

GUINEVERE
A TRAGEDY IN THREE ACTS

by

GRAHAM HILL

(1906)

"We have hissed away Kingdoms and Provinces"
SHAKESPEARE

*"One life, one death,
One heaven, one hell, one immortality,
And one annihilation"*
SHELLEY

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR *King of England*

MORDRED *Arthur's Nephew and Heir*

LAUNCELOT *Knight to Guinevere*

AGRAVAINE *of Mordred's Faction*

PATRISE *a Knight of Ireland*

MADOR *Cousin to Patrise*

GUINEVERE *Wife to Arthur*

VIVIEN *Wife to Mordred*

ABBESS

Knights, Squires, Ladies, Nuns, etc.

ACT I

SCENE I: *In the Meadows near Camelot (Afternoon)*

SCENE II: *The same (Evening)*

SCENE III: *The same (Next Morning)*

ACT II

SCENE: *A River Terrace, Westminster Palace.*

ACT III

SCENE I: *Guinevere's Apartments, Westminster Palace.*

SCENE II: *Interior of the Convent (Next Morning)*

ACT I

SCENE I

A wooded spot in the meadows near Camelot. King Arthur and his Court, who are on their way to meet Guinevere, are arriving. The scene is full of movement and gaiety. From the distance, gradually growing louder and nearer, are heard sounds of cheering. It is late afternoon, and the scene is filled with the golden glow of the setting sun.

AGRAVAINE and VIVIEN converse apart. MORDRED, at a little distance, stands buried in moody thought. AGRAVAINE approaches MORDRED. VIVIEN joins them.

AGRAVAINE

My lord, thy moody visage would proclaim
Our cause as lost, while yet our spears are bright,
Our bodies whole, our helms without a dent.

The CROWD cheer in distance.

MORDRED

Like one struck blind I am grown wise in sound,
And pick my way by virtue of mine ears.

AGRAVAINE

The sightless needs must go with troubled gait,
But, having eyes, we hold our course unstayed,
And beat the craven earth till it resounds
Our praises unto Him that gave us sight.

MORDRED

He that may hear the thunder of the surf,
And feinting that he hears it not, finds death
In the chill, clinging fingers of the deep --
Deserves no better fate.

AGRAVAINE

Yet shall the deaf
Not meet his master in the brutish sea,
For by the magic of an eye, he holds
In leash the dripping jaws that spit at him,
White, stinging drops of frenzied impotence;
While from afar the poor blind hears the roar,
Which clogs his feet with chains of formless fear,
And smites his soul with devastating dread.

Cheers are heard again nearer.

MORDRED

But when the darkness falls all men are blind:
'Tis then the wise have counsel of their ears.
Ye hear these sounds; wouldst urge me to believe
They threaten naught of ill?

AGRAVAINE

Naught; save to those
That pale at forest echoings, and take
A mental ague from a creaking branch.

VIVIEN

Mordred, these shoutings mean us good or ill
As we interpret them.

MORDRED

To me they mean
New foes made fast and unsured friends grown cold.
Wherever Arthur moves it is the same;
He has the trick of catching man's good will,
And bracing waverers. Let him but roam
This vasty, echoing England as he list,
And from Carlisle to sea-scarred Tintagil
The whole land would be ringing with his name.

AGRAVAINE

Cast off thy gloom, my lord; the public tongue
Is but a wanton, and is little famed
For constancy!

VIVIEN

'Tis true enough, my lord;
These throats that now shout "Arthur" would as lief
Suck wind enough to make the welkin ring
With cries of "Mordred" -- if they had a cause.

AGRAVAINE

And where shall better cause be found than in
The uncleared doubts of Arthur's ancestry?
He calls thee nephew, and in that bare word
Lies his sole claim and title to the crown.

(MORE)

AGRAVAINE (cont'd)

What other proof can he produce save thee?
And if thou say'st he is no kin of thine,
Then art thou King in thine own lawful right.

VIVIEN

While Merlin lived, his word did stand as good
As child-bed witnesses, but he is dead.
Who now shall challenge the compelling cry,
"This is no son of Uther -- not the King!"

MORDRED

That cry, my friends, was lisped by last year's leaves,
Which have no voice in this spring's forestry.
The rabble ask not how the King is bred,
Nor know, nor care. They love this man as man,
And, loving him, I do foresee a Queen,
A new bond 'twixt the people and the King;
A double cord where only one has been.

AGRAVAINE

Mark well my words: thy fears are placed amiss.
The King has thriven! Truly so -- but how?
By being ever at the people's beck,
Forswearing self and soft indulgencies
In ceaseless striving for the nation's weal.
He is their friend, their champion, their slave.
Let it be so! But will ye see the end
Of this so dear devotion? Then behold --
A Queen more beautiful than earth at dawn,
Fairer than moonlight as it steals its way
Through lattice op'nings to a bridal couch.
Trust me our model King shall not resist
A lure so sweet, but lend himself entire
To love's abandonments, until he finds
Duty, resolve, and Kingship fade away,
And leave him, stript of purpose and repute,
A prey to common outcry, and to us.

MORDRED

Yet was my plan more swift. With Launcelot
And numbers of our most feared knights away
In far Cameliard, or capering
Attendance on the homing Guinevere
In the long stages of their slow return;
With ferment in the West, and at the Court
No thought of pending harm -- We should have struck,
Suddenly and swift, on Westminster, before
The Queen's strong escort had rejoined the King.

AGRAVAINE

The time had been misjudged, and thy whole plan
Foredoomed to failure. Were we now to strike,
This crowd would forge an armour for the King
Of bodies interwoven, against which

(MORE)

AGRAVAINE (cont'd)

All mortal blades were vincible. But wait
Until they see their idol dallying
In soft, assotted fondness on the Queen;
See him grown smooth with pleasuring and round
With table practices; show them a King
Unfaithful to the promise of his youth --
Then may we strike and have these mouthing churls
Not fronting us, but charging at our backs.

VIVIEN

(with eager curiosity)

When didst thou see the lady Guinevere?

AGRAVAINE

'Twas in her native land, Cameliard,
When I was hunting there an autumn since.
I saw the damsel oft, but wot I best
Of my first sight of her. 'Twas on a morn
All grey as agelong night. Upon the castle hill
Fierce shadows flung themselves, like shapeless beasts
Upon a dying foe, and earth lay stunned
'Neath their benumbing touch. When suddenly
The grey walls cleft and issued forth a maid --
A fair white maid with streaming hair of gold,
That brake upon her shoulders and flowed down,
A gleaming amber torrent, to her feet.
She seemed like sunlight glinting from a rock,
And where she walked the sombre earth was sewn
With a lithe-moving skein of gold.

MORDRED

Perdy!
But these same lily-maids in Nature's way
Develop dangerously. Shall we then
Stand idly by while Nature hatches us
New claimants for our crown?

VIVIEN

Nay, have no fear
Of Nature, till thou need her tenderings.
I trust her least when she's at midwif'ry.
Quick to undo what is so hardly done,
Unmaking always swifter than she makes,
So loth to spare, so keen to seize again,
She covets life from life's first death-bought breath.
If I must take Dame Nature for my friend,
Give me suspense of her good services
Till I be harvesting.

AGRAVAINE

Ere Nature deals
Our cause a hurt in form of Arthur's heir,
We have large time to shape our plans.

VIVIEN

And time
To act on them. Either appeal to might
And press the issue at the lance's point,
Or hold us still, what time our Royal prey,
Steeped in deep draughts of stupefying ease,
Sinks to that sleep which never is renewed.

AGRAVAINE

'Tis as shall be, and being so, 'tis well.

MORDRED

(roused from a reverie, and angrily)
'Tis well, ye say! How well? I swear 'tis ill
Ye judge this priestly lord as some raw youth,
Fierce and incontinent from long restraint.
Ye know not Arthur well who judge him so.
The source of his famed purity is ice.
In time he may be thawed. What! Are we Gods
To sew the hours and reap the centuries?
A year at least 'twill take his pious eyes
To learn her charms. A further year ere yet
He soils his virgin conscience with desire.
God wot how long we bite our nails the while
He sways between desire and the desired.
Life is too short to wait for this green fruit
To ripe and fall, full rotten, in our palm.
God send him West to-night to quell the strife,
And I'll delay no longer than the dawn
To compass our bold ends by bolder means.
I'll waste no patience paltering with knots
That may be carved asunder at a blow;
Nor doze beside a snare while I have strength
To bring my quarry down in open fight.

Enter ARTHUR, with KNIGHTS and MESSENGER.

AGRAVAINE

Here Arthur comes. Methinks I'd liever wait
To pull his tusks, till that old boar was dead.

ARTHUR

(to a MESSENGER)
My lords, we'll bide no more in this green spot
The coming of the Queen. If from Sir Bors
Or Launcelot come other messengers,
Let them attend at once.

Exit MESSENGER.

MORDRED

Hast news, my lord,
That bars our onward march?

ARTHUR

So much of news
That love's advance has ended in retreat.
Our toes are even turned upon our heels;
Our laggard tail has ta'en itself a head,
That points our duty far from our desires!

VIVIEN

Sir King, 'tis easy seen some fresh unrest
Is tangled in the web of thy concerns.

ARTHUR

Our message still lacks answer from the Welsh.
With no alarm, but some uneasiness,
We question the intent of this delay.
Sir Bors is waiting at his charger's head,
One eye on us and one fixed on the West,
And cannot tell which whither he will ride.
While we, impatient to be on, must keep
In distance of his call. If we discharge
The short few miles that hold us from the Queen,
We put that distance 'tween us and the men
That may have need of me.

AGRAVAINE

'Tis no light thing,
This task of royalty. It confiscates
All small prerogatives in man, and while
It lifts him to the mountain-top, it holds
Him fast, as in the cleavage of a rock.
The King scarce dares to call himself, or this
Or that -- husband or friend or lover -- but,
Removed from all such fond, enfeebling ties
Of heart and interest, must ever be,
And ever know himself to be -- the King!

