

with the roaring of the fire. In time the blaze consumed Beowulf's bones, and all that was left of the famous lord of rings was a pile of ashes.

Wiglaf announced, "Let us listen to our beloved Beowulf's wishes and upon these ashes let us build, for our most worthy of warriors, a barrow that will be as mighty and memorable as his fame is throughout the wide world."

So it came to pass that, on the sea-cliff around the remains of the funeral fire, the Geat-Folk built a towering burial mound that would be seen from afar by the seafarer. The barrow would be to sea-folk the beacon that Beowulf, their brave battle-king, had been to his people. In the barrow they buried the treasure from the dragon hoard that had not burned with Beowulf, returning it to the earth from whence it had come.

Then the twelve bravest warriors among the Geats rode around the burial barrow. They spoke of their sorrow and told tales of their great king's courage and daring deeds. They gave him praise and honor as is proper when a leader dies. Beowulf's hearth-comrades grieved for their lord of rings, who had been the greatest of all kings, the most gentle, gracious, and kind of men, and the most eager to win praise.

Introducing King Arthur

Historical Background

Stories of King Arthur, the great legendary hero of Britain, have been popular for more than 800 years, yet scholars have been able to learn little about the real Arthur, for no contemporary accounts of his deeds exist. Some scholars think the real Arthur was probably a Welsh cavalry general named Artorius, who led twelve successful attacks against the invading Saxons between A.D. 500 and 517.

In 1985, however, the prominent Arthur scholar Geoffrey Ashe published evidence that challenges the traditional view of King Arthur's historical identity. Ashe bases his view upon the writings of Jordanes (6th century), William (11th century), Geoffrey of Monmouth (12th century), and on a letter from a Roman aristocrat to a 5th-century British king called Riothamus

(High King) who was then in Gaul (France). Ashe identifies Arthur with Riothamus, thereby placing the reign of King Arthur from 454 to 470 and including in it a British military campaign in Gaul in the late 460s. Geoffrey of Monmouth's description of Arthur's military exploits in Gaul have usually been regarded as fiction, but Riothamus actually led an army of 12,000 men into Gaul, where he fought courageously but unsuccessfully against the Goths in Burgundy. Moreover, like Arthur, he was betrayed by one of his associates, and he probably retreated by way of a French town that is still called Avallon.

Whatever his accomplishments, the real Arthur was such an appealing figure, both in his own day and in the years that followed, that an oral

tradition of Welsh folklore became associated with his name. The earlier references, to Arthur are found in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* (c. 800) and William of Malmesbury's *Gesta Regum Anglorum* (c. 1125).

Arthur first appears in literature as Britain's major national hero in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*), written in Latin in 1136. Arthur was already a popular subject in the oral tradition of Wales when Geoffrey recognized the need for a book about the history of Britain. He chose to make Arthur the major figure in his history, which covers the 1,900-year period from 1200 B.C. to A.D. 689.

Although Geoffrey cites sources for his material, scholars believe that he created fictitious sources in order to legitimize his use of folklore and his own imagination. His work must therefore be considered primarily literature rather than history.

To Geoffrey we owe the creation of Arthur as the great British king who conquered all of the British Isles and most of Europe as well. In Geoffrey's version Arthur would have conquered Rome also had he not been called home to fight his nephew, who had taken over the kingdom in his absence. Geoffrey also introduces the world to Arthur's unusual birth and death; Guinevere, his beautiful, unfaithful wife; Merlin, the magician; and the concept of chivalry. Geoffrey was most interested in Arthur as a military leader, but he included just enough about Merlin, Guinevere, magic, and chivalry to inspire other writers to deal with them in greater depth.

Geoffrey's history is so well written that it was popular not only in his own day but with succeeding generations as well. The poet Wace freely trans-

lated Geoffrey's history into Norman-French verse in 1155. He concentrated on the Arthurian material, used additional sources, and added a more courtly flavor to the work. It is Wace who mentions the Round Table for the first time.

After the appearance of Wace's poem, Chrétien de Troyes wrote five romances set in King Arthur's court. Being French, Chrétien had little interest in Arthur as the national hero of Britain or as the conquering king. Instead, he wrote of the world of chivalry, where King Arthur reigns over a court of knights who are heroes and lovers. He introduced the idea of courtly love, in which the woman is superior to the man and the lover is completely obedient to the wishes of his lady. In his *Lancelot*, the love between Lancelot and Guinevere appears for the first time. Chrétien was such a good storyteller that his romances were widely read and imitated.

King Arthur finally appeared in the English language when the poet Layamon freely translated Wace's poem into early Middle English in 1205. Layamon added more details to Wace's story and gave it a decidedly English flavor by emphasizing Arthur's courage and his love of adventure. Like Geoffrey of Monmouth, Layamon was patriotic, so he chose to ignore Chrétien's romantic version of the Arthur story.

Still another version of the King Arthur story, *Morte Arthure*, appeared in English in the middle of the 14th century. Again the focus was nationalistic, with the proud warrior-king, Arthur, presented as a great hero in battle. The author had no interest in love, chivalry, or a court of knights. Sir Gawain is Arthur's principal knight,

and Lancelot has only a minor role. This presentation resembles the French epic *Chanson de Roland* and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*.

Many years later, in 1485, Sir Thomas Malory published what became the definitive story of King Arthur, *Le Morte D'Arthur*. He combined the English tradition of Geoffrey of Monmouth with the French tradition of Chrétien de Troyes. In Malory's version Arthur becomes one of the world's greatest rulers, the equal of Alexander the Great. He does not return to England until he has been crowned emperor in Rome. Malory takes Mordred's treachery and Guinevere's infidelity from Geoffrey, but he combines it with the love affair of Guinevere and Lancelot. In addition, he broadens the picture of Arthur's court by presenting a number of tales about Arthur's principal knights. In this romantic version of English history, the collapse of the Round Table brings tragedy into a number of lives and marks the end of a Golden Age.

Appeal and Value

The story of King Arthur has appealed to writers and readers for hundreds of years because its content is so complex and varied. Something in the story is likely to appeal to almost every taste. Unlike most of the major epics, the story has a broad focus and contains a large cast of important characters. Whether the reader is interested in adventure, magic, chivalry, courtly love, or a great and tragic love story, *Le Morte D'Arthur* is the book to read.

Readers who are familiar with the basic version of the King Arthur legend will find many modern versions of

each is different. Enjoyable 19th-century versions include Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. The 20th century continues to be fascinated with the Arthurian legend. John Steinbeck, T. H. White, and Mary Stewart are among the writers who have carried on the tradition. Some versions simply retell the tale from the point of view of one of the major characters—such as King Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, Mordred, or Merlin. Some of the modern versions have been written with a historical focus, some with a comic focus, and some with a feminist focus.

The theme of the conflict between one's personal desires and one's responsibility to others is common to many ancient epics and as contemporary as the decisions we must make in our own lives. Readers today can still understand and sympathize with the conflicts Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere face.

The Arthurian Hero

The principal characters in *Le Morte D'Arthur* are heroic aristocrats. In the age of chivalry, only a man born to the nobility could become a knight. As a young page he learned how to behave at court, and later, as a squire, he learned the necessary martial skills. By his teens, a young man was well on his way to knighthood.

When a man became a knight, he took an oath that obligated him to live according to certain values. He was expected to be loyal to the king, to his relatives and friends, and to the lady he loved. He was also expected to be courteous and gentle, particularly in the presence of ladies. In addition, he

times, whether fighting for his lord in a battle, participating in a contest or tournament, or helping friends or ladies in distress. Finally, he was expected to be a man of honor, to live in such a way that the other members of the nobility held him in high esteem. The challenge was to balance these different values with a minimum of conflict.

It is important to understand that courtly love was often extramarital love. In the society that Chrétien and Malory depicted in literature, and in the real world as well, marriages among the nobility were arranged by the young couple's family or by the ruling lord for political, social, or economic reasons. The participants' feelings were not considered, and divorce did not exist. Therefore, it was not unusual for a married person to find love outside the marriage relationship.

Principal Characters

BRUTUS: great-grandson of Aeneas; leads Trojan exiles to Britain and establishes a kingdom

AURELIUS AMBROSIAS: son of King Constantine; older brother of Uther Pendragon; king of Britain; creates Stonehenge

UTHER PENDRAGON: son of King Constantine; younger brother of Aurelius Ambrosias; king of Britain; husband of Igraine; father of Arthur

IGRAINE: wife of the Duke of Cornwall; later, wife of Uther Pendragon and queen of Britain; mother of Arthur and Margawse

ARTHUR: son of Uther Pendragon and Igraine; husband of Guinevere; father of Mordred; king of Britain; estab-

ECTOR: foster father of Arthur

KAY: son of Ector; foster brother of Arthur; knight of the Round Table

GUINEVERE: daughter of King Leodegrance; wife of Arthur; queen of Britain

MERLIN: great magician and prophet; adviser to three British kings: Ambrosias Aurelius, Uther Pendragon, and Arthur

LUCIUS HIBERIUS: mythological emperor of the Roman Empire until Arthur defeats and replaces him

MARGAWSE: daughter of Duke of Cornwall and Igraine; half-sister of Arthur; wife of King Lot of Orkney; mother of Mordred by Arthur; mother of Gawain, Agravain, Gaheris, and Gareth by Lot

MORDRED: son of Arthur and his half-sister Margawse; stepbrother of Gawain and Agravain; knight of the Round Table

GAWAIN: nephew of Arthur and one of his two favorite knights; son of Margawse and King Lot of Orkney; brother of Agravain, Gaheris, and Gareth; stepbrother of Mordred; second greatest knight of the Round Table

AGRAVAIN: son of Margawse and King Lot; brother of Gawain, Gaheris, and Gareth; stepbrother and friend of Mordred; knight of the Round Table

GAHERIS: son of Margawse and King Lot; brother of Gawain, Agravain, and Gareth; knight of the Round Table

GARETH: son of Margawse and King Lot; brother of Gawain, Agravain, and Gaheris; knight of the Round Table

LANCELOT: son of King Ban of Benwick; greatest knight of the Round

knights; champion of Guinevere and her favorite knight

PELLINOR: knight of the Round Table

BORS: son of King Bors of Gaul; nephew of Lancelot; knight of the Round Table

BEDIVERE: knight of the Round Table; last knight to see Arthur alive

King Arthur

Prologue

Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas, leads a group of Trojan exiles to establish a second Troy on an island north of Gaul (France). He names the island Britain, after himself.

At the conclusion of the Trojan War, Aeneas fled from his flaming city with his father, his son Ascanius, and some of his people. His destiny led him by ship to Italy, where he established a new nation. After the death of Aeneas, Ascanius became king. He founded the town of Alba on the Tiber River, and became the father of Silvius. Silvius, in turn, became the father of Brutus. Seers prophesied that Brutus would cause the death of both of his parents, would therefore be banished from Italy, and would wander homeless through many lands, until finally he would settle in Britain, where he would become highly honored.

The prophecy proved correct. Brutus' mother died during his birth. When he was fifteen, he killed his father in a hunting accident, and his relatives banished him from Italian soil.

He first sought refuge in Greece, among people who were descendants of Priam, king of the Trojans. Brutus' courage and wisdom enabled him to free those Trojans from the tyranny of local Greek rule. He surprised the Greeks with a night attack, and the Trojans slaughtered the Greeks like wolves attacking slumbering sheep. Brutus married the daughter of the local king he had conquered and then sailed away with the Trojans for another land.

