



## TALES OF THE FIRST DAY

### THE KNIGHT'S TALE OF PALAMON AND ARCITE

Long ago, as old stories say, there was a great duke named Theseus, renowned in fight and perfect in all chivalry. One day, as he was returning from one of his most glorious battles, a great company of women met him, weeping and wringing their hands in grief. They besought Theseus that he would help them. "We are from Thebes," they said, "and in the days of our prosperity were ladies of rank; but alas, Creon, our foe, has sacked our city, slain our husbands and sons, and now denies us even the right to bury our dead."

Theseus was moved to anger at their story, and swore that he would punish Creon. Without more ado, he turned his horse and led his men to Thebes. There he killed Creon and his followers, and the mournful ladies were able to wash the bodies of their lords and give them honourable burial. Now it chanced that among those whom Theseus fought were two young knights, Palamon and Arcite. They were sorely wounded in the fight and had been left for dead; but after the battle they were wounded, and taken back to Athens as Theseus' prisoners.

For many a day they were shut up in a room in a high tower overlooking Theseus' garden. Very woeful were they, until one May morning Palamon looked through his barred window and saw a lovely maid walking in the garden below. It was early morning, with the dew still on the flowers and the first beams of the sun glistening on all things. The maid was as fair as the flowers that she gathered to make her garland. Her hair was golden and hung in a long plait, and the blossoms she gathered for her garland were red and white. For very joy she sang so sweet a song that Palamon beholding her loved her with all his heart, yet thought she was too beautiful to be a maid of earth. He looked long, and sighed, "O goddess, if thou wilt but help me to be free, I will be always thy trusty servant." Hearing him thus speak, Arcite also looked out, and he too at once loved the wondrous beauty of the maid. "May I die unless I have her," he said, and sighed too. At this Palamon was angry. "Traitor," he said, "do you now break the vow we made each other long ago—never to betray each other, and never to cross each other in love? I saw and loved the maid first. She must be *mine*."

"No," answered Arcite. "You thought she was a goddess; I loved her first as a woman. She must be *mine*." So they fell to quarrelling loudly and cruelly. At last Arcite said, "We waste our time to quarrel thus. Neither of us can ever win her. Poor prisoners we are, and doomed to die here without a thought from happier men. Some rich lord will carry her away. Ours she cannot be." And they were very sad.

Now it chanced that a certain duke who was a friend of Arcite came to visit Theseus, and persuaded him to set young Arcite free. Theseus did so, but only on condition that Arcite should leave Athens for ever. "If from this time forth you are found in this land," he said, "your head will be forfeit." So Arcite went to Thebes, very heavy-hearted, because although he was now free, he might never more see the maid of the garden. Palamon's case was equally hard, for although he might see his beloved,

never might he speak to her nor woo her, for he must remain a poor neglected prisoner, high up in the castle tower. Now tell me, you lovers, if you can, whose lot was the worse? Is it better to be free and never see one's lady, or to be a prisoner and see her every day? –Judge for yourselves. I must go on with my story.

Arcite lived in Thebes, so sorrowfully that he fell a-weeping whenever music was played, and soon grief had so changed his countenance that no man could have recognised him. At last he could bear this state no longer, but made up his mind to go to Athens, and there seek his lady. He came therefore to the palace of Theseus and hired himself as a servant. He was strong and able to draw water and hew wood. In course of time he was made a chamberlain, and at length, since he was always mannerly and courteous and obedient, Theseus promoted him, and he became a squire and one of his best beloved followers.

Meanwhile Palamon languished in prison, till, made desperate by despair, he one night drugged his jailer and escaped. When day came he sought refuge in a wood, intending to wait there for the dark to cover his escape. As Fortune willed it, that very morning, Arcite (now calling himself Philostratus) rode out into the wood to enjoy the fresh sweet air of the May morning, and dismounted from his horse near the very bush where Palamon lay hid. There he paced up and down, restless, and spoke aloud to himself of all his sorrows. "I am royally born," he said, "yet I must pretend to serve Theseus, my mortal enemy. Palamon my brother is a captive. Unhappy are we both—better to die of love for my lady than live this miserable life." At this mention of his love, Palamon's heart was stirred to wrath, and forth he rushed from his hiding-place. "Traitor Arcite," he cried, "do you still dare to love my lady? Will you still break our vow of fealty, one to the other? Now you have deceived Theseus! But beware! I am Palamon! You must give up your love or die!" Saying this he rushed at Arcite. As it happened Arcite was armed, and drew his sword, but seeing that Palamon had no weapon, he stayed his hand and said, "If you will do combat for your love, wait here till tomorrow. I cannot fight you unarmed as you are. At dawn I will bring you armour, and a sword, and food. Then let the best warrior have the fair lady of the garden!" And so they parted.

