

The Knights of the Holy Grail

by Constance Maud

Far away, in the mountains of Spain, there dwelt a holy band of knights, vowed to the service of all those in distress or need.

The famous Knight Parsifal was at this time king of the Order, and under his reign the Knights of the Holy Grail were unsurpassed for valor and truth. When any cry of distress went up to Heaven, the great bells of the Grail temple would commence to swing slowly to and fro, and at this sign the knights assembled in their temple, whatever the hour, day or night: there the Holy Grail would reveal to them, in letters of fire, what service was required.

The same night on which Elsa knelt in her prison-cell, far away in Antwerp, the mighty bells of Mount Salvat suddenly broke the stillness of the peaceful night. With Parsifal at their head, the brothers of the Holy Grail hastened to the temple. Among them was one Lohengrin, a young knight of most noble fame, son of Parsifal, the king.

Round the altar knelt the knights; while the king mounted the steps and took from a golden shrine the miraculous crystal Cup, known as the Holy Grail. A dazzling ray of light instantly streamed down from the dome above the altar, lighting up the Cup, which then began to glow with letters of fire written round the brim. Parsifal held the Cup aloft, that all might read the message: "There is one falsely accused, in sore need and trouble—the Princess Elsa of Brabant." So ran the writing on the Holy Grail. The glowing letters slowly faded and vanished.

But while the knights discussed among themselves which of them should at once depart for Brabant, the Cup again glowed with another message: "Let Lohengrin, the son of Parsifal, make ready and depart. He it is, appointed to be her champion."

Lohengrin rejoiced greatly at being chosen. Kneeling before his father, he craved a blessing before setting out on his journey. Then, buckling on his armor and his sword, a golden horn slung round his neck, he mounted his black charger, and rode off into the silent forest.

On he rode. The tall, dark pine trees met over his head; the silver moon peeped between the branches, lighting him on his way. All the forest slept. At length he came to the river which marked the boundary of the Grail dominions. He was about to ford the stream, when, to his amazement, he beheld a boat, drawn by a snow-white swan, evidently awaiting him.

Lohengrin dismounted, and recognized the swan as a bird which had not long since appeared among them, and taken up his abode with the knights. As a white swan had always been held in good omen by the knights, the bird received a hearty welcome. And the more so when, shortly after his arrival, the Grail revealed that the bird was none other than a youth of noble birth, the innocent victim of a wicked enchantment. Round the swan's neck was a fine gold chain of curious workmanship, with neither clasp nor fastening, so that no man could remove it without injury to the bird. From the day he appeared, the swan attached himself specially to Lohengrin. He would follow him about like a dog, and often gazed into his face as though he longed to speak with him.

Seeing this faithful bird awaiting him, Lohengrin asked him: "Wilt thou that I go with thee, dear

swan?" The bird instantly bent his graceful head, and spread wide his white wings, as though impatient to start. Lohengrin then dismissed his horse, bidding him return to Mount Salvat, stepped into the boat, and the swan sailed away joyfully with him. Down the river they floated swiftly. The swan seemed quite sure of his way. Even when they came at last to the sea, he never paused, but steered a steady course right out of the bay, and away across the wide ocean.

Lohengrin the Champion of Elsa of Brabant

by Constance Maud

In the city of Antwerp great preparations were going forward. King Henry of Germany had arrived in state, and had summoned all the ministers and chief nobles of Brabant to appear before him.

Elsa, in her prison-cell, was wakened early with the news that she would be tried this day before the king, in face of all the people.

She heard as though it scarce concerned her. Since the vision of the knight in shining armor, she no longer seemed to dwell in the dark prison. Her thoughts were far away, and she cared nothing for what took place around her.

It was noon when the king, with his heralds, outriders, and a numerous retinue, proceeded in solemn state to the Judgment Oak. Mid the cheers and blessings of the people, he ascended a gorgeous throne prepared for him.

Count Telramund bowed low before the king. Then, in a clear ringing voice, told his story, and made his accusation against Elsa, Princess of Brabant, of whose horrible crime he said he had, alas, convincing proof. He then claimed the kingdom of Brabant for himself, as next of kin to the late duke, and also in right of his noble wife Ortruda, whose fathers once ruled in that land.

“Now, O most noble king, thou hast heard me fully,” he concluded. “Naught have I spoken but the truth—my oath upon it. Be thou our judge.”

The crowd shuddered with horror at the story of Elsa’s crime. Their own princess, so gentle and fair, the cruel murderess of her brother! Impossible! Yet who dare dispute it, since Count Telramund, whose honor no man could doubt, himself swore to the fact.