ARTHUR

Yet would I not, for all it gave in ease
Or licence of life's liberties, renounce
One jot of the responsibility
That's vested in the crown. 'Tis privileged
For Kings to live and joy and suffer -- ay,
And when death comes, to meet it like a King.
Come, nephew; come, my Lady Vivien,
Who wilt be friend and kin to Guinevere;
I'd have thee know my purpose for the Queen,
Lest day should find us speeding to the West.

Exit ARTHUR and MORDRED. VIVIEN stands in deep thought.

AGRAVAINE

(significantly to VIVIEN)

A day will come we shall recall with smiles
These windy words of Sir Morality,
And judge poor Adam's fall with less contempt.

VIVIEN

(in a tone of earnest enquiry)

Is she so beautiful, so wondrous fair,
That e'en the stainless Arthur shall forget
His conscience as he looks on her?

AGRAVAINE

So fair,
As he is man he cannot choose but look,
And as he looks, forget. And so forgetting, die.
Let us go chase our tails to Camelot!

Exit AGRAVAINE.

VIVIEN

(meditatively)

And as he looks forget!

(With sudden animation)

But he? But Launcelot?
Shall she subdue the proud, responseless heart,
That has disdained a beauty not less rare?
Ah God! shall Launcelot withstand a snare
That threatens the resolution of the King?
Yet I'll believe it not, till I have seen
With my own eyes. Till then I'll not believe.

Exit VIVIEN hurriedly.

SCENE II

The same.

The stage remains empty for some moments, and the sound of distant cheers shows that the retinue of King Arthur is already well on the return journey. Presently, from the opposite direction, is heard the sound of MUSIC, and the cavalcade that is escorting Guinevere to Camelot make a leisurely appearance. The cavalcade crosses the stage on horseback and on foot. Their voices die away in the distance.

CHORUS

Pink and white, O flower of Spring,
Spread a carpet fair and sweet,
Deck her progress to the King,
(MORE)

CHORUS (cont'd)

Drop to kiss her lily feet.
She is come, the bride of May,
Speed her to the morrow;
Sweet the May and sweet the day,
And sweet, more sweet, the morrow.
Pink and white above her head,
Curtain her till morning light,
Burst thy heart to strew her bed,
'Neath the canopy of night.
She is here, the bride of May,
Guard her to the morrow.
Sweet the May and sweet the day,
O haste the sweeter morrow.

*During the singing of the latter part, off,
GUINEVERE and LAUNCELOT enter.*

GUINEVERE

Tell me again, Sir Knight, of this great King
Whose bride I am to be. Unless, perchance,
I weary thee with ceaseless questionings.

LAUNCELOT

My Queen, I doubt if aught remains untold;
But since what was to tell, was good to hear,
List once again of him that serves no lord
But conscience, and of all his Knights requires
But this -- that they revere their conscience as the King.

GUINEVERE

Tell me, my lord, are all of Arthur's Court
Like unto thee in likeness to the King?

LAUNCELOT

He has no like or similar, but is to men
Even as thou among the Queens of Earth.

GUINEVERE

Ah no! I am of those that he transcends.
I tremble, but in lifting up mine eyes
To his high state. How shall he mate with one
Who draws her being from the lowly earth?
The sun is in my blood, and my poor heart
Is caught by every breath of life and swayed,
As leaves are lift and rustled by the breeze,
That wills nor works them harm. I have been taught
To love all that is worshipful and true,
Because 'tis good and not for conscience sake.
And must I now lay siege unto myself,
Usurp the guards that Nature gave, and arm
My heart with duty, and the law of Kings?

LAUNCELOT

As truth's unconscious beauty is to thee,
Is conscience to the King -- no striving,
But the unstudied working of a mind
That dwells on none in search of littleness,
But holds all flesh in fair equality.
No maiden's heart could be more sure bestowed,
Nor maiden's faith find safer harbourage,
Than in the keeping of our England's King.

GUINEVERE

Sir Knight, I like thy hymning of his praise,
And his great virtues may not plead in vain
The truage due to his nobility.
But for his Kingship, hast thou yet to learn,
For ev'ry maid there is but one true King?
He is not crowned with shout or gilded pomp,
Nor flashes to the sky from quick drawn steel,
The cartel of his liege's loyalty.
But on his throne, secure, inviolate,
The siege set up within a maiden's heart,
He reigns sole lord, and wields a sway supreme,
Unconscious of his own dear sovereignty.

LAUNCELOT

If this be so, then must I hold myself
Most honoured among Knights, in that I bring
A Queen to grace our England: for the King,
A Kingdom fairer than men's eyes have seen.

GUINEVERE

Hast thou, my lord, thy rightful Kingdom won,
Or is it still unsought for, undesired?

LAUNCELOT

Kingdoms have come and gone and are forgot,
And thrones will fall before the thrones to be,
But beauty, labouring in joy, brought forth
One queen to stand as pattern for all time,
And at that birth fulfilled herself. So must
She barren be of Queens for evermore.

GUINEVERE

(sadly)

Long live thy Queen, Sir Knight, and long thy reign
In the rich kingdom of thy lady's heart.

LAUNCELOT

Ah, deem me not so blest! The throne I sought
Is changed from throne to shrine at my approach,
And low before the saint that stands within,
Where I may never kneel, another kneels.

GUINEVERE

I too can see, it must be with thine eyes,
That miscalled saint, that looks not down but forth,
From him that kneels to one that stands beyond.

LAUNCELOT

I pray that God who fashioned love's sweet throne
In her pure heart, may furnish her the guard
To hold it 'gainst the base, usurping Knight,
Who, helplessly impelled to the attack,
Would rend the bonds that bind him to his friend,
Scatter like straws, love, loyalty and truth
And thrust himself, a traitor, on the throne.

GUINEVERE

No traitor! He that conquers is the King.
No traitor, but the lord of his own realm.

LAUNCELOT

(as one reading his own impeachment)
Traitor to him, who, holding one his friend,
Did speed him forth to bring again his bride.
To him who clasped his hand long since, and vowed,
"Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death."
So dear he prized that trust, he had defied
Or love or hate to prove him what he is --
Traitor to self and faithless to his liege,
(Turning to GUINEVERE directly)
False to the uttermost -- even to thee!

GUINEVERE

O Launcelot, forbear! If this be true,
And thou art sunder'd from thy nobler self,
The sin is mine, the sinning and the shame.
My lord, I ask no vow, nor need a pledge
But this, in knowing thee, I surely know --
That not in Earth nor Hell, nor in high Heaven
Is found that spell could make thee false to me.

LAUNCELOT

My Queen, I have no words to plead thy grace,
For fear has set a seal upon my mouth,
And love has fired my blood with treachery
And ravished all my senses of their worth.
For I that swore to slay or to be slain
In ward of thy fair name and fairest self,
Am shaming thee, in telling thee my shame.
Another day and I had held my peace!
Another day --

GUINEVERE

So soon we are to part,
Another day!

LAUNCELOT

To-morrow and the end!

GUINEVERE

(as one in a dream -- unheeding him)
So soon it is that even as we stand
The morrow comes, the morrow and the end.
How swift it dies, the day that's born to die,
And spends all day a-dying.

LAUNCELOT

O my Queen,
Hast thou no word for very pity's sake?
No murmur of forgiveness and farewell?

GUINEVERE

No word but this -- this, that I must have died
Hadst thou kept silence!
(Quite simply)
For so it is to love.

LAUNCELOT

(atanding before her)
Queen, if I have thy love, lift but thine eyes
That I may read thy heart. Thou lovest me?
(She raises her eyes and he gazes into them)
God's miracle!
(He starts back in amazement)
My face reflected deep
In wells of molten sky.
(With conviction)
Thou lovest me!

GUINEVERE

Since first those dear-loved eyes communed with mine!
Since then, or ever then. My love was given
Ere thou didst look on me. When, as I stood
Close hidden by the arras in the hall,
I saw thee tower above my father's frame;
And as I linger'd there, mine arms crept up,
Crept softly up and met about thy neck,
My mouth was longing raised to touch thy mouth.
Why wast thou not the King, that all my days
I had been spared this vain attempt to wrest
Mine arms from off thy neck?

LAUNCELOT

(in desperation)
Ah, hear me, Love --
Thou wilt be prized as wife has never been,
By one more great than earth has ever known.
True-hearted, gentle, constant as a rock,
He'll hold thee in a love that shall outlive
(MORE)

LAUNCELOT (cont'd)

All things but love itself.

(Earnestly)

God find my words

A passage to thy heart, and give me wit
To plead his cause aright.

GUINEVERE

(vehemently)

His cause? His cause?

'Tis not his cause but rather is it mine

Thou urgest with such ardent cruelty,

To teach my heart how desp'rate is its case.

God's pity at our need light on us all,

Since with such steadfastness as he shall love

Must I love thee, for ever, and in vain.

LAUNCELOT

(in a tone of guilty, triumphant resignation)

Now, Love, I have nor trust nor plighted friend,

And hope of Heav'n is turned to Heav'n itself.

Nought have I left to pray for, having all

That heart can crave, or God in love can give.

He is still absorbed with guilty wonder at the inevitable, but she has accepted it without thought of shame or astonishment.

GUINEVERE

I have known always that I had thy love:

Is't not strange, although thou saidst no word, I knew?

But while I was so sure, I could not rest

Till thou hadst told it over in my ear.

Each day I waited longing, and each night

I said, "To-morrow. He will speak to-morrow."

And then I cried a little quietly,

Nor could tell why, save that I loved thee so.

But on a night I thought, "He will not speak,"

And then the pain near made me cry aloud;

And now I think I ne'er shall weep again.

LAUNCELOT

How shall I say all thy love holds for me?

GUINEVERE

(with a sigh of great contentment)

Is it so much to thee, so very much,

That I do love thee?

LAUNCELOT

'Tis more than all the world!

I'd have thee in my heart, that come what will,

There is nought else to live for or to die.

I'd have thee in my arms, that quick or dead,

I am immortal grown, past touch of grief.

