

THE PLOTS OF SIR MORDRED

In an upper room of the Castle of Camelot that same evening, while the candle light threw black, flickering shadows on the bare stone walls, Sir Agravain spoke with Sir Gawain his brother, and Mordred stood near the door, his dark eyes shining strangely.

'Brother Agravain,' said Sir Gawain, much moved, 'I pray you and charge you speak no more to me of such matters, for be assured that I will have no share in this business.'

'I marvel that you can let this shame be!' cried Agravain, his weak face working nervously. 'We all know that Launcelot loves the Queen and would bring shame upon King Arthur and all the realm of Logres if he could . . . We have but to tell King Arthur and this night Launcelot may be taken in the Queen's chamber, and put to death for treason.'

'If you are afraid to speak,' said Mordred quietly to Agravain, 'then I will go alone to the King.'

'That I can well believe,' said Gawain, 'for you, sir, are ever ready to stir up any unhappiness. But you, my brother, think before you do this thing of what will come of it.'

'Whatever may happen!' cried Agravain, 'I *will* tell the King!'

'Alas,' said Sir Gawain sadly, 'now is this holy realm of Logres about to be destroyed, and the noble fellowship of the Round Table broken by civil war.'

But Agravain and Mordred went from the room and found King Arthur.

'Take twelve knights and do what must be done,' said King Arthur when he had heard all the tale. 'But woe to you if you have come to me with lies and slanders in your mouths – for this is the saddest night's work that ever has been in this land.'

Then the two conspirators went to choose their followers. But some hours later Sir Gawain found King Arthur sitting all alone in the great empty hall in his place at the Round Table, with the tears running from his eyes and trickling unheeded through his grey beard and on to his hands.

Sir Launcelot sat up late in his room with Sir Bors; and at last he rose to his feet and said:

'I bid you good night, fair cousin. I go to speak with the Queen.'

'Sir,' said Bors, 'I counsel you not to go this night.'

'Why not?' asked Launcelot.

'I fear Sir Mordred,' answered Bors, 'for he and Sir Agravain are ever about to do you shame and bring ruin upon us all.'

'Have no fear,' said Launcelot, 'I shall go swiftly and silently, and return at once.'

'God speed you well,' said Sir Bors, 'and bring you safely back again.'

Then Launcelot took his sword under his arm, wrapped his long furred gown about him, and went through the dark castle to Queen Guinevere's room.

And they had not been together for many minutes

when Sir Mordred and Sir Agravain, with their twelve knights, came to the door and cried:

'You traitor, Sir Launcelot, now are you caught!' This they shouted with a loud voice so that all the castle might hear.

'Alas!' sobbed Queen Guinevere, 'now are we both betrayed!'

'Madam,' said Launcelot, 'is there any armour here that I can put on? If so, these cravens shall not take me easily.'

'Alas, no,' said Guinevere, 'I have no armour, nor a helmet, nor even a shield: wherefore I fear that our long love is come to a sad end.'

But Launcelot turned to the door and shouted: 'Fair lords, cease from all this noise and I will open the door quietly.'

'Come quickly, you traitor knight!' they shouted back. 'If you yield yourself quietly we will take you prisoner and bring you before King Arthur.'

Then Launcelot wound his cloak about his arm, unbarred the door with his left hand and opened it a little way. Immediately a knight – his name was Sir Colgrevaunce – rushed forward, striking at Launcelot with all his might. But Launcelot warded the blow with the thick folds of his cloak and struck Sir Colgrevaunce such a stroke on the head that he fell down and never moved again. Swiftly Launcelot dragged him into the room and barred the door once more. Then, with the Queen's help he stripped the armour from the dead man and put it on himself.

'Traitor knight! Come out of the Queen's room!' shouted Sir Agravain, beating on the door.

'Cease your noise, I am coming!' replied Launcelot.

'I advise you, Sir Agravain, to run away and hide!'

Then Launcelot flung wide the door and stood there a moment, as fine a knight as ever this world has seen. Next moment he was among them, and the swords flashed like lightning among dark clouds: at the first stroke he slew Sir Agravain, and then he laid about him with such blows that before long all his foes lay dead on the ground except for Sir Mordred who ran wounded from the place.

'I go now!' shouted Launcelot to the Queen. 'But if you are in any danger for this night's work be assured that while I am a living man I will rescue you.'

Then Launcelot rode away in haste from Camelot, and with him went Sir Bors and Sir Lionel and many another knight; and they hid themselves in the forest near by and waited to see what would happen.

Meanwhile Sir Mordred came, all wounded, to Arthur where he sat with Gawain in the great hall.

'How comes this to be?' asked the King. 'Did you not take him in the Queen's chamber?'

'He was there indeed,' gasped Mordred, 'and all unarmed. But he slew first Sir Colgrevaunce, armed himself in his armour, and killed all those who came against him, except for me, who escaped thus wounded.'

'Ah,' said the King sadly, 'he is indeed a marvellous knight! Alas that ever Sir Launcelot should be against me, for now I am sure that the noble fellowship of the Round Table is broken for ever, for many knights will side with him.'

