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opening extract from

King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table

(with an introduction by David Almond)

written by

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Sample extract includes:

Introduction by David Almond

Contents

Author's Note

Extract from *King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table*

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INTRODUCTION BY
DAVID ALMOND

Of all the books I read when I was young, this was my favourite. I tugged it from a Christmas stocking one Christmas morning. As I flicked through the pages, I was seduced straight away by Lotte Reiniger's wonderful illustrations, and then by Arthur himself, this ordinary-seeming kid who performs the miraculous in such an offhand way. His brother needs a sword? 'I know!' he says. 'I saw one sticking in an anvil in the churchyard, I'll fetch that: it's doing no good there!' And with a simple tug of his young arm, he confronts his destiny and a whole new world order begins to be established.

He pulls the sword from the stone on page seven, he's king by page nine, and by the time Merlin speaks of Logres, God's Kingdom upon earth, I was swept away from my Tyneside home, and was quite ready to agree that 'all who heard him felt that they were at the beginning of a time of wonders'. This tremendous opening is matched by the beautifully pitched ending, when a spine-tingling discovery made by a simple shepherd confirms the myth that Arthur and his knights will one day wake and rise again.

In between lie page after page of strong and sinewy storytelling. Bloody accounts of limbs being hacked off sit side by side with haunting descriptions of magic and miracle. Damsels are saved, knights are enchanted; there are dragons, witches, wise men and fools; there is love, desire, treachery and sin. The knights' quests take them to places of darkness and doom and to the anterooms of Heaven itself.

With Green, the language is properly heightened, beguiling, but is never self-regarding or portentous. He never allows the beauty of the prose to impede the progress of the story. See the first pages of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', for instance, where the lovely description of the knight himself ('. . . green was his face and green his hands; and the horse was also green from head to foot, with gold thread wound and knotted in the mane') is followed by the swift and accurate account of his decapitation ('Gawain whirled up the axe and struck so hard that the keen blade cut through flesh and bone and . . . the Green Knight's head leapt from his shoulders').

I loved this book as a boy. I kept it all through my teenage years. Then I left home and lost it. Years later, I came upon a copy on a Norfolk market stall, opened it, and its magic worked on me again. And then I read it for this new edition, and it works again, just as it did on that Christmas morning years ago. Each time this wonderful book is opened, the sword is drawn again, the realm of Logres is re-established, and Arthur and his knights set off on their quests through the imagination of each new reader.

Contents

Author's Note xi

BOOK ONE: THE COMING OF ARTHUR

1 The Two Swords 3
2 Balyn and Balan 25
3 The First Quest of the Round Table 51
4 The Magic of Nimue and Morgana le Fay 72

BOOK TWO: THE KNIGHTS OF THE ROUND TABLE

1 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight 93
2 The First Quest of Sir Launcelot 117
3 Sir Gareth, or The Knight of the Kitchen 145
4 Sir Tristram and the Fair Iseult 167
5 Geraint and Enid 190
6 Sir Gawain and the Lady Ragnell 213
7 Sir Percivale of Wales 229
8 The Story of Launcelot and Elaine 249

BOOK THREE: THE QUEST OF THE HOLY GRAIL

1 How the Holy Grail Came to Camelot 269
2 The First Adventures of Sir Galahad 281
3 The Adventures of Sir Percivale 288

4 The Adventures of Sir Bors de Gannis 298
5 The Adventures of Sir Launcelot 307
6 How Launcelot and Gawain Came to Carbonek 318
7 The End of the Quest 328

BOOK FOUR: THE DEPARTING OF ARTHUR

1 Launcelot and Guinevere 339
2 The Plots of Sir Mordred 354
3 The Last Battle 368

EPILOGUE

Avalon 379

Author's Note

The story of King Arthur and the adventures of his knights have been told so very many times that there seems at first sight little excuse for retelling them yet again.

But, setting aside poetical versions of a variety of the legends made by such poets as Dryden, Morris, Tennyson, Swinburne, and Charles Williams, scarcely any writer in English has done more than condense the narrative of Sir Thomas Malory, cutting and simplifying according to the age of his audience, but always following him with more or less exactitude.

