## The Last Defender of Camelot

Roger Zelazny

I wrote this one for The Saturday Evening Post and they asked me to cut it to 4500 words. It is 9000 words in length. Crossing out every other word made it sound funny, so I didn’t.

The three muggers who stopped him that October night in San Francisco did not anticipate much resistance from the old man, despite his size. He was well-dressed, and that was sufficient.

The first approached him with his hand extended. The other two hung back a few paces.

“Just give me your wallet and your watch,” the mugger said. “You’ll save yourself a lot of trouble.”

The old man’s grip shifted on his walking stick. His shoulders straightened. His shock of white hair tossed aa he turned his head to regard the other.

“Why don’t you come and take them?”

The mugger began another step but he never completed it. The stick was almost invisible in the speed of its swinging. It struck him on the left temple and he fell.Without pausing, the old man caught the stick by its middle with his left hand, advanced and drove it into the belly of the next nearest man. Then, with an upward hook as the man doubled, he caught him in the softness beneath the jaw, behind the chin, with its point. As the man fell, he clubbed him with its butt on the back of the neck.

The third man had reached out and caught the old man’s upper arm by then. Dropping the stick, the old man seized the mugger’s shirtfront with his left hand, his belt with his right, raised him from the ground until he held him at arm’s length above his-head and slammed him against the side of the building to his right, releasing him as he did so.

He adjusted his apparel, ran a hand through his hair and retrieved his walking stick. For a moment he regarded the three fallen forms, then shrugged and continued on his way.

There were sounds of traffic from somewhere off to his left. He turned right at the next comer. The moon appeared above tall buildings as he walked. The smell of the ocean was on the air. It had rained earlier and the pavement still shone beneath streetlamps. He moved slowly, pausing occasionally to examine the contents of darkened shop windows.

After perhaps ten minutes, he came upon a side street showing more activity than any of the others he had passed. There was a drugstore, still open, on the comer, a diner farther up the block, and several well-lighted storefronts. A number of people were walking along the far side of the street. A boy coasted by on a bicycle. He turned there, his pale eyes regarding everything he passed.

Halfway up the block, he came to a dirty window on which was painted the word READINGS. Beneath it were displayed the outline of a hand and a scattering of playing cards. As he passed the open door, he glanced inside. A brightly garbed woman, her hair bound back in a green kerchief, sat smoking at the rear of the room. She smiled as their eyes met and crooked an index finger, toward herself. He smiled back and turned away, but ...

He looked at her again. What was it? He glanced at his watch.

Turning, he entered the shop and moved to stand be-fore her. She rose. She was small, barely over five feet in height.

“Your eyes,” he remarked, “are green. Most gypsies I know have dark eyes.”

She shrugged.

“You take what you get in life. Have you a problem?”

“Give me a moment and I’ll think of one,” he said. “I just came in here because you remind me of someone and it bothers me—I can’t think who.” \ “Come into the back,” she said, “and sit down. We’ll talk.”

He nodded and followed her into a small room to the rear. A threadbare oriental rug covered the floor near the small table at which they seated themselves. Zodiacal prints and faded psychedelic posters of a semireligious nature covered the walls, A crystal ball stood on a small stand in the far comer beside a vase of cut flowers. A dark, long-haired cat slept on a sofa to the right of it. A door to another room stood slightly ajar beyond the sofa. The only illumination came from a cheap lamp on the table before him and from a small candle in a plaster base atop the shawl-covered coffee table.

He leaned forward and studied her face, then shook his head and leaned back.

She flicked an ash onto the floor.

“Your problem?” she suggested.

He sighed.

“Oh, I don’t really have a problem anyone can help me with. Look, I think I made a mistake coming in here. I’ll pay you for your trouble, though, just as if you’d given me a reading. How much is it?”

He began to reach for his wallet, but she raised her — hand.

“Is it that you do not believe in such things?” she asked, her eyes scrutinizing his face.

“No, quite the contrary,” he replied. “I am willing to believe in magic, divination and all manner of spells and sendings, angelic and demonic. But—”

“But not from someone in a dump like this?”

He smiled.

“No offense,” he said.

A whistling sound filled the air. It seemed to come from the next room back."That’s all right,” she said, “but my water is boiling. I’d forgotten it was on. Have some tea with me? I do wash the cups. No charge. Things are slow.”

“All right.”

She rose and departed.

He glanced at the door to the front but eased himself back into his chair, resting his large, blue-veined bands on its padded arms. He sniffed then, nostrils fiaring, and cocked his head as at some half-familiar aroma.

After a time, she returned with a tray, set it on the coffee table. The cat stirred, raised her head, blinked at it, stretched, closed her eyes again.

“Cream and sugar?”

“Please. One lump.”

She placed two cups on the table before him.

'Take either one,” she said.

He smiled and drew the one on his left toward him. She placed an ashtray in the middle of the table and returned to her own seat, moving the other cup to her place.

