

# TRISTRAM AND ISEULT

BY MATTHEW ARNOLD (1852)

## I: Tristram

*Tristram*

Is she not come? The messenger was sure.  
Prop me upon the pillows once again—  
Raise me, my page! this cannot long endure.  
—Christ, what a night! how the sleet whips the pane!  
What lights will those out to the northward be?

*The Page*

The lanterns of the fishing-boats at sea.

*Tristram*

Soft—who is that, stands by the dying fire?

*The Page*

Iseult.

*Tristram*

Ah! not the Iseult I desire.

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10 What Knight is this so weak and pale,  
Though the locks are yet brown on his noble head,  
Propt on pillows in his bed,

Gazing seaward for the light  
Of some ship that fights the gale  
On this wild December night?  
Over the sick man's feet is spread  
A dark green forest-dress;  
A gold harp leans against the bed,  
Ruddy in the fire's light.

20 I know him by his harp of gold,  
Famous in Arthur's court of old;  
I know him by his forest-dress—  
The peerless hunter, harper, knight,  
Tristram of Lyonesse.

What Lady is this, whose silk attire  
Gleams so rich in the light of the fire?  
The ringlets on her shoulders lying  
In their flitting lustre vying  
With the clasp of burnish'd gold  
Which her heavy robe doth hold.

30 Her looks are mild, her fingers slight  
As the driven snow are white;  
But her cheeks are sunk and pale.  
Is it that the bleak sea-gale  
Beating from the Atlantic sea  
On this coast of Brittany,  
Nips too keenly the sweet flower?  
Is it that a deep fatigue  
Hath come on her, a chilly fear,  
Passing all her youthful hour  
40 Spinning with her maidens here,  
Listlessly through the window-bars  
Gazing seawards many a league,  
From her lonely shore-built tower,  
While the knights are at the wars?

Or, perhaps, has her young heart  
 Felt already some deeper smart,  
 Of those that in secret the heart-strings rive,  
 Leaving her sunk and pale, though fair?  
 Who is this snowdrop by the sea?—  
 50 I know her by her mildness rare,  
 Her snow-white hands, her golden hair;  
 I know her by her rich silk dress,  
 And her fragile loveliness—  
 The sweetest Christian soul alive,  
 Iseult of Brittany.

Iseult of Brittany?—but where  
 Is that other Iseult fair,  
 That proud, first Iseult, Cornwall's queen?  
 She, whom Tristram's ship of yore  
 From Ireland to Cornwall bore,  
 60 To Tyntagel, to the side  
 Of King Marc, to be his bride?  
 She who, as they voyaged, quaff'd  
 With Tristram that spiced magic draught,  
 Which since then for ever rolls  
 Through their blood, and binds their souls,  
 Working love, but working teen?—  
 There were two Iseults who did sway  
 Each her hour of Tristram's day;  
 But one possess'd his waning time,  
 70 The other his resplendent prime.  
 Behold her here, the patient flower,  
 Who possess'd his darker hour!  
 Iseult of the Snow-White Hand  
 Watches pale by Tristram's bed.  
 She is here who had his gloom,  
 Where art thou who hadst his bloom?

One such kiss as those of yore  
 Might thy dying knight restore!  
 Does the love-draught work no more?  
 80 Art thou cold, or false, or dead,  
 Iseult of Ireland?

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Loud howls the wind, sharp patters the rain,  
 And the knight sinks back on his pillows again.  
 He is weak with fever and pain,  
 And his spirit is not clear.  
 Hark! he mutters in his sleep,  
 As he wanders far from here,  
 Changes place and time of year,  
 And his closéd eye doth sweep  
 90 O'er some fair unwint'ry sea,  
 Not this fierce Atlantic deep,  
 While he mutters brokenly:—

*Tristram*

The calm sea shines, loose hang the vessel's sails;  
 Before us are the sweet green fields of Wales,  
 And overhead the cloudless sky of May.—  
 "Ah, would I were in those green fields at play,  
 Not pent on ship-board this delicious day!  
 Tristram, I pray thee, of thy courtesy,  
 Reach me my golden phial stands by thee,  
 100 But pledge me in it first for courtesy.—"  
 Ha! dost thou start? are thy lips blanch'd like mine?  
 Child, 'tis no true draught this, 'tis poison'd wine!  
 Iseult! . . . .

