



❧ ARTHUR ❧

Mighty indeed was Tintagel, fortress of the Dukes of Cornwall, looming on a slate-cliffed headland high above the sea. No army could breach its defenses. Yet on a winter's night between one year and the next, a frail creature, no more than half a man, stole away with the castle's treasure and took it into his own keeping.

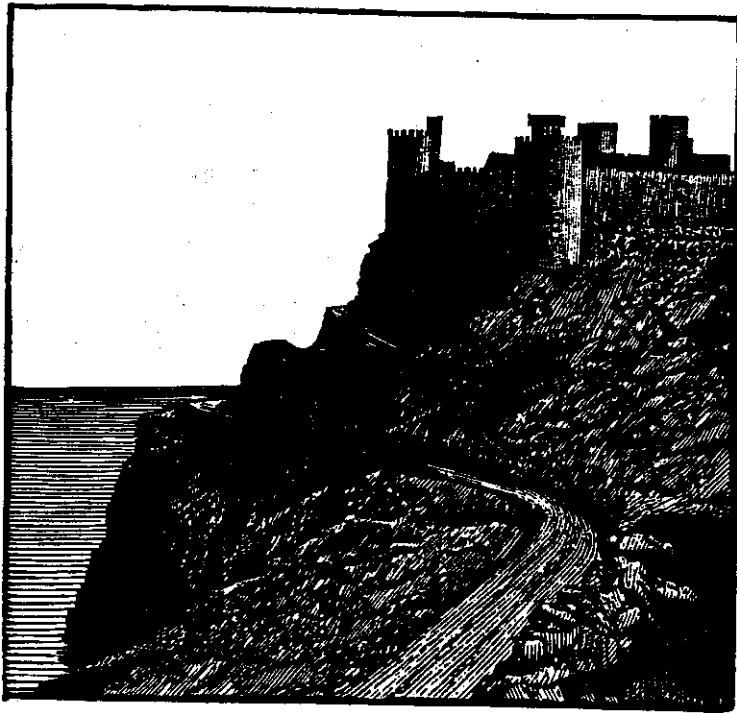
His was a deed of masterly stealth, a blend of both quickness and patience. In the depths of the night, he flitted across the narrow isthmus that linked Tintagel to the Cornish coast. With his black cloak gathered about him, he was a shadow among shadows, a mere stirring in the air. Guards paced the battlements above but they did not detect his approach, nor did they hear his light footsteps on the rain-slick stone. Then the intruder vanished into an archway marking a hidden postern gate that faced westward across the sea.

Motionless, he waited through the small hours. The rain ceased after a time, and the cold night wind died. Above the castle towers, the ordered stars—the Crown, the Dragon, the Archer, the Huntsman with his dogs, the sisters of the Pleiades—appeared and pursued the stately figures of their dance, then faded as dawn approached. Abruptly, the door in the wall swung open, a young woman was there, holding in her arms a swaddled infant. Without a word, she gave it to the watcher, without a word, he received it into the black folds of his cloak. Then he turned back onto the cliff, sped silently through the morning light, and disappeared.

Thus was the infant Arthur, heir to Britain, placed under a shield of magic, not to be seen again for fifteen years. Merlin the Enchanter was the man who took him from the fortress where his mother lay. Merlin was the man who hid him.

Merlin, that enigmatic being, son of a human woman and a creature of the other world, prophet and magician, had brought about the infant's birth. The boy's father was Uther Pendragon—Uther the Chief of Warriors, in Welsh—who ruled a troubled realm, a Britain torn by the internal strife of loosely united petty kingdoms and menaced from without by the greed and savagery of Saxon hordes from the European mainland. Uther had conceived a passion for the wife of one of his own Dukes.





A headland fortress called Tintagel was the birthplace of Arthur of Britain. Here, safe from assault, laired the Dukes of Cornwall.

Igraine, the Duchess of Gorlois of Cornwall, was the woman; Gorlois sequestered her at Tintagel, where Uther could not reach her. Mad-dened, the King turned to magic. He summoned Merlin.

And Merlin gave Uther what he wished; he waited until Gorlois was gone from Tintagel, defend-ing his eastern territories. Then, by enchantment, the old man changed Uther's shape to that of the Cornish Duke; in this form, the King was admitted one night to Tintagel and had his will.

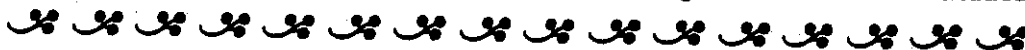
Merlin demanded a price for the pandering: The price was any child born of that night's union. Uther shrugged and agreed, and he had to keep his word, although he named Igraine his Queen when

Gorlois died in battle, making the infant she carried in her womb his rightful heir.

