

Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur

A New Modern English Translation Based on the Winchester
Manuscript

Edited and Translated by
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1 How Arthur was Born and Became King

It came to pass in the days of Uther Pendragon, when he was king and ruled over all England, that there was a mighty duke in Cornwall who had opposed him for a long time. He was called the Duke of Tintagel. Uther summoned this duke to his court, ordering him to bring his wife with him. She was a beautiful woman and very wise, and her name was Igraine.

So when the duke and wife came into the king's court, several great lords mediated an accord between them and Uther. The king liked and loved this lady greatly, and he entertained them both lavishly. He desired to lie by her, but she was a passing good woman and would not assent to the king's advances. She told the duke her husband this and said, "I suppose that we were sent for by the king so that I should be dishonored. Wherefore, husband, I counsel that we depart from here quickly, and ride all night until we come to our own castle." And just as she suggested, they departed, so that neither the king nor any of his council were aware of their departure.

As soon as King Uther knew of their sudden departure, he was exceedingly angry. He called to him his privy council and told them of the sudden departing of the duke and his wife. Then they advised the king to send an order to the duke and his wife to return. "And if he will not come at your summons, then you may do whatever you like; you will have just cause to make war against him."

So that was done, and the messengers had their answer, and that was this: that neither the duke nor his wife would come to him. Then the king was wondrously angry, and sent the duke a brusque message back. He bid him be ready and provision himself, for within forty days he would fetch him out of the biggest castle he had.

When the duke received this warning, he immediately went and supplied two of his strong castles. One of these was called Tintagel and the other was called Terrabyl. He put his wife Dame Igraine in the castle of Tintagel and positioned himself in the castle of Terrabyl, which had many exits and posterns.

Uther came in all haste with a great military host and laid siege to the castle Terrabyl, and there set up many tents and pavilions. Both sides fought fiercely, and many people were slain.

Then, due to his great anger at the duke and his great love for the fair Igraine, King Uther became sick. Sir Ulphius, a noble knight, came to King Uther and asked him why he was sick.

"I shall tell you," said the king. "I am so sick for great anger and for the love of fair Igraine that I am unable to be well."

"Well, my lord," said Sir Ulphius, "I will seek out Merlin; he shall provide you with a remedy that will please your heart." So Ulphius departed and by chance he met Merlin disguised in beggars' clothes. Merlin asked Ulphius whom he sought, and Ulphius replied he had little cause to tell him.

"Well," said Merlin, "I know whom you seek, for you seek Merlin. Therefore seek no further, for I am he. And if King Uther will well reward me and promise to grant my desire, then it shall be more for his honor and profit than for mine, for I shall cause him to have everything he desires."

"I shall try to arrange it so," said Ulphius, "so that as long as your request is reasonable, you shall have your desire."

"Well," said Merlin, "he shall have his intent and his desire. Therefore, ride on your way and I will not be far behind."

CI.2 Then Ulphius was glad and rode on a while until he came to King Uther Pendragon and told him how he met Merlin.

"Where is he?" said the king.

"Sir," said Sir Ulphius, "he will not be long." Then Ulphius was aware that Merlin was standing in the porch at the door of the pavilion, intending to come to the king. When King Uther saw him, he said he was welcome.

"Sir," said Merlin, "I know every part of your heart. If you will be sworn unto me, as you are a true king anointed, to fulfill my desire, you shall have your desire." Then the king was sworn upon the four Evangelists.

"Sir," said Merlin, "this is my desire: the first night that you lie with Igraine you will conceive a child on her, and when it is born, you shall deliver it to me to raise wherever I please. It shall be greater worship for you and better for the child, because of the great importance of this child."

"I will agree," said the king, "to allow things to be done as you wish."

"Now make you ready," said Merlin. "This night you will lie with Igraine in the castle of Tintagel. You shall look like the duke her husband. Ulphius will look like Sir Brastias, one of the duke's knights. I will look like a knight called Sir Jordanes, another of the duke's knights. But be careful that you do not ask questions or speak with her or her men. Rather, say that you are sick, and so hurry you to bed and do not arise in the morning until I come to you, for the castle of Tintagel is just ten miles from here."

