

Sir Lancelot and the Fair Maid of Astolat

Chapter I

Now after the quest of the Sangreal was fulfilled and all the knights who were left alive were come again to the Round Table, there was great joy in the court. And passing glad were King Arthur and Queen Guinevere to see Sir Lancelot and Sir Bors, for they had been long absent in that quest. And so greatly was Sir Lancelot's fame now spread abroad that many ladies and damsels daily resorted to him and besought him for their champion; and all right quarrels did he gladly undertake for the pleasure of our Lord Christ. And always as much as he might he withdrew him from the queen. Wherefore Queen Guinevere, who counted him for her own knight, grew wroth with him, and on a certain day she called him to her chamber, and said thus: «Sir Lancelot, I daily see thy loyalty to me doth slack, for ever thou art absent from this court, and takest other ladies' quarrels on thee more than ever thou wert wont. Now do I understand thee, false knight, and therefore shall I never trust thee more. Depart now from my sight, and come no more within this court upon pain of thy head.» With that she turned from him and would hear no excuses. So Sir Lancelot departed in heaviness of heart, and calling Sir Bors, Sir Ector, and Sir Lionel, he told them how the queen had dealt with him. «Fair sir,» replied Sir Bors, «remember what honour ye have in this country, and how ye are called the noblest knight in the world; wherefore go not, for women are hasty, and do often what they sore repent of afterwards. Be ruled by my advice. Take horse and ride to the hermitage beside Windsor, and there abide till I send ye better tidings.» To that Sir Lancelot consented, and departed with a sorrowful countenance. Now when the queen heard of his leaving she was inwardly sorry, but made no show of grief, bearing a proud visage outwardly. And on a certain day she made a costly banquet to all the knights of the Round Table, to show she had as great joy in all others as in Sir Lancelot. And at the banquet were Sir Gawain, and his brothers Sir Agravaine, Sir Gaheris, and Sir Gareth; also Sir Modred, Sir Bors, Sir Blamor, Sir Bleoberis, Sir Ector, Sir Lionel, Sir Palomedes, Sir Mador de la Port, and his cousin Sir Patrice--a knight of Ireland, Sir Pinell le Savage, and many more. Now Sir Pinell hated Sir Gawain because he had slain one of his kinsmen by treason; and Sir Gawain had a great love for all kinds of fruit, which, when Sir Pinell knew, he poisoned certain apples that were set upon the table, with intent to slay him. And so it chanced as they ate and made merry, Sir Patrice, who sat next to Sir Gawain, took one of the poisoned apples and eat it, and when he had eaten he suddenly swelled up and fell down dead. At that every knight leapt from the board ashamed and enraged nigh out of their wits, for they knew not what to say, yet seeing that the queen had made the banquet they all had suspicion of her. «My lady the queen,» said Sir Gawain, «I wit well this fruit was meant for me, for all men know my love for it, and now had I been nearly slain; wherefore, I fear me, ye will be ashamed.» «This shall not end so,» cried Sir Mador de la Port; «now have I lost a noble knight of my own blood, and for this despite and shame I will be revenged to the uttermost.» Then he challenged Queen Guinevere concerning the death of his cousin, but she stood still, sore abashed, and anon with her sorrow and dread, she swooned. At the noise and sudden cry came in King Arthur, and to him appealed Sir Mador, and impeached the queen. «Fair lords,» said he, «full sorely am I troubled at this matter, for I must be rightful judge, and therein it repenteth me I may not do battle for my wife, for, as I deem, this deed was none of hers. But I suppose she will not lack a champion, and some good knight surely will put his body in jeopardy to save her.» But all who had been bidden to the banquet said they could not hold the queen excused, or be her champions, for she had made the feast, and either by herself or servants must it have come. «Alas!» said the queen, «I made this dinner for a good intent, and no evil, so God help me in my need.» «My lord the king,» said Sir Mador, «I require you heartily as you be a righteous king give me a day when I may have justice.» «Well,» said the king, «I give ye this day fifteen days, when ye shall be ready and armed in the meadow beside Westminster, and if there be a knight to fight with you, God speed the right, and if not, then must my queen be burnt.»

When the king and queen were alone together he asked her how this case befell. «I wot not how or in what manner,» answered she. «Where is Sir Lancelot?» said King Arthur, «for he would not grudge to do battle for thee.» «Sir,» said she, «I cannot tell you, but all his kinsmen deem he is not in this realm.» «These be sad tidings,» said the king; «I counsel ye to find Sir Bors, and pray him for Sir Lancelot's sake to do this battle for you.» So the queen departed and sent for Sir Bors to her chamber, and besought his succour.