(MORE)

LAUNCELOT (cont'd)

I think on thee till thinking is a pain,
And when I look on thee, the rebel blood
Mounts hotly to my cheek, and I am glad
That thou hast not the skill to read my heart.

GUINEVERE

Nay, Love, blush not, lest thou would have me shame
To meet thy gaze. Hast thou one thought I may not share,
Or one desire in which I have no part?
This is our hour and life, poor life, that holds
For each and all but one such perfect hour,
Should close at its fulfilment. Just on hour
Close held in thy dear arms, is worth a world
Of lives where thou art not. For now I know
That I am mine own self, and I am thine;
Thine for thine own, and, without measure, thine.

LAUNCELOT

O that we two, we two together now,
In this our hour, heart fiercely knit to heart,
And lip on lip inseparably sealed,
Might put to sea on life's receding tide,
And outward drifting, drifting, disappear
In th'illimitable ocean of our love.

(A pause)

Why was I born unless it was to love thee?

GUINEVERE

Why have we met, if I was not to yield?

*LAUNCELOT catches GUINEVERE to his breast.
Trembling but unresisting she lies in his embrace.
The faint strains of a distant chorus is heard.
Without a word they turn and he leads her slowly
into the forest. During the foregoing, the sun has
set, and the light has changed to a pearly grey. A
nightingale has sung in the branches, and the moon
has risen. As the lovers disappear into the forest,
the moon passes behind a cloud and the scene
becomes dark.*

SCENE III

The same.

*In the interval of darkness the MUSIC denotes the
passing of the night and dawning of day. When the
sun rises on the scene, the KNIGHTS and LADIES and
COMMONERS of England, gaily dressed, are awaiting
the arrival of the QUEEN. During the singing of the
Chorus, ARTHUR enters at back, attended by MORDRED,
AGRAVAINE, VIVIEN, &c.*

CHORUS

Daughter of a warrior sire,
Bride of Arthur, England's Queen,
Speed thy coming, he is waiting,
All thy realm is waiting, waiting,
Waiting for the Queen.
Lark, from thy eminence swiftness implore her,
Pipe her a welcoming strain;
Are the miles many that stretch out before her
Or ride they behind in her train?
Look for pennons glancing bright,
Search the upland and the glen;
Is there yet no flash of light,
From the helms of armèd men?
Is she pricking o'er the plain,
Does she pierce the cover,
Rides she with impatient rein,
Glows she like a lover?

(A flourish of trumpets is heard in the distance)

Guinevere, our Queen of May,
Fairest flesh that eye hath seen,
Welcome to our hearts to-day;
Bride of Arthur, England's Queen;
Speed thy coming, he is waiting,
All thy realm is waiting, waiting,
Waiting for the Queen!

A nearer flourish of trumpets is heard. The CROWD cheer. ARTHUR's HERALDS reply with a trumpet peal. The CROWD is swayed by a wave of excitement. The last verse of the Chorus is repeated as the QUEEN's retinue enters. LAUNCELOT, bareheaded, leads GUINEVERE's horse. ALL uncover, and a murmur rises from the crowd, "The Queen!" VIVIEN presses forward to look at her as GUINEVERE dismounts.

MORDRED

(to AGRAVAINE)

She's fair, but tired, and lacks a bridal air.

AGRAVAINE

Less tired, methinks, than sad, less sad than fair.

VIVIEN

(bitterly, but with spontaneous admiration)

Ah God! How beautiful she is!

AGRAVAINE

How now?

Dost think such loveliness will be denied?

VIVIEN

Will not, nor has been, since God gave men sight!

ARTHUR

(to GUINEVERE)

Most noble maid, we do extend to thee
A threefold welcome. From our England's heart
Through England's mouth, in thee we proudly greet
Our royal bride, our mistress and our Queen.

GUINEVERE

My liege, I do not fail in gratitude,
But words. My heart is eloquent of thanks,
My unaccustomed lips refuse to speak.
I thank thee none the less that only say
"I thank thee," and again, I thank thee well.

ARTHUR

Thy beauty multiplies thy gentle thanks
And makes my heart a vast acknowledgement
To God, who tuned my rough suit to thine ear.

(To LAUNCELOT)

To thee, my prince of Knighthood and my friend,
I am too poor this service to requite;
For by this quest both Arthur and his realm
Rest in thy debt. And for this courtly deed
When men shall say "The Queen is come," will add,
"Safe brought by Launcelot;" and all our Knights,
That honour beauty and hold honour dear,
Shall drink to "Launcelot and Guinevere!"

(Shouts of "Sir Launcelot," and a voice, "Launcelot
and Guinevere")

(To GUINEVERE)

And thou, my Queen, wilt join thy might with mine,
To poise in place the keystone of this realm,
And make our isle the wonder of the world?
Too long have I, and with me, these ye see,
Striven without thee to complete our task;
But now, each resting upon each, shall we
Press gladly forward till the goal be won!
To England that I hold in trust for God,
I give no lesser trust, for unto her
I dedicate my Queen!

MORDRED

Long live the Queen!

*There is a great shout of "Guinevere!" "Long live
the Queen!" a braying of trumpets and waving of
bare swords. Then the KNIGHTS and LADIES approach
and make their obeisances to the QUEEN. VIVIAN
approaches LAUNCELOT.*

VIVIEN

Sir Launcelot, thy mein is less than kind,
And must belie thy heart, unless in truth
Regret doth mar thy quest's accomplishment.

LAUNCELOT

Lady, my mein must wrong me woefully.
Glad am I to be back, for I am one
Whose feet can ne'er outrun his love of home.
Yet I am sad, as who is not, that sees
The friendship of a lifetime made as nought
By one bright swifture of a maiden's eyes?

VIVIEN

Thou dost not want for friends!

LAUNCELOT

Nor gratitude
For those who have me in regard. But friends
At best are but the pawns of circumstance;
Kings, Knights and Bishops, even gentle Queens
May lift a hand, and lo! the friend is gone.

VIVIEN

Yet there are those who in regard for thee
Should suffer not or Arthur or his Court,
Husband nor friend nor Queen, to some between.

LAUNCELOT

(meditatively)

What friend is he that would in friendship's name
Prove traitor to his friend? What love is that,
Which ev'ry sacrifice that love can make
Shall cleanse not of a tittle of its shame?

VIVIEN

Love shall be judged by nothing less than love,
Which justifies both love and hate and death.

LAUNCELOT

(prophetically)

Yet shall not justify nor thee nor me.

*The CROWD about GUINEVERE and ARTHUR is broken up
by the entrance of a MESSENGER with papers for the
KING, who retires up stage, reads them, and
consults with the NOBLES about him. VIVIEN goes up
stage. GUINEVERE joins LAUNCELOT.*

GUINEVERE

O Launcelot, my mind is all distraught
And I am sick for healing solitude.
A sense of pending ill constraineth me

(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

To flee from Fate and this grave, blameless King
That I may never love. Ah, dear my lord,
Tell me that even now 'tis not too late!
Some way there is, some means, no matter what,
In pity tell me it is not too late!

LAUNCELOT

Alas! my Queen, there are nor ways nor means,
Thy father's word has gone from him, and now --
To turn back now, would put the King and him
And thee, to open shame.

GUINEVERE

Speak not of shame!
Is there more deadly shame than this that burns
A lurid flame ever before mine eyes?
Ah, Love, forgive, I meant not to upbraid.
My mind is tortured by a strange new dread,
And I, that knew not love nor any fear,
Both love and am afraid. I fear the King,
And these cold watchful eyes that never close
Or wander from my face. I fear myself,
And thee, O thou I hold most dear, most dear,
I fear thee most of all.

LAUNCELOT

Be comforted
A little while, and all these things will pass.
Walk not with fear for presently I go,
Alone with sin and sin's sweet memory
To hide us in some far, untrodden way,
Beyond the reach of envious eye and tongue.

GUINEVERE

My Knight, while in thy heart my image lives,
Live on, that I, when thou art gone from me,
Shall joy that somewhere in this parting world
Is one that holds me ever in his love,
And knows me for his own.

LAUNCELOT

All shall be well
When I am hence; yet I had never gone
Hadst thou less trust of me or I, less love.

GUINEVERE

Ah, Love, this is our doom; the penalty
Of sin so dear that we may not repent.
And now, since Fate has spoken, stay no more,
Lest these farewells, repeated o'er, shall last
Till no farewell may be, but Love's fierce spark
Upbursting into flame unquenchable,
Shall light the face of Heaven with our shame.

*There is a stir among the NOBLES who are gathered
round the KING, and ARTHUR comes forward.*

ARTHUR

My lords, this news is most malignly timed,
But thus it is: King Ryons of the Welsh
Has spurned our terms. The army of Sir Bors,
Hot to avenge this mischievius affront,
Impatient waits our order to advance.
So once again we'll buckle on our arms,
And ere we hang our shields on chamber walls,
To smoothly flatter a fair lady's charms,
We'll take the field against this rebel King.

LAUNCELOT

My lord, if I may speak, thy place is here
Beside the Queen. I do beseech thy leave
To join my valiant kinsman, good Sir Bors,
And with him to the fight.

ARTHUR

Not so, my friend,
For thou art journey-worn and needs must rest.
Stay thou to guard the Queen; I would be sure
That she can take no harm while I am hence.

LAUNCELOT

My liege lord, I have breathed too long a while
Soft perfumed airs, heard nought but honeyed sounds,
And journeyed daintily beneath fair skies;
I fret to hear again the battle's din,
The whistling arrow and the crash of arms.
My blood is hot for conflict, and my eyes
Are smarting with desire once more to peer
Into th' impenetrable face of death.

ARTHUR

Hast not enough of knightly worship won?
Go then; be thine the quest. Sir Messenger,
Speed straightly to Sir Bors that Launcelot
Will ride with him to-night into the West.

LAUNCELOT

Tell him I follow hard upon thy heels,
With four-score knights!
(Exit MESSENGER)
My lord, I thank thee well,
And will be found deserving of thy grace.

ARTHUR

No King was ever served by braver Knight,
Or more true friend. God keep thee in His care!

