



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

IDYLLS OF THE KING

after Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Chapters 1-9

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not Tennyson's verse and not a transcription.

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1: The Coming of Arthur

Chapter 2: Geraint and Enid

Chapter 3: Merlin and Vivien

Chapter 4: Lancelot and Elaine: The Lily Maid of Astolat

Chapter 5: The Holy Grail

Chapter 6: Pelleas and Ettarre

Chapter 7: The Last Tournament

Chapter 8: Guinevere

Chapter 9: The Passing of Arthur

A Note on Themes

Source Note

CHAPTER 1: THE COMING OF ARTHUR

After the old Roman order has faded, Britain in Tennyson's poem is divided among petty rulers, harried by heathen forces and threatened by disorder. King Leodogran of Cameliard, unable to protect his land, calls on the newly crowned Arthur for help. Arthur comes before his kingship is secure, drives back the attackers, clears the wild country, and then returns to face rebellion among British lords who dispute his birth and his right to rule.

Tennyson deliberately leaves Arthur's origin surrounded by competing stories. Bedivere gives Leodogran the human account: Uther desired Ygerne, wife of Gorlois; after Gorlois was killed and Ygerne was forced to marry Uther, Arthur was born before his time, secretly handed to Merlin, and raised by Sir Anton and his wife. Another tale, told through Bleys, is more mysterious: on the night of Uther's death a flaming wave bears a naked infant to Merlin's feet. Merlin himself refuses to settle the mystery plainly. What matters to Tennyson is that Arthur must prove his kingship by what he does.

Merlin brings Arthur forward as Uther's heir and Arthur is crowned despite fierce opposition. The barons and allied petty kings rise against him, but Arthur and his small company of loyal knights defeat them. From this new fellowship grows the Round Table. Arthur binds its knights to demanding vows: they must honour truth, redress wrongs, resist the heathen, uphold Christ, avoid slander, keep their word, live chastely, obey their King, and be faithful in love. The standard is deliberately higher than ordinary appetite, and the rest of the cycle will show how difficult it is to keep.

Arthur also seeks Guinevere, the only daughter of Leodogran. Leodogran hesitates because Arthur's parentage is still disputed, but after hearing the testimony surrounding Arthur and dreaming of the King crowned above a troubled land, he consents. Arthur sends Lancelot, the warrior he loves and honours most, to bring Guinevere to him. Lancelot returns with her in May, and Dubric, the chief churchman of Britain, marries Arthur and Guinevere before the assembled knighthood.

The wedding seems to begin a nobler age. Yet Tennyson also places Lancelot beside Guinevere from the beginning, a relationship that later becomes central to the ruin of the fellowship. For a time, however, Arthur and his knights are united. He refuses Rome's demand for tribute, draws the petty kingdoms under one rule, and in twelve great battles defeats the heathen forces that threaten the realm. Camelot stands at its brightest before the failures within the Round Table begin to match the enemies outside it.

CHAPTER 2: GERAINT AND ENID

Geraint is a knight of Arthur's court and a tributary prince of Devon. He has married Enid, daughter of the dispossessed Earl Yniol, after meeting her during the adventure of the sparrow-hawk tournament. In that earlier episode Geraint defeated Edyrn, son of Nudd, restored Yniol's fortunes, and brought Enid to Arthur's court. Edyrn was sent to face Guinevere's judgement and later reformed so completely that Arthur admitted him to the Round Table.

At court Enid becomes close to Guinevere. When a rumour begins to spread about the Queen's guilty love for Lancelot, Geraint fears that Enid may be corrupted by the example. He leaves Camelot with her and returns to Devon. His attempt to guard his marriage becomes another kind of failure: he gives himself so completely to Enid that he neglects hunting, tournaments, reputation and government. His people begin to say that love has made their prince weak. Enid hears the talk and is ashamed that she may be the cause, but she cannot bring herself to tell him.

One morning Enid looks at her sleeping husband and laments that she has failed as a wife because she has not warned him what people are saying. Geraint wakes only in time to hear fragments, including her fear that she is 'no true wife', and he disastrously misunderstands her. Convinced that she may be unfaithful, he orders her to put on the faded dress in which he first met her and ride before him into the wilderness. Most cruelly, he commands her not to speak.