“That wasn’t necessary,” he said, placing his hands on the table.

She shrugged.

“You don’t know me. Why should you trust me? Probably got a lot of money on you.”

He looked at her face again. She bad apparently removed some of the heavier makeup while in the back. room. The jawline, the brow ... He looked away. He took a sip of tea.

“Good tea. Not instant,” be said. “Thanks.”

“So you believe in all sorts of magic,'\* she asked, sipping her own. “Some,” he said. “Any special reason why?\*\* “Some of it works.”

“For example?”

He gestured aimlessly with his left hand. “I’ve traveled a lot. I’ve seen some strange things.”

“And you have no problems?”

He chuckled-

“Still determined to give me a reading? All right. III tell you a little about myself and what I want right now, and you can tell me whether 111 get it. Okay?”

“I’m listening.”

“I am a buyer for a large gallery in the Bast I amsomething of an authority on ancient work in precious metals. I am in town to attend an auction of such items from the estate of a private collector. I will go to inspect the pieces tomorrow. Naturally, I hope to find something good. What do you think my chances are?”

“Give me your hands.”

He extended them, palms upward. She leaned forward and regarded them. She looked back up at him immediately.

“Your wrists have more rascettes than I can counti”

\*'Yours seem to have quite a few, also.”

She met his eyes for only a moment and returned her attention to his hands. He noted that she had paled beneath what remained of her makeup, and her breathing was now irregular.

“No,” she finally said, drawing back, “you are not going to find here what you are looking for.”

Her hand trembled slightly as she raised her teacup. He frowned.

“I asked only in jest,” he said. “Nothing to get upset about. I doubted I would find what I am really looking for, anyway.”

She shook her head.

\*TelI me your name.”

“I’ve lost my accent,” he said, “but I’m French. The name is DuLac.”

She stared into his eyes and began to blink rapidly.

“No ...” she said. “No.”

“I’m afraid so. What’s yours?”

“Madam LeFay, she said. “I just repainted that sign. It’s still drying.”

He began to laugh, but it froze in his throat

“Now—I know—who—you remind me of....”

“You reminded me of someone, also. Now I, too, know.”

Her eyes brimmed, her mascara ran.

“It couldn’t be,” he said. “Not here.... Not in a place like this....”

“You dear man,” she said softly, and she raised his right hand to her lips. She seemed to choke for a moment, then said, “I had thought that I was the last, and yourself buried at Joyous Gard. I never dreamed ...” Then, “This?” gesturing about the room. “Only because it amuses me, helps to pass the time. The waiting—\*\*She stopped. She lowered his hand.

'Tell me about it,” she said.

“The waiting?” he said. “For what do you wait?”

“Peace,” she said. “I am here by the power of my arts, through all the long years. But you—How did you manage it?”

“I—” He took another drink of tea. He looked about the room. “I do not know how to begin,” he said. “I survived the final battles, saw the kingdom sundered, could do nothing—and at last departed England- I wandered, taking service at many courts, and after a time under many names, as I saw that I was not aging—or aging very, very slowly. I was in India, China—I fought in the Crusades. I’ve been everywhere. I’ve spoken with magicians and mystics—most of them charlatans, a few with the power, none so great as Merlin—and what had come to be my own belief was confirmed by one of them, a man more than half charlatan, yet ...” He paused and finished his tea. “Are you certain you want to hear all this?” he asked.

“I want to bear it. Let me bring more tea first, though.”

She returned with the tea. She lit a cigarette and leaned back.

“Go on.”

“I decided that it was—my sin,” he said. “with... the Queen.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I betrayed my Liege, who was also my friend, in the one thing which must have hurt him most. The love I felt was stronger than loyalty or friendship—and even today, to this day, it still is. I cannot repent, and so I cannot be forgiven. Those were strange and magical times. We lived in a land destined to become myth. Powers walked the realm in those days, forces which are now gone from the earth. How or why, I cannot say. But you know that it is true. I am somehow of a piece with those gone things, and the laws that rule my existence are not normal laws of the natural world. I believe that I cannot die; that it has fallen my lot, as punishment, to wander the world till I have completed the Quest. I believe I will only know rest the day I find the Holy Grail. Giuseppe Balsamo, before he became known as Cagliostro, somehow saw this and said it to me just as I had thought it, though I never said a word of it to him. And so Ihave traveled the world, searching. I go no more as knight, or soldier, but as an appraiser. I have been in nearly every museum on Earth, viewed ail the great private collections. So far, it has eluded me.”

“You are getting a little old for battle.”

He snorted.

“I have never lost,” he stated flatly. “Down ten centuries, I have never lost a personal contest. It is true that I have aged, yet whenever I am threatened all of my former strength returns to me. But, look where I may, fight where I may, it has never served me to discover that which I must find. I feel I am unforgiven and must wander like the Eternal Jew until the end of the world.” ^ She lowered her head.

