



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

MALORY: LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

VOL. 3 THE FALL OF THE FELLOWSHIP

Chapters 9-11

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER 9: THE QUEEN AND THE KNIGHT

The barge came down the river to Camelot on the morning current, black-draped, with no oarsman and no sail, and in it lay a dead maid with a letter on her breast.

Guinevere watched them carry the girl up from the wharf. She was young, her hair combed loose over a green gown, her hands folded as if she slept. The letter was addressed to the king, to Lancelot, and to all the ladies of the court. Arthur had it read aloud in the hall; Guinevere stood through it with her back straight and her palms gone cold.

Elaine of Astolat, Sir Bernard's daughter. The court knew the story; half of it had happened under this roof. Lancelot had lodged at her father's house before the Winchester tournament and worn her red sleeve on his helm as disguise. She loved him past reason, followed him to Camelot, and asked openly for his love. He answered gently and finally: he could not be hers. She went home and began to die. Now she had finished.

The letter said so, in a hand that blamed no one. I died of love for Sir Lancelot, and I charge you all to pray for my soul. It asked nothing. That was the worst of it.

Guinevere found she could not hate her, and that frightened her more than hatred would have. She knew what it was to want that man and go unanswered. The girl had only done openly what the queen did in secret, by inches. Across the hall Lancelot had gone grey to the lips.

"She had the cleaner sorrow," Guinevere said, into the hush. "She gave her heart to one man and one door, and all the world may pity her. Bury her like a king's daughter. I will pay the mass-pennies myself."

Arthur touched her hand, grateful, and did not understand what she had said. Lancelot did. She watched him understand, and looked away first.

. . .

Her own name was a coin other men spent. She learned how thin it was worn at the autumn dinner.

Sir Patrise of Ireland took an apple from her fingers and, before the cups came round, fell from his bench choking, and died. The poison, it came out later, was set in the dish for Gawain by a knight with a private grudge. Later was no use to her. Sir Mador de la Porte rose and cried treason against the queen, and the law gave her fifteen days to find a champion, or burn.

Not one knight of the Table stepped forward. They had all seen her hand the fruit out. Bors begged delay and sent riders. Guinevere sat through nine days of whispers and rain on the shutters, knowing her life hung on one man, and the whole court knew which man, and why.

On the fifteenth day a knight in plain arms rode into the lists and overthrew Sir Mador in a single course. When he put up his visor it was Lancelot. The queen was cleared before God and man; he knelt to her as if nothing else were true. The court cheered. Guinevere smiled and gave him her hand, and thought: they all saw. They have all seen for years.

. . .

She was right. Agravaine had been waiting for it said aloud, and now he said it, Mordred smiling at his shoulder: the queen and Sir Lancelot dishonored the king, and they would prove it. Arthur sat like a man being lowered into cold water.

"If you are wrong, he will kill you," the king said. "I ride hunting tomorrow and lie out the night. Take your proof, if proof there is."

That night Lancelot came to her door, as he had come a hundred times, softly, meaning to speak through the oak and go. She heard Agravaine's voice in the passage before her hand left the bar.

Traitor knight, come out.

Fourteen of them, armed. She got him inside, the door between them and the spears, and they stood listening to Agravaine cry shame through the wood.

"They will burn me and call it law," she said. "If you stay, they kill you here in your bare feet and call that law too. There is your sword." She put it in his hand. "Go through them. Living, you can still answer for me."

Isoud had seen her once, and known her, and said nothing to anyone. Guinevere understood that silence now, and the prayer inside it, at a door with fourteen swords on the far side and one man on hers: mercy for the fallers.

He looked at her the way he had looked at the chapel door on the quest, at a light he was forbidden.

"Open it," he said.

She opened it.

. . .

They judged her in her absence: guilty, and the fire. Arthur signed it with a hand that shook, because the law he had made left him no other pen. Gawain refused to attend. Gareth and Gaheris were commanded to attend and came unarmed, in mourning black, heads bare.

