

## **Arthurian Legends**

**By Thomas Malory**

Retold from *Morte D'Arthur* by U. Waldo Cutler

### **Uther's Son, the Rightful King of All England**

Then stood the kingdom in great jeopardy a long while, for every lord strengthened himself, and many a one thought to be king rather than be ruled by a child that they had never known. All this confusion Merlin had foreseen, and he had taken the young prince away, to keep him safe from the jealous barons until he should be old enough to rule wisely for himself. Even Sir Ector did not know that the boy growing up with his own son Kay was the King's child, and heir to the realm.

When now young Arthur had grown into a tall youth, well trained in all the exercises of honorable knighthood, Merlin went to the Archbishop of Canterbury and counseled him to send to all the lords of the realm and all the gentlemen of arms, that they should come to London at Christmas time, since God of His great mercy would at that time show by miracle who should be rightful king of the realm. The Archbishop did as Merlin advised, and all the great knights made them clean of their life so that their prayer might be the more acceptable unto God, and when Christmas came they went unto London, each one thinking that perchance his wish to be made king should be granted. So in the greatest church of the city (whether it was St Paul's or not the old chronicle makes no mention) all were at their prayers long ere day.

When matins were done and they came out of the church, there was seen in the churchyard a great square stone, in the midst of which was an anvil of steel, a foot high, with a fair sword naked at the point sticking through it. Written in gold about the sword were letters that read thus: "Whoso pulls out this sword from this stone and anvil is rightful king born of all England." All the people marveled at the stone and the inscription, and some assayed—such as would be king—to draw out the sword. But none might stir it, and the Archbishop said: "He is not here that shall achieve this sword, but doubt not God will make him known. This now is my counsel, that we cause to be chosen ten knights, men of good fame, to guard this sword until the rightful possessor shall appear."

So it was ordained, and it was proclaimed that every man should assay that would, to win the sword. And upon New Year's Day the barons held jousts and a tournament for all knights that would engage. All this was ordained for to keep the lords and the commons together, for the Archbishop trusted that God would soon make him known that should win the sword. So upon New Year's Day the barons rode to the field, some to ioust and some to tournev; and it happened that

Sir Ector rode also, and with him Sir Kay, his son, that had just been made knight, and young Arthur that was his foster-brother.

As they rode to the joust-ward Sir Kay suddenly missed his sword, which he had left at his father's lodging, and he begged young Arthur to ride and fetch it. "I will gladly," said Arthur, and he hastened off home. But the lady and all the household were out to see the jousting, and he found nobody at home to deliver him the sword. Then was Arthur troubled, and said to himself, "I will ride to the churchyard and take the sword that sticketh in the stone, for my brother Sir Kay shall not be without a sword this day."

So when he came to the great stone Arthur alighted, and tied his horse to the stile. He then went straight to the tent of the guards, but found no knights there, for they were at the jousting. So he took the sword by the handles, and lightly and fiercely pulled it out of the anvil; then he mounted his horse and rode his way till he came to his brother Sir Kay, and delivered him the sword.

As soon as Sir Kay saw the sword, he knew well it was that one of the stone, and so he rode away to his father, Sir Ector, and said: "Sir, lo here is the sword of the stone; wherefore I must be king of this land."

When Sir Ector beheld the sword, all three returned to the church and entered it. Anon Sir Ector made Sir Kay to swear upon a book how he came by that sword. And Sir Kay answered that Arthur had brought it to him. "And how gat ye the sword?" said he to Arthur; and when Sir Ector heard how it had been pulled from the anvil, he said to Arthur: "Now I understand ye must be king of this land."

"Wherefore I?" said Arthur, "and for what cause?"

"Sir," said Ector, "for God will have it so; for there should never man have drawn out this sword but he that shall be rightful king. Now let me see whether ye can put the sword there as it was, and pull it out again."

"That is no mastery," said Arthur, and so he put it into the stone. Therewith Sir Ector assayed to pull out the sword, and failed. Then Sir Kay pulled at it with all his might, but it would not yield.

"Now shall ye assay again," said Sir Ector to Arthur.

"I will well," said Arthur, and pulled it out easily a second time.

Now was Sir Ector sure that Arthur was of higher blood than had been thought, and that the rightful king had been made known. And he told his foster-son all, how he was not his father, but had taken him to nourish at Merlin's request. Arthur was grieved indeed when he understood that Sir Ector was not his father, and that the good lady that had fostered and kept him as her own son was

not his true mother, and he said to Sir Ector, "If ever it be God's will that I be king, as ye say, ye shall desire of me what I may do, and I shall not fail you."

