

THE GREATEST KNIGHT, THE HARDEST TRIAL.

THE STORY OF SIR

LAUNCELOT

AND HIS

COMPANIONS

THE CHRONICLES OF KING ARTHUR: BOOK 3



HOWARD PYLE

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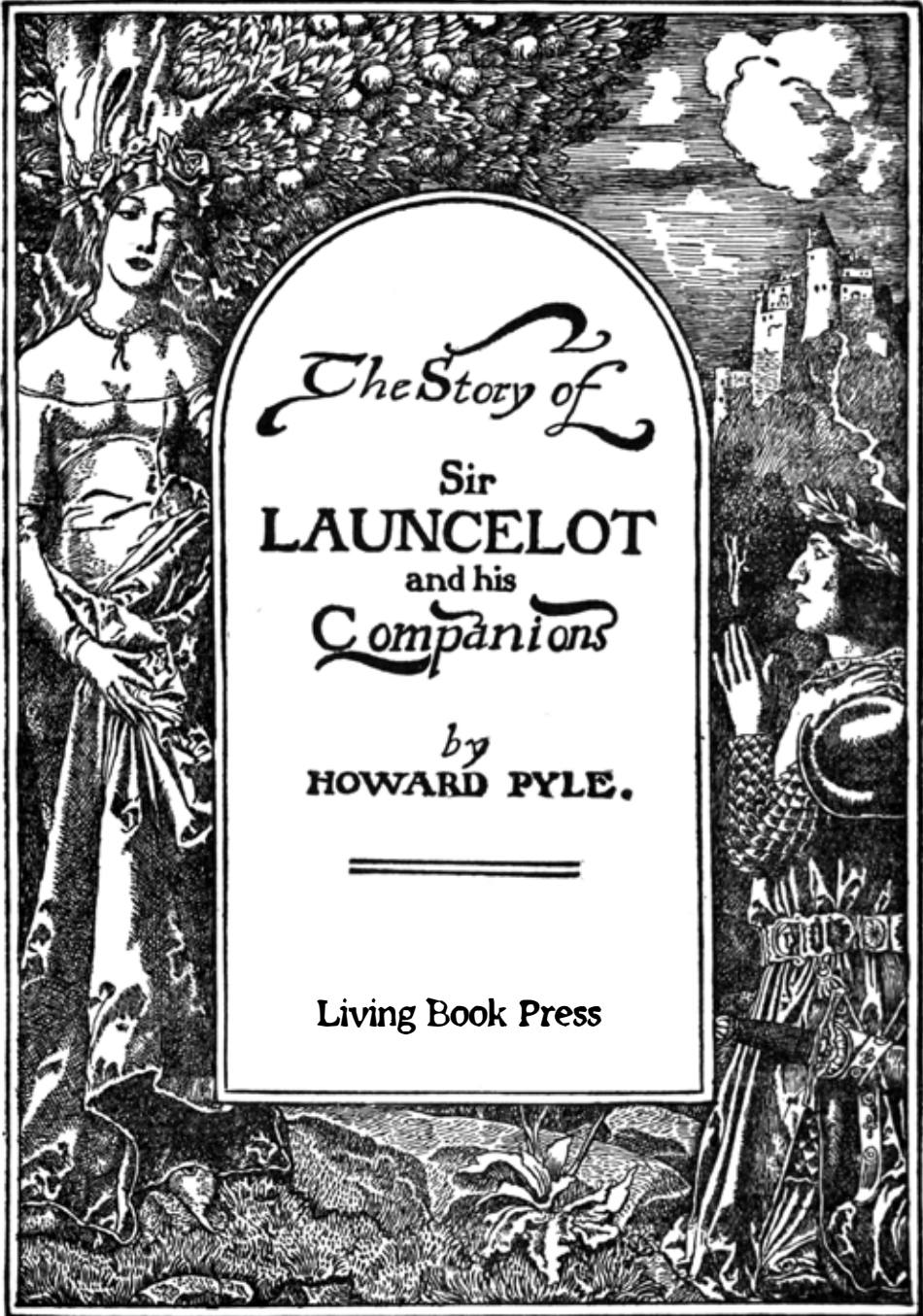
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Sir
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by
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Living Book Press



The Lady Elaine the Fair.





