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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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King Arthur: The Fair Maid Of Astolat (15/15)

At last, the Quest of the Holy Grail was ended, and by ones and twos the knights came back to Camelot, though many who had set out so boldly were never seen again about the Round Table.

Great was the joy of King Arthur when Sir Launcelot and Sir Bors returned, for, so long had they been away, that almost he had feared that they had perished. In their honor there was high festival for many days in London, where Arthur then had his court; and the king made proclamation of a great tournament that he would hold at Camelot, when he and the King of Nortgalis would keep the lists against all comers.

So, one fair morning of spring, King Arthur made ready to ride to Camelot and all his knights with him, save Launcelot who excused himself, saying that an old wound hindered him from riding. But when the king, sore vexed, had departed, the queen rebuked Sir Launcelot, and bade him go and prove his great prowess as of old. "Madam," said Sir Launcelot, "in this, as in all else, I obey you; at your bidding I go, but know that in this tournament I shall adventure me in other wise than ever before."

The next day, at dawn, Sir Launcelot mounted his horse and, riding forth unattended, journeyed all that day till,

as evening fell, he reached the little town of Astolat, and there, at the castle, sought lodgment for that night. The old Lord of Astolat was glad at his coming, judging him at once to be a noble knight, though he knew him not, for it was Sir Launcelot's will to remain unknown.

So they went to supper, Sir Launcelot and the old lord, his son, Sir Lavaine, and his daughter Elaine, whom they of the place called the Fair Maid of Astolat. As they sat at meat, the baron asked Sir Launcelot if he rode to the tournament. "Yea," answered Launcelot; "and right glad should I be if, of your courtesy, ye would lend me a shield without device." "Right willingly," said his host; "ye shall have my son Sir Tirre's shield. He was but lately made knight and was hurt in his first encounter, so his shield is bare enough. If ye will take with you my young son, Sir Lavaine, he will be glad to ride in the company of so noble a knight and will do you such service as he may." "I shall be glad indeed of his fellowship," answered Sir Launcelot courteously.

Now it seemed to the fair Elaine that never had she beheld so noble a knight as this stranger; and seeing that he was as gentle and courteous as he was strong, she said to him: "Fair knight, will ye wear my favor at this tournament? For never have I found knight yet to wear my crimson sleeve, and sure am I that none other could ever win it such honor." "Maiden," said Sir Launcelot, "right gladly would I serve you in aught; but it has never been my custom to wear lady's favor."

"Then shall it serve the better for disguise," answered

Elaine. Sir Launcelot pondered her words, and at last he said; "Fair maiden, I will do for you what I have done for none, and will wear your favor." So with great glee, she brought it him, a crimson velvet sleeve embroidered with great pearls, and fastened it in his helmet. Then Sir Launcelot begged her to keep for him his own shield until after the tournament, when he would come for it again and tell them his name.

The next morn Sir Launcelot took his departure with Sir Lavaine and, by evening, they were come to Camelot. Forthwith Sir Lavaine led Sir Launcelot to the house of a worthy burgher, where he might stay in privacy, undiscovered by those of his acquaintance. Then, when at dawn the trumpets blew, they mounted their horses and rode to a little wood hard by the lists, and there they abode some while; for Sir Launcelot would take no part until he had seen which side was the stronger. So they saw how King Arthur sat high on a throne to overlook the combat, while the King of Northgalis and all the fellowship of the Round Table held the lists against their opponents led by King Anguish of Ireland and the King of Scots.

Then it soon appeared that the two kings with all their company could do but little against the Knights of the Round Table, and were sore pressed to maintain their ground. Seeing this, Sir Launcelot said to Sir Lavaine: "Sir knight, will ye give me your aid if I go to the rescue of the weaker side? For it seems to me they may not much longer hold their own unaided." "Sir,"

answered Lavaine, "I will gladly follow you and do what I may."

So the two laid their lances in rest and charged into the thickest of the fight and, with one spear, Sir Launcelot bore four knights from the saddle. Lavaine, too, did nobly, for he unhorsed the bold Sir Bedivere and Sir Lucan the Butler. Then with their swords they smote lustily on the left hand and on the right, and those whom they had come to aid rallying to them, they drove the Knights of the Round Table back a space. So the fight raged furiously, Launcelot ever being in the thickest of the press and performing such deeds of valor, that all marvelled to see him, and would fain know who was the Knight of the Crimson Sleeve. But the knights of Arthur's court felt shame of their discomfiture, and, in especial, those of Launcelot's kin were wroth that one should appear who seemed mightier even than Launcelot's self. So they called to each other and, making a rally, directed all their force against the stranger knight who had so turned the fortunes of the day. With lances in rest, Sir Lionel, Sir Bors, and Sir Ector, bore down together upon Sir Launcelot, and Sir Bors' spear pierced Sir Launcelot and brought him to the earth, leaving the spear head broken off in his side. This Sir Lavaine saw, and immediately, with all his might, he rode upon the King of Scots, unhorsed him and took his horse to Sir Launcelot. Now Sir Launcelot felt as he had got his death-wound, but such was his spirit that he was resolved to do some great deed while yet his strength remained. So, with