Therewithal they went unto the Archbishop and told him how the sword was achieved, and by whom. And all the barons came thither, that whoever would might assay to take the sword. But there before them all none might take it out but Arthur. Now many lords became wroth, and said it was great shame unto them all and to the realm to be governed by a boy. They contended so at that time that the matter was put off till Candlemas, when all the barons should meet there again. A pavilion was set over the stone and the sword, and the ten knights were ordained to watch there day and night, five being always on guard.

So at Candlemas many more great lords came thither to win the sword, but none might prevail except Arthur. The barons were sore aggrieved at this, and again put it off in delay till the high feast of Easter. And as Arthur sped afore, so did he at Easter; yet there were some of the great lords that had indignation that Arthur should be their king, and put it off in a delay till the feast of Pentecost.

At the feast of Pentecost all manner of men assayed to pull at the sword, yet none might prevail but Arthur; and he pulled it out afore all the lords and commons that were there. Wherefore all the commons cried at once, "We will have Arthur unto our king; we will put him no more in delay, for we all see that it is God's will that he shall be our king, and who that holds against it we will slay as traitor." And they kneeled down all at once, both rich and poor, and begged mercy of Arthur, because they had delayed so long. And Arthur forgave them, and took the sword between both his hands, and offered it upon the altar where the Archbishop was, and so was he made knight of the best man that was there.

And anon was the coronation made, and there Arthur swore unto his lords and the commons to be a true king, to stand for justice all the days of his life. Then he made all the lords that were subject to the crown to come in, and to do service as they ought to do. And many great wrongs that had been done since the death of King Uther were righted, and to lords, knights, ladies, and gentlemen were given back the lands of which they had been unjustly deprived. When the king had thus established justice in all the countries about London, he made Sir Kay seneschal of England, and other officers he appointed also that should aid in keeping back his enemies and holding his realm in peace and orderliness.

### **How Arthur Got His Sword Excalibur**

Once there came into the court of the young King a squire on horseback, bringing a knight, his master, mortally wounded, and seeking justice against the murderer. Then came up Griflet, that was but a squire, a young man of the age of

King Arthur, who asked to be given the order of knighthood, so that he might ride out against the knight that had done the evil deed, who dwelt by a well in the forest.

Arthur was reluctant to bring this passing brave youth into peril by giving him so high an adventure, but at the request of Griflet the King at last gave him the order of knighthood, and he rode away till he came to the fountain.

There he saw the pavilion of the knight, and his horse all saddled and bridled, and his shield of diverse colors, and a great spear hanging on a nearby tree. Griflet struck the shield with the butt of his spear, so that it fell clattering down to the ground. With that the knight came out of the pavilion and said, "Fair knight, why did you knock down my shield?"

"Because I want to joust with you," said Griflet.

"It is better that you do not," the knight said. "You are but a young and recently made knight, and your strength is nothing to mine."

But Griflet would have it so, and the two ran together with such force that Griflet's spear was all shattered, and horse and rider fell down sore wounded. When the knight saw the youth lying on the ground, he was heavy of heart; and he unlaced his helm to give him air, and finally setting him on his horse, sent him with cheering words back to the court. Here great dole was made for him because of his wounds, and Arthur was passing wroth for the hurt of Sir Griflet.

The next morning ere day the King ordered his best horse, and in full armor rode out alone to encounter the knight of the fountain. It was a strong battle they had. Arthur's spear was all shattered, and his horse fell to the ground. Then they fought with swords with many great strokes and much blood-shed on both sides. Finally by a mighty blow from his enemy,—a passing big man of might,—Arthur's sword was smitten in two pieces, and he was called upon to yield himself as overcome and recreant, or die.

"As for death," said King Arthur, "welcome be it when it cometh; but to yield me unto thee as recreant, I had rather die than to be so shamed."

Therewithal came Merlin, and made known who Arthur was. Then by enchantment he caused the knight to fall into a deep sleep, and bore Arthur away to a hermit to be cured of his wounds.

When, after three days of rest and healing, he was riding with Merlin through the forest, King Arthur said, "I have no sword."

"No matter," said Merlin; "there is one near by that I can perhaps get for you."

So they rode on till it chanced that they passed a fair and broad lake. In the midst of the water Arthur became aware of an arm clothed in white samite<sup>[1]</sup> holding aloft a beautiful sword.

“Lo! there is the sword of which I spake,” said Merlin, “and yonder is the Lady of the Lake ready to help you to it, if you speak fair to her.”

Anon came the damsel unto Arthur and saluted him, and he her again. “Damsel,” said Arthur, “what sword is it that the arm holds above the water yonder? I would it were mine, for I have no sword.”