Guinevere remembered that afterward, when she could think at all: Gareth's face, gentle and grieved, above the piled wood. He had refused to wear steel against Lancelot, even to guard her

burning. He had promised once, in a greenwood, to come to Lancelot bare-handed if ever he was called. God had heard, she thought, and remembered.

Then the shouting: Lancelot's kin through the ring of spears, Lancelot at their head, visored, his sword already wet. The fire was not yet lit. She saw Gareth step forward, to help her down or shield her, she never knew, into the path of the man he loved. The sword went through him as through any armed stranger. He fell against the wood with his brother dying beside him.

She screamed his name. Lancelot heard, and did not know, and had no time to know. He cut her cords, lifted her to a saddle, and they rode out through a city of swords.

. . .

At Joyous Gard the truth came by degrees and messengers. Gareth and Gaheris, slain in the rescue, unarmed, by Lancelot's hand, unknowing. Lancelot walked out of the hall when they told him, and she let him go alone.

The second messenger told the rest. Gawain had knelt over Gareth's body a day and a night, and risen with an oath: never to eat seated in hall nor sleep in peace until he had Lancelot's blood for his brother's. The king's grief could not bend him. No prayer could.

At the arrow-slit, with the dark coming up, she understood that the war began in that moment, and her love had lit it. She had asked Heaven to be loved wholly. Two kingdoms would burn for it now, the gentlest knight in Britain lay dead of coming bare-handed, and there was no one left at Camelot wise enough to stop what she and Lancelot had begun.

CHAPTER 10: MORDRED'S TREASON

They had to pull Gawain from his brothers' tomb to make him eat, and when he ate he stood, for he had sworn not to sit in hall until Lancelot answered for Gareth's blood.

The king sat, and looked older than his crown. Lancelot had given back the queen at the pope's command, delivered her weeping, and offered what amends a man could offer. "He did not know them," Arthur said. "They went unarmed."

"That is the charge," Gawain said. "Gareth went unarmed because he loved him, and Lancelot's sword found my brother anyway. I will have justice, uncle, or I will have his life. There is no third thing."

He saw the weariness in Arthur's face and hated it, because under his own grief, where he did not look, lay other knowledge.

Agravaine had set the trap, and Gawain had not stopped him. Gawain had sworn the Grail quest that emptied half the hall and left too few knights to hold the peace. Gareth had stood at that fire

bare-headed while Gawain sulked in his chamber, refusing to watch. He could not punish the men truly at fault. The nearest one he could reach was Lancelot. So he reached.

. . .

Arthur gave way at last, as Gawain had known he would. The law demanded it, and the kinship, and only weariness stood against. Lancelot was banished to his own lands over the sea, and Arthur followed with an army to war on him there. He left Mordred, his nephew in the world's naming, smooth and courteous, who had brought the proof that began it all, as regent of England, and the queen in his keeping.

Gawain went gladly. France felt clean: siege lines, forage, the high walls of Benwick, and every morning his voice at the gate crying Lancelot's name like a curse.

Lancelot would not come out for weeks. His kin came instead, Bors and Lionel and the rest, and Gawain fought them and never fell. Then shame did what siege could not. Lancelot rode out one morning in plain arms, and Gawain knew at the first shock of spears that he was fighting the best knight in the world, and did not care.

His strength was a strange gift. It waxed with the sun, and by noon he was worth three men, and Lancelot gave ground before him across the trodden field. Gawain shouted at him to yield.

Then the sun turned, and the strength drained out of him like heat from a corpse. Lancelot, who had only endured and covered himself, stood up and beat him down into the dirt in three strokes, and set his point at Gawain's throat.

"Kill me," Gawain said, "or I will come against you again."

"Then come again," Lancelot said. "I will not slay Arthur's nephew, nor Gareth's brother." He took off his helm, and his face was wet, and Gawain hated him most for that. A month later, healed, he challenged again, and was spared again the same way, and mercy from Lancelot tasted like scorn.

