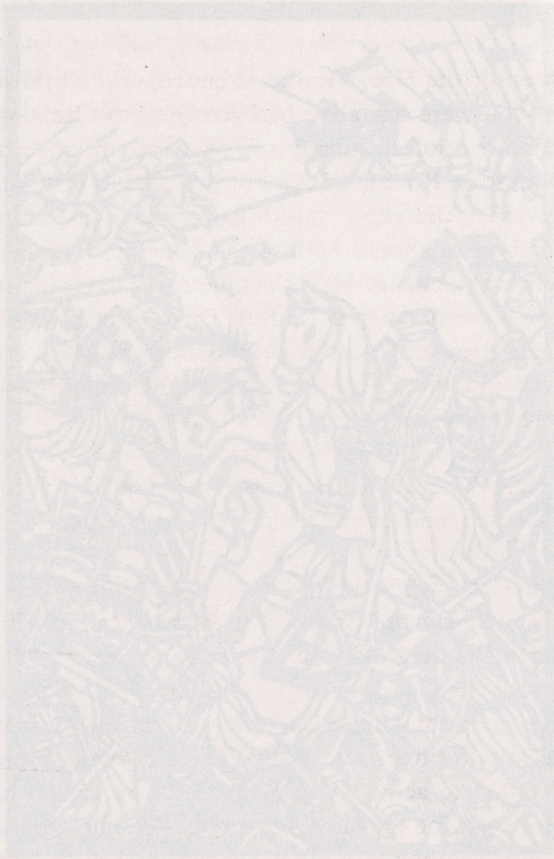


## THE DEPARTING OF ARTHUR



## 1

### LAUNCELOT AND GUINEVERE

The Quest of the Holy Grail was ended, and all those knights who were left alive had returned to Camelot. King Arthur rejoiced greatly to see them sitting once more about the Round Table, but he was sad also, for he knew that the time was drawing near when the realm of Logres should be lost again in the darkness. For there was a change after the Quest was over: many seats stood empty at the Round Table, and now no new names grew in letters of gold upon these seats, for there were no new knights to take the places of those who were dead.

Now too the evil which had never quite been rooted out of Logres began to stir once more, and in a little the fellowship and harmony of his court was to be broken.

Yet for a little while the sun shone as brightly as ever, and only Arthur, who remembered the words of Merlin the good enchanter, knew that the end was near.

Now that Sir Galahad was dead Launcelot was once more the greatest knight in Logres, and for a little time he was the noblest too, for he remembered how he had failed to achieve the Holy Grail by reason of his sinful love for Queen Guinevere. And the Queen noticed that Launcelot avoided her now and rode away



from Camelot on every quest that offered, and one day she sent for him and said:

'Sir Launcelot, I see and feel daily that your love for me grows less, and you ride ever to help damsels and gentlewomen. Have you perhaps found one of them who is dearer to your heart than I am?'

'Ah, madam,' said Launcelot sadly, 'I love you only and no other woman in all the world. But for many reasons I strive to flee your presence. Lately, when I followed the Quest of the Holy Grail, it was shown me how sinful was my love for you – for you, the wife of my dear lord King Arthur: and had it not been for this love I would have seen what Sir Gawain saw, and partaken from the Grail itself with my son Sir Galahad and with Sir Percivale and Sir Bors: and that I may not lightly forget. Moreover I think also of your good name – for there are those about the Court who wait only some such chance as this to bring sorrow to King Arthur, and shame and dissension to the whole realm of Logres.'

Then Queen Guinevere was angry with Sir Launcelot, and cried:

'These are all lies – and now I understand your falsehood clearly enough. You are tired of me and you have found someone else! Therefore go hence and never come near me again!'

In great sadness Sir Launcelot took his horse and rode away from Camelot, far into the forests of mid-Britain, and no one knew where he was. But in a little while Queen Guinevere was sorry and wished very much for Launcelot to return. However, she could not show this to anyone, so instead she called to her ten Knights of the Round Table and told them that she

would ride a-maying with them into the woods and fields near Camelot: for now it was the month of May when trees and flowers were growing and blossoming in the sunshine, and the hearts of men and woman should be filled with love and joy also.

