

Galahad Was Here

By Cindy Rae



Joan Baez

--

Central Park, 1971.

Joan liked the park. A few hit records into her career hadn't changed that, and her long, dark hair afforded her a certain amount of anonymity, particularly in a city of millions. She dressed in a way that rarely called attention to herself, a cotton skirt and a sleeveless blouse draping a figure that was destined to remain slender.

She settled herself into the soft grass of a spring evening, tucking nothing more than the skirt under her, for protection against any

dampness. Her Gibson guitar was in her hand, her favorite, the one she liked to compose on.

She wasn't sure if she'd compose anything, this evening. The muse for that was a mercurial thing, and composition was a tricky chore. If something inspirational happened, she'd remember it. And if it didn't, it hardly mattered. She'd travelled lightly this evening, and carried only the guitar, in its case.

Though the park was known for being both beautiful and sometimes dangerous, Joan wasn't worried. Fate had guided her this far, and fate had been kind, for the most part. Perhaps she had a guardian angel. Perhaps it was just luck. But she'd never been hurt, no matter how many times she'd done this; no matter how many times she'd sat in isolated spots with just her guitar for company.

It was a thing she needed to do, even in New York City. Perhaps especially in New York City, she realized.

Away from the maddening crowd, Joan thought, feeling the weight of the city begin to fall away from her slender shoulders. She strummed a few chords and adjusted the G string. In a minute, she'd be ready to play. "Sweet Sir Galahad" had been whispering in her ear all afternoon, the odd little song a friend and a favorite.



Sir Galahad, by GF Watts 1817-1904

Once tuned up, she began to play, her gorgeous, gifted voice caressing every word.

*Sweet Sir Galahad
Came in through the window
In the night when
The moon was in the yard.*

She was a few lines in, before she realized that she wasn't as alone as she'd hoped.

As the tall man tapped his way down the sidewalk, Joan's first impression was that he might be blind. He wore round, dark glasses over his eyes, and the cane was a long one.

But as he drew closer, she could see that the cane was simply being thrust forward onto the sidewalk, not making the 'side-to-side' sweeping motion the blind favored. Also, it was not a red tipped white cane. His stick gleamed dark ebony, and hit the pavement with a heavy sound, as if the end was steel-tipped.

When he noticed her, Joan felt uneasy. Something about him just engendered that reaction.

Perhaps coming to sit in the park wasn't such a good idea, after all, she mused.

"Evening," Joan said, her nervousness making her speak first. "Nice night." She could have bitten her own tongue for talking to him, rather than simply letting him pass by.

"So it appears." His voice was low. Slightly accented. Even in those few words, she could sense the resonance in the long throat. "Of course, it's early, yet." he rejoined.

What did that mean? Joan wondered. Did it mean he was about to change that, for her?

Joan gripped the neck of the guitar a bit more firmly, wondering if she'd need to swing it, and hating the thought. The action made her fingers tighten on the strings, and she strummed the chord it had been set to, reflexively.

I wonder if music really does have the power to charm beasts?

The thought jumped unbidden into her poet's mind as she simply began the song again.

*Sweet Sir Galahad
Came in through the window
In the night when
The moon was in the yard.
He took her hand in his
And shook the long hair
From his neck and he told her
She'd been working much too hard.
It was true that ever since the day
Her crazy man had passed away
To the land of poet's pride,
She laughed and talked a lot
With new people on the block
But always at evening time she cried.
And here's to the dawn of their days.*

The verse made him stop in the middle of the sidewalk, and he did seem to cock an ear to one side, a bit, and listen. Fortyish, maybe fifty. Greying hair at the temples. Long sleeves. Collar buttoned to the neck, in spite of the temperate evening.

He's cold, Joan thought, realizing she meant it in more ways than one. She sang part of the next verse.

*She moved her head
A little down on the bed*

*Until it rested softly on his knee.
And there she dropped her smile
And there she sighed awhile,
And told him all the sadness
Of those years that numbered three.*

He stilled at the sound, not just his feet, but all of the rest of him, and Joan wondered if her music wasn't having exactly the effect she hoped for.