So even before Arthur's life began, the eyes of the other world turned toward him. Uther's passion was a force that rent the fabric of human honor and human order; it left a path where the old ones might enter the mortal world. And Merlin, who aided the King and guarded the child of the King's desire, was half of the fairy race himself, a living link to the magic of the older age.

Why the Enchanter wanted the child the chroniclers never told, doubtless they did not know, for Merlin kept his own counsel. Some thought he hid Arthur for the child's safety while the British warred among themselves; some said that the old blood flowing in his veins made him treasure his power as kingmaker in the human world.

In any case, kingmaker he was, although none would know it for some time to come. The infant Arthur disappeared into the mountain fastness of Wales, placed in the care, it was said, of a lord named Ector. Merlin periodically appeared in Uther's court, watching Igraine and the King, keeping guard over the succession. He saw Igraine's three daughters by Gorlois—fey, witchlike maidens, adept, it was whispered, with the tools of enchantment—safely married to minor princes and sent away from court. Morgause, the eldest, became the Queen of Lot of Lothian and Orkney, a harsh, hotheaded lord who held almost unrivalled power in the north. Elaine married King Nentres of Carlot and faded



out of history. The youngest daughter, Morgan, became the wife of Urien of Gorre. Those were all the children of Igraine, except for Arthur, she bore no others.

Therefore, when Merlin knew that Uther was dying—after the King's last battle against invaders from the north, when he led his army from a litter, being too weak to sit a horse—he went to the King and asked for the word he wanted. That Arthur, Uther's only son, should be made King of the Britons. And, said the chroniclers, Uther assented. That was two years after Arthur's birth.

Thirteen years more passed before Merlin made the move to place Arthur on the throne—thirteen long years while the princes of Britain fought and the people suffered, thirteen years while the child, who did not know he was a king, grew to young manhood. Arthur underwent hard and patient training during this period, and when he at last appeared, he was royal indeed, the very prince and flower of chivalry.

His existence was revealed to the world at Christmastide. In the weeks and months beforehand, Merlin's messengers rode throughout Britain, summoning the princes of the realm to London to take counsel about the crowning of a king who would unite them once again, as they had been under Uther. All through December, parties of horsemen wound along the dirt tracks and crumbling highways that led to the city. Outside the walls, a great encampment grew on the high heaths and frost-ed stubble of the winter fields, a sprawl of bright tents and gilded standards, all overhung by a haze of smoke from cooking fires.

*Old magic slipped past the defenses of
Tintagel. Merlin the Enchanter carried away the infant
Arthur and placed him in hiding.*



And within the walls of London, where Merlin walked the narrow streets in his somber scholar's gown, enchantment was at work. At the city's heart, close by the square tower that was its ancient fortress, a chapel stood. The chapel was a small one, built to cover some old god's shrine, a cloister and grassy courtyard adjoined it, reminders that it had once been attached to a monastery. In the yard a massive stone appeared, pierced by a broadsword. On the stone, in letters that gave their own light, was a legend: *Whoso pulleth this sword from this stone is rightfully born King of all England.*



All the Kings—Lot, Urien of Gorre, Ban of Benwic in France, Idres of Cornwall and many others—came to study the sword. Its import was clear to them, for they were descended from sword-bearing warrior tribes and from lords whose emblems of office were sacred stones. The coronation seat of the Irish King, for instance, was the Lia Fail—the Stone of Destiny. It shrieked when the rightful King's foot touched it. All the British Kings therefore tried the sword: Who knew which blood would plumb the magic? But the stone would not yield its treasure to them.

Merlin observed the trials without comment. But on the first day of Christmas, when the Kings gathered in the fortress hall, he called them to silence. In his cold, dry voice Merlin said, "He is not yet here who shall achieve the sword." Then he left them to speculate, to form and break alliances, to plot among themselves.

So Christmas passed in mutterings and quarrels among the factions jockeying for power. The new year came, and with it bright sunlight and an icy wind that swept through the twisting streets of London, rattling the shutters of the houses and the painted signboards of the shops.

Under one of those boards—a painted bush, signifying a wineshop—three men stood on New Year's morning. Two of them were short of stature, compact and dark in the manner of the Welsh. Both were armored in mail, they held their helmets under their arms as they talked in the singing accents of the west. The third man was tall and broad of shoulder, with red-gold hair that lifted in the wind. So strong was he, so easy in his grace, that he seemed to catch and hold the sunlight, and although he wore the tunic and cloak of a squire, he drew the eyes of the passersby. He leaned against the wineshop wall, oblivious to the admiring coos of the good-wives, and listened to his companions. The golden man was Arthur, a fine lordling not yet old enough, it seemed, for knighthood. The other two were Kay, whom he thought to be his elder brother, and Ector, his supposed father. All of them were newly arrived from Ector's Welsh lands.

