

The Quest

Wednesday, 18 November 2009

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This is my submission for the 2009 Anniversary Literature Competition, and my first for any literature competition for that matter.

It is exactly 3,000 words long, which I believe is the maximum for an entry. Â

I hope you enjoy it and welcome constructive criticism, comments, feedback and questions about any aspect of it.

Sir Guy

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The wind soughed through the forest canopy, completely masking the muffled sound of the horse's hooves as the animal slowly walked between the trees, following a track-way made barely perceptible by the thick carpet of pine needles that covered it. Here and there an occasional shaft of sunlight pierced the green gloom of the forest floor.

Although the mount's head nodded slowly in time to the rhythm of its gait, its ears were pricked forward on the alert for any sudden sound that would betray a threat lurking back among the trees. The caparison covering the horse was mud-spattered and tattered about its hem. On its back, the rider lay slumped forward against the animal's neck, kept from falling by a combination of the gentle pace of the mount and the deep, close-fitting saddle.

The horse continued to walk on, seemingly knowing where it was going without the aid of directions from its comatose rider. After a time the animal came to the edge of a lake, where it halted first to slake its thirst, and then to commence grazing on the lush grass that grew by the water's edge. It was at this point that the rider roused from his exhausted sleep, to blearily look about and take in his surroundings. Before him lay a huge lake, the surface of which was deeply rippled by the strong breeze. The shoreline was littered with boulders and smaller rocks, between which grew lush grass, bull-rushes and tall flowers of blue and purple hues. Behind and to either side of the lake, a deep, dark pine forest lay. To his left, in the far distance, he could just see the grey crags of the Massif Orcal rising above the dark blue-green horizon formed by the forest.

“Well, Ceffyl, methinks we have reached our destination, the Lac de ChÃlons” he said to his grazing mount. After a moment longer to take in the vista fully, the knight rose up in the stirrups to get a better view of the lake's distant shore. As he re-seated himself back in the saddle, he added, “But of the Isle de Lys, I see no sign. Perchance, we need ride further yet along the lake's shore to see it. Afore we do that, I too must satisfy my thirst.” So saying, he dismounted from Ceffyl. The knight knelt at the water's edge and drank his fill of the cold, clear lake water, then splashed his face to revive himself. As an after-thought, he then leant forward and dunked his entire head in the water, and came up spluttering, but laughing at the sheer exhilaration the shock of the icy cold water had given him.

Shaking his head vigorously to shed some of the water from his long, flowing black locks, the knight stood and looked again towards the far side of the lake. At first he was not sure if the cold water had been too much of a shock to his brain causing him to imagine things, but on second look he thought he could see a boat skimming through the lake waters

toward him at great speed. As he watched, he suddenly realised that the boat appeared to have no oars or sail with which it was propelled. A chill ran down his spine as he concluded that the vessel could only be moving with the aid of some form of magic, and that could only mean one thing; he was about to meet the Lady herself.

As the boat drew closer to him, he could only see what appeared to be a cloaked figure standing behind the vessel's ornately carved prow, which was that of the gracefully curved neck and head of a swan. He could not make out the person's face as it was hidden within the shadows of a hood that was drawn up about their head. As the boat neared the shore, it slowed and then came to a halt no more than a stone's throw from where he stood. He noticed that the vessel created no additional disturbance to the rippled lake's surface as it came to rest.

The boat slowly turned sideways on to the shore, so that he could now clearly see the person standing within its hull; they were entirely enfolded within a hooded cloak of deep emerald green. Now the person turned to face him and as she did, her hands reached up to the hood concealing her face and pulled it back from her head. The knight's breath caught in his throat and his heart skipped a beat, for the face of the person now revealed to him was of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. Her hair was a lustrous cascade of the deepest copper; her eyes matched the colour of her cloak; her face and skin almost glowed with pale luminescence and her lips were the colour of rubies. The knight dropped to his knees and continued to look in dumbstruck wonder at the woman standing in the boat.

"Sir Knight, dost thou not know it is considered unchivalrous to stare so at a lady?" the woman's rich, almost seductive voice carried a hint of mirth in it.

"Lady, I beg your forgiveness" the knight replied, blushing deeply and bowing his head in shame.

"I would know whom I address ere I accept thy apology, Sir Knight" the woman replied.

"My Lady, I am called Anscouf de Vaux, and I have travelled from Lyonesse in search of the Lady of the Lake. Are you the Lady whom I seek?" the knight asked.

"Well met then Sir Anscouf de Vaux" she replied with a smile, then continued "and I do accept thy apology for regarding overlong. But alas, I am not the Lady whom thou seekest."

