

MADISON CAWEIN

ACCOLON OF
GAUL, WITH
OTHER POEMS

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Madison Julius Cawein

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PRELUDE

WHY, dreams from dreams in dreams remembered! naught
Save this, alas! that once it seemed I thought
I wandered dim with someone, but I knew
Not who; most beautiful and good and true,
Yet sad through suffering; with curl-crowned brow,
Soft eyes and voice; so white she haunts me now: —
And when, and where? – At night in dreamland.
She
Led me athwart a flower-showered lea
Where trammelled puckered pansy and the pea;
Spread stains of pale-rod poppies rinsed of rain,
So gorged with sun their hurt hearts ached with pain;
Heaped honeysuckles; roses lavishing beams,
Wherein I knew were huddled little dreams
Which laughed coy, hidden merriment and there
Blew quick gay kisses fragranting the air.
And where a river bubbled through the sward
A mist lay sleepily; and it was hard
To see whence sprung it, to what seas it led,
How broadly spread and what it was it fled
So ceaseless in its sighs, and bickering on
Into romance or some bewildering dawn
Of wisest legend from the storied wells
Of lost Baranton, where old Merlin dwells,
Nodding a white poll and a grand, gray beard
As if some Lake Ladyé he, listening, heard,
Who spake like water, danced like careful showers
With blown gold curls thro' drifts of wild-thorn flowers;
Loose, lazy arms in graceful movement tossed,
Float flower-like down a woodland vista, lost
In some peculiar note that wrings a tear
Slow down his withered cheek. And then steals near
Her sweet, lascivious brow's white wonderment,
And gray rude eyes, and hair which hath the scent
Of the wildwood Brécéliand's perfumes
In Brittany; and in it one red bloom's
Blood-drop thrust deep, and so "Sweet Viviane!"
All the glad leaves lisp like a young, soft rain
From top to top, until a running surge
The dark, witch-haunted solitude will urge,
That shakes and sounds and stammers as from sleep

Some giant were aroused; and with a leap
A samite-gauzy creature, glossy white,
Showers mocking kisses fast and, like a light
Beat by a gust to flutter and then done,
From Brécéliande and Merlin she is gone.
But still he sits there drowsing with his dreams;
A wondrous cohort hath he; many as gleams
That stab the moted mazes of a beech;
And each grave dream hath its own magic speech
To sting to tears his old eyes heavy – two
Hang, tangled brilliants, in his beard like dew:
And still faint murmurs of courts brave and fair,
And forms of Arthur and proud Guenevere,
Grave Tristram and rare Isoud and stout Mark,
Bold Launcelot, chaste Galahad the dark
Of his weak mind, once strong, glares up with, then,
– The instant's fostered blossoms – die again.
A roar of tournament, a rippling stir
Of silken lists that ramble into her,
That white witch-mothered beauty, Viviane,
The vast Brécéliande and dreams again.
Then Dagonet, King Arthur's fool, trips there,
A waggish cunning; glittering on his hair
A tinsel crown; and then will slightly sway
Thick leaves and part, and there Morgane the Fay
With haughty wicked eyes and lovely face
Studies him steady for a little space.

I

"

THOU askest with thy studious eyes again,
Here where the restless forest hears the main
Toss in a troubled sleep and moan. Ah, sweet,
With joy and passion the kind hour's replete;
And what wild beauty here! where roughly run
Huge forest shadows from the westering sun,
The wood's a subdued power gentle as
Yon tame wild-things, that in the moss and grass
Gaze with their human eyes. Here grow the lines
Of pale-starred green; and where yon fountain shines
Urned in its tremulous ferns, rest we upon
This oak-trunk of God's thunder overthrown
Years, years ago; not where 'tis rotted brown
But where the thick bark's firm and overgrown
Of clambering ivy blackly berried; where
Wild musk of wood decay just tincts the air,

As if some strange shrub on some whispering way,
In some dewed dell, while dreaming of one May,
In longing languor weakly tried to wake
One sometime blossom and could only make
Ghosts of such dead aromas as it knew,
And shape a specter, budding thin as dew,
To haunt these sounding miles of solitude.
Troubled thou askest, Morgane, and the mood,
Unfathomed in thine eyes, glows rash and deep
As that in some wild-woman's found on sleep
By some lost knight upon a precipice,
Whom he hath wakened with a laughing kiss.
As that of some frail, elfin lady white
As if of watery moonbeams, filmy dight,
Who waves diaphanous beauty on some cliff
That drowsing purrs with moon-drenched pines; but if
The lone knight follow, foul fiends rise and drag
Him crashing down, while she, tall on the crag,
Triumphant mocks him with glad sorcery
Till all the wildwood echoes shout with glee.
As that bewildering mystery of a tarn,
Some mountain water, which the mornings scorn
To anadem with fire and leave gray;
To which some champion cometh when the Day
Hath tired of breeding on his proud, young head
Flame-furry blooms and, golden chapletéd,
Sits rosy, trembling with full love for Night,
Who cometh sandaled; dark in crape; the light
Of her good eyes a marvel; her vast hair
Tortuous with stars, – as in some shadowy lair
The eyes of hunted wild things burn with rage, —
And on large bosoms doth his love assuage.

