

Johnston Annie Fellows

Keeping Tryst: A Tale of King Arthur's Time



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Keeping Tryst

NOW there was a troubadour in the kingdom of Arthur, who, strolling through the land with only his minstrelsy to win him a way, found in every baron's hall and cotter's hut a ready welcome. And while the boar's head sputtered on the spit, or the ale sparkled in the shining tankards, he told such tales of joust and journey, and feats of brave knight errantry, that even the scullions left their kitchen tasks, and, creeping near, stood round the door with mouths agape to listen.

Then with his harp-strings tuned to echoes of the wind on winter moors, he sang of death and valour on the field, of love and fealty in the hall, till those who listened forgot all save his singing and the noble knights whereof he sang.

One winter night, as thus he carolled in a great earl's hall, a little page crept nearer to his bench beside the fire, and, with his blue eyes fixed in wonderment upon the graybeard's face, stood spellbound. Now Ederyn was the page's name, an orphan lad whose lineage no man knew, but that he came of gentle blood all eyes could see, although as vassal 'twas his lot to wait upon the great earl's squire.

It was the Yule-tide, and the wassail-bowl passed round till boisterous mirth drowned oftentimes the minstrel's song, but Ederyn missed no word. Scarce knowing what he did, he crept so close he found himself with upturned face against the old man's knee.

"How now, thou flaxen-haired," the minstrel said, with kindly smile. "Dost like my song?"

"Oh, sire," the youth made answer, "methinks on such a wing the soul could well take flight to Paradise. But tell me, prithee, is it possible for such as *I* to gain the title of a knight? How doth one win such honours and acclaim and reach the high estate that thou dost laud?"

The minstrel gazed a little space into the Yule log's flame, and stroked his long hoar beard. Then made he answer:

"Some win their spurs and earn the royal accolade because the blood of dragons stains their hands. From mighty combat with these terrors they come victorious to their king's reward. And some there be sore scarred with conquest of the giants that ever prey upon the borders of our fair domain. Some, who have gone on far crusades to alien lands, and there with heart of gold and iron hand have proved their fealty to the Crown."

Then Ederyn sighed, for well he knew his stripling form could never wage fierce combat with a dragon. His hands could never meet the brawny grip of giants. "Is there no other way?" he faltered.

"I wot not," was the answer. "But take an old man's counsel. Forget thy dreams of glory, and be content to serve thy squire. For what hast such as thou to do with great ambitions? They'd prove but flames to burn away thy daily peace."

With that he turned to quaff the proffered bowl and add his voice to those whose mirth already shook the rafters. Nor had he any further speech with Ederyn. But afterward the pretty lad was often in his thoughts, and in his wanderings about the land he mused upon the question he had asked.

Another twelvemonth sped its way, and once again the Yule log burned within the hall, and once again the troubadour knocked at the gate, all in the night and falling snow. And as before, with merry jests they led him in and made him welcome. And as before, was every mouth agape from squire's to scullion's, as he sang.

Once more he sang of knights and ladies fair, of love and death and valour; and Ederyn, the page, crept nearer to him till the harp-strings ceased to thrill. With head upon his hands, he sat and

sighed. Not even when the wassail-bowl was passed with mirth and laughter did he look up. And when the graybeard minstrel saw his grief, he thought upon his question of the Yule-tide gone.

"Ah, now, thou flaxen-haired," he whispered in his ear. "I bear thee tidings which should make thee sing for joy. There *is* a way for even such as thou to win the honours thou dost covet. I heard it in the royal court when last I sang there at the king's behest."

Then all aquiver with his eagerness did Ederyn kneel, with face alight, beside the minstrel's knee to hear.

"Know this," began the graybeard. "'Tis the king's desire to 'stablish round him at his court a chosen circle whose fidelity hath stood the utmost test. Not deeds of prowess are required of these true followers, with no great conquests doth he tax them, but they must prove themselves trustworthy, until on hand and heart it may be graven large, '*In all things faithful.*'"

"To Merlin, the enchanter, he hath left the choice, who by some strange spell I wot not of will send an eerie call through all the kingdom. And only those will hear who wake at dawn to listen in high places. And only those will heed who keep the compass needles of their souls true to the north star of a great ambition. The time of testing will be long, the summons many. To duty and to sorrow, to disappointment and defeat, thou may'st be called. No matter what the tryst, there is but one reply if thou wouldst win thy knighthood. Give heed and I will teach thee now that answer."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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