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The Mathematics of Gonfal

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

IT is told how the quest was cried, and how, in the day's fashion, the hand of Morvyth, the dark Queen of Inis Dahut and of the four other Isles of Wonder, was promised to the champion who should fetch back the treasure that was worthiest to be her bridal gift. Eight swords, they say, were borne to the altar of Llew Llaw Gyffes to be suitably consecrated, after a brief and earnest address, by the Imaun of Bulotu. Eight appropriately ardent lovers raised high these swords to swear fealty to Queen Morvyth and to the quest of which her loveliness was the reward. Thus all was as it should be until they went to sheathe these swords. Then one knight among the company, striking his elbow against his neighbor, had, rather unaccountably, the ill luck to drop his sword so that it pierced his own left foot.

The horns sounded afterward through the narrow streets and over the red roofs, and seven of Queen Morvyth's suitors armed and rode forth to ransack the world of its chief riches for a year and a day.

He who did not ride with the others was Sir Gonfal of Naines. It was three months, indeed, before his wound

was so healed that Gonfal could put foot to stirrup. And by that time, he calculated regretfully, the riches of the world must have been picked over with such thoroughness that it would hardly be worth while for a cripple to be hobbling out to make himself ridiculous among unsympathetic strangers. His agony, as he admitted, under this inclement turn of chance was well nigh intolerable; yet nothing was to be gained by blinking the facts, and Gonfal was, as he also admitted, a realist.

Gonfal thus remained at court through the length of a year, and lived uneventfully in the pagan Isles of Wonder. Gonfal sat unsplendidly snug while all his rivals rode at adventure in the meadows that are most fertile in magic, and ascended the mountains that rise beyond plausibility in the climates most favorable to the unimaginable. But Gonfal's sufficing consolation appeared to be that he sat more and more often with the queen.

However, Sir Gonfal of Naines, alone of Morvyth's suitors, had overpassed his first youth; the aging seem to acquire a sort of proficiency in being disappointed, and to despatch the transaction with more ease: and so, Queen Morvyth speculated, Sir Gonfal

could perhaps endure this cross of unheroic tranquillity—even over and above his natural despair, now he had lost all hope of winning her—with an ampler fortitude than would have been attainable by any of the others. Besides, their famousness was yet to be won, their exploits stayed as yet resplendent and misty magnets which drew them toward the future. But Gonfal had come into Inis Dahut after notable service under Manuel of Poictesme and the unconquerable banner of the Silver Stallion. This Gonfal had in his day, the young queen knew, been through eight formal wars, with any amount of light guerrilla work. He had slain his satisfactory quota of dragons and usurpers and ogres, and, also some years ago, had married the golden-haired and starry-eyed and swan-throated princess who is the customary reward of every champion's faithful attendance to derring-do. Now, in the cooling, but yet mellow, afternoon of Gonfal's day, with his princess dead, and with the realms that he had shared with her all lost,—and with his overlord Count Manuel, too, departed from this world, and with the banner of the Silver Stallion no longer followed by any one,—this tall Sir Gonfal went among his fellows a little aloofly. Yet the fair-bearded man went smilingly, too, as one who amuses himself at a game which he knows to be not very important; for he was, as he said, a realist even in the pagan Isles of Wonder.

And Morvyth, the dark Queen of the five Isles of Wonder, was annoyed by the bantering ways of her slow-spoken lover; she did not like these ways: she would put out of mind the question whether this man was being bitterly amused by his own hopeless

infatuation or by something, incredible as that seemed, about her. But this question would come back into her mind, and Morvyth, with an habitual light, lovely gesture, would tidy the hair about her ears and would go again to talk with Gonfal, so that she might, privately and just for her own satisfaction, decide upon this problem. Besides, the man had rather nice eyes.

Now, when the year was over, and when the bland, persistent winds of April had come up again out of the south, the heroes returned, each with his treasure. Each brought to Morvyth a bridal gift as miraculous as the adventures through which it had been come by; and all these adventures had been marvelous beyond any easy believing.

Indeed, as the queen remarked in private, their tales were hardly credible.