Foreword

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With this begins the third of those books which I have set myself to write concerning the history of King Arthur of Britain and of those puissant knights who were of his Court and of his Round Table. In the Book which was written before this book you may there read the Story of that very noble and worthy knight, Sir Launcelot of the Lake; of how he dwelt within a magic lake which was the enchanted habitation of the Lady Nymue of the Lake; of how he was there trained in all the most excellent arts of chivalry by Sir Pellias, the Gentle Knight—whilom a companion of the Round Table, but afterward the Lord of the Lake; of how he came forth out of the Lake and became after that the chiefest knight of the Round Table of King Arthur. All of this was told in that book and many other things concerning Sir Launcelot and several other worthies who were Companions of the Round Table and who were very noble and excellent knights both in battle and in court.

So here followeth a further history of Sir Launcelot of the Lake and the narrative of several of the notable adventures that he performed at this time of his life.

Wherefore if it will please you to read that which is hereinafter set forth, you will be told of how Sir Launcelot slew the great Worm of Corbin; of the madness that afterward fell upon him, and of how

a most noble, gentle, and beautiful lady, hight the Lady Elaine the Fair, lent him aid and succor at a time of utmost affliction to him, and so brought him back to health again. And you may herein further find it told how Sir Launcelot was afterward wedded to that fair and gentle dame, and of how was born of that couple a child of whom it was prophesied by Merlin (in a certain miraculous manner fully set forth in this book) that he should become the most perfect knight that ever lived and he who should bring back the Holy Grail to the Earth. For that child was Galahad whom the world knoweth to be the flower of all chivalry; a knight altogether without fear or reproach of any kind, yet, withal, the most glorious and puissant knight-champion who ever lived.

So if the perusal of these things may give you pleasure, I pray you to read that which followeth, for in this book all these and several other histories are set forth in full.





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Sir Mellegrans interrupts the sport of the Queen. ୫୫୫୫୫





Prologue.

IT befel upon a very joyous season in the month of May that Queen Guinevere was of a mind to take gentle sport as folk do at that time of the year; wherefore on a day she ordained it in a court of pleasure that on the next morning certain knights and ladies of the court at Camelot should ride with her a-maying into the woods and fields, there to disport themselves amid the flowers and blossoms that grew in great multitudes beside the river.

Of this May-party it stands recorded several times in the various histories of chivalry that the knights she chose were ten in all and that they were all Knights of the Round Table, to wit, as followeth: there was Sir Kay the Seneschal, and Sir Agravaine, and Sir Brandiles, and Sir Sagramour the Desirous, and Sir Dodinas, and Sir Osanna, and Sir Ladynas of the Forest Sauvage, and Sir Persavant of India, and Sir Ironside and Sir Percydes, who was cousin to Sir Percival of Gales. These were the ten (so sayeth those histories aforesaid) whom the Lady Guinevere called upon for to ride a-maying with her all bright and early upon the morning of the day as aforesaid.

And the Queen further ordained that each of these knights should choose him a lady for the day. And she ordained that each lady should ride behind the knight upon the horse which he rode. And she ordained that all those knights and ladies and all such attendants as might be of that party should be clad entirely in green, as was fitting for that pleasant festival.

Such were the commands that the Queen ordained, and when those who were chosen were acquainted with their good fortune they took great joy therein; for all they wist there would be great sport at that maying-party.

So when the next morning was come they all rode forth in the freshness of dewy springtide; what time the birds were singing so joyously, so joyously, from every hedge and coppice; what time the soft wind was blowing great white clouds, slow sailing across the canopy of heaven, each cloud casting a soft and darkling shadow that moved across the hills and uplands as it swam the light blue heaven above; what time all the trees and hedgerows were abloom with fragrant and dewy blossoms, and fields and meadow-lands, all shining bright with dew, were spread over with a wonderful carpet of pretty flowers, gladdening the eye with their charm and making fragrant the breeze that blew across the smooth and grassy plain.

For in those days the world was young and gay (as it is nowadays with little children who are abroad when the sun shines bright and things are a-growing) and the people who dwelt therein had not yet grown weary of its freshness of delight. Wherefore that fair Queen and her court took great pleasure in all the merry world that lay spread about them, as they rode two by two, each knight with his lady, gathering the blossoms of the May, chattering the while like merry birds and now and then bursting into song because of the pure pleasure of living.