Kay, always short-tempered, was in a foul humor. He had left his sword at the camp outside the city walls. Ector's rough comments on his carelessness enraged the younger man. Unwilling—and unable—to quarrel with his father, he turned on Arthur and ordered him to fetch the sword.

Arthur, tired of talk and glad of action, answered Kay with a jaunty half salute and



strode off down the street between the leaning, timbered houses, weaving his way among the frozen puddles, the pigs that rooted in refuse, the fishwives with their heavy baskets, the bakers with their stacks of great round loaves. At the bottom of the path, an elderly man plucked at his sleeve. The golden head bent for a moment, giving courteous attention. Then, with the old man pacing at his side, Arthur turned a corner and vanished from view.

When he returned an hour later, his face was drawn and grave, but his eyes were bright. In his hand he held an unsheathed broadsword. He raised his brows inquiringly when he saw his brother standing alone. Kay gestured toward the wineshop, where Ector had gone. Then he held out his hands for the sword. Arthur laid the blade gently across Kay's hands, saying as he did so, "This sword is mine, brother."

Kay turned the sword over, examining the filigree that ornamented the hilt and the agates and carnelians that gleamed among the gold. He said, "This is not a sword of ours. Whose is it?"

"In a churchyard beside the fortress there stands a stone," said Arthur. "This sword was in the stone. I called the sword forth as I was told, and it came into my hand."

Kay stared at him with narrowed eyes. "I am the elder," he said. Then he shouted for his father, whose face appeared in the shop window.

"Sir," said Kay, "this is the sword from the sacred stone that we have heard of. I have found it; it brings me a crown." Arthur made a sharp movement, swiftly checked. Ector's face disappeared from the window. In a moment, he was with them.

The old man looked without expression at his sons, the one blazing with white fury, the other defiant, but trembling enough so that the jewels in the sword he held winked in the light. "Let us go, then, to the place of the stone," said Ector.

They did that, and when they stood in the quiet courtyard beside the empty stone, Ector turned to Kay. "Son," he said, "swear now on your honor that you yourself found the sword you hold and drew it from the stone."

The very walls of the yard seemed to breathe and listen. Finally, Kay shook his head. "I lied," he said. "My brother Arthur found the stone and drew the sword from it." And he returned the sword to Arthur.

Let us see, then," said Ector. At his gesture, Arthur replaced the sword in the great stone. Ector tried it; the hilt burned in his hand, he said, but the sword did not move. Kay tried, but the weapon remained fast in its prison. At last, Arthur put his hands to the golden hilt. The letters on the stone blazed out, with a metallic hiss, the sword slid free.

Ector sank slowly to his knees. He placed his hands over Arthur's on the sword hilt and began the solemn words of the oath of fealty. As he did so, Kay knelt beside him.

"Father," said Arthur, when Ector had finished, "do not kneel."

"Nay, lord, I am not your father but only he who fostered and trained you. I knew well that you were of higher blood than mine."



"That is true," said another voice. A face glimmered in the shadow of the cloister. Then Merlin came forth.

"You are he who brought me the boy to care for," said Ector.

"You are he who guided me to this stone," said Arthur.

"I am," replied the Enchanter. "I am he who has brought you to the throne, son of Uther Pendragon, High King of Britain."

Arthur's head went up, his hand tightened on the hilt of the sword as the mantle of power gathered around him, and his voice was clear when he claimed the crown.

The claim was not welcome everywhere, for the lords of Britain had no wish to be governed by a stranger. But they had the word of the Enchanter that Arthur was the rightful King and, what mattered more, they had the evidence of the sword and the evidence of the man himself. The blood of kings ran in Arthur's veins, and he had been schooled for a high place. Within a year, therefore, he was crowned, and the princes of the land had bent the knee to him. Those who, years before, had loved Uther—Baudwin of Britain, Ulfín, Brastias, Leodegran of Camelerd, Pellinore of the Isles—came willingly, bringing their armies. Many more, however, were secret enemies, waiting for the chance to seize the throne. Chief among these was Lot, brooding in the north, on his windswept islands.

He struck first a year after the coronation, when Arthur held court at the fortress of Caerleon in Wales. To that assembly rode Lot with the allies he had gathered: Urien of Gorre, Nentres of Garlot, the King of Scotland, the King of Carados. When Arthur's messenger greeted them, they sent back word, as the chroniclers wrote, that "it was a great shame to all of them to see such a boy have the rule of so noble a realm."