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Ah, sweet angels, let him dream!  
 Keep his eyelids! let him seem  
 Not this fever-wasted wight  
 Thinn'd and paled before his time,  
 But the brilliant youthful knight  
 In the glory of his prime,  
 110 Sitting in the gilded barge,  
 At thy side, thou lovely charge,  
 Bending gaily o'er thy hand,  
 Iseult of Ireland!  
 And she too, that princess fair,  
 If her bloom be now less rare,  
 Let her have her youth again—  
 Let her be as she was then!  
 Let her have her proud dark eyes,  
 And her petulant quick replies—  
 120 Let her sweep her dazzling hand  
 With its gesture of command,  
 And shake back her raven hair  
 With the old imperious air!  
 As of old, so let her be,  
 That first Iseult, princess bright,  
 Chatting with her youthful knight  
 As he steers her o'er the sea,  
 Quitting at her father's will  
 The green isle where she was bred,  
 130 And her bower in Ireland,  
 For the surge-beat Cornish strand;  
 Where the prince whom she must wed  
 Dwells on loud Tyntagel's hill  
 High above the sounding sea.  
 And that potion rare her mother  
 Gave her, that her future lord,  
 Gave her, that King Marc and she,  
 Might drink it on their marriage-day,

And for ever love each other—  
 140 Let her, as she sits on board,  
 Ah, sweet saints, unwittingly!  
 See it shine, and take it up,  
 And to Tristram laughing say:  
 "Sir Tristram, of thy courtesy,  
 Pledge me in my golden cup!"  
 Let them drink it—let their hands  
 Tremble, and their cheeks be flame,  
 As they feel the fatal bands  
 Of a love they dare not name,  
 150 With a wild delicious pain,  
 Twine about their hearts again!  
 Let the early summer be  
 Once more round them, and the sea  
 Blue, and o'er its mirror kind  
 Let the breath of the May-wind,  
 Wandering through their drooping sails,  
 Die on the green fields of Wales!  
 Let a dream like this restore  
 What his eye must see no more!

*Tristram*

160 Chill blows the wind, the pleasaunce-walks are drear—  
 Madcap, what jest was this, to meet me here?  
 Were feet like those made for so wild a way?  
 The southern winter-parlour, by my fay,  
 Had been the likeliest trysting-place to-day!  
 "Tristram!—nay, nay—thou must not take my hand!—  
 Tristram!—sweet love!—we are betray'd—out-plann'd.  
 Fly—save thyself—save me!—I dare not stay."—  
 One last kiss first!—"Tis vain—to horse—away!"

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Ah! sweet saints, his dream doth move  
 170 Faster surely than it should,  
 From the fever in his blood!  
 All the spring-time of his love  
 Is already gone and past,  
 And instead thereof is seen  
 Its winter, which endureth still—  
 Tyntagel on its surge-beat hill,  
 The pleasaunce-walks, the weeping queen,  
 The flying leaves, the straining blast,  
 And that long, wild kiss—their last.  
 180 And this rough December-night,  
 And his burning fever-pain,  
 Mingle with his hurrying dream,  
 Till they rule it, till he seem  
 The press'd fugitive again,  
 The love-desperate banish'd knight  
 With a fire in his brain  
 Flying o'er the stormy main.  
 —Whither does he wander now?  
 Haply in his dreams the wind  
 190 Wafts him here, and lets him find  
 The lovely orphan child again  
 In her castle by the coast;  
 The youngest, fairest chatelaine,  
 Whom this realm of France can boast,  
 Our snowdrop by the Atlantic sea,  
 Iseult of Brittany.  
 And—for through the haggard air,  
 The stain'd arms, the matted hair  
 Of that stranger-knight ill-starr'd,  
 200 There gleam'd something, which recall'd  
 The Tristram who in better days  
 Was Launcelot's guest at Joyous Gard—  
 Welcomed here, and here install'd,