Moreover, it has recently been shown that Malory himself did not write his Book of King Arthur as a single narrative, but merely as a collection of quite separate stories, based on a variety of old French romances. There is a certain coherence, but no fixed plan.

So now I have endeavoured to make each adventure a part of one fixed pattern – Arthur's Kingdom, the Realm of Logres, the model of chivalry and right striving against

the barbarism and evil which surrounded and at length engulfed it. This is only the bare foundation however; on it I have endeavoured to rear a fabric consisting of all the best-known adventures, exploits, and quests of the most famous Knights of the Round Table, and a few lesser-known stories which fit into the whole.

I have followed Malory in the main, except for certain isolated stories which he does not include; but I have not felt bound to follow him slavishly – any more than he scrupled to adapt or combine his many French sources.

Starting from the historical Arthur, the Leader or *Dux Bellorum* whose position in the Britain of the fifth century, when the Roman civilization made its last stand against the Saxons, is described by R. G. Collingwood in his *Roman Britain*, I have gone on to make use of the pseudo-history of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the verse chronicle of Layamon. These have given me a few ideas and details for Book One – but in essentials it is almost entirely Malory, except for the description of Balyn in the Grail Chapel which comes from the French *Merlin*, and of Nimue's imprisoning of Merlin from the Middle-English prose romance of *Merlin*.

In Book Two, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is taken from the famous Middle-English poem of that name; Launcelot's first quest is from Malory, but the account of his arrival at Camelot (which Malory omits) is from the French prose romance *Le Livre de Lancelot del Lac*. Sir

Gareth, the next story, seems to be Malory's own invention, and I have followed him, condensing a little, and smoothing out the end. In dealing with Tristram I have deserted Malory and gone back to the earlier version (which he does not seem to have known) of Godfrey of Strasbourg. *Geraint and Enid* (not included by Malory) is adapted from the Welsh *Mabinogion*, with a detail or two from the *Erec et Enide* of Chrétien de Troyes. *Sir Gawain and the Lady Ragnell* (not in Malory) is based on a Middle-English poem and a ballad, and seems never to have been retold; nor have the early adventures of Percivale, for which I have used another Middle-English poem and many incidents from the French *Conte du Graal. Launcelot and Elaine* is directly from Malory; and so also is my Book Three, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, except for Gawain's adventures at the Grail Castle which are from the German *Diu Crône* of Heinrich von dem Türlin, while the final adventures of Percivale are from the German *Parzival* of Wolfram von Eschenbach. (For synopses of both these poems I am indebted to the *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail* by Alfred Nutt.)

Book Four is directly from Malory, *The Last Battle* following him almost word for word in one of the finest tragedies in English literature. The death of Launcelot and Sir Hector's farewell is also Malory; but the account of the finding of the graves at Glastonbury is from a medieval Latin chronicle, and the story of the shepherd and the

cavern is elaborated from the folk-tale preserved by Sir Edmund Chambers in his *Arthur of Britain*, to which book, and to J. D. Bruce's magnificent work, *The Evolution of Arthurian Romance*, I am deeply indebted.

These are my sources, and I have used them very much as Malory used his originals. In place of the French 'Arthurian Cycle' I have had Malory's own immortal book; like him I have drawn from the romances which he also used. But my net has been wider cast than his in my search for incidents and versions of one of the world's greatest legends. No writer can rival Malory as the storyteller of the *Morte D'Arthur* as he told it almost exactly five hundred years ago – but the great legends, like the best of the fairy tales, must be retold from age to age: there is always something new to be found in them, and each retelling brings them freshly and more vividly before a new generation – and therein lies their immortality.

ROGER LANCELYN GREEN

BOOK ONE

The Coming of Arthur



1
The Two Swords

After wicked King Vortigern had first invited the Saxons to settle in Britain and help him to fight the Picts and Scots, the land was never long at peace. Although so much of it was covered with thick forests, much also was beautiful open country, with little villages and towns, country houses and cottages, as the Romans had left it not many years before. Having once seen it, the Saxons could never again be contented with their savage, unfruitful homes in Germany and Denmark; and year by year more and more of them came stealing across the North Sea in their long ships, to kill or drive out the Britons and settle in their homes.