“Sir Arthur King,” said the damsel, “that sword is mine, and if you will give me a gift when I ask it you, go you into yonder barge and row yourself to the sword, and take it and the scabbard with you.”

So Sir Arthur and Merlin alighted and tied their horses to a tree, and then they went into the magic boat. Soon they were beside the sword that the hand held up. Arthur took it by the handle, the arm and the hand went down beneath the water, and the two travelers rowed back to the land and went forth.

As they rode along Arthur looked on the sword, which had the name Excalibur, that is as much as to say Cut-steel, and he liked it passing well, for the handle was all set with precious stones.

“Which like you better,” said Merlin, “the sword or the scabbard?”

“The sword,” replied Arthur.

“You are unwise,” said Merlin; “the scabbard is worth ten of the sword, for while you have the scabbard upon you, you shall lose no blood; therefore keep well the scabbard always with you.”

In this way Arthur came by Excalibur, and many an adventure he was to have with it, and was to suffer great danger when by evil interference it was, as we shall see, for a time stolen from him. With it in hand the hardest fight went well in the end, for the scabbard kept him from weakness, and a mysterious power lay in the strong, true blade that none could withstand, until the time came for King Arthur to give back the sword to the Lady of the Lake and to die of the wounds of a traitor.

So King Arthur and Merlin rode on, and when they came back safe to Carlion and the court the knights were passing glad. Some wondered that the king would risk himself abroad so alone, but all men of valor said it was merry to be under such a chief that would put his person in adventure as other poor knights did.

### **The Ladies' Knight**

The King was wedded unto Dame Guenever at Camelot with great solemnity. Just as all were sitting at the high feast that followed the marriage, there came running into the hall a white hart, followed by a whole pack of hounds with a great cry, and the hart went about the Table Round. At a fierce bite from one of the dogs the hart made a great leap, and overthrew a knight that sat at the table,

and so passed forth out of the hall again, with all the dogs after him. When they were gone the King was glad, for they made such a noise, but Merlin said, "You may not leave this adventure so lightly. Let call Sir Gawaine, for he must bring again the white hart."

"I will," said the King, "that all be done by your advice." So Sir Gawaine was called, and he took his charge and armed himself for the adventure. Sir Gawaine was one of King Arthur's nephews, and had just been made a knight, for he had asked of the King the gift of knighthood on the same day that he should wed fair Guenever.

So Sir Gawaine rode quickly forth, and Gaheris his brother rode with him, instead of a squire, to do him service. As they followed the hart by the cry of the hounds, they came to a great river. The hart swam over, and they followed after, and so at length they chased him into a castle, where in the chief courtyard the dogs slew the hart before Sir Gawaine and young Gaheris came up. Right so there came a knight out of a room, with a sword drawn in his hand, and he slew two of the greyhounds even in the sight of Sir Gawaine, and the remnant he chased with his sword out of the castle.

When he came back he said, "O my white hart, me repents that thou art dead, for my sovereign lady gave thee to me, and poorly have I kept thee. Thy death shall be dear bought, if I live."

Anon he came fiercely towards Sir Gawaine, and they struck mightily together. They clove their shields and broke their helms and hauberks so that the blood ran down to their feet. At the last Sir Gawaine smote the knight so hard that he fell to the earth; and then he cried for mercy and yielded himself, and besought Sir Gawaine as he was a knight and gentleman to save his life.

"Thou shalt die," said Sir Gawaine, "for slaying of my hounds."

"I will make amends," said the knight, "unto my power."

Sir Gawaine would no mercy have, but unlaced his helm to strike off his head, when at that instant came his lady out of a chamber. She fell upon her husband just as the blow descended, and so Sir Gawaine smote off her head by misadventure, and the knight was saved.

"Alas!" said Gaheris, "that is foul and shamefully done; that shame shall never depart from you. You should give mercy unto them that ask mercy, for a knight without mercy is without honour."

Sir Gawaine was so astonished at the death of the fair lady that he knew not what he did, and he said unto the knight, "Arise, I will give thee mercy; and go thou unto King Arthur, and tell him how thou art overcome by the knight that went in the quest of the white hart."

“I care not for mercy now,” said the knight, “for thou hast slain my lady that I loved best of all earthly things it matters not whether I live or die.”

Then Sir Gawaine went into the castle and made ready to rest there all night.

“What will you do?” said Gaheris; “will you unarm you in this country? You may believe you have many enemies here.”