Tended of his fever here,  
 Haply he seems again to move  
 His young guardian's heart with love;  
 In his exiled loneliness,  
 In his stately, deep distress,  
 Without a word, without a tear.  
 210 —Ah! 'tis well he should retrace  
 His tranquil life in this lone place;  
 His gentle bearing at the side  
 Of his timid youthful bride;  
 His long rambles by the shore  
 On winter-evenings, when the roar  
 Of the near waves came, sadly grand,  
 Through the dark, up the drown'd sand,  
 Or his endless reveries  
 In the woods, where the gleams play  
 220 On the grass under the trees,  
 Passing the long summer's day  
 Idle as a mossy stone  
 In the forest-depths alone,  
 The chase neglected, and his hound  
 Couch'd beside him on the ground.  
 —Ah! what trouble's on his brow?  
 Hither let him wander now;  
 Hither, to the quiet hours  
 Pass'd among these heaths of ours  
 230 By the grey Atlantic sea;  
 Hours, if not of ecstasy,  
 From violent anguish surely free!

*Tristram*

All red with blood the whirling river flows,  
 The wide plain rings, the dazed air throbs with blows.  
 Upon us are the chivalry of Rome—

Their spears are down, their steeds are bathed in foam.  
 "Up, Tristram, up," men cry, "thou moonstruck knight!  
 What foul fiend rides thee? On into the fight!"

—Above the din her voice is in my ears;  
 240 I see her form glide through the crossing spears.—  
 Iseult! . . .

\* \* \*

Ah! he wanders forth again;  
 We cannot keep him; now, as then,  
 There's a secret in his breast  
 Which will never let him rest.  
 These musing fits in the green wood  
 They cloud the brain, they dull the blood!  
 —His sword is sharp, his horse is good;

Beyond the mountains will he see  
 250 The famous towns of Italy,  
 And label with the blessed sign  
 The heathen Saxons on the Rhine.  
 At Arthur's side he fights once more  
 With the Roman Emperor.  
 There's many a gay knight where he goes  
 Will help him to forget his care;  
 The march, the leaguer, Heaven's blithe air,  
 The neighing steeds, the ringing blows—  
 Sick pining comes not where these are.

260 Ah! what boots it, that the jest  
 Lightens every other brow,  
 What, that every other breast  
 Dances as the trumpets blow,  
 If one's own heart beats not light  
 On the waves of the toss'd fight,  
 If oneself cannot get free  
 From the clog of misery?

Thy lovely youthful wife grows pale  
 Watching by the salt sea-tide  
 270 With her children at her side  
 For the gleam of thy white sail.  
 Home, Tristram, to thy halls again!  
 To our lonely sea complain,  
 To our forests tell thy pain!

*Tristram*

All round the forest sweeps off, black in shade,  
 But it is moonlight in the open glade;  
 And in the bottom of the glade shine clear  
 The forest-chapel and the fountain near.  
 —I think, I have a fever in my blood;  
 280 Come, let me leave the shadow of this wood,  
 Ride down, and bathe my hot brow in the flood.  
 —Mild shines the cold spring in the moon's clear light;  
 God! 'tis her face plays in the waters bright.  
 "Fair love," she says, "canst thou forget so soon,  
 At this soft hour, under this sweet moon?"—  
 Iseult! . . .

\* \* \*

Ah, poor soul! if this be so,  
 Only death can balm thy woe.  
 The solitudes of the green wood  
 290 Had no medicine for thy mood;  
 The rushing battle clear'd thy blood  
 As little as did solitude.  
 —Ah! his eyelids slowly break  
 Their hot seals, and let him wake;  
 What new change shall we now see?  
 A happier? Worse it cannot be.

*Tristram*

Is my page here? Come, turn me to the fire!  
 Upon the window-panes the moon shines bright;  
 The wind is down—but she'll not come to-night.  
 300 Ah no! she is asleep in Cornwall now,  
 Far hence; her dreams are fair—smooth is her brow.  
 Of me she recks not, nor my vain desire.  
 —I have had dreams, I have had dreams, my page,  
 Would take a score years from a strong man's age;  
 And with a blood like mine, will leave, I fear,  
 Scant leisure for a second messenger.  
 —My princess, art thou there? Sweet, do not wait!  
 To bed, and sleep! my fever is gone by;  
 To-night my page shall keep me company.  
 310 Where do the children sleep? kiss them for me!  
 Poor child, thou art almost as pale as I;  
 This comes of nursing long and watching late.  
 To bed—good night!