Vortigern was dead, and Aurelius Ambrosius, last of the Romans, was dead too, when Uther Pendragon, whom some call the brother of Ambrosius, led the Britons. He defeated the Saxons in many battles, and brought peace to the southern lands where he was king – to London, and to Winchester, which was then called Camelot, and to Cornwall where Gorlois his loyal follower was duke.

But Uther fell in love with Gorlois's wife, the lovely Igrayne, and there was battle between them, until Gorlois fell, and Uther married his widow.

He visited her first in the haunted castle of Tintagel, the dark castle by the Cornish sea, and Merlin the enchanter watched over their love. One child was born to Uther and Igrayne – but what became of that baby boy only the wise Merlin could have told, for he carried it away by a secret path down the cliff side in the dead of night, and no word was spoken of its fate.

Uther had no other children, though Igrayne and Gorlois had three daughters: two of these were grown-up when Igrayne became queen, and were married – Morgawse to Lot, King of Orkney, and Elaine to Nantres, King of Garlot: they had sons who in after days were among the bravest Knights of the Round Table. But the third daughter, Morgana le Fay, was still only a child, and she was sent to school in a nunnery; yet, by some means, she learnt much magic, which she used wickedly.

King Uther Pendragon had only a little while of happiness with the fair Igrayne, for soon the Saxons made war against him once more, and sent a traitor to serve him, who poisoned the King and many of his followers.

Then the land fell upon days more evil and wretched than any which had gone before. King Uther's knights fought amongst themselves, quarrelling as to who should rule; and the Saxons, seeing that there was no strong man

to lead the Britons against them, conquered more and more of Britain.

Years of strife and misery went by, until the appointed time was at hand. Then Merlin, the good enchanter, came out from the deep, mysterious valleys of North Wales, which in those days was called Gwynedd, through Powys or South Wales, and passed on his way to London. And so great was his fame that neither Saxon nor Briton dared molest him.

Merlin came to London and spoke with the Archbishop; and a great gathering of knights was called for Christmas Day – so great that all of them could not find a place in the abbey church, so that some were forced to gather in the churchyard.

In the middle of the service, there arose suddenly a murmur of wonder outside the abbey: for there was seen, though no man saw it come, a great square slab of marble-stone in the churchyard, and on the stone an anvil of iron, and set point downwards a great, shining sword of steel thrust deeply into the anvil.

'Stir not till the service be done,' commanded the Archbishop when this marvel was made known to him. 'But pray the more unto God that we may find a remedy for the sore wounds of our land.'

When the service was ended the Archbishop and the lords and knights who had been within the abbey came out to see the wonder of the sword. Round about the anvil

they found letters of gold set in the great stone, and the letters read thus:

WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD FROM THIS STONE AND ANVIL IS THE TRUE-BORN KING OF ALL BRITAIN.

When they saw this, many and many a man tried to pull out the sword – but not one of them could stir it a hair's breadth.

'He is not here,' said the Archbishop. 'But doubt not that God will send us our King. Let messengers be sent through all the land to tell what is written on the stone: and upon New Year's Day we will hold a great tournament, and see whether our King is amongst those who come to joust. Until then, I counsel that we appoint ten knights to guard the stone, and set a rich pavilion over it.'

All this was done, and upon New Year's Day a great host of knights met together. But none as yet could draw forth the sword out of the stone. Then they went all a little way off, and pitched tents, and held a tournament or sham-fight, trying their strength and skill at jousting with long lances of wood, or fighting with broad-swords.

It happened that among those who came was the good knight Sir Ector, and his son Kay, who had been made a knight not many months before; and with them came Arthur, Sir Kay's young brother, a youth of scarcely sixteen years of age.

Riding to the jousts, Sir Kay found suddenly that he

had left his sword in his lodgings, and he asked Arthur to ride back and fetch it for him.

