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Sample file

FOREWORD

The setting is Britain in the Fifth Century A.D.—but not a Fifth Century known to any of our history books. It is, rather, an attempt to recreate in modern language the anachronistic, semi-mystical era described by Sir Thomas Malory and his predecessors, when necromancy was as much a fact of life as was the constant need to do battle in the Holy Land, when it was not then as it is nowadays, for “such custom was used in those days, that neither for favour, neither for love nor affinity, there should be none other but righteous judgment, as well upon a king as upon a knight, and as well upon a queen as upon another poor lady.” (Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Book XVIII, CHAPTER 6.)

I have sometimes used “Artus” and “Kex,” alternate forms in certain old romances for “Arthur” and “Kay,” as nicknames. In my mind, I always hear “Gawain” accented on the first syllable, the preferred way according to the older dictionaries I have consulted.

*“...I, Kay, that thou knawes
That owte of tyme bostus and drawus...”*

*—Middle English Metrical Romance
The Avowyng of King Arthur*

CHAPTER 1

THE POISONING OF SIR PATRISE

“And when he had eaten it he swelled so till he brast, and there Sir Patrise fell down suddenly dead among them.”

—Malory XVIII, 3

When Patrise put his head down on the table beside me and started groaning and twitching, my first thought was: and they call *me* the churl of this court.

Then the bloating became obvious—at least to me; I was sitting beside him. He hunched up with a half-choked cry and collapsed, his face still on the table, and suddenly I guessed that the dark stuff dribbling out of his mouth was not wine.

“Gouvernail,” I said.

I suppose, since I did not shout out the sarcasm, the old squire failed to hear the exact tone of my voice. He came and tried to lift Patrise tactfully, assuming the knight had drunk too much. One hardly expects to handle death at a private dinner given by the Queen of the land.

Patrise rolled away from Gouvernail, bumped Safere, and sprawled on the floor, his mouth still spewing blood.

It happened too quickly. Talk took a few minutes to die away. The last conversation—Pine’s stale speculation on how much of the heat Lancelot might actually have felt when Brumant the Proud was burned to cinders for sitting in the Siege Perilous beside him—went at least a breath-load of words after everyone else was quiet. (If I had been the one to talk about Lancelot at this particular dinner, I would not have been heard out so politely.)

Gouvernail, bent over Patrise, looked up at me and shook his graying head.

I glanced around at the other tables. Any chance for spiriting the body away as if the young knight had simply eaten and drunk himself into a stupor was gone. Besides, if it had been poison... “Gouvernail,” I said, “what happened?”

“Internal swelling, I think, my lord. He... He seems to have burst inside.”

“Poison, then,” said Mordred, who sat beside me at my right hand.

At the head table, Her Grace screamed. Gawain supported her on one side, her cousin Elyzabel rushed up to support her on the other. I fought down a surge of jealousy and looked at the others. Everybody had

stopped eating, of course. Pinel of Carbonek took a gulp of wine, then set his goblet down suddenly, as if he wished he had not drunk, and wiped his brown mustache and beard. Ironside and Bleoberis were sneaking the last bite of food out of their mouths. Probably others were as well. Safere, his chair overturned, was standing and staring down with his eyes like eggshells in his dark face. That pious pander Bors de Ganis had stepped aside to let Dame Elyzabel get close to Her Grace. Everyone else was glancing around as if trying to see who would burst next and praying it would not be himself. The dogs had caught the mood, and the only thing you could hear for a moment was their whining and tail-thumping, our breathing, and the Queen's sobs.

"Hand me that apple he was eating, Sir Seneschal," said Mordred calmly.

Patrise had let it roll out of his hand onto the table. I picked it up and handed it to Mordred. Delicately cutting a slice, he whistled to the nearest bitch. She came up, wagging her tail, snuffed up the piece of fruit from Mordred's fingers—and a few moments later was thrashing on the floor coughing up blood into the newly laid rushes. Astamore started up, one hand to his mouth, and looked for a moment as if he would rush from the room, but got control of himself and sat down again.

"So now," said Mordred, "the question is: was it that one piece of fruit only, or all of them? Brother Gawain, I believe the bowl was carried back to you. Will someone kindly fetch it here? Gouvernail? Dame Bragwaine? Dame Lore?"

"No!" screamed the Queen. "No, you will not! Bury it—no, burn it!"

"We must learn, dear liege lady." Mordred began sectioning his own pear, so far untasted, and whistled for another dog. The dogs were nosing their dead comrade; a few started to howl.

"No!" Dame Guenevere seized the bowl of fruit, turned, and threw it into the fire. Apples and pears spilled on the floor and table; she snatched them up and hurled them after the others. "Is it not enough? Will you kill them all? All our hounds and brachets, too?"