“... And you say I will not find it tomorrow?”

“You will never find it,” she said softly.

“You saw that in my hand?”

She shook her head.

“Your story is fascinating and your theory novel,” she began, “but Cagliostro was a total charlatan. Something must have betrayed your thoughts, and he made a shrewd guess. But he was wrong. I say that you will never find it, not because you are unworthy or unforgiven. No, never that. A more loyal subject than yourself never drew breath. Don’t you know that Arthur forgave you? It was an arranged marriage. The same thing happened constantly elsewhere, as you must know. You gave her something he could not. There was only tenderness there. He understood. The only forgiveness you require is that which has been withheld all these long years—your own. No, it is not a doom that has been laid upon you. It is your own feelings which led you to assume an impossible quest, something tantamount to total unforgiveness. But you have suffered all these centuries upon the wrong trail.”

When she raised her eyes, she saw that his were hard, like ice or gemstones. But she met his, gaze and continued: “There is not now, was not then, and probably never was, a Holy Grail.”

“I saw it,” he said, “that day it passed through the Hall of the Table. We all saw it.”

“You thought you saw it,” she corrected him. “I hate to shatter an illusion that has withstood all the other tests of time, but I fear I must. The kingdom, as yourecall, was at that time in turmoil. The knights were growing restless and falling away from the fellowship. A year—six months, even—and all would have collapsed, all Arthur had striven so hard to put together. He knew that the longer Camelot stood, the longer its name would endure, the stronger its ideals would become. So he made a decision, a purely political one. Something was needed to hold things together. He called up6n Merlin, already half-mad, yet still shrewd enough to see what was needed and able to provide it. The Quest was born. Merlin’s powers created the illusion you saw that day. It was a lie, yes. A glorious lie, though. And it served for years after to bind you all in brotherhood, in the name of justice and love. It entered literature, it promoted nobility and the higher ends of culture. It served its purpose. But it was—never—really—there. You have been chasing a ghost. I am sorry Launcelot, but I have absolutely no reason to lie to you. I know magic when I see it. I saw it then. That is how it happened.”

For a long while he was silent Then he laughed.

“You have an answer for everything,” he said. “I could almost believe you, if you could but answer me one thing more—Why am I here? For what reason? By what power? How is it I have been preserved for half the Christian era while other men grow old and die in a handful of years? Can you tell me now what Cagliostro could not?”

“Yes,” she said, “I believe that I can.”

He rose to his feet and began to pace. The cat, alarmed, sprang from the sofa and ran into the back room. He stooped and snatched up his walking stick. He started for the door.

“I suppose it was worth waiting a thousand years to see you afraid,” she said.

He halted.

“That is unfair,” he replied.

“I know. But now you will come back and sit down,” she said.

He was smiling once more as he turned and returned.

^eU me,” he said. “How do you see it?”

“Yours was the last enchantment of Merlin, that is how I see it.”

“Merlin? Me? Why?”

“Gossip had it the old goat took Nimue into the woodsand she had to use one of his own spells on him in selfdefense—a spell which caused him to sleep forever in some lost place. If it was the spell that I believe it was, then at least part of the rumor was incorrect. There was no known counterspell, but the effects of the enchantment would have caused him to sleep not forever but for a millennium or so, and then to awaken. My guess now is that his last conscious act before he dropped off was to lay this enchantment upon you, so that you would be on hand when he returned.”

“I suppose it might be possible, but why would he want me or need me?”

“If I were journeying into a strange time, I would want an ally once I reached it. And if I had a choice, I would want it to be the greatest champion of the day.”

“Merlin ...” he mused. “I suppose that it could be as you say. Excuse me, but a long life has just been shaken up, from beginning to end. If this is true ...”

“I am sure that it is.”

“If this is true ... A millennium, you say?”

“More or less.”

“Well, it is almost that time now.”

'I know. I do not believe that our meeting tonight was a matter of chance. You are destined to meet him upon bis awakening, which should be soon. Something has ordained that you meet me first, however, to be warned.”

“Warned? Warned of what?”

“He is mad, Launcelot. Many of us felt a great relief at his passing. If the realm had not been sundered finally by strife it would probably have been broken by his hand, anyway.”

“That I find difficult to believe. He was always a strange man—for who can fully understand a sorcerer?— and in his later years he did seem at least partly daft. But he never struck me as evil.”

“Nor was he. His was the most dangerous morality of all. He was a misguided idealist. In a more primitive time and place and with a willing tool like Arthur, he was able to create a legend. Today, in an age of monstrous weapons, with the right leader as his catspaw, he could unleash something totally devastating. He would see a wrong and force his man to try righting it. He would' do it in the name of the same high ideal he alwaysserved, but he would not appreciate the results until it was too late. How could he—even if he were sane? He has no conception of modem international relations.”

“What is to be done? What is my part in all of this?”