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She left the gleam-lit fireplace,  
 She came to the bed-side;  
 She took his hands in hers—her tears  
 Down on his wasted fingers rain'd.  
 She raised her eyes upon his face—  
 Not with a look of wounded pride,  
 A look as if the heart complained—  
 320 Her look was like a sad embrace;  
 The gaze of one who can divine  
 A grief, and sympathise.  
 Sweet flower! thy children's eyes  
 Are not more innocent than thine.

But they sleep in shelter'd rest,  
 Like helpless birds in the warm nest,  
 On the castle's southern side;  
 Where feebly comes the mournful roar  
 Of buffeting wind and surging tide  
 330 Through many a room and corridor.  
 —Full on their window the moon's ray  
 Makes their chamber as bright as day.  
 It shines upon the blank white walls,  
 And on the snowy pillow falls,  
 And on two angel-heads doth play  
 Turn'd to each other—the eyes closed,  
 The lashes on the cheeks reposed.  
 Round each sweet brow the cap close-set  
 Hardly lets peep the golden hair;  
 340 Through the soft-open'd lips the air  
 Scarcely moves the coverlet.  
 One little wandering arm is thrown  
 At random on the counterpane,  
 And often the fingers close in haste  
 As if their baby-owner chased  
 The butterflies again.  
 This stir they have, and this alone;  
 But else they are so still!  
 —Ah, tired madcaps! you lie still;  
 350 But were you at the window now,  
 To look forth on the fairy sight  
 Of your illumined haunts by night,  
 To see the park-glades where you play  
 Far lovelier than they are by day,  
 To see the sparkle on the eaves,  
 And upon every giant-bough  
 Of those old oaks, whose wet red leaves  
 Are jewell'd with bright drops of rain—  
 How would your voices run again!

360 And far beyond the sparkling trees  
 Of the castle-park one sees  
 The bare heaths spreading, clear as day,  
 Moor behind moor, far, far away,  
 Into the heart of Brittany.  
 And here and there, lock'd by the land,  
 Long inlets of smooth glittering sea,  
 And many a stretch of watery sand  
 All shining in the white moon-beams—  
 But you see fairer in your dreams!

What voices are these on the clear night-air?  
 370 What lights in the court—what steps on the stair?

## II: Iseult of Ireland

*Tristram*

Raise the light, my page! that I may see her.—  
 Thou art come at last, then, haughty Queen!  
 Long I've waited, long I've fought my fever;  
 Late thou comest, cruel thou hast been.

*Iseult*

Blame me not, poor sufferer! that I tarried;  
 Bound I was, I could not break the band.  
 Chide not with the past, but feel the present!  
 I am here—we meet—I hold thy hand.

*Tristram*

Thou art come, indeed—thou hast rejoin'd me;  
 380 Thou hast dared it—but too late to save.

Fear not now that men should tax thine honour!  
 I am dying: build—(thou may'st)—my grave!

*Iseult*

Tristram, ah, for love of Heaven, speak kindly!  
 What, I hear these bitter words from thee?  
 Sick with grief I am, and faint with travel—  
 Take my hand—dear Tristram, look on me!

*Tristram*

I forget, thou comest from thy voyage—  
 Yes, the spray is on thy cloak and hair.  
 But thy dark eyes are not dimm'd, proud Iseult!  
 390 And thy beauty never was more fair.

*Iseult*

Ah, harsh flatterer! let alone my beauty!  
 I, like thee, have left my youth afar.  
 Take my hand, and touch these wasted fingers—  
 See my cheek and lips, how white they are!

*Tristram*

Thou art paler—but thy sweet charm, Iseult!  
 Would not fade with the dull years away.  
 Ah, how fair thou standest in the moonlight!  
 I forgive thee, Iseult!—thou wilt stay?

*Iseult*

Fear me not, I will be always with thee;  
 400 I will watch thee, tend thee, soothe thy pain;  
 Sing thee tales of true, long-parted lovers,

Join'd at evening of their days again.

*Tristram*

No, thou shalt not speak! I should be finding  
 Something alter'd in thy courtly tone.  
 Sit—sit by me! I will think, we've lived so  
 In the green wood, all our lives, alone.

*Iseult*

Alter'd, Tristram? Not in courts, believe me,  
 Love like mine is alter'd in the breast;  
 Courtly life is light and cannot reach it—  
 Ah! it lives, because so deep-suppress'd!