They came to an island that had been deserted for many years. Investigating an abandoned city, Brutus found a temple of Diana, goddess of the hunt, and offered sacrifices to her. "Oh mighty goddess, both terror and hope of the wild woodlands," he prayed, "tell me where we can safely settle and worship you throughout the years to come."

When he lay down to sleep that night, Diana appeared before him and said, "Brutus, far beyond the setting of the sun, past Gaul, you will find an island in the sea that was once inhabited by a race of giants. This land will suit you and

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after you. There from your blood a race of kings will be born, and the whole earth will kneel before them."

When he awoke, a fair wind was blowing. Brutus took this as another sign from the goddess, and he and his people immediately resumed their journey. They sailed up the coast of Africa, past the pillars of Hercules at the western end of the Mediterranean Sea. There they escaped from the sea monsters known as the Sirens, who almost sank their ships.

Brutus and his companions then came upon another group of Trojan exiles. The two groups decided to join together and share a common future. The Trojans, who were now formidable, fought their way through Gaul acquiring wealth. Finally they returned to the coast and set sail for the island Diana had revealed to Brutus in his dream.

When the Trojans landed, they found that the island was uninhabited except for a few giants, whom they killed. They saw that they would thrive here, for the soil was fertile, wild animals lived in the forests, and numerous fish swam in the many rivers. Under Brutus' direction, the Trojans divided up the land, built houses, and began to farm.

Brutus searched the island for the best location for a capital city. He decided to build it along the Thames River, and he called it Troia Nova (New Troy). He named the island after himself: It became Britain, and Brutus and his companions were called Britons. Brutus gave the city of Troia Nova to his people, and he also gave them a code of laws to help them live in peace with one another.

However, many years of civil wars and invasions followed Brutus' death, including the conquest of Britain by the Romans. After the Romans were called back to defend Rome in about A.D. 400, the Britons had to depend upon their own meager resources for defense against barbarians. Seeking more land, the Teutonic tribes had already moved into Gaul, leaving the Britons isolated on their island. Early in the 5th century the Saxons, along with the Angles and the Jutes, invaded and conquered Britain. King Constantine was the first king of Britain who was able to defeat them. His sons, Aurelius Ambrosias and Uther Pendragon, ruled Britain during the period when the Saxons were their principal adversaries.

Chapter 1

When Arthur is fifteen years old, a sword in a stone miraculously appears in the churchyard in London.

Upon the stone is written: "Whoever pulls out this sword is the lawfully born king of Britain." Unaware of its meaning, Arthur pulls out the sword and learns that he will be king.

With the death of Uther Pendragon, the kingdom of Britain fell into a period of great danger, from both without and within. Every noble Briton who had the support of an army of loyal followers wished to become the next king. Meanwhile other nations wished to invade Britain and establish settlements upon its

independent dukes and rally them to defend their land, Britain was certain to be consumed, bite by bite, by foreigners.

The great enchanter Merlin recognized this danger. He advised the Archbishop of Canterbury to summon all of the nobles to London at Christmastime, when the rightful king of Britain would be revealed to the world.

From all parts of the British Isles, nobles and their loyal supporters crowded into the city of London. They all attended the first mass. When they left the cathedral, they were amazed to see that a huge, square, marble stone had miraculously appeared in the churchyard. An iron anvil protruded from this stone, and plunged into the anvil was a beautiful, unsheathed sword. When the nobles excitedly gathered around the sword, they found written in gold letters: "Whoever pulls out this sword from this stone and anvil is the lawfully born king of all Britain."

Many proud knights immediately tried to remove the sword, but none could budge it, so securely lodged was it within the stone and anvil.

"The rightful king of Britain is apparently not with us," announced the archbishop, "but be assured that God will make him known to us at the proper time. Let us gather here on New Year's Day and let all the knights of the kingdom mount their horses and participate in a tournament to reveal their skill with the sword and the spear. Afterwards, whoever wishes may try to withdraw the sword from this stone and anvil."

The archbishop commanded that a tent be placed over the marble block containing the sword. He ordered ten of the most honorable knights to keep a constant watch over the sword, five throughout each day and five throughout each night.

On New Year's Day, Sir Ector, accompanied by his son, Sir Kay, and his foster son, Arthur, prepared to participate in the tournament. Kay had recently become a knight, and Arthur, being only fifteen years old, was his squire.

Arthur watched with admiration as Sir Kay fought courageously and skillfully in the tournament. Suddenly, however, a strong stroke by another knight shattered his sword. "Do me a favor, Arthur!" he cried. "Ride back to the tent and bring me another sword. Hurry, for I do not want to lose my place in the contests!"

Although Arthur searched everywhere in the tent, he could not find another sword. He said to himself, "I know—I will ride into the churchyard and take the sword that is lodged in that stone. Kay will just have to manage with that one!"

When he arrived, the churchyard was deserted, for even those who were supposed to be guarding the sword in the stone had gone off to participate in the tournament. Arthur dismounted, walked up to the stone, grasped the hilt of the sword in his right hand, and easily withdrew it from the anvil.

Thinking little of his accomplishment, Arthur returned to his brother, handed him the sword, and said, "I could not find a sword back at the tent. Use this one!"

Sir Kay immediately recognized the sword as the one that had miraculously appeared in the churchyard. Since he was older and stronger than Arthur, he assumed that he could certainly do whatever his younger brother could do. He said to Arthur, "Tell no one that you found this sword, and I promise that you

"Father!" Kay exclaimed to Sir Ector. "Look! I have drawn this sword from the stone! Therefore, I must be the lawful king of Britain!"

Ector replied, "That may be, Kay, but be certain that your words are more than an empty boast. Let us return to the churchyard. If you are telling the truth, you are indeed the rightful king of this land. But first you will have to prove it by thrusting this sword back into the stone and drawing it free again. If you could do it once, then surely you can do it again. If you cannot, then you will shame yourself before every nobleman in London, for they too will demand proof of your right to kingship!"

Back at the churchyard Sir Kay replaced the sword, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not pull it out again. In the cathedral, Sir Ector commanded Kay, "Place your hand upon this holy Bible and swear that you will tell me truthfully how you came to possess this sword!"

"Sir, the truth is that Arthur brought it to me," Kay replied humbly.

"Yes," Ector responded, "that I can believe. Now, Arthur, how did you acquire this sword?"

Arthur explained, "During one of the contests, Kay's sword broke, so he asked me to get him another one from the tent. When I arrived, I could find no sword, no matter how carefully I searched. Fortunately, I remembered the sword in the stone. I knew how important it was for Kay to have a sword, so I rode over here and took it for him! It was easy — when I put my hand on the hilt and pulled, the sword simply slid from the anvil!"

"Were there no knights here as you did this?" Sir Ector inquired.

"No one was here. They must all have gone to the tournament."

"Arthur," Ector said. "Have you any idea what you have done? You are telling me that you are the rightful king of Britain!"

"Why do you say such a thing?" Arthur asked. "It does not make any sense, and it cannot be true!"

"Sir," Ector respectfully answered his foster son, "you are the rightful king of Britain because God has chosen you for this highest of honors. Only the rightful king of this land could have drawn this sword out of its stone. Now, let me watch you return the sword to its place in the anvil and then withdraw it once again."

"It is a simple task," said Arthur. He replaced the sword in the stone, drew it out, and returned it.

Sir Ector then tried to pull out the sword. But no matter how hard he tried, the sword would not budge. It stuck fast in its marble block.

"Now, you try it again!" Ector commanded Kay.

Sir Kay tried with all his might to pull out the sword, but he could not budge it either.

When Arthur easily withdrew the sword once again, Sir Ector and Sir Kay immediately knelt before him.

"Oh, no!" Arthur cried. "Dear Father and Brother, you have no reason to kneel before me. I am no king of Britain. I am your son!" he said to Ector. "And I am your brother!" he said to Kay.

"No, Arthur, I am not your father. In fact, I am not related to you at all. When you were just an infant, the great enchanter Merlin arrived at our home

one night bearing you in his arms. He never told me whose child you were, but he commanded me to rear you as my own son, and so I have."

These words filled Arthur with great sadness. "You have suddenly made me feel all alone," he said to Sir Ector. "I feel as if I have lost my father, and my mother, and my brother! You are the only family I have ever known. You are the ones I love most in the world. I do not know how to be the king of Britain!"

"You have not lost us, Arthur. We will love you as we always have! Think instead about what it is that makes a good king. I am certain Merlin will reappear to advise you."

The next morning Sir Ector gave Arthur armor and weapons and conferred knighthood upon him. Then he sent him off to the tournament. All that day Arthur showed his courage and his skill in many contests, and he earned great honor and praise.

On the following day, Sir Ector went to the archbishop and said, "I know a young knight who is noble, valiant, and well skilled in the use of weapons. He will be king of Britain according to the law, for he can draw the sword forth from the stone in the churchyard."

The archbishop replied, "Bring him here, and I will summon all of the nobles."

When everyone had arrived, all of the nobles in turn tried to pull out the sword, but not one of them could budge it. When they watched Arthur easily accomplish what no mighty effort of theirs could do, they were ashamed and angry. "It is ridiculous that a mere boy should have the right to rule over all of us!" they exclaimed.

The archbishop decided to postpone the decision of kingship until the next holiday, and the knights continued to watch over the sword in the marble stone. At that time, more dukes and barons gathered, and all were given the chance to try to withdraw the sword. Again only Arthur could perform the deed, but the nobles still were not satisfied.

Easter arrived, and the archbishop repeated the contest. Once again only Arthur could remove the sword from the stone, but the nobles still were not satisfied. The archbishop agreed to postpone the decision one more time. The following holiday, everyone was again given the opportunity to pull upon the sword, but no one was able to budge it. Arthur then performed the task as easily as he had before.

This time when Arthur held the sword in his hand, both the common folk and the nobles knelt at his feet and exclaimed, "We will have Arthur as our king, for it is God's will that he rule us!" "And," many added, "we will kill anyone who tries to prevent Arthur's reign!"

Arthur then knelt before the archbishop. Holding one end of the sword in each hand, he raised his arms and offered the sword upon the altar. He took the oath of kingship, promising to be true to both the common people and the nobility and swearing to reign justly all the days of his life. Then he listened to the complaints of his subjects and restored property to those from whom it had unjustly been taken.

As the people left the cathedral, they passed the place where the stone had been and noticed that it was no longer there. It had disappeared as miraculously as it had appeared.

Shortly thereafter, Arthur held a great feast in the city of Caerleon, in Wales. The dukes of northern Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, accompanied by their attendant knights, were present, but they would accept no gifts of friendship from the new king. Instead they told Arthur's messengers, "We will accept no gifts from a beardless boy! We will give him appropriate gifts of our own choosing — our swords plunged into his heart! It is shameful to see such a noble land as this ruled by an ordinary boy!"

Arthur's barons advised their king that his life was truly in danger. He chose 500 soldiers and retreated to a strong, well-provisioned castle, to which the hostile nobles promptly laid siege. Arthur and his men had been imprisoned there for two weeks when Merlin arrived in Caerleon.

The nobles greeted Merlin warmly and asked him, "Why has that boy been made king of Britain?"

"Sirs," Merlin replied, "his blood is more noble than your own! Arthur is King Uther Pendragon's son, born in wedlock to Igraine, the Duke of Cornwall's wife."

"Then Arthur is a bastard!" they all exclaimed.

"Not so!" Merlin replied. "Arthur was conceived more than three hours after the Duke of Cornwall died, and King Uther married Igraine soon thereafter. This is ample proof that Arthur is not a bastard. Indeed, Arthur shall long be king of Britain, and he will rule many other countries as well!"