He had no sooner said that word than there came four knights well armed, and anon they made Sir Gawaine and Gaheris yield themselves as prisoners, in spite of the brave battle wherein Sir Gawaine was sore wounded in the arm.

Early on the morrow there came to Sir Gawaine in the prison one of the ladies of the castle, and said, “Sir Knight, what cheer?”

“Not good,” said he.

“It is your own fault,” said the lady, “for you have done a passing foul deed in the slaying of the lady, which will be great disgrace unto you. Be you not of King Arthur’s kin?”

“Yes, truly,” said Sir Gawaine. “My name is Gawaine, and my mother is King Arthur’s sister.”

“Ah, then are you nephew unto King Arthur,” said the lady, “and I shall so speak for you that you shall have conduct to King Arthur, for love of him.”

Then anon they delivered Sir Gawaine under this promise, that he should bear the dead lady to the court, the severed head hanging about his neck. Right so he rode forth unto Camelot, and Merlin made him tell of his adventure, and how he slew the lady, and how he would give no mercy unto the knight, whereby the lady was slain. Then the King and the Queen were greatly displeased with Sir Gawaine, and by ordinance of the Queen there was set a quest of ladies on Sir Gawaine, and they ordered him for ever while he lived to be with all ladies, and to fight for their quarrels; and that ever he should be courteous, and never refuse mercy to him that asketh mercy. Thus was Gawaine sworn upon the four Evangelists that he should never be against lady nor gentlewoman, except if he fought for a lady and his adversary fought for another.

Thus ends the adventure of Sir Gawaine, that he did at the marriage of King Arthur.

### **Wise Merlin’s Foolishness**

Arthur was now established as king over all the land. The great council hall at Camelot, that is Winchester, had been built, some say by Merlin’s skill; and the

most loyal and the bravest knights of the world had been gathered at Arthur's court to do honor to him and his fair Queen Guenever.

Merlin was Arthur's wisest helper and most powerful friend, as he had before been the helper and friend of his father Uther, for whom he had made the Round Table, signifying the roundness of the world. We have seen how he hid the young Arthur away from the jealousy of the wild barons, and how, by his power over men and his knowledge of what would be, he had saved the King's life and guided his wise rule. The old magician Bleise, that dwelt in Northumberland, was Merlin's master, and he it was that wrote down all the battles of Arthur with his enemies word by word as Merlin told him, and all the battles that were done in Arthur's days, until Merlin was lost, as we shall see, through his own foolishness.

On a time Merlin told King Arthur that he should not endure long, but for all his crafts he should be put in the earth alive. Also he told many things that should befall, and how the king would miss him, so that rather than all his lands he would wish to have him again.

"Ah," said King Arthur, "since you know of this, provide against it, and put away by your crafts that misadventure."

"Nay," said Merlin, "it cannot be done." For Merlin, now grown an old man in his dotage, had fallen under the spell of a damsel of the court named Nimue. With her he soon departed from the King, and evermore went with her wheresoever she went. Ofttimes he wished to break away from her, but he was so held that he could not be out of her presence. Ever she made him good cheer, till she had learned from him all she desired of his secret craft, and had made him swear that he would never do any enchantment upon her.

They went together over the sea unto the land of Benwick, where Ban was king, that had helped Arthur against his enemies. Here Merlin saw young Launcelot, King Ban's son, and he told the queen that this same child should grow to be a man of great honour, so that all Christendom should speak of his prowess. So the queen was comforted of her great sorrow that she made for the mortal war that King Claudas waged on her lord and on her lands.

Then afterwards Nimue and Merlin departed into Cornwall, and by the way he showed her many wonders, and wearied her with his desire for her love. She would fain have been delivered of him, for she was afraid of him, almost believing him a devil's son, and yet she could not put him away by any means.

And so on a time it happened that Merlin showed to her a wonderful cavern in the cliff, closed by an enchanted stone. By her subtle working she soon made Merlin remove the stone and go into the cavern to let her know of the marvels there. Then she so wrought through the magic he had taught her that the

stone was placed back again, so that he never came out for all the craft that he could do. And then she departed and left him there.

On a day a certain knight rode to see adventures, and happened to come to the rock where Nimue had put Merlin, and there he heard him make great lamentation. The knight would gladly have helped him, and tried to move the great stone; but it was so heavy that a hundred men might not lift it up. When Merlin knew that the knight sought his deliverance, he bade him leave his labour, for all was in vain. He could never be helped but by her that put him there.

So Merlin's prophecy of his own end was fulfilled, and he passed from the world of men. Arthur truly missed his old friend and marveled what had become of him. Afterwards, when the last great battle came, he would have given everything to have Merlin with him again, but it could not be.

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