"He, coming thither in that haunted place,
Stoops low to quaff cool waters, when his face
Meets gurgling fairy faces in a ring
That jostle upward babbling; beckoning
Him deep to wonders secret built of old
By some dim witch: 'A city walled with gold,
With beryl battlements and paved with pearls,
Slim, lambent towers wrought of foamy swirls
Of alabaster, and that witch to love,
More beautiful to love than queens above.' —
He pauses troubled, but a wizard power,
In all his bronzen harness that mad hour
Plunges him – whither? what if he should miss
Those cloudy beauties and that creature's kiss?
Ah, Morgane, that same power Accolon
Saw potent in thine eyes and it hath drawn

Him deep to plunge – and to what breathless fate? —
Bliss? – which, too true, he hath well quaffed of late!
But, there! – may come what stealthy-footed Death
With bony claws to clutch away his breath!
And make him loveless to those eyes, alas! —
Fain must I speak that vision; thus it was:

"In sleep one plucked me some warm fleurs-de-lis,
Larger than those of earth; and I might see
Their woolly gold, loose, webby woven thro', —
Like fluffy flames spun, – gauzy with fine dew.
And 'asphodels!' I murmured; then, 'these sure
The Eden amaranths, so angel pure
That these alone may pluck them; aye and aye!
But with that giving, lo, she passed away
Beyond me on some misty, yearning brook
With some sweet song, which all the wild air took
With torn farewells and pensive melody
Touching to tears, strange, hopeless utterly.
So merciless sweet that I yearned high to tear
Those ingot-cored and gold-crowned lilies fair;
Yet over me a horror which restrained
With melancholy presence of two pained
And awful, mighty eyes that cowed and held
Me weeping while that sad dirge died or swelled
Far, far on endless waters borne away:
A wild bird's musick smitten when the ray
Of dawn it burned for graced its drooping head,
And the pale glory strengthened round it dead;
Daggered of thorns it plunged on, blind in night,
The slow blood ruby on its plumage white.

"Then, then I knew these blooms which she had given
Were strays of parting grief and waifs of Heaven
For tears and memories; too delicate
For eyes of earth such souls immaculate!
But then – my God! my God! thus these were left!
I knew then still! but of that song bereft —
That rapturous wonder grasping after grief —
Beyond all thought – weak thought that would be thief."
And bowed and wept into his hands and she
Sorrowful beheld; and resting at her knee
Raised slow her oblong lute and smote its chords;
But ere the impulse saddened into words
Said: "And didst love me as thy lips have spake
No visions wrought of sleep might such love shake.
Fast is all Love in fastness of his power,
With flame reverberant moated stands his tower;
Not so built as to chink from fact a beam

Of doubt and much less of a doubt from dream;
Such, the alchemic fires of Love's desires,
Which hug this like a snake, melt to gold wires
To chord the old lyre new whereon he lyres."
So ceased and then, sad softness in her eye
Sang to his dream a questioning reply:

"Will love grow less when dead the roguish Spring,
Who from gay eyes sowed violets whispering;
Peach petals in wild cheeks, wan-wasted thro'
Of withering grief, laid lovely 'neath the dew,
Will love grow less?

"Will love grow less when comes queen Summer tall,
Her throat a lily long and spiritual;
Rich as the poppied swaths – droned haunts of bees —
Her cheeks, a brown maid's gleanings on the leas,
Will love grow less?

"Will love grow less when Autumn sighing there
Broods with long frost streaks in her dark, dark hair;
Tears in grave eyes as in grave heavens above,
Deep lost in memories' melancholy, love,
Will love grow less?

"Will love grow less when Winter at the door
Begg on her scant locks icicles as hoar;
While Death's eyes hollow o'er her shoulder dart
A look to wring to tears then freeze the heart,
Will love grow less?"

