

The Water Carriers

OSCAR FAY ADAMS

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ARGUMENT.

Jack and Gill went up the hill
To draw a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown
And Gill came tumbling after.

"So all day long the noise of battle roll'd
Among the mountains by the winter sea,"
But young Lavaine, the knight of Astolat,
And brother to the lily maid who died
For Lancelot's love, was reckon'd not of those
Who "fell in Lyonesse about their Lord,"
King Arthur, whom the three Queens bore away.
For he, Lavaine, who lov'd Sir Lancelot
But revered his King and conscience more,
Had hasten'd to the standard of his King
When evil-hearted Modred rais'd revolt,
And Lancelot, the faithless, stain'd, alas!
His manhood, warring 'gainst his friend and King.
And so, because the lad was true and brave,
And modest seeming, nor was rash of speech,
Had Arthur made him of the Table Round
And lov'd to have him near. Whereat Lavaine
Greatly rejoic'd and gladly would have died
To serve in any wise the blameless King.
But when the sun came from the under world
And shone upon that field of battle near
The winter sea, Lavaine by Arthur's side
Receiv'd a vengeful thrust aim'd at the King,
And from his horse, slow reeling, fell, and o'er
Him swept the host; but bluff Sir Torre, who saw
His brother fall, came spurring hence and dragg'd
Him to one side, and there, in knightly wise,
Gave him such tendance as his wit devis'd,
And left him, guarded by a humble squire,
But thinking, "If I live, I will return;"

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And scarce an hour was gone before a stroke
From one of Modred's men had cleft Sir Torre
From brain to nape. So died he for his Lord.

But of his tendance or his death Lavaine
Knew naught, but lay in stupor deep as death,
And to the eye that watch'd he seem'd as dead.
Whereat the humble squire mus'd to himself:

"If he be dead, he needs not me to guard;
And if he be alive his foes will think
Him dead, and truly I do deem him dead,
Yet be he dead or living I must see
The issue of the fight," and saying went
And saw, and, seeing, met the death which might
Have spar'd him by the side of Sir Lavaine.

"So all day long the noise of battle roll'd,"
Yet Sir Lavaine in stupor lay upon
The field until the sun went down, and shone
The moon at full upon his armor clasps
And glinted on the chancing of his sword.
As one who journeying in lands remote
Returning takes by slow degrees the old
Life up, so Sir Lavaine return'd from death
Or what had seem'd like death, not all at once
But dimly had a knowledge of his state
And what had past, and then, because too weak
To think, he fell in sleep again and wak'd
Not till the sun brake from the underworld,
And near him, having watch'd the barge that bore
King Arthur out of sight, there slowly drew
The bold Sir Bedivere. These two last left
Alive upon the field.

The mournful twain

At length slow moving from the field, because
Lavaine was weak from hunger and the wound,
Past on to where within a little wood
A simple hermit liv'd a blameless life.
With him the pair abode until Lavaine
Was heal'd and then the bold Sir Bedivere
Past to his own land, distant Cameliard,
And then, a little later, past Lavaine
To his.

Small joy was now at Astolat

For him, the last of all his race, and night
And day he seem'd to hear the lily maid
Singing her swan song from the eastern tow'r,
Or bluff Sir Torre stride thro' the broken halls,

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Or else his father, dead a year ago,
Calling him tenderly as was his wont,
And so by always listening to the dead
He ceased to hearken to the living voice,
And more and more withdrew into himself.

But when the next approaching spring had fail'd
To stir the languid blood within his veins,
The dumb old servitor before him stood
One April morning in the castle yard
And pointed to the south, and then by signs
Essay'd to free his mind, and Sir Lavaine,
Half comprehending, asked him, "Shall I go
Thither?" Thereat the dumb old man nodded,
His finger once more pointing to the south.
So, deeming that his humble servitor
Had deeper knowledge of the best, Lavaine,
A little later gathering the few
Who serv'd for love, not hire, within the halls
Of Astolat, past with them into lands
Of Cornish name, and made a home for them
And for himself; and, marrying a maid
Of Cornish race, saw children of his own
And all the past became a memory.

Before his home in Cornwall lay the sea,
And a thick wood behind it northward stretch'd
But to the left a dusty white road climb'd
A hill on which there frown'd a single tow'r,
And on the farther side a hamlet slept
In peace and plenty, owning him for lord.
There o'er his Cornish castle past the years
From churlish winter into spring until
Ten times the ash buds blackened with the winds
Of March since blameless Arthur past beyond
The mournful gaze of bold Sir Bedivere.

