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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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King Arthur: Sir Launcelot And The Adventure Of The Castle Perilous (5/15)

Now, as time passed, King Arthur gathered into his Order of the Round Table knights whose peers shall never be found in any age; and foremost among them all was Sir Launcelot du Lac. Such was his strength that none against whom he had lain lance in rest could keep the saddle, and no shield was proof against his sword dint; but for his courtesy even more than for his courage and strength, Sir Launcelot was famed far and near. Gentle he was and ever the first to rejoice in the renown of another; and, in the jousts, he would avoid encounter with the young and untried knight, letting him pass to gain glory if he might.

It would take a great book to record all the famous deeds of Sir Launcelot, and all his adventures. He was of Gaul, for his father; King Ban, ruled over Benwick; and some say that his first name was Galahad, and that he was named Launcelot du Lac by the Lady of the Lake, who reared him when his mother died. Early he won renown by delivering his father's people from the grim King Claudas, who, for more than twenty years, had lain waste the fair land of Benwick; then, when there was peace in his own land, he passed into

Britain, to Arthur's Court, where the king received him gladly, and made him Knight of the Round Table and took him for his trustiest friend. And so it was that, when Guenevere was to be brought to Canterbury, to be married to the king, Launcelot was chief of the knights sent to wait upon her.

Now on a day, as he rode through the forest, Sir Launcelot met a damsel weeping bitterly, and seeing him, she cried, "Stay, sir knight! By your knighthood I require you to aid me in my distress."



Immediately Sir Launcelot checked his horse and asked in what she needed his service. "Sir," said the maiden, "my brother lies at the point of death, for this day he fought with the stout knight, Sir Gilbert, and sorely they wounded each other; and a wise woman, a sorceress, has said that nothing may stanch my brother's wounds unless they be searched with the sword and bound up with a piece of the cloth from the body of the wounded knight who lies in the ruined chapel hard by. And well I know you, my lord Sir Launcelot, and that, if ye will not help me, none may."

"Tell me your brother's name," said Sir Launcelot. "Sir Meliot de Logris," replied the damsel. "A Knight of our

Round Table," said Sir Launcelot; "the more am I bound to your service. Only tell me, gentle damsel, where I may find this Chapel Perilous." So she directed him, and, riding through forest byways, Sir Launcelot came presently upon a little ruined chapel, standing in the midst of a churchyard, where the tombs showed broken and neglected under the dark yews. In front of the porch, Sir Launcelot paused and looked, for thereon hung, upside down, dishonored, the shield of many a good knight whom Sir Launcelot had known.

As he stood wondering, suddenly there pressed upon him from all sides thirty stout knights, all giants and fully armed, their drawn swords in their hands and their shields advanced. With threatening looks, they spoke to him, saying, "Sir Launcelot, it were well ye turned back before evil befell you."

But Sir Launcelot, though he feared to have to do with thirty such warriors, answered boldly, "I turn not back for high words. Make them good by your deeds." Then he rode upon them fiercely, whereupon instantly they scattered and disappeared, and, sword in hand, Sir Launcelot entered the little chapel. All was dark within, save that a little lamp hung from the roof, and by its dim light he could just espy how on a bier before the altar there lay, stark and cold, a knight sheathed in armor. And drawing nearer Sir Launcelot saw that the dead man lay on a blood-stained mantle, his naked sword by his side, but that his left hand had been lopped off at the wrist by a mighty sword-cut.

Then Sir Launcelot boldly seized the sword and with it cut off a piece of the bloody mantle. Immediately the earth shook and the walls of the chapel rocked, and in fear Sir Launcelot turned to go. But, as he would have left the chapel, there stood before him in the doorway a lady, fair to look upon and beautifully arrayed, who gazed earnestly upon him, and said: "Sir knight, put away from you that sword lest it be your death." But Sir Launcelot answered her: "Lady, what I have said, I do; and what I have won, I keep." "It is well," said the lady. "Had ye cast away the sword your life days were done. And now I make but one request. Kiss me once." "That may I not do," said Sir Launcelot. Then said the lady, "Go your way, Launcelot; ye have won, and I have lost. Know that, had ye kissed me, your dead body had lain even now on the altar bier. For much have I desired to win you; and to entrap you, I ordained this chapel. Many a knight have I taken, and once Sir Gawain himself hardly escaped, but he fought with Sir Gilbert and lopped off his hand, and so got away. Fare ye well; it is plain to see that none but our lady, Queen Guenevere, may have your services." With that, she vanished from his sight.

So Sir Launcelot mounted his horse and rode away from that evil place till he met Sir Meliot's sister, who led him to her brother where he lay, pale as the earth, and bleeding fast. And when he saw Sir Launcelot, he would have risen to greet him; but his strength failed him, and he fell back on his couch. Sir Launcelot searched his wounds with the sword, and bound them up with the

blood-stained cloth, and immediately Sir Meliot was sound and well, and greatly he rejoiced. Then Sir Meliot and his sister begged Sir Launcelot to stay and rest, but he departed on his adventures, bidding them farewell until he should meet them again at Arthur's court. As for the sorceress of the Chapel Perilous, it is said she died of grief that all her charms had failed to win for her the good knight Sir Launcelot.