“I believe you should go back, to England, to be present at his awakening, to find out exactly what he wants, to try to reason with him.”

“I don’t know ... How would I find him?'\* '

“You found me. When the time is right, you will be in the proper place. I am certain of that- It was meant to be, probably even a part of his spell. Seek him. But do not trust him.”

“I don’t know. Morgana.” He looked at the wall, unseeing. “I don’t know,”

“You have waited this long and you draw back now from finally finding out?”

“You are right—in that much, at least.” He folded his hands, raised them and rested his chin upon them. “What I would do if he really returned, I do not know. Try to reason with him, yes—Have you any other advice?”

“Just that you be there.”

“You’ve looked at my hand. You have the power. What did you see?”

She turned away.

“It is uncertain,” she said.

That night he dreamed, as he sometimes did, of times long gone. They sat about the great Table, as they had on that day, Gawaine was there and Percival. Galahad ... He winced. This day was different from other days. There was a certain tension in the air, a before-the-storm feeling, an electrical thing.... Merlin stood at the far end of the room, hands in the sleeves of his long robe, hair and beard snowy and unkempt, pale eyes staring—at what, none could be certain ...

After some timeless time, a reddish glow appeared near the door. All eyes moved toward it. It grew brighter and advanced slowly into the room—a formless apparition of light. There were sweet odors and some few soft strains of music. Gradually, a form began to take shape at its center, resolving itself into the likeness of a chalice....

He felt himself rising, moving slowly, following it in its course through the great chamber, advancing uponit, soundlessly and deliberately,' as if moving underwater ...

... Reaching for it.

His hand entered the circle of light, moved toward its center, neared the now blazing cup and passed through....

Immediately, the light faded. The outline of the chalice wavered, and it collasped in upon itself, fading, fading. gone....

There came a sound, rolling, echoing about the halL Laughter.

He turned and regarded the others. They sat about the table, watching him, laughing. Even Merlin managed —a dry chuckle.

Suddenly, his great blade was in his hand, and he raised it as he strode toward the Table. The knights nearest him drew back as he brought the weapon crashing down.

The Table split in half and fell. The room shook.

The quaking continued. Stones were dislodged from the walls. A roof beam fell. He raised his arm.

The entire castle began to come apart, falling about him and still the laughter continued.

He awoke damp with perspiration and lay still for a long while. In the morning, he bought a ticket for London.

Two of the three elemental sounds of the world were suddenly with him as he walked that evening, stick in hand. For a dozen days, he had hiked about Cornwall, finding no clues to that which he sought. He had allowed himself two more before giving up and departing.

Now the wind and the rain were upon him, and he increased his pace. The fresh-lit stars were smothered by a mass of cloud and wisps of fog grew like ghostly fungi on either hand. He moved among trees, paused, continued on.

“Shouldn’t have stayed out this late,” he muttered, and after several more pauses, “Nel mezzo del cammm di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, che la diritta via era smarrita,” then he chuckled, halting beneath a tree.

The rain was not heavy. It was more a fine mist now.A bright patch in the lower heavens showed where the moon hung veiled.

He wiped his face, turned up his collar. He studied the position of the moon. After a time, he struck off to his right. There was a faint rumble of thunder in the distance.

The fog continued to grow about him as he went. Soggy leaves made squishing noises beneath bis boots. An animal of indeterminate size bolted from a clump of shrubbery beside a cluster of rocks and tore off through the darkness.

Five minutes ... ten ... He cursed softly. The rainfall had increased in intensity. Was that the same rock?

He turned in a complete circle. All directions were equally uninviting. Selecting one at random, he commenced walking once again.

Then, in the distance, he discerned a spark, a glow, a wavering light. It vanished and reappeared periodically, as though partly blocked, the line of sight a function of his movements. He headed toward it. After perhaps half a minute, it was gone again from sight, but he continued on in what he thought to be its direction. There came another roll of thunder, louder this time.

When it seemed that it might have been illusion or some short-lived natural phenomenon, something else occurred in that same direction. There was a movement, a shadow-wimin-shadow shuffling at the foot of a great tree. He slowed his pace, approaching the spot cautiously.

There!

A figure detached itself from a pool of darkness ahead and to the left. Manlike, it moved with a slow and heavy tread, creaking sounds emerging from the forest floor beneath it. A vagrant moonbeam touched it for a moment, and it appeared yellow and metallically slick beneath moisture.

He halted. It seemed that he had just regarded a knight in full armor in his path. How long since he bad beheld such a sight? He shook his head and stared.

The figure had also halted. It raised its right arm in a beckoning gesture, then turned and began to walk away. He hesitated for only a moment, then followed.

It turned off to the left and pursued a treacherous path, rocky, slippery, heading slightly downward. He actually used his stick now, to assure his footing, as he tracked itsdeliberate progress. He gained on it, to the point where he could clearly hear the metallic scraping sounds of its passage.

Then it was gone, swallowed by a greater darkness.