LAUNCELOT

Farewell, my Liege. Farewell, my lady Queen.

ARTHUR

Farewell!

GUINEVERE

God keep thee ever in His sight.

The CROWDS cheer and many KNIGHTS retire, followed by LAUNCELOT. The QUEEN stands in deep thought, gazing after LAUNCELOT. ARTHUR approaches GUINEVERE. She puts her hand in his and he leads her off.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT II

SCENE

A terrace in the Palace of Westminster. A banqueting hall at the back is partitioned off by curtains stretched between stone pillars. The table in the inner hall is fully spread for feasting. At the back of this hall is a large, iron-barred window.

SQUIRES and WAITING MAIDS lounge on the terrace. SERVING LADS carry dishes at intervals into the inner hall.

SIR MORDRED and VIVIEN converse apart.

VIVIEN

Go, get thee hence; no purpose can be served
By further tarrying. I have strawed well,
My lord, and the procreant seeds have struck
Deep in a rich and fertile soil. Do thou
Seek us out yeomen bred to scythe and flail,
While I keep ward beside the riping corn.
So fast it ripens. Ere thou return, I may
Have need to ply my sickle warily.

MORDRED

At once I go and come again with speed.
The Western firmament is streaked with red,
Reflected from fierce forges, where our men
Fashion new glaives against the harvesting.
The enterprise gains ground, and at our need
These palsied Knights are witched into unrest,
And fret themselves with wasting discontent.
Arthur himself scents mischief, yet it seems
He nothing knows of what these others see,
Between the Queen and his most trusted Knight.

VIVIEN

It is not what they see, but what they hear,
And hearing they think they see -- they know not what!
Nor rightly understand what they do hear.

MORDRED

They make the fair Queen's frailty a cloak
For their own wantonness, yet seek to rend
The very rag they take to shelter them.
She may be frail, I know not, she is fair,
And beauty will be served though Heav'n itself
Contest the first place in a husband's thought.
Wot ye I told they wit not Arthur well,
Who thought to see him bind this scarf of love
So tight about his trunk, that it would turn
His blood to syrup, or make weak his step,
Or lengthen out his slumbers by an hour.
He uses beauty to adorn his crown,
And treats love as an altar ornament.
Lips in his creed were only made for pray'rs,
And bodies for anointing. Is it strange
If Guinevere rebels against a creed
So coldly pure?

VIVIEN

Thy judgment speaks the man;
Too graced with mercy to condemn her quite,
Too wise to count her guiltless. List to me --
In twice two months since Launcelot returned,
Dight in new honours and the sheen of war,
The twain have met but twice. Once weeks ago,
And once again to-day.

MORDRED

Yet in my ear
Mean murmurs have grown great with certainty.

VIVIEN

The loud re-echoings of whispered hints
Projected by a glance. Mute suspicionings
Borne on the breath of envy. But I will swear
I know not man nor woman, no nor love,
If love has called them not or called in vain.

Enter PATRISE and MADOR. The former is talking earnestly, and in a low tone, to his companion.

MORDRED

Seest thou bluff Mador and that Knave, Patrise,
The Court's recording devil? How comes he
So distant from his house at such an hour?

VIVIEN

He is included of some score of guests,
The lesser Knights of Arthur's fellowship,
Who feast anon with Guinevere.

MORDRED

Methinks
He comes to feast with a most fasting face.

VIVIEN

A useful rogue that loves a secret well,
And shares it gladly; that envies no man
Save his hidden thoughts --

MORDRED

And ponders human hearts
As thieves may puzzle o'er a well-keyed chest.
He does not lack suspicion of our plans,
And has such purpose in his pick-lock eyes,
At his approach I cover up my mind
With generous resolves, nor dare unmask,
Till he be gone again.

VIVIEN

Be reassured,
He wills to serve our cause.

MORDRED

If wittingly,
Mistrust him with the zeal of Holy Church.

VIVIEN

Nay, thou dost push thy ready doubts too far,
I trust all thieves to steal, all snakes to bite.
(Regarding Patrise fixedly)
Mark well his mood, how stealthily he speaks,
'Tis like he mutters treason of the Queen.

MORDRED

(ironically)
'Tis like geese cackle and the full kine low;
Each to its note; the cuckoo's not for him
That seeks enchantment in a lullaby.

VIVIEN

(ignoring MORDRED's irony)
I chanced upon him even in the hour,
Straining his yellow eyes across the mead
On one who ever stopped to gather up
This flower or that, and lay them presently
On one, who bent her face upon the gift,
As if to search its sweetness with her lips.
For one was Launcelot and one --

MORDRED

Let be!
Sir Patrise is most zealous for the King,
And sniffs for treason as a dog for rats.
I hate the dog!

VIVIEN

And he hates us no less.
Yet have no fear of him. 'Tis somewhere writ
A goodlier man once took a most grave harm
For no worse matter than a lust of fruit.

MORDRED

Thou second Eve, what thought is in thy mind?

VIVIEN

A thought of poison and of sudden death.
Leave him to me. I have a plan by which
The Queen shall taste the venom of his spleen;
Leave him to me!

MORDRED

Yet would I know thy plan --
If it be shrewd.

*Other GUESTS begin to assemble. A SERVING LAD
crosses stage bearing a dish of apples. VIVIEN
stops him and points to the fruit.*

VIVIEN

What dainties have ye here?

SERVANT

Sweet apples, lady, purveyed by the Queen,
For one especial lord, who loves fruit well;
A Knight of Ireland who is named Patrise.

VIVIEN

'Tis well remembered.
(The SERVANT exits through curtains)
(To MORDRED)
Is the plan not shrewd?
Patriise is for the King. For that he dies.
Moreover, he suspects the Queen. For that
She has small cause to hold him dear. So then,
Did he mischance on poison at this feast,
The rest will have it that he took his death
For braving the distemper of the Queen.
No more. The guests arrive. Thy work is hence.
Farewell!

MORDRED

Farewell! Be close with Agravaine;
He comes from thee to us, and back again,
With all our plans and purpose fair agreed.
I go to say a prayer for Patrise's soul.

Exit MORDRED. VIVIEN walks with him up stage and stands gazing after him.

MADOR

Why goes the foxy Mordred in such haste,
Is he not bidden to our lady's feast?

1ST KNIGHT

It seems not so; yet our fair Queen must spread
Her favours far, or ever I should be
Included of her guests.

MADOR

Or I again,
What worship have I won to be so graced?

PATRISE

When me our lady named, I had a thought
My ears were playing me a knavish trick,
Or I was taken for -- some other Knight.

The other KNIGHTS nod their heads knowingly, and exchange understanding looks. VIVIEN comes down stage to PATRISE, who walks a little apart.

VIVIEN

I think I could divine the name of that,
-- Some other Knight.

PATRISE

'Twould be more strange to find
My lady saw no further than the King!

VIVIEN

It may be she is blest with younger sight.

PATRISE

Or puts her eyes to better purposes.

VIVIEN

The good King's eyes are ever inward turned,
To sentinel his conscience. While with us --

PATRISE

Lady, I have a dainty conscience, too;
'Tis much concerned of late about our feast.

MADOR

A conscience that can treat its stomach fair,
Is a wise friend, to be consulted oft.

VIVIEN

The great Patrise is faint for apple fare,
'Tis called a lover's fancy.

PATRISE

Is it so?
Then unto apples do I render thanks,
That I am eased of love.

VIVIEN

Ungallant Knight,
Go, eat thy fill, sith thou wouldst liever eat
Than love.

MADOR

I care not if 'tis meat or fruit,
Or only love, so we may something eat.

1ST KNIGHT

Perdy! How then?
Shall we go seek the Queen? Which one of ye
Will mind her of her breach of memory?

*Several KNIGHTS make a movement as if they would
act on the suggestion.*

PATRISE

My lords, if go ye will, rub well your eyes;
The world is full of unexpected sights.
*(The KNIGHTS hesitate and question one another with
their eyes apprehensively. MADOR would prevent
PATRISE from saying more)*
There is no dial where I have lately been,
And e'en the sun must stand to serve --

*At this moment the curtains of a side entrance are
thrown back and GUINEVERE's arrival is announced.*

HERALD

The Queen!

Enter GUINEVERE.

*The KNIGHTS are confused by the suddenness of the
announcement, but GUINEVERE does not at once
observe their embarrassment. She is in a happy
mood, and carries a posy of wild flowers.*

GUINEVERE

Good greeting all, Sir Knights. If I be late,
I bear with me a conscience offering,
To 'suage the wrath of injured appetites.

(Noticing their silence and their fixed gaze upon her)

But wherefore do ye gaze so fixedly
Upon my blooms? Why dumb? Is't wonderful
To find fresh blossoms in a woman's hands?
Indeed, they are but weeds, and may be touched
With safety. Ye look on me reproachfully,
As on a child caught bird-nesting. Be sure
I have left many more as gay as these,
Did ye know where to seek them.

GUINEVERE has been distributing the flowers among the KNIGHTS. She offers one to PATRISE, who affects not to see it.

PATRISE

(in an ominous tone that is almost a challenge)
I know my Queen!

A sudden hush falls over the company, and ALL watch GUINEVERE and PATRISE anxiously.

GUINEVERE

(surprised)
What thou, Sir Knight! We know thee learned in fruit,
But did not guess thee versed in floral lore.

PATRISE

I know at least the mead in which they grow,
Still I did see thee pluck them.

GUINEVERE

(in a confusion she is unable to entirely disguise)
I saw not thee.

PATRISE

Nay, lady, thou hadst eyes for nought beside
-- Thy flowers!

The menace in his tone and manner is unmistakable. The KNIGHTS are astonished at his daring, and they do not fail to notice the trepidation displayed by the QUEEN. She recovers her composure only by an evident effort.

GUINEVERE

'Twas even so, my lord, and here
Ye reap the harvest of my wrapt intent.
(With assumed gaiety of manner)

(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

But, sirs, the hour to feast is overpast,
And ye would feign to be served. I do but crave
A mirror and a moment's confidence,
To learn if I be decked for such good company.

