



## The Strange Quest

### Overview



No collection of the favorite tales of early England would be complete unless it contained some of the legends of King Arthur and the knights of his Round Table. King Arthur was a Celtic king who lived in England before the Anglo-Saxons came to conquer it. The ruins of his castle at Tintagel are still standing. He was a strong, brave, good man; and many bold knights came from far and near to fight under his banner. The courage and chivalry of King Arthur and his knights made a great appeal to the Norman minstrels. Most of the tales about them were known in French versions even before the Normans conquered England. They were brought over and translated into English by Norman bards.

The following story tells of the marvelous adventures of one of Arthur's less famous knights.

### The Tale of The Strange Quest

In a forest near King Arthur's court there once lived a boy fair of face and strong of body. He was the son of the fairy, Morgain le Fay. He never knew his real name, for she called him nothing but Beaufile, which means Fair Son. One day when he was playing in the forest, he saw a knight ride by in shining armor. Ever after that the boy's only thought was to go to Arthur's court and become a knight. At last he bade his mother farewell and set out for the court.

He reached the royal palace and entered the great hall where the knights were seated at the Round Table. Then he went up to the throne chair and knelt before the King.

"O King," said he, "I have come to beg a great favor of you. Pray make me a knight."

King Arthur noticed the boy's strength and beauty and said, "Indeed I have seen no one worthier of joining our brave company. Pray tell me what is your name?"

"I do not know my name," answered the boy, "for my mother calls me nothing but Beaufile."

"It is a strange thing for one who does not even know his own name to wish to become a knight," said the King, "but you are such a likely lad that I will grant your request. Hereafter you shall be called Libbius Disconus, or the Fair Unknown."

Then King Arthur knighted him, gave him bright new armor and a golden shield with a griffon<sup>1</sup> on it, and sent him out on the plain with Sir Gawain to learn all the knightly accomplishments. When the young Sir Libbius had learned all the things that a knight should know, he went to King Arthur and asked to be sent out on the next quest.<sup>2</sup> At first King Arthur thought that Sir Libbius was too young to be sent on a quest as yet, but finally he promised to send him.

The knights were just finishing their noonday meal when a fair messenger-maid rode into the hall on a milk-white horse with jeweled saddle and bridle. With her was a yellow-bearded dwarf clothed in gold. The maiden alighted and knelt down before them all.

“Alas!” she said, “the Lady of Synadowne lies in prison and sends me, Maid Elaine, to bring a knight to rescue her.”

Then up started the young knight and reminded King Arthur of his promise. King Arthur granted him the quest.

“Why, he is scarcely more than a child,” complained Maid Elaine. “Why do you send him when you have such mighty knights as Lancelot, Percival, and Gawain?”

“I am afraid of no man,” quickly answered Sir Libbius, “and I will follow the quest to the end.” King Arthur told the maiden that Libbius was the only knight she could have, and that she would have to be content with him. Then Sir Libbius was clothed in a white silk mantle and shining coat of fine-linked mail.<sup>3</sup> The other knights furnished him with arms. Sir Gawain gave him a shield, Sir Lancelot a spear and a sword, and Sir Iwain a strong steel helmet and a lion-hearted steed. Then Sir Libbius sprang on the new war horse and, after receiving the king’s blessing, rode forth with the maiden and the dwarf.

Sir Libbius, Maid Elaine, and the dwarf went on there way westward toward Synadowne for three days. All through the three days the maiden kept nagging the knight; for she thought he was only an unskilled boy who could never win a battle. On the third night, as they were far from town, they built two lodges of boughs in a green grove in the forest. Here Libbius and Elaine slept, while the dwarf watched outside to see that no one stole the horses.

In the middle of the night he came to Libbius, shaking with fear. “Arise quickly, young knight,” he cried. “I can smell smoke and fear that we are in danger.”

Sir Libbius leaped to his horse, took his shield and spear, and rode toward the fire. When he drew near, he saw two grisly giants, one red as fire and the other black as pitch. The red giant was turning a wild boar on a spit above the fire. The black one held in his arms a maiden as bright as a briar-blossom. The maiden was crying for some knight to come and rescue her.

“It would be a noble deed to rescue this maiden from the giants,” thought Sir Libbius, “but it is no child’s play to fight two such grim and grisly monsters.”

Spear in hand, he quickly charged forward and pierced the black giant through liver, heart, and lungs, so that he never arose again. The fair maiden was now free and ran back into the forest.

