

Part Six

THE HOUSE OF CONSTANTINE
(CONTINUED)

[viii.1] WHEN Merlin had made these prophecies, and others too, he filled all those present with amazement by the equivocal meaning of his words. Vortigern, who was even more astonished than the others, himself spoke highly of the young man's wit and his oracular pronouncements, for that particular period in history had produced no one who was ready to speak his mind in this way in front of the King.

Vortigern wanted particularly to learn what his own end would be, and he asked the young man to tell him what he knew about it. Merlin gave the following answer: 'Run from the fiery vengeance of the sons of Constantine, that is if you have the power to escape it. At this very moment they are fitting out their ships. Even as I speak they are leaving the coasts of Armorica and spreading their sails to cross the sea. They will make for the island of Britain, attack the Saxon people and conquer the race which they detest. The first thing they will do will be to burn you alive, shut up inside your tower! You made a fatal mistake when you betrayed their father and invited the Saxons to your island. You summoned them as your protectors, but in effect their coming ensured your own violent death. Two different ways of dying threaten you and it is not easy to see which of the two you will avoid. On the one hand the Saxons are ravaging your kingdom and will try to kill you. On the other hand the two brothers Aurelius and Uther are landing, and they will do their utmost to take vengeance on you for their father's death. Look for some refuge if you can: for tomorrow they will steer for the shore at Totnes. The Saxons' faces will be smeared with red blood; and when Hengist is killed Aurelius Ambrosius will be crowned King. He will restore peace to the people and build

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up the Church again; but he himself will die of poison. His brother Utherpendragon will succeed him, but his days too will be cut short by poison. Your own descendants will play a part in this dastardly act, but the Boar of Cornwall will eat them up.'

When the next day dawned, with no time lost, Aurelius Ambrosius came ashore.

As soon as the news of his coming reached them, the Britons, [viii.2] who had been scattered with such great slaughter, gathered together again from all sides, reassured as they were and made more optimistic than they had been before by the coming of their fellow-countrymen. The clergy were convened. They anointed Aurelius as King and did homage to him in the usual way. The Britons counselled an immediate attack on the Saxons, but the King persuaded them against it, for he wanted to hunt down Vortigern first. Aurelius Ambrosius had been so grieved by the betrayal of his father that he felt no other action of any sort could be contemplated until he avenged him. In order to carry out his design, he marched his army into Kambria and made for the castle of Genoreu, for it was there that Vortigern had fled in his search for a safe refuge. This castle, which belonged to Erging country, was beside the River Wye, on a hill called Cloartius.¹

As soon as he reached the place, Ambrosius, who could think of nothing but the betrayal of his father and brother, said to Eldol, the Duke of Gloucester: 'See now, my Lord Duke, if the fortifications and the walls of this place can protect Vortigern, and stop me burying the point of my sword in his entrails! He has earned a violent death, and I imagine that you yourself must be fully aware

1. Vortigern had built his tower of refuge on Mount Erith [= Snowdon], p. 166. MS. 1706 reads simply '*venit tandem ad montem Erith*'. Jesus elaborates this to: 'he found a spot suited for a castle in the place called at this hour dinas Emrys, in the Yrri [= Snowdon]'. The Arthurian Society met on Dinas Emreis on 18 August 1957. Now we are told that the castle is called Genoreu, and that it is on a hill called Cloartius, in Erging country, beside the River Wye. Cp. Lloyd, *Art.*, pp. 460-61, where Cloartius is Little Doward in Monmouthshire.

of how much he has deserved it. Of all men he is surely the most villainous! How much he deserves to die of unmentionable tortures! First of all he betrayed my father Constantine, who had freed him and his country from the invading Picts. Then he betrayed my brother Constans, whom he had caused to be made King so that he, Vortigern, could destroy him. Finally, when he had himself seized the crown by using his own crafty wits, he imported pagans to mix with the local population, so that he could destroy the men who remained loyal to me. By God's will, he has himself now fallen unwarily into the very snare which he prepared for my faithful adherents; for when the Saxons discovered how evil he was, they drove him out of the kingdom, a deed which ought to grieve no one. However, in my opinion, there is one aspect of all this which everyone must regret: that this evil man, through the heathen whom he invited over, has exiled the nobility, laid waste a fertile country, destroyed the holy churches and virtually obliterated Christianity from one sea to the other. Act, then, like true men, my fellow-countrymen, and take your first vengeance upon him by whose agency all these things have come about. After that we must turn our arms against the enemies who beset us, and free our homeland from their hungry maw!