This was done as Merlin had devised. But the duke of Tintagel saw how the king rode away from the siege of Terrabyl, and therefore that night he came out of the castle at a postern to attack the king's army, and through his actions the duke was slain before the king arrived at the castle Tintagel. So King Uther lay with Igraine more than three hours after the death of the duke, and conceived Arthur on her that night.

Before daybreak, Merlin came to the king and ordered him to get ready. So Uther kissed the Lady Igraine and departed hastily. When the lady heard the news concerning her hus-

band the duke—that by all accounts he was dead before King Uther came to her—she marveled at who it might have been who had lain with her in the likeness of her lord. But she mourned secretly and kept her peace.

Then all the barons got together and urged the king to make an accord between himself and the Lady Igraine. The king agreed to this, for he certainly wished to be accorded with her, and designated Ulphius to act as mediator between them. So by negotiation she and the king at last met together.

“Now it will be well for us,” said Ulphius. “Our king is a lusty knight and wifeless, and my lady Igraine is a passing fair lady. It would be great joy to us if it should please the king to make her his queen.” They all were in accord, and urged the king to agree. Then, like a lusty knight, the king assented with good will. So they were quickly married on a morning with great mirth and joy. And King Lot of Lothian and of Orkney then wedded Morgause, who would become Sir Gawain’s mother, and King Nentres of the land of Garlot wedded Elaine. All of this was done at the request of King Uther.

But the third sister, Morgan le Fay, was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she became a great practitioner of witchcraft. Afterward, she was wedded to King Uriens of the land of Gorre who was the father of Sir Uwain.

Then Queen Igraine daily grew larger and larger, and it happened that within half a year, as King Uther lay by his queen, that he asked her by the faith she owed him whose was the child within her body. She was too embarrassed to give him an answer.

“Do not be dismayed,” said the king, “but tell me the truth and I shall love you all the better, by the faith of my body.”

“Sire,” she said, “I shall tell you the truth. The same night that my lord died, at the very hour of his death as his knights claim, there came into the castle of Tintagel a man like my lord in speech and appearance, and with him were two knights who looked like his two knights Brastias and Jordanes. So I went to bed with him, as I ought to do with my lord. And the same night, as I shall swear before God, this child was begotten upon me.”

“That is the truth,” said the king, “just as you say. For it was I myself that came in the likeness of your husband. So dismay you not, for I am the father of the child.” Then he told her how Merlin had arranged it by his counsel, and the queen made great joy when she knew who was the father of her child.

Soon after this, Merlin came to the king and said, “Sir, you must make arrangements for the upbringing of your child.”

“As you wish,” said the king, “let it be done.”

“Well,” said Merlin, “I know a lord of yours in this land who is a passing true and faithful man, and he shall have the raising of your child. His name is Sir Ector, and he is a lord with profitable lands in many parts of England and Wales. Send for this lord Sir Ector to come and speak with you, and ask him yourself, as he loves you, that he should put his own child to nourishing with another woman, and have his wife nourish yours. And when the child is born, let it be delivered to me—unchristened—at yonder secret postern.”

Cl.3

So it was done just as Merlin devised. When Sir Ector came he agreed to nourish the child just as the king desired and the king granted him great rewards.

When the lady was delivered the king commanded two knights and two ladies to take the child, wrapped in a cloth of gold, and ordered that they "deliver him to the poor man who will meet you at the postern gate of the castle."

So the child was delivered to Merlin. He carried it to Sir Ector and had a holy man christen him, and named him Arthur. And Sir Ector's wife nourished him at her own breast.

CI.4

Then within two years King Uther fell sick with a great malady. And while he was sick, his enemies usurped his power and waged a great battle upon his men and slew many of his people.

"Sir," said Merlin, "you may not lie here as you do; you must go to the field, even if you are carried there in a horse-litter, for your army shall never defeat your enemies unless you are there in person. Then you will have the victory."

So it was done as Merlin devised, and they carried the king forth in a horse-litter with a great host toward his enemies. At Saint Albans the king met a great host from the north. And that day Sir Ulphius and Sir Brastias did great deeds of arms, and King Uther's men overcame the northerners in battle, killing many people and putting the remnant to flight. Then the king returned to London and made great joy of his victory.

Then he fell passing sick, so that for three days and three nights he was speechless. All the barons made great sorrow, and asked Merlin what course of action was best.

"There is no remedy," said Merlin. "It is as God wills it. But see that all you barons be before King Uther tomorrow, and God and I shall cause him to speak."

