

“How Arthur Becomes King” from Gilbert’s King Arthur’s Knights

In a few days the king was buried in all solemnity with the dead of his kindred in the Roman temple that had been made a church, where now stands St. Paul's. Thereafter men waited and wondered, for the land was without a king, and none knew who was rightfully heir to the throne. Nevertheless, some were already wagering which of the great lords would conquer the others, and take to himself the crown of Britain and the title of Pendragon.

As it neared the feast of Christmas, men heard that the Archbishop of London, who was then chief ruler of the Church, had sent his letters to each and all the great nobles, bidding them come to a great council to be holden at the church of St. Paul at Christmas.

When men heard that this was done by the advice of Merlin, faces lightened and looked more joyful.

"Now shall things go right," said they, "for the old, old Merlin hath the deepest wisdom of all the earth."

On Christmas Eve the city throbbled with the clank of arms and the tramp of the great retinues of princes, kings, and powerful lords who had come at the archbishop's summons, and by day and night the narrow ways were crowded with armed men. Long ere the dawn of Christmas Day, the lords and the common people betook themselves along the wide road which led across to the church, which then stood in a wide space amid fields, and all knelt therein to mass.

While it was yet dark a great strange cry rang out in the churchyard. Some ran forth, and there by the wall behind the high altar they saw a vast stone, four-square, that had not been there before, and in the middle thereof was stuck a great wedge of steel, and sticking therefrom by the point was a rich sword. On the blade were written words in Latin, which a clerk read forth, which said, "Whoso pulleth this sword out of this stone and wedge of steel is rightwise born King of all Britain."

The clerk ran into the church and told the archbishop, and men were all amazed and would have gone instantly to see this marvel, but the archbishop bade them stay.

"Finish your prayers to God," he said, "for no man may touch this strange thing till high mass be done."

When mass was finished, all poured forth from the church and thronged about the stone, and marveled at the words on the sword. First King Lot, with a light laugh, took hold of the handle and essayed to pull out the point of the sword, but he could not, and his face went hot and angry. Then King Nentres of Garlot took his place with a jest, but though he heaved at the sword

with all his burly strength, till it seemed like to snap, he could not move it, and so let go at last with an angry oath. All the others essayed in like manner, but by none was it moved a jot, and all stood about

discomfited, looking with black looks at one another and the stone.

"He that is rightwise born ruler of Britain is not here," said the archbishop at length, "but doubt not he shall come in God's good time."

So that the kings and lords should be kept together, the archbishop appointed a great tournament to be held on New Year's Day on the waste land north of the city, which men now call Smithfield.

Now when the day was come, a certain lord, Sir Ector de Morven, who had great lands about the isle of Thorney, rode towards the jousts with his son, Sir Kay, and young Arthur, who was Sir Kay's foster-brother. When they had got nearly to the place, suddenly Sir Kay be-thought him that he had left his sword at home. "Do you ride back, young Arthur," he said, "and fetch me my sword, for if I do not have it I may not fight."

Willingly Arthur turned his horse and rode back swiftly. But when he had arrived at the house he found it shut up and none was within, for all had gone to the jousts. Suddenly, as he saw the tower of St. Paul's church through the trees, he bethought him of the sword in the stone, about which many men had spoken in his hearing.

"I will ride thither," said he, "and see if I may get that sword for my brother, for he shall not be without a sword this day."

When he came to the churchyard, he tied his horse to the stile, and went through the grave-mounds to the tent wherein was the sword. He found the place un-watched, and the flashing sword was sticking by the point in the stone.

Lightly he grasped the handle of the sword with one hand, and it came forth straightway!

Then, glad that his brother should not be without a sword, he swiftly gat upon his horse and rode on, and delivered the sword to Sir Kay, and thought no more of aught but the splendid knights and richly garbed lords that were at the jousts.

But Sir Kay looked at the sword, and the writing, and knew it was the sword of the stone, and marveled how young Arthur had possessed himself thereof; and being of a covetous and sour mind he thought how he might make advantage for himself. He went to his father, Sir Ector, and said: "Lo, father, this is the sword of the stone, and surely am I rightful king."

Sir Ector knew the sword and marveled, but his look was stern as he gazed into the crafty eyes of his son.