The first response came from Merlin. He stepped one night, first a shadow and then a solid man, from the campfire where the rebel Kings had gathered. He surveyed them with wintry eyes, the kingmaker serving the King he had made.

"You would do better to give over this folly, lords. You would not prevail, not if you were ten times as many."

Urien, suddenly afraid, made the sign against evil. Lot spat at Merlin's feet. "Are we well advised to listen to a dream reader?" he said, and he laughed.

But the Enchanter had faded again into the flames.

The next morning, Arthur descended on the camp with his cavalry. Golden crowns gleamed on his shield, and a dreadful sword glittered in his hands—not the sword of ceremony that had made him King, but an elf-made sword, the weapon Caliburn, drawn from a lake by Merlin's magic. No enemy could withstand it. Moreover, even its sheath was magic: A touch of its scabbard, warriors whispered, could heal the gravest wound. It was no sword for mortal men, they said.

In the battle that followed, the King stayed always to the fore, and the great sword killed and killed. Lot's infantry was trampled, the rebel Kings and their knights



Unfathomable was the mystery of Merlin. In his veins ran fairy blood, yet he guarded a mortal king.

held formation but were driven steadily back by the High King's wolfish fury. At the last, they turned and fled.

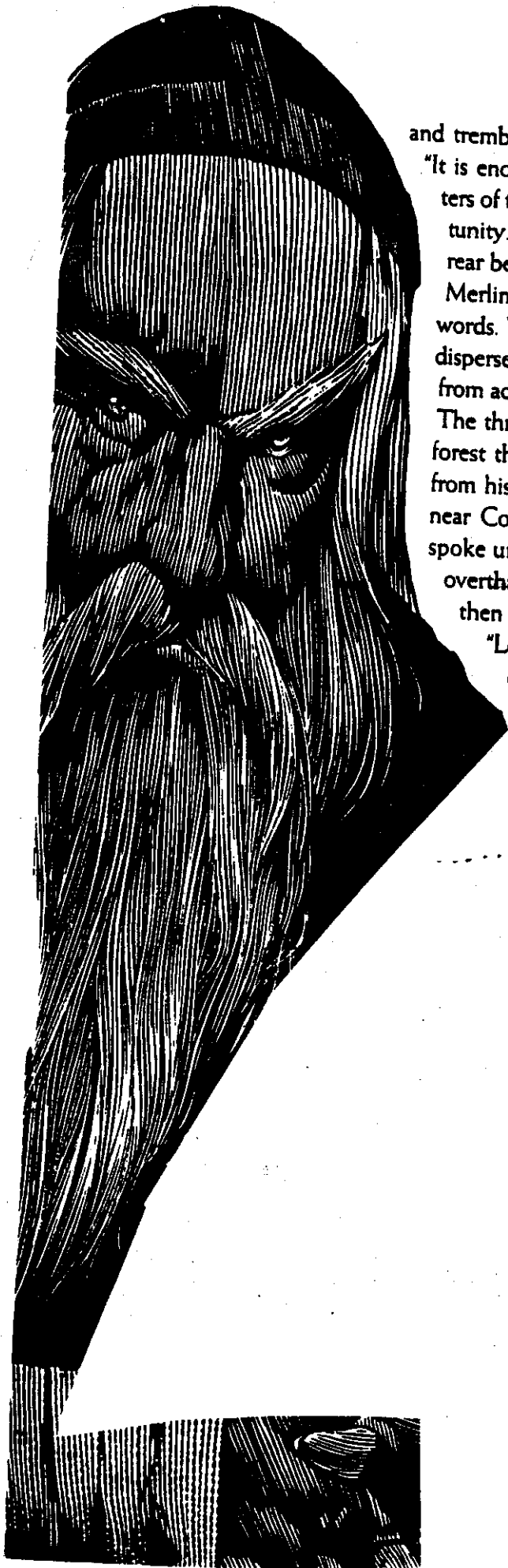
Arthur pursued them — but much later. For months he waited, weighing the reports that came down from the Scottish territories, reports of a gathering of eleven armies under Lot, a host that would sweep across England to bring the High King down.

Before Lot could move, however, Arthur was on the march. Along the northern track his battle train moved — knights and squires, foot soldiers, pack mules, supply wagons, armorers, surgeons and straggling women. They traveled through heavily wooded country, and all along the edges of the track the trees stirred and rustled, seeming to offer a faint echo to the slapping and jingling of harnesses, the creaking of wagon wheels, the clatter of bows, the thud of marching feet. But these were no echoes. Merlin had made an alliance with Ban of Benwic and Bors of Gaul, he had cast a cloak of invisibility over the French Kings' armies, and he himself led them north, through the forest, a shadow host flanking the armies of the High King.

