

## A GOOD KNIGHT'S WORK

Robert Bloch

*The next story is an example of the continuing use of the dragon-hunting theme in modern humorous fantasy. The tradition of the old sagas which F. Anstey brought into the twentieth century is here revived in a new guise by Robert Bloch, who is perhaps best known for his horror novel Psycho (1959) and the film of it by Alfred Hitch-cock, but is also highly regarded as a writer of witty fantasy dis-playing what has been called his 'graveyard humour. Although Bloch's early stories were mostly tales of horror, his skill in writing comic fantasy was revealed in the series of Lefty Feep stories which he contributed to Fantastic Adventures in the Forties. Describing the exploits of a wisecracking hustler, the titles of these tales say all about the contents: 'Time Wounds All Heels', 'Jerk the Giant Killer', 'Genie with the Light Brown Hair' and 'Stuporman'. The enthusiasm with which this series was received by readers encouraged Bloch to return to writing humorous fantasy throughout the rest of his life, and indeed one of the last stories he wrote was very much in the Lefty Feep tradition, 'The Shrink and the Mink'.*

*Robert Bloch (1917—1994) was born in Chicago, the home town of the legendary pulp Weird Tales, and, not surprisingly, his first horror stories appeared in its pages. Soon, however, he was broaden-ing his style, giving free rein to his ghoulish sense of humour and ultimately parodying a whole cross-section of the great writers of supernatural fiction, from H. P. Lovecraft to Stephen King. The suc-cess of Psycho opened the door to films, and he scripted numerous Hollywood pictures as well as a series of anthology movies made in England by Amicus and based upon his own short stories. In 1975 his contribution to the genre was honoured by a 'Life Award' at the First World Fantasy Convention, and he was regarded as one of the pre-eminent figures in fantasy fiction at the time of his sad death in 1994.*

*His talent, however, lives on—and especially in stories like this hilarious drama of a dragon-slayer on the loose in Thirties America, in which his literary model was unmistakably Damon Runyon, the famous chronicler of hardboiled characters with soft hearts. First published in Unknown Worlds in November 1942, the story imitates Runyon's present-tense style of writing, but is equally full of Robert Bloch's own special brand of comic invention.*

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I am stepping on the gas, air is pouring into the truck and curses are pouring out, because I feel like I get up on the wrong side of the gutter this morning.

Back in the old days I am always informing the mob how I am going to get away from it all and buy a little farm in the country and raise chickens. So now I raise chickens and wish I am back in the old days raising hell.

It is one of those things, and today it is maybe two or three of them, in spades. Perhaps you are lucky and do not live in the Corn Belt, so I will mention a few items to show that the guy naming it knows what he's talking about.

This morning I wake up at four a.m. because fifty thousand sparrows are holding a Communist rally under the window. I knock my shins over a wheelbarrow in the back yard because the plumbing is remote. When I get dressed I have to play tag with fifty chickens I am taking to market, and by the time that's over I am covered with more feathers than a senator who gets adopted by Indians in a news-reel. After which all I do is load the cacklers on the truck, drive fifty miles to town, sell biddies at a loss, and drive back—strictly without breakfast.

Breakfast I must catch down the road at the tavern, where I got to pay ten bucks to Thin Tommy Malloon for protection.

That is my set-up and explains why I am not exactly bubbling over with good spirits. There is nothing to do about it but keep a stiff upper lip—mostly around the bottle I carry with me on the trip back.

Well, I am almost feeling better after a few quick ones, and am just about ready to stop my moans and groans when I spot this sign on the road.

I don't know how it is with you. But this is how it is with me. I do not like signs on the road a bit, and of all the signs I do not like, the *SIAMESE SHAVE* signs I hate in spades.

They stand along the highway in series, and each of them has a line of poetry on it so when you pass them all you read a little poem about *SIAMESE SHAVE*. They are like the Old Lady Goose rhymes they feed the juveniles, and I do not have any love for Ma Goose and her poetry.

Anyhow, when I see this first sign I let out some steam and take another nip. But I cannot resist reading the sign because I always do. It says:

*DON'T WEAR A LONG BEARD*

And a little further on the second one reads:

*LIKE A GOAT*

Pretty soon I come to the third one, saying:

*JUST TAKE A RAZOR*

And all at once I'm happy, hoping maybe somebody made a mis-take and the fourth sign will say:

*AND CUT YOUR THROAT!*

So I can hardly wait to see the last one, and I'm looking ahead on the road, squinting hard. Then I slam on the brakes.

No, I don't see a sign. There is a *thing* blocking the road, instead. *Two* things.

One of these things is a horse. At least, it looks more like a horse than anything else I can see on four drinks. It is a horse covered with a kind of awning, or tent that hangs down over its legs and out on its neck. In fact, I notice that this horse is wearing a mask over its head with eyeholes, like it belongs to the Ku Klux Klan.

The other *thing* is riding the horse. It is all silver, from head to foot, and there is a long plume growing out of its head. It looks like a man, and it has a long, sharp pole in one hand and the top off a garbage can in the other.

Now when I look at this party I am certain of only one thing. This is not the Lone Ranger.

When I drive a little closer my baby-blue eyes tell me that what I am staring at is a man dressed up in a suit of armour, and that the long, sharp pole is a little thing

like a twelve-foot spear with a razor on the end.

Who he is and why he is dressed up this way may be very interesting to certain parties like the State police, but I am very far away from being one. Also I am very far away from Thin Tommy Malloon who is waiting for my ten bucks protection money.

So when I see Old Ironsides blocking the road, I place my head outside the window and request, 'Get the hell out of the way, buddy!' in a loud but polite voice.