Enid soon discovers that obedience and love now pull in opposite directions. She overhears three armed bandits planning to attack Geraint and breaks his command to warn him. He rebukes her and defeats them. A second group of three waits in ambush; again she warns him, and again he defeats them. Geraint forces Enid to drive the captured horses and armour ahead while his suspicion remains unresolved.

They next enter the territory of Earl Limours, who had once courted Enid. Limours tries to persuade her that Geraint no longer loves her and secretly offers to remove him. Enid pretends cooperation long enough to protect her husband, then tells Geraint of the danger. They ride out, Limours pursues them, and Geraint unhorses him, but in the fighting Geraint is wounded beneath his armour. He rides on until loss of blood causes him to collapse.

Earl Doorm's men find the apparently dying Geraint and the grieving Enid and carry them to Doorm's hall. Geraint eventually revives, but lies still while Enid tends him. Doorm tries first to feed and then to possess Enid. She refuses food, drink, fine clothing and his proposal while her husband lies before her. At last Doorm strikes her across the face. Her cry brings Geraint to his feet, and with a single sword-stroke he kills the man who had believed him dead.

The ordeal finally breaks Geraint's suspicion. He admits that he has wronged Enid more deeply than Doorm did and vows that he will rather die than doubt her again. Soon afterward they meet the reformed Edyrn, now acting for Arthur, and rejoin the King. Arthur cleanses the lawless district while Geraint heals. Geraint and Enid eventually return to Devon, where he rules strongly but justly and never doubts her again. Tennyson closes their story by saying that Geraint finally dies in battle against the heathen of the Northern Sea, fighting for the King.

CHAPTER 3: MERLIN AND VIVIEN

Vivien enters Tennyson's court as a deliberate enemy of Arthur's ideal. She says that her father died fighting against Arthur and that her mother gave birth to her on the battlefield among the dead. She has been fostered at the court of Mark of Cornwall, and her hatred of Arthur's purity suits Mark's own contempt for Camelot. After hearing rumours about Lancelot and Guinevere, Vivien goes to Arthur's court under a false show of helplessness and innocence and is received among the Queen's maidens.

She watches, whispers and spreads suspicion. An attempt to work upon Arthur himself fails, and she turns instead to Merlin, the greatest intellect at the court. Merlin has built Arthur's harbours, ships and halls, knows the stars and the arts, and is called a wizard by the people. Vivien plays upon his age, loneliness and vanity until he becomes partly accustomed to her company, even though he repeatedly sees through her slanders.

When Merlin falls into a deep foreboding about the collapse of Arthur's world, he leaves the court, crosses to Brittany and enters the forest of Broceliande. Vivien follows him uninvited. She already knows that Merlin possesses the secret of a charm made by woven steps and waving hands. Whoever suffers the charm appears shut inside an invisible prison, lost to life, use, name and fame. Vivien wants that knowledge because she believes the greatness of the victim will make her own triumph greater.

In the forest she alternates flattery, seduction, accusation, tears and oaths. Merlin refuses again and again, warning that the charm would give her power over another life. A violent storm breaks above them, and lightning strikes a great oak. Vivien clings to Merlin in apparent terror, calls him her protector and renews her professions of love. Exhausted by the argument and by his own weakness, Merlin finally yields and tells her the whole charm.

Merlin then sleeps. Vivien immediately performs the woven paces and the movements of the hands. He lies imprisoned in the hollow oak as though dead, cut off from the world he helped Arthur build. Vivien cries out that she has made his glory hers and flees through the forest. The fall of Merlin is therefore not a contest of stronger magic. Tennyson makes it a victory of manipulation over wisdom that knew the danger and surrendered anyway.