410 What, thou think'st men speak in courtly chambers  
 Words by which the wretched are consoled?  
 What, thou think'st this aching brow was cooler,  
 Circled, Tristram, by a band of gold?

Royal state with Marc, my deep-wrong'd husband—  
 That was bliss to make my sorrows flee!  
 Silken courtiers whispering honied nothings—  
 Those were friends to make me false to thee!

Ah, on which, if both our lots were balanced,  
 Was indeed the heaviest burden thrown—  
 Thee, a pining exile in thy forest,  
 Me, a smiling queen upon my throne?

Vain and strange debate, where both have suffer'd,  
 420 Both have pass'd a youth consumed and sad,  
 Both have brought their anxious day to evening,

And have now short space for being glad!

Join'd we are henceforth; nor will thy people,  
 Nor thy younger Iseult take it ill,  
 That a former rival shares her office,  
 When she sees her humbled, pale, and still.

I, a faded watcher by thy pillow,  
 I, a statue on thy chapel-floor,  
 Pour'd in prayer before the Virgin-Mother,  
 Rouse no anger, make no rivals more.

She will cry: "Is this the foe I dreaded?  
 This his idol? this that royal bride?  
 430 Ah, an hour of health would purge his eyesight!  
 Stay, pale queen! for ever by my side."

Hush, no words! that smile, I see, forgives me.  
 I am now thy nurse, I bid thee sleep.  
 Close thine eyes—this flooding moonlight blinds them!—  
 Nay, all's well again! thou must not weep.

*Tristram*

I am happy! yet I feel, there's something  
 Swells my heart, and takes my breath away.  
 Through a mist I see thee; near—come nearer!  
 Bend—bend down!—I yet have much to say.

*Iseult*

Heaven! his head sinks back upon the pillow—  
 440 Tristram! Tristram! let thy heart not fail!  
 Call on God and on the holy angels!



What, love, courage!—Christ! he is so pale.

*Tristram*

Hush, 'tis vain, I feel my end approaching!

This is what my mother said should be,  
When the fierce pains took her in the forest,  
The deep draughts of death, in bearing me.

"Son," she said, "thy name shall be of sorrow;  
Tristram art thou call'd for my death's sake."  
So she said, and died in the drear forest.  
Grief since then his home with me doth make.

I am dying.—Start not, nor look wildly!  
450 Me, thy living friend, thou canst not save.  
But, since living we were ununited,  
Go not far, O Iseult! from my grave.

Close mine eyes, then seek the princess Iseult;  
Speak her fair, she is of royal blood!  
Say, I will'd so, that thou stay beside me—  
She will grant it; she is kind and good.

Now to sail the seas of death I leave thee—  
One last kiss upon the living shore!

*Iseult*

Tristram!—Tristram!—stay—receive me with thee!  
Iseult leaves thee, Tristram! never more.

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You see them clear—the moon shines bright.

460 Slow, slow and softly, where she stood,  
She sinks upon the ground;—her hood  
Had fallen back; her arms outspread  
Still hold her lover's hand; her head  
Is bow'd, half-buried, on the bed.  
O'er the blanch'd sheet her raven hair  
Lies in disorder'd streams; and there,  
Strung like white stars, the pearls still are,  
And the golden bracelets, heavy and rare,  
Flash on her white arms still.  
470 The very same which yesternight  
Flash'd in the silver sconces' light,  
When the feast was gay and the laughter loud  
In Tyntagel's palace proud.  
But then they deck'd a restless ghost  
With hot-flush'd cheeks and brilliant eyes,  
And quivering lips on which the tide  
Of courtly speech abruptly died,  
And a glance which over the crowded floor,  
The dancers, and the festive host,  
480 Flew ever to the door.  
That the knights eyed her in surprise,  
And the dames whispered scoffingly:  
"Her moods, good lack, they pass like showers!  
But yesternight and she would be  
As pale and still as wither'd flowers,  
And now to-night she laughs and speaks  
And has a colour in her cheeks;  
Christ keep us from such fantasy!"—

Yes, now the longing is o'erpast,  
Which, dogg'd by fear and fought by shame  
490 Shook her weak bosom day and night,  
Consumed her beauty like a flame,

And dimm'd it like the desert-blast.  
 And though the bed-clothes hide her face,  
 Yet were it lifted to the light,  
 The sweet expression of her brow  
 Would charm the gazer, till his thought  
 Erased the ravages of time,  
 Fill'd up the hollow cheek, and brought  
 A freshness back as of her prime—  
 500 So healing is her quiet now.  
 So perfectly the lines express  
 A tranquil, settled loveliness,  
 Her younger rival's purest grace.