Not all of the nobles took Merlin's words seriously. Some laughed derisively, and others called him a witch. However, they did agree to let Arthur come out and speak with them.

Merlin entered the castle and said to Arthur, "Many nobles have gathered outside and would speak with you. Appear before them without fear in your heart. Answer their questions as their chief and their king, for you are destined to overpower all of them, no matter what harm they hope to bring upon you. But let me tell you something about your parents and your country before you face them. Knowledge will fortify your heart."

Chapter 2

Merlin explains to Arthur the circumstances surrounding his birth. He tells Arthur about his uncle, Aurelius Ambrosius, and his father, Uther Pendragon, each of whom reigned as king of Britain.

"Arthur," Merlin began, "I shall start with the tale of your birth."

In the days when Uther Pendragon was king of all Britain, he fought long and hard against the Saxon invaders. The Duke of Cornwall, an old man of great experience in warfare, had aided Uther in these wars. When the king held a great feast in London, he invited the Duke of Cornwall and his wife, Igraine.

Igraine's reputation had preceded her arrival. She was the most beautiful woman in Britain, and she was as good as she was beautiful. It was not surprising that King Uther fell in love with the duke's wife at the banquet. Ignoring his other guests, the king repeatedly sent his servants to her bearing plates of food

and golden goblets of wine. Meanwhile, he kept smiling at her and engaging her in conversation. He could not keep his eyes from her, and he showed her as much as he dared of his love.

His attentions did not escape the notice of the Duke of Cornwall, who decided that he owed no allegiance to a king who would tempt his wife. Without a word the duke rose from the table, took Igraine by the hand, and left the hall. No one could convince the duke to return; even the king's orders did not persuade him, so precious to him was his wife.

The duke returned to Cornwall, where he confined his wife under guard in the castle of Tintagel. Uther became determined to make love to Igraine. Since the fortress was surrounded on all sides by the sea, except for a narrow, rocky pathway to its entrance, Uther asked my help to achieve his goal.

When I saw the depths of the king's passion and the intensity of his resolve, I said, "Sir, I shall see to it that you have your wish, for it is destined that Igraine will bear you a son. This son will become the most marvelous king of Britain. He will live to the end of eternity, for people will remember his glory as long as the world exists. All who live in Britain will kneel at his feet. Bards will sing of his adventures, and poets will take inspiration from his deeds. The strongest and bravest will seek his company, for his spirit will live within them as well. Stone walls will crumble before his attack. Dukes and barons will retreat into submission. He and his knights will conquer many peoples in many lands, some far across the sea, and all will live in peace under his laws.

"However, for you to win Igraine, I will have to use magic. Even the strongest of men will never be able to storm the strong, high walls of Tintagel Castle. Enough food is stored within the fortress that a siege will be useless. Moreover, Igraine is so closely guarded that access to her is hopeless. And even if you were able to reach her, you could only despair, for there is no woman more loyal to her husband than Igraine is to the Duke of Cornwall.

"Therefore," I explained, "I shall use my drugs to give you the appearance of the duke in every respect. Your face, your body, your speech, your deeds, your clothing, even your horse will duplicate those of Igraine's husband. I will change my appearance and that of your friend Ulfius to resemble the duke's closest companions. We will all be able to enter the castle without suspicion, for no one will doubt our identity." This was my advice to Uther, your father.

So it came to pass that Uther Pendragon dined with Igraine in Tintagel Castle and spent the night with her. Given his appearance and his conversation, Igraine never knew that her companion was not her husband. The real duke was killed in battle that day, and later that evening you were conceived.

When the duke's men arrived in the morning bearing the news of their lord's death, they found Uther with Igraine. Uther convinced them that he was the duke, and that he was indeed alive and well. He said he intended to leave immediately to summon additional troops, for Tintagel Castle was in danger of attack from King Uther Pendragon. Once the three of us were safely outside, we resumed our proper shapes.

Uther mourned the death of the duke while he rejoiced in Igraine's freedom. He returned to Tintagel, conquered the castle without bloodshed, and married

Igraine. In time Igraine gave birth to you, and two years later Uther died. He and your mother loved each other dearly and were true to one another.

When Igraine was about to give birth to you, Uther asked her whose child she was carrying. "Tell me truthfully," the king said, "and I will love you all the more for it." Igraine explained that she had treated a stranger as if he were her husband because he appeared in all respects to be the Duke of Cornwall. Uther laughed and replied, "All that you say is indeed true, for it was I who came to you in the shape of the duke, and it is I who am the father of your child!" Igraine's heart filled with joy, for she was relieved and happy to know and to love the father of her child.

Shortly before you were born, I said to the king, "It is not safe for your child to live with you; as the heir to the throne of Britain, he will have many enemies. I know a lord who is loyal and good, Sir Ector by name. Let his wife nourish your baby as a foundling. Deliver him to me at the back gate before he is christened."

The elves themselves were present at your birth. They enchanted you with their strongest magic and presented you with special gifts. They gave you the courage and the strength to be the best of all knights. They gave you the intelligence to become a mighty king, combined with the generosity that would bring you lasting devotion and fame. And finally they gave you the gift of a long life.

The king commanded your mother to wrap you in a golden blanket and have two of her ladies in waiting, accompanied by two knights, bring you out to me. I appeared in the guise of a poor man, so no one recognized me. I brought you to Sir Ector and had you christened by a holy man. And that is how you came to be reared in the home of Sir Ector.

Your father is buried beside his brother, Aurelius Ambrosius, inside the Giants' Ring at Stonehenge. I will tell you of how Aurelius and I came to build that ring. King Aurelius wished to construct a memorial structure that would honor the many noble leaders who had fallen to the Saxons and were buried near Salisbury. Because of my fame as a prophet and as a builder, the Archbishop of Canterbury suggested that he send for me.

I received a royal welcome! Aurelius came forth to meet me, accompanied by many knights. I told him, "If you want to erect a lasting and awesome monument upon the burial site of these patriots, then send for the Giants' Ring in Ireland. That structure is of stone, and there is not another like it throughout the wide world. The stones that form that mighty circle are so enormous and so heavy that no ordinary man, no matter how strong, will ever be able to move them."

Aurelius simply laughed in my face. "Merlin," he asked, "if those stones are beyond the ability of any man to move, then how do you expect my stonemasons to move them? And why would you ever want to move stones from Ireland to Britain? Can't we find large enough stones in our own land?"

"First of all," I replied, "it will take skill and talent, rather than strength, to move those stones, for they are not ordinary stones. Long ago, when the giants lived in Ireland, they brought those stones from Africa because they possessed certain religious and medicinal properties. Whenever a giant became ill, he or she would bathe at the foot of those stones and would become well. No other medicine was needed.

"Knowledge and skill are better than might," I concluded. "So assemble an army and I will accompany them to Ireland. You will honor the burial place with the memorial you wish, and you yourself will be buried there when your life comes to an end."

My explanation convinced Aurelius, so he sent your father and 15,000 knights with me to Ireland to transport those stones to Britain. The Irish met us with an army of their own. Their king could not believe the reason for our invasion. "It is no wonder that the Saxons could invade the island of Britain!" he exclaimed. "The Britons must indeed be fools if they believe that our stones are better than their own! Who in his right mind would cross the sea and invade a country for so poor a treasure? However, they shall not remove one stone from the Giants' Ring! We will teach them how foolish it is to love stones, by causing their blood to flow upon Irish soil!"

We did meet the Irish in armed conflict, but they were a peaceful people and did not wear armor. Their fields welcomed their own blood rather than ours. More than 7,000 Irishmen fell there!

When our men had removed their armor and rested from the battle, I led them to the Giants' Ring. Your father and his knights were awestruck by it. "Only Giants could have arranged these stones and placed them upon one another!" they exclaimed.

"Knights," I said, "you are champions! See if you are strong enough to transport these stones to our ships!"

But 15,000 strong men, using sail ropes and pushing and pulling together, could not budge the stones. I said to them, "Withdraw from the circle, and watch me. I will prove to you that knowledge and skill are far more valuable than physical strength. Do not approach the stones again until I advise you to do so."

I entered the Giants' Ring and walked around the stones. Three times I walked around the ring, both within and without, silently speaking to the stones as I passed them. When I had finished, I said to the men, "Now, enter the ring and move the stones. The rocks will be as pebbles in your hands, and you can transport them to your ships with little effort!" And it was so.

Once we arrived back in Britain, Aurelius summoned clergy and Britons, both rich and poor, from all over the kingdom, to the burial-place near Salisbury. After the Archbishop of Canterbury rededicated the burial-place, I arranged the stones in their proper order so that they formed a circle as they had on Irish soil. The monument became known as Stonehenge.

Not long thereafter, the King was poisoned to death. That night your father, miles away from Aurelius, saw in the heavens a huge star of extraordinary brilliance. A single beam extended from the star, ending in a ball of fire that spread out in the shape of a dragon. Two rays of light shone from the dragon's mouth. One pointed in the direction of Gaul, and the other divided into seven smaller rays and pointed toward the Irish Sea. Three times this wondrous star appeared in the heavens!

Like everyone else, Uther was terrified by this strange sign, and he sent for me. "Merlin, dear friend, prove your wisdom and tell me what I have seen and what it means!"

At first I sat as in a dream. When I awoke and stopped trembling, I said, "Sorrow has befallen our land! Aurelius Ambrosius, the noblest of kings, is dead! Of all your noble family, Uther, you alone remain alive. You will become a good king, but first you must march against the Saxons. The star revealed your brother's death. The fiery dragon beneath it represented you, Uther. You will conquer the Saxon invaders and become king of all Britain.

"The ray of light that pointed toward Gaul represented the son that you will have (you, Arthur!). Your son will become a powerful king and will rule over all of the kingdoms that the beam shone upon. The ray of light that pointed toward the Irish Sea represented the stepdaughter you will have, who will be very dear to you. The seven bands within her ray represent her seven sons and grandsons who will be kings of Britain after your son has died." Thus I prophesied to your father the events of years to come.

After Uther had succeeded in killing many of the barbarous Saxon hordes, he held an elaborate funeral ceremony for Aurelius at Stonehenge. The great king was buried within the Giants' Ring that he had brought to Britain.

Your father was then crowned king of Britain. He was a good king. He upheld good laws and loved his subjects. He became known as Uther Pendragon (head war-leader) because the dragon he had seen with the star signified his kingship. When Uther and his men faced the last of the Saxon leaders, they set upon the Saxons in a surprise night attack and captured their two chieftains. With that victory your father, Uther Pendragon, finally put an end to Saxon terror in Britain.

"And that brings my story back to the point at which I began," Merlin concluded. "Now you know what you need to know in order to feel confident. You come from a family of honored kings, and you yourself will be an even greater king. Go forth and face the dukes of northern Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales with courage in your heart. In time they will kneel before you and will fight at your side."

Chapter 3

Merlin foresees that Arthur's illegitimate son, Mordred, will kill Arthur. The Lady of the Lake gives Arthur her sword, Excalibur. Arthur marries Guinevere, even though Merlin foresees that she and Sir Lancelot will love each other more than they will love Arthur.