So in the morning all the barons and Merlin came before the king. Then Merlin said aloud to King Uther, "Sire, shall your son Arthur be king of this realm after you with all your appurtenance?"

Then Uther Pendragon turned and said in hearing of them all, "I give him God's blessing and mine, and bid him pray for my soul, and righteously and worshipfully that he claim the crown upon forfeiture of my blessing." And then he yielded up the ghost.

He was interred as a king should be, and the queen, fair Igraine, made great sorrow, as did all the barons.

CI.5

Then the realm stood in great jeopardy for a long while, for every lord who was mighty of men strengthened himself, and many thought to have made themselves king. Then Merlin went to the Archbishop of Canterbury and counseled him to send for all the lords of the realm and all the gentlemen of arms, that they should come to London by Christmas upon pain of being cursed, and for this reason: so that Jesus, who was born on that night, would out of His great mercy, as He was come to be King of mankind, would show by some miracle who was to be rightwise king of the realm.

So the archbishop, on the advice of Merlin, sent for all the lords and gentlemen of arms, that they should come to London by Christmas, and many of them made clean confessions of their lives, that their prayers might be more acceptable to God.

So in the greatest church of London—whether it was St. Paul's or not, the French book does not say—all the estates were gathered before daylight in the church to pray. And when matins and the first mass was done there was seen in the churchyard near the high altar a great stone four-square, like a marble stone, and in the middle of it there was like an anvil of steel a foot high. Therein stuck a fair sword naked by the point, and there were letters written in gold about the stone that said thus: "WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD OF THIS STONE AND ANVIL IS RIGHTWISE BORN KING OF ALL ENGLAND." Then the people marveled, and told the archbishop.

"I command," said the archbishop, "that you stay within the church and continue to pray to God, and that no man touch the sword until the high mass is all done." So when the masses were all done all the lords went to behold the stone and the sword. When they saw the writing, some tried who wished to be king, but none might stir the sword nor move it.

"He is not here," said the archbishop, "who shall achieve the sword, but doubt not that God will make him known. This is my counsel," said the archbishop, "that we assign ten knights, men of good reputation, to guard this sword." So it was done, and then there was made a great announcement that every man should try who wished to win the sword. And upon New Year's day the barons organized jousting and a tournament, so that all knights who wished to joust or tourney might play there. All this was ordered to keep the lords and commons together, for the archbishop trusted that God wished to make known the one who should win the sword.

So on New Year's day, when the service was done, the barons rode on the field, some to joust and some to tourney. And it so happened that Sir Ector who had great lands near London rode to the jousting, and with him rode his son Sir Kay and young Arthur, who was his foster brother. Sir Kay had been made knight at the previous Allhallowsmass. As they rode toward the jousting, Sir Kay realized he had lost his sword, for he had left it at his father's lodging. He asked young Arthur to ride back for his sword.

"I will gladly," said Arthur, and rode fast to fetch the sword. When he came home he found that the lady of the house and everyone else were out to see the jousting. Then Arthur was upset and said to himself, "I will ride to the churchyard and take the sword that sticks up out of the stone, for my brother Kay shall not be without a sword this day."

When he came to the churchyard Sir Arthur alit and tied his horse to the stile; he went to the tent, but found no knights there, for they were at the jousting. He gripped the sword by the handles, and easily and fiercely pulled it out of the stone. Then he took his horse and rode his way until he came to his brother Sir Kay and gave him the sword. As soon as Sir Kay saw the sword, he knew well that it was the sword from the stone. He rode to his father Sir Ector and said, "Sir, lo, here is the sword of the stone, wherefore I must be king of this land."

When Sir Ector beheld the sword, he returned again to the church, and there all three of them alit and went into the church, and then he made Sir Kay swear upon a book how he came by that sword.

"Sir," said Sir Kay, "by my brother Arthur, for he brought it to me."

"How did you get this sword?" said Sir Ector to Arthur.

"Sir, I will tell you. When I came home for my brother's sword I found nobody at home to give me his sword. And so I thought my brother Sir Kay should not be swordless, and so I came here quickly and pulled it out of the stone without any trouble."

"Did you find any knights about this sword?" said Sir Ector.

"No," said Arthur.

"Now," said Sir Ector to Arthur, "I understand that you must be king of this land."

