

Free hearts, free foreheads<sup>6</sup>—you and I are old;  
 50 Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.  
 Death closes all; but something ere the end,  
 Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
 Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.  
 The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;  
 55 The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep  
 Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
 Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
 The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
 60 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths<sup>7</sup>  
 Of all the western stars, until I die.  
 It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;  
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,<sup>8</sup>  
 And see the great Achilles,<sup>9</sup> whom we knew.  
 65 Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
 We are not now that strength which in old days  
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are—  
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
 70 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

1833

1842

Tithonus<sup>1</sup>

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,  
 The vapors weep their burthen to the ground,  
 Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,  
 And after many a summer dies the swan.<sup>2</sup>  
 5 Me only cruel immortality  
 Consumes; I wither slowly in thine arms,<sup>3</sup>  
 Here at the quiet limit of the world,  
 A white-haired shadow roaming like a dream  
 The ever-silent spaces of the East,  
 10 Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.  
 Alas! for this gray shadow, once a man—  
 So glorious in his beauty and thy choice,  
 Who madest him thy chosen, that he seemed

7. The outer ocean or river that the Greeks believed surrounded the flat circle of the earth; the stars descended into it.

8. In Greek myth the Islands of the Blessed, a paradise of perpetual summer, located in the far-western ocean, where the virtuous and heroes dwell forever after death (often identified with Elysium).

9. The greatest of the Greek warriors at Troy,

where he was killed.

1. A Trojan prince loved by the goddess of the dawn, Eos or Aurora, who obtained for him the gift of living forever but neglected to ask for the gift of everlasting youth.

2. Some species of swans live for at least fifty years.

3. Aurora's arms.

To his great heart none other than a God!  
 15 I asked thee, "Give me immortality."  
 Then didst thou grant mine asking with a smile,  
 Like wealthy men who care not how they give.  
 But thy strong Hours indignant worked their wills,  
 And beat me down and marred and wasted me,  
 20 And though they could not end me, left me maimed  
 To dwell in presence of immortal youth,  
 Immortal age beside immortal youth,  
 And all I was in ashes. Can thy love,  
 Thy beauty, make amends, though even now,  
 25 Close over us, the silver star,<sup>4</sup> thy guide,  
 Shines in those tremulous eyes that fill with tears  
 To hear me? Let me go; take back thy gift.  
 Why should a man desire in any way  
 To vary from the kindly race of men,  
 30 Or pass beyond the goal of ordinance<sup>5</sup>  
 Where all should pause, as is most meet for all?

A soft air fans the cloud apart; there comes  
 A glimpse of that dark world where I was born.  
 Once more the old mysterious glimmer steals  
 35 From thy pure brows, and from thy shoulders pure,  
 And bosom beating with a heart renewed.  
 Thy cheek begins to redden through the gloom,  
 Thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine,  
 Ere yet they blind the stars, and the wild team<sup>6</sup>  
 40 Which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise,  
 And shake the darkness from their loosened manes,  
 And beat the twilight into flakes of fire.

Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful  
 In silence, then before thine answer given  
 45 Departest, and thy tears are on my cheek.  
 Why wilt thou ever scare me with thy tears,  
 And make me tremble lest a saying learnt,  
 In days far-off, on that dark earth, be true?  
 "The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts."  
 50

Ay me! ay me! with what another heart  
 In days far-off, and with what other eyes  
 I used to watch—if I be he that watched—  
 The lucid outline forming round thee; saw  
 The dim curls kindle into sunny rings;  
 55 Changed with thy mystic change, and felt my blood  
 Glow with the glow that slowly crimsoned all  
 Thy presence and thy portals, while I lay,  
 Mouth, forehead, eyelids, growing dewy-warm  
 With kisses balmier than half-opening buds  
 60 Of April, and could hear the lips that kissed  
 Whispering I knew not what of wild and sweet,

4. The morning star that precedes the dawn.

5. What is decreed or ordained as human destiny.

6. The horses that draw Aurora's chariot into the sky at daybreak.

Like that strange song I heard Apollo sing,  
 While Ilion like a mist rose into towers.<sup>7</sup>  
 Yet hold me not forever in thine East;  
 65 How can my nature longer mix with thine?  
 Coldly thy rosy shadows bathe me, cold  
 Are all thy lights, and cold my wrinkled feet  
 Upon thy glimmering thresholds, when the steam  
 Floats up from those dim fields about the homes  
 70 Of happy men that have the power to die,  
 And grassy barrows<sup>o</sup> of the happier dead.  
 Release me, and restore me to the ground.  
 Thou seest all things, thou wilt see my grave;  
 Thou wilt renew thy beauty morn by morn,  
 75 I earth in earth forget these empty courts,  
 And thee returning on thy silver wheels.