They lost no time, but moved into position with their siege-machines and did their utmost to break down the walls. When everything else had failed, they tried fire; and this, once it took hold, went on blazing until it burned up the tower and Vortigern with it.

[viii.3] When news of this reached Hengist and his Saxons, he was greatly frightened, for he dreaded the courage of Aurelius. The man was so brave and hardy that while he was living in various places in Gaul no one had dared to meet him in single combat. Whenever he had fought such a duel, he either dashed his opponent from his horse or else broke his own spear into splinters. What is more, he was liberal in his gifts, regular in his attendance at divine services, modest in all his behaviour and unwilling ever to tell a lie.

He fought well on foot and even better when mounted; and he was most skilled in commanding an army.

While Aurelius was still in Armorican Britain, rumour, which never halts its daily round, had brought reports of his accomplishments into the island. As a result the Saxons dreaded him and they now retreated across the Humber. They fortified the towns and castles in those parts, for the region had always been a refuge towards which they could retreat. The nearness of Scotland afforded them protection, for that country had never missed an opportunity of making matters worse whenever the Britons were in distress. It was a land frightful to live in, more or less uninhabited, and it offered a safe lurking-place to foreigners. Indeed, by its geographical position, it lay open to the Picts, the Scots, the Danes, the Norwegians and anyone else who came ashore to ravage the island.

Assured as they thus were of the sympathy of the country, the Saxons retreated in that direction, so that if need arose they could take refuge there, just as if they were in their own stronghold. As soon as this was reported to Aurelius, his courage rose, for he now had every hope of victory. He assembled his fellow-countrymen as quickly as he could, reinforced his army and marched northwards. As he passed through the different regions, he grieved to see how desolate they were, but most of all to find the churches razed to the ground. He swore that he would restore them, if only he were victorious.

Hengist took courage once more when he learned of the approach of Aurelius. He assembled a hand-picked army and gave encouragement to every single soldier, exhorting them all to fight like men and not be afraid to join battle with Aurelius. Hengist alleged that Aurelius had few Armorican Britons with him, for their number hardly exceeded ten thousand. What is more, he expressed the lowest possible opinion of the island Britons, seeing that he had defeated them so often in battle. He promised his own men victory, and personal safety, too, in view of their greater number, for there were about two hundred thousand armed men present.

Once he had emboldened all his men in this way, Hengist marched to meet Aurelius in a field called Maisbeli, through which the latter was about to pass. Hengist planned to make a sudden surprise attack and to fall upon the Britons when they were least expecting it. However, this move could not be kept hidden from Aurelius. He did not avoid passing through the field because of this, but hurried on all the more quickly. The moment he came in sight of the enemy, he drew up his troops. He ordered three thousand men from among the Armoricans to take up position with their horses. Those Armoricans who were left he disposed in line of battle here and there among the islanders. He stationed the Demetians on the hills and the Venedotians in the encircling woods. His reason for this was to ensure that, should the Saxons flee in either of those directions, men should be there to block their way.

[viii.5] Meanwhile Eldol, Duke of Gloucester, went to the King and said: 'I would consider this one day a sufficient recompense for all the remaining days of my life; if only God would grant that I might fight hand-to-hand with Hengist: for one of us two would die as we attacked each other with our swords. I remember the occasion on which we met, ready as we were on our side to make peace. While an agreement was being sought, Hengist betrayed every man present and had a knife stuck into each one of them, except me alone, for I discovered a wooden pole and so escaped. On that day there died four hundred and eighty great leaders and men of high rank, all of whom had come there unarmed. In that moment of great peril, God placed a wooden pole in my hand. With it I defended myself and so escaped.' These were the things which Eldol said. Aurelius then exhorted his comrades to place all their hope in the Son of God, to attack their enemies boldly and to fight as one man for their homeland.