Lavaine's aid, he got upon the horse, took a spear and laying it in rest, bore down, one after the other, Sir Bors, Sir Lionel, and Sir Ector. Next he flung himself into the thickest of the fight, and before the trumpets sounded the signal to cease, he had unhorsed thirty good knights. Then the Kings of Scotland and Ireland came to Sir Launcelot and said: "Sir knight, we thank you for the service done us this day. And now, we pray you, come with us to receive the prize which is rightly yours; for never have we seen such deeds as ye have done this day." "My fair lords," answered Sir Launcelot, "for aught that I have accomplished, I am like to pay dearly; I beseech you, suffer me to depart." With these words, he rode away full gallop, followed by Sir Lavaine; and when he had come to a little wood, he called Lavaine to him, saying: "Gentle knight, I entreat you, draw forth this spear head, for it nigh slayeth me." "Oh! my dear lord," said Lavaine, "I fear sore to draw it forth lest ye die." "If ye love me, draw it out," answered Launcelot. So Lavaine did as he was bidden, and, with a deathly groan, Sir Launcelot fell in a swoon to the ground. When he was a little recovered, he begged Lavaine to help him to his horse and lead him to a hermitage hard by where dwelt a hermit who, in bygone days, had been known to Launcelot for a good knight and true. So with pain and difficulty they journeyed to the hermitage, Lavaine oft fearing that Sir Launcelot would die. And when the hermit saw Sir Launcelot, all pale and besmeared with blood, he scarce knew him for the bold Sir Launcelot du Lac; but he bore

him within and dressed his wounds and bade him be of good cheer, for he should recover. So there Sir Launcelot abode many weeks and Sir Lavaine with him; for Lavaine would not leave him, such love had he for the good knight he had taken for his lord.

Now when it was known that the victorious knight had departed from the field sore wounded, Sir Gawain vowed to go in search of him. So it chanced that, in his wanderings, he came to Astolat, and there he had a hearty welcome of the Lord of Astolat, who asked him for news of the tournament. Then Sir Gawain related how two stranger knights, bearing white shields, had won great glory, and in especial one, who wore in his helm a crimson sleeve, had surpassed all others in knightly prowess. At these words, the fair Elaine cried aloud with delight. "Maiden," said Gawain, "know ye this knight?" "Not his name," she replied; "but full sure was I that he was a noble knight when I prayed him to wear my favor." Then she showed Gawain the shield which she had kept wrapped in rich broideries, and immediately Sir Gawain knew it for Launcelot's. "Alas!" cried he, "without doubt it was Launcelot himself that we wounded to the death. Sir Bors will never recover the woe of it."

Then, on the morrow, Sir Gawain rode to London to tell the court how the stranger knight and Launcelot were one; but the Fair Maid of Astolat rose betimes, and having obtained leave of her father, set out to search for Sir Launcelot and her brother Lavaine. After many journeyings, she came, one day, upon Lavaine exercising

his horse in a field, and by him she was taken to Sir Launcelot. Then, indeed, her heart was filled with grief when she saw the good knight to whom she had given her crimson sleeve thus laid low; so she abode in the hermitage, waiting upon Sir Launcelot and doing all within her power to lessen his pain.

After many weeks, by the good care of the hermit and the fair Elaine, Sir Launcelot was so far recovered that he might bear the weight of his armor and mount his horse again. Then, one morn, they left the hermitage and rode all three, the Fair Maid, Sir Launcelot, and Sir Lavaine, to the castle of Astolat, where there was much joy of their coming. After brief sojourn, Sir Launcelot desired to ride to court, for he knew there would be much sorrow among his kinsmen for his long absence. But when he would take his departure, Elaine cried aloud: "Ah! my lord, suffer me to go with you, for I may not bear to lose you." "Fair child," answered Sir Launcelot gently, "that may not be. But in the days to come, when ye shall love and wed some good knight, for your sake I will bestow upon him broad lands and great riches; and at all times will I hold me ready to serve you as a true knight may." Thus spoke Sir Launcelot, but the fair Elaine answered never a word.

So Sir Launcelot rode to London where the whole court was glad of his coming; but from the day of his departure, the Fair Maid drooped and pined until, when ten days were passed, she felt that her end was at hand. So she sent for her father and two brothers, to whom she said gently: "Dear father and brethren, I

must now leave you." Bitterly they wept, but she comforted them all she might, and presently desired of her father a boon. "Ye shall have what ye will," said the old lord; for he hoped that she might yet recover. Then first she required her brother, Sir Tirre, to write a letter, word for word as she said it; and when it was written, she turned to her father and said: "Kind father, I desire that, when I am dead, I may be arrayed in my fairest raiment, and placed on a bier; and let the bier be set within a barge, with one to steer it until I be come to London, Then, perchance, Sir Launcelot will come and look upon me with kindness." So she died, and all was done as she desired; for they set her, looking as fair as a lily, in a barge all hung with black, and an old dumb man went with her as helmsman.

Slowly the barge floated down the river until it had come to Westminster; and as it passed under the palace walls, it chanced that King Arthur and Queen Guenevere looked forth from a window. Marvelling much at the strange sight, together they went forth to the quay, followed by many of the knights. Then the king espied the letter clasped in the dead maiden's hand, and drew it forth gently and broke the seal. And thus the letter ran: "Most noble knight, Sir Launcelot, I, that men called the Fair Maid of Astolat, am come hither to crave burial at thy hands for the sake of the unrequited love I gave thee. As thou art peerless knight, pray for my soul."

Then the king bade fetch Sir Launcelot, and when he was come, he showed him the letter. And Sir Launcelot,

gazing on the dead maiden, was filled with sorrow. "My lord Arthur," he said, "for the death of this dear child I shall grieve my life long. Gentle she was and loving, and much was I beholden to her; but what she desired I could not give." "Yet her request now thou wilt grant, I know," said the king, "for ever thou art kind and courteous to all." "It is my desire," answered Sir Launcelot.

So the Maid of Astolat was buried in the presence of the king and queen and of the fellowship of the Round Table, and of many a gentle lady who wept, that time, the fair child's fate.

Over her grave was raised a tomb of white marble, and on it was sculptured the shield of Sir Launcelot; for, when he had heard her whole story, it was the king's will that she that in life had guarded the shield of his noblest knight, should keep it also in death.