"And yet, I think, these buoyant epics are based upon fact," replied Gonfal. "Each of these men is the shrewd, small, and ill-favored third son of a king. It is the law that such unprepossessing midgets should prosper, and should override every sort of evil, in the Isles of Wonder and all other extra-mundane lands."

"But is it fair, my friend, is it even respectful, to the august and venerable powers of iniquity that these whipper-snappers—"

Gonfal replied:

"Nobody contends, I assure you, that such easy conquests are quite sportsmanlike. Nevertheless, they are the prerogatives of the third son of a king. So, as a realist, madame, I perforce concede that fortune, hereabouts, regards these third sons with a fixed grin of approval. Even foxes and ants and ovens and broomsticks put aside their customary taciturnity

to favor these royal imps with invaluable advice; all giants and three-headed serpents must, I dare say, confront them with a half-guilty sense of committing *felo de se*; and at every turn of the road waits an enamoured golden-haired princess."

"Blondes do not last," said Morvyth, "and I am a queen."

"That is true," Sir Gonfal admitted. "I am not certain every third prince prospers with a queen. I can recall no authority upon the point."

"My friend, there is not any doubt that these dauntless champions have prospered everywhere. And it is another trouble for me now to decide which one has fetched back the treasure that is worthiest to be my bridal gift."

Gonfal pursed up his remarkably red and soft-looking lips. He regarded the young queen for a brief while, and throughout that while he wore his odd air of considering an amusing matter which was of no great importance.

"Madame," Gonfal then said, "I would distinguish. To be worthiest, a thing must first be worthy."

At this the slender brows of Morvyth went up.

"But upon that ebony table, my friend, are potent magics which control all the wealth of the world."

"I do not dispute that. I merely marvel, as a perhaps unpractical realist, how such wealth can be termed a gift when it at utmost is but a loan."

"Now do you tell me," commanded Morvyth, "just what that means!"

But Gonfal before replying considered for a while the trophies which were the increment of his younger, smaller, and more energetic rivals' heroism. These trophies were, indeed, sufficiently remarkable. Here, for one

thing, fetched from the fiery heart of the very dreadful seven-walled city of Lankha by bustling little Prince Chedric of Lorn, after an infinity of high exploits, was that agate which had in the years that are long past preserved the might of the old emperors of Macedon. Upon this strange jewel were to be seen a naked man and nine women portrayed in the agate's veinings, and this agate assured its wearer of victory in every battle. The armies of the pagan Isles of Wonder would be ready, at the first convenient qualm of patriotism or religious faith, to lay waste and rob all the wealthiest kingdoms in that part of the world should Morvyth choose that agate as her bridal gift.

And yet Gonfal, as he now put it aside, spoke rather sadly, and said only, "Bunkhum!" in one or another of the foreign tongues which he had acquired during his mundivagant career of knight-errantry.

Gonfal then looked at an onyx. It was the hollowed onyx of Thossakan. Its wearer had the power to draw out the soul of any person, even of himself, and to imprison that soul as a captive inside this hollowed onyx; and its wearer might thus bluster anywhither resistlessly. Beyond the somber gleaming of this onyx showed the green lusters of an emerald, which was engraved with a lyre and three bees, with a dolphin and the head of a bull. Misfortune and failure of no sort could enter into the house wherein was this Samian gem. But the brightest of all the ensorceled stones arrayed upon the ebony table was the diamond of Luned, whose wearer might at will go invisible; and to this Cymric wonder Gonfal accorded the tribute of a shrug.

"This diamond," said Gonfal then, "is a gift which a well balanced person

might loyally tender to his queen, but hardly to his prospective wife. I speak as a widower, madame; and I assure you that Prince Duneval of Orc we may dismiss from our accounting as a too ardent lover of danger."

Morvyth thought this very clever and naughty and cynical of him, but smilingly said nothing. And Gonfal touched the offering of pompous little Thorgny of Vigeois. This was the gray sideritis, which, when bathed in running waters and properly propitiated, told with the weak voice of an infant whatever you desired to learn. The secrets of war and statecraft, of all that had ever happened anywhere, and of all arts and trades, were familiar to the wearer of the gray sideritis. And Gonfal touched more gingerly the moonstone of Naggar Tura, whose cutting edge no material substance could resist, so that the strong doors of an adversary's treasure-house, or the walls of his fortified city, could be severed with this gem just as a knife slices an apple. Yet equally marvelous, in another fashion, was its neighbor, of a scarlet radiancy streaked with purple. All that was needed to insure a prosperous outcome of whatsoever matter one had in hand could be found engraved upon this stone, in the lost color called tingaribinus. For the wearer of this stone—a fragment, as the most reputable cantrap attested, of the pillar which Jacob raised at Beth-El—it was not possible to fail in any sort of worldly endeavor.