He let her strum a moment, before he spoke again.

"It's no use wishing for him, young lady."

She stopped playing and took in his utterly still form.

"Joan. My name is -"

"It's no use wishing for him, Joan. All your Galahads are dead, or soon will be, when they're sent off to this war that never ends. Oh, some may come back. Maimed. Crippled."

Joan's brown eyes showed their sympathy, in spite of his harsh words. He looked a bit old for Viet Nam. Maybe he'd been an officer. Something about his bearing spoke of that.

"Is that why you walk with a cane?" she asked. "Were you hurt in the war?"

He barely glanced at the lethal walking stick, and considered his answer. "Yes... But in a different war. One far closer to home. Right beneath your very feet, in fact."

Joan had no idea what he meant by that, and got the distinct impression she wasn't supposed to ask.

He lifted the cane to show that he didn't need it for balance. "And this is an affectation. One I'm rather attached to." He came closer and sat on the bench, across from her, resting the cane between his knees.

"Family heirloom?" she asked.

He eyed it. "It will be," he answered cryptically.

"There will be peace someday soon. The papers are full of it," Joan said hopefully, addressing his comment about the war. She strummed lightly, as she said, setting the song aside, for the moment.

"Followed by another war, eventually," he predicted. "And then another. Never underestimate the power of governments to do wasteful things with other people's bodies."

Clearly, the man before her was a pessimist's pessimist. Or at least, an unforgiving realist. "Man, you're a dark cat," Joan replied.

"You have no idea." Paracelsus replied, eyeing his manicure for a moment.

"So, what's the answer?" She posed the query to him. "Do away with the government? Go with Plato?"

"The philosopher king? Why Joan, you have no idea how much you've just risen in my estimation," he said with the kind of hauteur only John Pater could pull off. "Yes, that is *one* solution. *One* ruler. The strongest. The smartest. The one... *destined* for the position."

Joan got the distinct impression he was speaking of himself.

"A king is just another dictator. A despot," Joan challenged.

"Ah... but then ... so is a Father," Paracelsus pointed out, leaning back against the bench. He appeared to be taking in the early rising moon.

Joan's nimble mind grasped for an argument to that, and failed. She adjusted another string on her guitar, and plucked at it until it was in tune. She strummed, again. Better.

"Besides, my song isn't about politics. I wrote it for my sister, when she fell in love. It's *about* love. Listen."

*Well you know I think my fate's belated
Because of all the hours I waited
For the day when I'd no longer cry.
I get myself to work by eight
But oh, was I born too late,
And do you think I'll fail
At every single thing I try?
And here's to the dawn of their days.
He just put his arm around her
And that's the way I found her
Eight months later to the day.
The lines of a smile erased
The tear tracks upon her face,
A smile could linger, even stay.
Sweet Sir Galahad went down
With his gay bride of flowers,
The prince of the hours
Of her lifetime.*

He looked both patient, and unimpressed. A look he wore very comfortably, Joan realized. The words didn't touch anything in his heart. Or if they did, he hid it well.

"All songs are about love," he said, when she paused, looking up at him. "Even songs about hate are about love," he pronounced. "We love to detest a thing. Almost as much as we love to make war on it. Hate is the mask love wears when it's been betrayed. Ambition is the mask love wears when it's... hungry." The aristocratic voice had a keen edge.

Joan's sense of empathy was sharply developed. Whoever this strange man was, he'd been hurt. Badly.

"I'm sorry," she said. "For whatever happened to you. I'm sorry. It must have been bad."

Paracelsus shook his head slightly, then tilted it, considering. "Nothing that can't be overcome, in time. With a little effort. Rather like your hero," he answered calmly.

Almost "too calmly." Joan realized how... calculating a man this was.

"So, you think you're like Galahad? Joan prompted, hoping to find the romantic in there, buried under the severity. She did sense that he'd been one, or at least that he'd been partly one, once. Even if it was a very dark version of that.