'You must come on horseback,' she said, 'dressed all in green; and I will bring with me ten ladies, so that one may ride by the side of every knight; and each lady shall have a damsel to tend on her, and each knight a squire. For I would have all of you that be lovers to call ever to your remembrance the month of May!'

Away they rode into the green wood, their bridles flashing in the sun and jingling in tune with their merry laughter and songs.

But on that very same day there came to King Arthur's court a knight called Sir Urry, carried in a litter, with three grievous wounds in his head which no man could heal. For many years Sir Urry had been in great pain, for no doctors could cure him; and at last his mother and his sister had set out on pilgrimage to take him into all the courts of Europe to see if there was any man who could help. And at length they had come to Britain, to the Court at Camelot, and as they drew near they met with the Lady Nimue, and she came with them to King Arthur and said:

'Lord King, this man Sir Urry may be cured only by the touch of the best knight in the world.'

'If any man may heal Sir Urry,' answered King Arthur, 'surely it shall be one of my court: for there are none better in all this land, unless it be the good knight Sir Percivale who is King now in Carbonek. And to encourage all men, I myself will lay hands



upon him first – though I know that I am not worthy to heal him – and then all my subject kings, dukes, earls and knights shall try.’

Then all the fellowship of the Round Table, one hundred and ten of them, laid hands in turn upon Sir Urry; but none might heal him.

‘Where is Sir Launcelot of the Lake?’ asked King Arthur then. ‘For if he cannot do this thing, then surely there is no knight worthy enough.’

And while they stood speaking of these things Launcelot came riding back to Camelot. Arthur told him what had chanced, and begged him to attempt the cure of Sir Urry.

‘Not so,’ exclaimed Sir Launcelot. ‘It were but evil pride in me to think that I might succeed where so many noble knights have failed.’

‘You shall not choose,’ said King Arthur, ‘for I lay my command upon you.’

‘Then, my most noble lord,’ answered Launcelot, ‘I will not disobey you.’

So Launcelot knelt down beside Sir Urry, and when he had prayed a while he laid his hands on the three cruel wounds: and at once Sir Urry was as whole and as well as if he had never been wounded at all.

All the knights, and King Arthur among them, shouted aloud for joy and thanked God for His mercy. But Launcelot wept as if he were a little child that had been beaten. Then King Arthur grew silent too, for he remembered how upon the day when he first came to Camelot, Launcelot had healed a wounded knight in the very same way, and how Nimue, the Lady of the Lake of Avalon, had prophesied that Launcelot would

do just such another deed, his very last before the passing of Logres.

While these things were happening at Camelot, Guinevere with her knights and ladies rode a-maying deep into the forest. But there was a knight called Melliagraunce, who had long loved Queen Guinevere, and now when he saw her riding with so few attendants, and knew that Launcelot had been missing from Camelot for some time, he thought that his chance had come. So he set out with twenty armed men and a hundred archers, and laid in ambush for her, and surrounded her and her following suddenly.

‘You traitor knight,’ cried Queen Guinevere when she realized what had happened. ‘Remember that you are a king’s son, and a Knight of the Round Table: you bring dishonour upon all knighthood, upon your lord King Arthur, upon King Bagdemagus your father, upon me your Queen – and upon yourself.’

‘As for this talk,’ cried Sir Melliagraunce, ‘I care nothing for it. For know, madam, that I have loved you long, but never before found such a chance as this.’

Then the ten knights who rode with Queen Guinevere strove to defend her, but they had no armour with them, and before long all of them were stretched wounded on the ground.

‘Sir Melliagraunce, do not slay my noble knights!’ begged Guinevere. ‘I will go with you if you promise not to harm them further: but if you do not promise I will slay myself forthwith.’

‘Madam,’ said Sir Melliagraunce, ‘for your sake I will spare them, and they shall be carried into my own castle and well tended – if you will ride with me.’



So Guinevere and her knights were taken to Sir Melliagraunce's castle; but on the way one of the squires, a boy young and daring, broke away suddenly and galloped at full speed towards Camelot; and although the archers shot at him, he got safely away and came to the Court of King Arthur not very long after Launcelot had healed Sir Urry.

When they heard the tale, Launcelot, who was still armed, leapt immediately upon his horse. 'I will go thither at once!' he cried to King Arthur, 'and do you follow with many men as soon as you are armed. You will find me at the castle of Sir Melliagraunce – if I am still alive!'

