

THE TRAGEDY OF ELAINE OF ASTOLAT

A play in two scenes, by Lord Stefano d'Urbino.
Based upon Sir Thomas Mallory's "Le Morte
Darthur" Book Eighteen, Chapters VIII-XX,
originally published by William Caxton 1485.
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*Lancelot follows King Arthur to a joust so as to remain
unrecognised in the lists. On his way he meets Elaine of
Astolat, who falls in love with him. Lancelot is
unfortunately secretly in love with Queen Guenever, and
Elaine after discovering he does not return her affection,
dies of her love for him.*

Dramatis Personae

ARTHUR, King of Camelot
GUENEVER, Queen of Camelot
LANCELOT, knight of the Lake
ELAINE, fair maiden of Astolat
BERNARD, father to Elaine
LADY*, in waiting to Queen Guenever
GAWAINE, a knight, the narrator
KNIGHTS, brothers of Sir Lancelot

*(*Replaces Sir Bors from the original text.)*

Scene I

Book Eighteen, Chapter VIII

*London is stage left.
Astolat is stage centre.
Camelot is stage right.*

*Enter ARTHUR, GUENEVER, LANCELOT,
GAWAINE and LADY stage left.*

GAWAINE

In the later years of the round table, after the
achievement of the Sangreal and the court withal
had moved to London, Sir Lancelot fell to his old
love of Queen Guenever, and much intrigue and
wroth did it cause King Arthur's court. And so it
befell that the damosel of the lake, Nimüe, came
to court, and did great goodness of sorcery and
enchantment, settling the intrigue and calming the
wroth, and all was forgiven until the feast of the
Assumption, when the King -

ARTHUR

Let cry, a great jousts and a tournament shall be
held, and that I and the King of Scotland will
joust all that may come against us!

GAWAINE

- And when this cry was made, many knights and
Kings came thither and made ready.

ARTHUR

Sir Gawaine; truly, we are ready to depart. I would
have the Queen ride with me.

GUENEVER

Alas! I would not, for I am sick and cannot ride at
this time.

ARTHUR

That me repenteth, for this seven year ye saw not
such a noble fellowship together since we
departed from the court, to achieve the Sangreal.

GUENEVER

Truly, ye must hold me excused, I may not be
there, and that me repenteth.

GAWAINE

And many deemed the Queen would not be there
because Sir Lancelot would not ride with the King
either -

LANCELOT

Truly, I am not whole of the wound the late Sir
Mador, in his wroth, has given me afore.

GAWAINE

- Wherefore the King departed with the rest of
his fellowship, heavy and passing wroth, and on
his way to the jousts from London to Camelot,
lay the night in the Castle of Astolat.

ARTHUR and GAWAINE to Astolat.

*They are greeted by BERNARD and ELAINE whom
enter from stage centre.*

Exit LADY stage left.

GUENEVER

Sir Lancelot, Sir Lancelot, ye are greatly to blame thus to hold you behind my lord. What, trow ye, what will your enemies and mine say and deem? Nought else but 'See how Sir Lancelot holdeth him ever behind the King, and so doth the Queen, for that they would have their pleasure together.' And thus will they say, have ye no doubt thereof.

Book Eighteen, Chapter IX

LANCELOT

Madam, I allow your wit, it is of late come since ye were wise. And therefore, madam, I am ruled by your counsel. This night I will take my rest, and to-morrow by time I will take my way toward the jousts. But wit you well, that at the jousts I will be against the King, and against all his fellowship.

GUENEVER

Ye may there do as ye list, but by my counsel ye shall not be against your King and your fellowship. For therein be full many hard knights of your blood and kin, as ye wot well enough, it needeth not to rehearse.

LANCELOT

Madam, I pray you will not be displeased with me, for I will take the adventure that God will send me.

LANCELOT to Astolat.

Exit GUENEVER stage left.

GAWAINE

And so upon the morn early, Sir Lancelot heard mass and break his fast, and so took his leave of the Queen, and rode so much until he came to Astolat, where the King resided.

Exit GAWAINE stage centre.