Yet Gonfal put this, too, aside, speaking again in a foreign language unknown to Morvyth, and saying, "Hohkum!"

And then, but not until then, Sir Gonfal answered Queen Morvyth.

"I mean," he said, "that through the

virtues of these amulets and periapts and other very dreadful manifestations of egromancy, a monarch may retain much money and acreage and all manner of power for a score or for two-score or even for three-score of years. But not for four-score years, madame; for by that time the riches and the honors of this world must fall away from every mortal man and all that can remain of the greatest emperor or of the most dreadful conqueror will be, when four-score years are over, picked bones in a black box. Such is now the estate of Alexander, for all that he once owned this agate. Achilles, who wore the sideritis and was so notable at Troy, is master of no larger realm. And to Augustus and Artaxerxes and Attila—here to proceed no further in the alphabet—quite similar observations apply. These men went very ardently about this earth, the vigor of their misconduct was truly heroic, and the sound of their names is become as deathless as is the sound of the wind. But once that four-score years were over, their worldly power had passed as the dust passes upon the bland and persistent wind which now is come up out of the south to bring new life into Inis Dahut, but to revive nothing that is dead. Just so must always pass all worldly honors. Therefore it seems to me that these questing gentlemen are offering you no gift, but only a loan. I perforce consider, as a realist, and with howsoever appropriate regret, that the conditions of the quest have not been fulfilled."

The queen deliberated his orotundities. And she regarded Gonfal with a smile which now was like his smiling, and which appeared not very immediately connected with the trituration they were speaking of.

Morvyth said then:

"That is true. Your mathematics are admirable in that they combine resistlessly the pious and the platitudinous. There is no well-thought-of pagan in Inis Dahut or in any of the Isles of Wonder who will dare dispute that the riches of this world are but a loan, because that is the doctrine of Llew Llaw Gyffes and of all endowed religions everywhere. These over-busy, pushing, ugly little pests that ride impertinently about the world and get their own way in every place have insulted me. By rights," the queen said rather hopefully—"by rights, I ought to have their heads chopped off!"

"But these heroic imps are princes, madame. Thus, to pursue your very natural indignation, would entail a war with their fathers; and to be bothered with seven wars, according to my mathematics, would be a nuisance."

Morvyth saw the justice of this and said, with ever so faint a sighing:

"Very well, then. I approve of your mathematics. I shall pardon their impudence with the magnanimity becoming to a queen; and I shall have the quest cried for another year and another day."

"That," Gonfal estimated, still with his odd smiling, "will do nicely."

"And, besides," she added, "now you will have a chance with the others!"

"That," Gonfal assented, without any trace of a smile or any other token of enthusiasm, "will be splendid."

But Morvyth smiled as, with that habitual gesture, she tidied her hair; and she sent for all her lovers, and spoke to them, as she phrased it, frankly.

Thus all was to do again. The champions pulled rather long faces, and the lower orders were disappointed

in missing the gratis entertainments attendant on a royal marriage. But the clergy and the well-thought-of laity and the leading tax-payers applauded the decision of Queen Morvyth as a most glorious example in such feverish and pleasure-loving days of soulless materialism.

§ 2

So again the eight lovers of Morvyth met in the cathedral to have their swords appropriately consecrated by the Imaun of Bulotu. But when all had sacrificed to Llew Llaw Gyffes and to Toupan, and when the company with all their swords drawn had approached the altar, then limping Gonfal stumbled in mounting the steps and dropped his sword. The tall knight, clutching hastily at this sword as it fell, caught up the weapon by the newly sharpened blade; and he grasped it with such unaccountable vigor that he cut open his right hand to the bone, and cut also the muscles of his fingers.