. . .

The news out of England caught them in the third month. Mordred had forged letters saying King Arthur was dead of his wars. He had had himself crowned at Canterbury, and meant to marry the queen, his father's wife, to make the theft smell of law.

Guinevere had refused him to his face. Then, buying time the way she bought everything, she smiled and asked leave to go to London and make herself ready, and once inside the Tower she barred the gates, armed it, victualled it, and sent Mordred word she would die before she would be his. He had the Tower ringed now. The Bishop of Canterbury threatened him with bell, book, and candle, and Mordred did not care.

Men remembered then, in whispers, what Merlin had said long ago of a child born on May Day.

Gawain read the letter twice. Under the rage came a coldness he did not recognise at first: he had pushed Arthur across the sea and left the kingdom in the hands of the man who had opened this grave. Merlin was long under the stone; no wise head was left. For one night he could not tell Lancelot's fault from his own. Then morning came, and he chose the simpler sin to hate.

. . .

Arthur broke the siege of Benwick and turned for home, and Mordred's host met them on the shingle at Dover. Gawain was first ashore and fought in the surf until a sword found the old dint in his helm, the place Lancelot's blade had marked in France, and opened the wound beneath it.

They carried him to Dover castle. He lived two weeks, which was long enough.

To Arthur he said what he had never said to any man: "Uncle, this war was mine. I asked it of you and would not be answered no. Had Lancelot been at your side, Mordred had never dared. Lay it on me, and give him the pardon I would not."

Then he wrote, in his own hand, to the man he had sworn to kill. His hatred had cost more than his love ever had; he died forgiving what he could not forget. Let Lancelot come and see his tomb and pray for his soul, and then ride to the king, who needed him as England had never needed anyone.

He gave the letter to a chaplain, and gripped Arthur's hand.

"If God grants a dead man one more ride," he said, "I will come to you in your sleep and warn you. Do not fight Mordred until Lancelot lands. Wait a month. Promise me you will listen, even to a ghost."

Arthur promised, weeping. Gawain died before dawn, his face turned towards the sea road Lancelot would come by.

. . .

The king marched west after Mordred's retreating host, and behind him a single rider carried the letter towards France and the coast. On the road ahead lay a plain called Salisbury, where two armies would meet. And the question no one could yet answer rode with them all: whether the best knight in the world would reach England before the last battle was fought without him.

CHAPTER 11: THE LAST BATTLE AND AVALON

The king woke him an hour before the hosts were to join.

"Bedivere. I have seen Gawain." Arthur sat on his camp bed, unarmoured, grey-faced. "He stood by me in my sleep and said: make a truce and wait a month, until Lancelot lands, or tomorrow you are slain and your realm with you. I promised him at Dover I would listen, even to a ghost."

Heralds went between the armies, and by noon there was a truce to last until Lancelot came. Neither side trusted the other. "If you see any sword drawn," Arthur told his men, "come on and spare not." Mordred, across the field, gave the same order.

They met in the open to seal it, the wine poured, Bedivere at the king's shoulder watching Mordred's courteous face. Here stood the child of May. Merlin was under his stone; no wise head was left in England.

Then a knight, stung on the heel by an adder in the winter grass, forgot everything but the pain, and drew his sword to kill it.

The blade caught the light. A small, bright thing. Both armies saw it.

Horns. Shouting. The truce folded like a tent struck by wind, and Bedivere got the king into his saddle before the lines met. After that there was no more day, only work. Hold. Turn. Strike. Hold. When the light failed, the dead lay over the plain in sheaves, and of all that host only two of Arthur's knights stood: Bedivere, and Sir Lucan bleeding out his life beside him.

The king leaned on his spear. "Alas that this day should come. Here was the fellowship, and here it lies."

Then he saw Mordred, alone among the slain, leaning on his sword.