'What of the Queen?' asked Mordred. 'She is guilty of high treason, and by the law she must die at the stake!'

Then Arthur covered his face in his hands and wept.

'Be not over hasty, my lord,' said Gawain gently. 'How do we know that Launcelot and the Queen are guilty? Perchance she sent for him merely that she might thank him for saving her from Sir Melliagraunce.'

'The Queen must die according to the law,' said King Arthur. 'But if Launcelot comes here again he shall suffer a shameful death.'

'Then God forbid that ever I be by to see it!' exclaimed Gawain.

'Yet he slew your brother Agravain,' said King Arthur.

'Often I warned Agravain,' answered Sir Gawain, 'for I knew what his plots would bring him to. Moreover he was one of fourteen armed knights attacking a man unarmed ... Therefore I pardon Sir Launcelot his death.'

'Make you ready in the morning to lead my queen to the fire,' said King Arthur.

'Not so, my most noble King,' cried Gawain, 'it shall never be said that I was of your counsel for her death.'

'Then,' said the King, 'call before me your brothers Sir Gaheris and Sir Gareth.'

And when they were come, King Arthur gave them his commands.

'Sir,' they answered, 'what you bid us that will we do. Nevertheless, it is sorely against our will, and we will go there unarmed and dressed in robes of mourning.'

'Then make you ready,' cried the King, 'for the hour has come!'



'Alas,' said Sir Gawain, 'that ever I should live to see this day!'

So Guinevere was led to the stake, dressed only in her smock, and many followed her in mourning garments. But Sir Mordred was there fully armed and with him a band of knights armed also.

But when the torch was already lit, suddenly Sir Launcelot came, with his followers, cut his way to the stake, slaying many knights as he went, and carried off

Queen Guinevere. But, without knowing it, Launcelot killed both Gaheris and Gareth who stood near the stake unarmed and in mourning costume.

Then Sir Launcelot and all those who favoured his cause rode away into his own lands of Gwynedd in North Wales and fortified themselves strongly in his Castle of Joyous Garde.

Now indeed the realm of Logres was broken, for Britain was split with civil war, and there was hatred where of old love and faith had been. When his anger passed, King Arthur repented sorely that he had condemned Queen Guinevere to the flames so speedily, and rejoiced that Launcelot had saved her. But now the lifelong friendship between Gawain and Launcelot was ended, and a sudden hatred and a desire for revenge grew in its place.

'I swear before God that I will never rest,' cried Sir Gawain, 'until Launcelot and I meet face to face and one of us is slain. For never can I forgive him for slaying my dear brothers Gaheris and Gareth the good knight – slaughtering them unarmed and defenceless. And you, my uncle, I charge by the sacred order of knighthood, and as you are true king of this land, to make war forthwith against Sir Launcelot, both to avenge my brother and to rescue your queen.'

All the knights who remained faithful to him also begged King Arthur to make war; and at length he gathered together his forces and marched north until he came to Joyous Garde and laid siege to it.

After fifteen weeks of fruitless siege it chanced on a day that Sir Launcelot spoke from the gate-tower with King Arthur and Sir Gawain:

'My lords both,' he said, 'you cannot take this castle.'

'Come forth then,' cried King Arthur, 'and fight with me in single combat!'

'God forbid,' said Launcelot, 'that ever I should fight with the most noble king of all time, he moreover that made me a knight.'

'Now fie upon your fair language!' cried the King. 'Know that I am now your mortal foe, and ever will be. For you have robbed me of my wife, slain my knights, and broken this goodly realm of Logres.'

Then Launcelot begged King Arthur to make peace, offering to give up Queen Guinevere and defend her innocence against all her accusers. And the King might have listened to him had not Sir Gawain persuaded him against making any truce with Launcelot.

And on the next day Launcelot led his men suddenly out of the castle, for he was angered at length by the cruel taunts Sir Gawain had heaped upon him the day before, and a terrible battle ensued.

In it Sir Gawain, seeking for Launcelot, struck down Sir Lionel and slew him; but Sir Bors smote King Arthur to the earth and stood over him with drawn sword crying to Launcelot:

'Sir, shall I make an end of this war at a single stroke?'

But Launcelot answered: 'Strike not, or I will slay you myself. For I will never see our most noble lord King Arthur slain or shamed by any man.'

And then Sir Launcelot sprang down from his horse and very tenderly helped King Arthur to his feet, and so on to his own horse, saying as he did so:

'My dear lord king, for God's sake make an end of this war. Take back your queen with all honour, and I will promise to leave this land of Britain and never return until you may need me.'

Then King Arthur was deeply moved, thinking of the great courtesy of Sir Launcelot and of all the noble deeds he had done in the past. And in spite of all that Sir Gawain could do he made peace with Launcelot.

