

The Lay of the Horn

Anonymous

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The Lay of the Horn.

Once upon a time, King Arthur held a mighty feast at Carlion. Our tale saith that the king hath sent through all his realm; and from Esparlot in Bretagne into Alemaigne, from the city of Boillande down even into Ireland, the king, for fellowship, bath summoned his barons, that they be at Carlion at Ascension tide. On this day all came, both high and low; twenty thousand knights sat at the board, and thereto twenty thousand damoiselles, maidens and dames. It was of great mark that each man had his mate, for he who had no wife yet sat with a woman, whether sister or friend: and herein lay great courtesy. But before they may eat one and all shall be sore angered; for now, lo you, a youth, fair and pleasing and mounted upon a swift horse, who cometh riding into the palace.

In his hand he held a horn banded about four times with gold. Of ivory was that horn, and wrought with inlay wherein amid the gold were set stones of beryl and sardonyx and rich chalcedony; of elephant's ivory was it made, and its like for size and beauty and strength was never seen. Upon it was a ring inlaid with silver, and it had a hundred little bells of pure gold, a fairy, wise and skilful, wrought them in the time of Constantine, and laid such a spell upon the horn as ye shall now hear: whoever struck it lightly with his finger, the hundred bells rang out so sweetly that neither harp nor viol, nor mirth of maidens, nor syren of the sea were so joyous to hear. Rather would a man travel a league on foot than lose that sound, and whoso hearkeneth thereto straightway forgetteth all things.

So the messenger came into the palace and looked upon that great and valiant company of barons. He was clad in a bliaut, and the horn was hung about his neck, and he took it in his hand and raised it on high, and struck upon it that all the palace resounded. The bells rang out in so sweet accord that all the knights left eating. Not a damsel looked down at her plate; and of the ready varlets who were serving drink, and bore about cups of maplewood and beakers of fine gold filled with mulled wine and hippocrass, with drinks spiced and aromatic, not one of these but stopped where he was, and he who held aught scattered it abroad.

Nor was there any seneschal so strong or so skilful but if he carried a plate, let it tremble or fall. He who would cut the bread cut his own hand. All were astounded by the horn and fell into forgetfulness; all ceased from speech to hearken to it; Arthur the great king grew silent, and by reason of the horn both king and barons became so still that no word was spoken.

The messenger goeth straightway to the king, bearing in his hand the ivory horn; well knew he the ten kings by their rich array; and still because of the horn's music all were silent about King Arthur. The comely youth addressed him, greeted him fairly, and laughing, bespoke him: "King Arthur, may God who dwells above save you and all your baronage I see here assembled." And Arthur answered him: "May he give you joy likewise." Saith the messenger: "Lord, now give heed to me for a little space. The king of Moraine, the brave and courteous, sendeth you this horn from out his treasure, on such a covenant hearken to his desire herein that you give him neither love nor hate therefor."

"Friend," then saith the king, "courteous is thy lord, and I will take the horn with its four bands of gold, but will return him neither love nor hate therefor." So King Arthur took the horn which the varlet proffered him: and he let

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fill with wine his cup of pure gold, and then bespoke the youth: "Take this beaker, sit you down before me, and eat and drink; and when we have eaten I will make you a knight, and on the morrow I will give you a hundred livres of pure gold." But laughing the youth maketh answer: "It is not meet that the squire sit at table with the knight, rather will I go to the inn and repose me; and then when I am clothed and equipped and adorned I will come again to you, and claim my promise." Thereupon the messenger goeth his way; and forthright he issueth out of the city, for he feareth lest he be followed.

The king was in his palace, and his barons were gathered about him:

never before was he in so deep a study. He still held the horn by its ring, never had he seen one so fair; and he showeth it to Gawain and Iwain and Giflet; the eighty brethren looked at it, and so likewise did all the barons there gathered. Again the king took the horn, and on it he saw letters in the gold, enameled with silver, and saith to his chamberlain:

"Take this horn, and show it to my chaplain, that he may read this writing, for I would know what it saith." The chamberlain taketh it, and gave it to the chaplain who read the writing. When he saw it he laughed, and saith to the king: "Sir, give heed, and anon I will tell you privately such a marvel that its like was never heard in England or any other realm; but here and now it may not bespoken." Nonetheless the king will not so suffer it, rather he swore and declared that the chaplain should speak out before them all, and that his barons should hear it. "Nor shall a thing so desired be kept from the dames and demoiselles and gentle maidens here assembled from many a far land," so saith the king.