Which turns out to be a mistake, in spades and no trump.

The party in the tin tuxedo just looks at the truck coming his way, and cocks his iron head when he sees steam coming from the radiator. The exhaust is beginning to make trombone noises, because I am stepping hard on the gas, and this seems to make up the heavy dresser's mind for him.

'Yoiks!' howls his voice behind his helmet. 'A dragon!'

And all at once he levels that lance of his, knocks his tootsies against the horse's ribs, and starts coming head-on for the truck.

'For Pendragon and England!' he bawls, over the clanking. And charges ahead like a baby tank.

That twelve-foot razor of his is pointed straight for my radiator, and I do not wish him to cut my motor, so naturally I swing the old truck out of the way.

This merely blows the radiator cap higher than the national debt, and out shoots enough steam and hot air to supply a dozen congressmen.

The horse rears up, and the tintype lets out a yap, letting his lance loose. Instead of hitting my radiator, it smashes my windshield.

Also my temper. I stop the truck and get out, fast. 'Now, listen, buddy,' I reason with him.

'Aha!' comes the voice from under the helmet. 'A wizard!' He uses a brand of double-talk I do not soon forget. 'Halt ye, for it is Pallagyn who speaks.'

I am in no mood for orations, so I walk up to him, waving a pipe wrench.

'Bust my windows, eh, buddy? Monkey business on a public highway, is it? I'm going to—Yow!'

I am a personality that seldom hollers 'Yow!' even at a burlesque show, but when this armour-plated jockey slides off his horse and comes for me, he is juggling a sharp six feet of sword. And six feet of sword sailing for your neck is worth a 'Yow!' any day, I figure.

I also figure I had better duck unless I want a shave and a haircut, and it is lucky for me that Iron-lung has to move slow when he whams his sword down at me.

I come up under his guard and give him a rap on the old orange with my pipe wrench.

There is no result.

The steel king drops his sword and lets out another roar, and I caress his helmet again with the wrench. Still no result. I get my result on the third try. The wrench breaks.

And then his iron arms grab me, and I am in for it.

The first thing I know, everything is turning black as solitary, and my sparring partner is reaching for a shiv at his belt. I get my foot there, fast.

All I can do is push forward, but it works. About a hundred and fifty pounds of armour loses balance, and there is nothing for the guy inside to do except to go down with it. Which he does, on his back. Then I am on his chest, and I roll up the Venetian blind on the front of his helmet.

‘Hold, enough!’ comes the double-talk from inside. ‘Prithee, hold!’

‘OK, buddy. But open up that mail box of yours. I want to see the face of the jerk that tries to get me into a traffic accident with a load of tin.’

He pulls up the shutters, and I get a peek at a purple face decorated with red whiskers. There are blue eyes, too, and they look down, ashamed.

‘Ye are the first, O Wizard, to gaze upon the vanquished face of Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep,’ he mumbles.

I get off his chest like it was the hot seat. Because, although I am very fond of nuts, I like them only in fruit cakes.

‘I’ve got to be going,’ I mention. ‘I don’t know who you are or why you are running around like this, and I maybe ought to have you run in, but I got business up the road, see? So long.’

I start walking away and turn around. ‘Besides, my name is not O. Wizard.’

‘Verily,’ says the guy who calls himself Sir Pallagyn, getting up slow, with a lot of rattling. ‘Ye are a wizard, for ye ride a dragon breathing fire and steam.’

I am thinking of the fire and steam Thin Tommy Malloon is breath-ing right now, so I pay little or no attention, but get in the truck. Then this Pallagyn comes running up and yells, ‘Wait!’

‘What for?’

‘My steed and arms are yours by right of joust.’

Something clicks inside my head, and even if it is an eight ball, I get interested. ‘Wait a minute,’ I suggest. ‘Just who are you and where do you hang out?’

‘Why,’ says he, ‘as I bespoke, O Wizard—I am Sir Pallagyn of the Black Keep, sent here ensorcelled by Merlin, from Arthur’s court at Camelot. And I hang out at the greves in my armour,’ he adds, tucking in some cloth sticking out of the chinks and joints in his heavy suit.

‘Huh?’ is about the best I can do.

‘And besting me in fair combat, ye gain my steed and weapons, by custom of the joust.’ He shakes his head, making a noise like a Tommy-gun. ‘Merlin will be very angry when he hears of this, I wot.’

‘Merlin?’

‘Merlin, the Grey Wizard, who sent me upon the quest,’ he explains. ‘He it was who sped me forward in Time, to quest for the Cappadocian Tabouret.’

Now I am not altogether a lug—as you can tell by the way I look up some of the spelling on these items—and when something clicks inside my noggin it means I am thinking, but difficult.

I know I am dealing with the worst kind of screwball—the kind that bounces—but still there is some sense in what he is saying. I see this King Arthur and this Merlin in a picture once, and I see also some personalities in armour that are called knights, which means they are King Arthur’s trigger men. They hang out around a big table in a stone hideout and are always spoiling for trouble and going off on quests—which means putting the goniff on stuff which doesn’t belong to

them, or copping dames from other knights.

But I figure all this happens maybe a hundred years ago, or so, over in Europe, before they throw away their armour and change into coloured shirts to put the rackets on an organised paying basis.

And this line about going forward in Time to find something is practically impossible, unless you go for Einstein's theory, which I don't, preferring Jane Fonda.

Still, it is you might say unusual, so I answer this squirrel. 'What you're trying to tell me is that you come here from King Arthur's court and some magician sends you to find something?'

