

NOTES ON SCHOOL READERS.

BY THE EDITOR.

ST. AGNES' EVE AND SIR GALAHAD. Tennyson
N. B. Reader IV.

St. Agnes was a beautiful young Christian girl who suffered martyrdom during the persecution of Diocletian in 306 A. D. Her day is the 21st of January, and the belief which in Scotland was attached to Hallowe'en, the eve of All Saints' Day, was in England associated with the eve of St. Agnes. It used to be the custom for girls to go to bed fasting and silent on St. Agnes' Eve, in the hope of seeing their future husbands.

"They told her how upon St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have visions of delight."

Two great English poets have made use of this tradition. Keats, in his *St. Agnes' Eve*, tells how two lovers, Madeline and Porphyro, fled away upon one stormy St. Agnes' Eve, after Madeline had tried the spell. The "vision of delight" which the holy nun in Tennyson's poem seeks and is granted, is of no earthly love. Through faith and earnest prayer she wins the vision of the Heavenly Bridegroom.

Sir Galahad is based on one of the most famous stories that are connected with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. The Holy Grail was the cup from which our Lord drank at the Last Supper. Joseph of Arimathea brought it to Glastonbury in Somerset.

"And there awhile it bode; and if a man
Could touch or see it, he was healed at once
By faith, of all his ills. But then the times
Grew to such evil that the holy cup
Was caught away to Heaven, and disappeared."

But in the time of King Arthur the cup appeared to a nun, the little sister of Sir Percivale, one of the Knights of the Round Table. She told her brother, and bade him pray that they might all see the vision and so be healed of all evil. Sir Galahad was the youngest, the most beautiful and the most innocent of the Knights, and he was the first to see the Grail.

The two poems are alike in that both turn on the same feeling—the spiritual passion, the affection set on things above, of both the nun and the Knight. One leads the contemplative life; "to prayer and praise she gave herself."

The other lives the life of action—"To ride abroad redressing human wrong." But both are filled with the longing of the Psalmist. "As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after Thee, O God." As the nun prays, she has vouchsafed to her the vision of the Heavenly Bridegroom, and as Sir Galahad rides and fights, "the airs of heaven" meet him here, heavenly forms surround him, and heavenly voices commend him.

The first poem is full of imagery from the Bible. Some references that the teacher should study are: Ps. 51, 7; Isaiah 54, 5; St. Matthew 22, 2; and 25, 1-10; Ephesians 5, 29 and 30; Revelation 4, 6 and 15; 2 and 21; 2 and 9; St. Matthew 5, 8.

Before teaching *Sir Galahad* read *The Holy Grail* in the *Idylls of the King* with special attention to the description of the nun and Sir Galahad, lines 45-143; the appearance of the Grail in the hall, lines 182-194; and Galahad's story of how he saw the Grail, lines 464-484. Also, with the lines

"My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure."

Compare Sir Percivale's sad words:

"Then every evil word I had spoken once."
—lines 371-374.

With Galahad's sight of the "blessed forms" compare II Kings 6, 15-17; with "the cock crowed ere the Christmas morn," Horatio's "the bird of dawning singeth all night long." *Hamlet* I, 1, 159; and with "in mine earthly house," and "my spirit beats her mortal bars." Lorenzo's speech about "this muddy vesture of decay" *Merchant of Venice*; v. 1. 61. With "this heart and eyes are touched, etc.," compare Arthur's words in *The Holy Grail*, "this earth he walks on seems not earth, etc."

The poems will repay close study, and the more you find in them the better you can interest your pupils; but you must not expect them to see in the poems all that you do. With *St. Agnes' Eve*, let them begin by reading to themselves, and naming any words they do not understand. Possibly "snowy sword" and "argent round" may puzzle them. These explained, ask them what time of year is described, and how they know. ("This first snowdrop of the year," fixes it, for England, as not later than very early in February.) What kind of night