

THE IDYLLS OF THE KING.

AN INTERPRETATION.*

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FOR fifty years Tennyson worked on the Celtic Saga of King Arthur until it became, as he himself says in his lines to the Queen, an "old imperfect tale—

New—old, and shadowing
Sense at war with Soul,
Ideal manhood, closed in
real man,

Rather than the gray king,
whose name, a ghost,

Streams like a cloud.

The Arthur Saga dates back to a period previous to the time of Chaucer, for we find reference to it in Dante. It was worked over by many poets, and one of the first books printed by Caxton was Malory's "Morte d'Arthur." The Arthurian land stretches from Arthur's Seat, near Edinburgh, to the Loire in France, and several places claim that Arthur sleeps there an enchanted sleep, or still plays at chess with his knights.

The popularity of the saga makes us wonder, "Is this Arthur real or mythical?" Probably he is both historical and mythical, for our histories tell us that Arthur guarded the coast after the Romans left Britain. No doubt he was a cultured hero, who introduced new ideas and bettered society.

Tennyson makes Camelot the capital, that is, the abode of the spiritual conscience. Therefore he says it is built to music, and therefore not built at all, and therefore built for ever. In other words, the abode of conscience is built to spiritual harmony. In "Gareth

and Lynette" we read that the fairies come from out a sacred mountain "cleft towards sunrise," and built it, so it is not built by human hands. In "Lancelot and Elaine," the city is described as strange and dim, beneath it lying a plain, the city itself being built on a slope, and the only entrance thereto is a gate, which represents the Church, and the "Lady of the Lake" forms the gate, and so symbolizes purity.

In contrast to Arthur's castle, built by Merlin, is that of Pellam, the false Arthur, described in "Balin and Balan."

The hall
Of Pellam, lichen bearded, grayly draped
With streaming grass, appeared, low-built,
but strong ;

The ruinous donjon as a knoll of moss,
The battlement overtop with ivytods,
A home of bats, in every tower an owl. . .

Leaves
Laid their green faces flat against the panes,
Sprays grated, and the canker'd boughs
without

Whined in the woods.

But let us turn now to the Idylls in their natural order.

I.—*The Coming of Arthur.*

Arthur loved at sight Guinevere, the one fair daughter of Leodogran, the king, but Leodogran's doubt concerning Arthur's birth stands in the way of marriage, so he questions the messengers sent by Arthur, concerning this "slayer of the heathen" (that is, the passions slain by spiritual conscience).

Sir Bedivere describes the two aspects in which Arthur is regarded —by the *flesh* with hate, by the *spiritual* as more than human. He relates the common story believed

* Based to some extent on notes taken in lectures at McGill University, 1899.