The ghostly army turned the tide for Arthur in the end. Ban and Bors could not in honor keep themselves shielded with invisibility, they could, however, remain in ambush so that Lot's armies were drawn forward, tempted by Arthur's seemingly small force. And that is what happened. The armies met on a field at the borders of the forest of Bedegraine, hard by a river that marked the Scottish border. There, Arthur and his knights waited, still as stones on their mighty horses, their lances resting on their thighs. Lot and his eleven Kings charged, screaming. And then death's cold hand touched man and beast so wantonly that, according to the chroniclers, the horses were soon up to their fetlocks in blood and the device on Arthur's shield could not be seen for the gore that bespattered it. When the fray was at its worst, Ban and Bors and their companies slipped out from the trees. Lot and his men checked at the sight of this host, led by two Kings who were called the best warriors in the world. Their spirit failed them then. Stumbling over broken bodies and through pools of blood, they fled from the field of battle.

Arthur pressed forward, his heralds beside him, Bors and Ban just behind. But the horses halted of their own accord and stood sweating





and trembling. No spur could move them. Merlin stood on the field. "It is enough killing," said the Enchanter. "You have slain three quarters of their men. You will not follow now, you will have other opportunity. And enemies are on the northern shores. Lot must secure his rear before he threatens English kingdoms."

Merlin said no more, but all who listened knew the rightness of his words. The High King withdrew into his own lands. His under Kings dispersed to their various territories, all save Bors and Ban, his allies from across the water.

The three Kings repaired to Arthur's rough fortress, called, like the forest that surrounded it, Bedegraine, to be greeted by messengers from his ally Leodegran of Camelard, in the southwest of England, near Cornwall. Merlin stood beside the High King as the heralds spoke urgently of the enemies of Leodegran, men who sought to overthrow the kingdom. The Enchanter studied the men intently, then frowned.

"Lord," said the Enchanter, who could always see the pattern of Arthur's life, "do not go to Leodegran."

"Enchanter, do not seek to bind me longer. Leodegran was my father's vassal and is my own ally as well," the King replied. He left the hall.

So the High King rode south in the autumn, through the water meadows and marshes called the Summer Country, home of folk who lived their lives on small and shifting lake villages and had leather boats for horses. These people were the isolated survivors of an early age, their metal was bronze, not iron, and they worshipped old gods strange to Arthur and his men. He passed the high hill ruled by Melwas, a prince known to court the old ones, the hill was covered with apple trees heavy with crimson fruit, but no mortal man dared touch those apples. They were the food of Faerie, the soldiers said.

Down to the coast Arthur's army marched, then along the shore to the fortress of Leodegran. He fought like a lion for Leodegran, and won.

Chroniclers say that ten thousand men died in the battle, but that seems unlikely. The world was sparsely populated, and military actions were matters of hundreds, not thousands.



Yet victory was not the prize of Camelot. After the fighting, when the High King feasted in his vassal's hall, the wheel of his fate began to turn. The hall was a high one, hung with fine weaving, long tables lined it. The lord's own table was vast and round, not like the trestles used by other kings. The vessels that adorned it were of glass and gold, reflecting the light of torches and hearth.

And the maiden who served the wine of the High King reflected the light as well. She was a tall girl, her hair hung unbound and unadorned except for a princess's circlet, and the hair was the brown of autumn leaves, touched with gold from the sun. Her eyes were downcast as befitted a maiden, the lashes made shadows on her flesh. The robe she wore was white, the hands that held the drinking horn were long and pale, she had a scent of flowers about her.

Arthur was no stranger to women: He was the High King, a golden warrior unrivaled on the field, and he had their admiration. He had a son already by a knight's daughter named Lionors, who had once attracted him. But this woman clearly was no mere knight's child, and far from showing admiration, she had neither glanced nor spoken. He was charmed.

Leodegran, on Arthur's right, caught the High King's look and said, "That is my daughter, lord."

"A noble maiden," replied the King. He turned to speak to her, but the girl had gone from the hall.

"Her name is Guinevere," said Leodegran, then guided the talk to other matters.

Arthur saw no more of Leodegran's daughter until the day he left the King's fortress. As he mounted, a movement caught his eye. With the warrior's quick attention, he turned in the saddle. The maiden stood in a window of a low stone tower, gazing gravely at him. He lifted a hand in farewell, then he rode away.