ARTHUR

It is well! I have espied one knight that will play his play at the jousts to which we be gone toward. I undertake he will do marvels. Yet ye shall not wit from me at this time.

Exit ARTHUR stage centre.

BERNARD

Fair Sir, I welcome you in the best manner, and make you reverence, but I am an old knight, an I know you not.

LANCELOT

Fair Sir, pray you then, to lend me a shield that were not openly known, for mine is well known, to all but you.

BERNARD

Sir, ye shall have your desire, for meseemeth ye be one of the likeliest knights of the world, and therefore I shall show you friendship. Sir, wit you well I have a son hight Tirre, and a daughter hight Elaine, and that the son was but late made knight, and he was hurt that same day he was made knight, that he may not ride; and his shield white ye shall have, for that is not known I dare say but here, and in no place else.

ELAINE

(I behold this knight, wonderfully. Ah, cast in me such a love as I can never withdraw!)
Father. Fair knight, I beseech you, wear upon thy body a token of mine at the jousts.

LANCELOT

Fair damosel, an if I grant you that ye may say I do more for your love than ever I did for lady or damosel.
(Ah, but I will be disguised, an especially since I have never afore borne no manner of token of no damosel.)
Fair maiden I will, grant you, to wear a token of yours upon mine helmet, and therefore what it is, show it me.

ELAINE

Sir, it is a red sleeve of mine, of scarlet, well embroidered with great pearls.

LANCELOT

Never did I erst so much for no damosel. Fair maiden, betake you my shield for keeping, and pray you to keep that secret until that I come again, and to-night, Fair Maiden, we will have merry rest and great cheer!

Book Eighteen, Chapters X through XIII

Enter ARTHUR and GAWAINE stage centre.

Exit BERNARD and ELAINE.

*ARTHUR, GAWAINE and LANCELOT
(following) to Camelot.*

*Enter KNIGHTS stage right. LANCELOT and the
KNIGHTS begin to fight.*

GAWAINE

And so in the morn the King withal rode to Camelot, where many strong knights took to the field. Much to my enchainment, King Arthur bade me stay close by him, whereby we watched an unknown knight, with a white shield and a red sleeve on his head, unhorse many by brave and bloody deeds. O mercy Jesu! What knight is yonder that doth so marvellous deeds of arms?

ARTHUR

I wot well what he is, but at this time I will not name him.

GAWAINE

Sir, I would say it were Sir Lancelot by his riding and his buffets that I see him deal, but ever meseemeth it should not be he, for that he beareth a red sleeve, for I wist him never bear token at no jousts.

ARTHUR

Let him be. He will be better known, and do more, or ever he depart. See how he fights nine of Sir Lancelot's kinsmen at once. Ah! And he is struck as good as he giveth, but unhorses many and does not fall himself. Worthy is he, say ye not, of the prize of these jousts!

GAWAINE

And thus when the King blew for lodging, the prize of the jousts was to be given unto the knight with the white shield that bare the red sleeve on his helm.

LANCELOT

My fair lords, wit you well if I have deserved thanks, I have sore bought it, and that me repenteth, for I am like never to escape with my life, I am so sore hurt that it nigh slayeth me. Therefore, I pray you that ye will suffer me to depart.

(Exit LANCELOT stage right.)

GAWAINE

All those at the jousts did marvel at the actions of that knight that departed. 'Know ye him?' said all the knights. Know ye him, my King?

ARTHUR

As for that, whether I know him or know him not, ye shall not know from me what man he is, but Almighty Jesu, send me good tidings of him.

GAWAINE

By my head, if it so be that the good knight be so sore hurt, it is great damage and pity to all this land, for he is one of the noblest knights that ever I saw; and if he may be found, I will find him.

ARTHUR

Bare you well, an ye may find him; unless that he be in such a plight, that he may not wield himself no more.

GAWAINE

Jesu defend! But wit I shall also find what he is, an I may find him.

Exit ARTHUR and KNIGHTS stage left.

GAWAINE (searching) to Astolat.

Enter BERNARD and ELAINE stage centre.

GAWAINE

Sir Bernard! Fair Maiden Elaine!

