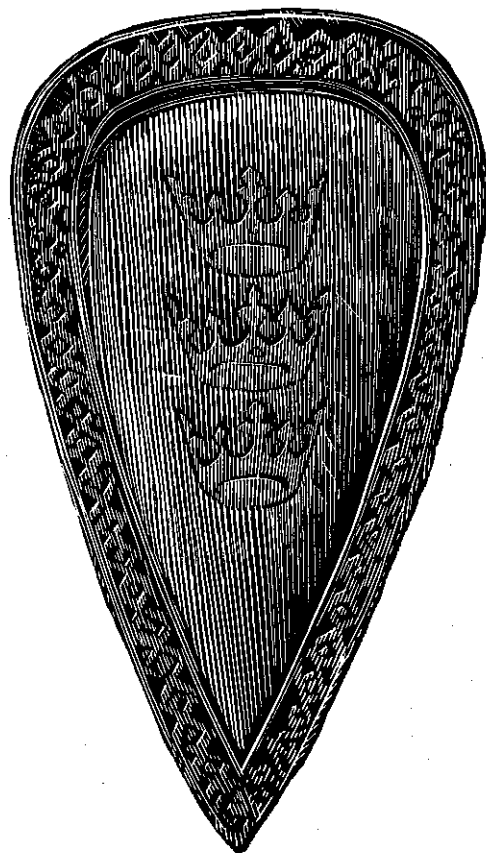


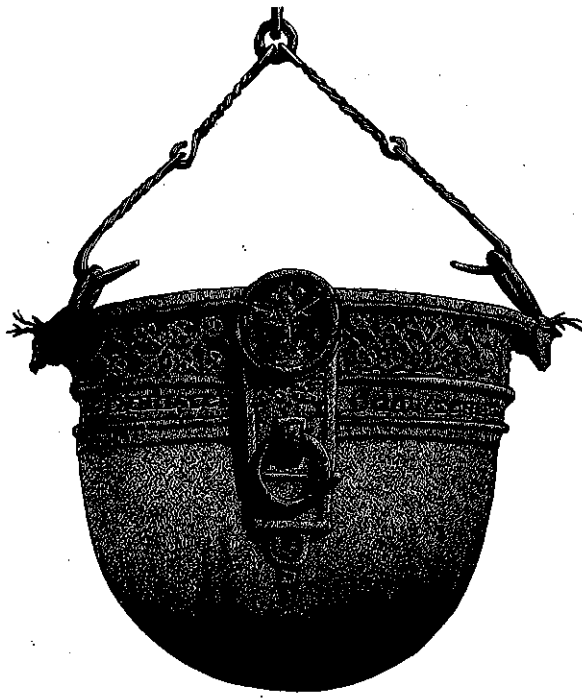
The Enchanted World
THE FALL OF CAMELOT

by the Editors of Time-Life Books



Time-Life Books • Alexandria, Virginia

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PROLOGUE

Three ships set sail once from the stony coast of Wales, three low, square-sailed ships running before an easterly wind. Above their decks, the spears of warriors glittered in bristling array, among the spear blades, the warriors' standards snapped and fluttered, and the painted lions, leopards, wolves and griffins that adorned them danced in the sun. On the lead ship, one banner rose higher than the rest, displaying thirteen golden crowns on a field of blue. This was the standard of Arthur, High King of Britain. The crowns signified his own royalty and that of the twelve petty kingdoms that the young King had brought under his rule, but Arthur was after greater prey than these. Arrogant in his quick-won glory, he sought to invade Annwfn, the world of Faerie, and take its magic treasure for his own. This was a raiding party.

It was a mighty company, high in spirit and strong in arms—and in more than arms: On the King's ship sailed the Welsh bard Taliesin. Bards often accompanied kings to war. The poets sang men into battle and, later, in their songs, preserved those men's deeds for history. But Taliesin was more than a bard. He was an enchanter, a man who could take the shape of a lantern or an eagle or a harpstring. In his youth he had slain dragons, and he had sung at battles where the very trees pulled up their roots and marched heavily across the ground to join the fray. The old man's presence on the venture was a safeguard, for even the people of Annwfn gave reverence to the powers of Taliesin.

Another safeguard sailed with Arthur: The mightiest warrior in the world was in his company. Taliesin named this man Lluch Lleminawc, which meant in Welsh "the fated one," but Taliesin did not say what the epithet might portend, and no later chroniclers spoke of him.

In fact, everything the bard recorded of the venture was wrapped in mystery, and when the words of his song were written down, they seemed to glow and fade on the page, revealing and concealing meaning. Arthur sailed west across the sea, beyond the shore of the world, recounted the enchanter. The King's ships beached on a mist-shrouded island where a fortress rose, tower upon tower, hall upon

hall, battlement upon battlement of translucent glass, shimmering in the light of the place, which was now twilight, now night-dark.

In that strange hour, the warriors passed a sentinel who would not speak, and they found the wonders they had come to find: a wellspring of wine bubbling from the ground and a caldron rimmed with pearls, infinitely precious. Nine maidens guarded this caldron, for it was a vessel of magic, giants' work charged with the powers of the first world. Its blue-enameled sides gave forth a radiance that endowed good men with the wisdom to sing and the courage to fight. And the caldron provided meat for brave men only, it would not cook the food of cowards.

Arthur and his warriors stole the caldron, they carried it away and hid it, safe in their own territory. But they paid heavily for the treasure they took.

The lesser payment was in life. Six thousand warriors of Annwfn defended the glass fortress and the caldron against the human invaders. Although Taliesin did not describe the battle—except to praise the valor of the knight Lluch Lleminawc—he told its grim results. Only a handful of the company returned alive to Britain. "When we went with Arthur in his splendid labors, Arthur of mournful memory," sang the bard, "save seven, none returned from the enclosure of the perfect ones, the enclosure resting on the height."

The greater payment was lifelong, which perhaps was why Taliesin cloaked his chronicle in shadowy phrases and why Arthur never afterward spoke of his adventure or showed the treasure he had won. It was a terrible thing to challenge the ancient powers of the other world, it was a foolhardy act to steal a relic of old magic from the place where it rightly dwelled.

The bard, it seemed, understood the danger, for in his oblique fashion, he included warnings in his account of the venture—warnings that Arthur understood only when it was too late. Taliesin said that amid the splendors of Annwfn's fortress of glass a prison tower rose, in that tower, bound with chains of steel, a mortal king was kept, a man whose ceaseless lamentations could be heard throughout the fairy island. His name was Gweir. He had, it seemed, offended the old ones and thus brought perpetual imprisonment upon himself and famine upon his country. And, said Taliesin, the long-vanished Kings Pwyll and Pryderi served in Annwfn. Father and son, the two had ruled the kingdom of Dyfed in Wales before Arthur's time, their trespasses on the lands of Faerie had brought a wasting enchantment to their domain.

These prisoners of Annwfn had reigned in an era when humankind seemed more vulnerable and the princes of Faerie wandered freely on the earth. Arthur was the lord of a new age. The star of human power, he gathered the realms of Britain into his hands. Even Arthur, however, could not safely insult the hidden elder world that was not human. The Princes of Annwfn took vengeance for the loss of their treasure. Their eyes were keen, their reach long, their weapons many, their patience infinite. They sent their servants among the conquering mortals, servants who worked in secret ways, who formed with threads of shadow the cracks that caused the British King's bright honor to crumble into dust and ruin to settle on his dominion.