King Arthur was a born leader. Despite his youth, he possessed the qualities necessary in the best of knights: strength, courage, and skill. He also possessed the qualities necessary in the best of kings. He met arrogance with self-confidence and pride, yet treated the weak and poor with sympathy and understanding. He was a father to the young and a comfort to the old. He was strict with those who acted unwisely or unlawfully, yet he was generous and courteous to all. He used his wisdom, his strength, and his resources to improve the lives of

his people. His subjects loved him. His kingdom brought him fame from the early days of his reign, and he towered above the other kings of his time.

However, many powerful dukes and barons resisted King Arthur's effort to unify Britain. He had to conquer the outlying parts of his kingdom by force of arms. With Merlin to advise him, King Arthur spent the first years of his reign subduing the dukes of northern Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. He sailed to Iceland and added that island to his kingdom.

During this time, he met and loved Queen Margawse, the wife of King Lot of Orkney. Only later did Merlin reveal that she was Arthur's half-sister. "God is angry with you, for you have slept with your sister, and she has given birth to your son, who will destroy you and all of the knights of your kingdom. It is your destiny to die in battle against him as punishment for your foul deed."

Merlin advised King Arthur to save his life by collecting and secretly killing all the male children of noble blood who had been born on the day Margawse gave birth. Given the penalty of death for withholding such a child, many infants arrived at King Arthur's court. He put them all into a small boat and sent it out to sea. He expected that the infants would drown, or if by chance the boat remained afloat, that they would surely die of exposure or starvation.

The small boat crashed on the rocks by a castle and broke apart. Unknown to Merlin and Arthur, Arthur's son survived the catastrophe and was rescued by a good man, who named him Mordred and reared him to the age of fourteen. Then Mordred returned to the household of his mother and King Lot, where he trained with their four sons to become a knight. Arthur always believed that Mordred was one of his nephews.

When King Arthur's subjects learned of their children's deaths, they were outraged. Many blamed Merlin.

One day soon thereafter, Arthur was riding in the forest when he saw three peasants pursuing Merlin. Arthur forced the peasants to flee and said to Merlin, "You would have been killed if I had not happened to ride by and save you!"

"You are wrong," Merlin replied. "I could have saved myself. You are the one who is riding toward your death, for God is not your friend!"

The two friends came to an armed knight sitting in a chair by a fountain. "I challenge any knight who comes this way to a duel," the knight announced, "and so I challenge you!"

"So be it!" King Arthur replied.

The two men fought fiercely on horseback, breaking their spears to splinters upon one another's shields. When King Arthur reached for his sword, the knight said, "It is better if we continue to fight with spears. My squire will supply us with two good ones."

The two fought on with the new spears until they too shattered. Again King Arthur reached for his sword. "Let your sword rest," the knight said, "for you are the best spearman I have ever encountered. Let us do battle with spears once more for the love of knighthood!"

The squire brought two good spears, and the two men resumed their contest. This time, however, King Arthur's spear shattered while the knight's spear remained whole. The knight gave Arthur such a mighty blow upon his shield that

sword and said, "I will fight you on foot, Sir Knight, since I can no longer fight on horseback."

Thus began a new contest, sword to sword, with each knight on foot. They charged one another like two rams until the earth ran red with their blood. Finally the knight's sword sliced King Arthur's sword into two pieces, and the king was at the knight's mercy. But Arthur quickly leaped upon the knight, threw him to the ground, and removed his helmet.

The knight, realizing how vulnerable he now was, summoned all of his strength and overturned Arthur. He removed Arthur's helmet and raised his sword.

Before the knight could behead the king, Merlin cast a spell upon him, causing the knight to fall into a deep sleep. Merlin then picked up King Arthur and rode off with him on the knight's horse.

"What have you done, Merlin?" Arthur cried. "Have you killed that knight with your enchantments? He is one of the best knights I have ever fought!"

"I advise you not to worry about him, Arthur," Merlin replied, "for he is far healthier than you are! I have simply put him to sleep for a short time. He is indeed a great knight, and from this time forth he will serve you well, as will his two sons. His name is Sir Pellinor."

Merlin took King Arthur to a hermit skilled in the art of medicine, who healed the king. When they were leaving, Arthur said to Merlin, "I no longer have a sword."

"Do not be concerned," replied Merlin. "Not far from here you will find a suitable sword."

As they rode together, they came upon a lovely, wide lake. A woman's arm protruded from the middle of the water. It was clothed in a white embroidered silk fabric, and its hand held a beautiful sword. "There!" exclaimed Merlin. "Now you can see the sword I had in mind."

Then they noticed a lady in a boat upon the lake. "Who is that lady?" Arthur asked.

"She is the Lady of the Lake," Merlin replied. "She is coming to speak with you. Treat her well so that she will give you that sword."

When the lady arrived, King Arthur said to her, "Lady, what sword is being held above the water by that arm? I wish that it were mine, for I have no sword."

The lady replied, "King Arthur, that is my sword, Excalibur, but I will give it to you if you will give me a gift when I ask for it."

"I will give you whatever gift you wish," Arthur replied.

"Then take my boat and row out to the sword. Take both the sword and its sheath, and I will request a gift of you when I am ready to do so." Once Arthur took the sword and its sheath, the hand and arm withdrew beneath the water.

"Which do you prefer," Merlin asked, "the sword Excalibur or its scabbard?"

"I prefer Excalibur of course!" Arthur replied.

"Then you are not wise," Merlin responded, "for the sheath is worth ten of the swords! As long as you wear the scabbard upon your body, no matter how wounded you are, you will not lose a drop of blood. So take care of that sheath, and always keep it with you!"

When King Arthur returned to Caerleon, his knights were amazed to hear of his adventure with Sir Pellinor. They were disturbed that he would risk his life in

such a way, and yet they were glad to serve a king who would take the same risks they themselves did.

The time came when King Arthur said to Merlin, "My nobles want me to marry so that I will not leave the throne of Britain without an heir. Whom do you advise?"

"Whom do you love above all others?" Merlin asked.

"Guinevere, the daughter of Sir Leodegrance, who has in his possession the Round Table. She is the most beautiful lady alive!"

"If you did not love her as you do," Merlin replied, "I would find you another lady whose beauty and goodness would please you. But I can see that your mind is set on Guinevere, and I cannot hope to change it."

"You are right," Arthur responded. "But why would you want to change my mind?"

Merlin counseled: "As beautiful as she is, Guinevere will not be a good wife for you. In days to come, she and the great knight Sir Lancelot will love each other more than they will love you."

This prophecy did not deter King Arthur. He sent Merlin and a group of knights to Sir Leodegrance to request the hand of Guinevere in marriage.

Sir Leodegrance was delighted to have Guinevere marry the king of Britain. Since a dowry of land would be no gift for Arthur, Leodegrance decided to give him 100 knights and the Round Table, which Uther Pendragon had given him. "This is a most fitting gift for King Arthur," Sir Leodegrance said. "It will bring peace among all of his knights, since the table has neither a head nor a foot. Whenever the knights meet, their thrones, their services, and their relationship to one another will be equal."

King Arthur married Guinevere at Camelot in a solemn ceremony that was followed by a great feast. He appreciated the gift of the Round Table, which seated 150 knights. When the knights went to sit around the table, each found his name magically inscribed upon the throne that would be his.

Chapter 4

Lucius Hiberius, Emperor of Rome, demands tribute from Britain; King Arthur declares war upon Rome. Arthur fights and kills a giant in northern Gaul. He and his knights then defeat the Roman army, and King Arthur becomes the ruler of the Roman Empire.

King Arthur conquered Norway and Denmark. Then he conquered Gaul, which was a province of Rome. One day King Arthur was seated with his knights when twelve old men, their white hair encircled with gold bands, entered the hall two by two. Each man grasped the hand of his companion with one hand and held an olive branch in his other hand as he approached King Arthur's throne. They greeted the king and announced that they were ambassadors from Emperor Lucius Hiberius of Rome.

King Arthur read aloud to the assembled group from the parchment scroll they handed him. "From Lucius Hiberius, Emperor of Rome, to King Arthur, his enemy,

Who are you that you can steal Roman land? Who are you to teach law to Rome, the father of justice? How dare you refuse to pay the tribute you owe to Rome?

"Why do you refuse to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's?" the document continued. "Do you expect the lion to run from the calf? The wolf to fear the lamb? The leopard to quake before the hare? Such miracles do not occur in this world! Julius Caesar, our valiant ancestor, conquered Britain, and since that time, Britons have paid tribute to Rome."

King Arthur continued reading. "If you do not appear before the Roman Senate and pay what you owe, then I will come with a mighty army and take Gaul from you. I will burn all of Britain and crush your knights. Should you attempt to flee, I will pursue you and give you no rest until I have destroyed you. Even if you were to dig a hole in the earth and hide yourself there, you could not escape the might of Rome!"

The Roman emperor's words were greeted with such a hostile uproar that King Arthur physically had to restrain his knights from harming the Roman ambassadors. Then he met with his private council in the Giant's Tower. King Arthur said, "Friends and companions, your skill has enabled me to acquire treasure and gold and to subject many neighboring kingdoms to British rule. A nation is entitled to keep whatever land it can conquer and defend. However, Rome is a mighty nation. We must decide what action is in our own best interest."

The council decided to go to war against Rome. King Arthur said to the ambassadors, "Tell your emperor that I intend to travel to Rome, but I will demand tribute, not pay it. I will bind and hang Lucius Hiberius. I will destroy your land and kill any knights who fight against me."

The Roman ambassadors returned to their homeland and reported King Arthur's decision. Emperor Lucius decided to fight King Arthur in the mountains of Gaul. Arthur and his noblemen also prepared for war.

On board the ship that was transporting him across the English Channel, King Arthur had a dream. He saw a dreadful bear flying through the air from the east. Its appearance was huge, hideous, and black as storm clouds. Lightning and thunder accompanied its flight, and the seacoasts trembled from its horrible roars. A fearsome dragon flew toward the bear from the west. The glare from the dragon's eyes illuminated the sea and the countryside. The bear fought valiantly, but it could not withstand the dragon's repeated attacks. The dragon's fiery breath burned the bear until its scorched body fell lifeless to the earth below.

When Arthur described his dream to his companions, they said, "The dragon signifies you. The bear represents a terrifying giant that you will have to fight. Just as the dragon overcomes the bear, so you will emerge victorious over the giant."

Arthur replied, "I disagree with your interpretation. To me, my dream represents my coming conflict with Emperor Lucius Hiberius. In time, God will reveal its true meaning."

Soon after the Britons arrived in northern Gaul, a knight came in search of King Arthur. "Lord king," he began, "for seven years a monstrous giant has been tormenting us. The fiend destroys the farmers' houses, tears up their crops, and devours their cattle, horses, sheep, goats, and pigs.

"We have even seen him seize and eat men alive! He carries off women and children to his den on Mont Saint Michel. So far he has eaten more than 500

people, including infants. On the cliff where he lurks, you will find more dead than you can count and more treasure than the Greeks found in Troy when they captured that ancient walled city.

"Now," the knight continued, "the fiend has captured the noble niece of the Duke of Brittany. He has been holding her on the crest of Mont-Saint-Michel for the past two weeks. By now she may even be dead. No one has been willing to risk death in order to save her. No one in this land, neither knight nor commoner, possesses the courage and strength to confront the giant. We no longer dare to attack him on land, for that means certain death. When we tried to attack him from the sea, he hurled huge boulders upon our ships and sank them, drowning those who were aboard. He roams wherever he wishes and does whatever he pleases.

"You must have noticed, that our countryside lacks any sign of human life. To escape the giant's wrath, many people have hidden deep in the forests. Others are dying of starvation in their own secret hiding places. The fields have become a barren wasteland.