So they disported themselves among the blossoms for all that morning, and when noontide had come they took their rest at a fair spot in a flowery meadow that lay spread out beside the smooth-flowing river about three miles from the town. For from where they sat they might look down across the glassy stream and behold the distant roofs and spires of Camelot, trembling in the thin warm air, very bright and clear, against the blue and radiant sky beyond. And after they were all thus seated in the grass, sundry attendants came and spread out a fair white tablecloth and laid upon the cloth a goodly feast for their refreshment—cold pasties of venison, roasted fowls, manchets of white bread, and flagons of golden wine and ruby wine. And all they took great pleasure when they gazed upon that feast, for they were anhungered with their sport-

ing. So they ate and drank and made them merry; and whilst they ate certain minstrels sang songs, and certain others recited goodly contes and tales for their entertainment. And meanwhile each fair lady wove wreaths of herbs and flowers and therewith bedecked her knight, until all those noble gentlemen were entirely bedight with blossoms—whereat was much merriment and pleasant jesting.

Thus it was that Queen Guinevere went a-maying, and so have I told you all about it so that you might know how it was.

Now whilst the Queen and her party were thus sporting together like to children in the grass, there suddenly came the sound of a bugle-horn winded in the woodlands that there were not a very great distance away from where they sat, and whilst they looked with some surprise to see who blew that horn in the forest, there suddenly appeared at the edge of the woodland an armed knight clad cap-a-pie. And the bright sunlight smote down upon that armed knight so that he shone with wonderful brightness at the edge of the shadows of the trees. And after that knight there presently followed an array of men-at-arms—fourscore and more in all—and these also were clad at all points in armor as though prepared for battle.

This knight and those who were with him stopped for a little while at the edge of the wood and stood regarding that May-party from a distance; then after a little they rode forward across the meadow to where the Queen and her court sat looking at them.

Now at first Queen Guinevere and those that were with her wist not who that knight could be, but when he and his armed men had come nigh enough, they were aware that he was a knight hight Sir Mellegrans, who was the son of King Bagdemagus, and they wist that his visit was not likely to bode any very great good to them.

For Sir Mellegrans was not like his father, who (as hath been already told of both in the Book of King Arthur and in The Story of the Champions of the Round Table) was a good and worthy king, and a friend of King Arthur's. For, contrariwise, Sir Mellegrans was malcontented and held bitter enmity toward King Arthur, and that for this reason:

A part of the estate of Sir Mellegrans marched upon the borders of Wales, and there had at one time arisen great contention between Sir Mel-

legrans and the King of North Wales concerning a certain strip of forest land, as to the ownership thereof. This contention had been submitted to King Arthur and he had decided against Sir Mellegrans and in favor of the King of North Wales; wherefore from that time Sir Mellegrans had great hatred toward King Arthur and sware that some time he would be revenged upon him if the opportunity should offer. Wherefore it was that when the Lady Guinevere beheld that it was Sir Mellegrans who appeared before her thus armed in full, she was ill at ease, and wist that that visit maybe boded no good to herself and to her gentle May-court.

So Sir Mellegrans and his armed party rode up pretty close to where the Queen and her party sat in the grass. And when he had come very near he drew rein to his horse and sat regarding that gay company both bitterly and scornfully (albeit at the moment he knew not the Queen who she was). Then after a little he said: "What party of jesters are ye, and what is this foolish sport ye are at?"

Then Sir Kay the Seneschal spake up very sternly and said: "Sir Knight, it behooves you to be more civil in your address. Do you not perceive that this is the Queen and her court before whom you stand and unto whom you are speaking?"

Then Sir Mellegrans knew the Queen and was filled with great triumph to find her thus, surrounded only with a court of knights altogether unarmed. Wherefore he cried out in a great voice: "Hah! lady, now I do know thee! Is it thus that I find thee and thy court? Now it appears to me that Heaven hath surely delivered you into my hands!"

To this Sir Percydes replied, speaking very fiercely: "What mean you, Sir Knight, by those words? Do you dare to make threats to your Queen?"

Quoth Sir Mellegrans: "I make no threats, but I tell you this, I do not mean to throw aside the good fortune that hath thus been placed in my hands. For here I find you all undefended and in my power, wherefore I forthwith seize upon you for to take you to my castle and hold you there as hostages until such time as King Arthur shall make right the great wrong which he hath done me aforetime and shall return to me those forest lands which he hath taken from me to give unto another. So if you go with me in peace, it shall be well for you, but if you go not in peace it shall be ill for you."