"Come ye with me," he said, and all three rode to the church, and alit from their horses and went in.

Sir Ector strode up the aisle to the altar, and turning to his son, said sternly: "Now, swear on God's book and the holy relics how thou didst get this

sword."

Sir Kay's heart went weak, and he stammered out the truth.

"How gat you this sword?" asked Sir Ector of Arthur.

"Sir, I will tell you," said Arthur, and so told him all as it had happened.

Sir Ector marveled what this should mean; for Arthur had been given to him to nourish and rear as a week-old child by Merlin, but the wizard had only told him that the babe was a son of a dead lady, whose lord had been slain by the pagans.

Then Sir Ector went to the stone and bade Arthur put back the sword into the wedge of steel, which the young man did easily.

Thereupon Sir Ector strove with all his strength to draw the sword forth again, but though he pulled till he sweated, he could not stir the sword.

"Now you essay it," he said to his son. But naught that Sir Kay could do availed. "Now do you try," he bade Arthur.

Arthur lightly grasped the handle with one hand, and the sword came out without hindrance.

Therewith Sir Ector sank to his knees, and Sir Kay also. And they bared their heads.

"Alas," said Arthur, "my own dear father and brother, why kneel ye so to me?"

"Nay, nay, my lord Arthur, it is not so," said Sir Ector, "for I was never your father. I wot well ye are of higher blood than I weaned. For Merlin delivered you to me while yet ye were a babe."

The tears came into Arthur's eyes when he knew that Sir Ector was not his father, for the young man had loved him as if he were of his own blood.

"Sir," said Ector unto Arthur, will ye be my good and kind lord when ye are king?"

"Ah, if this be true as ye say," cried Arthur, "ye shall desire of me whatsoever ye may, and I shall give it you. For both you and my good lady and dear mother your wife have kept and loved me as your own."

"Sir," said Sir Ector, "I crave a boon of you, that while you live, your foster-brother, Sir Kay, shall be high seneschal of all your lands."

"That shall be done, and never man shall have that office but him, while he and I live," replied Arthur.

Then hastily Sir Ector rode to the archbishop, and told him how and by whom the sword had been achieved from the stone. Thereupon the archbishop let call a great meeting on Twelfth Day of all the kings and barons.

So on the day appointed, all men gathered in the churchyard of St. Paul's. From day dawn to the evening the kings and princes and lords strove each in his turn to draw the sword from the stone. But none of them availed to move it. While they stood about, dark of look, gnawing their lips with rage and disappointment, the archbishop turned privily to Sir Ector and bade him bring Arthur.

The young man came, quietly clad in a tunic of brown samite, of medium height, with curly hair above a fair face of noble, though mild mien. As he came among the richly clad nobles, they looked haughtily at him, and wondered who he was and why he came, for as yet none had been told that the sword had been drawn by him.

The archbishop, tall, white-haired and reverend, called Arthur to him and said in grave tones: "My son, I have heard a strange tale of thee, and whether it be true or false, God shall decide. Now, therefore, do ye take hold upon this sword and essay to draw it from the stone."

The proud barons, some with looks amazed and others with sneering laughter, pressed about the young man as he stepped towards the stone. Arthur took the handle of the sword with his right hand, and the sword seemed to fall into his grasp.

Thereat arose great cries of rage, and angry looks flashed forth, and many a hand went to dagger haft.

"Ho, archbishop!" cried King Lot, fiercely striding towards the tall ecclesiastic, "what wizard's brat are you foisting upon us here to draw the sword by magic?"

"'Tis a trick!" cried Nentres of Garlot, his bluff manner falling from him, and all the savage anger gleaming from his eyes. "A trick that shall not blind men such as we!"

"Who is this beggar's boy that is put forth to shame us kings and nobles?" said King Mark, and his hand sought his dagger as he disappeared among the crowd and wormed his way towards where stood young Arthur.

But Sir Ector and Sir Kay, seeing the threatening looks of all, had quickly ranged themselves beside young Arthur, and with them went Sir Bedevere, Sir Baudwin, and Sir Ulfius, three noble lords who had loved King Uther well.