His answer was a considered one: "Let us just say that I understand what it is to give up a woman, so that you can get what you want... eventually," Paracelsus said, an image of Anna briefly flitting across his eyes, behind the smoky glasses.

"What you want... And what's that?" Joan asked, strumming a chord, thoughtfully. She really did want to know. As thin as this man was, he seemed to have no appetite. Except for the part of him that seemed consumed by those.

"The same thing Galahad wanted," he answered easily. "Immortality. Power. The only things worth having. Your 'A' string is out of tune."

Joan suspected those ears missed little. Maybe nothing.

"Galahad didn't quest for power. He quested for-"

"What else, my dear, do you think a Grail represents?" he inquired idly, a salt and pepper eyebrow lifting.

"Love. I was about to say 'love,'" she answered, twisting a peg. He was a hard one, she'd give him that.

"Ah. And we've already discussed what 'love' is." John replied, his voice as smooth as the polished steel on a springing trap.

"So we have."

Joan stood up, and brushed at the grass which clung to her skirt. Without being asked, she sat on the bench. Not right next to him - he projected a personal bubble which absolutely forbade that. But a ways down near the edge, where she could still keep the guitar across her lap, comfortably.

"Well, at least we figured out you're not going to mug me," Joan said, noting the gold ring on his finger. Joan had travelled the world over with her father, growing up. She knew a Krugerrand when she saw one.

"Have we?" Paracelsus intoned. "My ridiculous girl, what would I take from you? Your out of tune 'A' string?"

Her brown eyes regarded him carefully. "You know how it is. Some people get their kicks hurting other people."

The scrutiny behind his dark glasses was as unmistakable as it was impenetrable.

"Shall I tell you a secret, Joan?" he asked.

"Sure. If you want to," she shrugged. She knew she had a nice face, and that it often inspired confidences. That, and her voice, were a big part of why her singing career had done as well as it had.

He leaned just a little closer, and in the gesture, Joan sensed something cloying around him. A sickness. But the kind of sickness that translated itself into authority, rather than disability.

"I intend to hurt a great many people. People who have hurt me, have taken from me. And I intend to enjoy it, very much. Get my kicks, if you will." He leaned back, comfortably, as if he'd never moved.

She was shocked at his confession. She'd lived her entire life preaching non-violence.

"Don't. Don't do that. It will consume you. No matter what happened, you can't-"

"Can't be anything other than what I am." he said, with a ring of finality.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "Sorry no one ever loved you like you wanted."

She got the impression that the eyes behind the glasses were skewering her.

"Ah, but that's just it," he replied, silkily. "Someone did. She just didn't do it quite... long enough," he concluded, deciding to rise.

"There's a better song than the one you're about to sing, Mr... I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't give it. Paracelsus. And I never sing. I orchestrate." He said it with absolute certainty.

"Paracelsus? Like the alchemist?" she asked, amazed.

"Ah, I once again I see your public education wasn't entirely lacking. Yes. Exactly."

Joan was stung enough by his condescension to be just a bit irritated.

"My father helped invent the x-ray microscope. And I went to college."

"Mmm. College during the nineteen sixties. Sober or inebriated?" he inquired, his voice making it sound as if he truly didn't care.

"A little of both. And ... not for very long," she admitted. If nothing else, Joan was an honest troubadour.

"Nothing to be ashamed of. I myself found university less than satisfactory. Full of fools in love with the sound of their own voice, their own sanctimonious idiocy. And as for being... well, let's just shall we say, "under the influence," I couldn't applaud more. It's how I intend to make my next fortune, as a matter of fact." He studied his nails again. Or perhaps it was the ring.

Joan had no desire whatsoever to inquire as to how he'd made his last one.

"It's not too late, you know," she tried to sound encouraging. "You could still find love. Change your life around. Leave the past behind you."

"Can I?" he inquired, the arch tone firmly in place. "Can you? Let's see. Could Joan the folk singer change who she was? Derail her life? Go back to being... whatever it was you were, say even ten years ago?"

