

Gareth and Lynette¹

By Alfred Tennyson

Old King Lot and good Queen Bellicent had three sons. Gawain and Modred were Knights of the Round Table at Arthur's court, and young Gareth, who was the youngest and tallest of the three, sighed to think he had to stay home and be fondled like a baby boy instead of riding off like a venturesome knight fighting gloriously for the king and winning a great name.

"There!" he cried, one chilly spring day as he stood by a waterfall and saw a bit of a pine tree caught from the bank and whirled madly away. "That's the way the king's enemies would fall before my spear—if I had a spear to use! And you are just a senseless waterfall doing the Maker's will. Your veins are swollen with cold snows, while through mine courses living blood. I have strength and wit to do great deeds, but am imprisoned in my good mother's hall. Why, when Gawain came home last summer and asked me to tilt with him and Modred was the judge, didn't I shake him so in his saddle that he said I had half overcome him?"

Gareth went home to his mother and hovered around her chair for some time; then, finally he asked, "Mother, you still think that I am a child, but do you love this child?"

She laughed and said, "You are a wild goose to doubt it."

"Then, mother, if you love the child," he said, "hear the child's story."

"Yes, my dear child, even if it were only a story of the goose that laid the golden eggs."

Gareth's eyes kindled and he answered, "No, no, good mother. This egg of mine was finer gold than any goose can lay. This Eagle—a royal Eagle—laid it almost beyond eye-reach on a tree. And there was a poor young man who always went near the tree and saw the splendor sparkling from the height, and thought, 'If I could climb and lay my hand on it, I would be wealthier than a leash of kings.'

¹ "Gareth and Lynette" is a prose rendition of Alfred Tennyson's poem found in *Tales from Tennyson* by Molly K. Bellow (1902). The original poem by the same name is contained in *Idylls of the King*. This rendition was revised and edited by William Walter.

But every time he reached a hand to climb, his mother caught and stopped him, saying, “Don’t climb the tree! You’ll break your neck. By my love, I command you not to climb it.” And so the boy, sweet mother, did not climb, nor did he break his neck, but broke his very heart in pining for it, and passed away.”

Gareth’s mother then said, “True love, sweet son, would have risked himself and climbed, and handed down the golden treasure to him.”

And Gareth’s eyes kindled again, and he said excitedly, “Gold? Did I say gold? No, it was made of that true steel that they forged the brand Excalibur out of. And lightnings played about it in the storm, and all the little birds were flurried at it, and there were cries and clashings in the nest that sent him from his senses. Mother, please let me go.”

Bellicent sighed and said, “Take pity on my loneliness, my child. Look at your father Lot. He lies beside the hearth like a log, and all but smoldered out! Ever since he fought against the king in the barons’ war, and Arthur gave him back his territory, he’s grown suddenly old, and now lies there like a still-warm corpse, and yet unburiable. And both your brothers are in Arthur’s hall. And you’ve never known what it is to feel the pain of a broken limb. I can’t bear to think of what will happen to you in those brain-stunning shocks and falls at the tourney. Stay, I say. Follow the deer by these tall firs, and so become more a man day by day. I’ll look for a pretty bride for you to grace your climbing life and cherish my declining years, until I fall into your father’s forgetfulness when I won’t know you, myself, or anything. Stay, my best son! You are still more a boy than a man.”

Then Gareth said, ‘If you consider me still a child, mother, hear once more the story of the child. There was once a King, like ours. The prince his heir, when tall and marriageable, asked for a bride. And so the King set two before him. One was beautiful, strong, armed—but had to be won by force—and many men desired her. But the other, unfortunately, no man desired. And these were the conditions of the King. Unless the prince won the first by force, he would have to wed the other that no one wanted. Yes, some she

cleaved to, but they died of her. And one—they called her Fame. And the other—O Mother, how can ye keep me tethered to you—Shame. I have become a man, and a man's work must I do. Follow the deer? No. I will follow the Christ, the King. I will live pure, speak true, right wrong, and follow the King. Why else was I born?"

