the great South hall,
With Lancelot at her side in quick hot speech . . .
What means it all? Ah, well, a fool hath ears . . .
Too large his ears, they say, too long his tongue.
Howbeit, I know a fool who hath listened much
Already, and can listen more, betimes.
A very wise and comfortable fool
Is Dagonet, since he loves to serve his lord,
King Arthur, and with all his lack of wit
May serve more wisely than some wise fools dream.

(Queen Guinevere has meanwhile appeared from archway.)

GUINEVERE:

What dost thou, Dagonet, moping in the moon?

DAGONET:

I mope not, sweet my lady, but compose
A soft love-ballad to the maid I love.

ACT II.

GUINEVERE:

Lov'st thou a maid? In mercy wed her not.
Bedlam doth brim with madness, as it is.
There, get thee thence; that gargoyle leer of thine
Jars on my mood—nay, tarry not to bow.

DAGONET (*aside*):

(If I but loved thy lord the less, fair Queen,
I'd show thee, who hast ever used me ill,
How fools can hate. . . . But no; I serve the King.
Though curses be my thanks I still will serve.

(Dagonet goes out.)

GUINEVERE:

How dizzy looks the abyss of my misdeed,
Seen from the precipice of sheer resolve!
Yet now it is too late; I dare not pause.
And these majestic towers and buttresses,
Courts, galleries, gardens, all—in losing these,
What may I win? Perchance a frigid throne
Set in dull wastes of country, heaths and wilds.
And yet . . . the face-wash and the hair-dye; here
Is guerdon . . . Nay, but wherefore? If I beamed
A hundredfold more beautiful than now,
What profit, in a land of clods and churls?
Ah, why should this unrest in human hearts
Yearn always after change, though change be loss?

(She sings.)

O lady moon, O mother moon, O moon that movest high,
Elucidate, explain to me, the wherefore and the why!
What is it that coerces us our mortal term to mar
By always wishing we were not the very thing we are?
O lady moon, in splendid state,
In beauty pure and high,
Investigate and intimate
The wherefore and the why!

The New King Arthur

O queenly moon, O saintly moon, pale priestess of the sky,

If X be X, what makes him want forever to be Y?

If Y is Y, and well-to-do, then wherefore is he led

Invariably to repine because he is not Z?

O lady moon, in lonely state,

Attend my longing sigh;

Enunciate and extricate

The wherefore and the why!

O sombre moon, O sober moon, however well we thrive,

Why should we mourn that two and two make four instead of five?

And when our ducks are healthy ducks, and swim in handsome lakes,

Why should we droop with discontent because they are not drakes?

O lady moon, of glow sedate,

With gracious heed reply;

Communicate and indicate

The wherefore and the why!

(Lancelot now appears, joining Guinevere.)

SIR LANCELOT:

My Queen, it lacks not long of twelve o'clock.

Thy knowledge, as I trust, is now complete,

By just what means to grasp and gain the sword.

GUINEVERE:

Yes, yes . . . Oh, Lancelot, should I quite break down!

SIR LANCELOT:

Break down? Ah, that would break me up, my Queen!

Forgive the jest, which hath a modern tinge,

Unseemly in our quaint Arthurian age.

GUINEVERE:

Oh, Lancelot, I'm a very foolish queen!

Thou knowest I am; deny it not . . . Pray tell,

Shall not my altered tresses and new skin

Find many to admire them in your realm?

ACT II.

SIR LANCELOT:

Myself above all others, glorious Queen!

GUINEVERE:

How many others?

SIR LANCELOT:

We in family

Are seven, if I count fair the list of us.

GUINEVERE:

What! seven! And shall no more than fourteen eyes
Pay homage to my beauty every day?

SIR LANCELOT:

Yes, vassals, village-folk, and—

GUINEVERE:

Out on thee!

What care I whether these admire or no?
Shall I be Queen of Love and Beauty, then,
At no more jousts? or head no cavalcade
Of merry falconers in forests green?
No court, no knights, no ladies, as of yore!
Only the secrets of old Merlin's flasks,
The face-wash and the hair-dye, and—

SIR LANCELOT:

Myself!

My passionate homage, Guinevere, will hold
All other that their deed or speech could pay.

(He takes a lute from near by, and sings.)

If I should make some perfect song,

Your smile to claim,
Another voice, more sweet and strong,
Would wake another song and shame
My own, erelong—
If I should make some perfect song,
Your smile to claim.