'Verily, O Wizard. Merlin counselled me that I might not be believed,' says Pallagyn, sadlike. He chews on his moustache, with-out butter. He almost looks like he is promoting a weeper.

'I believe you, buddy,' I say, wanting to cheer him up and also get out of here.

'Then take my mount and weapons—it is required by law of the joust,' he insists.

Right then I figure I would rather take a drink. I do. It makes me feel better. I get out and walk over to the oat burner. 'I don't know what to do with this four-legged glue barrel,' I tell him, 'or your manicure set, either. But if it makes you happy, I will take them with me.'

So I grab the nag and take him around back of the truck, let down the ramp and put him in. When I get back, Sir Pallagyn is piling his steel polo set into the front seat.

'I place these on the dragon for thee,' he says.

'This isn't a dragon,' I explain. 'It's a Ford.'

'Ford? Merlin did not speak of that creature.' He climbs into the seat after his cutlery, looking afraid the steering wheel will bite him.

'Hey, where you going?'

'With thee, O Wizard. The steed and weapons are thine, but I must follow them, even into captivity. It is the law of the quest.'

'You got laws on the brain, that's your trouble. Now listen, I don't like hitchhikers—'

Then I gander at my ticker and see it is almost ten and remember I am to meet Thin Tommy at eight. So I figure, why not? I will give this number a short lift down the pike and dump him where it is quiet and forget him. Maybe I can also find out whether or not there is somebody missing from Baycrest, which is the local laughing acad-emy, and turn him in. Anyway, I have my date to keep, so I start the truck rolling.

This Pallagyn lets out a sort of whistle through his whiskers when I hit it up, so I say, 'What's the matter, buddy, are you thirsty?'

'No,' he gasps. 'But we are flying!'

'Only doing fifty,' I tell him. 'Look at the speedometer.'

'Fifty what? Speedometer?'

My noggin is clicking like a slot machine in a church bazaar. This baby isn't faking! I get another look at his armour and see it is solid stuff—not like fancy-dress

costumes, but real heavy, with little designs in gold and silver running through it. And he doesn't know what a car is, or a speedometer!

'You need a drink,' I say, taking it for him, and then passing him the bottle.

'Mead?' he says.

'No, Haig & Haig. Try a slug.'

He tilts the bottle and takes a terrific triple-tongue. He lets out a roar and turns redder than his whiskers.

'I am bewitched!' he yells. 'Ye black wizard!'

'Hold it. You'll cool off in a minute. Besides, I'm not a wizard. I'm a truck farmer, believe it or not, and don't let them kid you down at the Bastille. I'm through with the rackets.'

He gets quieter in a minute and begins to ask me questions. Before I know it, I am explaining who I am and what I am doing, and after another drink it doesn't seem so screwy to me any more.

Even when he tells me about this Merlin cat putting a spell on him and sending him through Time to go on a quest, I swallow it like my last shot. I break down and tell him to call me Butch. In a few minutes we're practically cell mates.

'Ye may call me Pallagyn,' he says.

'OK, Pal. How about another slug?'

This time he is more cautious, and it must go down fairly well, because he smacks his lips and doesn't even turn pink.

'Might I enquire as to your destination, O Butch?' he lets out after a minute or so.

'You might,' I say. 'There it is, straight ahead.'

I point out the building we are just coming to. It is a roadhouse and tavern called 'The Blunder Inn', and it is in this rat hole that Thin Tommy Malloon hangs his hat and holster. This I explain to Pal.

'It doth not resemble a rat hole,' he comments.

'Any place where Thin Tommy gets in must be a rat hole,' I tell him, 'because Thin Tommy is a rat. He is a wrongo but strongo. Nevertheless, I must now go in and pay him his ten dollars for protection or he will sprinkle lye on my alfalfa.'

'What do you mean?' asks Pallagyn.

'Yes, Pal. I have a little farm, and I must pay Thin Tommy ten a week or else I will have trouble, such as finding ground glass in my hen mash, or a pineapple in my silo.'

'Ye pay to keep vandals from despoiling the crops?' asks the knight. 'Would it not be expedient to discover the miscreants and punish them?'

'I know who would wreck the farm if I didn't pay,' I reply. 'Thin Tommy.'

'Ah, now methinks I comprehend thy plight. Thou art a serf, and this Thin Thomas is thy overlord.'

Somehow this remark, and the way Pallagyn says it, seems to show me up for a sucker. And I have just enough drink in me to resent it.

'I am no serf,' I shout. 'As a matter of fact, I am waiting a long time to fix the clock of this Thin Tommy. So today I pay him no ten dollars, and I am going in to tell him so to what he calls his face.'

Pallagyn listens to me kind of close, because he seems pretty ignorant on

English and grammar, but he catches on and smiles.

‘Spoken like a right true knight,’ he says. ‘I shall accompany ye on this mission, for I find in my heart a liking for thy steadfast purpose, and a hatred of Thin Thomas.’

‘Sit where you are,’ I says, fast. ‘I will handle this myself. Because Thin Tommy does not like strangers coming into his joint in the daytime without an invitation, and you are dressed kind of loud and conspicuous. So you stay here,’ I tell him, ‘and have a drink.’

And I pull up and climb out of the car and march into the tavern fast.

My heart is going fast also, because what I am about to do is enough to make any heart go fast in case Thin Tommy gets an idea to stop it from beating altogether. Which he sometimes does when he is irked, particularly over money.

Even so I walk up to the bar and sure enough, there is Thin Tommy standing there polishing the glasses with boxing gloves on. Only when I look again I realise these are not boxing gloves at all, but merely Thin Tommy’s hands.