"Then my Lady, may I be so bold as to ask you where I might find the Lady or perchance find the Isle de Lys whereon the Lady is rumoured to dwell?" Anscouf asked.

The beautiful woman drew in a deep breath and laid her hand upon her breast, as if in shock, saying with mock severity "Thou dost cause me grave hurt to dismiss me so readily in thy haste to meet with my Lady, Sir Anscouf de Vaux."

"My Lady, I again beg your forgiveness for my clumsiness, for I intended not to give you hurt or to slight you. I seem to be incapable of ordering my thoughts properly before speaking, so overcome am I by your presence, my Lady" the knight said, blushing even more deeply.

The woman chuckled with a throaty seductiveness, and said, "Now ye resort to flattery to disarm me, Sir Anscouf. But I shall again grant thee mine acceptance of thy pretty apology and at how ye colour so." She then took a moment or two to observe the flustered knight before asking, "On what business do ye seek my Lady? For I am in her service, and was sent here to find why ye come to the lake shore."

"I come to ask the Lady to grant me a Quest so that I may become a worthy knight in attaining its fulfilment" the knight replied, then for fear of sounding arrogant or too certain of his success, added, "Or die in my attempt to fulfil its objective, my Lady."

"Indeed, ye shall be granted thy Quest, Sir Anscouf, for I am bid by my Lady to tell thee to seek a cave in yonder crags, and here she gestured towards the grey peaks of the Massif Orcal, "wherein an enchanted bracelet of gold and silver is

hid and guarded jealously by one ye must defeat. The bracelet was borne by another of my Lady's emissaries. But alas she was set upon and slain by the beast that now holds the object. Ere the emissary died, she was able to reach my Lady with an image of the place wherein she was attacked.

The woman continued, "Ye have until the next full moon to return here and deliver the bracelet to me." Then she added, "I am also bid by my Lady to grant thee something that may aid thee on thy Quest. But ask me no more than thrice what ye would have me give thee."

Still on his knees and gazing up at the beautiful emissary from the Lady, Sir Anscouf tried to gather his thoughts and identify what he would need most to help him accomplish the Quest he was now set. After a while he drew a deep breath and asked, "How will I know which cave to seek?"

"Tis hid betwixt where the water doth fall and the rock riseth sheer" the lady replied.

Again the knight thought carefully before asking his next question, which was, "What nature of beast guards the bracelet?"

"Tis a creature of the shadows. The emissary was unable to see it ere it slew her." the lady responded, then added, "I answered thee carefully upon thy last question."

Anscouf knew this and took his time before asking it. Finally, he smiled and said, "I ask for a weapon with which I can slay this beast."

To this question, the lady answered, "But what form the beast takes is unknown. Thus I give thee something which ye must use wisely" and with those words, she held out a leather pouch for the knight to take.

Anscouf got up from his knees and proceeded to wade out to the boat. The freezing water was very nearly up to his armpits by the time he stood within reach of the pouch. It was the size of a fist and held closed by a drawstring. When the woman dropped it into Anscouf's up-turned hand, it was both heavy and its contents felt quite solid. When he showed an expression of both surprise and puzzlement at this, the woman smiled down at him, but said nothing.

The knight looked up into her eyes and said, "May I be so bold as to ask your name, my Lady? For I would die happy if I knew at least from whom I received this gift."

She smiled down at him again, and said in her seductive voice, "I am known as Teigan, Sir Anscouf, and I would wish ye to know not only my name but also to carry my favour" and with this she reached inside her cloak, removed the silken sash from around her waist and held it out to Anscouf.

He took the sash from her, and as he did, Teigan said, "Perchance it will bring ye good fortune and success in thy Quest."

"I will wear it with honour, Lady Teigan" he replied.

"Until the next full moon then..." she said, then turned to look towards the far shore of the lake. In response, the boat turned before carrying her away from the knight, who stood and watched until the vessel disappeared into the misty distance of the lake. He waded back to the shore and his horse Ceffyl, feeling both elated and chilled to the bone by his recent immersion in the lake waters.

"Well, Ceffyl, methinks you have had plenty to fill your belly and quench your thirst. Now it is my turn to catch my supper and find a place to warm myself before bedding down somewhere, for we have far to travel and much to do come the morrow." He gathered up the reins, hauled himself up onto his destrier's back, and set the horse into a brisk trot along the lake shore that angled in the direction of the Massif Orcal.