If I should match in marble pure

That shape divine,
The years would level and obscure
My sculpture till no certain sign
Were left secure—
If I should match in marble pure
That shape divine!

If I caught colors from the sea,

The flowers, the sun,
To paint your picture with—ah me!
Back to their native bournes each one
At last would flee—
If I caught colors from the sun,
The flowers, the sea!

Since I can praise from many ways

No deathless way,
'Tis sweet to dream that for all days
Immortally my love shall stay,
Its own best praise—
Since I can praise from many ways
No deathless way!

(Merlin has now appeared.)

MERLIN:

A tender song, but this were scarce the hour
For ditties tuned in such a lightsome key.
The Queen hath full instruction of her task?

GUINEVERE:

Ay, full, and will perform it if her nerves
Can possibly endure the dreadful stress.

MERLIN:

Nerves, madam? Dost thou not anticipate
Thy time by several centuries too soon?
Nerves feminine, if right I prophesy,
Will not importantly develop till
Somewhere about the nineteenth century,
When ills of strange name, like neuralgia,
Dyspepsia and hysteria, wide should rage.

SIR LANCELOT:

Great prophet!—fit Prime Minister indeed!

GUINEVERE:

Nathless I now do feel what nerves are like . . .
Oh, Merlin, Lancelot, why do we commit
This reckless deed, when all have much to lose,
When none, in losing much, may safely count
As absolute result on winning more?

MERLIN:

I cannot give the answer you exact;
It is immersed in psychologic mist;
And yet I will advance it as a fact
That many people stalk
From virtue's proper walk
Because of some obscure cerebral twist.
And therefore what we do I would explain
By venturing the clause
That it is done because
All three of us are morally insane.

GUINEVERE:

How thoroughly delightful to be told
This welcome and invigorating news!
With altered gaze my conduct I behold,

ACT II.

When on the grim affair
At last I bring to bear
Your liberally scientific views;
Since now 'tis far more easy to explain
The reason of our lapse
By saying that perhaps
All three of us are morally insane.

SIR LANCELOT:

Extenuating circumstances ought
Undoubtedly to help condone our crime,
And possibly you've neither of you thought
That we have been compelled
To live in days of eld,—
A most romantic yet barbaric time!
So this consideration may explain
The mischief we are at
More lucidly than that
All three of us are morally insane.

GUINEVERE, MERLIN AND SIR LANCELOT:

Oh, yes, though we are keenly picturesque,
Our casuistry may appear amiss,
And stimulate sardonical burlesque
For persons yet unborn,
Who probably will scorn
Our total want of moral synthesis.
And so this new reflection may explain
Our object of debate
Much better than to state
All three of us are morally insane.

SIR LANCELOT:

Let us return, my Queen, else all within
Will gossip of our absence from the rout.

GUINEVERE:

Sir Lancelot, for the last time thou and I
As Queen and subject will together dance.
And then . . . Why, then I shall be Queen no more—
Only the most ungrateful wife on earth!

SIR LANCELOT:

But think—you may be morally insane.

GUINEVERE:

Alas! that plea may legally excuse
The brazen indiscretion I commit.
But can it salve the wound of conscience?—no!

SIR LANCELOT (*to Merlin*):

Thou hast no salves for wounds of conscience, eh?

MERLIN:

There grew a field—herb hereabouts, wherefrom
I once distilled a physic for remorse.
But scarce the people of its use had learned
When I was so besieged by calls for it
That roundly at last I cried to them, "Go cure
Your own remorsees," and I spilled my drug.

GUINEVERE:

Let us pass in, Sir Lancelot, thou and I—
The wicked courtier and his foolish Queen!

SIR LANCELOT:

Remember, Merlin. On the stroke of twelve
All three of us do meet where now we stand.

(Sir Lancelot and Guinevere go out.)

MERLIN:

Small marvel that the Queen should hate her fault
Ere consummate! I cannot well decide
Wherefore she lets herself slip into it.
True, Lancelot is a comelier make of man,
Steps freer and hath more majesty of build.
Then Arthur is a most transcendent prig;

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

I think 'twere hard for one to ever find,
Not though he lived three spans of mortal life,
A more self-centered prig than is our King.
Not Galahad may compare with him in this,
For Galahad's glory of self is like a child's.
And yet I think some motive sways the Queen,
Ungessed by any one save Lancelot.
Nor is it her regard for Lancelot,
Nor yet . . .