"But some of the barons say he isn't the true king."

"Hasn't he conquered the Romans and driven off the heathen and made all the people free? Who has a right to be king if not the man who has done that? He is the true king."

When Bellicent found that she could not turn Gareth from his purpose, she said that if he was determined, he must do one thing before he asked the king to make him a knight.

"Anything," cried Gareth. "Give me a hundred proofs. Only be quick."

The queen looked at him very slowly and said, "You are a prince, Gareth, but before you are fit to serve the king you must go into Arthur's court disguised and hire yourself to serve his meats and drink among the kitchen servants. And you must not tell your name to anyone and you must serve that way for a year and a day."

The queen made this condition, thinking that Gareth would be too proud to act the servant. But he thought a moment, and said, "A slave may be free in his soul, and I can see the jousts there. You are my mother so I must obey you and I will be a servant in King Arthur's kitchen and keep my name a secret from everyone, even the king."

So Bellicent grieved and watched Gareth every moment wherever he went, dreading the time when he should leave. And he waited until one windy night when she slept, then called two servants and slipped away with them, all three dressed like poor peasants of the field.

They walked away towards the south and as they came to the plain stretching to the mountain of Camelot, they saw the royal city upon its brow. Sometimes its spires and towers flashed in the sunlight; sometimes only the great gate shone out before their eyes, or again the whole fair town vanished away. Then the servants said, "Let us go no further. It's an enchanted city, and all a vision. The

people say anyway, that Arthur isn't the true king, but only a changeling from fairyland, and that Merlin won his battles for him with magic."

Gareth laughed and replied that he had magic enough in his blood and hopes to plunge old Merlin into the Arabian sea. And he pushed them on to the gate. There was no other gate like it under heaven. The Lady of the Lake stood barefooted on the keystone and held up the cornice. Drops of water fell from either hand and above were the three queens who were Arthur's friends, and on each side Arthur's wars were pictured in weird figures with dragons and elves so intertwined that they made men dizzy to look at them. The servants cried out, "Lord, the gateway is alive!" Then a blast of music pealed out of the city, and the three queens stepped aside while an old man with a long beard came out and asked,

"Who are you, my sons?"

"We are peasants," Gareth answered, "who have come to see the glories of your king, but the city looked so strange through the morning mist that my men are wondering whether it is not a fairy city or perhaps no city at all. So tell us the truth about it."

"Oh, it's a fairy city," the old man answered, "and a fairy king and queen came out of the mountain cleft at sunrise with harps in their hands and built it to music, which means it never was built at all, and therefore built forever."

"Why do you mock me so?" Gareth cried angrily.

"I am not mocking you so much as you are mocking me and everyone who looks at you. Though you are not what you seem, I know who you are."

Then the old man turned away and Gareth said to his men, "Our poor little white lie stands like a ghost at the very beginning of our enterprise. Blame my mother's love for it and not her nor me."

So they all laughed and came into the city of Camelot with its shadowy and stately palaces. Here and there a knight passed in or out, his arms clashing and the sound was good to Gareth's ears. Or out of a casement window glanced the pure eyes of lovely women. But Gareth made at once for the hall of the king where his heart fairly hammered into his ears as he wondered whether Arthur

would turn him aside because of the half shadow of a lie he had told the old man by the gate about being a peasant. There were many suitors coming before the king to tell him of some hurt done to them by marauders or the wild beasts, and each one was given a knight by the king to help them.

When Gareth's turn came, he rested his arms, one on each servant, and stepped forward saying, "A boon, Sir King! Do you see how weak and hungry I seem, leaning on these men? Let me go into your kitchen and serve there for a year and a day, and do not ask me my name. After that I will fight for you."

"You are a handsome youth," said the king, "and worth something better from the king, but if that is what you wish, go and serve under the seneschal, Sir Kay, Master of the Meats and Drinks."