One and all rejoiced when they heard from the king that they should know what the writing said; but many a one made merry who thereafter repented him, many a one was glad who thereafter was sorry. Now the chaplain, who was neither fool nor churl, saith: "If I had been heeded what is here written would not be read out in this place; but since it is your will, hear it now openly: "Thus saith to you Mangon of Moraine, the Fair: this horn was wrought by an evil fay and a spiteful, who laid such a spell upon it that no man, howsoever wise and valiant, shall drink therefrom if he be either jealous or deceived, or if he hath a wife who has ever in folly turned her thoughts towards any man save him only; never will the horn suffer such a one to drink from it, rather will it spill out upon him what it may contain; howsoever valiant he be, and howsoever high, yet will it bespatter him and his garments, though they be worth a thousand marks. For whoso would drink from this horn must have a wife who has never thought, whether from disloyalty, or love of power, or desire of fortune, that she of would fain have another, better than her lord; if his wife be wholly true, then only may he drink from it.' But I do not believe that any knight from here to Montpelier who hath taken to him a wife will ever drink any whit therefrom, if it so be that the writing speaketh truth."

God! then was many a happy dame made sorrowful. Not one was there so true but she bowed her head; even the queen sat with bent brow, and so did all the barons around and about who had wives that they doubted. The maidens talked and jested among themselves, and looked at their lovers, and smiled courteously, saying: "Now will we see the jealous brought to the test; now will we learn who is shamed and deceived."

Arthur was in great wrath, but made semblance of gladness, and he calleth to Kay: "Now fill for me this rich horn, for I would make assay, and know if I may drink therefrom." And Kay the seneschal straightway filled it with a spiced wine, and offered it to the emperor. King Arthur took it and set his lips to it, for he thought to drink, but the wine poured out upon him, down even to his feet. Then was the king in sore wrath.

"This is the worst," crieth he, and he seized a knife, and would have struck the queen in the heart below the breast, had not Gawain and Iwain and Cadain wrung it from him; they three and Giflet between them took the knife from his hand, and bitterly blamed him. "Lord,"

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then saith Iwain, "be not so churlish, for there is no woman born who, if she be brought to the test, hath not sometime thought folly. No marvel is it that the horn spilled its wine. All here that have wives shall try it, to know if they can drink from it, thereafter may ye blame the queen of the fair face. Ye are of great valiance, and my lady is true; none ever spoke blame of her." "Iwain," saith the queen, "now may my lord let kindle a fire of thorns, and cast me into it, and if one hair of my head burneth, or any of my garments, then may he let me be dragged to death by horses. No man have I loved, and none will I ever love, save my lord only. This horn is too veracious, it has attacked me for a small cause. In years past I gave a ring to a damoiseau, a young boy who had slain a giant, a hateful felon who here in the court accused Gawain of sore treason. The boy, Gawain's cousin germain, gave him the lie, and did battle with him, and cut off his head with his sword: and as soon as the giant was slain the boy asked leave of us. I granted him my favour, and gave him a ring, for I hoped to retain him to strengthen the court, but even had he remained here, he had never been loved by me. Certes,"

saith the queen, "since I was a maid and was given to thee blessed was that hour no other evil have I done on any day of my life. On all the earth is no man so mighty no, not though he were king of Rome that I would love him, even for all the gold of Pavia, no, nor any count or amiral. Great shame hath he done me who sent this horn; never did he love lady. And until I be revenged, I shall never know gladness."

Then said Arthur, "Speak no more of this. Were any mighty neighbor, or cousin or kinsman, to make war upon Mangon, never more would my heart love him; for I made the king a covenant before all my folk, and by all that is true, that I would hate him no hate for his gift. It is not meet to gainsay my word, that were great villainy; I like not the king who swiftly belies himself." "Lord," saith the queen, "blessed was I when as a maiden I was given to you. When a lady of high parentry who hath a good lord seeketh another friend, she doth great wrong. He who seeketh a better wine than that of the grape, or better bread than that of the wheat, such a one should be hung and his ashes given to the winds. I have the best one of the three who were ever king under God, why then should I go seeking a fairer or a braver? I promise you, lord, that wrongfully are you angry with me. Never should a noble knight be offered this horn to the shaming of his lady " But the king saith, "Let them do it. All shall try it, kings and counts and dukes; I alone will not have shame herein."