VIVIEN (*who has covertly approached*):
Great seer, the revel tempts not thee?

MERLIN:
Nor thee, it seems, fair Lady Vivien.

VIVIEN:
Thou call'st me fair; I would be fair indeed,
Had I that face-wash and that hair-dye, kept
In separate flasks of crystal by thyself
This many and many a year. O give them me!

MERLIN:
An idle tale. No charms like these are mine.

VIVIEN:
Denial is easy, but I know . . . I know!
(Now, could I win these flasks ere twelve be struck,
I would play false to Modred and inform
The King what treachery menaces his realm!)
Nay, Merlin, hide the treasures if thou wilt,
Yet Vivien, who already holds thee dear,
For such an act of generosity
Would pay thee all her heart in recompense!

MERLIN:
(I never had such flasks, as Heaven could prove!
Yet I have heard this rumor, and it served
My purpose to augment authority

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

and fame for witchcraft by a mute assent.)

VIVIEN:

What mutterest thou so weirdly to thyself,
Great Merlin? Is it bane to hurt poor me?

MERLIN:

Nay, lady. Rather would I strike the dust
From some rare moth's voluptuous-colored wings,
Than send a sorrow to thy guileless life.

VIVIEN:

I beg from thee those magic flasks, kind seer!

MERLIN:

Would I could give them! Yet it may not be!

VIVIEN:

Then grant me but a few dear drops from each!

MERLIN:

(I never felt so hollow a fraud as now!)
A few drops, Lady Vivien? No, not one!

VIVIEN:

Not one! . . . What symmetry thy nose conveys,
Here in the dubious moonlight's dreamy dusk!
I always yearned to love a man who had
Importance, dignity and wisdom, all
Blent in the single compass of a nose!

MERLIN:

I have been told ere now my nose was not
Contemptible . . . Yet seek not for the flasks!

The New King Arthur

VIVIEN:

And then thy beard, thy patriarchal beard!
Always from early girlhood I have longed
To win the love and loyalty of a man
With beard so admirably white as thine!

(Galahad now appears from ramparts of castle, where he has been walking, and overhears Vivien's last words.)

SIR GALAHAD:

O faithless girl, for shame!
O girl of trick and feint!
O clever young tactician!
You make love just the same
To Galahad, the saint,
As Merlin, the magician!

MERLIN:

Has Vivien then made love
To you, my spotless child?—
I scarce the tale can credit!
Yet Galahad, my dove,
My lily undefiled—
Remember that you said it!

VIVIEN:

O Galahad, I see
Your eyes upon me beam
With look intensely haughty;
Yet sometimes we are free
From blame, although we seem
Immeasurably naughty!

SIR GALAHAD:

No wonder, wily friend,
That I esteemed your mind
In lore of love omniscient;
I now can comprehend
The causes that combined
To render you proficient.

The New King Arthur

MERLIN:

A censure so severe
From this most mild of men
Should wound its object sadly.
From all accounts, I fear,
My Lady Vivien,
You've been behaving badly!

VIVIEN:

Of course I feel the stings
Of all this fuss and buzz,
As would not be surprising.
And yet so many things
One innocently does
Are counted compromising!

SIR GALAHAD:

I fail to catch the sense
Of your rejoinder dark,
Though all its wit conceding;
I rest on evidence
(As lawyers would remark)
The case that I am pleading.

(King Arthur now appears from archway of castle.)

KING ARTHUR:

What, lords and ladies, chanting i' the moon?
Wise Merlin here? and thou, Sir Galahad?
And Lady Vivien? Where, then is the Queen?

VIVIEN:

We know not, good my liege. Does she not dance?

KING ARTHUR:

She hath not danced this hour, I will be sworn.
I thought to find her here. Why look ye all
At your most royal sire thus bitinglly?

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

MERLIN:

Not biting, your Grace, yet with due leave
We all have dread lest you be half in wine.

KING ARTHUR:

Half, think ye? I am nigh three quarters in't.

VIVIEN:

My lord!

SIR GALAHAD:

King Arthur—thou!

MERLIN:

Incredible!