'Certainly I will,' said Arthur, who was always ready to do anything for other people, and back he rode to the town. But Sir Kay's mother had locked the door, and gone out to see the tournament, so that Arthur could not get into the lodgings at all.

This troubled Arthur very much. 'My brother Kay must have a sword,' he thought, as he rode slowly back. 'It will be a shame and a matter for unkind jests if so young a knight comes to the jousts without a sword. But where can I find him one? . . . I know! I saw one sticking in an anvil in the churchyard, I'll fetch that: it's doing no good there!'

So Arthur set spurs to his horse and came to the churchyard. Tying his horse to the stile, he ran to the tent which had been set over the stone – and found that all ten of the guardian knights had also gone to the tournament. Without stopping to read what was written on the stone, Arthur pulled out the sword at a touch, ran back to his horse, and in a few minutes had caught up with Sir Kay and handed it over to him.

Arthur knew nothing of what sword it was, but Kay had already tried to pull it from the anvil, and saw at a glance that it was the same one. Instantly he rode to his father Sir Ector, and said:

'Sir! Look, here is the sword out of the stone! So you see I must be the true-born King of all Britain!'

But Sir Ector knew better than to believe Sir Kay too readily. Instead, he rode back with him to the church, and there made him swear a solemn oath with his hands on the Bible to say truly how he came by the sword.

'My brother Arthur brought it to me,' said Kay, with a sigh.

'And how did *you* get the sword?' asked Sir Ector.

'Sir, I will tell you,' said Arthur, fearing that he had done wrong. 'Kay sent me to fetch his sword, but I could not come to it. Then I remembered having seen this sword sticking uselessly into an anvil in the churchyard. I thought it could be put to a better use in my brother's hand – so I fetched it.'

'Did you find no knights guarding the sword?' asked Sir Ector.

'Never a one,' said Arthur.

'Well, put the sword back into the anvil, and let us see you draw it out,' commanded Sir Ector.

'That's easily done,' said Arthur, puzzled by all this trouble over a sword, and he set it back easily into the anvil.

Then Sir Kay seized it by the hilt and pulled his hardest: but struggle and strain as he might, he could not move it by a hair's breadth. Sir Ector tried also, but with no better success.

'Pull it out,' he said to Arthur.

And Arthur, more and more bewildered, put his hand to

the hilt and drew forth the sword as if out of a well-greased scabbard.

'Now,' said Sir Ector, kneeling before Arthur and bowing his head in reverence, 'I understand that you and none other are the true-born King of this land.'

'Why? Oh, why is it I? Why do you kneel to me, my father?' cried Arthur.

'It is God's will that whoso might draw forth the sword out of the stone and out of the anvil is the true-born King of Britain,' said Sir Ector. 'Moreover, though I love you well, you are no son of mine. For Merlin brought you to me when you were a small child, and bade me bring you up as my own son!'

'Then if I am indeed King,' said Arthur, bowing his head over the cross-hilt of the sword, 'I hereby pledge myself to the service of God and of my people, to the righting of wrongs, to the driving-out of evil, to the bringing of peace and plenty to my land . . . Good sir, you have been as a father to me since ever I can remember, be still near me with a father's love and a father's counsel and advice . . . Kay, my foster-brother, be you seneschal over all my lands and a true knight of my court.'

After this they went to the Archbishop and told him all. But the knights and barons were filled with rage and jealousy, and refused to believe that Arthur was the true-born King. So the choice was put off until Easter; and at Easter once more until Whitsun, or Pentecost as it then

was called: but still, though many kings and knights came to try their strength, Arthur alone could pull out the sword.

Then all the people cried: 'Arthur! We will have Arthur! By God's will he is our King! God save King Arthur!' And they knelt down before him, the noble and the humble together, the rich and the poor, and cried him mercy for delaying him so long. And Arthur forgave them readily, and kneeling down himself he gave the wondrous sword to the Archbishop and received of him the high and holy order of Knighthood. And then came all the earls and the barons, the knights and squires, and did homage to Arthur, swearing to serve and obey him as was their duty.