BERNARD and ELAINE

Sir Gawaine!...

BERNARD

...What tidings?

ELAINE

...And who did best at the tournament?

GAWAINE

So God me help, there was a knight that bare a white shield and a red sleeve upon his head, and certainly he was one of the best knights that ever I saw joust in field, but I know him not.

ELAINE

Now be blessed God, that that knight sped so well, for he is the man in the world that I first loved, and truly he shall be the last that ever I shall love.

GAWAINE

Now, fair maid; is that good knight your love?

ELAINE

Certainly sir, wit ye well he is my love.

GAWAINE

Then know ye his name?

ELAINE

Nay truly, I know not his name nor from whence he cometh, but to say that I love him, I promise you and God that I love him.

GAWAINE

How had ye knowledge of him first?

Book Eighteen, Chapter XIV

ELAINE

He came to our house, and betook my father to do him the lending of a shield.

BERNARD

He said his shield was too well known, yet we knew it not.

GAWAINE

Ah! Noble knight, fair damosel, please it you, let me have a sight of that shield.

ELAINE

Sir, it is in my chamber, but...

BERNARD

...Bring it out, daughter, and ye shall see it.

ELAINE shows GAWAINE the shield of LANCELOT.

GAWAINE

Ah Jesu mercy! Now my heart is heavier than ever it was to-fore.

ELAINE

Why?

GAWAINE

For I have great cause. Is that knight that oweth this shield your love?

ELAINE

Yea truly, my love he is, God would I were his love.

GAWAINE

So God me speed, fair damosel ye have right, for ye love the most honourable knight of the world. But truly, although ye have fair grace, never I saw nor heard nor say that ever he bare token or sign of no lady, gentlewoman ne maiden, at no jousts nor tournament. Fair maiden, ye are much beholden to him to give him thanks, but I dread me that ye shall never see him in this world.

ELAINE

Alas! How may this be? Is he slain?

GAWAINE

I say not so, but grievously wounded. Wit ye well, he is the noble knight, Sir Lancelot du Lake.

ELAINE

Alas! How may this be? What was his hurt?

GAWAINE

Truly, the nine men in the world that loved him best hurt him so.

ELAINE

Now fair father, I require you give me leave to ride and seek him, or else wot well I shall go out of my mind, for I shall never stint till that I find him.

BERNARD

Do as it liketh you, for me sore repenteth of the hurt of that noble knight.

Exeunt stage centre.

Scene II

Book Eighteen, Chapter XV

Enter ELAINE and GAWAINE stage centre.

GAWAINE

And so fair Elaine sought to Camelot, and there all about for her love, and at length by fortune came upon him in a wood, sick and pale of his wound.

Exit GAWAINE stage centre.

Enter LANCELOT stage right.

ELAINE

Ah! My lord, Sir Lancelot, alas why be ye in this plight?

LANCELOT

Fair maiden, why fare ye thus? Ye put me to pain. Wherefore, make ye no more such cheer, for if ye be come to comfort me, ye be right welcome. An of this little hurt that I have, I shall be right hastily whole, by the grace of God. But I marvel, who hast told you my name?

ELAINE

Sir Gawaine did come and lodge with my father, and there, by your shield, he discovered your name.

LANCELOT

Alas, that me repenteth that my name is known, for I am sure it will turn unto great anger.

ELAINE

My love, you are wounded, put such from your mind. We will to Astolat, an I will watch you day and night, and do such attendance to you that there was never woman more kindlier for man.

LANCELOT

An yet, I pray ye, also make a-spies to Camelot for courtiers of London if they come there. For well I am sure that I will be sought.

ELAINE

An I, my love, will do ye asks.

Exit LANCELOT and ELAINE stage right.

Enter ARTHUR, GUENEVER and LADY stage left.

Enter GAWAINE stage centre, meeting ARTHUR.

GAWAINE

King Arthur! I have found Sir Lancelot's shield in the keeping of the Fair Maiden of Astolat; and it was he that jousted best afore he took himself to depart the field.

