

The Boy at the Bellows

He had spent most of his life searching for the Grail King. Not recklessly. He had done it properly — consulting the learned, studying old accounts, ferreting out which rumors carried weight and which were smoke. He knew the signs. He knew what to ignore. And he knew the Grail King would not be found on some lofty throne. On that the old stories agreed. Late one winter afternoon, on a narrow road he would rather forget, his horse stumbled. The iron rang wrong. A shoe had loosed. Just down the road, at the edge of a small village, stood a dreary blacksmith's hut. "Wait a bit," said the blacksmith. "I've a tricky piece on the forge. Won't take long." At the bellows worked a young apprentice — sleeves rolled, face smudged with soot. He worked the leather handles with a steady, unhurried rhythm. The fire breathed when he breathed. The heat neither flared nor faltered. The knight watched. When the work was finished, the blacksmith examined the shoe and shook his head. "Size eight. I'm out. Have to make one." He glanced toward the darkening sky. "Too late for tonight." The knight nodded. Nothing to be done. "We're headed to the inn," said the blacksmith. "Join us." The inn was rustic but warm. They broke coarse bread. They shared a bowl of thin stew. They poured something they called "ale." The knight found himself lingering over the meal. There was something about the boy at the bellows — wait — Could it be HE? But, but — Why would the Grail King be HERE, in a village like THIS? That night he slept fitfully, the question churning in his dreams. Next morning, the new shoe was made and fitted. As he mounted, the apprentice glanced up. Their eyes met. The boy smiled knowingly. The knight rode on.

For years afterward — long after his search was spent — he still found himself wondering about the boy at the bellows.

— *William Zeitler*

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