"Decidedly," he said, with a wried smile, "there is some fatality in this; the quest of Morvyth is not for me."

He spoke the truth, for his sword-bearing days were over. Gonfal must seek for a physician and bandages while his rivals' swords were being consecrated. The queen noted his going, and, from a point midway between complacency and religious scruples, said under her breath, "One must perforce somewhat admire this realist."

She heard from afar a dwindling resonance of horns, and knew that once more the seven heroic lovers of Queen Morvyth had ridden forth to ransack the world of its chief riches. But fair-bearded Gonfal stayed in the pagan Isles of Wonder, and beneath the same roof that covered Morvyth,

and cared for no riches except the loveliness of Morvyth, whom he saw daily. And with time the hurt in his hand was cured, but the fingers on that hand he could not ever move again. And for the rest, if people whispered here and there, the susurrus was a phenomenon familiar enough to the economy of court life.

Now, when the year was over, and the south wind was come again into Inis Dahut, the seven princes returned, bringing with them yet other prodigies acquired by heroic exploits. Here, for example, was the effigy of a bird carved in jade and carnelian.

"With the aid of this inestimable bird," explained Prince Chedric of Lorn, who, if one elected to believe him, had upon a very dreadfully inhabited peninsula wrested this talisman from Morskoi of the Depths, "you may enter the Sea Market, and may go freely among a folk that dwell in homes builded of coral and tortoise-shell and tiled with fishes' scales. Their wisdom is beyond the dry and arid wisdom of earth, their knowledge derides the fictions which we call time and space, and their children prattle of mysteries unknown to any of our major prophets and most expert geomancers."

"Ah, but," cried Prince Balein of Targamon—"but I have here a smoke-colored veil embroidered with tiny gold stars and inkhorns, and it enables one to pass through the ardent gateway of Audela, the country that lies behind the fire. This is the realm of Seshra. There is no grieving in this land, and happiness and infallibility are common to everybody there, because Seshra is the master of an art which corrodes and sears away all error, whether it be human or divine."

Prince Duneval of Orc said nothing.

His mutely tendered offering was a small mirror about three inches square. Morvyth looked into this mirror, and what she saw in it was very little like a sumptuous dark young girl. She hastily put aside that gleaming and over-wise counselor; and the queen's face was troubled, because there was no need to ask what mirror Duneval had fetched to her from out of Antan.

But Thorgny of Vigeois did not love silence. And he was the next suitor.

"Such knickknacks as I notice at your feet, my Princess," stated Thorgny of Vigeois, "have their merits. Nobody denies their merits. But I, who may now address you with the frankness which ought to exist between two persons already virtually betrothed—I bring that sigil which gave wisdom and all power to Apollonius and, later, to Merlin Ambrosius. It displays, as you observe, an eye encircled with scorpions and stags and"—he coughed—"with winged objects which do not ordinarily have wings; and it controls the nine million spirits of the air. I need say no more."

"I need to," said Prince Gurguint. "I say that I have here the shining triangle of Thorston. And to say that is to say a great deal more than Thorgny has said. For this triangle is master of the wisdom of the Duergar and of all peoples that dwell underground. Moreover, madame, when this triangle is inverted,—thus,—it enables you to bless and curse at will, to converse with dead priests, and to control the power and wisdom of the moon."

"To such hole-and-corner wisdom, to such cavemen devices, and more especially to your lunar vaporings, I cry out like a bird upon the housetops, and I cry, Cheap! cheap!" observed Prince Clofurd. "For I have here, in

this shagreen case, the famous and puissant and unspeakably sacrosanct ring of Solomon, to whose wearer are subject the jinns and the ass-footed Nazikeen and fourteen of Jahveh's most discreet and trustworthy seraphim."

Prince Grimauc said:

"Solomon had, in his archaic way, his wisdom, a good enough sort of workaday wisdom, but yet a limited wisdom, as it was meted out to him by the God of Judea; but I have here an altar carved from a block of selenite. Within this altar you may hear the moving and the dry rustling of an immortal. Let us not speak of this immortal; neither the sun's nor the moon's light has ever shone upon him, and his name is not lovable. But here is the Altar of the Adversary, and the owner of this little altar may, at a paid price, have access to the wisdom that defies constraint and goes beyond the bounds permitted by any god."