"We desperately need your help," the knight concluded. "The monstrous giant will destroy this entire land and all of its people unless you come to our aid!"

"Alas!" King Arthur replied. "Had I known about this giant, I would have offered him my life before I let him ravage this land. I shall seek this fiend upon his crag. If it is treasure or land that he wants, I shall appease his anger. If his hatred is implacable, I shall fight him to the death! I doubt that he surpasses me in skill and strength!"

That evening Arthur took his foster brother, Sir Kay, aside and said, "At midnight tonight, without a word to anyone except our squires, I want you to come with me to find this giant. I intend to kill him myself—it is important for a king to set a fine example for his knights. I think my own strength and skill will be all that I need. However, if it looks as if I need help, come to my aid."

At midnight the two were riding toward Mont-Saint-Michel when they noticed a great fire blazing above the cliffs upon its crest. Reaching the inlet, they tethered their horses to a tree. They had to make the middle part of their journey in a small rowboat that was kept tied far up the beach, for whenever the tide was high, the hill rose straight out of the sea.

As they climbed toward the crest of the high cliffs, they heard the sound of a woman's cry echoing through the trees above them. King Arthur withdrew Excalibur from its sheath and bravely continued on his way. "I shall walk on ahead of you, but follow me," he said to Sir Kay. "When we reach the crest of the hill, place yourself where you can observe what is happening. For your own safety, remain deep within the shadows. No matter what blows I may suffer, remain in hiding unless the giant pins me to the ground and has me at his mercy. It is not appropriate for anyone but me to fight the giant."

Upon the crest of the hill, King Arthur found the huge, blazing fire. Human bones lay scattered upon the ground, more or less picked clean of flesh. But there was no sign of the giant. Instead, the flames flickered upon the body of an old woman in torn clothing who was sitting by the side of a fresh grave mound. Her long hair fell over her face, and she was weeping and wailing with grief.

As King Arthur entered the lighted area with Excalibur ready in his hand, the woman stopped her wailing and turned in his direction. "Who are you, and what evil fate has brought you here?" she asked. "Are you an angel, or a knight? If heaven is your home, you may wander upon this mountain in safety. But if you are a knight and the earth is your home, then you are indeed an unfortunate man!

"I pity you, for you are about to be tortured to death by a giant, who will then tear your limbs to pieces. Even if you were made of the strongest metal, he would destroy you. Even if you had come with fifty knights as strong as you are, he would destroy you all! May his name be cursed!

"I have just buried the Duke of Brittany's niece," the woman continued, "and the giant will not hesitate to kill you as well! He attacked the best of all castles in Brittany. The gates fell to pieces in his hands. He pulled down the wall of the great hall. He tore the door to my lady's room into five pieces. He grabbed us and carried us into this wild, wooded area. My poor child was only fifteen years old. I was her nurse and had cared for her ever since the day of her birth. She died of terror in the monster's arms! I watched as the light of my life flickered and went out!

"Take my advice, fair lord, and flee while you can. To remain here is to seek your death. If the giant finds you, he will tear you to pieces and eat your flesh. Do not try to win him with words. He cannot be bought with lands, or with treaties, or even with chests of gold. He will rage where he chooses, regardless of the law, for he is his own master, and he answers to no one."

Then the woman's face filled with terror. King Arthur turned to follow her gaze and found himself staring at the monstrous giant.

The horrible appearance of the fiend was matched only by the terrible nature of his deeds. His face was darkly splotched like the skin of a frog. His eyebrows hung low over his eyes, which burned with fire. His ears were enormous, and his nose was hooked like a hawk's beak. His mouth was as flat as a flounder's, and his fat, loose, fleshy lips spread apart to display his swollen gums. His bristly black beard fell over his chest, concealing part of his fat body. He had the broad neck and shoulders of a bull. His arms and legs stretched out like the limbs of a mighty oak tree. From the top of his head to the tip of his shovel-shaped feet, he was thirty feet tall.

The giant wore a tunic made from human hair, fringed with the beards of men. He carried the corpses of twelve peasants tied together on his back. In his hand, he carried a club so mighty that the two strongest farmers in the land could not have lifted it off the ground.

The giant dropped the corpses by the fire and approached Arthur with broad strides. As Arthur fingered Excalibur, he saw that the giant's mouth was still smeared with the clotted blood and scraps of flesh from his last meal. Even his beard and his hair were strewn with gore.

Arthur said to him, "May great God in heaven, who rules the world, give you a short life and a shameful death! Surely you are the most foul fiend that was ever formed! Guard yourself, you dog, and prepare to die, for this day my hands will kill you!"

The giant responded by raising his fearsome club. He grinned like a ferocious boar, confident of its menacing tusks. Then he growled, and foam spilled from his

King Arthur raised his shield and prayed to God that it would protect him against the fiend's mighty club. The giant's first blow fell upon Arthur's shield, making the cliffs clang like an anvil and shattering his source of protection. The shock of the impact almost knocked Arthur to the ground, but he quickly recovered.

The blow ignited King Arthur's rage, and he furiously struck the giant on the forehead with his sword. Blood gushed into the giant's eyes and down his cheeks, blinding him.

Just as an enraged boar, its flesh torn from the attacks of hunting hounds, turns and charges upon a hunter, so the giant, maddened with the pain of his wound, rushed with a roar upon King Arthur. Groping blindly with his hands, the giant grabbed the king by the shoulders and clasped him to his chest, trying to crush Arthur's ribs and burst his heart. King Arthur summoned all of his strength and twisted his body out from under the giant's grasp.

"Peace to you, my lord!" the giant exclaimed. "Who are you that fights so skillfully with me? Only Arthur, the most noble of all kings, could defeat me in combat!"

"I am that Arthur of whom you speak," the king replied. Then, quick as lightning, Arthur struck the giant repeatedly with his sword. Unable to see through the blood in his eyes, the giant never knew where the next blow would fall. Arthur's sword thrusts rained upon him relentlessly until one finally entered his ear and plunged into his skull.

The giant gave a dreadful roar and crashed to the ground like a mighty oak tree torn up by a furious storm wind. Arthur gazed upon his fallen prey and laughed with relief.

Sir Kay stepped into the firelight and said, "That was an impressive death blow! The fiend should have worn a helmet!"

"Take your sword, Kay, and slice off his head," Arthur commanded. "I want to take it back to our companions for everyone to admire. If we place our swords through his ears, we can carry the head between us all the way back to our tents. If you want any treasure, take whatever pleases you. I want nothing more than the fiend's tunic and his club."

The first glow of dawn was streaking the sky with shades of rose when King Arthur and Sir Kay entered their camp. Word had already traveled from tent to tent, so an enthusiastic group of knights greeted their return. They stared at the giant's huge, hideous head in awe, for its size and ugliness were beyond compare.

The Duke of Brittany built a chapel over his niece's grave on top of Mont-Saint-Michel, so that she would not be forgotten. By the time it was finished, the allies of King Arthur had arrived from Ireland and Scotland, and they all set forth to meet the Roman legions.

The two knights without equal in King Arthur's court were Sir Lancelot of the Lake and Sir Gawain, the king's nephew. Both showed their prowess in the war against Rome.

In the first battle, Sir Gawain received serious wounds but fought on. When the battle ended, Arthur's knights had killed more than 10,000 Roman soldiers,

King Arthur put Sir Lancelot in command of the prisoners, who were to be taken to Paris. Emperor Lucius Hiberius sent 60,000 Roman soldiers to ambush Lancelot.

Lancelot's scouts warned him of the ambush. Even though the Romans outnumbered the Britons six to one, he met them in deadly combat. He was so strong and skillful that his soldiers won the battle, killing many Roman soldiers and forcing the rest to run from them as sheep run from a lion or a wolf.

But when he returned to the king, Arthur said, "Your courage nearly destroyed you, Lancelot! It is foolish to fight under circumstances where you are badly outnumbered."

Sir Lancelot replied, "No, it is not foolish, for once a person acts shamefully, he can never recover his honor."

The decisive battle followed. King Arthur met Emperor Lucius Hiberius in a long, mighty contest. Arthur received a serious wound, but ultimately he took Excalibur and sliced off the Roman emperor's head. That day, King Arthur and his men also killed sixty Roman senators and twenty kings of countries that were Roman allies.

"Bring these corpses before your Senate with this message," King Arthur commanded the three senators who remained alive. "Tell them this is the tribute they have demanded of me. Tell them also that if this is not sufficient, I will pay an additional tribute when I arrive in Rome. Make it clear to them that this is the only kind of tribute I will pay. Finally, tell them that they may never again demand a tribute or a tax of any kind from Britain."

Shortly after the funeral procession started, Arthur and his knights began their own march toward Rome. City after city in the provinces yielded to them. The cities of Italy—including Rome—also yielded. When the leading Roman officials asked for peace, Arthur agreed to hold his Round Table in Rome that Christmas and to be crowned Emperor of Rome at that time.

Thus it came to pass that King Arthur ruled all the lands of the Roman Empire. After his coronation, Arthur rewarded his knights and servants generously with land. Each knight now longed to return home to his wife.

King Arthur himself had no desire to acquire more power. "We have achieved great glory and honor," he announced. "It is not wise to tempt God."

So Arthur and his army returned to Britain and received a royal welcome throughout the kingdom.

Chapter 5

Sir Lancelot has many adventures and performs many heroic deeds. He then returns to the Round Table and resumes his love affair with Queen Guinevere. He defends her against a charge of treason. In tournaments, he fights in disguise on the side against the king.

After King Arthur and his knights returned to Britain, Sir Lancelot became the leading knight of the Round Table. Not only had he performed outstanding

feats upon the field of battle in Gaul, but at home he surpassed all other knights in tournament skills and in noble deeds. Queen Guinevere loved him above all other men, and he loved her above all other women.

Sir Lancelot loved to earn glory, honor, and praise. He soon tired of the routine of tournaments and other such contests of skill with arms. He decided to increase his honor by seeking adventures in which he could excel in other, equally noble ways.

One noble way in which Lancelot proved himself was in his loyalty to Queen Guinevere. After falling asleep under a tree, he awoke to find himself imprisoned by four queens. They said to him, "We know Queen Guinevere is the only lady you love, but she is lost to you forever. You must choose one of us or die in this prison."

Lancelot replied, "You have given me a difficult choice, but I will die rather than choose one of you. If I were free, I would prove to you that Queen Guinevere is true to her lord, King Arthur."

Sir Lancelot also proved himself by defending ladies in distress. Not long after his adventure with the four queens, he came upon a maiden in the forest who complained of a knight who assaulted any woman who passed his way.

"Are you telling me that a knight is a thief and a rapist?" Lancelot asked. "He brings shame upon the order of knighthood! He has broken his sacred oath, and he should die for it. Ride ahead of me, slowly, through the forest. If that knight bothers you, I will come to your rescue."

When the knight appeared and forced the maiden from her horse, Sir Lancelot challenged him to a duel and killed him. "Now, lady," he said, "what other service can I perform for you?"

"Nothing at this time, sir," the maiden replied. "But you need a wife. You are the most courteous of knights to all ladies, yet you love none of them. I have heard that Queen Guinevere has placed an enchantment upon you so that you will never love anyone but her."

"Fair lady," replied Lancelot, "I have no interest in marriage, for then I would have to remain with my wife and give up the tournaments, battles, and adventures that I love. To love a woman and not marry her would be even worse! God punishes such immoral behavior. Such knights are unfortunate in their contests and wars."