“What terrible accusation dost thou bring? Bid the accused appear!” cried the king. “The trial shall forthwith begin.”

The herald blew his trumpet, and proclaimed the king’s order. There was a stir in the crowd. All eyes turned towards her as Elsa appeared, followed by her ladies. Slowly she walked to the foot of the throne, gazing before her like one in a dream.

“Art thou Elsa of Brabant?” asked the king. Elsa bowed her head.

“Dost thou know the charge that is brought against thee?” he demanded sternly.

Again Elsa assented, dropping her head sadly, but without speaking.

“What answer canst thou make? Dost admit thy guilt?” the king inquired.

She gazed around her with a bewildered air, as though trying to remember something long forgotten.

“Alas,” she sighed, “my poor brother!”

The people murmured: “’Tis marvellous! What can it mean?”

“Speak, Elsa!” urged the king, wondering at her strange behavior. “Dost thou not trust in thy king?”

Then Elsa spoke in a low gentle voice, as to herself when alone in the prison: “In my misery I knelt one night and besought God’s aid. My woeful cry seemed all at once caught up to the highest heaven. I listened wondering, then peace fell on my spirit, and a gentle sleep came over me.”

The King thought Elsa’s mind was certainly affected, whether from brooding on her crime, or on her innocence and the injustice of her imprisonment, he could not tell. “Come, Elsa,” he said, in a rousing tone, “defend thyself now before the judge.”

But Elsa appeared neither to hear nor understand, and continued her dream with a look of rapture: “Borne through the air he came—a knight of such perfection and nobility never yet I saw! Clothed in glittering armor—in his hand a sword—slung round his neck a golden horn! No word he spake, but gazed on me tenderly. Peace and comfort came to me with his look. That knight will be my champion and deliverer!”

The king was sorely perplexed. This dreamy maiden hardly seemed like a criminal. Looking at the sad, fair face of the prisoner, he could not find it in his heart to believe her guilty. Yet he held the count, as a true and honorable knight, incapable of falsehood; one who had, besides, risked his life for king and country.

Turning to the count, he then asked solemnly: “Frederick of Telramund, wilt thou in mortal combat let Heaven’s ordeal decide thine accusation as true or false?”

“Yea, that will I, O king,” answered Telramund, with proud confidence.

“And thee also, I ask, Elsa of Brabant, wilt thou abide by Heaven’s decree in the mortal combat that shall be fought for thy cause?”

Elsa’s eyes were fixed on the far distance. “Yea, that will I,” she replied slowly.

“What champion shall defend thee?” asked the king.

“That knight whom Heaven sent me! He and none other shall be my champion,” replied Elsa. “And this is the reward I offer. He shall wear my father’s crown, and high honor I shall deem it to give to him my land, my wealth, and my hand.”

“A prize worth fighting for!” murmured the people. Their hearts beat true to their princess, in spite of appearances against her.

“Let the summons go forth!” cried the king.

The heralds and trumpeters then marched to the outposts and proclaimed the challenge, so that

all might hear it, far and near: "Let him who will fight in mortal combat for Elsa of Brabant now appear!" There was a long pause, and breathless silence followed. The echo of the trumpet's blast died away into the distance. But no one appeared in answer to the call. Elsa listened, looking round on all sides, with anxious, expectant gaze. "O gracious king," implored Elsa, "I beseech thee let the call go forth once again to summon my knight. He dwells so far he has not heard."

"Let the summons go forth yet once more," he ordered. Again the heralds proclaimed the challenge.

There followed a longer pause and a longer silence. No one stirred. The people scarcely seemed to breathe, so great was the suspense and expectation.

Elsa fell on her knees, while her maidens closed round as though to protect her. "O Lord," she cried, "send my knight speedily, I beseech thee. Once, at Thy command, he came to me. Oh, send him now again. Tell him of my sore need," she implored in despair. Her women knelt also, weeping and praying.

Suddenly a cry went up from the people standing near the river-bank: "See! A wondrous sight! A swan! a swan drawing a boat! And, standing in the prow, behold a knight in shining armor. Lo, he comes with utmost speed!" All rushed forward eagerly to see.

The king from his throne looked towards the river and beheld the amazing sight. Elsa, on her knees, listened spellbound, in a transport of joy. Frederick of Telramund, struck dumb with awe and astonishment, looked at Ortruda. Her face had turned to an ashen hue. Her glittering eyes were dull, as though the light within had suddenly gone out. She gazed at the swan with greater terror than had he been a dragon.