CHAPTER 4: LANCELOT AND ELAINE: THE LILY MAID OF ASTOLAT

Arthur has established a series of diamond jousts to test the strength of his knights. For eight years Lancelot has won the annual diamond and intends, when he wins the ninth and greatest, to give the complete set to Guinevere. When the final tournament approaches, the Queen urges him to compete in disguise so that his famous name cannot win the contest before his spear does. Lancelot rides towards Camelot by an unfamiliar route and loses his way, reaching the castle of Astolat.

The Lord of Astolat receives him with his sons, Torre and Lavaine, and his daughter Elaine. Lancelot asks for an unrecognisable shield. Torre, injured in his first tilt, has a blank shield that can be lent to him, while the younger Lavaine chooses to ride with the stranger. Elaine is struck by Lancelot almost at once. On the morning of the joust she asks him to wear her favour, a red sleeve embroidered with pearls. Lancelot has never worn a lady's favour in the lists, but realises that doing so will make his disguise more convincing and accepts it. He then leaves his own shield in Elaine's keeping.

At the tournament Lancelot fights magnificently. His own kinsmen and the knights of the Round Table, not knowing who he is, become determined to overcome the mysterious stranger who seems to rival Lancelot himself. In the massed assault a spear pierces Lancelot's side and breaks there. He still helps drive back the opposing party and wins the prize, but refuses the diamond and

rides away with Lavaine. At a hermit's cave Lavaine pulls the broken spear-head from the wound, and Lancelot collapses. The hermit tends him, but for many weeks his life remains uncertain.

Elaine learns where he is and travels repeatedly from Astolat to the hermitage. She nurses him with such constancy that the hermit credits her care with saving his life. When Lancelot recovers, the three return to Astolat. Elaine finally confesses that she loves him and asks first to be his wife and then simply to remain with him. Lancelot answers that he will never marry. He offers land, protection and lifelong friendship, but cannot give the love she wants.

After he leaves, Elaine's hope collapses. Knowing she is dying, she asks her family to dress her richly, place her body in a black barge, put a lily in one hand and a letter in the other, and allow their old mute servant to row her to Arthur's palace. Meanwhile Lancelot has returned to Guinevere with the nine diamonds. The Queen, convinced that Elaine has displaced her in Lancelot's heart, rejects the gift and throws the diamonds into the river. As they vanish, the black barge bearing Elaine passes beneath the palace windows.

Arthur has Elaine carried into the hall and reads her letter, which declares her love, asks for burial and asks Lancelot to pray for her soul. Lancelot explains publicly that he never encouraged her deliberately and could not return her love. The court mourns her, and Arthur ensures that she is buried with honour. Elaine's tragedy exposes a different fracture in Camelot: innocence is destroyed not by a villain but by a web of secrecy, jealousy and love that cannot be returned.

CHAPTER 5: THE HOLY GRAIL

Tennyson frames the Grail story as a memory told by Percivale after he has left knighthood for a monastery. He speaks to the monk Ambrosius and explains how his own sister, a holy nun, first saw the Grail in her cell. She believes that the sacred vessel has returned to Britain and urges the knights to prepare themselves. Her vision especially affects Galahad, a young knight in white armour whom some at the court call Lancelot's son, though Tennyson presents the claim as court talk rather than settled fact.

Galahad sits in the Siege Perilous, the mysterious chair made by Merlin. During a summer banquet, while Arthur is away dealing with lawlessness in his realm, thunder shakes the hall and a beam of light passes through it. The Grail moves along the beam beneath a luminous cloud. The knights see one another transfigured in the light. Percivale, because he has not seen the vessel itself, vows to ride for a year and a day until he does. Galahad, Bors, Lancelot, Gawain and many others swear the quest as well.

Arthur returns too late to prevent the oath. He does not deny the holiness of the vision; rather, he fears what the quest will do to men not fitted for Galahad's calling. The Round Table was made to redress wrongs in the world, and Arthur warns that while his knights chase visions, ordinary people will cry for help to empty seats. He predicts that many will follow wandering fires and never come home. The vows are sacred once sworn, however, and the knights depart.