KING ARTHUR:

Nay, credible enough. I like it, too,
This being in wine the first time o' my life.
How sits the mad mood, Merlin, on thy King?
Say quick, or I'll have Dagonet here, my fool,
To answer in thy stead.

MERLIN:

It suits thee well,
My lord, as all moods. (Even in wine, still prig!)

KING ARTHUR:

Am I not blameless knight and gentleman,
Quite as before? I warrant you I am!
Where's Galahad? . . . Ah, so thou hast kept from wine,
My prodigy? Alas! thou hast no more
A rival in thy King, but reignest sole
For all abstemious habits under sun.

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

(Guinevere and Lancelot now appear, and afterward Modred.)

Sir Lancelot and the Queen! So, Guinevere,
Thou'rt found at last. Now, by the saints, I ask
Is this nice courtesy to leave thy lord,
So late returned as victor from dread wars,
And while the jubilant revel misses thee,
Steal with a knight of ours to watch the moon
Float pensive over Camelot's thronging towers?

GUINEVERE:

I do beseech thy clemency, my liege.
Sir Lancelot kept at heart an eating pain,
And sought my counsel with desire to use
What help alleviative I could lend.
(Some falsehood must I coin, and why not this?)

VIVIEN *(to Modred):*

Mark how the King doth gaze on Lancelot.
Can this be jealousy's hot stab and cut,
Or do the wine-fumes breed mere flitting wrath?

MODRED *(to Vivien):*

'Tis neither. Wine doth make him jest—no more.
The King could never bring himself to dream
That any spouse of his preferred him not
Before all men, live, dead or yet to be.

KING ARTHUR:

What pain of soul could my good Lancelot have
He would not tell his King, yet trust his Queen
To-night in gallant confidence withal?

MODRED *(to Vivien):*

What said I? Go persuade the swan her plumes
Are soot-black ere thou couldst make Arthur think

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

The woman breathes who does not worship him!

KING ARTHUR:

Ah, now I think, my Lancelot, thou perchance
Dost grieve remembering that fair girl, Elaine,
Who floated down to Camelot in a barge,
Quite dead for love of thee.

GUINEVERE (*to Lancelot*):

Say yes—say yes.

SIR LANCELOT:

Why, yes, my lord. This was and is my grief.

KING ARTHUR:

A sorry and pretty tale; I mind it well.
Elaine, the lily—maid of Astolat,
Died all for love of thee, who loved her not.
Ah me! how worse than foolish in the maid!
Had she but seen ourself, now, all were changed.
We had consoled her graciously. Perchance,
On noting that she loved us to excess,
We would have given her out Sir Galahad,
The lily of men to wed the lily—maid.

SIR GALAHAD:

Thanks, thanks, your Majesty. (what gross conceit!)

SIR LANCELOT:

(Was ever such a pattern of a man,
So drenched and steeped in arrant egotism?)

KING ARTHUR:

I made a ballad on the lily—maid;
How goes it? Let me con it in my thoughts.

The New King Arthur

MODRED (*to Vivien*):

(Twelve soon will strike, and if the King bide here,
'Twill ruin the whole conspiracy they plan.)

MERLIN (*to Sir Lancelot and the Queen*):

(If he should sing the ballad, draughts of time
Were drawn, ere midnight, that we ill can spare.)

GUINEVERE:

(I know . . . Yet when he wills to sing, he sings.)

SIR LANCELOT:

(He deems his ballad sweet; 'tis trivial stuff.
Peace rest thee, lily–maid of Astolat!)

KING ARTHUR:

I have it, every word and every line!
It is an almost faultless piece of work
(*He sings.*)
In a castle quite decayed,
 Not so very long ago,
Dwelt a modest little maid,
 With a neck as white as snow,
And a manner that was meek and unconventional.
To this castle's gate, one day,
Did the good Sir Lancelot stray,
Though his visit there by means was intentional.

CHORUS:

O you captivating Lancelot,
So clever to advance a lot
Of pleasantries that ended but in pain!
 Though your conduct was inviolate,
 With love you did annihilate
The lily–maid of Astolat, Elaine.

KING ARTHUR:

How her rosy ears did hum

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

As she oped the castle-door,
And besought the knight to come
Where her family of four
Had been lunching upon nothing in particular!
It was certainly no sin
For Elaine to ask him in,
Though already somewhat off her perpendicular!