Elaine and the dwarf met her and led her to Elaine’s own lodge of boughs. There they waited and prayed that Sir Libbius might conquer the red giant.

The red giant seized the spit and smote a mighty blow. Luckily it missed Sir Libbius, but it struck his horse down dead. Libbius sprang from the saddle and drew his sword. The giant struck again, and at the second blow the spit broke in two. He uprooted a large tree to use for a club and did not stop fighting one instant.

With a smart blow of the tree, he broke the young knight’s shield in three pieces. Then Libbius thought that the giant had surely won the fight. As the giant lifted the tree to strike again, Sir Libbius darted forward and struck off his right arm. At once he fell to the ground and Libbius cut off his head. Then Sir Libbius took the heads of the two giants and went back to the lodge of boughs. The two maidens and the dwarf cried with joy when they saw that he had killed the giants.

“Tell me, gentle lady,” said Sir Libbius to the strange maiden, “what is your name and where do you live?”

“My name is Violette,” she replied. “My father is a rich earl and a mighty knight. Yesterday morning as I was picking flowers in my garden, the giants sprang from a cave and carried me off to their fire. I fear that I should never have escaped from them if you had not come to my aid. But come! My father’s castle is not far from here and I know that he will want to thank you for himself.”

They rode on to the Earl’s castle. The Earl was overjoyed to see his daughter again. When he heard the story of her rescue, his thankfulness to Sir Libbius was boundless. He offered the young knight fifteen castles and lands if he would stay with him. Sir Libbius refused, saying that he was on a quest to Synadowne and could stop for no man. Then he sent a messenger back to King Arthur with the two giants’ heads and set forth on his journey again. As parting gifts, Violette’s

father gave him rich new robes, rose-red shield and armor, and a new war horse to replace the one killed by the giant.

Sir Libbius, Maid Elaine, and the dwarf rode onward until they came to the city of Cardiff. There in the middle of a park was a palace larger and more splendid than any that Sir Libbius had ever seen. At once he asked to whom it belonged.

“It belongs to a knight named Sir Griffron,” answered Maid Elaine. “He has a sweetheart so beautiful that he challenges anyone in the world to find a fairer maiden. The man who can bring a fairer maiden wins the prize of a snow-white falcon. If the maiden he brings is not so fair, he must fight with Sir Griffron. If he loses the fight, his head will be cut off and put on a spear-shaft for all to see.

“I will challenge his falcon,” said Sir Libbius.

“I will say that I have in this city a lady fairer than his sweetheart, and if he wants to see her, I will show you to him.”

“Sir Libbius,” said the dwarf, “pray do not be so rash. You will put yourself in great danger, for Sir Griffron is a stern knight and has never been conquered in battle.”

Sir Libbius bade him have no fear and rode into the town. The next morning at dawn he put on the new armor that the Earl had given him and rode toward the proud palace of Sir Griffron with the dwarf by his side. When Sir Griffron came out of the palace that morning, he saw Sir Libbius riding toward him like a prince in his pride.

“Tell me quickly,” he cried out shrilly, “whether you come as friend or foe.”

“I come to challenge your white falcon and win it for Arthur, my king,” said Sir Libbius, “for I have here in town a maiden fairer than your sweetheart.”

“Gentle Knight, how shall we judge which is fairer?” asked Sir Griffron.

“Let us bring them together and place them side by side in the market place of Cardiff,” answered Sir Libbius. “If the maiden I bring is not fairer, then I will fight with you for the falcon.”

They agreed to have the meeting at nine o’clock that morning and parted, holding up their gloves as a sign of their wager.

Sir Libbius rode back and said to Maid Elaine, “Get ready quickly and put on your finest garments, for we are to meet Sir Griffron and his sweetheart in the market place at nine o’clock. If you are not so fair as she, then I must fight to win the falcon.”

Maid Elaine put on a robe of white samite<sup>4</sup> and white kerchiefs embroidered in gold. Over her shoulders she cast a velvet cloak bordered with gray fur and upon her head she set a crown of gold and jewels. Then Libbius mounted her upon a white palfrey and they rode into the city. Each man who saw them pass said, “Here comes a lady bright and fair to see.”