Such were the gifts they brought to Morvyth. And, for reasons of at least two kinds, the queen found difficulty in saying which of these offerings was the worthiest to be her bridal gift.

But Gonfal, when the queen consulted him in private, as she was now apt to do about most matters, tall, handsome Gonfal shrugged. He said that, to his finding, as a, no doubt, unpractical realist, her lovers had once more fetched back no gifts, but only loans of very dubious value.

"These wise men, madame, that had all this knowledge in the old time, do they retain it now? The question is absurd, since the dirt that once was Solomon keeps no more sentiency than does the mud which formerly was Solomon's third under-scullion. Indomitable persons have before to-day won

to the wisdom of Audela or of the Sea Market; and that Freydis whom Dom Manuel loved, and that unscriptural Herodias who was Tana's daughter, these women once attained to the wisdom of Antan: but might they carry any of this wisdom into the grave? Equally, where now is your Thorston or your Merlin? All which to-day remains of any one of these thaumaturgists may well, at this very instant, be passing us as dust in that bland and persistent wind which now courses over Inis Dahut: but the mage goes undiscerned, unhonored, impotent, and goes as the wind wills, not as he elects. Ah, no, madame, these kickshaws may for a little while lend wisdom and understanding, but, none the less, within four-score of years—"

"Oh, have done with your arithmetic!" she begged of him. "It serves handily, and I approve of your mathematics. I really do consider it is perfectly wonderful, sweetheart, how quickly you realists can think of suitable truisms. But, just the same, I begin to dislike that wind, and I would much rather talk about something else."

"Let us talk about, then," Gonfal said, "the different way I feel concerning you as compared with all other women."

"That is not a new topic, but it is invariably interesting."

So they discussed this matter at some length. Then they went on to other matters. And then Morvyth asked Sir Gonfal if he was sure that he respected her just as much as ever, and Morvyth tidied her hair and summoned the Imaun of Bulotu, and sent also for Masu, the prime minister.

"The wisdom of this world is as a dust that passes," said Morvyth.

"The wise men that had wisdom in the old time do they retain it now?"

She then repeated the rest of Gonfal's observations with applaudable accuracy. And her hearers did applaud in unfeigned emotion.

"For this prying into matters which Llew Llaw Gyffes has not seen fit to reveal has always seemed to me unwholesome," remarked the prime minister.

"In fact, the claims of science, so-called—" began the Imaun, and spoke for the usual twenty minutes.

All was thus settled edifyingly. The offerings of the kings' sons were decreed to be no true gifts, the quest was cried again, and once more the seven champions rode forth. There was no thought of tall Gonfal going with the little heroes, for a cripple who could not bear a sword was ill fitted to ransack the treasures of the world. Instead, fair-bearded Gonfal stayed in Inis Dahut, and lived uneventfully in the pagan Isles of Wonder. And if people now talked outright, a queen can never hope to go wholly free of criticism.

§ 3.

So, when spring came again, and when once more the south wind was coursing over Inis Dahut, Sir Gonfal of Naines sat, as it happened, with his head in Morvyth's lap, and waited for her less ill-starred lovers to return.

"What gifts, I wonder, will they be bringing me," Queen Morvyth said, "at about this time to-morrow."

And Gonfal, without moving, sighed stupendously and answered:

"To me, madame, they will be bringing bitter gifts. For, whosoever wins in this quest, I lose; and whatsoever he may bring to you, to me he brings dis-

severance from content, and to me he brings a poignant, if brief, period of loneliness before you decide to have my head off."

Now she caressed that head maternally.

"Why, but what a notion!" said Morvyth, now that the man himself spoke of the nearing social duty whose imminence had for some while been fretting her. "As if, sweetheart, I would ever think of such a thing!"

"Undoubtedly that will happen, madame. Marriage entails many obligations, not all of them pleasant. Queens in particular have to preserve appearances; they have to insure the discretion of those whom they have trusted."

"That," she said sorrowfully, "is what the dear old Imaun has been telling me—lately, you know. And Masu talks about what a married woman owes to religion and setting a fine moral example."