CHORUS:

O you captivating Lancelot,
You're capable to glance a lot,
Yet from imprudent speeches you refrain!
To your graces not insensible,
She found you indispensable,
The lily-maid of Astolat, Elaine!

KING ARTHUR:

To her brothers he was kind,
And the aged, Earl, her sire;
All the culture of his mind
He induced them to admire,
When the lily-maid was watching and was listening.
But he failed to see the blush
That her tender cheek would flush,
Or the lights that in her lovely eyes were glistening.

CHORUS:

O you captivating Lancelot,
You owe to circumstance a lot,
For making you excel in brawn and brain;
But unhappy was the day with her
You had a word to say with her,
The lily-maid of Astolat, Elaine!

KING ARTHUR:

By necessity the stay
Of Sir Lancelot was brief,
And he shortly rode away,
To the girl's exceeding grief,
And the flattering regret of all her family;

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

But before a year had fled,
Poor Elaine was lying dead—
On her modest little bed was lying clammily!

CHORUS:

O you captivating Lancelot,
You've added to romance a lot,
Yet still you've every reason to complain
Of the mournful notoriety
She gave you in society,
The lily–maid of Astolat, Elaine!

KING ARTHUR:

But the luckless lily–maid,
By her *ante–mortem* charge,
Had her beauteous body laid
On an ornamental barge,
That to Camelot floated sombre and funereal;
And the lords and ladies here,
When they saw the barge appear,
Thought they scented very scandalous material.

CHORUS:

O you captivating Lancelot,
In Italy or France a lot
Of similar events we could sustain,
But in England we have froze a bit
And fear she meant to pose a bit,
The lily–maid of Astolat, Elaine!

KING ARTHUR:

Yet Sir Lancelot was sound
In his conduct as a knight,
For the evidence was found
To exonerate him quite,
In a posthumous epistle most poetical.
It was hid within her breast,
And intelligence expressed
Of a passion unrequited and pathetic!

CHORUS:

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

O you captivating Lancelot,
Your manners may entrance a lot,
Yet all ignoble dealings you disdain;
For to smile upon and fascinate
Was hardly to assassinate
The lily–maid of Astolat, Elaine!

KING ARTHUR:

Pardon, dear Lancelot, if our verse offends.
We think that we ere now have sung it thee.
Our mood is merry at whiles, as thou dost know,
When onerous cares of state engross us not.

SIR LANCELOT:

The greatest have been merry amid their cups,
And therefore why not thou? (My sarcasm stings
No more than would a nettle sting an ox!)

KING ARTHUR:

True, I am great. No greater yet has lived.
I sometimes marvel at the plenitude
Of mine own greatness—just as thou, I know,
Sir Galahad, marvellest at thy pure fame.

SIR GALAHAD:

Nay, sire, I rank my virtue with naught else
That lives on earth. I draw my line at earth.

KING ARTHUR:

Come, now, Sir Galahad; and I rank my strength
Of greatness well above thy sinless life.

SIR GALAHAD:

Then does thy majesty in error dwell,
Nor wouldst thou speak like this except in wine.

KING ARTHUR:

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Thou darest thus to brave my royalty?

SIR GALAHAD:

Yes, for if angry thou wouldst cease to be
A blameless knight and stainless gentleman.

KING ARTHUR:

I had forgot. I must be always those.
Yet, Galahad, dost thou positively think
Thyself mine equal? Candidly respond.

SIR GALAHAD:

Hadst thou my purity, thou wouldst excel
As never king excelled since time began.
Had I thy force in fight, I would be more
Than thou this hour canst ever dream to be.

MODRED (*to Vivien*):

(Mark how they wrangle now in discourse hot.
Forsooth, a pair of kings, the realm of each
His own immeasurable love for self!)

SIR LANCELOT (*to Guinevere*):

("Twill soon be twelve. Must we stand here and list
To interchange of vanities like these?
Address the King; persuade him to return
Ere languor in the revel he has quit
Shall mar its joy and spoil his worth as host.)

GUINEVERE (*to Sir Lancelot*):

(Fain would I speak, yet fear my wariest phrase
Might wake the alert distrust I would avoid.)

CHORUS OF REVELLERS (*heard within*):

Oh, dance with glee,
For what know we
Of things that are and things to be?

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Oh, pour anew
The wine, for who
Hath power to part the false from true?