*(The curtains of the inner hall are thrown aside and
the KNIGHTS disappear slowly within. GUINEVERE,
whose gaze is searching for somebody among the
pages, intercepts LAUNCELOT'S PAGE, as he is
crossing the stage)*

(To PAGE)

Art thou not one that serves Sir Launcelot?

PAGE

Ay, Madam, I am to him now.

GUINEVERE

Stay not,
But to him speedily and speak him thus:
The Queen doth pray he come to her forthwith,
Full armed for journeying. Be instant, boy,
And speak the message to him privily.

*Exit PAGE. GUINEVERE exits into inner hall among
her GUESTS.*

*VIVIAN approaches PATRISE and MADOR, who are among
the last to enter.*

VIVIEN

Sir Knight, that nimble tongue of thine will wag
Thy body into trouble. Have a care
How thou provoke the anger of a Queen!

PATRISE

(contemptuously)

What have I done that savours of offence?
What said, could kindle wrath in innocence?

VIVIEN

(to MADOR)

Sir Mador, bid thy cousin heed my words.
Do thou remember them!

*(Exeunt ALL KNIGHTS into banqueting hall. The
curtains are drawn. VIVIEN, alone, creeps to
curtains and stands listening. Then comes down
stage)*

If this so well approvèd plot misfalls,
There is no death in drugs, nor pow'r in hate,
Nor honey in revenge. I fear it not!
That choleric, rash, babbling fool, Patrise
Will to his apples soon, and then -- farewell, Patrise;
While all eyes shall be bent upon the Queen.
It is a fearsome thing, this hooded death,
A terror that men shrink from. With the dread

(MORE)

VIVIEN (cont'd)

Of death upon their tongues, men lock their jaws,
Nor ope them, till the creeping enemy
Is found and exorcised with whips of flame.

Exit VIVIEN.

*Enter GUINEVERE from the inner hall, from which
sounds of voices and laughter are heard. She is
greatly agitated.*

GUINEVERE

Why comes he not? What mischief hinders him?
Each moment is in labour with the word --
The fatal word that would communicate
This ardent scandal to my lord the King.
His honour hangs upon a sidling glance,
A loose, unmannered smile, a careless shrug
Of scornful shoulders. The air is feverish
With becks and nods and understanding looks,
And eloquent with meaning stillnesses.

*ARTHUR crosses the stage in earnest talk with some
venerable COUNSELLORS, who carry papers in their
hands. On seeing GUINEVERE, he motions them to
proceed and joins the QUEEN.*

ARTHUR

Thou wait'st for me, my Queen?

GUINEVERE

Ay, my good lord,
For whom I wait so often and so long.

ARTHUR

Fair wife, I have but one un'suaged desire,
That I may always hold me at thy side.
But thou, King's wife and daughter of a King,
Dost know that kingly offices must come
'Fore everything, and even thee before.

GUINEVERE

Yet, knowing this, 'tis not less hard to yield
All that a woman longs for, for the sake
Of Government; to live estranged from love,
And yearn in vain for those small tenderings,
That, costing nothing, are beyond all worth
In 'complishing a woman's happiness.

ARTHUR

Nay, not estranged, albeit our love lacks
The full expression and the constant glow
That lesser lovers share. Yet wit we well
'Tis but the puny weeds of love that spread
Their pretty blossom to the common view;

(MORE)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

While ours, deep-rooted, shall eternal live
When meaner loves lie dead.

GUINEVERE

(bitterly)

All love must die
The meaner with the great; the love that dares,
The love that is ashamed; the unrevealed;
False love and true; the love that is fulfilled,
And that which long outlives its benefice,
And that which is unblossomed ere its prime;
Blest love or shameful -- it is only love
And when it dies -- 'tis dead.

ARTHUR

(reproachfully)

We, too, my Queen,
We two belong, by right, to England first.
Yet art thou dearer to me than my life,
For thou art part of life's appointed work,
A purpose greater than myself and which,
Save for thy sweet, sustaining sympathy,
Had failed of its attainment. Forget awhile
That thou art Arthur's bride. As England's Queen
Thy name shall live in ages yet unborn,
'Mong people that will neither ask nor care,
Whose wife thou chanced to be. Enough for them
Twin toilers we in this great sunlit world,
This pleasant vineyard of our Father Christ,
Who gives to each his true apportioned task;
To me, the brunt of battle and the storm,
To thee, the higher and the holier work
Of thy pure life, and blessful influence.

*Sounds of wild confusion, anger and alarm are heard
in the inner hall, and the KNIGHTS presently issue
forth on to the terrace, half-leading, half-
carrying PATRISE, who is dying. The stage is filled
with angry KNIGHTS.*

PATRISE

(to the QUEEN)

Queen, thou hast worked thy will.

(He falls to the ground)

E'en now I die.

Dies.

An apple rolls from his hand.

MADOR

(bending over the body of PATRISE)

O deed of shame and infamy accursed,
God in Thy mercy take him into rest.

(MORE)

MADOR (cont'd)

(ALL stand for a moment with bowed heads. Then MADOR springs up beside the body, and securing the poisoned apple holds it aloft)

My lord the King, of this so trait'rous deed
I do impeach the Queen, and claim the right
Due to my murdered kinsman and our state.

The KNIGHTS reveal their suspicion and ill-will towards the QUEEN by angry glances and deep-murmurings. GUINEVERE recoils, stunned by the charge.

GUINEVERE

This charge is false, I wot not what it means;
I do protest I had no part or thought
In compassing the end of this brave Knight.
And thus I do report myself to God.

MADOR

My lord, I charge this treason on the Queen.
'Twas at her feast, and by her own desire
He tasted of the fruit, placed cunningly
Against his hand. God wot he had no time
To thank the Queen for her most gracious thought,
But fell on silence suddenly.

GUINEVERE

Sir Knight,
You do your honoured self and him deep wrong
To put upon me such a shameful charge.
What cause had I to wish thy kinsman dead?

MADOR

Madam, 'tis not for me to read thy mind.
He was full keen in sighting and in speech;
'Tis like that he both saw and said too much
To win the favour of a Queen. But by High God,
I charge thee with the making of this death,
And on my body claim to prove my words.

The KNIGHTS renew their angry murmurs against the QUEEN.

ARTHUR

Sir Knight, I have no knowledge of this feud,
But none that sue for justice of the King
Appeal in vain. Full justice thou shalt have,
And this my Queen whose honour is distained,
Shall by the issue of the joust abide,
As should the lowliest lady of my court.
Arm thee at once, Sir Knight, and take thy stand
Within the lists, there presently to meet
The Knight accepted champion of the Queen.

(Exit MADOR)

(MORE)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

(To the KNIGHTS)

My lords, which one of ye will dare to put
His body at the need of Guinevere,
And answer for her to this frenzied Knight?

*(The KNIGHTS turn their eyes from his gaze and none
answers the KING, who looks from one to the other
in anger and amazement)*

Choose ye in haste, my lords, lest Mador deem
We have no Knight will pledge his chivalry
To clear her name of this disparagement.

ARTHUR exits.

*PRIESTS enter to take charge of the body of
PATRISE. Some KNIGHTS bear away the corpse; the
rest follow.*

*Exeunt OMNES. The QUEEN gazes around in wonder and
great fear as each KNIGHT avoids her eye and slinks
away.*

*When they are all gone LAUNCELOT is discovered
standing in the background, fully armed. GUINEVERE,
who is watching the departing KNIGHTS, does not at
first see him, and she utters a wail of despair.*

GUINEVERE

Alone! alone! 'Mid all the press, not one
Will couch a lance to save me from my doom!

*(She turns slowly and catches sight of LAUNCELOT.
His visor is down, his shield is without a device,
the familiar lions have been removed from his
vestments. He raises his visor as he comes forward.
GUINEVERE utters a cry of joy and relief)*

O love, true Knight, and ever loyal friend,
Hast thou heard aught of this most dread mischance,
The death, the charge, and all that has befall?

LAUNCELOT

All has been told me, and I come, to crave
At thy dear hands one favour for the last;
That I may still this slander in his throat,
And break a spear, the last, for thy sweet sake.

GUINEVERE

Alas, my Knight, but that has passed, which robs
My utter hopelessness of thy strong aid:
Our love is spied on and envenomed tongues
Have named us both. Think not of me, but fear
For him, whose honour like a torch burnt low,
Is kept alight at peril to the hand.
Did these dread lords descry thee in the lists,
So well they will I find a shameful death,
In their blind anger they would not forbear

(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

To blazon their suspicions to the King,
And he, with us, should know peace nevermore.

LAUNCELOT

Not so, my Queen, for I have banishèd
The lions from my shield. Bereft of name
And barren of device, I take the lists.
It is my fate, to-day thy fair fame rests
Upon the prowess of an unknown Knight,
And I forego the worship of my life --
To risk my poor self proudly in thy cause
Before the eyes of all men, and of God.

*LAUNCELOT kneels at her feet. Silently and with
tearful emotion she takes her scarf and binds it
about his helm.*

GUINEVERE

Once more thou perilest thy life for mine?

LAUNCELOT

Nay, Queen, my life was ended in the hour.
I go to clear thy name and then --
(*He rises*)

GUINEVERE

For thee,
My Knight and my true friend, the endless road
That bears thee ever from my heart. For me
A life all loveless and alone, until the end.
Yet for a breath return, that from thy hands
I'll take again this life I would not have,
Take one last look on thee, one last embrace,
One kiss -- the last! O God, the very last!

LAUNCELOT

My Queen, there is no law beyond thy wish.

*LAUNCELOT kneels again, kisses her hand, draws down
his visor, and exits.*

*The QUEEN sinks upon a couch in an attitude of
utter hopelessness and misery. Presently a fanfare
of trumpets is heard in the distant meadows. The
QUEEN rouses herself and springs to her feet.*

GUINEVERE

The challenge of Sir Mador! O my lord,
My love, spur fast that all the world may know
One Knight there is, rests faithful to the Queen.
(*Another fanfare of trumpets is heard and the sound
of cheering*)
He comes! The people cheer -- they know not whom.
And now they rock impatiently the while
(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

The heralds cry aloud the shameful charge,
And make my name a mouthful for the mob.