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It took Anscouf a good three days of riding through the thick pine forest to reach the boulder-strewn lower slopes of the Massif Orcal. About a day before, the ground had begun to slope upward and the trees started to thin out more. However, the terrain was more difficult, with many rocky outcrops and large boulders scattered among the trees, sometimes causing him to have to double-back to find an easier route for Ceffyl to follow. Dark grey crags loomed ahead and Anscouf could see that there were steep-sided ravines and clefts in the rock faces. This would be no easy Quest, he decided. But then reasoned that it would be all the more satisfying and worthy for that when he accomplished it - if he accomplished it - he reminded himself.

As he rode, he concentrated on remembering what the Lady Teigan had said in reply to his questions. He still did not yet understand the purpose of the leather pouch of fine sand that she had given him, or her words to use it wisely. How could it be used to defeat whatever the creature was that guarded the bracelet? He knew, however, that first he had to find a waterfall and that meant there had to be a river flowing away from wherever the foot of the waterfall was. So he set off in search of such a river.

Because of the increasingly difficult terrain, it took another two days before he came across a fast flowing river that tumbled down through a narrow gorge and over a rocky bed. From where he sat astride Ceffyl, Anscouf carefully surveyed the rock face above him in the hope of seeing some hint of a waterfall. After a while, he could see the faint colours of a rainbow where the sunlight shone through a cloud of mist or spray far above and set well back above a ledge. He had located a possible waterfall. However, it was obvious it would be impossible for him to take Ceffyl.

He dismounted and removed his travel items, saddle, harness, his shield and the caparison from the horse. Finally, he removed the reins and bridle from Ceffyl's head. Then he set about hobbling the horse's front legs, so that the animal could move about to graze and drink, while preventing it from running off or moving away by any great distance. Satisfied that he had dealt with Ceffyl's welfare, Anscouf then found a suitable hollow between some boulders to stow the saddle, harness and items he did not want to take with him on the climb up to the waterfall. Finally, he covered them with the folded caparison. After saying farewell to his horse, the knight slung his shield and sword across his back, made sure that the leather pouch of sand was securely tied to his belt, settled his helmet on his head and set off to find the waterfall and the cave.

He followed the course of the river up through the narrow gorge, clambering over the moss-covered and slippery rocks that littered the ground alongside the river. The climb was steep and difficult making his upward progress painfully slow. Thus it was not long before he was breathing hard and feeling so hot he was forced to remove his visored helmet. Anscouf took a brief stop to catch his breath, take a cooling drink from the mountain stream and tie his bascinet to the back of his belt.

Encumbered by his shield, helmet, sword, mail and plate armour, he was nearly exhausted by the time he could clearly hear the sound of cascading water coming from somewhere beyond a ledge a short distance above him. The sound was echoing off a sheer rock face that rose above a cloud of mist or spray. He knew this must be what Lady Teigan had described to him, and that the cave would be somewhere near, so he needed to proceed with great caution.

While he rested for a while, he took time to examine his surroundings carefully, looking for a way that would take him up and onto the ledge above him. He could see no easy way other than to clamber up the rocks over which the mountain stream itself flowed. The river course at this point was almost vertical and the rocks slippery with weed, making them treacherous. He knew he would need to take extra care, not only of his footing and hand holds, but also of what lay beyond the rock ledge above.

He stepped into the river and found to his consternation that the pressure and icy temperature of the water was going to make this even more difficult than he had imagined. Slowly, he inched his way up to the rock ledge above, his legs beginning to shake with tiredness and cold as he strained every muscle to haul himself upwards. Finally, he was able to grip hold of the edge of the rock with his numb fingers and with a mighty effort he heaved himself up to peer over at what lay beyond. There was the waterfall and behind its spray he could just make out the dark mouth of a cave.

By now his whole body was shaking with the effort of the climb and the effects of the icy water. He clawed desperately at the rocks in front of him and pushed with all his might against the rocks on which he stood. With every ounce of strength left, Anscouf hauled himself up and over the rock ledge, where he lay wet and numb with cold, and totally exhausted. He knew he had to move to somewhere that he could hide until he could regain his strength and some warmth.

Slowly he rose to his hands and knees. As he went to rise and run towards a rocky outcrop below the mouth of the cave, a dark shape suddenly loomed into view and hurtled straight at him. He only had time to feel a blow that knocked the breath from his lungs and the shock of the icy water as he fell back into the river.

Anscouf awoke in shock. There stood his grinning sergeant with a bucket in his hand, his boot raised to kick him again.

â€œWake up, Scooffa! Itâ€™s toime ter foight agin!â€•Â Â Â