The air of the December-night  
 Steals coldly around the chamber bright,  
 Where those lifeless lovers be;  
 Swinging with it, in the light  
 Flaps the ghostlike tapestry.  
 And on the arras wrought you see  
 A stately Huntsman, clad in green,  
 510 And round him a fresh forest-scene.  
 On that clear forest-knoll he stays,  
 With his pack round him, and delays.  
 He stares and stares, with troubled face,  
 At this huge, gleam-lit fireplace,  
 At that bright, iron-figured door,  
 And those blown rushes on the floor.  
 He gazes down into the room  
 With heated cheeks and flurried air,  
 And to himself he seems to say:  
 520 "What place is this, and who are they?  
 Who is that kneeling Lady fair?  
 And on his pillows that pale Knight  
 Who seems of marble on a tomb?

How comes it here, this chamber bright,  
 Through whose mullion'd windows clear  
 The castle-court all wet with rain,  
 The drawbridge and the moat appear,  
 And then the beach, and, mark'd with spray,  
 The sunken reefs, and far away  
 530 The unquiet bright Atlantic plain?  
 —What, has some glamour made me sleep,  
 And sent me with my dogs to sweep,  
 By night, with boisterous bugle-peal,  
 Through some old, sea-side, knightly hall,  
 Not in the free green wood at all?  
 That Knight's asleep and at her prayer  
 That Lady by the bed doth kneel—  
 Then hush, thou boisterous bugle-peal!"  
 —The wild boar rustles in his lair;  
 540 The fierce hounds snuff the tainted air;  
 But lord and hounds keep rooted there.

Cheer, cheer thy dogs into the brake,  
 O Hunter! and without a fear  
 Thy golden-tassell'd bugle blow,  
 And through the glades thy pastime take—  
 For thou wilt rouse no sleepers here!  
 For these thou seest are unmoved;  
 Cold, cold as those who lived and loved  
 A thousand years ago.

### III: Iseult of Brittany

A year had flown, and o'er the sea away,  
 550 In Cornwall, Tristram and Queen Iseult lay;  
 In King Marc's chapel, in Tyntagel old—  
 There in a ship they bore those lovers cold.

The young surviving Iseult, one bright day,  
 Had wander'd forth. Her children were at play  
 In a green circular hollow in the heath  
 Which borders the sea-shore—a country path  
 Creeps over it from the till'd fields behind.  
 The hollow's grassy banks are soft-inclined,  
 And to one standing on them, far and near  
 The lone unbroken view spreads bright and clear  
 560 Over the waste. This cirque of open ground  
 Is light and green; the heather, which all round  
 Creeps thickly, grows not here; but the pale grass  
 Is strewn with rocks, and many a shiver'd mass  
 Of vein'd white-gleaming quartz, and here and there  
 Dotted with holly-trees and juniper.  
 In the smooth centre of the opening stood  
 Three hollies side by side, and made a screen,  
 Warm with the winter-sun, of burnish'd green  
 With scarlet berries gemm'd, the fell-fare's food.  
 570 Under the glittering hollies Iseult stands,  
 Watching her children play; their little hands  
 Are busy gathering spars of quartz, and streams  
 Of stagshorn for their hats; anon, with screams  
 Of mad delight they drop their spoils, and bound  
 Among the holly-clumps and broken ground,  
 Racing full speed, and startling in their rush  
 The fell-fares and the speckled missel-thrush  
 Out of their glossy coverts;—but when now  
 Their cheeks were flush'd, and over each hot brow,  
 580 Under the feather'd hats of the sweet pair,  
 In blinding masses shower'd the golden hair—  
 Then Iseult call'd them to her, and the three  
 Cluster'd under the holly-screen, and she  
 Told them an old-world Breton history.