"Give me my spear," Arthur said. "He is the cause of all this."

"Sir, let him be," Bedivere said. "The day is yours. Remember your dream."

"We remembered it an hour." Arthur took the spear. "Whether I die now or later, he shall not live to boast of this."

He set spurs, and Bedivere watched him ride, and thought of Balin and Balan, who slew each other unknowing. This was worse. These two knew their blood, and it changed nothing.

"Traitor," the king cried, "now is thy death come."

Mordred ran to meet him. The spear went through him more than a fathom, and Mordred, feeling his death, hauled himself up the shaft by main strength and struck one blow through the king's helm to the brain. Father and son fell together, and did not rise.

Lucan and Bedivere lifted the king between them. Lucan's wounds burst with the strain and he died on his feet, still holding, and then there was only Bedivere, one man to carry a king.

. . .

Bedivere got him to a chapel near the water. The king's wound bled as it never would have bled had Morgan not thrown his scabbard into a lake, long ago. "Take Excalibur," Arthur said, "and cast it into the water, and tell me what you see."

Bedivere took it. The hilt was gold, the pommel one great stone; its like would never be seen again. He hid it under a tree, went back, and said it was done.

"What did you see?"

"Sir, only wind on the water."

"That is not truly said. Go again."

He went again, and again his hand would not, and he came back with the same answer. The king looked at him a long moment. "Ah, traitor untrue. Twice you have betrayed me for the riches of a sword, and I a dying man."

He ran and took the sword and hurled it as far as he could send it. An arm clothed in white samite rose out of the lake and caught it by the hilt, and brandished it three times, and drew it under.

He told the king, and the king wept, and said, "Now bear me to the shore."

. . .

There came a barge out of the mist, draped in black, and in it many ladies in black hoods, and one was Morgan le Fay, the king's sister. They took Arthur from Bedivere's arm and laid him with his head in her lap. "Ah, dear brother," she said, "why have you tarried so long?"

"Lord," Bedivere said, "what shall become of me, now you go from me and leave me alone?"

"Comfort yourself, and do as well as you may," Arthur said. "I go into the vale of Avilion, to heal me of my grievous wound. If you never hear more of me, pray for my soul."

The barge went out into the mist, and for a while the water spoke against its side; then there was nothing to watch, and nothing to hear.

. . .

The rest he saw, or heard, from a hermit's cell near Glastonbury, where he ended his days in prayer, as the king had asked him.

Lancelot landed at Dover too late. He knelt at Gawain's tomb in the castle there, as the letter had begged him, and prayed for the soul of the man who had sworn to kill him. Then he sought the queen at Almesbury, where she had taken the veil. She would not come out to him. Through us two, she sent word, all this war was wrought. Pray for me, as I shall for you.

He came to the hermitage hollow-eyed and told it, and took the priest's gown from the old Bishop of Canterbury, and served. When word came that the queen was dead, penitent, at prayer, he carried her body to Glastonbury in his own arms and buried her beside the king. Then he sickened, and would not eat, and died within six weeks, of no sickness but grief.

Sir Ector de Maris, his brother, who had sought him seven years, came the morning after and stood over the body, and what he said Bedivere wrote down.

“Ah, Lancelot, thou wert head of all Christian knights. Thou wert the most courteous knight that ever bare shield, and the truest friend to thy lover that ever bestrode horse. Thou wert the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies, and the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest.”

. . .

Under the chapel floor they set a stone for the king, lettered: HIC IACET ARTHURUS, REX QUONDAM REXQUE FUTURUS. Here lies Arthur, the once and future king.

Some men say he is not dead, but healed, and will come again. Bedivere never said so. He had seen the blood, and the barge, and the mist that took it. What he said, when travelers asked, was what Merlin said at the beginning: glory and grief together. It must be.

Then he would go in, and pray for his lord's soul, as he had been asked, and let the stone say the rest.

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