He advanced to the place where he bad last beheld it. He stood in the lee of a great mass of stone. He reached out and probed it with his stick.

He tapped steadily along its nearest surface, and then the stick moved past it. He followed.

There was an opening, a crevice. He had to turn sidewise to pass within it, but as he did the full glow of the light he had seen came into sight for several seconds.

The passage curved and widened, leading him back and down. Several times, he paused and listened, but there were no sounds other than his own breathing.

He withdrew his handkerchief and dried his face and hands carefully. He brushed moisture from his coat, turned down his collar. He scuffed the mud and leaves from his boots. He adjusted his apparel. Then he strode forward, rounding a final comer, into a chamber lit by a small oil lamp suspended by three delicate chains from some point in the darkness overhead. The yellow knight stood unmoving beside the far wall. On a fiber mat atop a stony pedestal directly beneath the lamp lay an old man in tattered garments. His bearded face was half-masked by shadows.

He moved to the old man’s side. He saw then that those ancient dark eyes were open.

“Merlin ...?” he whispered.

There came a faint hissing sound, a soft croak. Realizing the source, he leaned nearer.

“Elixir ... in earthern rock ... on ledge ... in back,” came the gravelly whisper.

He turned and sought (he ledge, the container.

“Do you know where it is?” he asked the yellow figure.

It neither stirred nor replied, but stood like a display piece. He turned away from it then and sought further. After a time, he located it. It was more a niche than a ledge, blending in with the wall, cloaked with shadow. He ran his fingertips over the container’s contours, raised it gently. Something liquid stirred within it. He wiped its lip on his sleeve after he had returned to the lighted area. The wind whistled past the entranceway and he thought he felt the faint vibration of thunder.Sliding one hand beneath his shoulders, he raised the ancient form. Merlin’s eyes still seemed unfocussed. He moistened Merlin’s lips with the liquid. The old man licked them, and after several moments opened his mouth. He administered a sip, then another, and another ...

Merlin signalled for him to lower him, and he did. He glanced again at the yellow armor, but it had remained motionless the entire while. He looked back at the sorceror and saw that a new light had come into his eyes and be was studying him, smiling faintly.

“Feel better?”

Merlin nodded. A minute passed, and a touch of color appeared upon his cheeks. He elbowed himself into a sitting position and took the container into his hands. He raised it and drank deeply.

He sat still for several minutes after that His thin hands, which had appeared waxy in the flamelight, grew darker, fuller. His shoulders straightened. He placed the crock on the bed beside him and stretched his arms. His joints creaked the first time he did it, but not the second. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and rose slowly to his feet. He was a full head shorter than Launcelot

“It is done,” he said, staring back into the shadows. “Much has happened, of course...”

“Much has happened,” Launcelot replied.

“You have lived through it all. Tell me, is the world a better place or is it worse than it was in those days?”

“Better in some ways, worse in others. It is different.”

“How is it better?”

“There are many ways of making life easier, and the sum total of human knowledge has increased vastly.”

“How has it worsened?”

“There are many more people in the world. Consequently, there are many more people suffering from poverty, disease, ignorance. The world itself has suffered great depredation, in the way of pollution and other assaults on the integrity of nature.”

“Wars?”

“There is always someone fighting, somewhere.”

“They need help.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

Merlin turned and looked into his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“People haven’t changed. They are as rational—andirrational—as they were in the old days. They are as moral and law-abiding—and not—as ever. Many new things have been learned, many new situations evolved, but I do not believe that the nature of man has altered significantly in the time you’ve slept. Nothing you do is going to change that. You may be able to alter a few features of the times, but would it really be proper to meddle? Everything is so interdependent today that even you would not be able to predict all the consequences of any actions you take. You might do more harm than good; and whatever you do, man’s nature will remain the same.”

“This isn’t like you. Lance. You were never much given to philosophizing in the old days.”

“I’ve had a long time to think about it.”

“And I’ve had a long time to dream about it. War is your craft. Lance. Stay with that.”

“I gave it up a long time ago.”

“Then what are you now?”

“An appraiser.”

Merlin turned away, took another drink. He seemed to radiate a fierce energy when he turned again.

“And your oath? To right wrongs, to punish the wicked ...?”

“The longer I lived the more’difficult it became to determine what was a wrong and who was wicked. Make it clear to me again and I may go back into business.”

“Galahad would never have addressed me so.”

“Galahad was young, naive, trusting. Speak not to me of my son.”

“LauncelotI Launcelott” He placed a hand on his arm. “Why all this bitterness for an old friend who has done nothing for a thousand years?”

“I wished to make my position clear immediately. I feared you might contemplate some irreversible action which could alter the world balance of power fatally. I want you to know that I will not be party to it.”

“Admit that you do not know what I might do, what I can do.”

“Freely. That is why I fear you. What do you intend to do?”