Sir Lancelot then left the maiden. After riding through the forest for two days, he found himself at the castle of Tintagel, where King Arthur had been born. Two giants approached him, each armed with a huge club.

Lancelot immediately raised his shield, fended off the blow of the first giant's club, and sliced off his head with his sword. Seeing this, the other giant ran for his life. Lancelot caught him and sliced through his body from the shoulder to the stomach.

Sir Lancelot then returned to the castle. When he entered the great hall, sixty ladies came and knelt before him in thanks.

"Most of us have been imprisoned here for seven years," they told him, "earning our food by embroidering silk. Who are you that you were able to deliver us from these giants? Many knights have tried, but their courage brought them only death. We thought that only Sir Lancelot of the Lake could save us, for these

"Fair ladies," Lancelot replied, "I am the very knight you hoped to see!" Then he left them to their freedom and went on his way.

Sir Lancelot had many more adventures. Word of his triumphs reached King Arthur and Queen Guinevere in various ways. Sir Lancelot asked some of the people he helped to go to Arthur's court and relate their stories to the queen and the knights assembled there. He also sent knights he had defeated to Queen Guinevere to become her prisoners. Other tales of Lancelot's heroic deeds were told by those of King Arthur's knights who met him in the course of their own adventures.

By the time Sir Lancelot returned to the Round Table, he had already earned the greatest name of any knight in the world and was honored by both the common folk and the nobility.

Lancelot's love affair with Guinevere resumed on his return. Their relationship was common knowledge at court. Lancelot was embarrassed by the gossip and began to spend his time helping the numerous maidens and ladies who asked for his assistance.

Queen Guinevere finally called Sir Lancelot to her and said, "Lancelot, your love for me must be dying; for you no longer seem to enjoy my company. Instead, you spend your time helping other women with their problems."

Lancelot replied, "Since I was last a part of the Round Table, I have given up all the pleasures of this world except my love for you. I might have chosen to become a holy man if I did not love you as I do. You are my earthly joy, and I love you too much to give you up for anyone—even Arthur, my lord and king.

"However, our continued boldness will bring great slander and shame upon us, and I do not want to see you dishonored. Surely you are aware, Guinevere, that many knights already speak openly of our love. I fear them more for your sake than mine, since if I must I can return to my own country across the sea. But you must remain here and face whatever is said about you.

"Therefore," Lancelot concluded, "I am making an effort to help various ladies so that the members of the court will think that I love attending all women, and not just you."

Queen Guinevere said, "I see from your words that you are a false knight. You love other women and have only scorn for me! Therefore, I shall no longer love you. Leave this court and never return, for I never want to see you again!"

To prove that she loved other knights as much as she loved Sir Lancelot, Queen Guinevere gave a dinner for them. One of the knights ate a poisoned apple and immediately died. Because Queen Guinevere had prepared the feast, she was blamed for his death. Another knight came before King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table and accused the queen of treason, which was punishable by death.

King Arthur said, "Fair lords, my heart is heavily troubled. I must be the judge in this matter, so I cannot also defend my wife. I ask that one of you come to her aid so that she will not be burned for a crime she did not commit."

"Forgive me, my gracious lord," said the knight, "but not one of the twenty-four knights who attended the dinner is willing to defend the queen's

Arthur replied, "Be armed and ready for a contest in fifteen days. When that day comes, if no knight has come forward to defend the queen, then that will indicate her guilt, and she will be burned."

King Arthur then went to Queen Guinevere and asked, "Where is Sir Lancelot? He would defend you!"

"His relatives tell me that he has left Britain," she responded.

The king advised, "Ask his nephew, Sir Bors, to fight for you for Lancelot's sake!"

But Bors was unwilling to honor Queen Guinevere's request. "Madam," he replied, "how can I defend you when I attended that dinner? If I take your part, the other knights will suspect that I poisoned the apple!"

"Sir Lancelot would have defended you even if you were guilty, but you drove him out of Britain although he worshipped you! How can you ask me to defend you when you have treated my uncle in such a cruel manner?"

King Arthur found Queen Guinevere pleading with Lancelot's nephew. "Gentle knight," he said, "have mercy upon the queen, for I am certain that she is innocent. Defend her for the love of Sir Lancelot!"

"My lord," replied Bors, "you are asking me to incur the wrath of my fellow knights. Nevertheless, I will defend the queen for Lancelot's sake and your sake, unless a better knight is willing to be her champion."

When Guinevere banished Lancelot from court, he went to stay with a hermit in the countryside. He received the news of Guinevere's distress with great joy, for now he had an opportunity to win back her favor.

The day of the contest arrived. The two knights were prepared to begin, when suddenly another knight, riding a white horse and bearing a shield with a strange coat of arms, galloped out of the woods and talked with Sir Lancelot's nephew. Sir Bors then announced that this stranger would defend the queen in his place. The strange knight defended Guinevere against her accuser and proved her innocent of treason.

After the contest King Arthur asked the strange knight to remove his helmet and reveal his identity. It was, of course, Sir Lancelot. Queen Guinevere rejoiced at his return and regretted her harsh treatment of him.

Arthur and the knights of the Round Table then prepared to participate in a great tournament at Camelot. The king asked Queen Guinevere to accompany him, but she said she was too ill to ride. Sir Lancelot also refused to attend the tournament because his wounds from his combat in defense of Guinevere had not yet healed. The coincidence provided those who loved scandal with much to discuss, and King Arthur left for Camelot with sadness and anger in his heart.

After the king departed, Queen Guinevere said to Sir Lancelot, "You were wrong to stay behind! Our enemies will accuse us of remaining here to make love!"

Lancelot decided to attend the tournament in disguise and fight on the side against the king. Guinevere could not convince him to appear in a more honest manner. But King Arthur recognized Lancelot when they lodged in the same town en route to Camelot and was pleased to see him.

All was not well, however. Since Lancelot never wore the token of any woman, he agreed to wear one as part of his disguise. During the course of the

tournament, he was seriously wounded by his own nephew, Sir Bors. In time, Sir Gawain discovered Sir Lancelot's identity. Queen Guinevere was furious that her knight had worn the token of another woman, when he had always refused to wear her own token.

As a result, when the next great tournament was announced, Guinevere said to Lancelot, "I understand why you wore a maiden's token at the last tournament. However, from now on, I want you to wear my golden token upon your helmet as a sign of your love for me. And make certain that your relatives are well informed of your disguise so they do not injure you."

Sir Lancelot agreed, and at the next tournament he again rode against the knights of the Round Table, wearing Queen Guinevere's token. His relatives, who were also in disguise, fought on his side. Sir Gawain recognized them, and he counseled King Arthur that it would be better to let Sir Lancelot and his relatives win the day rather than to contest heavily against their own knights.

Chapter 6

Two of King Arthur's nephews reveal to him the love affair between Sir Lancelot and Guinevere. The queen is condemned to die, but Lancelot rescues her and takes her to his castle.

Sir Agravain and Sir Mordred, brothers of Sir Gawain, had long concealed their hatred of Queen Guinevere and Sir Lancelot. Finally Agravain's emotion conquered his good judgment, and he announced in a voice that many knights could hear, "What false men we are! I am amazed that we are all not ashamed to see how Sir Lancelot openly loves Queen Guinevere. Yet, day after day, we endure this shame and permit King Arthur to suffer this embarrassment without making any effort to punish the offenders! How long are we going to conceal Lancelot's treason? It is time to tell the king!"

Sir Gawain replied, "Do not speak of such matters within my hearing, for I will have nothing to do with that subject!"

"I will!" exclaimed Sir Mordred.

"You would do us all a service to leave the matter alone, my brother," Gawain replied, "and tend to your own affairs, for I know what will come of your mischief."

"Come of it what may," Sir Agravain answered, "I intend to disclose the affair to King Arthur."

"Not with my approval," said Sir Gawain. "If you proceed with this, you will cause a war between Lancelot and us. And as you well know, many dukes and barons will side with Lancelot. As for me, I will never take a stand against Sir Lancelot. He is my friend!"

"Do as you wish," replied Agravain. "I will keep silent no longer!"

"Your action will destroy the noble fellowship of the Round Table and bring ruin upon us!" Gawain exclaimed. "I urge you both to reconsider!"

But Agravain and Mordred could not be dissuaded. They told King Arthur of the relationship between Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere. "We will prove that

"You will need to prove it," Arthur replied, "for Sir Lancelot is the mightiest of knights, and he will kill the knight who insults his honor."

King Arthur had long been aware of the love between his wife and Lancelot. He had pretended ignorance because Lancelot had helped both him and the queen on many occasions, and King Arthur loved him. If their relationship became public, Arthur knew that, as king, he would have to consider his honor and his position and would be compelled to take action.

Yet Agravain was determined to make a public issue of the matter, so Arthur reluctantly consented to his plan. King Arthur would go hunting and send back word to Queen Guinevere that he would be away for the night. If Sir Agravain, Sir Mordred, and twelve knights found Sir Lancelot with the queen in his absence, they would bring Lancelot before him.

Lancelot was indeed with Guinevere when Agravain and his party of knights knocked on the queen's door. They called, "Sir Lancelot of the Lake, you are a traitor knight! Come out of the queen's bedroom! We intend to bring you before King Arthur."

"Alas!" Queen Guinevere cried. "Our love has destroyed us! Since you do not have armor and weapons, surely these men will kill you, and I shall be burned!"

Lancelot put his arms around Guinevere and said, "Most noble queen, you have always been my lady, and I have at all times been your true knight. I have never failed you since King Arthur first made me a knight. Pray for my soul if I am killed here. My relatives will rescue you from the fire. Take comfort in that and return with them to my lands, for there you will live like a queen."

"No, Lancelot," Guinevere replied. "I shall not choose to live once you are dead!"

"Know that I will do my best to stay alive," Lancelot said, "although I am more concerned for you than for myself. Nevertheless, I would rather have my armor upon me right now than be lord of all Christendom! I would choose to die performing deeds that bring fame rather than to die a shameful death!"

With that, Sir Lancelot opened Queen Guinevere's door just wide enough for one knight to enter the room. Lancelot killed him, took his armor and weapons, and attacked those who had chosen to destroy him. Only Sir Mordred escaped.

Lancelot then said to Guinevere, "Because I have killed these knights, King Arthur will always be my enemy. I must leave Britain. Come with me! I will save you from the dangers that await you."

Guinevere replied, "No, Lancelot. I will not do more harm to the kingdom by fleeing. But if I am condemned to burn, please rescue me!"

"Have no doubt of that!" Sir Lancelot exclaimed. He kissed Queen Guinevere, and they exchanged rings.

Sir Lancelot returned to his lodgings, where he gathered his family and the knights who were loyal to him. "You all know," he explained, "that ever since I came to Britain, I have been loyal to my lord, King Arthur, and to my lady, Queen Guinevere. Tonight the queen sent for me to speak with her. King Arthur commanded Sir Agravain, Sir Mordred, and twelve knights to betray me while I was in her room.

"Now that I have killed these knights," he continued, "war is certain to follow. The king, in his anger and malice, will order the queen to be burned. I will fight for her and declare that she has been true to her lord."

Meanwhile, Sir Mordred returned to King Arthur and his knights with the terrible tale of his encounter with Sir Lancelot.

Arthur exclaimed, "The fellowship of the Round Table is broken forever, for many a noble knight will side with Sir Lancelot! Alas, that I wear this crown upon my head! Now I must lose the fairest fellowship of noble knights that a king has ever had!