And in her hair wept softly and her breast
Rose and was wet with tears; like as, distressed,
Night steals on Day rain sobbing thro' her curls.
"Tho' tears become thee even as priceless pearls,
Weep not for love's sake! mine no gloom of doubt,
But woe for sweet love's death such dreams brought out.
Nay, nay; crowned, throned and flame-anointed he
Kings our twin-kingdomed hearts eternally.
Love, high in Heaven beginning and to cease
No majesty when hearts are laid at peace;
But reign supreme, if souls have wrought as well,
A god in Heaven or a god in Hell.
Yea, Morgane, for the favor of his face
All our rich world of love I will retrace:

"Hurt in that battle where thy brother strove
With those five kings thou wot'st of, dearest love,
Wherein the five were worsted, I was brought

To some king's castle on my shield, methought, —
Out of the grind of spears and roar of swords,
From the loud shields of battle-bloody lords,
Culled from the mountained slain where Havoc sprawled
Gorged to her eyes with carnage, growling crawled; —
By some tall damsels tiremaids of some queen
Stately and dark, who moved as if a sheen
Of starlight spread her presence; and she came
With healing herbs and searched my wounds. A dame
So marvelous in raiment silvery
I feared lest some attendant chaste were she
To that high Holy Grael, which Arthur hath
Sought ever widely by hoar wood and path; —
Thus not for me, a worldly one, to love,
Who loved her even to wonder; skied above
His worship as our moon above the Main,
That passions upward yearning in great pain,
And suffers wearily from year to year,
She peaceful pitiless with virgin cheer. —
Ah, ideal love, as merciless as fate!
And, oh, that savage aching which must wait
For its fulfillment, tortured love in tears,
Until that beauty dreamed of many years
Bends over one from luminous skies, so grand
One's weakness fears to touch its mastering hand,
And hesitates and stammers nothings weak,
And loves and loves with love that can not speak!
Ah, there's the tyranny that breeds despair;
Breaks hearts whose strong youth by one golden hair
Coiled 'round the throat is sooner strangled dumb
Than by a glancing dagger thrust from gloom
Of an old arras at the very hour
One thought one safest in one's guarded tower. —
Thus, Morgane, worshiping that lady I
Was speechless; longing now to live, now die,
As her fine face suggested secrets of
Some passion kin to mine, or scorn of love
That dragged heroic humbleness to her feet,
For one long look that spake and made such sweet.
Ah, never dreamed I of what was to be, —
Nay! nay! how could I? while that agony
Of doubtful love denied my heart too much,
Too much to dream of that perfection such
As was to grant me boisterous hours of life
And sever all the past as with a knife!

"One night a tempest scourged and beat and lashed
The writhing forest and vast thunders crashed
Clamorous with clubs of leven, and anon,

Between the thunder pauses, seas would groan
Like some enormous curse a knight hath lured
From where it soared to maim it with his sword.
I, with eyes partly lidded, seemed to see
That cloudy, wide-wrenched night's eternity
Yawn hells of golden ghastliness; and sweep
Distending foams tempestuous up each steep
Of furious iron, where pale mermaids sit
With tangled hair black-blown, who, bit by bit,
Chant glimmering; beckoning on to strangling arms
Some hurt bark hurrying in the ravenous storm's
Resistless exultation; till there came
One breaker mounting inward, all aflame
With glow-worm green, to boom against the cliff
Its thunderous bulk – and there, sucked pale and stiff,
Tumbled in eddies up the howling rocks
My dead, drawn face; eyes lidless; matted locks
Oozed close with brine; tossed upward merrily
By streaming mermaids. – Madly seemed to see
The vampire echoes of the hoarse wood, who,
Collected, sought me; down the casement drew
Wet, shuddering fingers sharply; thronging fast
Up hooting turrets, fell thick screaming, cast
Down bastioned battlements trooped whistling off;
From the wild woodland growled a backward scoff. —
Then far away, hoofs of a thousand gales,
As wave rams wave up windy bluffs of Wales,
Loosed from the groaning hills, the cohorts loud,
Spirits of thunder, charioteered of cloud,
Roared down the rocking night cored with the glare
Of fiery eyeballs swimming; their drenched hair
Blown black as rain unkempt back from black brows,
Wide mouths of storm that voiced a hell carouse
And bulged tight cheeks with wind, rolled riotous by
Ruining to ruinous cliffs to headlong die.

"Once when the lightning made the casement glare
Squares touched to gold, between it rose her hair,
As if a raven's wing had cut the storm
Death-driven seaward; and a vague alarm
Stung me with terrors of surmise where hope
As yet pruned weak wings crippled by their scope.
And, lo, she kneeled low, radiant, wonderful,
Lawn-raimented and white; kneeled low, – 'to lull
These thoughts of night such storms might shape in thee,
All such to peace and sleep,' – Ah, God! to see
Her like a benediction fleshed! with her
Hearing her voice! her cool hand wandering bare
Wistful on feverish brow thro' long deep curls!