Then Gonfal, still smiling up at her, went on:

"And yet it seems an odd thing, delight of my delights, that I shall leave you—for the headsman—without any real regret. For I am content. While my shrewd fellows rode about the world to seek and to attain to power and wisdom, I have elected, as an unpractical realist, to follow after beauty. I have followed, to be sure, in the phrase of that absurd young Grimauc, at a paid price. Yet, at that price, I have won, maimed and foredoomed, to beauty. And I am content."

The queen put on the proper air of diffidence.

"But what, my friend, what, after all, is mere beauty!"

And he replied, with the neatness

which she always rather distrusted:

"Beauty, madame, is Morvyth. It is not easy to describe either of these most dear and blinding dangers, as how many reams of ruined paper attest!"

She waited, still stroking him, and in her mind was the old question, whether it was possible that, even now, this man was laughing at her? She said:

"But would it not grieve you unendurably, sweetheart, to see me the wife of another man? And so, would it not be really a kindness—"

But the obtuse fellow did not chivalrously aid in smoothing her way to that nearing social duty. Instead, he replied, oddly enough:

"The Morvyth that I see, and in my manner worship, can be no man's wife. All poets learn this truth in their vexed progress to becoming realists."

For yet another while the young queen was silent. And then she said:

"I do not understand you, my dear, and probably I never shall. But I know that through your love of me you have twice maimed yourself, and have, as though it were a trifle, put aside your chance of winning honor and great wealth and all that gentle persons most prize—"

"I am," he replied, "a realist. To get three utterly pleasant years one pays, of course. But realists pay without grumbling."

"My dearest," the queen continued, now breathing quicker, and with the sort of very happy sobbing which she felt the occasion demanded, "you alone of all the men who have talked and postured so much, you alone, have given me whole-hearted and undivided love, not weighing even your own knightly honor and worldly fame

against the utterness of that love. And while of course, just as the Imaun says, if I were ever to marry anybody else, as I suppose I did promise to do, —in a way, that is,—still, it is not as if I cared one snap of my fingers about appearances, and I simply will not have it cut off! For such utterly unselfish love as yours, dear Gonfal, is the gift which is worthiest to be my bridal gift: and, no matter what anybody says, it is you who shall be my husband!"

"Ah, but the cried quest, madame!" he answered, "and your promise to those seven other idiots!"

"I shall proclaim to those detestable third sons, and to the Imaun and to Masu and to everybody," the queen said, "a very weighty and indeed a sacred truth. I shall tell them that there is no gift more great than love."

But the tall man who now stood before her shared in nothing the exaltedness of her sentiments, and his dismay was apparent.

"Alas! madame, you propose an enormity; for we are all so utterly the slaves of our catchwords that everybody would agree with you. There is no hope in 'what anybody may say.' Imbeciles everywhere will be saying that you have chosen wisely."

Morvyth now sat peculiarly erect upon the ivory couch.

"I am sure, I am really quite sure, Gonfal, that I do not understand you."

"I mean, madame, that, while of course your offer is all that is most kind and generous, I must here again, in mere honesty, I must distinguish. I mean that I think you know, as well as I do, love is not a gift which any man can give or any person hope long to retain. Ah, no, madame! We shrug, we smilingly allow romanticists their catchwords; meanwhile it remains the

veriest axiom, among realists like you and me, that love too is but a loan."

"So you have come back," the queen remarked, with an approach to crossness, "to your eternal loans!"

He slightly flung out both hands, palms upward.

"Love is that loan, my dear, which we accept most thankfully. But at the same time let us concede, as rational persons, the impermanence of all those materials which customarily provoke the erotic emotions."

"Gonfal," the young queen said, "now you talk stupidly. You talk with a dangerous lack of something more important than discretion."

"My love, I talk again as a widower." Then for a while he said nothing, and it appeared to Morvyth that this incomprehensible ingrate had shivered. He said: "And still, still, I talk of mathematical certainties! For how can you hope to remain in anything a lovable object? In a score of years, or within at most two-score, you will have become either fat or wrinkled, your teeth will rot and tumble out, your eyes will blear; your thighs will be most unenticingly mottled, your breath will be unpleasant, and your breasts will have become flabby bags. All these impairments, I repeat, my dear, are mathematical certainties."