"Why me?" said Arthur. "For what reason?"

"Sir," said Sir Ector, "because God would have it so, for never should a man have drawn out this sword except that he were rightwise king of this land. Now let me see whether you can put the sword back where it was and pull it out again."

"That is no great feat," said Arthur. So he put it in the stone. Then Sir Ector tried to pull out the sword and failed.

CI.6 "Now try," said Sir Ector to Sir Kay. Then Kay pulled at the sword with all his might, but it would not move. "Now you shall try," said Sir Ector to Arthur.

"I will gladly," said Arthur, and pulled it out easily. Then Sir Ector kneeled down to the earth and so did Sir Kay. "Alas!" said Arthur, "my own dear father and brother, why do you kneel to me?"

"No, no, my lord Arthur, it is not so. I was never your father nor of your blood, but I know well you are of a higher blood than I thought you were." And then Sir Ector told him about how he was given Arthur to raise and by whose commandment this was done, and how Merlin delivered Arthur to him. Then Arthur was very sad when he understood that Sir Ector was not his father.

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

"If I did not I would be to blame," said Arthur. "For you are the man in the world that I am most beholden to, and my good lady and mother your wife has fostered and kept me as one of her own. And if it should ever be God's will that I should be king as you say, you may ask of me whatever I may do, and I shall not fail you. God forbid I should fail you."

"Sir," said Sir Ector, "I will ask nothing more of you but that you should make my son, your foster brother Sir Kay, seneschal of all your lands."

"That shall be done," said Arthur, "and more, by the faith of my body, that never another man shall have that office while he and I both live."

Then they went to the archbishop and told him how the sword was achieved and by whom. On the twelfth day all the barons who wished to try came there to try and take the sword, but in spite of all their efforts, none was able to take it out except Arthur. Because of this many lords were angry, and said it was a great shame to all of them that the realm should be governed by a boy who came of low blood. They so disagreed at that time that it was put off until Candlemass when all the barons should meet there again; but always ten knights were ordered to watch the sword day and night. So they set a pavilion over the stone and the sword and there were always five keeping watch.

So at Candlemass many more great lords came thither for to win the sword, but none were able to prevail. And just as Arthur had done at Christmas, so he did at Candlemass and pulled the sword out easily, wherefore the barons were sore aggrieved and delayed until the high feast of Easter. As Arthur had done before, so he did at Easter. Yet there were some of the great lords who were indignant that Arthur should be king and delayed until the feast of Pentecost.

Then the archbishop with Merlin's assistance selected the best knights that they might get, and such knights as Uther Pendragon had loved best and trusted most in his days. And about Arthur were put such knights as Sir Baldwin of Britain, Sir Kay, Sir Ulphius, and Sir Brastias. All these with many others were always about Arthur day and night until the high feast of Pentecost.

CI.7

At the feast of Pentecost all manner of men tried to pull out the sword who wished to try, but none might prevail except Arthur, and he pulled it out before all the lords and commons that were there, wherefore all the commons cried at once, "We will have Arthur as our king! We will put him no more in delay for we see that it is God's will that he shall be our king, and whoever holds against this, we will slay!"

Then they kneeled at once, both rich and poor, and cried to Arthur for mercy because they had delayed him so long. And Arthur forgave them and took the sword between both his hands and offered it upon the altar where the archbishop was. He was made knight by the best man who was there, and so anon was his coronation performed; there he swore unto his lords and commons to be a true king and to stand with true justice from thence forth all the days of his life.

Then he made all lords that held title of the crown to come and do service as they ought to do; and many complaints were made unto Sir Arthur of great wrongs that had been done since the death of King Uther—of many lords, knights, ladies and gentlemen who had been bereaved of lands—and thus King Arthur made the lands to be given again to those who ought to possess them.

When this was done and the king had established all the lands about London, then he made Sir Kay seneschal of England, and Sir Baldwin of Britain he made constable, and Sir Ulphius was made chamberlain, and Sir Brastias was made warden to watch over the north from Trent onwards, for at that time that was where most of the king's enemies were. But within a few years, Arthur won all the North, Scotland, and all the lands under their obedience, and also Wales. A portion of those lands held against Arthur, but he overcame them all—as he did the remnant—through his noble prowess and with his knights of the Round Table.