Sir Kay thought the boy had probably run away from the farm belonging to some Abbey where he had not had enough to eat, and he promised that if Gareth would work well he would feed him until he was as plump as a pigeon.

But Lancelot, the king's favorite, said to Kay, "You don't understand boys as well as dogs and cattle. Can't you see by this lad's broad fair forehead and fine hands that he is nobly born? Treat him well or he may shame you."

"Fair and fine—really!" cried Kay. "If he had been a gentleman he would have asked for a horse and armor."

So he hustled and harried Garreth, set him to draw water, hew wood and labor harder than any of the grimy and smudgy kitchen servants. Gareth did all with a noble sort of ease and graced the lowliest act, and when the servants all gathered together in the evenings to tell stories about Arthur on the battlefields or of Lancelot in the tournament, Gareth listened delightedly or made them all, with gaping mouths, listen charmed, to some big tale of his own about wonderful knights cutting their scarlet way through twenty folds of twisted dragons. When there was a joust and Sir Kay let him attend it, he went half beside himself in an ecstasy watching the warriors clash their springing spears, and the sniffing chargers reel.

At the end of the first month, lonely Queen Bellicent felt sorry for her poor, dear son, toiling and moiling among pots and pans, so she sent a servant to Camelot with the beaming armor of a knight and freed him from his vow. Gareth colored redder than any young girl and went alone to the king and told him all.

“Make me your knight in secret,” he begged Arthur, “and give me the very next quest from your court!”

“Son,” answered the king, “my knights are sworn to vows of utter hardihood, of utter gentleness, of utter faithfulness in love and of utter obedience to the king.”

Gareth sprang lightly from his knees, “My king, I can vouch for my hardihood. As far as my obedience, ask Sir Kay. And as for love, I have not loved yet, but God willing some day I will, and faithfully.”

The reply so pleased the great king, he laid his hand on Gareth’s arm and smiled and knighted him.

A few days later a noble maiden with a brow like a May-blossom and a saucy nose passed into the king’s hall with her page and told Arthur that her name was Lynette, and that her beautiful sister, the Lady Lyonors lived in the Castle Perilous which was beset with bandit knights.

“A river runs about the castle in three loops,” she said. “Each loop has a bridge and every bridge is guarded by a wicked outlaw warrior, Sir Morning-Star, Sir Noon-sun and Sir Evening-Star, while a fourth called Death, a huge man-beast of boundless savageries, is besieging my sister in her own castle so as to break her will and make her wed with him. They are four fools,” the maiden cried disdainfully, “but they are mighty men, so I have come to ask for Lancelot to ride away with me to help us.”

Gareth was up in a twinkling with kindled eyes. “A boon, Sir King, this quest,” he cried. “I am only a servant from your kitchen, but I can topple over a hundred such fellows. Your promise, king.”

“You are rough and sudden and worthy to be a knight. Therefore go,” said Arthur to the great amazement of the court.

“Fie on you, King!” exclaimed Lynette in a fury. “I asked you for your best knight, Lancelot, and you give me a servant from your kitchen,” and she scampered down the aisle, leaped to her horse and

flitted out of the weird white gate. “A kitchen servant!” she sputtered as she flew. “Why didn’t the king send me a knight that fights for love and glory?”

Gareth in the meantime had strode to the side doorway of the royal hall where he saw a warhorse awaiting him, the gift of Arthur and worth half the price of a town. His two servants stood by with his shield and helmet and spear. Dropping his coarse kitchen cloak to the floor, he instantly harnessed himself in his armor, leaped to the back of his beautiful steed and flashed out of the gateway while all his kitchen mates threw up their caps and cried, “God bless the king and all his fellowship!”

“Maiden, the quest is mine,” he said to Lynette as he overtook her, “Lead and I follow.”

“Away with you!” she cried, nipping her slender nose. “You smell of kitchen grease. See there, your master is coming!”