Then he set spurs to his horse and galloped away in a cloud of dust. But before he had gone very far a band of archers appeared in front of him with their bows bent, and bade him stand.

'You will not pass this way!' they cried. 'Or if you do, it shall be upon your feet, for we will slay your horse!'

'That will be little advantage to you!' said Launcelot, and he charged at them full tilt. Then they loosed a flight of arrows and the horse fell to the ground, pierced to the heart; but Launcelot leapt clear and attacked the archers, who broke and fled in every direction so that he could not overtake any of them.

So he continued along the road on foot: but his armour and his spear and shield were so heavy that he could only move very slowly, and yet he did not like to leave any of them behind, for fear lest Melliagraunce had prepared any more snares for him.

But presently he met two woodmen who were driving a cart along the road.

'Fair friends!' cried Launcelot, 'let me ride in your cart, I beg of you!'

'Whither would you go?' asked one woodman.

'To speak with Sir Melliagraunce at his castle,' answered Launcelot grimly.

'He is our master,' said the woodman, 'and he has sent us out to gather wood in the forest. We will not let you ride in our cart!'

Then one woodman struck at Launcelot with his whip, and spoke evil words; but Launcelot smote him on the side of the head with his fist, and his skull broke into pieces so that he fell dead to the ground.

'Fair lord,' said the second woodman, 'spare my life, and I will take you wheresoever you wish to go!'

'Then turn your cart about,' said Launcelot, 'and drive me to the Castle of Sir Melliagraunce more swiftly than ever you drove before!'

'Jump in!' cried the woodman, 'and you will be there in no time!'

So away they went at a great speed; and presently Queen Guinevere's damsel, who was looking out of the window of Melliagraunce's castle, exclaimed:

'Ah, look, madam! Here comes a cart such as hangmen use, and in it rides a goodly knight!'

'Where?' cried Guinevere; and then she looked out and knew Sir Launcelot by the device on his shield. 'Oh, I knew he would come!' she murmured. 'I knew he would come!'

Meanwhile Launcelot arrived at the gate; and there he descended from the cart and cried out in such a voice that the whole castle rang with it:

'Where are you, false traitor Sir Melliagraunce? Come out and fight, and all your treacherous curs with



you – for here am I, Sir Launcelot of the Lake, ready to do battle with you all!’

Then Melliagraunce took fright, and he came and grovelled at Queen Guinevere’s feet, and begged her forgiveness; and at length she said that she would ask Launcelot to spare his life, for she would rather have peace than war. So the gate was opened and Launcelot came rushing in like an angry lion, but Guinevere managed to persuade him to make peace with Sir Melliagraunce; but not until they had agreed to do battle together in full armour, knight against knight, at Camelot in the presence of King Arthur.

Then Guinevere took Launcelot by the hand and led him to her room, where she unarmed him and bathed the hurts he had received from the arrows which had been shot against him.

That night they stayed in the castle; and early the next day King Arthur arrived with a great company of knights. But when Queen Guinevere had told him all that had happened, he too agreed readily that no vengeance should be taken on Melliagraunce or any of his people, but that Melliagraunce should fight with Launcelot.

‘This day week the battle shall be,’ said King Arthur, ‘in the meadow between Camelot and the river. And if either knight keeps not his tryst, then he shall be called the shamefullest knight in all Logres.’

After this King Arthur led Guinevere back with him to Camelot, and the wounded knights were carried there in litters.

‘Sir,’ said Melliagraunce to Launcelot, ‘there is not hate between us now, I trust? For this day week our honours shall be satisfied. Therefore I pray you, abide

with me in my castle this day and I will feast you royally.’

‘I am content to do so,’ said Launcelot.

But when the evening came Melliagraunce went to Launcelot’s room and led him down towards the hall; and he brought him by a passage in the midst of which was a trap-door, and when Launcelot trod upon it, it opened under his feet and he fell a great way into a dark vault filled with straw.

There he lay for seven nights and days, and each evening a fair damsel brought him food and water; and each evening she said:

‘Noble Sir Launcelot, if you will but promise to be my lord and love, I will set you free from this prison. But if you do not promise, here you shall stay until your honour is gone for ever.’