KING ARTHUR:

Thy hand, my Galahad. Heardest thou that strain?
The knights and nobles call us. Well, agree
We both are almost, in our separate ways,
Pre-eminently perfect, yet not quite.

SIR GALAHAD:

It seems to me, my liege, that I am quite.

KING ARTHUR:

Incorrigible Galahad! Farewell.
I go to join the dance again. And thou,
Sir Lancelot, hast thou ended with the Queen?
Come all—thou Merlin, too, our seer and priest,
Come, taste the flashing wine from golden cups,
And dream thy lore its jocund wisdom mates!

(They all retire except Modred and Vivien.)

MODRED:

A happy chance. The wine-song from within
Has lured King Arthur back. Now, Vivien—ick;
Hide yonder with me in the buttresses.

(The form of a cloaked man steals along back of stage.)

VIVIEN:

Look, Modred. What strange flitting shape was that?
Nay, saw you nothing?

MODRED:

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Nothing, as I live.

VIVIEN:

Well, well, perchance I only dreamed I saw.

(She goes with Modred into ambush.)

(An interval. The stage is empty. Guinevere appears from castle. Sir Lancelot and Merlin soon follow.)

GUINEVERE:

I bade the pages ply the King with wine.

MERLIN:

Right hast thou done, my Queen. 'Tis twelve. Prepare.
Here are the keys, and yonder is the vault.

SIR LANCELOT:

Go bravely and go firmly, Guinevere.
How art thou shod? In overshoes, I trust.

GUINEVERE:

Look. Are these queenly feet thou dost behold?

SIR LANCELOT:

O desecrated feet! . . . And yet endure
The ordeal; it will not be for long. Farewell!

(Twelve o'clock sounds from one of the towers.)

MERLIN:

Farewell, my Queen. Haste ere the final stroke!

The New King Arthur

(Guinevere hurries to the door of the vault, unlocks it, and disappears.)

MODRED *(heard from the dimness):*

Look, Vivien. She has gone to seek the sword.

VIVIEN:

And art thou sure to seize it first of all,
When she emerges? What if thou shouldst fail?

MODRED:

I shall not fail. Nor Lancelot nor the sage
Dream we are here. Take courage; all is well.

SIR LANCELOT:

Merlin, what voice was that? Or did my sense
Entrap me with the semblance of a voice?

MERLIN:

Sir Lancelot, I heard nothing. All is still.

(A noise of thunder is heard, and the vault is redly illumined.)

SIR LANCELOT:

Heaven save us, Merlin! Is the Queen beset
By peril that we had not counted on?
What mean this glare and sound?

MERLIN:

 Allay thy fears.
'Tis but the Lady of the Lake, whose wrath
As guardian of Excalibur we rouse.
Thus far hath Guinevere her task achieved;
Each minute, now, is big with fateful chance.

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

(The moonlight becomes obscured; the thunder grows louder.)

SIR LANCELOT:

Alas! the imperilled Queen! We both were mad
To let her dare those diabolic spells.

MERLIN:

This last wild crash gave signal that the sword
Was lifted from his chest below the moat.
All future risk threats only her return.

SIR LANCELOT:

And see . . . the vault grows ruddier; that is well.
If now no actual flame shall touch the Queen,
This fairy wrath will dissipate the dark,
And so make easier each new step she takes.

(Guinevere soon emerges from the vault, staggering, and dragging the sword, whose hilt she clutches with both hands. The darkness becomes denser, and the thunder—peals are of greater volume. She utters a shriek as the sword is seized from her hand by some one whose face she cannot discern, and who instantly afterward vanishes. The darkness is diminishing when she encounters Merlin and Sir Lancelot.)

MERLIN:

Thou hast secured the sword, heroic Queen!

SIR LANCELOT:

Flower of all courage feminine art thou!
I kiss thy hands—d yet . . . they bear no sword!

MERLIN:

Excalibur? What hast thou done with him?
Just ere the darkness grew so dense, I saw
Thee bearing him, close—clutched, from out the vault.

GUINEVERE:

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Nay, some one seized him from me, vanishing
So swiftly in the lurid dusk, I keep
No record of his lineaments or shape.

MERLIN:

O dire misfortune! Ruin is now our doom!

SIR LANCELOT:

O dread fatality!

(Encountering Modred.)

Traitor, it was thou!

Thou hast Excalibur! Confess, or feel
My sword forever make thine answers mute!