The fruit sizzled, sending off an odor of roasting juices, laced with something more sickly. Dame Guenevere turned back to us, the flames leaping in strange colors behind her. "My lords! My good lords—all who have taken any, throw it onto the fire! All of it! At once!"

No one moved. I grabbed the pieces of Mordred's pear, deliberately walked around the room to the fireplace, and threw them into the flames.

My right hand was sticky with pear juice. "Coupnez," I said to the nearest page, "clean water." Coupnez went for ewer and basin, looking, for once, very glad to have something to do.

“That was a foolish deed, Sir Kay,” said Mordred. “Come, who else took a piece of it? Will you all play the fool, like our good seneschal?”

Gawain reached down slowly and picked up the apple he had chosen for himself. His hand trembled. The whole court knew that apples and pears were Gawain’s favorite light food. At this time of year, the large bowl of fruit had obviously been served in honor of the King’s favorite nephew, although, with his usual over-insistence on courtesy, he had caused it to be passed around among the other guests first.

“My God!” he said softly. “This was meant for me!” He looked at the Queen, weeping in Elyzabel’s arms, at Mordred, back at the Queen. Half-turning, he flung his apple into the flames. Then, in a low voice to the Queen—if the rest of us had not been so silent, we would not have heard him—“Madame, I fear for you.”

“True, brother Gawain,” said Agravain the Beautiful. He went on, siding as usual, with Mordred, “It certainly looks as if it had been meant for you. But as you’ve just destroyed your own choice of the fruit, we can never know whether it was tainted also, can we?”

“What difference if it was meant especially for Gawain?” Mador de la Porte was on his feet now. So were most of us, though not, it seemed, for the same reason as Mador. “Whether she meant to murder one or all, she did not care how many good knights died. And I have lost my cousin, madame, my good cousin and a noble knight, through your treason. A great knight he would have been of his arms in his time! Here I charge you, madame the Queen, with his death!”

Dame Guenevere started at him, a wild, frightened look in those lovely gray eyes. She moved her lips as if to speak. Ihesu! to see her reduced to this!

“Think, Mador,” I said quickly. “Twenty-four knights here, four ladies and Gouvernail to serve us, not to mention the cooks and scullions—it could have been any one of us trying to murder any other one of us!”

“I rather like the idea of someone attempting to murder us all at a stroke.” Mordred leaned back in his chair and lifted his goblet to his mouth.

“You have not lost a kinsman, neither of you!” Mador shook his fist at the Queen. “I will be revenged for his death, madame—by Ihesu and His Holy Mother, I will be revenged! If I must renounce my allegiance to do it, I will prove your treachery with my body!”

Again Dame Guenevere tried to speak, but her cousin had to speak for her. “She will not lack champions, my lord Sir Mador!” Elyzabel looked around at all of us, her temper rising. This was the woman who had once brazened it out with King Claudas of France. “Which of you will champion the Queen, my lords? You do not all believe Sir Mador’s

lies? Which of you will fight for her? Sweet Mother Mary, must I put on armor myself and prove that Heaven aids the just cause?"

Palomides, who has fought in as many women's quarrels as has Lancelot, and almost as many as Gawain himself, lifted his knife and drove it heavily into the table before him. "Good Dame Elyzabel, think not that we do not pray for the Queen's innocence and happy deliverance. But it is not for us to fight in her cause." The old Saracen sat down and buried his face in his hands. He was right. Whichever of us here present fought for the Queen as good as confessed himself her accomplice, a poisoner.

All my life, I have craved and prayed for at least one more chance to fight for Her Grace, hating Lancelot, as I would have hated Gawain or anyone else who took her battle away from me time after time. And now, when Lancelot was not at hand to take it on himself, when God and Lancelot alone knew where Lancelot had been for the last week, neither I, nor Gawain, Palomides nor Persant nor any of the rest of us were able to take up her quarrel!

"There is cousin Ywain of the Lion of course," said Mordred, glancing around as if to take stock of who was here and who was not. "I rather wondered why he was not among us. Dining with the King seemed rather a feeble reason. Or there is Sir Lucan the Butler—he knows food. We might perhaps entice the good Sir Pelleas up from the arms of the beautiful Nimue in their Lake retreat. Or we might send for Mark of Cornwall. As I remember, King Mark once defended himself very ably in an unjust cause."

"Damn you, Mordred," I said. The Queen had fainted.

Gouvernail and three of her ladies carried her away to her own chamber. Dame Lore of Castile remained in the small banquet room with us. Maybe she thought to defend the Queen's interests here.

I looked around, counting pages. "Where in God's Name is Grimpains?"

"Sick, sir," said Clarence, one of the older lads, looking none too well himself.

"All right, Clarence," I said, "go summon the King."