(She stands with her hands pressed over her closed eyes)

Ah, Love! I see it all, and thee. How still
Thou art and terrible. Thy jaws are set,
Thy fingers bite the shoulder of thy spear,
And all thy face is white with blanching rage.
And now an ecstasy of tenderness
Has swept thy heart -- a swift, untamed desire
To strain me in the shelter of thine arms,
And shield me, on thy breast, against the world.

(Another and louder fanfare of trumpets is heard.)

GUINEVERE rushes to the window)

Ah God! that note -- the signal for the fight!
God keep thee, yet not any fear have I
What may befall. For death is but to die, --
So easy will it be to die with thee.

(Another trumpet blast. GUINEVERE strains her ears to learn what has occurred, and struggles to control the emotion that sways her. There is a dull sound of cheering. She walks mechanically to some arms hanging on the wall, takes a dagger, crosses nearer to the window and holds herself more rigidly. The cheering crowd draws nearer and the cry is faintly heard, "The Unknown!" "The Unknown!" She presses her hands which clasp the dagger to her breast. Then she staggers to the window and clings to the iron lattice for support. Again and more clearly are the cries heard for "The Unknown!" In a voice of joy and gratitude she cries:)

O God be thanked! He lives! He lives! He lives!

She throws up her hands as she says this, and the dagger falls to the ground. Again she clings to the window for support. The cheering draws nearer. GUINEVERE's hands relax their hold on the lattice and she drops in a heap under the window.

VIVIEN emerges noiselessly from the concealment of the curtains. She throws one meaning look on the unconscious body of GUINEVERE as she passes and exits. The cheering CROWD is now almost at the walls.

END OF ACT TWO

ACT III

SCENE I

Guinevere's apartments in the Palace at Westminster. The sleeping chamber is curtained off at back. There are benches draped with silks and rugs.

GUINEVERE is sitting with her back to the audience, reading. VIVIEN, who is in attendance, is embroidering and watching her mistress. There is a noise as of KNIGHTS returning from the chase. The KING enters with his SQUIRE, who takes his cloak, spear, etc., and goes up stage where he converses idly with VIVIEN.

GUINEVERE

(rising, and rather wearily)
Greeting, my Lord; has fortune mocked the chase
That ye repair to us thus soon?

ARTHUR

Thus soon!
The phrase doth argue cheerfulness of mind,
And weary hours made light with busyness!

GUINEVERE

Is it already late?

ARTHUR

'Tis late enough,
For those that mark time's passage by the glass.
The day that 'scaped so gladly from the night,
And joyed in freedom and the sun's high noon,
Already tires of its brief liberty
And creeps again into the friendly dark.
The boar has joined himself unto the night,
That old-time enemy of man, that turns
(MORE)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

Our sharpest spears to bulrushes, and makes
All paths a maze and a bewilderment.

VIVIEN

'Tis in the night, my Lord, that vaunting man
Is worse advantaged than his meanest foe;
Then, like a child whose candle is outblown,
He quails at sense of his sheer helplessness.

ARTHUR

He hunts too long that hunting still is caught.
(With an ominous tone in his voice)
There is a time for pressing and for pause,
A time when man must glance from left to right,
If that he still does lead in the pursuit,
Or if pursued, to learn from whom he flees.

GUINEVERE

What mean these words, my Lord? What humour strikes
That unaccustomed, harsh chord in thy voice?
Is it some danger that thou ponderest?

ARTHUR

Danger? why no, 'twas but a whimsy thought;
My mind in idleness goes gathering
'Midst vague, unformed, unfashionable doubts;
What doubts and why and whence, I wit not well,
Nor doubt there is no reason for my doubts.

GUINEVERE

(regarding him anxiously)
Yet thy calm face, that once was wont to be
A re-assurance, now is ruffled o'er
With gusts of care and little questionings.

ARTHUR

Nay, mark it not,
But sing to me some comforting conceits.

GUINEVERE

(hastily)
Nay, my good Lord.

ARTHUR

What! Hast thou not one song
That can confirm the comfort of a crown,
Or reconstruct for doubling royalty
Its image as a thing to be desired?

GUINEVERE

(with increasing distress)
My Lord, my Lord, I have no heart for song,
Nor stomach for the feast. I prithee of
Thy gentleness --

ARTHUR

Nay, pray me not, my Queen,
When did I ever urge thee 'gainst thy wish?
The chilling fear, stern pencil's legacy,
Is on thee yet, and thy sweet woman's heart,
So unfamiliar with the thought of ill,
Still throbs with recollection. Have thy wish!
'Tis in man's temper to forget the throes
Of ancient peril; once 'tis overborne
'Tis then no more than it had ever been.
So all new trouble finds him void of fear.
For Nature wraps a smooth forgetfulness
Of danger close about his head, and through
The rift left cunningly, he only marks
The course stretched out before him, and beyond,
The goal already crowned with victory.
But woman ne'er out-distances her grief;
It runs before to mock the day, and makes
The future dread with instant menaces
Of repetition of the past's unrest.

GUINEVERE

Shall I outlive the thought that I am called
Destroyer of good Knights? that I was charged
Of robbing one, of God's fair gift of life?
Or that, because of me, another Knight
Rendered his life, unasked, into God's hands?
There are some griefs defy forgetfulness!

ARTHUR

Think not that any dies, until his death
Is prospered by the countenance of God.
Man dies not when he wills, but as God lists,
Nor no man kills unauthorised of Him.

GUINEVERE

Still may one grieve to be the instrument
Of doom -- to stand for all men as a sign
Of God's incarnate wrath.

VIVIEN

Nay, Guinevere,
To me, thy lot is not to mourn that death
By thee has ta'en a pair of lusty knights,
But that by God's good grace, and with the aid
Of the stout sinew of a knightly arm,
Thou livest still.

ARTHUR

He reapeth as He wills,
'Tis not for us to question where He takes,
Or where His mercy spares.

(To his SQUIRE)

(MORE)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

How comes it, Sir,
I have not yet the knowledge I required
Of that unknown and valorous good Knight
That did maintain the cause of Guinevere,
And made of her accuser and his charge
A stark and bleeding stillness?

SQUIRE

Sir King, we have
No tidings of him either good or ill,
Save that he went, low-bending, wounded-wise,
Upon his horse, as one that goes to death;
And all our seeking for him has been vain.

ARTHUR

It much repents me that he 'voided us,
Ere we had seen his hurt or learnt his name,
Or thanked him for his knightly services.

VIVIEN

Had Launcelot been here this search had not
Proved profitless, for he doth know the wood
Both far and near. There's not a depth of it
Could hide a man, or quick or dead, so close
He'd find him not.

ARTHUR

Had Launcelot been here
The unknown Knight had still been unbeknown,
For Launcelot is own Knight to the Queen;
No lesser man for her had couched a lance,
Had Launcelot been here. Why was he hence?
What sudden quest did spirit him away
Without a word of warning or farewell,
And masks him from us so relentlessly?
(Then, with more sternness in his voice)
Did no quick instinct mind him of his oath,
Or warn him thou had chanced on evil days?
That he should fail me, he that never yet
Has failed, nor faltered in a single pledge
By which friend seals himself to friend! And yet --
It cannot be. There's nought of earth could make
Disruption 'twixt the King and Launcelot!

GUINEVERE

(with nervous agitation)
My Lord, thy riddles are beyond my wit;
My mind is subject to some sickly spell,
That stands revealed in sharp impatiences,
And aftermaths of impotent regrets.

ARTHUR

Poor troubled one, I will not vex thy mind
With selfish confidence, or magnify
(MORE)

ARTHUR (cont'd)

The burden of thy fears. Forgive me, Love;
(He bends down and kisses her on the forehead)
Farewell!

GUINEVERE

Farewell, my Lord.

ARTHUR

God send thee sleep.

Exit ARTHUR in troubled thought. VIVIEN lingers in the background.

GUINEVERE

(fearfully, to herself)
Had he remained, my sore, guilt-stricken soul
Must have unveiled its bitterness in cries,
And those fierce tears that flow but to condemn.

VIVIEN

(coming forward)
Madam, is it thy will I wait?

GUINEVERE

Nay, nay!
Get thee to feasting. I would be alone.
(Exit VIVIEN)
(Springing up, and with an intenseness of bitterness and suppressed agitation)
His words search out my bosom like a shaft
Loosed by the aimless fingers of the blind.
Poor witless shaft, poor bosom, and poor blind!
What curse is on me that I may not have
My joy in him? that all his boasted parts --
His vast unselfishness, his noble faith,
His very purity so clear and cold --
Strike me with ceaseless terror and alarm
And ev'ry agony save that of love;
And make my wifely vows, my ev'ry thought
A treason and a shriveless infamy?
(She takes from the breast of her gown the scarf given to LAUNCELOT and presses it to her lips)
Within an hour he will have come and gone
And I shall be alone for evermore.
O God, in pity grant he will be gone,
Vouchsafe me brief forgetfulness of self;
Lest losing him, I lose my reason's crown
And with love's speeding words, I bid him stay!

She stands a moment in an attitude of prayer, then retires into her chamber.

Enter VIVIEN and AGRAVAINE in cautious conversation. The latter's dress bears signs of travel.

VIVIEN

Here may we rest a moment undisturbed;
Arthur is busy feasting, and the Queen
Hath urged a sickness, and is gone to rest.
Thou say'st that Launcelot will void the realm,
But hast good grounds for such belief?

AGRAVAINE

As good
As eye and ear can prove them, for in truth
The wound he had of Mador is made whole;
To-night he gets him to his own far land.

VIVIEN

To-night?

AGRAVAINE

This very night.
(VIVIEN remains deep in thought)
Methinks my news,
Is scarce as welcome as it well deserves.

VIVIEN

So he is not yet gone, I am content.
Hast thou none other news?

AGRAVAINE

Of Launcelot?

VIVIEN

Ay, of him!