ARTHUR

All the latter I knew aforehand, and it was that caused me I would not suffer you to have ado at the great jousts, for he has bested you many times grievously, an I espied him when he came in till our lodgings in Astolat. But marvel have I, that he would bear sign of any damosel, for I never heard nor saw nor knew that ever he bare any token of none earthly woman.

GAWAINE

By my head, the Fair Maiden of Astolat loveth him marvellously well. What it meaneth, I cannot say.

ARTHUR

Let us to London then, and openly disclose this to all the court.

GAWAINE and ARTHUR are greeted by GUENEVER and LADY.

GAWAINE

So the King and all came to London, and there we disclosed to all the court that it was Sir Lancelot that jousted best, Sir Lancelot that wore the white shield, and Sir Lancelot that bare the red sleeve of the Fair Maiden of Astolat upon his helm. And when Queen Guenever wist, she went nigh out of her mind for wrath.

Exit ARTHUR and GAWAINE stage left.

GUENEVER

Ah lady handmaiden, have ye heard say how falsely Sir Lancelot hath betrayed me?

LADY

Alas madam, I am afeard he hath betrayed himself and us all.

GUENEVER

No force, though he be destroyed, for he is a false traitor-knight.

LADY

Madam I pray you say ye not so, for whith you well we should not say such language of him.

GUENEVER

Why should I not call him traitor when he bare the red sleeve upon his head at Camelot, at the great jousts?

LADY

Madam, I dare say he did it to none evil intent, but for the cause he bare the red sleeve that none of his blood should know him on the field.

GUENEVER

Fie on him! For all his pride and bobaunce! Fie on him! For I heard Sir Gawaine say before my lord Arthur that it were marvel to tell the great love that is between the Fair Maiden of Astolat and him.

LADY

Madam, I may not warn Sir Gawaine to say what it please him; but I dare say, as for Sir Lancelot, he loveth no lady, gentlewoman nor maid, but all he loveth in like much.

GUENEVER

Ye may say what ye will; but wit ye well and haste ye to seek him, and find him wheresomever he may be, and God, send me good tidings of him.

Book Eighteen, Chapters XVI through XVIII

Exit GUENEVER stage left.

Enter LANCELOT and ELAINE stage right.

LANCELOT and ELAINE meet LADY at Astolat.

ELAINE

Are ye of the court?

LADY

I am sent in search of Sir Lancelot.

ELAINE

Lady, within this hour ye shall see him.

LADY

O Sir Lancelot, God bless you and send you hasty recover; but let you know how the Queen is passing wroth with ye, because, by Sir Gawaine's discovery, ye wore the sleeve of this fair maiden at the jousts.

LANCELOT

Then is the Queen wroth and I am right heavy for I deserve no wrath, for all I did was because I would not be known.

LADY

Right so I excused you, but all was in vain, for the Queen said more largelier to me than I to you now. But is this she, that is so busy about you, that men call the Fair Maiden of Astolat?

LANCELOT

She it is, that by no means I cannot put her from me.

LADY

Why should ye put her from you? I see well, by her diligence about you that she loveth you entirely, and that she is of fair grace, and birth, and learning.

LANCELOT

That me repenteth, and God make we well to depart the quicker.

Book Eighteen, Chapter XIX

ELAINE

My lord, Sir Lancelot, now I see ye will depart with this lady of the court, and for that ye sent me hither to seek her; now fair knight and courteous knight, have mercy on me, and suffer me not to die for thy love.

LANCELOT

What would ye I did?

ELAINE

I would have you to my husband.

LANCELOT

Fair damosel, I thank you, but truly, I cast me never to be a wedded man.

ELAINE

Then fair knight, will ye be my paramour?

LANCELOT

Jesu defend me! For then I reward your kin full evil for their great goodness!

ELAINE

Alas. Then I must die for your love.

LANCELOT

Ye shall not so, for wit ye well, fair maiden, I might have been married an I had would, but I never applied me to be married yet; but because, fair damosel, that ye love me as ye say ye do, I will for your good will and kindness show you some goodness, that wheresomever ye will beset your heart upon some good knight that will wed you, I shall give you a thousand pound, yearly, to you and your heirs; thus much will I give you, fair madam, for your kindness, and always while I live to be your own knight.