They went into the market place and stopped. Soon Sir Griffron came riding with two squires by his side. He bore a red shield with three silver owls upon it. All his trappings were of the same colors. One of his squires carried three stout spears. The other bore upon his wrist the snow-white falcon. After them rode his fair lady and everyone marveled to see how small and slender she was. She wore a gown of purple and a mantle of rose edged with royal ermine. Upon her head was a crown set with many a bright jewel. She had milk-white skin and rosy cheeks and eyes gray as glass. Her hair was as fine and soft as silken thread and shone like golden wire. No man could begin to tell of her beauty. When they placed the two maidens side by side in the market place, Elaine seemed like a kitchen maid beside her.

“You have lost the falcon,” said Sir Griffron to Sir Libbius.

“Nay, but I will fight for it,” answered Sir Libbius, “and if you bear me down, you may take my head, but if I down you, I take the falcon.”

Then they rode together with a clash like thunder and struck each other’s shields so hard that their spear-shafts shattered.

“This young fellow sits in his saddle as firmly as a stone in a castle wall,” thought Sir Griffron, “but even if he is as skilled a knight as Percival

or Lancelot or Arthur himself, I can push him from his horse and give him a bad fall.”

They came together again and Libbius struck Griffron’s shield to the ground. All the men there laughed, for they had never before seen a knight who could stand up against Sir Griffron. Sir Griffron rushed up and smote like a madman.

Sir Libbius sat so steadily that the shock of the blow cast down both Griffron and his horse. Griffron broke his leg with a crack that could be heard at a distance. He was carried from the place on his shield. Then all present said that Libbius had won the snow-white falcon. He sent it to King Arthur with a letter telling how he had won it.

When Arthur received the bird and the letter, he said, “Sir Libbius is a worthy knight. He has shown that he is fit to be one of the knights of the Round Table. I will send him treasure to reward him.”

He sent a good hundred pounds in golden florins to Cardiff, where Sir Libbius was still feasting to celebrate his victory. Soon after, Sir Libbius took his leave of the townsmen and went on his way with Maid Elaine and the dwarf toward Synadowne. As they were going along on their journey again, they came to a fair city by a riverside with high castles and a strong gate. Sir Libbius asked what it might be.

“Men call it Iledor,” answered Maid Elaine, “and they say that there has been more fighting here than in any other country. Now a giant, Mogs, has taken the city and holds prisoner a lady as fair as a rose. This giant is black as pitch and bold as a boar. Anyone who crosses the bridge into the city must lay down his weapons and yield himself to the giant.”

“In a great storm,” said Sir Libbius, “large oaks often fall while small trees stand. I will attack the giant, and even though I am small and light, I may strike him down in this fight.” They rode on toward Iledor and soon saw on the bridge the giant, all armed in black, with a spear in his hand.

“Young fellow, if you love your life, turn and go home as fast as you can,” called the giant.

“Arthur’s knights never turn back,” replied Sir Libbius. “Prepare yourself to fight.”

At the sound of voices, many lords and ladies came out upon the city turrets and leaned over to watch the fight. They were hoping and praying that Sir Libbius would kill the giant and free the city.

Libbius and the giant came together with a crash. Their shields rang under the heavy blows. Everyone wondered that Sir Libbius had not fallen at the first stroke. They drew swords and clashed again. Libbius struck the giant’s shield to the ground. Soon they had killed each other’s horses and were fighting on foot. They fought and fought all through the day and well into the evening.

At last the young knight became very thirsty and said, “Mogs, pray let me go and drink, for my throat is parched and dry. It would be shameful for a knight to have to give up a battle just on account of thirst. If you come to need, I shall grant you any favor you may ask.”

“Go and drink your fill,” said Mogs.

Sir Libbius lay down on the river bank and drank through his helmet. The giant crept up behind him and knocked him into the river. Then many a swan-white lady wrung her hands in despair for Libbius.

He quickly climbed out of the river, but Mogs crushed his shield with one blow. Then Libbius saw the giant’s shield lying on the ground where it had been struck during the first of the battle.

He picked it up and went back to fighting again. The battle lasted until after dark. At last Libbius thrust his sword through the giant’s armor-plate and mail into his shoulder bone. Then Mogs fled with might and main. Libbius pursued him and caught him. He broke his back with three strokes and cut off his head.

When Sir Libbius returned to Iledor with the giant’s head, he found all the people coming to meet him in a procession. They led him into the city with much rejoicing and thanksgiving and freed the fair lady from prison.