A younger copy of himself, or like
Himself when but eight tender seasons old,
Now listen'd, wonder-ey'd, to Sir Lavaine
When he would talk of arms and of the last
Great day in Lyonesse. Jack had the lad
Been call'd for some past claimant for the hand
Of her Lavaine call'd wife, yet this Lavaine
Knew not, but deem'd the unfamiliar name
A careless fancy of his Cornish wife's,
Whose lightest fancy 'twas his care to please.
Slender the lad, as once his father was,
But all the blood of lusty Astolat
Made summer in his veins. Seldom apart
From him his sister Gillian was, and each

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Without the other droopt and pin'd. Most like
Her aunt, the dead Elaine, young Gillian seem'd,
And oft the father, looking at her, felt
Remembrance of the distant past confuse
The present, till if he were boy or man
And this his child or playmate sister seem'd
Sometimes a thing of doubt.

The two, the maid

And Jack, lov'd better than all else to climb
The long white road, that steep and stony, led
Up to the single, broken, frowning tow'r.
Four trees beside the tow'r bent o'er a spring
That broke from out a sombre, rocky cleft.
Here Tristram once had drunk with fair Iseult,
Mark's wife, and laught to see the shining drops
Slip thro' her fingers, when she held her hand
Cupwise, that he might drink therefrom. And here
Had sweet Sir Percivale once stopt to drink,
Returning from the Quest of Holy Grail;
Here, too, had Pelleas, the bright boy knight,
A brief hour linger'd, flying from the court
In that dark time when all his early faith
In woman's virtue died, and good Sir Bors,
The false Gawain, the pure Sir Galahad,
And many more of that great Table Round
Had drunk from these sweet waters to their gain.
Full oft had Gillian and the stripling Jack
Bent o'er the spring as bent the trees above,
And laught to see two faces gazing up,
One fair and pale, the other fair and red.
Maid Gillian's was the one, the other his.

Now as it hapt, Lavaine in that tenth year
Fell ill of some dull fever in the blood,
And twenty mornings past and still the knight
Felt the slow poison creeping thro' his veins
And grew at last indifferent to the end.
To him maid Gillian pityingly came
And said with tears:

"Sure am I that one thing
Would cure this deadly fever."

Then Lavaine:
"Yea, dost thou think it, little maid? then let
Me hear."

Then she:
"A draught of water brought
From spring beside the tow'r would cure, so pure
It is and sweet, and Jack and I would bring
It gladly an' 'twould please you drink, my lord."

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To whom the sick man answer'd wearily,
Yet thinking she by chance had spoken truth
As he bethought him of the water's fame:
"Child, since you wish it, bring, and I will drink."

Thereat and lightly sprang the maiden down
The steps that led to outer air, and close
Beside came Jack, a silver vessel swung
From one small hand, and so the childish twain
Went up the hill and quickly reach'd its top.
Then Jack, with Gill beside, stoopt low and fill'd
The vessel till the drops did chase themselves
All down its burnisht sides. This done, they left
The spring, and holding each the vessel's rim,
Return'd as they had come, but slower, lest
By haste the precious draught were spilt and lost.
Then as in distance smaller grew the tow'r
Behind, the maid broke out in tender song:

"Sweet is the sunshine coming after rain;
And sweet this water unto lips in pain:
Which is the sweeter? that in truth know I.

"Light, art thou sweet? then sweeter waters be:
Light, thou art grateful; sweet this draught to me.
O light, if death be near him, let me die.

"Sweet light that fades at eve too soon away,
Sweet waters springing from the dark to day,
Which is the sweeter? that in truth know I.

"Pain, follow night, and henceforth from him flee;
Thou needs must follow night that waits for thee;
But, if thou wilt not, then O let me die."

Clear with the last line rang her voice, and Jack,
Who heeded not his ways when Gillian sang,
Slipt, as the last note ceas'd, upon a piece
Of sliding stone, and slipping, fell, dragging
The singer down, and both together roll'd,
All in a horror of loose stones and dust
And flying limbs and broken bones and crowns,
Far down the steep side of that rocky hill.
So perish'd these two of the fated house
Of Astolat; and in the night that follow'd,
And near a dawning fierce with wind and rain,
Wherein the sea wag'd battle with the sky
And both with earth, to final judgment past
Lavaine.