King Arthur now gathered together all the hosts of Britain, and with the pick of the older knights who had served his father and the younger knights whose chief desire was to show their courage and loyalty, he set out to do battle with the Saxons and to punish all those thieves and robbers who had ravaged the land for many years, doing cruel and shameful deeds.

Before long he had brought peace and safety to the southern parts of Britain, making his capital at Camelot. But the other kings who ruled then in and about Britain – the Kings of Orkney and Lothian, of Gwynedd and Powys, of Gorre and Garloth – grew jealous of this unknown boy who was calling himself King of all Britain, and sent word that they were coming to visit him with

gifts – but that their gifts would be given with sharp swords between the head and shoulders.

Then Merlin came suddenly to Arthur and led him to the city of Caerleon in South Wales, into a strong tower well provisioned for a siege. The hostile kings came also to Caerleon and surrounded the tower: but they could not break in, to kill Arthur and his faithful followers.

Merlin came out of the tower after fifteen days, stood upon the steps in the gateway and asked all the angry kings and knights why they came in arms against King Arthur.

'Why have you made that boy, that Arthur, our King?' they shouted.

'Be silent and listen, all of you!' commanded Merlin, and a great quiet fell upon all who were gathered together, an awe and a wonder as the good enchanter spoke to them.

'I will tell you of wondrous things,' he said. 'Arthur is indeed your King, the rightful King of all this land – yes, and of Wales too, of Ireland and Scotland and Orkney also, and of Armorica beyond the sea; and he shall rule other lands also. He is the true and only son of the good King Uther Pendragon! Of his birth and of the things which should befall when he was King, I knew by my holy arts. Uther came to Tintagel in the form of Gorlois three hours after Gorlois was dead: then and thus he comforted the Lady Igrayne and won her to be his wife. But, so my

knowledge told me, their son, this Arthur, was born to great and wondrous things. A little while after his birth at dark Tintagel, Uther, who hearkened to my words, gave the child into my care, and I bore him to Avalon, the Land of Mystery. And the Dwellers in Avalon – you know them not, but you would call them Fairies and Elves – cast a pure and great enchantment upon the child, a magic most strong. Three gifts they gave to Arthur: that he should be the best of all knights; that he should be the greatest king this land shall ever know; and that he should live long – longer than any man shall ever know. These, the virtues of a good and generous prince, the Dwellers in Avalon gave to Arthur. And in Avalon the elves are forging Excalibur to be the sword of his right – the clean flashing blade that shall be raised only in the cause of right, shining on the earth until the time comes when they shall call it back again . . . Arthur is your King! Year by year as he reigns, his kingdom shall grow – not Britain, nor the islands of the seas, no, nor Armorica and Gaul – but Logres, the land of blessing, God's Kingdom upon earth, which Arthur shall show you for a little space before the darkness falls again.'

There was silence for a while when Merlin had finished speaking, for all those who heard him felt that they were at the beginning of a time of wonders, and that Arthur was more than just a King who ruled because his father had been King, or because he was the strongest man amongst them.

Suddenly they all knelt before him where he stood above Merlin on the steps of the tower, and with one voice promised to be his true and faithful subjects all the days of their lives.

Then the Archbishop set the crown upon Arthur's head, and the people cheered him once more: and this was the real beginning of his reign.

'To-morrow we will begin to collect our forces,' said King Arthur. 'And when all are gathered together, we march to the north and to the east to do battle with the Saxons and drive them out of Britain. Then we will build castles and set guards along the coast so that never again may they invade us: we will rebuild the churches which they have destroyed, and build new ones to the glory of God; and our knights shall ride about the country punishing all those who break the peace and do ill to any. And if any man or woman, be he or she the greatest or the least of my subjects, be in any trouble, or have complaint against any man, let them come to me, and never shall their sorrow go uncomforted and their wrong unrighted.'

King Arthur feasted that day in the great castle of Caerleon: but before ever the feast was ended there befell the first of the marvellous adventures that were to happen in the wonderland of Logres during his reign.

Suddenly into the courtyard there rode a young squire, leading another horse, across the saddle of which lay the body of a knight but newly slain.