Now this lady was as lovely to look upon as any in the world, but she was a sorceress<sup>5</sup> who had the power to enchant all men. She would sing to a man, and at the magic of her song, he would forget everything and think only of the sweetness

of her voice and the loveliness of her face. She sang to Sir Libbius and he thought he was in Paradise. He forgot his quest and the Lady of Synadowne and even Arthur, his King. He noted not the passing of the days or the nights or the weeks or the months. For more than a year he lay under her spell.

Then one day he met Maid Elaine within the castle wall and she said to him, "Fie, for shame, sir, that you, a knight of the Round Table should forget your quest and your king! Here my poor Lady of Synadowne has been lying in prison for over a year, and that is a great pity."

When Sir Libbius heard those words, he thought his heart would break with shame and sorrow. At once the spell cast over him was gone. He put on his armor, ran to the stable and got his horse. Then he and Maid Elaine and the dwarf rode away from Iledor as fast as they could ride.

On the third day they came at last to Synadowne, a fair city with fine palaces and a strong castle. They saw many men gathering into one heap all the mud and filth which had been cast out of the city. Sir Libbius wondered much at this strange custom and asked Maid Elaine what it meant.

"No knight of any degree," she said, "even if he has lost his way, can get shelter here for the night on account of a steward named Sir Lambard, the keeper of this castle. If you ride up to the east gate and ask courteously for shelter, he will joust with you before he grants your request.

If he bears you down, his trumpeters will blow and a band of youths and maidens will come out of Synadowne and throw mud and filth on you. You will have to go forth spattered with mud, and everywhere you go to your life's end, you will be known as a coward and will shame Arthur, your king."

Then Sir Libbius made up his mind to joust with Sir Lambard and win for Arthur's sake. He rode up to the east gate and asked for shelter for the night. The porter let him in at once and asked who his lord was. When he found out that Sir Libbius was one of Arthur's knights, he went to his master, Sir Lambard, and told him that a knight of the Round Table had come, strongly armed in rose-red armor with three golden lions on his shield.

"He must fight with me," said Sir Lambard. "I want to try the skill of one of Arthur's knights. Tell him to make ready for battle and go await me in the field outside the castle."

Sir Libbius saw to his shaft and shield and rode into the field. Soon Sir Lambard rode out in full armor, bearing an iron-pointed spear and a golden shield with a black boar's head on it. They rode together with such a shock that their spear-shafts shattered and fell to the ground in splinters. Sir Lambard was very angry, for never had a knight withstood him so skillfully before. He called for a new shaft and chose a round one with a sharply ground point, for he wished to give a deadly wound.

He rushed up and gave Libbius so strong a blow that his shield fell to the ground, but still the young knight sat steadily in the saddle. Then Libbius struck off Lambard's helmet and that bold knight rocked in his saddle like a child in the cradle. Still he wished to fight and cried for another helmet and a fresh spear. They clashed again. Sir Libbius sat firm as a rock and the shock of the encounter sent Sir Lambard backward off his horse.

"Have you had enough?" asked Sir Libbius.

"Yes, indeed," he answered. "Never since I was born have I seen a knight so skilful and so pleasing to me. If you will fight for my Lady of Synadowne, you are very welcome to me."

"I have come on a quest from King Arthur to rescue the lady," said Sir Libbius, "but I do not know what her trouble is nor who has done her wrong. Who is the knight that has imprisoned the Lady of Synadowne?"

"It is no common knight who has dared to take away the Lady of Synadowne, but the two brother magicians, Maboun and Irain. In this city they have built a strange palace of wizardry and enchantment. No knight or baron, not even the boldest, dares to enter it. There they have imprisoned my gentle lady and torment her day and night. Often we can hear her cry out, but we can never see her. We are very sad, for she is sweet and lovely and beloved of old and young and rich and poor.

"Tomorrow I will conquer Maboun and Irain and free the fair lady," Sir Libbius said. That night he rested, and the next morning he set forth fresh to

fight. Sir Lambard led him to the gate of the enchanted palace. The gate was open wide, but Sir Lambard did not dare to enter and left Sir Libbius to go in alone. He rode in, alighted, and led his horse into the hall. There was a band of minstrels clothed in pall,<sup>6</sup> who played upon the harp and fiddle such music as Sir Libbius had never heard before. In front of each minstrel a torch burned bright and clear. The minstrels were playing to an empty hall, for no knights were anywhere in sight. Libbius went in farther to look for Maboun and Irain. He even looked in the corners and behind the pillars. These pillars were of jasper<sup>7</sup> and fine crystal. The walls were richly painted, the doors were of brass, and the windows were of glass stained with beautiful pictures.