“Nothing, at first I wish merely to look about me, to see for myself some of these changes of which you have spoken. Then I will consider which wrongs need righting,who needs punishment, and who to choose as my champions. I will show you these things, and then you can go back into business, as you say.”

Launcelot sighed.

“The burden of proof is on the moralist. Your judgment is no longer sufficient for me.”

“Dear me,” the other replied, “it is sad to have waited this long for an encounter of this sort, to find you have lost your faith in me. My powers are beginning to return already, Lance. Do you not feel magic in the air?”

“I feel something I have not felt in a long while.”

“The sleep of ages was a restorative—an aid, actually. In a while. Lance, I am going to be stronger than I ever was before. And you doubt that I will be able to turn back the clock?”

“I doubt you can do it in a fashion to benefit anybody. Look, Merlin. I’m sorry. I do not like it that things have come to this either. But I have lived too long, seen too much, know too much of how the world works now to trust any one man’s opinion concerning its salvation. Let it go. You are a mysterious, revered legend. I do not know what you really are. But forgo exercising your powers in any sort of crusade. Do something else this time around. Become a physician and fight pain. Take up painting. Be a professor of history, an antiquarian. Hell, be a social critic and point out what evils you see for people to correct themselves.”

“Do you really believe I could be satisfied with any of those things?”

“Men find satisfaction in many things. It depends on the man, not on the things. I’m just saying that you should avoid using your powers in any attempt to effect social changes as we once did, by violence.”

“Whatever changes have been wrought, time’s greatest irony lies in its having transformed you into a pacifist.”

“You are wrong.”

“Admit it! You have finally come to fear the clash of arms! An appraiser! What kind of knight are you?”

“One who finds himself in the wrong time and the wrong place. Merlin.”

The sorcerer shrugged and turned away.

“Let it be, then. It is good that you have chosen to tell me all these things immediately. Thank you tor that, anyway. A moment"Merlin walked to the rear of the cave, returned in moments attired in fresh garments. The effect was startling. His entire appearance was more kempt and cleanly. His hair and beard now appeared gray rather than white. His step was sure and steady. He held a staff in his right hand but did not lean upon it.

“Come walk with me,” he said.

“It is a bad night.”

“It is not the same night you left without. It is not even the same place.”

As he passed the suit of yellow armor, he snapped his fingers near its visor. With a single creak, the figure moved and turned to follow him.

“Who is that?” — Merlin smiled.

“No one,” he replied, and he reached back and raised the visor. The helmet was empty. “It is enchanted, animated by a spirit,” he said. “A trifle clumsy, though, which is why I did not trust it to administer my draught A perfect servant, however, unlike some. Incredibly strong and swift. Even in your prime you could not have beaten it. I fear nothing when it walks with me. Come, there is something I would have you see.”

“Very well.”

Launcelot followed Merlin and the hollow knight from the cave. The rain had stopped, and it was very still. They stood on an incredibly moonlit plain where mists drifted and grasses sparkled. Shadowy shapes stood in the distance.

“Excuse me,” Launcelot said. “I left my walking stick inside.”

He turned and re-entered the cave.

“Yes, fetch it, old man,” Merlin replied. “Your strength is already on the wane.”

When Launceiot returned, he leaned upon the stick and squinted across the plain.

“This way,” Merlin said, “to where your questions will be answered. I will try not to move too quickly and tire you.

“Tire me?”

The sorcerer chuckled and began walking across the plain. Launcelot followed.

“Do you not feel a trifle weary?” he asked."Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. Do you know what is the matter with me?”

“Of course. I have withdrawn the enchantment which has protected you all these years. What you feel now are the first tentative touches of your true age. It will take some time to catch up with you, against your body’s natural resistance, but it is beginning its advance.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because I believed you when you said you were not a pacifist. And you spoke with sufficient vehemence for me to realize that you might even oppose me. I could not permit that, for I knew that your old strength was still there for you to call upon. Even a sorcerer might fear that, so I did what had to be done. By my power was it maintained; without it, it now drains away. It would have been good for us to work together once again, but I saw that that could not be.”

Launcelot stumbled, caught himself, limped on. The hollow knight walked at Merlin’s right hand.

“You say that your ends are noble,” Launcelot said, “but I do not believe you. Perhaps in the old days they were. But more than the times have changed. You are different. Do you not feel it yourself?”

Merlin drew a deep breath and exhaled vapor.

“Perhaps it is my heritage,” he said. Then, “I jest. Of course, I have changed. Everyone does. You yourself are a perfect example. What you consider a turn for the worse in me is but the tip of an irreducible conflict which has grown up between us in the course of our changes. I still hold with the true ideals of Camelot.”

Launcelot’s shoulders were bent forward now and his breathing had deepened. The shapes loomed larger before them.

“Why, I know this place,” he gasped. “Yet, I do not know it. Stonehenge does not stand so today. Even in Arthur’s time it lacked this perfection. How did we get here? What has happened?”