Their experiences differ according to their characters. Galahad sees the Grail clearly and continually. Percivale suffers visions that expose his pride, then meets Galahad near a hermit's chapel. He watches Galahad travel away across a perilous causeway, the Grail shining above him,

until both pass towards the distant spiritual city. Percivale later returns to Arthur, then gives up the sword for the monastic life and dies not long afterward.

Bors also returns. He will say only that he saw the Grail, and tears accompany the admission. Lancelot returns broken by the knowledge that his love for Guinevere has become inseparable from the nobler parts of his life. At the enchanted castle of Carbonek he reaches a radiant chamber and believes he sees the Grail, veiled and surrounded by terrible glory, but he is blinded and overcome. He tells Arthur that the quest was not for him.

Only a small remnant of those who rode out comes back. Arthur's warning has been fulfilled, yet the poem does not dismiss the Grail as false. Galahad's vision is real for Galahad; Bors, Percivale and Lancelot receive what they are capable of receiving. The tragedy lies in the cost to the Round Table when a spiritual calling meant for the few becomes a mass vow that empties Arthur's fellowship of the knights needed to do earthly justice.

CHAPTER 6: PELLEAS AND ETTARRE

After the Grail quest has thinned the Round Table, Arthur makes new knights. Among them is Pelleas, a young prince of the isles who comes to court full of confidence in knighthood and love. Arthur holds a Tournament of Youth, withholding his older and mightier champions so the younger knights may prove themselves. The prize is a knightly sword and a golden circlet. Pelleas fights all day, wins both prizes and gives the circlet to Ettarre, the woman he has chosen as his ideal of beauty.

Ettarre accepts the glory but not the man. Once the tournament is over she mocks Pelleas, calls him childish and keeps him from her castle. Pelleas remains outside in patient devotion. Her three knights repeatedly ride out against him; he defeats them, but allows himself to be bound when that is Ettarre's command, because he still imagines her cruelty is a test of his faith. His innocence becomes self-deception.

Gawain encounters the scene and frees Pelleas. Claiming the honour of the Round Table, he swears that he will help his fellow knight. Gawain borrows Pelleas's horse and armour, rides into Ettarre's castle and falsely reports that Pelleas is dead. Instead of praising Pelleas until Ettarre's heart changes, Gawain becomes her lover. Pelleas waits three days, then enters the unguarded castle and finds Gawain and Ettarre sleeping together.

For a moment Pelleas intends to kill them. The oath of brotherhood stops him from murdering a sleeping knight. Instead he lays his naked tournament sword across their throats and leaves. His idealism collapses into rage. When Ettarre wakes and understands what happened, her feelings swing too late towards the man she had despised, while Pelleas rides away convinced that the vows and loyalties of Camelot are lies.

Near Camelot he meets Lancelot and attacks him, calling himself a scourge of the Table Round and accusing Lancelot and the Queen. But Pelleas is exhausted, his horse fails beneath him, and Lancelot throws him. Lancelot refuses to kill him. Pelleas follows him back to the hall, where Guinevere sees the two men return together. Pelleas leaves again into the darkness. Tennyson does not turn him into the later Red Knight of the North: his story ends with disillusionment, not

with a new outlaw kingdom.

CHAPTER 7: THE LAST TOURNAMENT

The last tournament is built around a relic of lost innocence. Years earlier Lancelot and Arthur heard a child crying in an eagle's nest. Lancelot climbed to it and rescued a baby girl who wore a ruby necklace. Arthur gave the child to Guinevere to rear, and the Queen came to love her and called her Nestling. The child later died. Unable to bear the necklace's memories, Guinevere gave it back to Arthur to use as a tournament prize. The joust that follows becomes known, sincerely by some and mockingly by others, as the Tournament of the Dead Innocence.

Arthur does not preside. A maimed swineherd has brought news of a lawless Red Knight in the north who has founded a grotesque counter-Round-Table and boasts that his followers openly practise the very vices Arthur's knights have sworn to reject. Arthur rides north with his younger knights to destroy this last stronghold of disorder. The Red Knight is a separate, unnamed renegade in this poem, not Pelleas.