To see her rich throat's carcaneted pearls
Rise as her pulses! eyes' large influence
Poured toward me straight as stars, whose sole defense
Against all storm is their bold beauty! then
To feel her breathe and hear her speak again!
'Love, mark,' I said or dreamed I moaned in dreams,
'How wails the tumult and the thunder gleams!
As if of Arthur's knights had charged two fields
Bright as sun-winds of dawn; swords, spears and shields
Flashed lordly shocked; had, – to a man gone down
In burst of battle hurled, – lain silent sown.
Love, one eternal tempest thus with thee
Were calm, dead calm! but, no! – for thee in me
Such calm proves tempest. Speak; I feel thy voice
Throb soft, caressing silence, healing noise.'

"Is radiance loved of radiance? day of day?
Lithe beam of beam and laughing ray of ray?
Hope loved of hope and happiness of joy,
Or love of love, who hath the world for toy?
And thou – thou lov'st my voice? fond Accolon!
Why not – yea, why not? – nay! – I prithee! – groan
Not for that thou hast had long since thine all.'
She smiled; and dashed down storm's black-crumbled wall,
Baptizing moonlight bathed her, foot and face
Deluging, as my soul brake toward her grace
With worship from despair and secret grief,
That felt hot tears of heartsease sweet and brief.
And one immortal night to me she said
Words, lay I white in death had raised me red.
'Rest now,' they were, 'I love thee with *such* love! —
'Some speak of secret love, but God above
Hath knowledge and divinement.'... Passionate low,
'To lie by thee to-night my mind is': – So
She laughed; – 'Sleep well! – for me? why, thy fast word
Of knighthood, look thou, and this naked sword
Laid in betwixt us... Let it be a wall
Strong between love and lust and lov'st me all in all.'
Undid the goodly gold from her clasped waist;
Unbound deep locks; and, like a blossom faced,
Stood sweet an unswayed stem that ran to bud
In breasts and face a graceful womanhood.
And fragrance was to her as natural
As odor to the rose; and she a tall,
White ardor and white fervor in the room
Moved, some pale presence that with light doth bloom.
Then all mine eyes and lips and limbs were fire;
My tongue delirious throbbed a lawless lyre,
That harped loud words of laud for loveliness,

Inspired of such, but these I can not guess.
Then she, as pure as snows of peaks that keep
Sun-cloven crowns of virgin, vanquishing steep,
Frowned on me, and the thoughts, that in my brain
Had risen a glare of gems, set dull like rain,
And fair I spake her and with civil pain:

"Thine, sweet, a devil's kindness which is given
For earthly pleasure but bars out from Heaven.
Temptation harbored, like a bloody rust
On a bright blade, leaves ugly stains; and lust
Is love's undoing when love's limbs are cast
A commonness to desire that makes unchaste;
And this warm nearness of what should be hid
Makes love a lawless love. But, thou hast bid; —
Rest thou; I love thee, how, — I only know:
But all that love shall shout "out!" at love's foe.'
And turning sighed into my hair; and she
Stretched the broad blade's division suddenly.
And so we lay its fire between us twain;
Unsleeping I, for, oh, that devil pain
Of passion in me that strove up and stood
A rebel wrangling with the brain and blood!
An hour stole by: she slept or seemed to sleep.
The winds of night came vigorous from the deep
With storm gusts of fresh-watered field and wold
That breathed of ocean meadows blue-ly rolled.
I drowsed and time passed; stealing as for one
Whose drowsy life dreams in Avilion.
Vast bulks of black, wind-shattered rack went down
High casement squares of heaven, a crystal crown
Of bubbled moonlight on each monstrous head,
Like as great ghosts of giant kings long dead.
And then, meseemed, she lightly laughed and sighed,
So soft a taper had not bent aside,
And leaned a soft face seen thro' loosened hair
Above me, whisp'ring as if sweet in prayer,
'Behold, the sword! I take the sword away!'
It curved and clashed where the strewn rushes lay;
Shone glassy, glittering like a watery beam
Of moonlight in the moonlight. I did deem
She moved in sleep and dreamed perverse, nor wist
That which she did until two fierce lips kissed
My wondering eyes to wakement of her thought.
Then spake I, 'Love, my word! is it then naught?
Nay, nay, my word albeit the sword be gone! —
And wouldst thou try me? rest thou safe till dawn!
I will not thus forswear! my word stands fast!'
But now I felt hot, desperate kisses cast

On hair, eyes, throat and lips and over and over,
Low laughter of 'Sweet wretch! and thou – a lover?
What is that word if she thou gavest it
Unbind thee of it? lo, and she sees fit!
Ah, Morgane, Morgane, then I knew 'twas thou,
Thou! thou! who only could such joy allow."