"Peace, lords!" said the old archbishop; calmly meeting the raging looks about him. "Ye know what words are about the sword, and this youth hath drawn the sword. I know naught of tricks or wizardry, but I think high Heaven hath chosen this way of showing who shall be lord of this land, and I think this young man is the rightful king of us all."

"'Tis some base-born churl's son that the wizard Merlin would foist upon us!" cried the barons. "We will have none of him!"

"A shame and dishonour it is, so to try to over-rule us, kings and lords of high lineage, with an unknown youth," cried others.

"We will have the sword put back and set a watch over it," cried King Uriens, "and we will meet here again at Candlemas, and essay the sword. And at that time, my lord archbishop, thou shalt do the proper rites to exorcise all evil powers, and then we will try the sword once more."

So was it agreed by all, and ten knights watched day and night about the stone and the sword. But it

befell at Candlemas as it had befallen at Twelfth Day, that for all their strength and might, none of the kings or barons could draw forth the sword; but into the hand of the unknown Arthur the weapon seemed to fall.

Whereat they were all sore aggrieved and rageful, and resolved that they would have yet another trial at Easter. It befell at the feast of Easter as it had befallen before, and this time the kings and lords for angry spite would have fallen upon Arthur and slain him, but the archbishop threatened them with the most dreadful ban of Holy Church. They forbore, therefore, and went aside, and declared that it was their will to essay the sword again at the high feast of Pentecost.

By Merlin's advice the young Arthur went never about, unless the five friends of Uther were with him, that is to say, Sir Ector and his son Sir Kay, Sir Bedevere, Sir Baudwin and Sir Ulfius. And though at divers times men were found skulking or hiding in the horse-stall, the dark wood by the hall, or the bend in the lane, in places where Arthur might pass, no harm came to him by reason of the loving watch of those noble knights.

Again at the feast of Pentecost men gathered in the churchyard of St. Paul's, and the press of people was such that no man had ever seen the like. Once more the kings and princes and great barons, to the number of forty-nine, came forward, and each in turn pulled and drew at the sword in the stone until the sweat stood on their brows. Nevertheless, though the sword point was but the width of a palm in the stone, not the mightiest of them could move it by the breadth of a hair.

King Mark of Tintagil was the last of them who had to stand back at length, baffled and raging inwardly. Many were the evil looks that would have slain Arthur as he stood among his friends.

Then a cry came from among the common people, and so strong was it that the nobles looked as if they hated to hear it.

"Let Arthur draw the sword!" was the call from a thousand throats.

The venerable archbishop came and took Arthur by the hand, and led him towards the sword. Again the young man held the rich pommel with his single hand and that which none of the forty-nine great men could do, he did as easily as if he but plucked a flower. A fierce cry leaped from among the thousands of the common people. "Arthur shall be our king!" they cried. "Arthur is our king! We will no longer deny him!"

Many of the princes and barons cried out with the commons that this was their will also; but eleven of the most powerful and ambitious showed by their arrogant and angry gestures that they refused to own Arthur as their lord. For a long time the uproar raged, the cries of the common folk becoming fiercer and more menacing against the counter cries of the eleven kings and their adherents.

At length from among the people there came the governor of London who, in his rich robes of office, leaped upon the stone where but lately the sword had been.

"My lords, I speak the will of the commons," he cried, and at his voice all were silent. "We have taken counsel together, and we will have Arthur for 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 holdeth against him, we will slay."

With that he got down from the stone, kneeled before Arthur, put the keys of the city in his hands, and rendered homage unto him. The great multitude kneeled likewise, bowing their bare heads, and cried him mercy because they had denied him so long. Because they feared the great multitude, the eleven kings kneeled with them, but in their hearts there was rage and rebellion.

Then Arthur took the sword between his hands and, going into the church, he laid it on the high altar, and the archbishop blessed him. Then, since Arthur was as yet unknighthed, King Kador of Cornwall, who was brother of King Uther, made him a knight. Standing up in the sight of all the people, lords and commons, Arthur laid his left hand upon the holy relics; then, lifting up his right hand, he swore that he would be a true king, to stand forth as their ruler in justice and mercy, to keep them from oppression, to redress their wrongs, and to establish right throughout the length and breadth of his dominions.

Men went forth from the church in great joy, for now they had a king they loved, and they felt that the land was safe from civil strife and the griefs of war.