Thin Tommy is not really thin, you understand, but is called that because he weighs about three hundred fifty pounds—stripped—such as once a month, when he takes a bath.

‘So, it’s you!’ he says, in a voice like a warden.

‘Hello, Thin Tommy,’ I greet him. ‘How are tricks?’

‘I will show you how tricks are if you do not cough up those ten berries fast and furious,’ grunts Thin Tommy. ‘All of the others have been here two or three hours ago, and I am waiting to go to the bank.’

‘Go right ahead,’ I tell him. ‘I wouldn’t stop you.’

Thin Tommy drops the glass he is polishing and leans over the bar. ‘Hand it over,’ he says through his teeth. They are big yellow teeth, all put together in not such a pleasant grin.

I grin right back at him because how can he see my knees shaking?

‘I have nothing for you, Tommy,’ I get out. ‘In fact, that is why I am here, to tell you that from now on I do not require protection any longer.’

‘Ha!’ yells Thin Tommy, pounding on the bar and then jumping around it with great speed for a man of his weight. ‘Bertram!’ he calls. ‘Roscoe!’

Bertram and Roscoe are Tommy’s two waiters, but I know Tommy is not calling them in to serve me.

They come running out of the back, and I see they have experience in such matters before, because Bertram is carrying a blackjack, and Roscoe has a little knife in his hand. The knife worries me most, because I am practically certain that Roscoe is never a Boy Scout.

By the time I see all this, Thin Tommy is almost on top of me, and he lets go with one arm for my jaw. I bend my head down just in time, but Thin Tommy’s other hand catches me from the side and slaps me across the room. I fall over a chair, and by this time Bertram and Roscoe are ready to wait on me. In fact, one of them pulls out the chair I fell over, and tries to hit me on the head with it.

I let out a yell and grab up a salt cellar from the table. This I push down Bertram’s mouth, and I am just ready to throw a little pepper in Roscoe’s eyes when Thin Tommy crashes over, grabs the knife from Roscoe’s hand, and backs me into

the corner.

All at once I hear a crash outside the door, and somebody hollers, 'Yoiks! Pendragon and Pallagyn!'

Into the room gallops Sir Pallagyn. He has got his sword in one hand, and the empty bottle in the other, and he is full to the eyeballs with courage.

He lets the bottle go first and it catches Bertram in the side of the head, just when he is getting the salt cellar out of his mouth. Bertram slides down with a sort of moan, and Roscoe and Tommy turn around.

'It's one of them there rowboats, like in science fiction!' remarks Thin Tommy.

'Yeah,' says Roscoe, who is all at once very busy when Pallagyn comes for him with his sword. In fact Roscoe is so busy he falls over the chair and lands on his face, which gets caught in a cuspidor. Pallagyn is ready to whack him one when Thin Tommy drops hold of me and lets out a grunt.

He grabs up the blackjack and the dagger both in the same hand and lets fly. They bounce off Pallagyn's helmet, of course, so Thin Tommy tries a chair. This doesn't work, either, so he picks up the table.

Pallagyn just turns kind of surprised and starts coming for him. And Thin Tommy backs away.

'No...no—' he says. All at once he reaches into his hip pocket and pulls out the old lead poisoner.

'Watch out!' I yell, trying to get to Tommy before he can shoot. 'Duck, Pal—duck!'

Pallagyn ducks, but he is still running forward and his armour is so heavy he can't stop if he wants to keep from falling over.

The gun goes off over his head, but then Sir Pallagyn is going on, and he runs right into Thin Tommy, butting his head into his stomach. Thin Tommy just gives one 'Ooooof!' and sits down backward, holding his belly where the helmet hits it, and he turns very green indeed.

Pallagyn sticks out his sword, but I say, 'Never mind. This ought to teach him a lesson.'

Going out, Thin Tommy just manages to whisper to me, 'Who's that guy?'

'That,' I tell him, 'is my new hired man. So if I was you, I wouldn't plant any pineapples on my farm, because he is allergic to fruit.'

So we leave and climb back into the truck.

'Thanks, Pal,' I say. 'You not only throw a scare into that monkey but you also save my life. I am in debt to you, whoever you are, and if Thin Tommy doesn't serve such rotgut, I would take you back in and buy you a drink.'

'Verily, 'tis a trifle,' says Pallagyn.

'I'll do you the same some day, Pal,' I tell him. 'You are my buddy.'

'Ye could help me now, methinks.'

'How?'

'Why, in pursuit of my quest. I was sent here by Merlin to seek the Cappadocian Tabouret.'

'I do not know anything about the new night clubs,' I tell him. 'I am not an uptown boy any longer.'



‘The Cappadocian Tabouret,’ says Pallagyn, ignoring me, ‘is the table on which the Holy Grail will rest, once we find it.’

‘Holy Grail?’

So Pallagyn begins to tell me a long yarn about how he is living in a castle with this King Arthur and a hundred other triggers who are all knights like he is. As near as I get it, all they do is sit around the drink and fight each other, which makes it look like this King Arthur is not so good in controlling his mob.

The brain in this outfit is this guy Merlin, who is a very prominent old fuddy in the Magicians’ Union. He is always sending the lads out to rescue some dames that have been snatched, or to knock off the hoods of other mobs, but what he is really interested in is this Holy Grail.

I cannot exactly catch what the Holy Grail is, except it’s kind of a loving cup or trophy that has disappeared from some hock shop back there in the Middle Ages. But everybody is hot to find it, including the big boys in the mob like Sir Galahad and Sir Lancelot.