'Vengeance, lord King!' cried the squire, when Arthur came from the hall to learn what this might mean. 'Give me vengeance! Here lies Sir Miles, dead upon his steed, as goodly a knight and as brave as any in the land. In the forest not many leagues from here King Pellinore has set up his pavilion beside the high road, by a well of fresh water, and he goes about to slay all knights that pass this way. Wherefore I pray you that my master be honourably buried, and that some knight ride out to avenge his death.'

There was a certain squire in Arthur's court, whose name was Gryflet, no older than Arthur himself, and now he fell on his knees before the King and begged him for all his service to make him a knight so that he might go out and fight with Pellinore.

'You are not old enough yet for such a battle,' said King Arthur, 'nor have you grown great enough in strength.'

'Yet, make me a knight!' begged Gryflet.

'My lord,' said Merlin quietly to Arthur, 'it were a great pity to lose Gryflet, for he would be a passing good man when he comes of age, and would be your faithful knight all his life . . . Pellinore is the strongest man in the world now bearing arms, and surely Gryflet will be slain if they come to sword strokes.'

King Arthur nodded, and turned again to his young squire: 'Gryflet,' he said, 'kneel, and I will make you a knight according to your wish.' And when this was done,

he went on: 'And now, Sir Gryflet, since I have made you knight, surely you owe me a gift.'

'My Lord, whatever you shall ask is yours,' said Gryflet.

'Promise me then,' commanded Arthur, 'by your honour as a knight, that when you come upon King Pellinore by the well in the forest, you joust but with your spears and, on horseback or on foot, fight with him in no other wise.'

'That will I promise you,' said Gryflet; and then he took his horse in great haste, snatched up his spear, slung his shield on his left arm, and went off in a cloud of dust until he came to the well-side in the forest. And there he saw a rich pavilion, and before it a horse ready saddled and bridled, and at the side a tree on which hung a shield painted in bright colours, and by it a great spear.

Sir Gryflet hit the shield with the butt of his own spear so hard that it came clattering to the ground, and King Pellinore came out of the pavilion – a tall strong man as fierce as a lion.

'Sir knight!' he cried, 'why smote you down my shield?'

'Sir, for that I would joust with you!' answered Gryflet.

'It were better that you did not,' said King Pellinore. 'You are but a new, young knight, and not so strong as I!'

'In spite of that, I will joust with you,' repeated Gryflet.

'Well, this is by no desire of mine,' said King Pellinore as he buckled on his armour, 'but let things fall as they must. Whose knight are you?'

'Sir, I am one of King Arthur's court!' cried Gryflet. And with that they rode away in either direction along the road, then turned their horses, set their spears in rest, and galloped at one another as hard as they could. Sir Gryflet's spear struck the shield of King Pellinore and broke all to pieces: but King Pellinore's spear went straight through Gryflet's shield, deep into his side, and there broke off short. And Sir Gryflet and his horse fell upon the ground.

King Pellinore came and bent over Sir Gryflet, who lay still where he had fallen, and unloosed his helmet. 'Well, this was a brave youth,' said Pellinore, 'and if he lives, will be a mighty knight.' Then he placed Gryflet across the saddle, and the horse galloped back to Caerleon with none to guide it.

Arthur was very wroth when he saw how badly hurt was Sir Gryflet, and at once he put on his own armour, closed the vizor of his helmet so that no one could see his face, and with spear in hand rode hard into the forest to be revenged upon King Pellinore.

But on his way he found three robbers attacking Merlin, and they seemed like to beat him to death with great clubs.

'Fly, churls!' cried Arthur, riding at them furiously, and the three cowards turned and fled when they saw the knight charging at them.

'Ah, Merlin,' said Arthur, 'for all your wisdom and your magic, you would have been murdered in a few minutes if I had not come to your rescue!'

'Not so,' answered Merlin, smiling his mysterious smile. 'Easily could I have saved myself, had I willed it. It is you who draw near to your death – for you go towards it in your pride, if God does not aid you.'

But Arthur would not take heed of Merlin's wisdom, and rode fiercely on until he came to the rich pavilion by the well. And there sat King Pellinore upon his great war-horse, waiting for him.