Indeed she told the truth, for Sir Kay, infuriated with Gareth’s boldness in the king’s hall was hounding after them. “Don’t you know me?” he shouted.

“Yes, too well,” returned Gareth. “I know you to be the most ungentle knight in Arthur’s court.”

“Have at me, then,” cried Kay. Gareth pounced on him with his gleaming lance and struck him instantly to the earth, then turned for Lynette and said again, “Lead and I follow.”

But Lynette had hurried her galloping palfrey away and would not stop the beast until his heart had nearly burst with its violent throbbing. Then she turned and eyed Gareth as scornfully as ever. As he pranced to her side she observed, “Do you suppose, servant, that I think any more of you now that by some good luck you have overthrown your master. You dishwasher and water-carrier, you smell of the kitchen quite as much as before.”

“Maiden,” Gareth rejoined gently, “Say what you will, but whatever you say, I will not leave this quest until it is ended or I have died for it.”

“O, my, how the servant talks! But you’ll soon meet with another servant whom in spite of all the kitchen concoctions ever brewed, you’ll not dare look in the face.”

"I'll try him," answered Gareth with a smile that maddened Lynette. And away she darted again far into the strange avenues of the limitless woods.

Gareth plunged on through the pine trees after her and a serving man came breaking through the black forest crying out, "They've bound my master and are throwing him into the lake!"

"Lead and I follow," Gareth cried to Lynette, and she led, plunging into the pine trees until they came upon a hollow sinking away into a lake, where six tall men up to their thighs in reeds and bulrushes were dragging a seventh man with a stone about his neck toward the water to drown him.

Gareth sprang upon three and stilled them with his doughty blows, but three scurried away through the trees. Then, Gareth loosened the stone from the gentleman and set him on his feet. He proved to be a baron and a friend of Arthur and asked Gareth what he could do to show his gratitude for the saving of his life. Gareth said he would like a night's shelter for the lady who was with him. So they rode over toward the graceful manor house where the baron lived, and as they rode he said to Gareth, "I believe you are of the Table," meaning that Gareth was a Knight of the Round Table.

"Yes, he is of the table after his own fashion," Lynette laughed, "for he serves in Arthur's kitchen." And turning toward Gareth she added, "Do not imagine that I admire you the more for having routed these miserable cowardly foresters. Any thresher with his flail could have done that."

And when they were seated at the baron's table, Gareth by Lynette's side, she cried out to their host, "It seems dreadfully rude in you, Lord Baron, to place this servant beside me. Listen to me. I went to King Arthur's court to ask for Sir Lancelot to come to help my sister, and as I ended my plea, up bawls this kitchen boy, 'Mine's the quest.' And Arthur goes mad and sends me this fellow who was made to kill pigs and not redress the wrongs of women."

So Gareth was seated at another table and the baron came to him and asked him whether it might not be better for him to relinquish his quest, but the lad replied that the king had given it to him and

he would carry it through. The next morning he said again to proud Lynette, "Lead and I follow."

But the maiden responded, "We are almost at the place where one of the servants is stationed. Don't you want to go home? He will slay you and then I'll go back to Arthur and shame him for giving me a knight from his kitchen cinders."

"Just let me fight," cried Gareth, "and I'll have as good luck as little Cinderella who married the prince."

So they came to the first coil of the river and on the other side saw a rich white pavilion with a purple dome and a slender crimson flag fluttering above. The lawless Sir Morning-Star paced up and down outside.

"Damsel, is this the knight you've brought me?" he shouted.

"Not a knight, but a servant. The king scorned you, so he sent someone from his kitchen."

"Come, Daughters of the Dawn, and arm me!" cried Sir Morning-Star, and three bare-footed, bare-headed maidens in pink and gold dresses brought him a blue coat of mail and a blue shield.

"A kitchen servant in scorn of me!" roared the blue knight. "I won't fight him. Go home, servant! It isn't proper for you to be riding abroad with a lady."