When Pallagyn mentions these two I know I hear of them some place, so naturally I ask questions and find out quite a bit about ancient times and knights and how they live and about the tourna-ments—which are pretty much the same as the Rose Bowl games, without a take—and many other items which are of great interest to an amateur scholar like myself.

But to slice a long story thin, Merlin cannot put the finger on this Holy Grail yet, although he is sending out parties every day to go on these quests for it. But he is a smart cookie in many another way, and one of his little tricks is to get himself high and then look into the future. For example, he tells King Arthur that he is going to have trouble some time ahead, and Pallagyn says he may be right, because he personally notices that this Sir Lancelot is making pigeon noises at Arthur’s bird. But gossip aside, one of the things Merlin sees in the future is this Cappadocian Tabouret, which is a sacred relic on which the Holy Grail is supposed to sit.

So the old hophead calls in Sir Pallagyn and says he is sending him on a quest for the glory of Britain, to get this table for the Holy Grail and bring it back.

All Merlin can do to help him is to put a spell on him and send him into the future to the time where he sees the Tabouret.

And he tells him a little about these times and this country, sprinkles a little powder on him, and all at once Pallagyn is sitting on his horse in the middle of County Trunk AA, where I find him.

‘That is not exactly the easiest story in the world to believe,’ I remark, when Pallagyn finishes.

‘Here I am,’ says the knight, which is about as good an answer as any.

For a minute I think I can understand how he must feel, being shipped off through Time into a new territory, without even a road map to help him. And since he is a good guy and saves my life, I figure the least I can do is try.

‘Doesn’t this old junkie give you a hint where it might be?’ I ask.

‘Merlin? Forsooth, he spoke of seeing it in a House of the Past.’

‘What kind of house?’

‘House of the Past, methinks he named it.’

‘Never hear of it,’ I says, ‘unless he means a funeral parlour. And you don’t

catch me going into any stiff hotel.'

I say this as we are driving into my yard, and I stop the truck.

'Let's grab a plate of lunch,' I suggest. 'Maybe we can think of something.'

'Lunch?'

'Scoff. Bread.'

'Here?'

'Yeah. This is my pad-house.'

I salvage Pallagyn out of the car and take him inside. Then, while I fix the food, he sits there in the kitchen and asks me a thousand screwy questions. He is very ignorant about everything.

It turns out that back in his times, there is not enough civilisation to put in your ear. He doesn't know what a stove is, or gas, and I can see why they call them the Dark Ages when he tells me he never sees an electric light.

So I tell him everything, about cars and trains and aeroplanes and tractors and steamships, and then I break down and give him a few tips on how citizens live.

I hand it to him about the mobs and the rackets and the fuzz, and politics and elections. Then I give him a few tips about science—machine guns and armoured cars and tear gas and pineapples and fingerprints—all the latest stuff.

It is very hard to explain these matters to such an ignorant guy as this Pallagyn, but he is so grateful that I want to give it to him straight.

I even show him how to eat with a knife and fork, as it turns out at lunch that King Arthur's court doesn't go in for fancy table manners.

But I am not a schoolteacher, and after all, we are not getting any closer to Sir Pallagyn's problem, which is snatching this Tabouret in his quest.

So I begin asking him all over again about what it is and what it looks like and where this fink Merlin said to find it.

And all he manages to come clean with is that it's in the House of the Past, and that Merlin sees it in a jag.

'Big place,' he says. 'And the Tabouret is guarded by men in blue.'

'Police station?' I wonder.

'It is in a transparent coffin,' he says.

I never see any of these, though I hear Stinky Raffelano is in one after he catches his slugs last year.

'Ye can see but cannot touch it,' he remembers.

All at once I get it.

'It's under glass,' I tell him. 'In a museum.'

'Glass?'

'Never mind what that is,' I say. 'Sure—guards. House of the Past. It's in a museum in town.'

I tell him what a museum is, and then start thinking.

'First thing to do is get a line on where it is. Then we can figure out how to pull the snatch.'

'Snatch?'

'Steal it, Pal. Say—do you know what it looks like?'

'Verily. Merlin described it in utmost detail, lest I err and procure a spurious Tabouret.'

‘Good. Give me a line on it, will you?’

‘Why, it is but a wooden tray of rough boards, with four short legs set at the corners. Brown it is in hue, and it spans scarce four hands in height. Plain it is, without decoration or adornment, for it was but crudely fashioned by the good Cappadocian Fathers.’

‘So,’ I say. ‘I think maybe I have a notion. Wait here,’ I tell him, ‘and improve your education.’

And I hand him a copy of a girlie magazine. I go down to the cellar, and when I come up after a while, Sir Pallagyn comes clanking up to me, all excited.

‘Pray, and who is this fair damsel?’ he asks, pointing out a shot of a broad in a bikini. ‘She has verily the appearance of the Lady of the Lake,’ he remarks. ‘Albeit with more...more—’

‘You said it, Pal,’ I agree. ‘Much more, in spades. But here—does this look like the table you’re after?’

‘Od’s blood, it is the very thing! From whence didst thou procure it?’

‘Why, it’s nothing but a piece of old furniture I find laying down in the basement. A footstool, but I knock the stuffing out of it and scrape off some varnish. Now, all you got to do is get this Merlin to wave his wand and call you back, and you hand him over the goods. He will never catch wise,’ I say, ‘and it will save us a lot of trouble.’

Pallagyn’s puss falls in a little and he starts chewing his red moustache again.

‘I fear, Sir Butch, thy ethics are not of the highest. I am a quest, nor could I present a spurious Tabouret in sight of mine own conscience.’

