



## TALES OF THE FIRST DAY

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

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

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

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

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

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