Then all the ladies that were of the Queen's court were seized with great terror, for Sir Mellegrans's tones and the aspect of his face were very fierce and baleful; but Queen Guinevere, albeit her face was like to wax for whiteness, spake with a great deal of courage and much anger, saying: "Wilt thou be a traitor to thy King, Sir Knight? Wilt thou dare to do violence to me and my court within the very sight of the roofs of King Arthur's town?"

"Lady," said Sir Mellegrans, "thou hast said what I will to do."

At this Sir Percydes drew his sword and said: "Sir Knight, this shall not be! Thou shalt not have thy will in this while I have any life in my body!"

Then all those other gentlemen drew their swords also, and one and all spake to the same purpose, saying: "Sir Percydes hath spoken; sooner would we die than suffer that affront to the Queen."

"Well," said Sir Mellegrans, speaking very bitterly, "if ye will it that ye who are naked shall do battle with us who are armed, then let it be even as ye elect. So keep this lady from me if ye are able, for I will here-with seize upon you all, maugre anything that you may do to stay me."

Then those ten unarmed knights of the Queen and their attendants made them ready for battle. And when Sir Mellegrans beheld what was their will, he gave command that his men should make them ready for battle upon their part, and they did so.

Then in a moment all that pleasant May-party was changed to dreadful and bloody uproar; for men lashed fiercely at men with sword and glaive, and the Queen and her ladies shrieked and clung in terror together in the midst of that party of knights who were fighting for them.

And for a long time those ten unarmed worthies fought against the armed men as one to ten, and for a long time no one could tell how that battle would end. For the ten men smote the others down from their horses upon all sides, wherefore, for a while, it looked as though the victory should be with them. But they could not shield themselves from the blows of their enemies, being unarmed, wherefore they were soon wounded in many places, and what with loss of blood and what with stress of fighting a few against many without any rest, they presently began to wax weak and faint. Then at last Sir Kay fell down to the

earth and then Sir Sagramour and then Sir Agravaine and Sir Dodinas and then Sir Ladynas and Sir Osanna and Sir Persavant, so that all who were left standing upon their feet were Sir Brandiles and Sir Ironside and Sir Percydes.

But still these three set themselves back to back and thus fought on in that woful battle. And still they lashed about them so fiercely with their swords that the terror of this battle filled their enemies with fear, insomuch that those who were near them fell back after a while to escape the dreadful strokes they gave.

So came a pause in the battle and all stood at rest. Meantime all around on the ground were men groaning dolorously, for in that battle those ten unarmed knights of the Round Table had smitten down thirty of their enemies.

So for a while those three stood back to back resting from their battle and panting for breath. As for their gay attire of green, lo! it was all ensanguined with the red that streamed from many sore and grimly wounds. And as for those gay blossoms that had bedecked them, lo! they were all gone, and instead there hung about them the dread and terror of a deadly battle.

Then when Queen Guinevere beheld her knights how they stood bleeding from many wounds and panting for breath, her heart was filled with pity, and she cried out in a great shrill voice: "Sir Mellegrans, have pity! Slay not my noble knights! but spare them and I will go with thee as thou wouldst have me do. Only this covenant I make with thee: suffer these lords and ladies of my court and all of those attendant upon us, to go with me into captivity."

Then Sir Mellegrans said: "Well, lady, it shall be as you wish, for these men of yours fight not like men but like devils, wherefore I am glad to end this battle for the sake of all. So bid your knights put away their swords, and I will do likewise with my men, and so there shall be peace between us."

Then, in obedience to the request of Sir Mellegrans, the Lady Guinevere gave command that those three knights should put away their swords, and though they all three besought her that she should suffer them to fight still a little longer for her, she would not; so they were obliged to

sheath their swords as she ordered. After that these three knights went to their fallen companions, and found that they were all alive, though sorely hurt. And they searched their wounds as they lay upon the ground, and they dressed them in such ways as might be. After that they helped lift the wounded knights up to their horses, supporting them there in such wise that they should not fall because of faintness from their wounds. So they all departed, a doleful company, from that place, which was now no longer a meadow of pleasure, but a field of bloody battle and of death.

Thus beginneth this history.

And now you shall hear that part of this story which is called in many books of chivalry, "The Story of the Knight of the Cart."

For the further history hath now to do with Sir Launcelot of the Lake, and of how he came to achieve the rescue of Queen Guinevere, brought thither in a cart.



PART I

The Chevalier of the Cart

Here followeth the story of Sir Launcelot of the Lake, how he went forth to rescue Queen Guinevere from that peril in which she lay at the castle of Sir Mellegrans. Likewise it is told how he met with a very untoward adventure, so that he was obliged to ride to his undertaking in a cart as aforesaid.