Sir Libbius had never seen such a wonderful palace. He sat down at the end of the hall and marveled at it all. Of a sudden, the torches went out and the minstrels vanished. The doors and the windows fell in and the stones of the wall crashed down upon him. The whole place rocked and shook as if in an earthquake.

As Sir Libbius sat shaking with fear among the ruins, he heard horses neighing. He looked up and a field was spread before him. Over this field two knights came riding, armed in purple with trappings and garlands of gold.

“Sir Adventurous Knight,” called Maboun, “however proud and skilful you may be, you must fight with me and my brother, Irain, to win the fair Lady of Synadowne.”

Sir Libbius was fresh for the fight and jumped to his saddle with right good will. He attacked with such fury that he knocked Maboun off his horse. Before he could slay Maboun, Irain rushed into the fight. With a deft thrust of his spear, Sir Libbius tore Irain’s coat of mail. After a bitter struggle in which his horse was lamed, Libbius felled Irain to the ground. By this time, Maboun had risen to continue the battle. Libbius alighted to fight with Maboun on foot. They exchanged such blows that they struck sparks from each other’s shields. Libbius’s sword broke in two. Then he was angry and ashamed, for he feared that he would lose the fight and be disgraced in the eyes of Arthur, his king.

He ran to the fallen Irain and wrenched away his sword. Then he attacked Maboun with renewed strength. Maboun fought like a lion, but Libbius

soon cut off his shield arm. At last Maboun begged for mercy and promised to give up the Lady of Synadowne, but Libbius wanted to fight to a finish and cleft Maboun’s head in two.

After Maboun was dead, Libbius went to slay Irain. Before he could reach the fallen magician, Libbius was whisked away through the air. He found himself back in the hall again. The doors and the windows and the stones of the walls were all back in their places. The hall was just as it had been when he first saw it except that there were now no minstrels. Sir Libbius was sore afraid and prayed to be delivered from the enchantment. Suddenly a window fell from the wall and a long slimy serpent slid through. But, strange to see, this serpent had the face of a beautiful maiden. Sir Libbius was so numb with fear that he could not move from his place. The serpent came crawling up to him and kissed him on the mouth. Then its scales and tail fell away, and in its place stood the loveliest lady Sir Libbius had ever seen.

“Kind Sir,” she said, “I am the Lady of Synadowne. The wicked magicians, Maboun and Irain, changed me to a serpent and said that I should have to remain a serpent until I had kissed one of Arthur’s knights. Now you have saved me from a life of horror and I thank you with all my heart. I will give you fifteen castles and will gladly become your wife and share the rule of Synadowne with you, if it is your wish and Arthur’s will.”

Then the heart of Libbius was filled with gladness, although he was still very anxious about getting out of the enchanted palace. But the magic spell was broken and they went out of the hall and through the open gate with no trouble at all.

Many people were waiting outside the gate and when they saw the Lady of Synadowne, they sent up a cry of joy. They brought a crown of gold and set it upon her head and led her with a gay procession to the royal palace. Sir Libbius was hailed as a great hero and given the freedom of the city, but he soon had to return to Arthur’s court, and the Lady of Synadowne went with him, leaving the faithful Maid Elaine to rule over the city in her place.

King Arthur welcomed his brave knight and the fair lady, and gladly gave his consent to their marriage. So they were married in Arthur’s

palace in the presence of all the knights of the Round Table, and there was much merrymaking and good cheer and a feast of forty days.

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<sup>1</sup> A griffon was an imaginary monster, half lion and half eagle.

<sup>2</sup> A quest was a journey of adventure which a knight undertook in order to help some person in distress.

<sup>3</sup> The coat of mail fitted closely to the body like a shirt and was made of a fabric of steel links.

<sup>4</sup> Samite was a rich silk fabric usually interwoven with threads of gold.

<sup>5</sup> A sorceress was, so people used to believe, a woman who could do magic deeds.

<sup>6</sup> Pall was a rare heavy fabric used for rich cloaks in the Middle Ages.

<sup>7</sup> Jasper is a beautiful polished stone, now only used for making vases and other small articles.