So Arthur giveth it to the king of Sinadone, but so soon as he took it, the wine spilled out upon him; then King Nuz taketh it, and it spilled out upon him; and Angus of Scotland would fain drink from it by force, but the wine all poured out upon him, at which he was sore angered. The king of Cornwall thought certes to drink from it, but it splashed all over him that he was in great wrath; and the horn splashed over King Gahor, and spilled great plenty upon King Glovien, and it spilled out upon King Cadain as soon as he took it in his hands. Then King Lot taketh it, and looketh on himself as afoot; and it splashed the beard of Caraton; and of the two kings of Ireland there was not one it did not bespatter; and it splashed all the thirty counts, who had great shame thereof; nor of all the barons present who tried the horn was there one who might take a drop therefrom. It poured out over each king, and each was in great wrath; they passed it on and were in great sorrow by reason of it; and they all said, may the horn, and he who brought it and he who sent it, be given over to the devils, for whoso believeth this horn shameth his wife.

Now when King Arthur saw it spilled out upon all, he forgot his sorrow and wrath, and began to laugh and made great joy. "Lords," he saith to his barons, "now hear me. I am not the only one bemoaned. He who sent me this horn gave me a good gift: by the faith I owe all those here gathered, I will never part with it for all the gold of Pavia; no man shall have it save he who shall drink from it." The queen grew bright red because of the marvel whereof she dared not speak; fairer than the rose was she. The king looked on her and found her most fair; he drew her to him and three times he kissed her: "Gladly, dame, I forget my ill will."

"Lord, gramercy," saith she.

Then all, high and low, tried the ivory horn. A knight took it and laughed across at his wife; he was the most joyous of all the court, and the most courteous; none boasted less, yet when he was armed none was more feared;

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for in Arthur's court there was no better warrior, none mightier of his hands, save only my lord Gawain. Fair was his hair, his beard russet, his eyes gray-blue and laughing, his body comely, his feet straight and well arched; Caradoc was his name, a well skilled, knight, and of full good renown. His wife sat at his left; she was sister to King Galahal and was born at Cirencester. Full true was she, and thereto comely and gracious, featly fashioned and like unto a fay; her hair was long and golden; fairer woman was there none, save the queen only. She looked upon Caradoc, nor changed colour, but bespoke him, saying:

"Fair friend, fear not to drink from the horn at this high feast; lift up your head and do me honour. I would not take any man for lord however mighty; no, though he were amiral, I would not have him for my husband and leave you, friend; rather would I become a nun and wear the veil. For every woman should be as the turtle dove, who after she has had one mate will never take another: thus should a lady do if she be of good lineage."

Full glad was Caradoc, and he sprang to his feet; fair he was, a well skilled and a courteous knight. When they had filled the horn it held a lot and a half; full to the brim it was of red wine; "Wassail," he saith to the king. He was tall and strong, and he set the horn to his lips, and I tell you truly that he tasted the wine and drank it all down. Right glad was he thereof, but all the table started in wonder. Straightway he goeth before Arthur, and as he goeth he saith to him, nor did he speak low-voiced: "Lord, I have emptied the horn, be ye certain thereof."

"Caradoc," saith the king, "brave and courteous are you; of a sooth ye have drunk it, as was seen of more than a hundred. Keep you Cirencester; two years is it since I gave it in charge to you, and never will I take it from you, I give it to you for life and to your children; and for your wife who is of great worth I will give you this horn which is prized at a hundred pounds of gold." "Lord, I give you good thanks,"

Caradoc made answer, and sat down again at the board beside his wife of the fair face. Now when they had eaten, each man took leave and Went back to his own domain whence he had come, taking with him the woman he best loved.

Lords, this lay was first sung by Caradoc, who wrought its adventure. And whoso goeth to a high feast at Cirencester, will, of a sooth, see there the horn: so say I, Robert Biquet, who have learned much concerning the matter from an abbot, and do now, by his bidding, tell the tale, how in this wise the horn was tested at Carlion.