MODRED:

By every saint I swear to you, the brand
Excalibur I have not, nor conceive
Whither he has been spirited, or by whom!

VIVIEN:

What Modred utters is the whitest truth.

GUINEVERE:

Some grewsome mystery lies beneath all this.

MERLIN:

Excalibur has disappeared! Oh, shame,
Disaster, punishment unspeakable!

SIR LANCELOT:

The King approaches. Modred, we are all
Conspirators against him; that is plain.

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Vivien and you in ambush were concealed,
Knowing our plot to rape Excalibur,
And hoping to secure him for yourselves.
Confess that you, as we, were deep in guile.

MODRED:

We do confess!

VIVIEN:

We both are black with blame!

SIR LANCELOT:

So be it. Then let us all stand firm of front,
And cleave, each one, to what the other says.
Our single hope of safety dwells in this.
Let all cry innocence with common tongue,
And fight it out hereafter as we may,
When watched no longer of the royal eye.

(King Arthur now appears from castle, with many knights, ladies, retainers, etc.)

KING ARTHUR:

What sounds are these
That break upon our joy,
Our blood to freeze,
Our revel to destroy?
What means, where all was recently so quiet,
This horrid elemental roar and riot?

CHORUS:

What means it all?
(We thrill with nameless fright.)
Has somebody, with boldness to appall,
Done something that offends the rules of right?
Who, then, is the delinquent? Let us meet him,
And with proper indignation greet him!

KING ARTHUR:

We danced, we sang,

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Our hearts were filled with peace.

This dreaded clang
Began, and would not cease.
And while with merriment we strove to shun it,
We feared, each one, lest what we drank had done it.

CHORUS:

Oh, no, a little wine
Of brand exceeding dear,
Could never make the intellect incline
To such a strange deception of the ear.
Habitual intemperance might do it,
But as for that, we all of us eschew it!

MERLIN:

Some impious hand, my lord, hath dared to steal
Thy sacred sword, Excalibur. The vault
Flared red with light a moment since, while bursts
Of thunder shook the heaven, and darkness veiled
The journeying moon. Sir Modred thought he saw
A cloaked shape dart away at headlong speed,
Bearing the sword; but who the dastard thief
We dream not, and the keys that ope the vault
I keep, as always, guarded with my life.

KING ARTHUR:

My sword, Excalibur! Blood, flame and death!
Where are thy magic arts, astrologer?
Catch me the knave, and I will see him swing
This very night from Camelot's tallest tower.

(Dagonet now appears. He hurries to King Arthur with the sword, and lays it at his feet, kneeling.)

OMNES:

What, Dagonet! Then did Dagonet steal the sword?

DAGONET:

Nay, Dagonet saved it for his kingly sire.
My liege, they all are traitors—Merlin there,
And Lancelot, Modred, Vivien—yes, even she
Thou trustest with surpassing trust—thy Queen!

ACT II.

SIR LANCELOT:

What insolence is this? Thou canst not, sire,
Believe the fool who babbles its mad tale.

GUINEVERE:

Nay, Lancelot, do not dream the king believes.

MERLIN:

Thy fool, King Arthur, hath purloined the sword,
And fearing after, with a true thief's fear,
Flings this atrocious charge upon ourselves.

MODRED:

I mind me now of what I had forgot,
My King, or deemed not worth remembering.
This fool, while Merlin dozed, some three hours since,
I saw emerging, with a cat-like tread,
From the seer's chamber in the northmost tower.
He paled and cowered when I confronted him,
Threading by chance the outer corridor.
'Twas then, past doubt, that he had filched the keys
From Merlin, afterward returning them,
I dare be sworn, when he had oped the vault
And made all ready for his midnight theft.

GUINEVERE:

And now, in terror, sire, he soils *my* name
With gross aspersion. Ah, 'tis horrible!

VIVIEN:

A fool's mere random transport. Who but scorns
To credit him, or deems his empty rant
Of weightier purport than the idle breeze?

DAGONET:

My lord, King Arthur, hear me when I say—

ACT II.

KING ARTHUR:

That thou art crafty knave no less than fool!
Speak not another word! Already crime
By right has drawn the noose about thy throat!
That we can pardon thee is due alone
To thy scant wit, whose work may not be judged
Equal with villainies of sounder brains.

DAGONET:

Hear me, Lord Arthur! Mercifully hear!