‘Far greater dishonour would be mine,’ said Launcelot, ‘if I were to buy my freedom at such a price. King Arthur will know well that only some treachery could keep me from Camelot when the day of battle comes.’

But on the morning of the day when he was due to fight with Sir Melliagraunce, the damsel came to Sir Launcelot weeping, and said:

‘Alas, noble Launcelot, I have loved you in vain. Give me but one kiss, and I will set you free.’

‘There is no shame in one kiss such as this,’ said Launcelot. Then he kissed the damsel once and hastened from the prison, stopping only to put on his armour which she had brought to him, sprang upon a horse which stood waiting in the courtyard, and galloped away to Camelot.

But the damsel stood weeping softly in the gateway:



'Alas,' she sobbed, 'my kiss meant nothing to Sir Launcelot: he thinks only of Queen Guinevere!'

Meanwhile the King and Queen with many knights and ladies were gathered in the great meadow by Camelot to see the battle. The hour came – but there was no sign of Sir Launcelot, and Sir Melliagraunce swaggered about, boasting that he was the best knight in all the realm of Logres, while Launcelot was a coward and a runaway.

And he was about to ride home, leaving all the fellowship of the Round Table shamed for ever, when suddenly a cry was raised, and Launcelot came into sight, spurring his horse desperately.

When he was come before King Arthur he told of how treacherously Melliagraunce had tricked him – and all those present began to cry shame upon Sir Melliagraunce until at length he seized his spear and cried: 'Have at you!' to Sir Launcelot.

Then the two knights drew away to the ends of the meadow, and at a given signal came together like two thunderbolts; and Sir Launcelot struck Sir Melliagraunce so hard that he fell backwards over his horse's tail. Then Launcelot dismounted, drew his sword, waited until Melliagraunce was on his feet again, and attacked him fiercely. Melliagraunce tried to escape in many ways, and to have the better of his enemy by unfair means; but the end of it was that Launcelot smote him such a stroke with his sword that helmet and head were split into halves. And that was the end of Melliagraunce the traitor.

There was great joy after this in Camelot, and King Arthur thanked Launcelot before all the Court for rescuing his Queen. Guinevere, however, said little,

only she looked upon Launcelot with shining eyes, and she whispered to him:

'Come to me in my garden at sundown, for I would thank you alone.'

It chanced that Agravain, Sir Gawain's brother, heard her words; he was one of the wicked and disloyal knights who hated the Queen and were jealous of Sir Launcelot's fame and renown. Agravain told Sir Mordred, his cousin, Queen Morgana le Fay's son, who was the evildest knight of all, hating all things good as his mother had done, and seeking ever to bring shame and ruin upon King Arthur and the whole realm of Logres.

Mordred now saw his chance, and he and Agravain hid themselves in the Queen's garden that evening when the sun was casting long shadows under the apple trees; and presently she came, walking among the flowers, more fair than the fairest rose in the world.

Guinevere walked in the garden alone for a while; and then Sir Launcelot came, the goodliest knight in the world. He knelt before Queen Guinevere, and she thanked him for saving her from Sir Melliagraunce, and asked his forgiveness for her harsh words.

'Oh, Launcelot, Launcelot,' she said softly, 'since the first day that you came to Camelot, when I was little more than a girl, the bride of King Arthur, I saw you and loved you.'

'I loved you on that day also,' said Launcelot, 'and all these years I have striven against that love – but in vain.'

'Launcelot,' said Guinevere, her voice trembling, 'I wish above all things in the world that you would be



my lord and my love, even though it must be in secret . . . I would that you might come and visit me secretly in my room this evening . . .'

'My lady and my love,' said Launcelot in a strained voice, 'wish you that with all your heart?'

'Yes truly,' answered the Queen.

'Then for your love, it shall be so!' cried Launcelot.

Guinevere drew near to him and kissed him on the lips: then she turned and glided away through the twilight, passing amidst the flowers from which all the colours had gone, leaving them grey in the dying light. But Launcelot stood quite still with the last sunbeam on his face, and he trembled from head to foot, and sighed with joy as he remembered Guinevere's kiss.



Presently he also turned and went out of the garden in the gathering darkness.

'And now,' said Sir Mordred, 'my time has come. These two have given the whole realm of Logres into my hands.' And the look in his eyes was not good to see as he and Agravain stepped out into the night.