So I see I am in for it. Of course it will be easy for me to tell this tin can to go chase his quest, but somehow I feel I owe him a good turn.

‘I will work things out in a jiffy, Pal. You just go out and put your nag in the stable, and when you come back, I will have things set.’

‘On thy honour?’ he says, smiling all of a sudden.

‘Sure. Shake.’

He shakes until his armour rattles.

‘Never mind,’ I say. ‘Take care of the nag and leave it to me.’

He clunks out and I get busy on the phone.

When he comes back I am ready.

‘Come on out and hop in the truck,’ I invite. ‘We are on our way to pick up that furniture for you.’

‘Indeed? Then we really quest together, Sir Butch?’

‘Don’t ask any questions,’ I remark. ‘On your way.’

I notice he fumbles with that magazine a minute, and when he sees me looking he blushes.

‘I wouldst carry the image of this fair lady, as is the custom of the quest,’ he admits, tucking the picture of the broad in his helmet, so only her legs stick out over his forehead.

‘OK by me, Pal. But come on, we got a drive ahead of us.’

I grab up a pint, the fake Tabouret, and a glass cutter, head for the truck, and we’re off.

It is a long drive, and I have plenty of time to explain the lay of the land to Sir

Pallagyn. I tell him how I call the museum and find out if they have this table in hock. Then I hang up and call back in a different voice, telling them that I am an express man with a suit of armour on hand for them which I will send over.

‘Pretty neat, hey, Pal?’ I ask.

‘But I do not comprehend. How did you talk to the museum if it is in the city and—’

‘I am a wizard myself,’ I let it go.

‘Still, I fail to perceive the plan. What place has armour in a House of the Past?’

‘Why, it’s a relic. Don’t you know nobody wears armour no more? It’s all bulletproof vests.’

‘Still, how doth that contrive for us to—snatch—the Tabouret?’

‘Don’t you get it? I’ll carry you into the museum like an empty suit of armour. Then we will spot this Tabouret. I will set you down in a corner, and when the joint closes up you can snatch it very quick indeed. You can use this glass cutter to get it out, substitute this fake furniture in the case, and nobody will be hep to it the next morning. Simple.’

‘By’re Lady, ‘tis a marvel of cunning!’

I admit it sounds groovy myself. But I notice we are now coming into some traffic, so I stop the truck and say, ‘From now on you are just a suit of armour with nothing inside. You climb into the back of the truck so citizens will not give you the queer eye, and lie quiet. When we get to the museum I will drag you out, and you just hold still. Remember?’

‘Verily.’

So Pallagyn hops into the back of the truck and lies down and I head into the city. Before I get too far I take myself a couple of quick ones because I am a little nervous, being so long since I pull a job.

I am not exactly floating but my feet do not touch bottom when we get downtown. Which is why I accidentally touch a fender of the car ahead of me when we stop in traffic. In fact I touch it so it drops off.

It is a big black Rolls, and an old Whitey with a mean-looking puss opens the door and leans out and says:

‘Here now, you ruffian!’

‘Who are you calling a ruffian, you bottle-nosed old baboon?’ I answer, hoping to pass it off quiet.

‘Aaaaargh!’ says Whitey, climbing out of his buggy. ‘Come along, Jefferson, and help me deal with this hoodlum.’

It is funny he should call me such when I feel sure he never sets peepers on me before in his life, but then it is a small world. And the chauffeur that hauls out after him is much too big to be running around in a small world. He is not only big but mean-looking, and he comes marching right at me along with old Whitey.

‘Why don’t you go away and soak your feet?’ I suggest, still wanting to be diplomatic and avoid trouble. But Whitey does not go for my good advice.

‘Let me have your licence,’ he growls. ‘I am going to do something about reckless drivers that smash into cars.’

‘Yeah,’ says the big chauffeur, sticking his red face into the window. ‘Maybe

this fellow would slow down a little if he was driving with a couple of black eyes.'

'Now wait a minute,' I suggest. 'I am very sorry if I bump into you and lose my temper, but I am on my way to the museum in a hurry with a rush order. If you look in the back of the truck, you will see a suit of armour I am delivering there.'

As it turns out this is not such a hot suggestion at that. Because when I see Whitey and the chauffeur marching at me I have the presence of mind to toss the whisky bottle in the back of the truck. And now Sir Pallagyn has got a gander at it, so when Whitey hangs his nose over the side, there is Pal, taking a snifter.

When he sees the old guy coming he stops still with his arm in the air, snapping his visor shut with the bottle in his mouth.

'Here, what's this?' snaps Whitey.

'Huh?'

'What's that bottle doing stuck in the visor of this helmet? And what's making the arm hold on to it?'

'I don't know, mister. That's how I find it when I unpack it this morning.'

'Something wrong,' insists old Whitey. 'They didn't drink whisky way back then.'

'It's pretty old whisky,' I tell him.

'I'll vouch for that,' he says, real nasty, 'if your breath is any indication. I think you ought to be run in for drunken driving.'

'Say,' pipes up Jefferson, the big chauffeur. 'Maybe this guy doesn't even own the truck like he says. He might have stole this armour.'

Whitey smiles like a desk sergeant. 'I never thought of that. Now, sir'—and he wheels on me fast—'if you know so much about this particular bit of armour, perhaps you can tell me the name of its original wearer.'

'Why...why...Sir Pallagyn of the Round Table,' I stammer.

'Pallagyn? Pallagyn? Never heard of him,' snaps Whitey. 'He never sat at the Round Table.'

'He is always under it,' I say. 'Quite a lush.'