'Sir knight!' cried Arthur, 'why stand you here, fighting and striking down all the knights who ride this way?'

'It is my custom to do so,' answered Pellinore sternly. 'And if any man would make me change my custom, let him try at his peril!'

'I will make you change it!' cried Arthur.

'And I will defend my custom,' replied Pellinore quietly.

Then they drew apart, and came riding together at full tilt, so hard that both spears shivered into little pieces as each hit the centre of the other's shield. Arthur would have drawn his sword then, but Pellinore said:

'Not so, let us run together with spears yet again.'

'So I would,' said Arthur, 'if I had another spear!'

'I have plenty,' answered Pellinore, and he shouted to his squire to bring two out of the pavilion.

Once more the two kings jousted together; and once more their spears broke into fragments without either of them being struck from his horse. A third time they jousted, and Arthur's spear broke, but King Pellinore's

struck him so hard in the middle of the shield that horse and man fell to the earth.

But Arthur sprang to his feet in a great fury, drawing his sword and shouting defiance at Pellinore, who thereupon came down from his horse and drew his own sword. Then began a fierce battle, with many great strokes; they hacked and hewed at one another, cutting pieces off their shields and armour, and suffering each of them so many wounds that the trampled grass in front of the pavilion was stained with red. They rested once, and then charged each other again: but their swords met together with so mighty a crash that Arthur's broke in two, leaving him with the useless hilt in his hand.

'Ah-ha!' cried King Pellinore. 'Now you are in my power, to slay or spare as I will! And I will kill you forthwith, unless you kneel and yield to me, confessing yourself to be a knight of little worth.'

'There are two ways with that,' cried Arthur, mad with shame and fury. 'Death is welcome when it comes; but to yield – never!' And with that he leapt in under Pellinore's sword, seized him round the waist and hurled him to the ground. They struggled there for a little while, but Pellinore was still the strongest, and presently he tore off Arthur's helmet and took up his sword to cut his head off also.

But Merlin came suddenly and laid his hand on Pellinore's shoulder: 'Knight,' he said, 'hold your hand and

do not strike this stroke. For if you do the hope of Logres dies, and you put this land of Britain into the greatest ruin and desolation that ever a country suffered.'

'Who is it?' asked Pellinore.

'This is King Arthur!' said Merlin.

For a moment Pellinore was tempted to strike the blow: for he feared that if Arthur lived, he would never forgive him for what he had done. But Merlin smiled quietly, and placed his hand on Pellinore's head. And at once all the anger and fear went from his mind, and he sank back quietly against the tree beside the well of clear water, and passed into a deep sleep.

Merlin helped King Arthur, who was sorely wounded, to mount his horse, and led him away into the forest.

'Alas, Merlin, what have you done?' asked Arthur; for now he had put from him all the pride and wilfulness which had so nearly caused his death. 'You have killed this good knight by your magic – and I would rather have lost my kingdom than that one so brave and mighty should die thus.'

'Cease to trouble,' said Merlin. 'For all things work by the will of God and to the glory of Logres. He is more like to live than you are, for you are sorely wounded, and he does but sleep . . . I told you how mighty a fighter he was. This is King Pellinore who in time to come shall do you good service. And his sons, Sir Tor and Sir Lamorak, shall be among the bravest of your knights.'

Then Merlin brought Arthur to a hermitage where lived

a good old man who was a clever leech, or healer of wounds. And in three days he was nearly cured, and could ride once more and fight as strongly as ever.

'Alas,' said Arthur as they rode through the forest. 'Now I have no sword.'

'Let not that trouble you,' said Merlin. 'There was no virtue in the sword which is lost: it has served its purpose. But near here your own sword awaits you: it was made in Avalon by fairy craft, made for you alone until you must return it ere you journey to Avalon yourself. It is called Excalibur, and none may stand against its stroke: and with it you shall bring freedom and peace to Logres. This is the hour appointed when Excalibur shall be placed in your hand – for now you will grasp its hilt in all humility, and draw it only to defend the right.'