Warm in their mantles wrapt the three stood there,  
 Under the hollies, in the clear still air—  
 Mantles with those rich furs deep glistening  
 Which Venice ships do from swart Egypt bring.  
 Long they stay'd still—then, pacing at their ease,  
 Moved up and down under the glossy trees.  
 590 But still, as they pursued their warm dry road,  
 From Iseult's lips the unbroken story flow'd,  
 And still the children listen'd, their blue eyes  
 Fix'd on their mother's face in wide surprise;  
 Nor did their looks stray once to the sea-side,  
 Nor to the brown heaths round them, bright and wide,  
 Nor to the snow, which, though 't was all away  
 From the open heath, still by the hedgerows lay,  
 Nor to the shining sea-fowl, that with screams  
 Bore up from where the bright Atlantic gleams,  
 600 Swooping to landward; nor to where, quite clear,  
 The fell-fares settled on the thickets near.  
 And they would still have listen'd, till dark night  
 Came keen and chill down on the heather bright;  
 But, when the red glow on the sea grew cold,  
 And the grey turrets of the castle old  
 Look'd sternly through the frosty evening-air,  
 Then Iseult took by the hand those children fair,  
 And brought her tale to an end, and found the path,  
 And led them home over the darkening heath.

And is she happy? Does she see unmoved  
 610 The days in which she might have lived and loved  
 Slip without bringing bliss slowly away,  
 One after one, to-morrow like to-day?  
 Joy has not found her yet, nor ever will—  
 Is it this thought which makes her mien so still,  
 Her features so fatigued, her eyes, though sweet,

So sunk, so rarely lifted save to meet  
 Her children's? She moves slow; her voice alone  
 Hath yet an infantine and silver tone.  
 But even that comes languidly; in truth,  
 620 She seems one dying in a mask of youth.  
 And now she will go home, and softly lay  
 Her laughing children in their beds, and play  
 Awhile with them before they sleep; and then  
 She'll light her silver lamp, which fishermen  
 Dragging their nets through the rough waves, afar,  
 Along this iron coast, know like a star,  
 And take her broidery-frame, and there she'll sit  
 Hour after hour, her gold curls sweeping it;  
 Lifting her soft-bent head only to mind  
 630 Her children, or to listen to the wind.  
 And when the clock peals midnight, she will move  
 Her work away, and let her fingers rove  
 Across the shaggy brows of Tristram's hound  
 Who lies, guarding her feet, along the ground;  
 Or else she will fall musing, her blue eyes  
 Fixt, her slight hands clasp'd on her lap; then rise,  
 And at her prie-dieu kneel, until she have told  
 Her rosary-beads of ebony tipp'd with gold,  
 Then to her soft sleep—and to-morrow'll be  
 To-day's exact repeated effigy.  
 640 Yes, it is lonely for her in her hall.  
 The children, and the grey-hair'd seneschal,  
 Her women, and Sir Tristram's aged hound,  
 Are there the sole companions to be found.  
 But these she loves; and noisier life than this  
 She would find ill to bear, weak as she is.  
 She has her children, too, and night and day  
 Is with them; and the wide heaths where they play,

The hollies, and the cliff, and the sea-shore,  
 The sand, the sea-birds, and the distant sails,  
 650 These are to her dear as to them; the tales  
 With which this day the children she beguiled  
 She gleaned from Breton grandames, when a child,  
 In every hut along this sea-coast wild.  
 She herself loves them still, and, when they are told,  
 Can forget all to hear them, as of old.

Dear saints, it is not sorrow, as I hear,  
 Not suffering, which shuts up eye and ear  
 To all that has delighted them before,  
 And lets us be what we were once no more.  
 No, we may suffer deeply, yet retain  
 660 Power to be moved and soothed, for all our pain,  
 By what of old pleased us, and will again.  
 No, 'tis the gradual furnace of the world,  
 In whose hot air our spirits are upcurl'd  
 Until they crumble, or else grow like steel—  
 Which kills in us the bloom, the youth, the spring—  
 Which leaves the fierce necessity to feel,  
 But takes away the power—this can avail,  
 By drying up our joy in everything,  
 To make our former pleasures all seem stale.  
 670 This, or some tyrannous single thought, some fit  
 Of passion, which subdues our souls to it,  
 Till for its sake alone we live and move—  
 Call it ambition, or remorse, or love—  
 This too can change us wholly, and make seem  
 All which we did before, shadow and dream.