Arcite kept his word and brought the armour at daybreak. As soon as it was light those two armed themselves in the wood, and fell on each other like a lion and a tiger when they wage mortal combat in the thick forest. Neither shrank himself nor spared his adversary. Their shields were dented, sparks flew from their helmets, and down their breastplates many a stream of blood flowed.

Amid the din of their blows on the armour and the fury of combat, they did not hear the hunting horn nor the baying of the hounds, and so, before they knew it, Theseus and all his court were around them, and had called on them to cease their clamour and explain why they strove so fiercely together. They dropped their weapons in amazement, and saw that with Theseus were his queen, and the lady for whose love they fought, Emily the Fair, the niece of Theseus. She was dressed in green, as befitted a huntress on so bright a morning. Palamon spoke at once. "Show us no mercy, Lord Theseus. Better it is that we should both die, for well have we deserved death. I, Palamon, am your captive, escaped from prison but yesterday, and this man here is Arcite, who for many years has deceived you. This our quarrel is for the love of Emily, the bright maid at your side. Slay us both, and let our sorrow have an end." Theseus was wroth, and would indeed have slain them, but the queen and Emily pleaded so well for their lives that the duke relented. "You are foolish, both of you," he said; "but lovers are ever thus. This is my judgement. For fifty weeks you shall be free, and then shall you appear, each with a hundred knights, to do battle for Emily in a tournament. Whoso wins that day shall have her for his bride." Palamon and Arcite leapt up with joy at this; and all the court praised Theseus for his chivalrous behaviour and knightly courtesy.

Those fifty weeks were busy times in Athens. The lists prepared for the tournament were the most wonderful ever seen. The walls were circular and a mile round. At the east and west ends were

marble gateways over which were temples. On the east gate was a temple to Venus, the Goddess of Love, and on the west gate a temple to Mars, God of War. On the north side was a temple in honour of Diana, the Goddess of Maidens. Every man in the kingdom who could carve or paint or build had been summoned to work on these lists and make them beautiful. I wish I could describe to you all their magnificence. On the walls of the temple of Venus were painted the stories of the great lovers of fable and history. The statue of the goddess herself seemed to float in a grass-green sea, and on her head she wore a garland of roses. Mars' temple was dark and gloomy, with pictures of battle and murder on the walls. The statue of Mars himself was guarded by a wolf of stone. In Diana's temple was the statue of the goddess riding upon a hart, with small hounds about her feet. Her dress was green and she carried a bow and quiver of arrows. A waxing moon, her symbol, was painted below her statue.

On the Sunday appointed for their meeting, Arcite and Palamon entered Athens with their companies. Bold knights and noble princes were assembled from every land to do battle in honour of so fair a maid. With Palamon came the great King of Thrace, wearing a crown of gold set with rubies and diamonds. His armour was covered with a coal-black bear-skin, and he was carried in a chair of gold.

The other knights were all famous and goodly to look upon. Each was armed according to his liking, with mace or spear, breastplate and shield. Some had greaves, some a Prussian shield; no fashion was too old or too new to be seen there.

With Arcite came the great King of India, whose horse was decked with cloth of gold, while he himself had coat-armour studded with pearls, a saddle of beaten gold, and a mantle of sparkling rubies. On his head was a green wreath of laurel, and he carried a tame white eagle on his hand. Many a tame lion and leopard ran about his horse's feet. With him came many a goodly knight equipped for the fray.

The entertainment was princely. I cannot tell you of the feasts, and the minstrelsy, nor of the great gifts to high and low; neither can I describe to you the fairness of the ladies and their graceful dancing; nor the hounds that lay upon the floor, and the hawks who perched aloft. It was all wondrous indeed. Such feasting and splendour had ne'er been known before.

At last the great day of the tournament came. At dawn Palamon arose and went to sacrifice to Venus in her temple, and ask her help. "I care not, goddess, whether in fight I win the laurels," he said. "For me it is enough if she whom I love, the lady Emily, look on me kindly and grant me her love. Help me, great goddess, help me. Never shalt thou have a truer servant than I." Great was his joy when after some delay the statue of Venus shook, for by this sign Palamon understood that his prayer would be answered.

With the uprising of the sun, Emily herself also arose, bathed herself in clear cool water, and went to ask Diana's help. "I would rather be a maid all my life, and run and leap in the fields and woods," she said, "but if the gods will that I be given to one of these knights who desire me, O grant that I be given to him who loves me most!" Thereat a marvellous thing happened; for one of the two fires on the altar suddenly died down, but quickly leaped up in flame again, while the other as suddenly died down and drops of blood oozed from the dying embers. The statue of Diana shook and rattled the arrows in its quiver, while the goddess herself appeared. "It is the will of the gods you marry one of these men," she said, "but I may not as yet declare which." And so she vanished. "I am in thy hands, Diana!" cried Emily. "Grant me at least thy protection."