Denneys and the Hermit help
Sir Launcelot to his armor.





Chapter First

How Denneys Found Sir Launcelot, and How Sir Launcelot Rode Forth for to Rescue Queen Guinevere from the Castle of Sir Mellegrans, and of What Befell him upon the Assaying of that Adventure.

Now after that sad and sorrowful company of the Queen had thus been led away captive by Sir Mellegrans as aforetold of, they rode forward upon their way for all that day. And they continued to ride after the night had fallen, and at that time they were passing through a deep dark forest. From this forest, about midnight, they came out into an open stony place whence before them they beheld where was built high up upon a steep hill a grim and forbidding castle, standing very dark against the star-lit sky. And behind the castle there was a town with a number of lights and a bell was tolling for midnight in the town. And this town and castle were the town and the castle of Sir Mellegrans.

Now the Queen had riding near to her throughout that doleful journey a young page named Denneys, and as they had ridden upon their way, she had taken occasion at one place to whisper to him: "Denneys, if thou canst find a chance of escape, do so, and take news of our plight to some one who may rescue us." So it befel that just as they came out thus into that stony place, and in the confusion that arose when they reached the steep road that led up to the castle, Denneys drew rein a little to one side. Then, seeing that he was unobserved, he suddenly set spurs

to his horse and rode away with might and main down the stony path and into the forest whence they had all come, and so was gone before anybody had gathered thought to stay him.

Then Sir Mellegrans was very angry, and he rode up to the Queen and he said: "Lady, thou hast sought to betray me! But it matters not, for thy page shall not escape from these parts with his life, for I shall send a party after him with command to slay him with arrows."

So Sir Mellegrans did as he said; he sent several parties of armed men to hunt the forest for the page Denneys; but Denneys escaped them all and got safe away into the cover of the night.

And after that he wandered through the dark and gloomy woodland, not knowing whither he went, for there was no ray of light. Moreover, the gloom was full of strange terrors, for on every side of him he heard the movement of night creatures stirring in the darkness, and he wist not whether they were great or little or whether they were of a sort to harm him or not to harm him.

Yet ever he went onward until, at last, the dawn of the day came shining very faint and dim through the tops of the trees. And then, by and by, and after a little, he began to see the things about him, very faint, as though they were ghosts growing out of the darkness. Then the small fowl awoke, and first one began to chirp and then another, until a multitude of the little feathered creatures fell to singing upon all sides so that the silence of the forest was filled full of their multitudinous chanting. And all the while the light grew stronger and stronger and more clear and sharp until, by and by, the great and splendid sun leaped up into the sky and shot his shafts of gold aslant through the trembling leaves of the trees; and so all the joyous world was awake once more to the fresh and dewy miracle of a new-born day.

So cometh the breaking of the day in the woodlands as I have told you, and all this Denneys saw, albeit he thought but little of what he beheld. For all he cared for at that time was to escape out of the thick mazes of the forest in which he knew himself to be entangled. Moreover, he was faint with weariness and hunger, and wist not where he might break his fast or where he could find a place to tarry and to repose himself for a little.

But God had care of little Denneys and found him food, for by and by he came to an open space in the forest, where there was a neatherd's hut, and that was a very pleasant place. For here a brook as clear as crystal came brawling out of the forest and ran smoothly across an open lawn of bright green grass; and there was a hedgerow and several apple-trees, and both the hedge and the apple-trees were abloom with fragrant blossoms. And the thatched hut of the neatherd stood back under two great oak-trees at the edge of the forest, where the sunlight played in spots of gold all over the face of the dwelling.

So the Queen's page beheld the hut and he rode forward with intent to beg for bread, and at his coming there appeared a comely woman of the forest at the door and asked him what he would have. To her Denneys told how he was lost in the forest and how he was anhungered. And whilst he talked there came a slim brown girl, also of the woodland, and very wild, and she stood behind the woman and listened to what he said. This woman and this girl pitied Denneys, and the woman gave command that the girl should give him a draught of fresh milk, and the maiden did so, bringing it to him in a great wooden bowl. Meanwhile, the woman herself fetched sweet brown bread spread with butter as yellow as gold, and Denneys took it and gave them both thanks beyond measure. So he ate and drank with great appetite, the whiles those two outland folk stood gazing at him, wondering at his fair young face and his yellow hair.