To such horrid and irrelevant nonsense the queen replied, with dignity:

"I am not your dear, and I simply wonder at your impudence in ever for one moment thinking I was."

"Then, too," Sir Gonfal had gone on meditatively, "you have not much intelligence. That is very well for the present, because intelligence in youth, for some reason or another, is bad for the hair and muddies the complexion.

Yet an old woman who is stupid is also quite unendurable."

"But what," she asked him, rationally, "have I to do with stupid old women? I am Morvyth, I am Queen of the Isles of Wonder. I have the secrets which control all wealth and if I should ever take a fancy to such things, all wisdom, too. There is no beauty like my beauty, nor any power like my power—"

"I know, I know," he returned; "and for the present I of course adore you. But, nevertheless, did I fall in with your very dreadful suggestion, and permit you to place me, quite publicly, at your dear side, upon the terraced throne of Inis Dahut—why, then within a terribly brief while, I would not mind your being stupid, I would not actually notice your dilapidated looks, I would accept all your shortcomings complacently. And I would be contented enough with you, who once were the despair and joy of my living. No, Morvyth; no, my child! I, who was once a poet of sorts, could not again endure to live in contentment with a stupid and querulous woman who was unattractive to look at. And very certainly, within two-score of years—"

But a queenly gesture had put a check to such wild talk, and Morvyth, too, had arisen, saying:

"Your arithmetic becomes tiresome. One can afford to honor truisms in their proper place and about suitable persons: but there is, and always must be, a limit to the scope of such trite philosophy. Your audience is over, Messire Gonfal. And it is your last audience, because I consider you quite unutterably a beast."

He kissed the imperious little hand which dismissed him.

"You, at all events, my dear," he stated, "are quite unutterably human."

§ 4

Thus it came about, to the Imaun's vast relief,—and, as it seemed to the pious, kindly old man, perhaps in direct answer to his prayers that this matter might be settled agreeably all around and without any unpleasantness,—that the next day at noon, just as the seven champions were returning with their gifts, an attendant brought to Queen Morvyth the severed head of Gonfal.

This was in the vaulted hall of Tothmes, whose building was a famous tale, and of whose splendors travelers, come homeward, spoke without real hope to be believed. There Morvyth waited, crowned, upon her throne; and without, on that bright April morning, the trumpets sounded through the narrow streets and over the red roofs, proclaiming that the mightiest and most shrewd of champions were riding toward Inis Dahut from all kingdoms of the earth, through their desire of the young Queen of the Isles of Wonder whose beauty was the marvel of the world, and a legend in far lands not known to her even by their names.

Thus Morvyth sat, and at her feet one placed the severed head of Gonfal. There was blood on the fair beard, but still the lips were smiling, pallidly, over something of no great importance. And in her mind was the old question, whether it was possible that even now this man was laughing at her. Or, was it possible, she wondered, as she of a sudden recollected that first talk of theirs, that blondes did sometimes last

very damnably, and that some little washed-out, fly-by-night princess of nowhere in particular might thus get, even from her grave, in one way or another, the better of a great queen.

Well, but there was no need for a great queen to think as yet about graves and their most unpleasant contents; for Morvyth sat high as yet, superb and young and all powerful, in this fine palace of hers, about which so many lovers sighed, and the bland winds of April went caressingly. Nobody denied that this very tiresome wind would every year be coming up from the south—the lovely girl reflected as she fell meditatively to prodding with her toe at what remained of Gonfal—nor that, just so, this most persistent wind would be coursing over Inis Dahut when there was no Morvyth and no palace in this place any longer. Nobody denied, and nobody except insane and very rude persons thought at all seriously, about such truisms. It was enough, for really pious people, that in youth one had the loan of a bright sheltering against the ruthless and persistent wind which bore everything away as dust; if one felt a bit low-spirited now and then, it was not for any especial cause, and Morvyth, who as yet, for her permitted season, was Queen of the five Isles of Wonder, could hear the trumpets and the heralds proclaiming the entry of Prince Chedric of Lorn.

He, then, was the first to return of those perfectly detestable little meddlers who out of love for her had, now for a third time, ransacked the riches of the world; and he had rather nice eyes. Morvyth tidied her hair.