"'Tis a miracle! A miracle of Heaven!" exclaimed the men.

The women, on their knees, cried joyfully: "Oh, God be thanked, who hast heard our prayer! Hail to the Heaven-sent one who comes to save the guiltless!"

The boat had now reached the bank. Lohengrin stepped lightly to land, and then turned lovingly to the swan: "My thanks to thee, beloved swan," he said. "Return now o'er the waters to the blessed land from whence we came. Faithfully hast thou fulfilled thy task. Farewell, beloved swan."

He gazed sadly after his faithful companion, as the swan slowly turned and swam away.

The crowd made way for him eagerly, as Lohengrin advanced to the king's throne and bowed low. As he raised his head, Elsa turned, and uttered a cry of joy at beholding no other than the knight of her vision.

"Hail, royal Henry! May the blessing of Heaven ever rest on thee!" said Lohengrin.

"Welcome, sir knight!" replied the king graciously. "Surely by a miracle divine thou art come to this land?"

"I have been sent, O king, to fight for the honor of an innocent maiden, in sore need and distress," answered Lohengrin. Then, going before Elsa, he asked her: "Wilt thou trust thy cause to me,

O Elsa of Brabant? Wilt thou take me for thy champion without doubt or fear?"

Elsa raised her eyes to his. "My deliverer, my knight—with my whole heart do I trust thee!" she answered. Lohengrin knelt and, taking her hand in his, asked: "And if, with Heaven's help, I win this fight for thee, wilt thou consent to be my bride?"

"I am thine—thine only, my knight. All I have I give thee gladly!" said Elsa, with shining eyes.

"One promise wilt thou give me?"

"To thee will I promise anything," Elsa answered readily.

"Then if thou desirest, as I, that nothing part us ever—that thy people and thy country become from henceforth my people and my country—never shalt thou ask of me my name and race, or whence I come," said Lohengrin earnestly.

"Never will I seek to know thy secret. Thy love is enough for me—naught else do I desire!"

"But Elsa, think well what it is I ask," urged Lohengrin. "Never must thou desire this knowledge, and never must this secret between us cause thee sadness."

Elsa was troubled that Lohengrin repeated his request. There was nothing in the world she would not gladly grant to him—her champion, her deliverer. "Thou hast never doubted my innocence," she answered. "Dost thou not trust in me? And shall not I also trust in thee, my knight, whate'er thou askest of me?"

Then Lohengrin stood forth, and, in a ringing voice that all might hear, proclaimed: "Hear now, all ye people, and ye nobles of Brabant! I hereby declare, before Heaven and before all men, by my honor as a knight, that free from every shadow of guilt is the maiden Elsa, Princess of Brabant. False and unfounded is thy black charge, Frederick of Telramund, and that will I prove by Heaven's ordeal!"

Telramund advanced with angry mien and flashing eyes: "What magic brought thee here, sir stranger, I know not. Thy talk is bold enough! But my answer is not in words. This, my good sword, shall defend mine honor. May victory be to right and truth, say I!"

Lohengrin turned towards the throne: "We await thy command, O king, to commence the combat."

The king ordered the fighting-ring to be measured; and this being done, he then besought Heaven that in this fight victory might be, not as in other fights, to skill and strength, but to the one on whose side was right. And all the people fervently echoed the good king's prayer.

Scarce a breath could be heard. Every eye was fixed on the gleaming swords, as they cut the air like flashes of lightning, and clashed with sharp, ringing strokes.

A few intense moments, which seemed to Elsa's beating heart a very eternity; then a crash of falling armor, a wild shout from the people, and the fight was over.

Telramund had fallen; over him, like an angel of judgment, stood Lohengrin. "Through

Heaven's victory, thy life is mine!" he cried. "I give it thee again, that thou mayest use it for repentance."

"Victory, victory! Hail to the hero!" shouted a thousand glad voices.

"The victory I owe to thy innocence alone," said Lohengrin to Elsa. "All that thou hast suffered shall now be atoned to thee." Then Lohengrin and Elsa were lifted on the shields of the nobles, and all the people marched round them in a triumphal procession, shouting a hymn of joyful thanksgiving, in which the good King Henry himself joined lustily.

Only Ortruda and the defeated Telramund stood sullenly apart. "Woe is me! Mine honor and fame are undone," muttered the count. "It would seem indeed that Heaven is against me."

Ortruda, with clenched hands, asked herself in dismay: "Who can this be? Before whom even I feel my powers weaken! Who? and from whence?"

Sources:

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