After that, Denneys journeyed on for the entire day, until the light began to wane once more. The sun set; the day faded into the silence of the gloaming and then the gloaming darkened, deeper and more deep, until Denneys was engulfed once more in the blackness of the night-time.

Then lo! God succored him again, for as the darkness fell, he heard the sound of a little bell ringing through the gathering night. Thitherward he turned his horse whence he heard the sound to come, and so in a little he perceived a light shining from afar, and when he had come nigh enough to that light he was aware that he had come to the chapel of a hermit of the forest and that the light that he beheld came from within the hermit's dwelling-place.

As Denneys drew nigh to the chapel and the hut a great horse neighed

from a cabin close by, and therewith he was aware that some other wayfarer was there, and that he should have comradeship—and at that his heart was elated with gladness.

So he rode up to the door of the hut and knocked, and in answer to his knocking there came one and opened to him, and that one was a most reverend hermit with a long beard as white as snow and a face very calm and gentle and covered all over with a great multitude of wrinkles.

(And this was the hermit of the forest several times spoken of aforetime in these histories.)

When the hermit beheld before him that young lad, all haggard and worn and faint and sick with weariness and travel and hunger, he took great pity and ran to him and caught him in his arms and lifted him down from his horse and bare him into the hermitage, and sat him down upon a bench that was there.

Denneys said: “Give me to eat and to drink, for I am faint to death.” And the hermit said, “You shall have food upon the moment,” and he went to fetch it.

Then Denneys gazed about him with heavy eyes, and was aware that there was another in the hut besides himself. And then he heard a voice speak his name with great wonderment, saying: “Denneys, is it then thou who hast come here at this time? What ails thee? Lo! I knew thee not when I first beheld thee enter.”

Then Denneys lifted up his eyes, and he beheld that it was Sir Launcelot of the Lake who spoke to him thus in the hut of the hermit.

At that, and seeing who it was who spake to him, Denneys leaped up and ran to Sir Launcelot and fell down upon his knees before him. And he embraced Sir Launcelot about the knees, weeping beyond measure because of the many troubles through which he had passed.

Sir Launcelot said: “Denneys, what is it ails thee? Where is the Queen, and how came you here at this place and at this hour? Why look you so distraught, and why are you so stained with blood?”

Then Denneys, still weeping, told Sir Launcelot all that had befallen, and how that the Lady Guinevere was prisoner in the castle of Sir Mellegrens somewhere in the midst of that forest.

But when Sir Launcelot heard what Denneys said, he arose very

hastily and he cried out, "How is this! How is this!" and he cried out again very vehemently: "Help me to mine armor and let me go hence!" (for Sir Launcelot had laid aside his armor whilst he rested in the hut of the hermit).

At that moment the hermit came in, bringing food for Denneys to eat, and hearing what Sir Launcelot said, he would have persuaded him to abide there until the morrow and until he could see his way. But Sir Launcelot would listen to nothing that might stay him. So Denneys and the hermit helped him don his armor, and after that Sir Launcelot mounted his war-horse and rode away into the blackness of the night.

So Sir Launcelot rode as best he might through the darkness of the forest, and he rode all night, and shortly after the dawning of the day he heard the sound of rushing water.

So he followed a path that led to this water and by and by he came to an open space very stony and rough. And he saw that here was a great torrent of water that came roaring down from the hills very violent and turbid and covered all over with foam like to cream. And he beheld that there was a bridge of stone that spanned the torrent and that upon the farther side of the bridge was a considerable body of men-at-arms all in full armor. And he beheld that there were at least five-and-twenty of these men, and that chief among them was a man clad in green armor.

Then Sir Launcelot rode out upon the bridge and he called to those armed men: "Can you tell me whether this way leads to the castle of Sir Mellegrans?"

They say to him: "Who are you, Sir Knight?"

"I am one," quoth Sir Launcelot, "who seeks the castle of Sir Mellegrans. For that knight hath violently seized upon the person of the Lady Guinevere and of certain of her court, and he now holds her and them captive and in duress. I am one who hath come to rescue that lady and her court from their distress and anxiety."

Upon this the Green Knight, who was the chief of that party, came a little nearer to Sir Launcelot, and said: "Messire, are you Sir Launcelot of the Lake?" Sir Launcelot said: "Yea, I am he." "Then," said the Green Knight, "you can go no farther upon this pass, for you are to know that