"And, oh, unburied passion of that night;
The sleepy birds too early piped of light;
Too soon came Light girt with a rosy breeze,
Strong from his bath, to wrestle with the trees,
A thewy hero; and, alas! too soon
Our scutcheoned oriel stained was overstrewn
Of Dawn's air-jewels; then I sang a strain
Of sleep that in my memory strives again:

"Ethereal limbed the lovely Sleep should sit,
Her starbeam locks with some vague splendor lit,
Like that the glow-worm's emerald radiance sheds
Thro' twilight dew-drops globed on lily-beds.
Her face as fair as if of graven stone,
Yet dim and airy us a cloud alone
In the bare blue of Heaven, smiling sweet,
For languorous thoughts of love that flit and fleet
Short-rainbow-winged about her crumpled hair;
Yet on her brow a pensiveness more fair,
Ungraspable and sad and lost, I wist,
Than thoughts of maiden whom her love hath kissed,
Who knows, thro' deepening eyes and drowsy breath,
Him weeping bent whiles she drifts on to death.
Full sweet and sorrowful and blithe withal
Should be her brow; not wholly spiritual,
But tinged with mortal for the mortal mind,
And smote with flushings from some Eden wind;
Hinting at heart's ease and a god's desire
Of pleasure hastening in a garb of fire
From some dim country over storied seas
Glassed of content and foamed of mysteries.
Her ears two sea-pearls' morning-tender pink,
And strung to harkening as if on a brink
Night with profundity of death and doubt,
Yet touched with awfulness of light poured out.
Ears strung to palpitations of heart throbs
As sea-shells waver with dim ocean sobs.
One hand, curved like a mist on dusking skies,
Hollowing smooth brows to shade dark velvet eyes, —
Dark-lashed and dewed of tear-drops beautiful, —
To sound the cowering conscience of the dull,
Sleep-sodden features in their human rest,

Ere she dare trust her pureness to that breast.
Large limbs diaphanous and fleeced with veil
Of wimpled heat, wove of the pulsing pale
Of rosy midnight, and stained thro' with stars
In golden cores; clusters of quivering bars
Of nebulous gold, twined round her fleecily.
A lucid shape vague in vague mystery.
Untrammeled bosoms swelling free and white
And prodigal of balm; cupped lilies bright,
That to the famished mind yield their pure, best,
Voluptuous sleep like honey sucked in rest."

Thus they communed. And there her castle stood
With slender towers ivied o'er the wood;
An ancient chapel creeper-buried near;
A forest vista, where faint herds of deer
Stalked like soft shadows; where the hares did run,
Mavis and throstle caroled in the sun.
For it was Morgane's realm, embowered Gore;
That rooky pile her palace whence she bore
With Urience sway; but he at Camelot
Knew naught of intrigues here at Chariot.

II

NOON; and the wistful Autumn sat among
The lurid woodlands; chiefs who now were wrung
By crafty ministers, sun, wind and frost,
To don imperial pomp at any cost.
On each wild hill they stood as if for war
Flaunting barbaric raiment wide and far;
And burnt-out lusts in aged faces raged;
Their tottering state by flattering zephyrs paged,
Who in a little fretful while, how soon!
Would work rebellion under some wan moon;
Pluck their old beards deriding; shriek and tear
Rich royalty; sow tattered through the air
Their purple majesty; and from each head
Dash down its golden crown, and in its stead
Set there a pale-death mockery of snow,
Leave them bemoaning beggars bowed with woe.
Blow, wood-wind, blow! now that all's fresh and fine
As earth and wood can make it; fresh as brine
And rare with sodden scents of underbrush.
Ring, and one hears a cavalcade a-rush;
Bold blare of horns; shrill music of steel bows; —
A horn! a horn! the hunt is up and goes

Beneath the acorn-dropping oaks in green, —
Dark woodland green, a boar-spear held between
His selle and hunter's head, and at his thigh
A good, broad hanger, and one fist on high
To wind the rapid echoes from his horn,
That start the field birds from the sheavéd corn,
Uphurled in volleys of audacious wings,
That cease again when it no longer sings.
Away, away, they flash a belted band
From Camelot thro' that haze-ghostly land;
Hounds leashed and leamers and a flash of steel,
A tramp of horse and the long-baying peal
Of stag hounds whimp'ring and – behold! the hart,
A lordly height, doth from the covert dart;
And the big blood-hounds strain unto the chase.
A-hunt! a-hunt! the *pryce* seems but a pace
On ere 'tis wound; but now, where interlace
The dense-briered underwoods, the hounds have lost
The slot, there where a forest brook hath crossed
With intercepting waters full of leaves.
Beyond, the hart a tangled labyrinth weaves
Thro' dimmer boscage, and the wizard sun
Shapes many shadowy stags that seem to run
Wild herds before the baffled foresters.
And treed aloft a reckless laugh one hears,
As if some helping goblin from the trees
Mocked them the unbayed hart and made a breeze
His pursuivant of mocking. Hastening thence
Pursued King Arthur and King Urience
With one small brachet, till scarce hear could they
Their fellowship far-furthered course away
On fresher trace of hind or rugged boar
With haggard, hairy flanks, curled tusks and hoar
With fierce foam-fury; and of these bereft
The kings continued in the slot they'd left.
And there the hart plunged gallant thro' the brake
Leaving a torn path shaking in his wake,
Down which they followed on thro' many a copse
Above whose brush, close on before, the tops
Of the large antlers swelled anon, and so
Were gone where beat the brambles to and fro.
And still they drave him hard; and ever near
Seemed that great hart unwearied; and such cheer
Still stung them to the chase. When Arthur's horse
Gasped mightily and lunging in his course
Lay dead, a lordly bay; and Urience
Left his gray hunter dying near; and thence
They held the hunt afoot; when suddenly
Were they aware of a wide, roughened sea,