*burial mounds*

1833, 1859

1860

### Break, Break, Break

Break, break, break,  
 On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!  
 And I would that my tongue could utter  
 The thoughts that arise in me.

5 O, well for the fisherman's boy,  
 That he shouts with his sister at play!  
 O, well for the sailor lad,  
 That he sings in his boat on the bay!

And the stately ships go on  
 10 To their haven under the hill;  
 But O for the touch of a vanished hand,  
 And the sound of a voice that is still!

Break, break, break,  
 At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!  
 15 But the tender grace of a day that is dead  
 Will never come back to me.

1834

1842

7. The walls of Troy ("Ilion") were supposed to have been built to the strains of the god Apollo's music.

That God, which ever lives and loves,  
 One God, one law, one element,  
 And one far-off divine event,  
 To which the whole creation moves.

1833-50

1850

### The Charge of the Light Brigade<sup>1</sup>

## 1

Half a league,<sup>2</sup> half a league,  
 Half a league onward,  
 All in the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.<sup>3</sup>  
 5 "Forward the Light Brigade!  
 Charge for the guns!" he said.  
 Into the valley of Death<sup>4</sup>  
 Rode the six hundred.

## 2

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"  
 10 Was there a man dismayed?  
 Not though the soldier knew  
 Someone had blundered.  
 Theirs not to make reply,  
 Theirs not to reason why,  
 15 Theirs but to do and die.  
 Into the valley of Death  
 Rode the six hundred.

## 3

Cannon to right of them,  
 Cannon to left of them,  
 20 Cannon in front of them  
 Volleyed and thundered;  
 Stormed at with shot and shell,  
 Boldly they rode and well,  
 Into the jaws of Death,  
 25 Into the mouth of hell  
 Rode the six hundred.

1. During the Crimean War (1854-56), owing to confusion of orders, a brigade of British cavalry charged some entrenched batteries of Russian artillery. This blunder cost the lives of three-quarters of the six hundred horsemen engaged (see Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Reason Why*, 1954). Tennyson rapidly composed his "ballad" (as he called the poem) after reading an account

of the battle in a newspaper.

2. About a mile and a half.

3. In the recording Tennyson made of this poem, *hundred* sounds like "hunderd"—a Lincolnshire pronunciation that reinforces the rhyme with *thundered*, etc.

4. See Psalms 23.4: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death."

## 4

Flashed all their sabers bare,  
 Flashed as they turned in air  
 Sab'ring the gunners there,  
 30 Charging an army, while  
     All the world wondered.  
 Plunged in the battery smoke  
 Right through the line they broke;  
 Cossack and Russian  
 35 Reeled from the saber stroke  
     Shattered and sundered.  
 Then they rode back, but not,  
     Not the six hundred.

## 5

Cannon to right of them,  
 40 Cannon to left of them,  
 Cannon behind them  
     Volleyed and thundered;  
 Stormed at with shot and shell,  
 While horse and hero fell.  
 45 They that had fought so well  
 Came through the jaws of Death,  
 Back from the mouth of hell,  
 All that was left of them,  
     Left of six hundred.

## 6

50 When can their glory fade?  
 O the wild charge they made!  
     All the world wondered.  
 Honor the charge they made!  
 Honor the Light Brigade,  
 55 Noble six hundred!

1854

1854

**Idylls of the King** When John Milton was considering subjects suitable for an epic poem, one of those he entertained was the story of the British king Arthur, a semilegendary leader from about 500 C.E. who fought off the Saxon invaders who had swarmed into Britain after the withdrawal of the Roman legions. Tennyson likewise saw that the Arthurian story had epic potential and selected it for his lifework as "the greatest of all poetical subjects." At intervals, during a period of fifty years, he labored over the twelve books that make up his *Idylls of the King*, completing the work in 1888.

The principal source of Tennyson's stories of Arthur and his knights was Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, a version that Malory translated into English prose from French sources in 1470. As Talbot Donaldson suggested, one basis of the appeal of the Arthurian stories, like the legends of Robin Hood and stories of the