

The Adventures of Sir Tristram of Lyonesse

Chapter I

Again King Arthur held high festival at Caerleon, at Pentecost, and gathered round him all the fellowship of the Round Table, and so, according to his custom, sat and waited till some adventure should arise, or some knight return to court whose deeds and perils might be told. Anon he saw Sir Lancelot and a crowd of knights coming through the doors and leading in their midst the mighty knight, Sir Tristram. As soon as King Arthur saw him, he rose up and went through half the hall, and held out both his hands and cried, «Right welcome to thee, good Sir Tristram, as welcome art thou as any knight that ever came before into this court. A long time have I wished for thee amongst my fellowship.» Then all the knights and barons rose up with one accord and came around, and cried out, «Welcome.» Queen Guinevere came also, and many ladies with her, and all with one voice said the same. Then the king took Sir Tristram by the hand and led him to the Round Table and said, «Welcome again for one of the best and gentlest knights in all the world; a chief in war, a chief in peace, a chief in field and forest, a chief in the ladies' chamber--right heartily welcome to this court, and mayest thou long abide in it.» When he had so said he looked at every empty seat until he came to what had been Sir Marhaus', and there he found written in gold letters, «This is the seat of the noble knight, Sir Tristram.» Whereat they made him, with great cheer and gladness, a Fellow of the Round Table. Now the story of Sir Tristram was as follows:

There was a king of Lyonesse, named Meliodas, married to the sister of King Mark of Cornwall, a right fair lady and a good. And so it happened that King Meliodas hunting in the woods was taken by enchantment and made prisoner in a castle. When his wife Elizabeth heard it she was nigh mad with grief, and ran into the forest to seek out her lord. But after many days of wandering and sorrow she found no trace of him, and laid her down in a deep valley and prayed to meet her death. And so indeed she did, but ere she died she gave birth in the midst of all her sorrow to a child, a boy, and called him with her latest breath Tristram; for she said, «His name shall show how sadly he hath come into this world.» Therewith she gave up her ghost, and the gentlewoman who was with her took the child and wrapped it from the cold as well as she was able, and lay down with it in her arms beneath the shadow of a tree hard by, expecting death to come to her in turn. But shortly after came a company of lords and barons seeking for the queen, and found the lady and the child and took them home. And on the next day came King Meliodas, whom Merlin had delivered, and when he heard of the queen's death his sorrow was greater than tongue can tell. And anon he buried her solemnly and nobly, and called the child Tristram as she had desired. Then for seven years King Meliodas mourned and took no comfort, and all that time young Tristram was well nourished; but in a while he wedded with the daughter of Howell, King of Brittany, who, that her own children might enjoy the kingdom, cast about in her mind how she might destroy Tristram. So on a certain day she put poison in a silver cup, where Tristram and her children were together playing, that when he was athirst he might drink of it and die. But so it happened that her own son saw the cup, and, thinking it must hold good drink, he climbed and took it, and drank deeply of it, and suddenly thereafter burst and fell down dead. When the queen heard that, her grief was very great, but her anger and envy were fiercer than before, and soon again she put more poison in the cup. And by chance one day her husband finding it when thirsty, took it up and was about to drink therefrom, when, seeing him, she sprang up with a mighty cry and dashed it from his hands.

At that King Meliodas, wondering greatly, called to mind the sudden death of his young child, and taking her fiercely by the hand he cried: «Tritress, tell me what drink is in this cup or I will slay thee in a moment;» and therewith pulling out his sword he swore by a great oath to slay her if she straightway told him not the truth. «Ah, mercy, lord,» said she, and fell down at his feet; «mercy, and I will tell thee all.» And then she told him of her plot to murder Tristram, that her own sons might enjoy the kingdom. «The law shall judge thee,» said the king. And so anon she was tried before the barons, and condemned to be burnt to death. But when the fire was made, and she brought out, came Tristram kneeling at his father's feet and besought of him a favour. «Whatsoever thou desirest I will give thee,» said the king. «Give me the life, then, of the queen, my step-mother,» said he. «Thou doest wrong to ask it,» said Meliodas; «for she would have slain thee with her poisons if she could, and chiefly for thy sake she ought to die.» «Sir,» said he, «as for that, I beseech thee of thy mercy to forgive it her, and for my part may God pardon her as I do; and so I pray thee grant me my boon,