He paused to rest, and Merlin halted to accommodate him.

“This night we have walked between the worlds,” the sorcerer said. “This is a piece of the land of Faerie and that is the true Stonehenge, a holy place. I have stretched the bounds of the worlds to bring it here. Were I unkind I could send you back with it and strand you there for-ever. But it is better that you know a sort of peace. Come!”

Launcelot staggered along behind him, heading for the great circle of stones. The faintest of breezes came out of the west, stirring the mists.

“What do you mean—know a sort of peace?”

“The complete restoration of my powers and their increase will require a sacrifice in this place.”

“Then you planned this for me all along!”

“No. It was not to have been you. Lance. Anyone would have served, though you will serve superbly well. It need not have been so, had you elected to assist me. You could still change your mind.”

“Would you want someone who did that at your side?”

“You have a point there.”

“Then why ask—save as a petty cruelty?”

“It is just that, for you have annoyed me.” Launcelot halted again when they came to the circle’s periphery. He regarded the massive stands of stone.

“If you will not enter willingly,” Merlin stated, “my servant will be happy to assist you.”

Launcelot spat, straightened a little and glared. “Think you I fear an empty suit of armor, Juggled by some Hell-born wight? Even now. Merlin, without the benefit of wizardly succor, I could take that thing apart.” The sorcerer laughed.

“It is good that you at least recall the boasts of knighthood when all else has left you. I’ve half a mind to give you the opportunity, for the manner of your passing here is not important. Only the preliminaries are essential.”

“But you’re afraid to risk your servant?”

“Think you so, old man? I doubt you could even bear the weight of a suit of armor, let alone lift a lance. But if you are willing to try, so be it!”

He rapped the butt of his staff three times upon the ground.

“Enter,” he said then. “You will find all that you need within. And I am glad you have made this choice. You were insufferable, you know. Just once, I longed to see you beaten, knocked down to the level of lesser mortals. I only wish the Queen could be here, to witness her champion’s final engagement.”

“So do I,” said Launcelot, and he walked past the monolith and entered the circle.

A black stallion waited, its reins held down beneath arock. Pieces of armor, a lance, a blade and a shield leaned against the side of the dolmen. Across the circle’s diameter, a white stallion awaited the advance of the hollow knight.

“I am sorry I could not arrange for a page or a squire to assist you,” Merlin, said, coming around the other side of the monolith. “I’ll be glad to help you myself, though.”

“I can manage,” Launcelot replied.

“My champion is accoutered in exactly the same fashion,” Merlin said, “and I have not given him any edge over you in weapons.”

'"I never liked your puns either.”

Launcelot made friends with the horse, then removed a small strand of red from his wallet and tied it about the butt of the lance. He leaned his stick against the dolmen stone and began to don the armor. Meriin, whose hair and beard were now almost black, moved off several paces and began drawing a diagram in the dirt with the end of his staff.

“You used to favor a white charger,” he commented, “but I thought it appropriate to equip you with one of another color, since you have'abandoned the ideals of the Table Round, betraying the memory of Camelot.”

“On the contrary,” Launcelot replied, glancing overhead at the passage of a sudden roll of thunder. “Any horse in a storm, and I am Camelot’s last defender.”

Merlin continued to elaborate upon the pattern he was drawing as Launcelot slowly equipped himself. The small wind continued to blow, stirring the mist. There came a flash of lightning, startling the horse. Launcelot calmed it.

Merlin stared at him for a moment and rubbed his eyes. Launcelot donned his helmet.

“For a moment,” Merlin said, “you looked somehow different....”

“Really? Magical withdrawal, do you think?” he asked, and he kicked the stone from the reins and mounted the stallion.

Merlin stepped back from the now-completed diagram, shaking his head, as the mounted man leaned over and grasped the lance.

“You still seem to move with some strength,” he said.

“Really?”

Launcelot raised the lance and couched it. Beforetaking up the shield he had hung at the saddle’s side, he opened his visor and turned and regarded Merlin.

“Your champion appears to be ready,” he said. “So amL”

Seen in another flash of light, it was an unlined face that looked down at Merlin, clear-eyed, wisps of pale gold hair fringing the forehead.

“What magic have the years taught you?” Merlin asked.

“Not magic,” Launcelot replied. “Caution. I anticipated you. So, when I returned to the cave for my stick, I drank the rest of your elixir.”

He lowered the visor and turned away.

“You walked like an old man....”

“I’d a lot of practice. Signal your champion 1”

Merlin laughed.

“Good! It is better this way,” he decided, “to see you go down in full strength! You still cannot hope to win against a spirit!”

Launcelot raised the shield and leaned forward.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“Nothing!” Merlin said. Then he shouted, “Kill him, Raxas!”

A light rain began as they pounded across the field; and staring ahead, Launcelot realized that flames were flickering behind his opponent’s visor. At the last possible moment, he shifted the point of his lance into line with the hollow knight’s blazing helm. There came more lightning and thunder.