AGRAVAINE

None, save Sir Mordred's spies report
He passes from this island over seas,
In secret, and attended by his kin.
It was for this we tarried, witting well
The danger that some news of us might come
To Arthur's ears, but still we made no sign.
'Twere better for our cause they were away
Than that the fight already were half won.

VIVIEN

(as if to herself)
This very night! The warning comes so late!
Yet is there time for him to come, and time
Perchance, to go again.

AGRAVAINE

Nay, Queen!

VIVIEN

(still communing with herself)
Perchance,
To go again!

AGRAVAINE

To go indeed, if thou
Dost speak of Launcelot. The King it is,
The noble Mordred, that will come to crown
His Queen at Westminster.

VIVIEN

(not regarding him)
To crown his Queen.

AGRAVAINE

To-morrow shall thy triumph be complete,
Thy dearest vengeance shall be realised.
And, in the mean, thy husband greets thee thus:
Place guards of trusty friends, thou knowest whom,
At every gate and charge them on their lives
That no one shall have ingress to the King.
Fail not in this, for on it must depend
The issue and completion of our plans.

VIVIEN

(gathering her energies)
Go, tell my husband he shall be obeyed,
In ev'ry point.

AGRAVAINE

Nay, Madam, with thy leave
I am constrained to bring thee to his camp.
The road is perilous.

VIVIEN

For those that ride
In glittering, aggressive suits of mail,
A vaunting menace to night's folded ease,
All paths are perilous.

AGRAVAINE

'Twas Mordred's will
That I should ride with thee.

VIVIEN

Say to my lord
I'll come attended by my woman's wit,
And gain in safety what I lose in state.

AGRAVAINE

Lady, I dare intreat thee --

VIVIEN

Say no more!
This is no time for question or reply.
I have a matter here brooks no delay,
Nor can be trusted to another hand.
The matter presses, and thy tarrying
Endangers all. Tread warily, and if
Thou chancest upon anyone, say naught,
See naught. Thou shalt know all before the morn:
Be swift and secret.

*(VIVIEN hurries AGRAVAINE from the apartment. When
he is gone her manner changes, and in her mind hate
and self-interest struggle for the mastery)*

Be swift, but what's to do?
'Tis sure that if to-night he goes, to-night
He comes. Yea, he would come, although the way
Were held against him by a hundred spears;
He'd hew a passage through the world in arms
For that last dear embrace, and that last kiss,
Which by the living God shall be the last.
She shall not look upon his face again.
Yet hers he is. To-morrow she shall die.
Yet will he still be hers -- in life or death,
In peace or shame, for ever, only, hers.
Yet could I stamp upon her spotless brow
The brand of shame, and show her to the world
Stripped of her robes of prizèd innocence,
Naked in sin for all eyes to behold.
It were so easy done, yet I forsee
The mischief it might work to our designs.
'Twere sweet, but if in grasping at revenge,
I fill this sleeping atmosphere with storm,
Delay Sir Launcelot and his fierce kin,
Rouse in resistance this ensurèd Court,
And in the great upheaval, lose a crown?
My crown 'gainst her unmasking! If I dared!
I dare not, yet for this would I dare much.
O if I dared!

*She is roused from her deliberations by the sound
of GUINEVERE moving in her chamber. For a moment
she stands with her eyes riveted on the curtain of
the QUEEN's room. Then she exits stealthily.*

Enter GUINEVERE. She has been weeping.

GUINEVERE

O for a love that wars not with its longings,
A purer love unsullied of desire.
Great spirit and immortal soul of me,
(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

How frail thou art, how wholly weak beside
The longings of this little mortal flesh!
This would I have, the safety of his arm,
The benediction of his grave, slow smile,
The human lips that chide and praise and press --

(Enter LAUNCELOT. GUINEVERE stretches out her hands to him. Their eyes are fixed on one another. LAUNCELOT advances to her as one in a dream and their hands meet. GUINEVERE trembles at his touch and sinks on to a couch. LAUNCELOT kneels beside her, and the QUEEN, taking his head between her hands, presses it against her bosom. For a moment or two they are silent)

Farewell, my own true Knight; yet not farewell,
For neither time nor the estranging seas
Can separate thee from my love of thee.

He rises and stands before her.

LAUNCELOT

My Queen, thy will has ever been my law,
And at thy word, O Love, more dear than life,
More precious than my honour --

He stops, labouring to suppress his emotion.

GUINEVERE

Rising and with forced composure.
Love of mine,
As mine thou art and all compassionate,
Be very strong for me. Now fold me once,
Once close about from grief and grievous things;
Then let the night, the night that is so long,
Close in on us -- we two that love so well.

He takes her in his arms.

LAUNCELOT

Farewell, my Queen; the moon has sullen grown,
Bare are the branches where the May has been.
Farewell! How drear it sounds, familiar and old,
As some new sorrow that is long fore-known.
Loudly, yet all in vain, the echoes ring,
"Farewell!" "Farewell!" As dream sounds in a dream,
They are bereft of tone and meaningless.
Farewell! To leave thee! See thee never more!
To listen for the voice I shall not hear;
To live long years and never cease to yearn,
What nevermore shall be!

GUINEVERE

(bitterly)

Do I not know?
Am I not woman that I should be spared

(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

One drop of sorrow's cup? Too well I know,
And in the knowledge is my most dear dread.
Not brave am I, but blest in my great need,
On thee to lean, and unto thee to yield
My love, myself, and my fond helplessness.

LAUNCELOT

How helpless I that falter at thy touch,
And reel upon the thought of leaving thee!

GUINEVERE

As thine I am, deal with me in thy might,
And save me from myself. For his great sake
That made thee knight -- for him --

*She sinks upon her knees beside the couch, unable
to say more.*

LAUNCELOT

(awakened to his duty by her appeal)

For his great sake
O God, O Thou that doest all things well,
Dispose of us aright. For his great sake --

(GUINEVERE lifts her face in mute supplication)

O Love, and Life, and Soul of me -- Farewell!

*The last word bursts from him in a sob of anguish.
He stoops and folds GUINEVERE for a moment in a
passionate embrace. Then he releases her suddenly
and rushes to the door by which he entered. It is
bolted.*

*At the same moment a loud knocking is heard at the
opposite door and the voice of the KING calls on
them to open.*

*LAUNCELOT returns silently to GUINEVERE and raises
her to her feet. As silently she takes her stand
beside her lover. The uproar outside grows louder.
LAUNCELOT unsheathes his sword as the door is
beaten down and ARTHUR enters, followed by a crowd
of KNIGHTS, bearing torches which fill the stage
with a blaze of light. VIVIEN, who accompanies the
KING, glances from him to the lovers with hate and
triumph gleaming in her eyes. For some moments
ARTHUR stands without speaking, stunned by the
discovery.*

VIVIEN

My lord, did I not bear thee good report?
Or is this not the trusted Knight,
Thou didst lament an hour ago?

The KING does not heed her.

LAUNCELOT

(moving a step towards the KING)

Sir King --

ARTHUR

(with a majestic gesture)

Nay, do not stir; a moment hold you still.
The end is come, and my poor reason strays
Amid the wreckage of this stricken thing
That was the King. Now are all dear hopes dead,
And all I thought so near has taken wings
And fled beyond the reach of human hands!
O ne'er was sin in such brave guise arrayed,
Or vileness dight in such pure loveliness.
Unto ye two I plighted love and faith,
Into your hands, as 'twere a ball, I placed
My England's honour. Ye have let it fall,
And I have lived to see it in the dust.
Was it so mean a thing, so slight a trust,
That ye, my wife and my most trusted Knight --
Twin sources of the strength on which I leaned --
Should by your sinning make an endless shame
To all my hopes, and in the making lend
Your honoured names to foul disloyalty?
God's mercy on our land, the end is near,
Now noble knights betray their sacred trust,
And Queens discard their vows of chastity,
And virtue bleaches on the sands of shame.
The sword is bared again, red burns the sun,
The old sore of corruption gapes afresh,
"The Kingdom backward reels into the beast,"
And all's undone that never was done true.

LAUNCELOT

(in cold, measured tones)

As Guinevere has ever been to me,
My lady and my lord's most noble Queen,
I swear the only mischief to atone
Is that embraced in thy rash calumny.

ARTHUR

(contemptuously)

Sir Knight, that quick flung charge of calumny
Is ever ready in a traitor's mouth.

LAUNCELOT

Sir King, I swear again and then no more.
For naught of evil was I summoned here,
Nor aught of evil stayed me. This I swear.

(With sudden heat)

My Liege, thou ever hast been overkind
With those that murmured treason 'gainst the Queen,
And now 'tis in my mind that on a day

(MORE)

LAUNCELOT (cont'd)

I fought her fight whilst thou stood idly by,
Immovable, austere, and dark of brow,
As questioning the merits of the charge.

GUINEVERE

*(breaking in between them and speaking with
gathering emphasis as she proceeds)*

My lords, my husband and my friend, no more --
Dispute no more, but let there be an end.
My life is not so sweet I shrink from death,
Nor death so bitter that I long to live.
I make sore dole that some would have me dead,
But hug the joy that one for me would die.
And yet I lie not when I say ye lie
In charging me with shame! I had been dead,
So long ago, but for the friend that thrust
His loyal body 'twixt me and the flame.
My lords, which errant of ye all did hold
By Guinevere, when danger lit her sky?
These lips are red with blood he shed for me,
And yet I lie not, saying that ye lie!
Since first I came, my heart has ever roamed
Loveless through Arthur's halls, and quite alone,
While he was near that loved me as his soul.
Love is not shame, nor lack of love a crime;
I speak God's truth, and tell ye that ye lie!

ARTHUR

No more! I'll hear no more! Take her away!
*(A loud disturbance is heard without, and a voice
crying, "My Lord the King! Bring me to the King!")*
What noise is that?

1ST KNIGHT

Some messenger, my Lord.