And near the wood the hart upon the sward
Bayed, panting unto death and winded hard.
Right so the king dispatched him and the *pryce*
Wound on his hunting bugle clearly thrice.

As if each echo, which that wild horn's blast
Waked from its sleep, – the quietude had cast
Tender as mercy on it, – in a band
Rose moving sounds of gladness hand in hand,
Came twelve fair damsels, sunny in sovereign white,
From that red woodland gliding. These each knight
Graced with obeisance and "Our lord," said one,
"Tenders ye courtesy until the dawn;
The Earl Sir Damas; well in his wide keep,
Seen thither with due worship, ye shall sleep."
And then they came o'erwearied to a hall,
An owlet-haunted pile, whose weedy wall
Towered based on crags rough, windy turrets high;
An old, gaunt giant-castle 'gainst a sky
Wherein the moon hung foam-faced, large and full.
Down on dank sea-foundations broke the dull,
Weird monotone of ocean, and wide rolled
The watery wilderness that was as old
As loud, defying headlands stretching out
Beneath still stars with a voluminous shout
Of wreck and wrath forever. Here the two
Were feasted fairly and with worship due
All errant knights, and then a damsel led
Each knight with flaring lamp unto his bed
Down separate corridors of that great keep;
And soon they rested in a heavy sleep.

And then King Arthur woke, and woke mid groans
Of dolorous knights; and 'round him lay the bones
Of many woful champions mouldering;
And he could hear the open ocean ring
Wild wasted waves above. And so he thought
"It is some nightmare weighing me, distraught
By that long hunt;" and then he sought to shake
The horror off and to himself awake;
But still he heard sad groans and whispering sighs,
And deep in iron-ribbed cells the eyes
Of pale, cadaverous knights shone fixed on him
Unhappy; and he felt his senses swim
With foulness of that cell, and, "What are ye?
Ghosts of chained champions or a company
Of phantoms, bodiless fiends? If speak ye can,
Speak, in God's name! for I am here – a man!"
Then groaned the shaggy throat of one who lay

A dusky nightmare dying day by day,
Yet once of comely mien and strong withal
And greatly gracious; but, now hunger-tall,
With scrawny beard and faded hands and cheeks:
"Sir knight," said he, "know that the wretch who speaks
Is but an one of twenty knights here shamed
Of him who lords this castle, Damas named,
Who mews us here for slow starvation keen;
Around you fade the bones of some eighteen
Tried knights of Britain; and God grant that soon
My hunger-lengthened ghost will see the moon,
Beyond the vileness of this prisonment!"
With that he sighed and round the dungeon went
A rustling sigh, like saddened sin, and so
Another dim, thin voice complained their woe: —

"He doth enchain us with this common end,
That he find one who will his prowess bend
To the attainment of his livelihood.
A younger brother, Ontzlake, hath he; good
And courteous, withal most noble, whom
This Damas hates – yea, ever seeks his doom;
Denying him to their estate all right
Save that he holds by main of arms and might.
And thro' puissance hath he some fat fields
And one rich manor sumptuous, where he yields
Belated knights host's hospitality.
Then bold is Ontzlake, Damas cowardly.
For Ontzlake would decide by sword and lance
Body for body this inheritance;
But Damas dotes on life so courageless;
Thus on all knights perforce lays coward's stress
To fight for him or starve. For ye must know
That in his country he is hated so
That no helm here is who will take the fight;
Thus fortunes it our plight is such a plight."
Quoth he and ceased. And wondering at the tale
The King was thoughtful, and each faded, pale,
Poor countenance still conned him when he spake:
"And what reward if one this battle take?"
"Deliverance for all if of us one
Consent to be his party's champion.
But treachery and he are so close kin
We loathe the part as some misshapen sin,
And here would rather dally on to death
Than serving falseness save and slave our breath."