'Preposterous! This is all a fraud of some sort.'

'Look!' Jefferson yells. 'The whisky!'

We all look around, and sure enough the whisky is disappearing from the bottle because Pallagyn is gargling it down very quiet.

'Fraud!' says Whitey, again, and taps the helmet with his cane.

'Come on, where did you steal this from?' growls Jefferson, grab-bing me by the collar. And Whitey keeps hitting the helmet.

'Desist, by blessed St George!' roars Pallagyn, sitting up. 'Desist, ere I let air through thy weasand, thou aged conskiter!'

Whitey stands there with the cane in the air and his mouth is open wide enough to hang a canary in. Pal sees the cane and grabs for his sword.

'A joust, is it?' he yells.

And all around us the citizens are honking their horns and staring out, but when they see Pallagyn standing up and waving his pocket-knife they drive away very fast.

'Robot!' mumbles Whitey.

'Rodent, am I?' and Pallagyn begins to slice away at Whitey's breadbasket.

'Hey!' yells the chauffeur, dropping me. 'Cut that!' He makes a dive for the knight, but he sees him climbing up into the truck and bops him with the whisky bottle. The big guy falls down and sits still. Whitey dances around for a minute and then runs for his car.

'I am a trustee of the museum,' he bawls. 'And whatever that thing is, it isn't going on display. Witchcraft—that's what it is!'

Now this is a fine time for the fuzz to show up, but when he does I quick-motion to Pal to hold still and grab the copper by the collar.

'This guy and his chauffeur back into me,' I say. 'And if you smell the chauffeur you see he is drunk; as a matter of fact he is out. That old bird is also a lush, but me,' and I step on the gas, 'I am in a hurry to deliver this armour to a museum, and I do not wish to press charges.'

'Hey—' says the beat daddy, but I pull away fast. I am around the corner before he has time to cry 'Wolf!' and I take it up several alleys.

Meanwhile I bawl out Pallagyn in all suits.

'From now on,' I tell him, 'you don't make a move, no matter what happens. Understand?'

'Hic,' says Pallagyn.

'The only way I can get you into the museum is for you to be quiet and lay limp,' I say.

'Hic.'

'Here we are,' I tell him, pulling up in back of the big grey building, into the loading zone.

'Hic.'

'Shut your trap,' I snarl.

Pallagyn pulls down his visor.

'No, wait.' He is still hiccuping, so I yank his plume off and stuff it into his mouth.

'Now, be quiet and leave it to me,' I say. I get the table under one arm and slip the glass cutter into one pocket. Then I open the back of the truck and slide Pallagyn down the ramp to the ground.

'Ugh! Oooof!' he groans, under his helmet.

'Sh! Here we go!'

It is not so easy to drag Pallagyn along by the arms, but I manage to hoist him up the platform and get him past the door. There is a guard standing there.

'New armour,' I tell him. 'Where is your hardware department?'

'Funny. Nobody told me to expect a delivery. Oh, well, I'll let you set it up. Dr Peabody will probably arrange to place it tomorrow.'

He looks at me, all red in the puss, trying to drag Pallagyn along.

'Funny it should be so weighty. I thought armour was light.'

'This baby is wearing heavy underwear,' I tell him. 'How about giving me a hand?'

He helps lift Pallagyn and we carry him through a lot of halls into a big room.

There are a lot of suits of armour standing around the walls, and several are hanging on wires from the ceiling, but I see something else and let out a snort.

Sure enough, in the centre of the room is a glass case, and inside it is standing

a little table just like the one I have under my arm.

I set the thing down and the guard notices it for the first time.

‘What you got here?’ he asks.

‘The armour is supposed to stand on it,’ I explain. ‘It comes with the set.’

‘Oh. Well, just stand it up against the wall. I got to get back to the door.’

And he goes away. I take a quick gander up and down and see the place is empty. It is getting dark and I figure it is closing time already.

‘Here we are,’ I whisper.

‘Hic,’ says Pallagyn.

He opens his visor and takes a look at the Tabouret.

‘Verily, it is that for which I seek,’ he whispers. ‘My thanks, a thousandfold.’

‘Forget it. Now all you got to do is wait till it gets a little darker, then make the snatch.’

I go up to the case and tap it.

‘Why,’ I say, ‘this is real luck. It opens from the back and you don’t even have to use the glass cutter.’

But Pallagyn is not paying any attention. He is looking around at the armour on the walls.

‘Gawain!’ he snorts.

‘What?’

‘’Tis the veritable armour of Sir Gawain!’ he yaps. ‘One of the Brotherhood of the Round Table.’

‘You don’t say!’

‘Aye—and yonder stands the coat of mail of Sir Sagramore! Indeed! I recognise the main of Eldeford, he that is cousin to Sir Kay. And Maligant—’

He is rattling off the names of old friends, clanking around and tapping the tin, but it all looks like a bunch of spare parts in a hot car hide-out to me.

‘I am among friends,’ he chuckles.

‘Yeah? Don’t be too sure. If these museum babies ever find out what you’re up to, it’s goodbye quest. Now get to work, quick. I got to be going back.’ I push him over to the case. ‘I’ll watch the door for you in case anyone is coming,’ I whisper. ‘You switch the Tabourets. Snap to it.’

So I stand there, and Pallagyn makes for the case, trying not to clank too loud. It is dark and quiet, and creepy.

Pallagyn gets the case open in no time, but he has trouble in hauling out the Tabouret, because it has nails holding it down.

He is grunting and yanking on it and I am shaking because he is maybe going to rouse a guard.