Lancelot takes Arthur's chair at the tournament. What should be a ceremony of ordered chivalry becomes confused and violent: rules are broken, tempers flare and the white clothing worn in honour of the dead child is stained. Tristram of Lyonesse enters late in green armour. He has recently returned from Brittany, where he married Isolt of the White Hands, but he has already abandoned that marriage in his desire to return to the other Isolt. Tristram wins the tournament, and Lancelot gives him the ruby necklace.

While Arthur destroys the Red Knight's tower in the north, Tristram rides west to Tintagel. The woman waiting there is Queen Isolt of Britain, the Irish Isolt and wife of King Mark, not Isolt of the White Hands. She and Tristram know that both have broken vows, yet they try to make their failures into an argument against vows themselves. Tristram fastens the ruby necklace around her throat as a final love-gift.

At the moment Tristram bends towards Isolt, Mark rises from the darkness behind him. His words are not a holy invocation but the declaration of his own treacherous method: 'Mark's way.' He strikes Tristram from behind and kills him. The ruby prize that began as a memorial to an innocent child thus ends in adultery and murder, while Arthur's attempt to restore justice elsewhere cannot prevent the moral collapse at the heart of his own world.

CHAPTER 8: GUINEVERE

By the time of 'Guinevere', Modred has become the watcher inside Arthur's court. Tennyson calls him the King's nephew and presents him as a man who chills praise of Arthur, cultivates discontent and waits for evidence that can be used against Lancelot and the Queen. Guinevere knows that he watches her, and her fear grows as the secret of her relationship with Lancelot becomes harder to contain.

She finally tells Lancelot to leave. They agree to meet once more, on a night when Arthur will not be present, and part forever. Modred brings his own men to the base of the tower as witnesses and calls Lancelot out. Lancelot rushes from the chamber, leaps on Modred and hurls him down.

Modred is stunned and carried away by his followers. There is no Agravain in this exposure scene in the 1896 text.

Lancelot offers to take Guinevere to his stronghold overseas, but she refuses. She says the shame is hers because she was Arthur's wife and chooses sanctuary instead. Lancelot gets her horse, rides with her to a divided road and there they part in tears: he returns to his own land, while Guinevere rides through the night to the religious house at Almesbury. She gives no name and is received among the nuns.

The scandal now becomes political catastrophe. The poem later tells us that Arthur has waged a bitter war against Lancelot. Lancelot will not raise his hand directly against the King who made him a knight, but many knights die and much of his kin remain with him. At the same time Modred seizes the realm and allies himself with the heathen forces Arthur had once driven back. The Round Table fractures between Lancelot, Modred and the small remnant still loyal to Arthur.

At Almesbury a young novice, not knowing the stranger is the Queen, talks innocently about Arthur's greatness and the wicked Queen blamed for the kingdom's ruin. Her words torment Guinevere because they are spoken without malice. Guinevere begins to understand the full distance between Arthur's purpose and the life she has lived.

Arthur comes to Almesbury on his way to the last war. Guinevere falls before him and cannot look up. Arthur speaks in grief rather than simple rage. He tells her that the relationship with Lancelot helped break the trust on which the Round Table depended, but he does not come merely to curse her. He forgives her, blesses her and leaves to meet Modred, believing that he may be riding towards his death.

After Arthur is gone, Guinevere remains in the religious house and turns repentance into service. In time the abbess dies, and Guinevere is chosen to succeed her because of her good works and ability to care for others. She lives three more years as abbess. Tennyson gives her no return to Camelot: her final change occurs after Camelot is already beyond saving.

CHAPTER 9: THE PASSING OF ARTHUR

Arthur's last campaign drives Modred westward into Lyonesse, a land of shifting sand beside the winter sea. The final battle takes place under a death-white mist so thick that friend and enemy become shadows. Knights who once swore the same vows strike one another without recognition. By the end of the fighting the Round Table has fallen around its King.

Bedivere remains with Arthur. Modred is still alive among the dead, and Arthur resolves upon one final act of kingship. He attacks the traitor. Modred strikes him through the battered helm, but Arthur's last blow with Excalibur kills Modred. Arthur falls almost slain and Bedivere carries him away from the field to a ruined chapel between the sea and a great lake.