"May God deliver you for mercy, sirs!"
And right anon an iron noise he hears

Of chains clanked loose and bars jarred rusty back,
The heavy gate croak open; and the black
Of that rank cell astonished was with light,
That danced fantastic with the frantic night.
One high torch sidewise worried by the gust
Sunned that lorn den of hunger, death and rust,
And one tall damsel vaguely vested, fair
With shadowy hair, poised on the rocky stair.
And laughing on the King, "What cheer?" said she;
"God's life! the keep stinks vilely! and to see
So noble knights endungeoned hollowing here
Doth pain me sore with pity – but, what cheer?"

"Thou mockest us; for me the sorriest
Since I was suckled; and of any quest
To me the most imperiling and strange. —
But what wouldst thou?" said Arthur. She, "A change
I offer thee, through thee to these with thee,
And thou but grant me in love's courtesy
To fight for Damas and his livelihood.
And if thou wilt not – look! thou seest this brood
Of lean and dwindled bellies specter-eyed,
Keen knights erst who refused me? – so decide."
Then thought the King of the sweet sky, the breeze
That blew delirious over waves and trees;
Thick fields of grasses and the sunny earth
Whose beating heat filled the red heart with mirth,
And made the world one sovereign pleasure house
Where king and serf might revel and carouse;
Then of the hunt on autumn-plaintive hills;
Lone forest chapels by their radiant rills:
His palace rich at Caerlleon upon Usk,
And Camelot's loud halls that thro' the dusk
Blazed far and bloomed a rose of revelry;
Or in the misty morning shadowy
Loomed grave for audience. And then he thought
Of his Round Table and that Grael wide sought
In haunted holds on demon-sinful shore;
Then marveled of what wars would rise and roar
With dragon heads unconquered and devour
This realm of Britain and pluck up that flower
Of chivalry whence ripened his renown:
And then the reign of some besotted crown,
A bandit king of lust, idolatry —
And with that thought for tears he could not see:
Then of his greatest champions, King Ban's son,
And Galahad and Tristram, Accolon:
And then, ah God! of his dear Guenevere,
And with that thought – to starve and moulder here? —

For, being unfriend to Arthur and his court,
Well wist he this grim Earl would bless that sport
Of fortune which had fortun'd him so well
To have to starve his sovereign in a cell. —
In the entombing rock where ground the deep;
And all the life shut in his limbs did leap
Thro' eager veins and sinews fierce and red,
Stung on to action, and he rose and said:
"That which thou askest is right hard, but, lo!
To rot here harder; I will fight his foe.
But, mark, I have no weapons and no mail,
No steed against that other to avail."

"Fear not for that; and thou shalt lack none, sire."
And so she led the path: her torch's fire
Scaring wild spidery shadows at each stride
From cob-webbed coignes of scowling passes wide,
That labyrinth'd the rock foundation strong
Of that ungainly fortress bleak of wrong.
At length they came to a nail-studded door,
Which she unlocked with one harsh key she bore
Mid many keys bunched at her girdle; thence
They issued on a terraced eminence.
Beneath the sea broke sounding; and the King
Breathed open air that had the smell and sting
Of brine morn-vigored and blue-billowed foam;
For in the East the second dawning's gloam,
Since that unlucky chase, was freaked with streaks
Red as the ripe stripes of an apple's cheeks.
And so within that larger light of dawn
It seemed to Arthur now that he had known
This maiden at his court, and so he asked.
But she, well-tutored, her real person masked,
And answered falsely; "Nay, deceive thee not;
Thou saw'st me ne'er at Arthur's court, I wot.
For here it likes me best to sing and spin
And work the hangings my sire's halls within:
No courts or tournaments or gallants brave
To flatter me and love! for me – the wave,
The forest, field and sky; the calm, the storm;
My garth wherein I walk to think; the charm
Of uplands redolent at bounteous noon
And full of sunlight; night's free stars and moon;
White ships that pass some several every year;
These lonesome towers and those wild mews to hear."
"An owlet maid!" the King laughed. But, untrue
Was she, and of false Morgane's treasonous crew,
Who worked vile wiles ev'n to the slaying of
The King, half-brother, whom she did not love.

And presently she brought him where in state
This swarthy Damas with mailed cowards sate...