An hour later Arcite went to the temple of the terrible God of War. "O Mars," he prayed, "grant me victory in the fight this day, and evermore I will serve thee." At this the rings of the temple doors

clanged, the very walls rang, while the fire on the altar blazed bright in the gloom. From the earth rose a sweet savour. The statue of Mars itself shook, and murmured "Victory." The walls and armour re-echoed, "Victory."

Arcite rose up from his prayer glad and confident, and went to prepare for the fight.

Never was such excitement before. On every hand was noise of bolting of armour, buckling of helms, bridling of horses, sounding of trumpets, pawing of steeds; rushing here to see a fine prince and his retinue, rushing there to see a fine new banner and shield; and over all the bright sun of a fresh May morning. Some were sure Arcite would win, some favoured Palamon, but whatever the event of the day, all knew that ere the sun set many a deed of valour would be done, and many a gallant knight show his prowess.

At an early hour Theseus himself in all his royal robes appeared at his palace window, and all the folk hastened thither to see him and hear his will. The royal herald mounted a high scaffold. "Ho! Ho!" he cried. "Hear the will of Theseus the great duke! For inasmuch as it were destructive to gentle blood to fight a mortal battle this day, he that shall be overcome shall not be slain, but shall be brought to the stakes which are at either end of the lists. There, brought by force, shall he abide, nor take any further part in fighting. If and when the chieftain on either side be taken, then shall we declare the tourney over and award the prize. Go forth, good people, go forth! This is my lord's will!"

Loud were the people's cheers, and at once the processions began. Theseus with his queen and Emily and all his royal court led the way. Palamon followed with his hundred knights in battle array, with white plumes and banners waving in the wind. Next came Arcite with his knights under red pennons. Oh! it was a sight to gladden the heart of a man! Such colour, such workmanship in arms, such skill in riding, such knightly bearing, and to crown all, such beauty!

And now the companies enter the lists and are lined up two deep, facing one another. The heralds' trumpets sound, the names of the combatants are read and the gates closed.

Once more the trumpets blare, the heralds call "To your places, knights," and the fight begins. The combatants rush together. Swords flash, spears are set in rest. Here one is borne from his horse, here another is pierced through the breast. Here a knight swings his mace and crashes through helm and bone. Nor armour nor skill can ward off such mighty blows, and horses and their riders fall. One is taken captive to the stake. Another shares his fate. Thick rises the dust, loud rings the battle din, and on all sides fierce confusion reigns and cruel war.

Throughout the melee rage Palamon and Arcite; Arcite like a tiger that has lost her whelp, Palamon like a ravening lion athirst for blood. Through the long day they fight, until at last Palamon is set upon by Arcite and the Indian king at once, with twenty more knights to help them. Then, not all the great strength of his arm and sword can avail him, but, overcome by the weight of numbers, he is dragged, resisting still, to the shameful stake.

When Theseus saw this he stopped the fight.

"Ho—no more," he said. "All is done. Emily is the bride of Arcite of Thebes." Sad was Palamon, but Arcite, with helm unlaced, rode proudly on his courser towards Emily. All the trumpets sang loud of his victory. Thousands of voices acclaimed him. Mars had fulfilled his prophecy. What then could Venus be doing, for had she not promised success to Palamon?

A moment! My story is not ended. As Arcite rode thus joyously to claim his prize, it chanced that an

adder suddenly started from the ground before the horse's feet. The charger reared and swerved, and Arcite was thrown against the pommel of his saddle with such violence that his breast-bone was broken, and he fell down in a swoon. He was carried quickly away; but all that night, while feasting and merry-making reigned in the palace, poor Arcite lay dying. "Alas!" he cried. "Farewell to you, my lady, my love, my wife won by my prowess. Farewell to the world and merry company. I go where man must be alone and cold. Farewell again, my fairest Emily!" And so with his lady's name on his lips, he died.

Great was the mourning throughout Athens for so noble a warrior and so true a lover. His funeral pyre was heaped high with all sweet woods and spices. All famous Greeks came thither to play in his funeral games.

Men mourned for Arcite for many a long year. But at last their sorrow spent itself,—one day Palamon came again to the court of Theseus.

There, with gentle patient wooing, he won at length the hand of Emily, and gained thus his heart's desire and the reward of his true love of her.

They lived long in richness and health. Never was fairer wife than Emily; never was knight more faithful than Palamon. There I leave them. God bless them, and grant His grace and loving-kindness to this fair company. Amen.



THE KNIGHT