And when all was agreed, Launcelot came unarmed before the King, leading Queen Guinevere by the hand, and he said:

'My most noble lord, I bring hither your queen. And if there is any knight who dares say that she is false to you, then I will fight with him to the death. Whatever I have done, or sought to do, this lady is innocent: but you have listened to liars and quarrel-makers,' and as he said this he turned and looked towards Sir Mordred, 'and by their evil mischief-making the goodly fellowship of the Round Table is broken in sunder.'

'The King may do as he will,' broke in Sir Gawain, 'but never while we live shall I make peace with you: for you slew my dear brother Sir Gareth, and Sir Gaheris and Sir Agravain also.'

'You know well that I loved no man better than Sir Gareth,' began Launcelot, 'and all my life I shall lament that I slew him, not knowing what I did—'

'I will never forgive my brothers' death,' interrupted Gawain passionately, 'and in particular the death of my brother Gareth.'

'And now,' said Launcelot, 'I must bid farewell to this dear land, and to the holy realm of Logres, and go overseas into Armorica, in the land of France.'

'Be sure that in time I shall follow you there!' cried Sir Gawain.

Peace reigned in Britain for a little while after this, but it was a broken and a troubled peace. For ever Sir

Gawain brooded on his brothers' deaths, and ever Sir Mordred stirred up hatred against Sir Launcelot. And at length so many knights sided with Sir Gawain that Arthur was forced to declare war on Sir Launcelot; and he gathered together a great army and went into France, leaving Mordred to rule Britain while he was away.

They marched into Armorica, to the Castle of Benwick where Launcelot had taken up his abode, and they remained there for a long while. And three times did Launcelot and Gawain fight together, and each time Launcelot overcame Gawain and wounded him almost to death. But it seemed now that Gawain was mad, for even when he lay desperately wounded he ceased not to cry:

'Traitor knight! Coward! When I am whole again I will do battle with you once more. For never will I forgive you for Gareth's death, and never will I rest until one of us is slain!'

Meanwhile in Britain Sir Mordred continued with his plots. And when he had won enough knights to his side, he announced that King Arthur had been killed in the French wars, and he persuaded the people to choose him as their king, and even had himself crowned at Canterbury.

Then he seized Queen Guinevere and tried to force her to marry him. But she managed to escape from him and came to London. Thence she sent messengers to find King Arthur and meanwhile she and those who remained faithful to her retreated into the Tower of London and fortified it.

Presently Sir Mordred came and tried to force his way into it, but it was too strong. He tried to persuade

Queen Guinevere to come out, but she answered him bravely: 'I would rather die by mine own hand than be wife to you!'

Then the Archbishop of Canterbury, the same who had crowned King Arthur so many years ago, and who was now a very old man, came and warned Sir Mordred:

'Do you not fear the vengeance of God?' he cried. 'King Arthur is not slain – and you do great harm to the Queen and to all this land.'

'Peace, you false priest!' shouted Mordred, 'for if you anger me more, I will strike off your head!'

'Sir,' answered the Archbishop, 'if you leave not your sin, I will curse you with bell, book, and candle!'

'Do your worst,' cried Mordred, 'I care not for you or your curses!' So the Archbishop left Sir Mordred and gathered all the clergy together and cursed Sir Mordred, putting him outside all the rites and blessings of the Church.

Then Mordred sought to kill the Archbishop; but he fled away to Glastonbury in Somerset and there became a hermit at the abbey.

Queen Guinevere's messenger had reached King Arthur by this time, and swiftly he marched to the sea coast with all his men, and set sail for England. But Mordred was waiting for him at Dover, and a terrible battle had to be fought before he and his men could land. At length, however, they were all ashore; and then they charged the rebels, and sent them flying over the downs, Sir Mordred leading the flight.

When the battle was over King Arthur found Sir Gawain lying mortally wounded, for the last wound which Sir Launcelot had given him had broken out afresh.

'Alas, my beloved nephew,' said King Arthur, kneeling beside him, 'here now you lie dying, the man whom I loved best in all the world. And now all my joy is gone. For you and Launcelot I loved best of all my knights: and I have lost you both.'

'Ah, my dear lord,' said Gawain, 'all this is my doing. Oh, I have been mad of late – mad with wicked pride and anger . . . If the noble Sir Launcelot had been with you this war would never have come about. I forgive him now – would that I had forgiven him sooner . . . Can he ever forgive me?'

Then Gawain asked for pen and ink, and he wrote a letter to Sir Launcelot:

'Oh, Launcelot, flower of all noble knights that ever I saw or heard of, I Gawain, dying by your hand – and by a nobler man might no one be slain – beg your forgiveness . . . Come again, noble Launcelot, come with all the speed you may, for the realm of Logres is in deadly peril, and our dear lord King Arthur has need of you . . . This day we landed at Dover and put the false traitor Sir Mordred to flight, and by misfortune I was smitten again upon the wound that you gave me. And now I write this in the very hour of my death. And oh, I beg you, the most famous knight in the world, to come swiftly. Of me you will find only the grave: but come at once before Mordred can gather fresh rebels . . . Noble Launcelot, I salute you, and – farewell.'

Then Sir Gawain died, and King Arthur wept at his side all the long night through.