‘I cannot say much for this guy Merlin,’ I comment. ‘He is supposed to help you knights over the hard spots, but I do not notice he has done you a good turn yet.’

‘Nay, I have thee to thank for my success,’ Pallagyn says. ‘For, lo, my quest is ended!’

And he rips the Tabouret loose and slides the other one in. Then he closes the glass again and marches over across the room.

Only right in the middle of it he lets out a squawk and falls down on the stone

floor when his foot slips.

There is a loud crash like all hell is breaking loose.

It does.

Guys are yelling down the hall and I hear feet running this way. I get over to Pallagyn and help him up, but just as I am easing him onto his feet a squad of guards charges into the room and the heat is very much on.

‘Stop, thief!’ yells the guy in the lead, and the whole gang charges down on us. Pallagyn is trying to stand still again and I am yanking open a window, but when he sees them coming, Pal lets out a whoop and drops the Tabouret, waving his sword around.

‘Stand back ere I skewer thy livers!’ he howls. Then he turns to me. ‘Make haste, Sir Butch, and effect thy escape whilst I hold off yon varlets.’

‘Give me that,’ I say, grabbing at the sword. ‘I’ll hold them off and you get out of here and gallop back to your Merlin with the Bingo prize.’

‘There he is, men!’ yells a new voice. Coming through the door is none other than Old Whitey in person, and behind him are about eight cops. Then the cops are ahead of him, because they are coming for us, fast. A fat sergeant has his gun extremely out.

‘Pendragon and England!’ yells Pallagyn, patting the first cop on his bald spot with the flat side of his sword.

‘Hell and Damnation!’ bawls the sergeant. He lets go a slug, which bounces off Pallagyn’s helmet.

‘Superman!’ hollers another cop.

‘Get him, boys!’ screams Whitey.

It is a picnic without ants. I plant one on the sergeant’s neck, and Pal wades in with his sword. But the other six push us back into a corner, and the guards come up behind them. As fast as we knock them down, the others close in. They swarm over us like a gang of Airedales on a garbage heap.

‘Here we go,’ I gasp out, punching away.

‘Be of good ... uh ... heart!’ roars Pallagyn. He slices away. All at once he slips and the sword falls. And two coppers jump him before he can get up. The sergeant gets his gun out again and points it at me.

‘Now then—’ he says. The boys grab us and push us forward.

All at once Pallagyn closes his eyes. ‘Merlin!’ he whispers. ‘Aid!’

Something very unusual happens here. The first thing I notice is a lot of clanking and scraping coming from the dark corners of the room.

And then there is more noise, like Pallagyn’s armour makes, only louder.

‘For Arthur and England!’ Pallagyn yells. ‘Gawain, Sagramore, Eldevord, Maligaint!—’

‘Aye, we come!’

Out of the dark crashes a half dozen suits of armour; but there are men in them now. It is the armour from the walls, and I see Pallagyn’s gang is here.

‘Merlin sends help!’ he grunts. And then he grabs his sword and wades in.

The others are whacking up the cops already, and there is a smash-ing of tinware. Some of the fuzz are running and the guards make for the door. As fast as they get there, the suits of armour hanging on the walls drop down on their necks



and throw them.

In a minute it is all through.

Pallagyn stands in the centre of the room holding the Tabouret and all the guys in armour huddle around him.

‘The quest is over,’ he says. ‘Thanks to Merlin, and Sir Butch, here—’

But I am not here any more. I am sneaking out of the window, fast, because I have enough trouble and do not like to get mixed up in hocus-pocus or magicians’ unions. So I do not stay, but drop over the ledge.

Before I do so I think I see a flash of lightning or something, but cannot be sure. Anyway, I look around once more and see the museum room is empty. There are a lot of cops lying on the floor and a lot of empty suits of armour are standing around, but there is nothing in them. I look for Pallagyn’s suit and it is gone. So I blink my eyes and head for the truck, which I drive the hell away from there.

That is how it is, and I do a lot of thinking on my way home. Also the air helps to sober me up and I remember that I am practically drunk all the time since morning.

In fact, I am drunk since before I meet this Pallagyn if I ever do meet him and it is not my imagination.

Because when I look back in the museum I do not see him any more and I wonder if it is all something I dream up out of air and alcohol. It bothers me, and I know that whatever happens at the museum will not leak out in print, because cops are touchy about such matters and as far as they know nothing is missing.

Then I figure maybe Thin Tommy Malloon can tell me if I drop in, so on the way home I park the truck at his tavern and step inside.

Nobody is behind the bar but Bertram, and when he sees me he is very polite.

‘I would like to speak with Thin Tommy,’ I say.

Bertram gulps. ‘He is upstairs lying down,’ he says. ‘In fact, he does not feel so well since you bop him in the belly this morning.’

‘What do you mean I bop him?’ I ask. ‘My buddy does that.’

‘You come in alone,’ Bertram tells me. He gives me a long look, but there are customers in the joint so I just shrug and walk out.

So the rest of the way home I am up tight, because I figure either Bertram is lying to me or I am nuts. And right now I would just as soon be a little nuts as admit anything so screwy could happen.

Which is how it stands with me. I am sober, and I am done with chasing around for the day. If I lay off drinking shellac, I will not see any more knights in armour with dopey stories about magicians and quests. I will let bygones be bygones and be a good boy.

That suits me, so I back the truck into the garage.

And then I get out and start cursing all over again.

All at once I know for sure whether or not it all happens.

Because standing there in the garage is that dizzy nag with the mask over the head that I have Sir Pallagyn put into the stable.

Do you know anybody who wants to buy a horse, cheap? It’s only twelve hundred years old.