Joan stared at him a moment, then lowered her eyes and shook her head. She knew she couldn't. And though it had cost her some heartbreak along the way, she knew she'd never be that green-as-the-grass-she'd-just-been-sitting-on young woman, again.

"No. No, I can't," she said honestly. "In the beginning, it was hard to get going, but now, well... now life kind of just carries me along."

"Precisely. The law of momentum. A body in motion tends to remain in motion, unless acted on by an outside force."

"That's Newtonian physics," Joan replied.

"It is also life, young lady. Good luck. You'll need it, Joan." He stepped away.

"I think you'll need it more," Joan said candidly.

He gave a small smile. His first one, she realized. She wasn't sure smiling suited him. As a matter of fact, she was sure it didn't. His teeth looked small, and sharp. *Like he was used to eating small portions of raw meat*, she realized.

"I don't believe in luck. I believe in the only thing I've ever been able to believe in." The aristocratic tone was unmistakable.

Lord, that voice. Satan charmed innocents with one of those, Joan was sure.

"And what's that?" she asked.

"Myself," he replied almost predictably, stepping onto the path. He fished something out of his pocket, just a coin, and tossed it onto the cover of her guitar case.

"A minstrel should expect to be paid. Take care, young lady. You never know what nasty creatures prowl this park at night."

Joan had a feeling she was looking at one of the park's deadliest inhabitants right now, and that she was only alive because he was not in a killing mood.

In a flash of insight, she realized that his cane, his "affectation," was probably a weapon, rather than just a walking stick. She would never know how right she was.

"There *are* Sir Galahads out there," she said to his back. "You'll meet one, one day," she predicted. "And... and I don't think it will go well for you, when you do." It was a brave thing to say. Perhaps even a foolhardy one. But something in her felt she had to.

He turned, slightly. "Meet one?" He raised the eyebrow over the rim of his round glasses, again. "Meet one? Oh, I'll do so much better than 'meet one,' my dear. I *made* one. My *son* is one."

Joan was startled at the pronouncement. Something about this man screamed of bareness, in many ways.

"But you said..."

"I said *you* didn't have any chance of meeting one. I didn't say *I* didn't." He glanced off in the direction of the carousel, for some reason.

"Why, he's out there right now." He gestured to the open expanse all around them. "Perhaps even nearby. A beast of a teenager, learning to hold himself in check, learning to feel shame, feel loss, feel pain. Absolutely being *schooled* in it, Joan. As virginal a thing as... as, well, as you or I will never be again." He sound very satisfied, with that pronouncement.

"And as for your unkind little statement about the outcome of our eventual meeting ..." He gave a thoughtful pause, "You may well be right." He moved off down the sidewalk, as if her prediction meant nothing to him.

In a few moments, he was gone from her sight.

Her bare arms felt chilled, as if he'd trailed "cold" in his wake.

She'd left "Sweet Sir Galahad" unfinished, all but for the little refrain. Needing the warmth of it, she finished the tune.

And here's to the dawn

Of their days,

Of their days.

She strummed until the last of the song faded away into the night, and wondered about the teenager he'd spoken of.

Nothing about the evening had gone as she'd planned. And as the still-rising moon shone brightly enough to make shadows, Joan Baez sent a simple prayer winging heavenward:

"Sweet Sir Galahad, help him," Joan intoned softly, rising to put the Gibson away. Her dark eyes tried to penetrate the even deeper darkness of the path Paracelsus had taken. She knew that "help" might be impossible. She looked toward the carousel, as he had done when he'd spoken of the adolescent boy he was destined to meet, one day.

"And if you can't help him... at least make sure you survive him."

She fervently hoped it would be so.



God Speed, by Edmund Blair Leighton, 1900

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No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy

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Sweet Sir Galahad

By Joan Baez

(1969)

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It was true that ever since the day
Her crazy man had passed away
To the land of poet's pride,
She laughed and talked a lot
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But always at evening time she cried.
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Well you know I think my fate's belated
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Of their days.*