King Urience that dawning woke and found
Himself safe couched at Camelot and wound
In Morgane's arms; nor weened he how it was
That this thing secretly had come to pass.
But Accolon at Chariot sojourned still
Content with his own dreams; for 'twas the will
Of Morgane thus to keep him hidden here
For her desire's excess, where everywhere
In Gore by wood and river pleasure houses,
Pavilions, rose of rock for love carouses;
And there in one, where 'twas her dearest wont
To list a tinkling, falling water fount, —
Which thro' sweet talks of idle paramours
At sensuous ease on tumbled beds of flowers,
Had caught a laughing language light thereof,
And rambled ever gently whispering, "love!" —
On cool white walls her hands had deftly draped
A dark rich hanging, where were worked and shaped
Her fullest hours of pleasure flesh and mind,
Imperishable passions, which could wind
The past and present quickly; and could mate
Dead loves to kisses, and intoxicate
With moon-soft words of past delight and song
The heavy heart that wronged forgot the wrong.
And there beside it pooled the urnéd well,
And slipping thence thro' dripping shadows fell
From rippling rock to rock. Here Accolon,
With Morgane's hollow lute, one studious dawn
Came solely; with not ev'n her brindled hound
To leap beside him o'er the gleaming ground;
No handmaid lovely of his loveliest fair,
Or paging dwarf in purple with him there;
But this her lute, about which her perfume
Clung odorous of memories, that made bloom
Her flowing features rosy to his eyes,
That saw the words, his sense could but surmise,
Shaped on dim, breathing lips; the laugh that drunk
Her deep soul-fire from eyes wherein it sunk
And slowly waned away to smouldering dreams,
Fathomless with thought, far in their dove-gray gleams.
And so for those most serious eyes and lips,
Faint, filmy features, all the music slips
Of buoyant being bubbling to his voice
To chant her praises; and with nervous poise
His fleet, trained fingers call from her long lute
Such riotous notes as must make madly mute

The nightingale that listens quivering.
And well he knows that winging hence it'll sing
These aching notes, whose beauties burn and pain
Its anguished heart now sobless, not in vain
Wild 'neath her casement in that garden old
Dingled with heavy roses; in the gold
Of Camelot's stars and pearl-encrusted moon;
And if it dies, the heartache of the tune
Shall clamor stormy passion at her ear,
Of death more dear than life if love be there;
Melt her quick eyes to tears, her throat to sobs
Tumultuous heaved, while separation throbs
Hard at her heart, and longing rears to Death
Two prayerful eyes of pleading "for one breath —
An ardor of fierce life – crushed in his arms
Close, close! and, oh, for such, all these smooth charms,
Full, sentient charms voluptuous evermore!"
And sweet to know these sensitive vows shall soar
Ev'n to the dull ear of her drowsy lord
Beside her; heart-defying with each word
Harped in the bird's voice rhythmically clear.
And thus he sang to her who was not there:

"She comes! her presence, like a moving song
Breathed soft of loveliest lips and lute-like tongue,
Sways all the gurgling forests from their rest:
I fancy where her rustling foot is pressed,
So faltering, love seems timid, but how strong
That darling love that flutters in her breast!

"She comes! and the green vistas are stormed thro' —
As if wild wings, wet-varnished with dripped dew,
Had dashed a sudden sunbeam tempest past,
– With her eyes' inspiration clearly chaste;
A rhythmic lavishment of bright gray blue,
Long arrows of her eyes perfection cast.

"Ah, God! she comes! and, Love, I feel thy breath,
Like the soft South who idly wandereth
Thro' musical leaves of laughing laziness,
Page on before her, how sweet – none can guess!
To say my soul 'Here's harmony dear as death
To sigh wild vows, or utterless, to bless.'

"She comes! ah, God! and all my brain is brave
To war for words to laud her and to lave
Her queenly beauty in such vows whereof
May hush melodious cooings of a dove:
For her light feet the favored path to pave

With oaths, like roses, raving mad with love.

"She comes! in me a passion – as the moon
Works madness in strong men – my blood doth swoon
Towards her glory; and I feel her soul
Cling lip to lip with mine; and now the whole
Mix with me, aching like a tender tune
Exhausted; lavished in a god's control.

"She comes! ah, Christ! ye eager stars that grace
The fragmentary skies, that dimple space,
Clink, and I hear her harp-sweet footfalls come:
Ah, wood-indulging, violet-vague perfume,
Art of her presence, of her wild-flower face,
That like some gracious blossom stains the gloom?

"Oh, living exultation of the blood!
That now – as sunbursts, the almighty mood
Of some moved god, scatter the storm that roars,
And hush – her love like some spent splendor pours
Into it all immaculate maidenhood,
And all the heart that hesitates – adores.

"Vanquished! so vanquished! – ah, triumphant sweet!
The height of heaven – supine at thy feet!
Where love feasts crowned, and basks in such a glare
As hearts of suns burn, in thine eyes and hair,
Unutterable with raveled fires that cheat
The ardent clay of me and make me air.

"And so, rare witch, thy blood, like some lewd wine,
Shall subtly make me, like thee, half divine;
And, – sweet rebellion! – clasp thee till thou urge
To combat close of savage kisses: surge
A war that rubies all thy proud cheeks' shine, —

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