"Dog, you lie! I'm sprung from nobler lineage than you," and saying this, Gareth sprang fiercely at his adversary who met him in the middle of the bridge. The two spears were hurled so harshly that both knights were thrown from their horses like two stones but up they leaped instantly. Gareth drew forth his sword and drove his enemy back down the bridge and laid him at his feet.

"I yield," Sir Morning-Star cried, "don't kill me."

"Your life is in the hands of this lady," Gareth replied. "If she asks me to spare you, I will."

"Servant!" Lynette cried, reddening with shame. "Do you suppose I will ask a favor of you?"

"Then he dies," and Gareth was about to slay the wounded knight when Lynette screamed and told him he ought not to think of killing a man of nobler birth than himself. So Gareth said, "Knight, your life is spared at this lady's command. Go to King

Arthur's court and tell him that his kitchen servant sent you, and crave his pardon for breaking his laws."

"I thought the smells of the odors of the kitchen grew fainter while you were fighting on the bridge," Lynette remarked to Gareth as he took his place behind her and told her to lead, "but now they are as strong as ever."

So they rode on until they arrived at the second loop of the river where the knight of the Noonday-Sun flared with his burning shield that blazed so violently that Gareth saw scarlet blots before his eyes as he turned away from it.

"Here's a kitchen servant from Arthur's hall who has overthrown your brother," Lynette called across the river to him.

"Ugh!" returned Sir Noonday-Sun, raising his visor to reveal his round foolish face like a cipher, and with that he pushed his horse into the foaming stream.

Gareth met him midway and struck him four blows of his sword. As he was about to deal the fifth stroke, the horse of the Noonday-Sun slipped and the stream washed his dazzling master away. Gareth plucked him out of the water and sent him back to King Arthur.

"Lead and I follow," he said to Lynette.

"Do not fancy," she rejoined, as she guided him toward the third passing of the river, "that I thought you bold or brave when you overcame Sir Noonday-Sun. He just slipped on the river-bed. Here we are at the third fool in the allegory, Sir Evening-Star. You see he looks naked, but he is only wrapped in hardened skins that fit him like his own. They will turn the blade of your sword."

"Never mind," Gareth said, "the wind may turn again and the kitchen odors grow faint."

Then Lynette called to the Evening-Star, "Both of your brothers have gone down before this youth and so will you. Aren't you old?"

"Old with the strength of twenty boys," said Sir Evening-Star.

"Old in boasting," Gareth cried, "but the same strength that slew your brothers can slay you."

Then the Evening-Star blew a deadly note upon his horn and a storm-beaten, russet, grizzly old woman came out and armed him

in a quantity of dingy weapons. The two knights clashed together on the bridge and Gareth brought the Evening-Star groveling in a minute to his feet on his knees. But the other vaulted up again so quickly that Gareth panted and half despaired of winning the victory.

Then Lynette cried, "Well done, servant. You are as noble as any knight. Now do not shame me. I said you would win. Strike! strike! and the wind will change again."

Gareth struck harder, he hewed great pieces of armor from the old knight, but clashed in vain with his sword against the hard skin, until at last he lashed the Evening-Star's sword and broke it at the hilt. "I have you now!" he shouted, but the cowardly knight of the Evening-Star writhed his arms about the lad till Gareth was almost strangled. Yet straining himself to the uttermost he finally tossed his foe headlong over the side of the bridge to sink or to swim as the waves allowed.

"Lead and I follow," Gareth said to Lynette.

"No, it is lead no longer," the maiden replied. "Ride beside me the knightliest of all kitchen servants. Sir, I am ashamed that I have treated you so. Pardon me. I do wonder who you are, you servant."

"You are not to blame for anything," Gareth said, "except for your mistrusting of the king when he sent you someone to defend you. You said what you thought and I answered by my actions."