Knowing that his end is near, Arthur commands Bedivere to throw Excalibur into the water. Bedivere twice walks to the lake and twice hides the sword instead, unable to destroy such a marvel. Each time he returns with an ordinary description, and Arthur knows he has disobeyed. On the third attempt Bedivere closes his eyes against the jewels and hurls the sword. An arm clothed

in white samite rises from the lake, catches Excalibur, brandishes it three times and draws it beneath the water.

Bedivere then carries Arthur to the shore. A dark barge approaches, crowded with stately figures and three Queens wearing crowns of gold. The women receive Arthur, and the tallest of them cradles his wounded head. Bedivere, left alone on the shore, mourns the destruction of the fellowship and asks what remains for him when the old world has ended.

Arthur's answer is not that nothing remains. The old order must give way, and no human custom can become permanent simply because it was once good. He tells Bedivere to pray, and says that he is going towards the island-valley of Avilion, a peaceful land where he may be healed of his grievous wound. Whether this is death, healing, return or mystery is left open.

The barge moves away into the mist. Bedivere watches until it becomes only a speck and then nothing. From the distance he hears, or thinks he hears, a great cry like a people welcoming their king. The new sun rises with the new year. Tennyson ends Arthur's reign in defeat, but not in simple extinction: the fellowship has failed, while the ideal that created it passes beyond the broken kingdom.

A NOTE ON THEMES

One way to read the cycle is as a repeated conflict between ideal vows and ordinary human desire. Arthur creates the Round Table to make private courage serve public justice. Its members are asked not merely to fight well but to tell the truth, honour their word, live chastely, remain faithful in love and use strength for the protection of others. The tragedy is that the same people who can perform extraordinary deeds cannot consistently live at the height of the vows they have sworn.

The failures are not all identical. Vivien attacks the ideal because she despises it. Gawain treats loyalty lightly. Ettarre enjoys power over devotion. Tristram argues that vows are unrealistic after breaking his own. Pelleas fails in a different way: his innocence has so little judgement in it that betrayal turns idealism into rage. Lancelot and Guinevere are more complicated still, because their genuine greatness exists beside a relationship that damages the very order they love.

The Grail quest adds another tension. Spiritual aspiration is not mocked as unreal: Galahad's vision is the clearest in the poem. Arthur's fear is that not every knight is Galahad. A vow that is holy for one man may become an abandonment of duty for another. When the knights leave Camelot in search of the Grail, the ordinary work of protecting the realm is left undone, and only a small part of the fellowship returns.

Across the later idylls the collapse therefore comes by accumulation rather than by one villain or one event. Private betrayals become public distrust; distrust weakens shared vows; weakened vows make room for Modred and the returning heathen; and Arthur is left fighting people who once belonged to his own fellowship. Yet Tennyson also preserves examples of loyalty and change: Enid remains faithful under injustice, Edyrn reforms, Bors remains honest, Guinevere repents, and Bedivere obeys at last when obedience costs him most.

The ending does not restore the Round Table. Instead it separates the failure of the institution from the value of the ideal that inspired it. Camelot can end, a fellowship can break, and even a great King can fail to complete his work. The final movement towards Avilion and the rising new-year sun leave open the possibility that what was best in Arthur's purpose may survive the world that could not perfectly embody it.

SOURCE NOTE

This prose retelling was checked against Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, Philadelphia: Henry Altemus, 1896. It is an original prose retelling, not a transcription of Tennyson's verse.

The 1896 Henry Altemus edition used for this check contains *The Coming of Arthur*, *Gareth and Lynette*, *Geraint and Enid*, *Merlin and Vivien*, *Lancelot and Elaine*, *The Holy Grail*, *Pelleas and Ettarre*, *The Last Tournament*, *Guinevere* and *The Passing of Arthur*, together with the dedication and *To the Queen*. The earlier draft included *Balin and Balan*, but that idyll is not present in this source edition and has therefore been removed from this source-matched version. *Gareth and Lynette* remains outside the scope of this selected prose retelling.