His shield deflected the others lance while his went on to strike the approaching head. It flew from the hollow knight’s shoulders and bounced, smouldering, on the ground.

He continued on to the other end of the field and turned. When he had, he saw that the hollow knight, now headless, was doing the same. And beyond him, he saw two standing figures, where moments before there had been but one.

Morgan Le Fay, clad in a white robe, red hair unbound and blowing in the wind, faced Merlin from across his pattern. It seemed they were speaking, but he could not hear the words. Then she began to raise her hands, and they glowed like cold fire. Merlin’s staff was also gleaming, and he shifted it before him. Then he saw nomore, for the hollow knight was ready for the second charge.

He couched his lance, raised the shield, leaned forward and gave his mount the signal. His arm felt like a bar of iron, his strength like an endless current of electricity as he raced down the field. The rain was falling more heavily now and the lightning began a constant flickering- A steady rolling of thunder smothered the sound of the hoofbeats, and the wind whistled past his helm as he approached the other warrior, his lance centered on his shield.

They came together with an enormous crash. Both knights reeled and the hollow one fell, his shield and breastplate pierced by a broken lance. His left arm came away as he struck the earth; the lancepoint snapped and the shield fell beside him. But he began to rise almost immediately, his right hand drawing his long sword.

Launcelot dismounted, discarding his shield, drawing his own great blade. He moved to meet his headless foe. The other struck first and he parried it, a mighty shock running down his arms. He swung a blow of his own. It was parried.

They swaggered swords across the field, till finally Launcelot saw his opening and landed his heaviest blow. The hollow knight toppled into the mud, his breastplate cloven almost to the point where the spear’s shaft protruded. At that moment, Morgan Le Fay screamed.

Launcelot turned and saw that she had fallen across the pattern Merlin had drawn. The sorcerer, now bathed in a bluish light, raised his staff and moved forward. Launcelot took a step toward them and felt a great pain in his left side.

Even as he turned toward the half-risen hollow knight who was drawing his blade back for another blow, Launcelot reversed his double-handed grip upon his own weapon and raised it high, point downward.

He hurled himself upon the other, and his blade pierced the cuirass entirely as he bore him back down, nailing him to the earth. A shriek arose from beneath him, echoing within the armor, and a gout of fire emerged from the neck hole, sped upward and away, dwindled in the rain, flickered out moments later.

Launcelot pushed himself into a kneeling position. Slowly then, he rose to his feet and turned toward thetwo figures who again faced one another. Both were now standing within the muddied geometries of power, both were now bathed in the bluish light. Launcelot took a step toward them, then another.

“Merlin!” he called out, continuing to advance upon them. “I’ve done what I said I wouldi Now I’m coming to kill you!”

Morgan Le Fay turned toward him, eyes wide.

“No!” she cried. “Depart the circle! Hurry! I am holding him heret His power wanes! In moments, this place will be no more. Go!”

Launceiot hesitated but a moment, then turned and walked as rapidly as he was able toward the circle’s perimeter. The sky seemed to boil as he passed among the monoliths, He advanced another dozen paces, then had to pause to rest. He looked back to the place of battle, to the place where the two figures still stood locked in sorcerous embrace. Then the scene was imprinted upon his brain as the skies opened and a sheet of fire fell upon the far end of the circle.

Dazzled, he raised his hand to shield his eyes. When he “lowered it, he saw the stones falling, soundless, many of them fading from sight. The rain began to slow immediately. Sorceror and sorceress had vanished along with much of the structure of the still-fading place. The horses were nowhere to be seen. He looked about him and saw a good-sized stone. He headed for it and seated himself. He unfastened his breastplate and removed it, dropping it to the ground. His side throbbed and he held it tightly. He doubled forward and rested his face on his left hand.

The rains continued to slow and finally ceased. The wind died. The mists returned.

He breathed deeply and thought back upon the conflict. This,-this was the thing for which he had remained after all the others, the thing for which he had waited, for so long. It was over now, and he could rest.

There was a gap in his consciousness. He was brought to awareness again by a light. A steady glow passed between his fingers, pierced his eyelids. He dropped his hand and raised his head, opening his eyes.

It passed slowly before him in a halo of white light. He removed his sticky fingers from his side and rose to hisfeet to follow it. Solid, glowing, glorious and pure, not at all like the image in the chamber, it led him on out across the moonlit plain, from dimness to brightness to dimness, until the mists enfolded him as he reached at last to embrace it.

HERE ENDETH THE BOOK OF LAUNCELOT, LAST OF THE NOBLE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE, AND HIS ADVENTURES WITH RAXAS, THE HOLLOW KNIGHT, AND MERLIN AND MORGAN LE FAY, LAST OF THE WISE FOLK OF CAMELOT, IN HIS QUEST FOR THE SANGREAL.

QUO FAS ET GLORIA DVCUNT.