And yet, I swear, it angers me to see  
 How this fool passion gulls men potently;  
 Being, in truth, but a diseased unrest,

And an unnatural overheat at best.  
 How they are full of languor and distress  
 680 Not having it; which when they do possess,  
 They straightway are burnt up with fume and care,  
 And spend their lives in posting here and there  
 Where this plague drives them; and have little ease,  
 Are furious with themselves, and hard to please.  
 Like that bald Caesar, the famed Roman wight,  
 Who wept at reading of a Grecian knight  
 Who made a name at younger years than he;  
 Or that renown'd mirror of chivalry,  
 Prince Alexander, Philip's peerless son,  
 690 Who carried the great war from Macedon  
 Into the Soudan's realm, and thundered on  
 To die at thirty-five in Babylon.

What tale did Iseult to the children say,  
 Under the hollies, that bright winter's day?

She told them of the fairy-haunted land  
 Away the other side of Brittany,  
 Beyond the heaths, edged by the lonely sea;  
 Of the deep forest-glades of Broceliande,  
 Through whose green boughs the golden sunshine creeps,  
 Where Merlin by the enchanted thorn-tree sleeps.  
 For here he came with the fay Vivian,  
 700 One April, when the warm days first began.  
 He was on foot, and that false fay, his friend,  
 On her white palfrey; here he met his end,  
 In these lone sylvan glades, that April-day.  
 This tale of Merlin and the lovely fay  
 Was the one Iseult chose, and she brought clear  
 Before the children's fancy him and her.

Blowing between the stems, the forest-air  
 Had loosen'd the brown locks of Vivian's hair,  
 Which play'd on her flush'd cheek, and her blue eyes  
 Sparkled with mocking glee and exercise.  
 710 Her palfrey's flanks were mired and bathed in sweat,  
 For they had travell'd far and not stopp'd yet.  
 A brier in that tangled wilderness  
 Had scored her white right hand, which she allows  
 To rest ungloved on her green riding-dress;  
 The other warded off the drooping boughs.  
 But still she chatted on, with her blue eyes  
 Fix'd full on Merlin's face, her stately prize.  
 Her 'haviour had the morning's fresh clear grace,  
 The spirit of the woods was in her face.  
 720 She look'd so witching fair, that learned wight  
 Forgot his craft, and his best wits took flight;  
 And he grew fond, and eager to obey  
 His mistress, use her empire as she may.

They came to where the brushwood ceased, and day  
 Peer'd 'twixt the stems; and the ground broke away,  
 In a sloped sward down to a brawling brook;  
 And up as high as where they stood to look  
 On the brook's farther side was clear, but then  
 The underwood and trees began again.  
 This open glen was studded thick with thorns  
 730 Then white with blossom; and you saw the horns,  
 Through last year's fern, of the shy fallow-deer  
 Who come at noon down to the water here.  
 You saw the bright-eyed squirrels dart along  
 Under the thorns on the green sward; and strong  
 The blackbird whistled from the dingles near,  
 And the weird chipping of the woodpecker  
 Rang lonelily and sharp; the sky was fair,

And a fresh breath of spring stirr'd everywhere.  
Merlin and Vivian stopp'd on the slope's brow,  
740 To gaze on the light sea of leaf and bough  
Which glistering plays all round them, lone and mild,  
As if to itself the quiet forest smiled.  
Upon the brow-top grew a thorn, and here  
The grass was dry and moss'd, and you saw clear  
Across the hollow; white anemonies  
Starr'd the cool turf, and clumps of primroses  
Ran out from the dark underwood behind.  
No fairer resting-place a man could find.  
"Here let us halt," said Merlin then; and she  
Nodded, and tied her palfrey to a tree.

750 They sate them down together, and a sleep  
Fell upon Merlin, more like death, so deep.  
Her finger on her lips, then Vivian rose,  
And from her brown-lock'd head the wimple throws,  
And takes it in her hand, and waves it over  
The blossom'd thorn-tree and her sleeping lover.  
Nine times she waved the fluttering wimple round,  
And made a little plot of magic ground.  
And in that daisied circle, as men say,  
Is Merlin prisoner till the judgment-day;  
760 But she herself whither she will can rove—  
For she was passing weary of his love.