ELAINE

Of all this, I will none, for but if ye will wed me, or else be my paramour at the least, wit you well, Sir Lancelot, my good days are done.

LANCELOT

Of these two things ye must pardon me.
(*Exit LANCELOT and LADY stage left.*)

ELAINE

Why? Why should I pardon ye? Am I not an earthly woman? And all the while the breath is in my body, I may complain me, for my belief is I do none offence though I love an earthly man; and I take God to my record I loved none but you, Sir Lancelot du Lake; nor never shall, and a clean maiden I am for him and for all other; and sithen it is the sufferance of God that I shall die for the love of so noble a knight, I beseech the High Father of Heaven to have mercy upon my soul. Lord Jesu, I swear on Thee I was never great offencer against thy laws, but that I loved this noble knight out of measure, and of myself, good Lord, I might not withstand this fervent love, wherefore I have my death. Father!

Enter BERNARD stage centre.

BERNARD

Elaine, my child, what is wrong? And where is the noble knight gone hence?

ELAINE

He has gone, he has gone, he loves me not, and I pray you, father, take this letter as I devise it, and pray you watch over me until I am dead, for I die of love. And while my body is hot let this letter be put in my right hand, and my hand bound fast with the letter until I be cold. And let me be put in a fair bed with my richest clothes, and let the bed be put in a barget that saileth down river to London, and let me be covered with black samite over and over. Thus, father, I beseech you my will.

BERNARD

I grant it you faithfully, all like you devise, but with great dole, fair Elaine...

ELAINE dies.

BERNARD

...Fair departed daughter, with great dole.

ELAINE'S body is done to as she willed by BERNARD. Exit BERNARD stage centre.

Book Eighteen, Chapter XX

Enter ARTHUR, GUENEVER, LANCELOT, GAWAINE and LADY stage left.

GAWAINE

When Sir Lancelot took his leave of Elaine, he came withal to London, where when Arthur wist he was whole and sound, the King made great joy of him, and so did all the knights of the round table except the few who did not love him, and also Queen Guenever, who was wood wroth of him, and would by no means speak with him. And yet, by fortune the court were passing by a window on the Thames, and they espied a black barget, and had marvel what it meant.

ARTHUR

Look! In the barget, a fair corpse as ever there was.

GUENEVER

And I espy, a letter in her right hand.

ARTHUR

(Reads the letter.)

'Most noble knight Sir Lancelot, now hath death made us two at debate for your love. I was your lover, that men called the Fair Maiden of Astolat; therefore unto all ladies I make my moan, yet pray for my soul and bury me at least, and offer ye my mass-penny; this is my last request. And a clean maiden I die, an I take God to witness. Pray for my soul, Sir Lancelot. Thou art peerless.'

LANCELOT

My lord Arthur, wit ye well I am right heavy of the death of this fair damosel. God knoweth I was never causer of her death by my willing. She was both fair and good, and much was I beholden unto her, but she loved me out of measure.

GUENEVER

Ye might have showed her some bounty and gentleness that might have preserved her life.

LANCELOT

Madam, she would none other ways be answered but that she would be my wife, outhere else my paramour, and of these two I would not grant her; for madam, I love not to be constrained by love, for love must arise in the heart, and not by no constraint.

ARTHUR

That is truth, and many a knight's love is free in himself, and never will be bounden, for where he is bounden, he looseth himself. Lancelot, it will be your worship that ye oversee that she be interred worshipfully.

LANCELOT

Sir, that shall be done as I can best devise.

LANCELOT offers the mass penny. A bell is rung.

Exit ARTHUR, GAWAINE and LADY stage left.

GUENEVER

Lancelot, I pray you for mercy, for I have been wroth with you causeless.

LANCELOT

This is not the first time that ye had been displeased with me causeless; but madam, ever I must suffer you, and what sorrow I endure, I take no force.

Exit GUENEVER stage left.

LANCELOT

For I behold Queen Guenever wonderfully. Ah! Cast in me such a love, as I can never withdraw!

Exit LANCELOT.

Finis.

(For Elaine, Mea Amica.)