At that moment he heard the hoofs of a horse clattering in the road behind him. "Stop!" cried a knight with a veiled shield, "I have come to avenge my friend, Sir Kay."

Gareth turned, and in a trice had closed in on the stranger, but when he felt the touch of the stranger knight's magical spear, which was the wonder of the world, he fell to the earth. As he felt the grass in his hands he burst into laughter.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Lynette.

"Because here am I, the son of old King Lot and good Queen Bellicent, the victor of the three bridges, and a knight of Arthur's thrown by no one knows whom."

"I have come to help you and not harm you," said the strange knight, revealing himself. It was Lancelot, whom King Arthur had

sent to keep a guardian eye upon young Gareth in his first quest, to prevent him from being killed or taken away.

“And why did you refuse to come when I wanted you, and now come just in time to shame my poor defender just when I was beginning to feel proud of him?” asked Lynette.

“But he isn’t shamed,” Lancelot answered. “What knight is not overthrown sometimes? By being defeated we learn to overcome, so hail, Prince and Knight of our Round Table!” “You did well, Gareth—only you and your horse were a little weary.”

Lynette led them into a glen and a cave where they found pleasant drinks and meat, and where Gareth fell asleep.

“You have good reason to feel sleepy,” cried Lynette. “Sleep soundly and wake strong.” And she tended him as gently as a mother, and watched over him carefully as he slept.

When Gareth woke, Lancelot gave him his own horse and shield to use in fighting the last awful outlaw, but as they drew near Lynette clutched at the shield and pleaded with him, “Give it back to Lancelot,” said she. “O curse my tongue that was reviling you so today. He must do the fighting now. You have done wonders, but you cannot do miracles. You have thrown three men today and that is glory enough. You will get all maimed and mangled if you go on now when you are tired. There, I vow you must not try the fourth.”

But Gareth told her that her sharp words during the day had just spurred him on to do his best and he said he must not now leave his quest until he had finished. So Lancelot advised him how best to manage his horse and his lance, his sword and his shield when meeting a foe that was stouter than himself, winning with fineness and skill where he lacked in strength.

But Gareth replied that he knew but one rule in fighting and that was to dash against his foe and overcome him.

“Heaven help you,” cried Lynette, and she made her palfrey halt. “There!” They were facing the camp of the Knight of Death.

There was a huge black pavilion, a black banner and a black horn. Gareth blew the horn and heard hollow trampling to and fro and muffled voices. Then on a night-black horse, in night-black arms rode forth the dread warrior. A white breast-bone showed in

front. He spoke not a word and his silence made him the more fearful.

“Fool!” shouted Gareth sturdily. “People say that you have the strength of ten men. Can’t you trust to it without depending on these toggeries and tricks?”

But the Knight of Death said nothing. Lady Lyonors at her castle window wept, and one of her maids fainted away, and Gareth felt his head prickling beneath his helmet and Lancelot felt his blood turning cold. Every one stood aghast.

Then the chargers bounded forward and Gareth struck Death to the ground. Drawing out his sword he split apart the vast skull; one half of it fell to the right and one half to the left. Then he was about to strike at the helmet when out of it peeped the face of a blooming young boy, as fresh as a flower.

“O Knight!” the boy cried. “Don’t kill me. My three brothers made me do it to make a horror all about the castle. They never dreamed that anyone could pass the bridges.”

Gareth then said to the boy, who was not much younger than he was, “My child, what madness overtook you to challenge the nest knight of Arthur’s Hall?”

“Fair Sir, they told me to do it. They hate the King—and Lancelot, the King’s friend. They hoped to kill him somewhere on the stream. They never dreamed the passes could be passed.”

Then Lady Lyonors with all her house had a great party of dancing and revelry and song and making merry because the hideous Knight of Death that had terrified them so was only a pretty little boy. And there was mirth over Gareth’s victorious quest.

And some people say that Gareth married Lynette, but others who tell the story later say he wedded with Lyonors.