"It must break with Sir Lancelot in order to keep my honor," King Arthur continued. "And the queen must suffer the penalty of death, for under the law, she is guilty of treason. She is responsible for the deaths of thirteen knights of the Round Table. Therefore, I command that she be put into the fire and burned!"

Sir Gawain said, "My lord, I counsel you not to judge the queen too hastily. Even though Sir Lancelot was found in her room, he may have been there for no evil purpose. You know that the queen owes more to Lancelot than to any other knight, for he has often saved her life and has fought for her when the entire court refused to do so. Perhaps she sent for him with good reason.

"Maybe," Gawain continued, "the queen asked Lancelot to come secretly to her room in order to avoid slander. Many times we choose what we think is the best course of action, only to learn that it is the worst! I say to you that Queen Guinevere is both good and true to you. As for Sir Lancelot, he will defend the queen's honor against any knight living, and he will take the crime and the shame upon himself in order to save her."

"I have no doubt that he will!" Arthur replied. "Sir Lancelot trusts so in his courage and his skill with arms that he fears nothing, neither man nor law. But this time I will not permit him to fight for the queen. She will suffer the consequences of her actions, for we all are subject to the law. And, if I can, I will bring a shameful death upon Lancelot."

Then Arthur asked Gawain, "Why are you defending Lancelot? He has killed two of your sons, and last night he killed one of your brothers and severely wounded another."

"They brought their deaths upon themselves!" Gawain answered. "I warned them of the perils of their action, but they refused to heed my counsel."

"Dear Nephew," the king commanded Sir Gawain, "put on your best armor, and with your brothers, Sir Gareth and Sir Gaheris, bring my queen to the fire. There she will receive her judgment and her death."

"No, my most noble lord," said Gawain. "That I will never do. My heart will not permit me to witness the shameful death of such a noble lady! And let no one ever say that I supported you in judging the queen guilty and condemning her to death!"

"Then," replied King Arthur, "permit your brothers to be there."

Gawain replied, "They feel as I do! However, they are too young to reject your command."

"Indeed, you may command us and we will obey you," Gareth and Gaheris said, "even though we are much opposed to the deed. But we will wear no armor and will carry no weapons."

Thus it came to pass that Queen Guinevere was led from the castle of Carlisle in a simple smock to face her death. Most of the lords and knights

Just as Guinevere reached the fire, a group of knights led by Sir Lancelot galloped forth to save her. Everyone who fought against the invading knights was killed, for Sir Lancelot had no equal on the field of combat.

A sword thrust intended to pierce some knight's armor struck the unprotected heads of Gaheris and Gareth, who were unarmed and unprepared for battle. It was Lancelot who cut them down, though he did not even see them in the heat of battle.

Once Sir Lancelot had killed or scattered anyone who would deter him, he placed a robe upon Queen Guinevere, sat her behind him on his horse, and rode off with her to the castle of Joyous Gard. There he kept her as a noble knight keeps a lady.

Sir Gawain had remained in his room, where he learned of Guinevere's rescue. He exclaimed, "I knew that Sir Lancelot would save the queen or die in the attempt! He would not have been a man of honor otherwise, since she was being burned because of his deed. I would have done the same thing myself in his place."

Then Gawain was told of his brothers' deaths. He could not believe that Lancelot had killed them. "Gareth loved Lancelot better than he loved any of his brothers or the king!" he exclaimed. "If Lancelot had wished it, Gareth would have stood with him against all of us!"

Sir Gawain was overwhelmed with grief and anger. "How did Sir Lancelot slay my brothers?" he asked King Arthur. "Neither bore arms against him!"

"I can only tell you what I have been told," Arthur replied. "They were standing among a great group of armed knights, and he did not see them there. He did not know that he killed them. However, let us plan how to avenge their deaths."

"My king, my lord, and my uncle," Sir Gawain replied, "I now make you a promise that I shall hold as sacred as my knighthood. From this day forth, no man on earth will convince me to make peace with Sir Lancelot of the Lake! I shall not rest until I have met him in battle and one of us has killed the other! If necessary, I shall seek Sir Lancelot throughout seven kings' kingdoms, but I shall find him and avenge the deaths of my brothers!"

Thus the war between King Arthur and Sir Lancelot began.

Chapter 7

The siege of Lancelot's castle in Britain is unsuccessful. He returns Guinevere to King Arthur, but Sir Gawain compels Arthur to follow Lancelot across the sea in order to continue the war. Mordred seizes the throne, and Arthur returns to fight him. Sir Gawain is mortally wounded. Before he dies, he asks Lancelot to come to Arthur's aid in the war against Mordred.

Sir Lancelot and his knights prepared the castle Joyous Gard for a siege, and soon King Arthur and Sir Gawain arrived with a huge army. Although great fighting occurred, Lancelot and his best knights remained within the castle for almost four months and would not take part in the battle.

Finally Sir Lancelot spoke with King Arthur and Sir Gawain over the castle wall. "You win no honor here with this siege, since I refuse to do battle with you. I will never fight the noble king who made me a knight!"

Arthur replied, "Spare me your honeyed words! I am your mortal enemy until I die! You have killed my good knights and relatives. You have slept with my queen for many years. And now, like a traitor, you have taken her from me by force!"

"Most noble lord and king," said Lancelot, "say whatever you wish to me, but I will not fight against you. I am sorry that I killed your knights, but I did so only to save my own life. And as for Queen Guinevere, of all the knights under heaven, only you or Gawain could charge me with being a traitor and yet live! I will defend the queen's honor against any other knight alive, for she is as true to you as any lady living is to her lord.

"It is true that the queen has treated me kindly and has cherished me more than any other knight, but then I have deserved her favor. In your anger, more than once you would have had her burned, and I have saved her from the judgment and the flames. Then you loved me, and thanked me, and were loyal to me."

Lancelot continued, "I would have lost my honor if I had let the queen burn for my deeds. I have always taken her part in quarrels with others. How then could I leave her undefended when this quarrel concerned me? So, my good and gracious lord, take your queen and honor her, for she is both true and good!"

"You are a false knight!" Sir Gawain exclaimed. "I shall never think shameful thoughts of the queen. But what cause did you have to kill my brothers? They were not even armed!"

"I know that you will not accept my excuse," Sir Lancelot replied, "but by the faith I owe to the high order of knighthood, I did not mean to kill them!"

"You lie, cowardly knight!" cried Gawain. "I will fight you as long as I live, until one of us kills the other!"

"From the moment I learned of their deaths," said Lancelot, "I knew that I would never again have your friendship and that you would cause my noble lord, King Arthur, ever to be my mortal foe. If it were not for your abiding anger, I believe that I would again be in my king's good graces."

Sir Lancelot was indeed correct. The noble King Arthur would have welcomed his queen and made his peace with that valiant knight if Sir Gawain had permitted it. But Gawain's anger was implacable, and he led many of Arthur's knights to call Lancelot a false, cowardly knight.

To preserve his honor, Sir Lancelot was forced to leave the castle and fight for his good name. He pleaded with King Arthur and Sir Gawain to leave the field, but Gawain said that they had come to fight. Lancelot instructed his knights to fight everyone except those two.

Lancelot himself rescued Arthur from the sword of Sir Bors. "As dearly as I love you," Lancelot said to his nephew, "I will kill you before I see the noble king who made me knight either shamed or killed!"

As Lancelot put Arthur back on his horse, tears flowed from the king's eyes, for he knew that Sir Lancelot was more noble than any other man. "Alas that

Finally news of the war reached the Pope in Rome. He sent King Arthur a papal order commanding him to accept his queen and make peace with Sir Lancelot. Gawain agreed that Guinevere should return to Arthur, but he would not permit the king to make peace with Lancelot.

Sir Lancelot rode with Queen Guinevere to King Arthur's castle in Carlisle. An escort of 100 knights, each clothed in green velvet and carrying an olive branch as a token of peace, accompanied Lancelot and the queen, who were dressed in white and gold. When they arrived at Carlisle Castle, Lancelot and Guinevere knelt before Arthur in the presence of Gawain and many great lords.

"My most honored king," Lancelot said, "It was never my thought to withhold your queen from you. My only desire was to save her from danger. I am a thousandfold happier bringing her here than I was taking her away."

He continued, "If any knight, except for you, my lord, dares to say that Queen Guinevere is other than true to you, I, Sir Lancelot of the Lake, will defend her good name. You have listened to liars, and they have caused this argument between us. Without the might of God on my side, unarmed and surprised as I was, I could never have killed thirteen armed knights who were determined to kill me. Remember how well I have always served you, and favor me with your goodwill."

"The king may make his peace with you if he chooses," said Gawain, "but I shall never forgive you for killing my brothers! If you were not here under the Pope's command, I would fight you right now to prove that you have been false to both my uncle and me. Know that I shall prove it once you have left Britain, wherever I find you! You must leave this land within two weeks."

Lancelot then said to Guinevere, so that everyone could hear him, "Madam, I must now depart from you and this noble fellowship forever. However, if any false tongues slander you, send me word and I will defend you." He kissed the queen and said, "Now let us see who will dare to speak against the queen and say that she is not true to my lord, Arthur."

With these words, Sir Lancelot handed Queen Guinevere to King Arthur and left the court. Neither king nor duke nor earl nor knight nor maiden nor lady could hold back a flood of tears. Only Sir Gawain remained unmoved, for his hatred of Lancelot was implacable.

King Arthur's heart ached with sorrow for his country. He knew that from this time forth, his kingdom would be torn with debate and strife. The fellowship of the Round Table had brought responsible leadership to Britain. Without that fellowship to sustain them, duke would fight duke, baron would fight baron, and knight would fight knight.

Sir Lancelot returned to his lands across the sea. King Arthur and Sir Gawain prepared to follow him with a huge army. Arthur decided to leave Britain in the care of his nephew, Sir Mordred. Mordred had virtues, but loyalty was not among them. He schemed to reign in King Arthur's place and marry Queen Guinevere, whom he loved.

Arthur was unaware of Mordred's evil plans. He left Mordred in control of all he possessed—his queen, his land, and his people. Then he left to fight Sir Lancelot, for he would remain loyal to Sir Gawain, and Gawain's heart was set on vengeance.

For six months Gawain fought Lancelot's knights, but Lancelot refused to appear and contest with him. Many knights were slaughtered on both sides. Finally Gawain appeared before the castle gates and shouted, "Where are you, Lancelot, you false traitor? Why do you hide within the walls of your castle like a coward?"

Then Sir Lancelot realized that he would have to fight the knight who had once been his dear friend. His own sense of honor could not let Sir Gawain publicly shame him. They agreed to do battle and told their knights that no man should come near to help until one of them died or yielded to the other.

Gawain possessed a gift that a holy man had given him: Every day of the year, from nine o'clock in the morning until noon, his might increased to three times its normal strength. Only King Arthur knew of this gift, and he always set the contests to resolve quarrels at that time of day.

Sir Lancelot was amazed to see Sir Gawain's strength gradually double and then triple. He fought more and more carefully, preserving his own strength. As noon passed and Gawain's strength began to diminish, Lancelot gave his helmet such a blow that it knocked him off his horse. Gawain lay defenseless on the ground, but Lancelot walked off and left him there.

"Turn around, traitor," Sir Gawain called after him, "and slay me! If you leave me as I am, when I am well I will fight you once again!"

Sir Lancelot replied, "You know very well, Gawain, that I will never strike a knight who is down!"