KING ARTHUR:

Get hence, poor Dagonet; liberty and life
Are compassed for thee in our pity, and this
We give from natural benignancy,
Being perhaps the most magnanimous king
That ever sat or shall sit throned to rule.

DAGONET:

My lord, I plead with you—

KING ARTHUR:

Why, seize him, then,
Sir Lamorack, Sir Gawain, and lodge him safe
Within the nearest monastery. Instruct
The monks to watch him as a lunatic
Of dangerous fashion and conceit, and tell
The holy men how he essayed to steal
My brand, Excalibur.

(Dagonet is borne away.)

Good people, all,

I pray you will observe my noble act.
It is but one of many hundreds more
Since I began to reign. Make note of it,
Good people; at some future day 'twill serve

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

With gold memorial letters to illumine
One of my many monuments on earth.

SIR GALAHAD:

I hope your majesty does not expect
Complete monopoly, when you are dead,
Of all the monuments that shall be built.

GUINEVERE:

I tremble, Arthur, at the indignity
Of that fool's reckless charge. Sir Lancelot, thou
Must feel the scorching wrong of Dagonet's words.

SIR LANCELOT:

That jester's falsehood? Why, the tinkle of bells
Trilled through its gravity, making all mere masque
And mummery, till I scarce kept wrath to frown.

MERLIN:

Sir Lancelot speaks in wisdom. Nay, to heed
Such fury of accusation were to clothe
Slander with dignity, had even our fool
Been other than the garrulous imp he is.
(My Queen, be wary lest thy lord should see
Thine overshoes peep forth below thy robe.
Trifles like these might sow calamity—
And rid the holy men of Dagonet's care.)

VIVIEN:

(Sir Galahad, canst thou never love me, then,
If I remain brunette? I promise thee
That no brunette of more domestic turn
Has ever lived as wife than I would prove.)

SIR GALAHAD:

(Hadst thou been blonde . . . ah, well, I will not say
What joy has perished for all future time!
O Vivien, wildly, passionately loved!—)

VIVIEN:

(My Galahad! Dost thou mean it?)

SIR GALAHAD:

(No, not now.

I would have meant it, wert thou only blonde.
Farewell, my blonde that art not nor canst be,
This woful barrier lies between us twain
Forevermore. I shall be virgin knight
Henceforth, with one long sorrow in my soul,
And all my dreams and thoughts to one sad tune
Set ceaseless—"She might have been a blonde!")

KING ARTHUR:

Why should this rough mishap our joyance mar?
Let us forget that Dagonet's folly was.
It still wants hours of dawn. Come, ladies, knights,
With thanks that good Excalibur is saved,
Let us fare back to revel and high pomp.

(He sings.)

Excalibur, the sacred sword,
Back to his royal owner is restored.
Give thanks, with high acclaim, with loud accord;
Let Camelot's towers and halls their echoes deep
O'er buttress, moat and bastion rise and sweep.
Excalibur, that we could ill afford
To lose, has found again his rightful lord!
Give thanks, give thanks,
Our loyal people, of all grades and ranks,
Give thanks, give thanks!

GENERAL CHORUS:

Give thanks, give thanks,
That by whatever curious tricks or pranks,
From out his awful chest
Some thief has dared to wrest
Our great Excalibur, the villain gains
Prompt punishment for all his evil pains.
Of course the present ode
Wherewith we celebrate this unsuccessful crime

ACT II.

The New King Arthur

Should mark an episode
That merits chronicling in future time.
And yet we greatly fear
That everybody here
Will merely prove the subject of romantic rhyme.
For none of us with surety can insist
That we at all exist,—
Nor knight, nor seer, nor lady!
It is our private feeling that we all are shady
As matter for the archæologist!
We somehow feel, although it may be fancy,
We soon will disappear by necromancy,—
Dissolved in something vague and legendary,
To puzzle every future antiquary!
But whether right or wrong
 In this our supposition,
And whether we belong
To poet, to historian or to statistician,
 We still with all due courtesy make bold
To call this New King Arthur of our song
 As thoroughly authentic as the Old.
Nay, we will even go farther,
And say that no King Arthur
One bit of authenticity may hold
In his apocryphal and mythic mould,
 Despite the songs that have been sung,
 Despite the rhymes that have been rung,
Despite the tales nonsensical, like this that we have told!
END.