Deeper and deeper into the forest they went, and before long the hills rose on either side until they were riding through a narrow valley that wound through dark mountains. And at last they came to a narrow pass in the rocks, and beyond it, in a cup of the mountains, Arthur saw a strange lake. All around it the hills rose darkly and desolately, but the lake water was of the clearest, sunniest blue, and the shore was covered thickly in fresh green grass and flowers. Over the brow of a little rise beyond the lake, the mountains opened out into a great plain, and beyond it was water, half hidden in mist, and broken with many islands.

'This is the Lake of the Fairy Palace,' said Merlin, 'and

beyond the lake, over the brow of the hill yonder, lies the plain of Camlann where the last battle shall be fought, and you shall fall beneath the stroke of the Evil Knight. And beyond the plain lies Avalon, hidden in the mist and the mysterious waters . . . Go down now and speak with the Lady of the Lake, while I wait for you here.'

Leaving his horse with Merlin, Arthur went down the steep path to the side of the magic lake. Standing on the shore, he looked out across the quiet blue water – and there in the very centre of the Lake he saw an arm clothed in white samite with a hand holding above the surface a wondrous sword with a golden hilt set with jewels, and a jewelled scabbard and belt.

And then Arthur saw a beautiful damsel dressed in pale blue silk with a golden girdle, who walked across the water until she stood before him on the shore.

'I am the Lady of the Lake,' she said, 'and I am come to tell you that your sword Excalibur awaits you yonder. Do you wish to take the sword and wear it at your side?'

'Damsel,' said Arthur, 'that is indeed my wish.'

'For long I have guarded the sword,' said the Lady of the Lake. 'Give me but a gift when I shall come to ask you for one, and the sword shall be yours.'

'By my faith,' answered Arthur, 'I swear to give you whatsoever gift you shall ask for.'

'Enter into this boat, then,' said the Lady of the Lake. And Arthur saw a barge floating on the water before him,

into which he stepped. The Lady of the Lake stood on the shore behind him, but the barge moved across the water as if unseen hands drew it by the keel, until Arthur came beside the arm clothed in white samite. Leaning out, he took the sword and the scabbard: and at once the arm and the hand which had held it sank quietly out of sight beneath the blue waters.

Then the barge brought Arthur to the shore where the Lady of the Lake had stood: but now she was gone also. He tied the barge to a tree-root which curved over the waterside, and strode joyfully up the steep path to the pass, buckling the sword Excalibur to his side as he went.



Merlin awaited him with the horses, and together they rode away into the forest, and back by many winding paths until they drew near the river which lay between them and Caerleon, and came to the straight, paved road leading to the city.

'In a little while,' said Merlin, 'King Pellinore will come riding towards us. For he has ceased to do battle with all who pass through the forest, having seen a Questing Beast which he must follow now for many years.'

'Then I will fight with him once more,' cried Arthur. 'Now that I have so good a sword as Excalibur maybe I shall overcome and slay him!'

Merlin shook his head: 'Let him pass,' he said, 'for so I counsel you. He is a brave knight and a mighty, and in days to come he will do you good service, and he and his sons shall be among the bravest in your court.'

'I will do as you advise me,' said Arthur. But he looked upon the sword Excalibur, and sighed.

'Which like you better, the sword or the scabbard?' asked Merlin.

'I like the sword!' cried Arthur.

'Then are you the more unwise,' said Merlin gravely. 'The scabbard is worth ten such swords: for while you wear that magic scabbard you shall lose but little blood, however sorely you are wounded. Keep well that scabbard, and have good care of it after I am gone from you, for a

certain wicked lady who is nearly related to you shall seek to steal both sword and scabbard.'

They rode on, and in a little while met King Pellinore – who rode past as if he had not seen them.

'I marvel,' said Arthur, 'that he did not even speak to us!'

'He saw you not,' answered Merlin 'for my magic was upon him. But had you striven to stay him in your pride, then he would have seen you well enough.'

Before long they came to Caerleon, and his knights welcomed Arthur joyfully. And when they heard of his adventures, they were surprised that he should thus have gone into danger alone. But all the bravest and noblest of them rejoiced exceedingly that they had such a king, one who would risk his life in an adventure as other ordinary knights did.