*Enter a MESSENGER, breathless and dishevelled with
hard riding. He bursts through the throng and
kneels before the KING. VIVIEN starts at his
entrance as if she realises that SIR MORDRED's plot
has failed through her neglect in placing guards at
the doors. She edges into the background.*

MESSENGER

My liege, I come to thee with evil news.

ARTHUR

Ill tidings come amain. Whence? Whence? Be brief!

MESSENGER

I fled the camp of Mordred and King Mark.

1ST KNIGHT

Of Mordred and King Mark?

2ND KNIGHT

What meaneth this?

3RD KNIGHT

Are they allied?

4TH KNIGHT

What brings Mark from the West?

MESSENGER

My lord, false Mordred and King Mark are joined,
They camp from Westminster not twenty miles,
And traitor Knights of thine own fellowship --
Won by great promises of gain, and tales
Of weakness, treachery and sin at Court --
Are hasting to their ranks. This very night
At rise of moon, they move to the attack.

ARTHUR

(in ringing tones of strong excitement)

Now by God's rood what make of man art thou
That dares miscall such lusty tidings bad?
To arms, my lords; in blood and not in rheum,
We'll drown the mem'ry of our royal shame.
No more ye fight for Arthur and a cause,
But for your homes and children and your lives.
True Knight and traitor, we'll ride heel to heel,
And fall like vengeance on this rebel crew,
To die -- God's pity, if we may! -- to die,
Hot with the sweat of bloody victory.

(To GUINEVERE -- in cold, passionless tones)

And thou, bide thou within the holy house,
Until the threated danger shall be past.
If I shall die, live on; but wit ye well
Ye have no cause to pray that I shall live.

GUINEVERE

(in clear, commanding tones)

My liege, I still am Queen, and I demand
By right as Queen -- I do not ask a boon --
That word be sent me of this coming fight.

ARTHUR

The right is thine. The news shall reach thee straight.
Shrive thee and be anealed. Thy destiny
Will be between the lips of him that comes,
And on his tongue shalt thou find life or death.

GUINEVERE

I am content. One lord of all thy court
Thou counted worthy to escort thy bride
To Camelot. I will abide thy choice.
Send him again to me, that I may learn

(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

My doom from him whom thou didst one time bless
In bringing me -- my Knight, Sir Launcelot.

SCENE II

The Chapel of the Convent. Before an altar the NUNS are going through their morning devotions. Day is breaking, but the place is dimly lit with candles upon the altar, etc. The service is Lauds, and the NUNS are chanting the Benediction.

Enter GUINEVERE suddenly, interrupting the chant. She approaches the ABBESS.

GUINEVERE

Good Mother, have ye aught of tidings yet?
No swifthing harbinger of ill? No word
By one brought early wounded to thy care?
Or have ye that of news ye fear to speak?
Ah! hide it not, but give me dear relief
From this incertitude!

ABBESS

Have patience, child!

GUINEVERE

These mocking fears are flames within my brain,
And I would fly this maddening suspense,
E'en to the solace of dread madness' self.

ABBESS

We have heard nothing, but the secret night
Shall find its silence broken by new day.
'Tis woman's lot to suffer and to wait;
Compose thyself to patience and to rest.

GUINEVERE

To rest! There is no more of rest in earth
For Guinevere, that is herself a cause
Of fiery turmoil and the world's unrest.

ABBESS

My daughter, when the tidings come, they shall
Be brought thee. Doubt it not. Whate'er it be,
We will hold nothing back. Go thou apart
And lay thy heavy burden on the Lord.

GUINEVERE

Ah! Drive me not away to be alone!
I'll make no sound. Let me remain to hear
Thy prayers, and pray for me that cannot pray.

ABBESS

Daughter, we pray for thee unceasingly,
That God in His good time will lift His hand
And stay thy heart with praise and penitence.

The NUNS resume their chanting. The rising sun slowly illumines the scene. The sound of a horse galloping is presently heard. GUINEVERE leaps to her feet and rushes to the ABBESS.

GUINEVERE

(fiercely)

Hearken! O hearken! Will ye never cease?
I hear the music of a horse's hoofs.
'Tis one with news; he halteth at the door.
Speak, Mother, speak, and bid them let him in!
*(The doors are thrown open, letting in more light.
Enter LAUNCELOT's PAGE, travel-stained and
distressed)*
(To PAGE with eager intensity)
Speak, Sir, what tidings do ye bring?

PAGE

(tongue-tied, with emotion)

Madam --

GUINEVERE

(feverishly)

Stay not to pick thy words. There is no tongue
Can pluck the bitterness from woe, or weave
A vestment to make fair, grief's nakedness.
What is thy news?

PAGE

Madam, the day is ours.
Sir Mordred is among the dead.

GUINEVERE

Yes! Yes!
Thou seest how we hang upon thy words!
Tell on!

PAGE

Would God there were no more to tell!

GUINEVERE

(frantic with impatience)

Sir, must we wait till thou art grown a man,
To learn thy news? Or would'st thou have us tear
The tidings from thy craven tongue?

PAGE

Lady,
Our sovereign lord, King Arthur, is no more!

GUINEVERE is stunned by the news, and stands for a moment overcome. The ABBESS goes to her.

ABBESS

He has said, I am thy refuge and thy strength.
The Lord that gives, the Lord that takes away,
Have thee in His grace.

GUINEVERE scarcely heeds the ABBESS, but turns again to PAGE.

GUINEVERE

And he, thy master,
How fares Sir Lancelot? Is he of those
That live?

PAGE

He follows with what speed he may.

GUINEVERE

He lives! He lives!

PAGE

Lives, Madam, but is like to die.

GUINEVERE

To die? Ah no! He lives! Thou saidst he lives.

PAGE

He took a hurt intended for the King,
Upon whose shoulder as a shield he hung
Throughout the fight.

GUINEVERE trembles and sways. The ABBESS puts her arms about her. The chant is resumed. Presently there are more sounds without, and LAUNCELOT enters, supported between TWO KNIGHTS. He is in full armour save for his helm. He is dazed with loss of blood, and his sight is failing.

LAUNCELOT

Gently, fair Sirs; the road
Is all composed of unremembered turns,
And this new darkness maketh all things strange.

GUINEVERE

(with a great sob)
Ah God! he comes to die!

LAUNCELOT

I heard a voice
Of one afar; a voice made sweet with tears.
Am I not near the Queen?

GUINEVERE crosses over to LAUNCELOT.

GUINEVERE

Aye, Launcelot,
I am that Guinevere that was the Queen.

LAUNCELOT

The fight is done, my Queen. The realm is safe,
But he, the King --

GUINEVERE

I have been told. And thou --
Where is thy wound?

LAUNCELOT

(in a far-away voice)
He spake no word, but died
All silently, as men might die in dreams.

GUINEVERE

(to the supporting KNIGHTS)
Sirs, bear him tenderly, and set him free
From the misprized enchantment of his mail.
(To LAUNCELOT)
Art thou sore hurt? Yet is there ease in store;
Thou wilt bide here till I shall make thee whole.

LAUNCELOT

(recovering himself)
My Queen, I may not stay at thy command.
I must go hence, at once, to join the King.
'Tis said by ghostly men that all will be
Fair equals in the beautiful beyond.
'Tis false! I have no equal there or here;
For I have prest my mouth upon thy mouth,
And touched thy golden head, and felt thy heart
Beat strong beneath the worship of my hand.
(The QUEEN weeps)
Weep not, my Queen, but give me leave to go.
*(LAUNCELOT steps forward from between the KNIGHTS
that support him and falls with a heavy crash of
armour to the ground. GUINEVERE makes a movement to
go to him, but the ABBESS restrains her)*
How shall he wish to live, that in one hour
Has lived out all the joy of all the world?
Yet would I crave another boon -- that I
Might touch again thy hand before I go.

GUINEVERE moves again to him, and again the ABBESS seizes her arm to restrain her.

ABBESS

Rash Queen, would'st burn eternally for him?

GUINEVERE

(shaking off her restraining hand)

For him, or with him, would I burn for ever!

(The NUNS shrink back from her in horror)

This love is mine; I have nought else to give
But this, my deathless love, this frailty
That moves me e'en against the will of God,
And fills my heart with eager sacrifice.

GUINEVERE goes to LAUNCELOT, who is supported against the knee of one of his KNIGHTS, and bends over him.

LAUNCELOT

O Guinevere, 'tis not to die I grieve,
But to die thus, and leave to thee the shame.

GUINEVERE

Beloved, if this love were only mine,
I had been dead of shame ere now; but if
Some smallest part of it belong to thee,
O deck me bride-wise in the web of it,
Or hang it for a charm upon my breast.

LAUNCELOT

(in a low voice of one dying)

The sin so sweet that we may not repent,
The love that suffers all things. O my Queen,
Thou makest death more sweet to me than life.

GUINEVERE

(kneeling and holding him in her arms)

O my dear lord, we love not as we would,
But as love comes to us, and as love wills.
Never for us the unpleasant ways of love,
Ours but to love. So soon the end has come,
But sithen there could be no other end,
What matter if it come or then or now?
Together we go forth into the night;
Let me hold fast thy hand, be close to thee,
Lest in the fearsome passage of the dark
I lose thee, and should be afraid. In life,
In death, we are together still,
My heart upon thy true heart beats its last.

(The full-risen sun sheds a golden glory on the lovers. GUINEVERE strains him to her breast and kisses his mouth. His body quivers for an instant,

(MORE)

GUINEVERE (cont'd)

*then his mailed hand slips from her shoulder and
falls to the ground)*

Not yet, O God! The time is not quite yet!

*Still pressing him to her, she raises the lifeless
arm and replaces it about her neck. Then she falls
lifeless across his body. The NUNS close the heavy
door, shutting out the sunshine.*

*At the back of the stage, like a vision, a tableau
is shown of the Meadows near Camelot, with the
effect of waning moonlight, as at the close of the
Second Scene in the First Act. The figures of
LAUNCELOT and GUINEVERE are revealed; his arm is
about her, and her head rests against her shoulder.
Slowly they disappear into the forest -- the moon
passes behind a cloud. The entire stage becomes
dark.*

CURTAIN