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The Accolade

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The Accolade

By Richard Brenner Hull ●



HE WALKED along, nondescript and disillusioned—a tattered figure almost lost in the swirling indifference of the crowd. Bending low against the raw blast which roared down the grey, dismal canyon of buildings, he shivered perceptibly. The sun, pale, sickly, gleamed half-heartedly through the chill winter haze, unsmiling, aloof, unfriendly. The weary people below, plodding through the cold, dirty slush, noticed it only with a bewildered sort of resentment. Hanging low, the heavy sky seemed intent on smothering the insolent humanity which had the effrontery to exist.

A flake of snow, already turned to muddy water, rested momentarily on his nose, a sensitive, proud nose.

“Life,” he reflected, “is like that—a few bits of drifting snow, grimy with soot, before they strike the hard cement.”

“Only,” he considered further, “I’m already on the sidewalk.”

Involuntarily he started, just as a ragged excuse of a dog, small, muddy, miserable, rubbed past him. Seconds later, a sharp, painful yelp scratched against his ears. He supposed someone had kicked the pup. Dog or man, the city ground them underfoot, not deliberately, not with conscious cruelty—just crushed them with the magnificent indifference of a steam-roller, unseeing and uncaring.

CAREFULLY pulling his tattered coat closer under his stubbled chin, he endeavored to smile complacently as an obese gentleman in an astrakhan coat hurried swiftly and importantly by. Hurry—why? To get some place so one could turn around and come back. He continued to meander, aimlessly. When one has no place to go there is no haste in getting there.

He brushed into the fringe of a crowd gathered about a bookstore window. Two women stared fastidiously at his ragged approach and stepped politely aside lest he touch them. He edged wistfully in towards the window. Books, books, books, very smart, very attractive in their bright jackets. Jackets, especially new ones, make so much difference.

"I like the old books better," he thought; "I have to."

They were old friends to him, these children's books—old friends with new clothes: "The Story of the Sigfried", "King Arthur and his Knights", "Lancelot and the Holy Grail". Surmounting the whole display and dominating the window was a picture of Sir Galahad. Below the print a card bore the old, old words so familiar to him: "My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure." His mother had always liked that. Funny, when he was a kid he always thought Galahad looked like a girl or a sissy. His mother never cared about having him say that, but she just smiled . . . hadn't thought of her or dad in a long time . . . thought of them . . . but hated so to . . . couldn't bear to tell them . . . His folks had been so splendidly hopeful when he left.

It came flooding back to him so strangely . . . the funny little town of his boyhood . . . the long winter evenings in the small snug house. Winter there was clean and cold, but the house was warm . . . warm. He shivered unconsciously as a damp gust pierced his flimsy garments.

"John," his father was saying, "learn to love books and you'll never be lonely. Books are friends which last—faithful and enduring. Sometime you'll remember Galahad and Lancelot and Gawain. Why, when he got his accolade."

"Pop," he heard himself saying, "what's an accolade?"

His mother's gentle voice, then: "Don't interrupt your father."

"The boy was just wondering, Mabel. Well, Johnny, in the olden days when a man became a knight he went through a certain ceremony. After all his getting ready, when he had finished with being a page and a squire, when he was through with his watch in the chapel, he was ready to be knighted. After he had made his vows, the king,

swearing him to be 'ever' a gentle, perfect knight, struck him gently on the shoulder with his sword. That's the accolade, boy."

"Will I get an accolade sometime, Mom—will I?"

She smiled strangely. "Yes, Johnny, sometime."

"**WHAT'S** he looking at, mother?" The shrill voice of the little boy snatched him suddenly into reality. He had been gazing at the window for longer than he knew. Sharply conscious of the curious stares, he shouldered himself forlornly into the wind-swept street—a street where silver knights and bannered castles were not even dreams.

He hesitated at the crossing. The thick, ugly stream of traffic, black and snaky and sinuous, seemed singularly evil and foreboding—like a dragon. He laughed. The man waiting beside him glanced up, startled.

Abruptly from the other side a little child darted out into the traffic, unseeing and unafraid. She paused a moment on the dull-gleaming trolley tracks, then stood bewildered, alone. A woman screamed. A black car—huge, ominous—skidded blindly, beyond control. Suddenly without seeming to move, he was in the street, no longer at the curb. A small girl, flung clear by one mad swoop of his arm, lay stunned but safe. Sliding cruelly, a roaring mountain of steel and rubber pressed his neck and shoulders harshly crushing them agonizingly against the cold, wet pavement.

The grey afternoon became suddenly dark—the dull track, a shining sword.

Then softly he heard his mother saying, "Sometime, Johnny," and he smiled quietly in his dream begun.



Blue Sequence

By Alice Wortman

SO MANY lovely things are blue—
 October skies,
 A baby's eyes,
 The acrid notes of a violin,
 A breath from the ocean faint and thin—
 All these are blue.