For the next three weeks, Gawain lay sick in his tent. When he felt well enough to resume the battle, he approached the castle and taunted Lancelot until he had to come out and fight. Again the contest between the two knights began at nine o'clock in the morning, and Lancelot carefully bided his time until after noon. Again Lancelot struck Gawain upon the helmet, reopening his wound, and again he walked away from the sorely injured knight.

As soon as Sir Gawain had recovered enough to speak, he called to Sir Lancelot. "Traitor knight, you know that I am still alive! Come and kill me, or I will live to do battle with you again! I will not give up until one of us lies dead!"

"I will do no more than I have done," Lancelot replied. "As long as you can stand on your feet, I will fight you. But I will not shame myself by striking a wounded man who cannot stand!"

This time Gawain lay sick in his tent for a month. He was preparing to resume the contest when King Arthur received news that Sir Mordred had formally been crowned king of Britain and that he intended to marry Queen Guinevere.

Fake letters claiming that Lancelot had killed Arthur had convinced the House of Lords of the need to crown a successor. Since Guinevere found the idea of marrying Mordred both shameful and distasteful, she told him she was going to London to prepare her trousseau. Then she stocked the Tower of London with food and knights and took refuge within it.

Try as he might, Sir Mordred could not win Queen Guinevere, who publicly announced that she would die rather than marry him. Then he received word that King Arthur had withdrawn the siege from Sir Lancelot and was returning home with his army.

Quickly Mordred wrote to barons throughout Britain asking for their support. Most of them sided with him, forgetting what a good king Arthur had been. They foolishly believed that King Arthur's reign had caused strife and war. With Sir Mordred, they thought that they would be able to live in joy and in peace.

The two armies met at Dover, and even the water ran red with blood. King Arthur was such a courageous leader that his knights followed him ashore with great spirit in their hearts. After a deadly battle, Sir Mordred and his forces retreated. Arthur returned to find Sir Gawain dying in one of the boats.

"Now all my earthly joy has left me!" the king cried. "I loved you and Lancelot above all other knights, and now I have lost you both!"

"Dear uncle, my lord and king," Gawain said, "I am dying because of my own rash judgment! Lancelot's wound is killing me. If he were still at your side this unhappy war would never have begun! When I set you against him, I caused the destruction of your kingdom. I beg you, give me paper, pen, and ink that I may write to Lancelot in my own hand."

Gawain wrote to Lancelot of Mordred's treachery, Guinevere's seclusion, Arthur's need for help, and his own impending death. He publicly cleared Sir Lancelot of blame and asked him to return to Britain to help Arthur and to visit Gawain's own tomb.

When his letter was finished, Sir Gawain told King Arthur to send for Sir Lancelot and to cherish him above all other knights. Gawain was given the last rites, and then he died.

Chapter 8

Arthur kills Mordred, but Mordred fatally wounds Arthur, as Merlin had predicted. Excalibur returns to the Lady of the Lake, and four queens take Arthur away with them. Guinevere and Lancelot recognize the destruction that their love has caused; she becomes a nun, and he a priest. Guinevere dies, and Lancelot dies shortly thereafter.

King Arthur had a dream in which he was sitting on a chair that was attached to a wheel. He was wearing his crown and a robe of rich, gold cloth, and all his knights were bowing before him. Far below him he could see deep, black water in which dragons, serpents, and wild beasts were fighting. The sight was terrible to behold! Suddenly his chair turned upside down, and he fell into the deep, black water. All of the monsters immediately swam toward him and began to attack him. Arthur cried out in his sleep.

Then in his sleep he saw Sir Gawain approach him. "My lord and uncle," Gawain said, "If you fight Mordred tomorrow, you and most of your knights will be killed. I advise you to offer Mordred a great reward if he will agree to postpone tomorrow's battle for one month. By that time Sir Lancelot will have arrived with his noble knights. They will kill Sir Mordred and those who support him." With these words, Sir Gawain disappeared.

Arthur revealed his second dream to his knights and sent two of them to Sir Mordred to bargain for the month's delay. Mordred had gathered 100,000 men

and was prepared for battle. But he agreed to the postponement in return for the regions of Cornwall and Kent during King Arthur's lifetime and all of Britain after his death.

Arthur and Mordred each chose fourteen knights and met between the two armies to sign the treaty. The two leaders had so little trust in one another that each directed his men to watch for any drawn sword. At the first sign of an exposed blade, the knights were to kill every enemy in sight.

During the signing, a poisonous snake slithered out from a heath bush and stung one of the knights on the foot. The knight instinctively drew his sword to slay the snake. Seeing his drawn sword, both armies immediately clashed in warfare.

King Arthur sadly rode into battle, encouraging his knights and fighting his best. "Would that great God in heaven had destined me to die for all of you!" he exclaimed. "I would rather save your lives than rule all that Alexander possessed while he lived upon this earth!"

By dusk, 200,000 men had fallen upon the earth, their bodies as cold as the ground they lay upon. When the king looked about him, only one of his knights, Sir Bedivere, remained alive. "Alas, that I have seen this saddest of days!" Arthur exclaimed.

Then Arthur noticed Mordred standing among a great heap of dead men. The king said to his knight, "Give me my spear, for I see the traitor who caused all this woe! I will repay him for his treachery and treason!"

"My lord," Bedivere replied, "remember your dream and let him be. If you leave Mordred alone, your day of destiny will pass."

"Come death or come life," King Arthur replied, "I will kill him now." He took his spear in both hands and ran toward Mordred, shouting, "False knight and traitor! Dark death now comes upon you, and no man on earth will rescue you!"

Mordred ran toward Arthur with his sword drawn. The king struck Mordred beneath his shield with a mortal blow, but Mordred summoned his last strength and struck King Arthur on the side of the head, piercing through his helmet to his brain. Then Mordred's body crumpled to the earth.

King Arthur cried, "Ah, Lancelot, I sorely missed your help this day! The rich blood of my Round Table soaks this muddy earth. My loyal knights, who by the might of their hands made me master of the earth, have been struck down by treachery. This day's bloody deeds have drowned all my joy. I weep for the glory, the honor, and the fellowship that are no more. Even I have received my death blow."

Arthur then said to his knight, "Take my sword, Excalibur, to the lake that is nearby and throw it into the water. Then return and tell me what you saw there."

Sir Bedivere went off as King Arthur had directed, but when he saw that the hilt of the sword was covered with precious stones, he thought, "Nothing good can come from throwing such a valuable sword into the lake! Why waste all this wealth?" So he hid Excalibur under a tree.

When he returned and said that he had tossed the sword into the lake

"Only the deep waters, the dark waves, and the wind," Bedivere replied.

"Then you have not done what I asked you to do. Return to the lake, and throw the sword into it!"

Bedivere went back to the lake, but again could not bear the thought of tossing away an object of such great value. He left Excalibur under the tree.

When he said that he had tossed the sword into the lake, Arthur asked, "What did you see?"

"Nothing but the water lapping upon the shore and the dark waves," Bedivere replied.

"Now you have twice betrayed me!" King Arthur exclaimed. "Go quickly and do as I have asked you, for your delay is endangering my life. Already I feel cold. If you disobey my command this time, I shall kill you with my own hands!"

When Sir Bedivere approached the lake for the third time, he took Excalibur and threw it as far out into the water as he could. To his amazement, an arm rose out of the water and caught the sword in its hand. Three times the arm waved the gleaming sword aloft in the air; then, sword in hand, the arm withdrew into the water.

When the knight returned with this tale, King Arthur said, "Help me reach the lake, for I fear that I have stayed here too long."

So Bedivere carried the king to the edge of the lake. A rich ship, containing the Lady of the Lake and three fair queens, was waiting where the waves met the shore. The four women wore black hoods of mourning, and they wept and wailed as Bedivere brought Arthur aboard.

Bedivere watched as the queens rowed the ship out into the lake. "Farewell," King Arthur called. "I am going to Avalon, where I will be healed of my wound. Some day I will return to my kingdom and live among the Britons with great joy."

The last sounds the knight heard were the mournful sobbing and wailing of the queens on board the ship.

Sir Bedivere spent the night walking through the forest. The next morning he came upon a chapel near Glastonbury, where he saw a holy hermit praying beside a newly dug grave.

When he asked for whom the hermit was praying, the holy man replied, "Last night, at midnight, a number of ladies came here bearing a corpse, and they asked me to bury it. They gave me 100 candles and 100 gold coins."

"Alas!" exclaimed Bedivere. "That was my lord, King Arthur, whom you buried in this chapel. We have lost the best king who ever ruled Britain!"

When Queen Guinevere learned of the deaths of King Arthur, Sir Mordred, and their armies, she entered a convent and became a nun. She spent her days fasting, praying, and performing deeds for the poor. People marveled at how virtuous she had become.

By the time Sir Lancelot arrived in Britain to fight on the side of the king, Arthur and Mordred were both dead, and Queen Guinevere was in the convent at Almesbury. Lancelot visited the tomb of Sir Gawain, and then he set out to find Guinevere.

When he came to the convent, Guinevere said to the other nuns, "This man and I caused this terrible war and the deaths of the most noble knights in the

world. Our love for each other caused my most noble lord, King Arthur, to be killed by Sir Mordred. ”

Then Guinevere said to Lancelot, “I am determined to heal my soul of its sins. In the name of all the love we two shared, I ask you never to look upon my face again. Leave me now. Return to your kingdom across the sea, and work to keep war from destroying it. Take a wife, and live with her in joy and contentment. As much as I love you, I may not see you, for our love for each other has destroyed the flower of kings and knights. Pray for me, that I may be able to atone for my past life.”

Lancelot replied, “My lady, you and you alone have been my earthly joy. If you were willing, I would now take you back to my kingdom to be my wife. But I will never marry anyone else. I have promised always to be true to you. I will turn away from the world as you have done, and I will always pray especially for you. I ask you to kiss me for the last time.”

“No,” Guinevere replied. “That I will not do.”

Thus Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere parted. Even the hardest heart would have wept to see such pain in the noble knight and his noble lady.

Lancelot became a priest at the chapel where King Arthur was buried. There he served God by praying and fasting. One night a vision came to him and said, “Come to the convent at Almesbury, where you will find Queen Guinevere dead. Bury her beside her husband, the noble King Arthur.”

Lancelot journeyed to the convent, where he found that Guinevere had died a few minutes earlier. He buried her next to her lord, the king. As Guinevere’s body was lowered into the earth, Sir Lancelot wept. The holy hermit, feeling that it was inappropriate for a priest to lament the loss of his beloved lady, criticized his behavior.

Lancelot replied, “I trust that I do not displease God with the nature of my sorrow, for it is not sinful. When I saw King Arthur and Queen Guinevere lying together in their final earthly resting place, my heart overflowed with sorrow. I remembered her great beauty, and the nobility that she and her king both possessed. I remembered their kindness and my unkindness. I remembered how my pride and my fault destroyed both the king and his queen, who were without equal.”

Thereafter, Lancelot took so little nourishment that he wasted away. Day and night he lay by the tomb of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere and prayed, and no one could comfort him. Finally, he died.

The body of Sir Lancelot was carried to his castle at Joyous Gard for burial. His brother gazed at his corpse and said, “Ah, Lancelot! You were the most courteous man who ever carried a shield. You were the kindest man who ever struck with a sword. You were the most courageous man who ever fought with the spear. You were the most loyal friend and truest lover who ever rode a horse. Truly, you were the greatest of all knights!”

So ends the story of King Arthur and his noble knights of the Round Table. Many people believe that King Arthur is still alive in Avalon and that, when Britain is in great peril, he will return and rescue his country.