On his side Hengist was marshalling his troops and as he placed them in position he gave them instructions for the battle. He walked round among the ranks to give his orders, so that he could inspire everyone with a concerted zeal for the fight. Finally, when on

both sides the companies had been posted in position, the two lines of battle joined combat, matching each other's blows and shedding a great amount of blood. Britons on this side and Saxons on that died of the wounds which they had received. Aurelius urged on the Christians, and Hengist encouraged the pagans. As long as they continued with this battle, Eldol never once stopped his attempts to find an opportunity for fighting hand-to-hand with Hengist, but he was not successful; for when Hengist saw that his men were beaten and that by God's grace the Britons were victorious, he fled immediately, making his way to the castle of Kaerconan, which is now called Cunungeburg. Aurelius pursued him and killed or forced into slavery every man whom he overtook on the way.

When Hengist saw that Aurelius was following him, he decided not to occupy the castle. He once more drew up his people in their companies, arranging them so that they were ready to join battle again; for he knew well that the castle could never withstand Aurelius and that the only defence left to him lay in sword and spear. When Aurelius finally caught up with Hengist, he stationed his own soldiers in their companies and attacked with the utmost ferocity. However, the Saxons resisted as one man, and on both sides troops were wounded mortally. Wherever one looked there was blood flowing and the screams of the dying roused to fury those who were still alive.

The Saxons would have won in the end, if a cavalry detachment of Armorican Britons had not come on the scene. Aurelius had posted this squadron in exactly the same way as he had done in the first battle. When the cavalry arrived the Saxons gave ground before it and once they had moved from their positions they were not able to re-form. At this the Britons attacked even more fiercely, rushing at the enemy as one man. All the time Aurelius was issuing orders to his own men, wounding such of the enemy as came his way, pursuing those who had turned in flight, and so bringing comfort to his own army. In the same way Eldol rushed hither and thither, dealing deadly wounds to those who stood up to him; but

whatever else occupied him, his heart was still set on the possibility of fighting hand-to-hand with Hengist.

[viii.6] As the various companies of troops moved forward in this direction and in that, by chance Eldol and Hengist were brought together, with no advantage to either of them, and they began to rain blows on each other. What men they were, and how much more war-like than the others! As each in turn slashed at the other with his sword, the sparks flew from his blows as if he were at once a source of thunder-claps and of lightning-flashes. For a long time it was not clear on which side lay the greater strength. At one moment Eldol pressed forward and Hengist yielded; and then Eldol drew back and Hengist advanced.

As they fought on in this way Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, moved up towards them with the squadron which he commanded, harassing the enemy's companies as he came. When he set eyes on Gorlois, Eldol gained a new assurance. He seized hold of Hengist by the nasal of his metal helmet and by exerting all his strength dragged him in among his own men. A great flood-tide of joy boiled up within him and he shouted at the top of his voice: 'God has granted my prayer! Now, men, down with what is left of the Ambrones! Victory is in your hand! Now that Hengist is beaten, you have beaten them all!'

While these things were happening, the Britons redoubled their attacks on the pagans, charging them again and again, and as they retreated attacking them once more with ever-increasing courage. They gave them no respite until finally victory was won. The pagans turned in flight, each man for himself. Some fled to the towns, some to the thickly-wooded mountains, and others again to their own ships. Hengist's son Octa retreated to York with the biggest band; and his kinsman Eosa garrisoned that town with a great force of armed men.

[viii.7] Once Aurelius had won the victory in this way, he seized the town of Conan which I have already mentioned earlier on, and there he halted for three days. During this time he ordered the

dead to be buried, the wounded to receive medical attention, the weary to take rest and all of them to refresh themselves with such consolations as they could find. Next he called his leaders together and ordered them to decide what should be done with Hengist. Among those present was Eldadus, Bishop of Gloucester, the brother of Eldol and a man of the greatest wisdom and piety. When Eldadus saw Hengist standing before the King, he ordered the others to be silent and spoke as follows: 'Even if you all were doing your level best to have this man set free, I would hack him in pieces myself. In this I would be following the prophet Samuel, who, when he held in his power Agag, King of Amalek,¹ hewed him in pieces, saying: "As thy sword hath made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women." Do, therefore, the same with this man, who is clearly a second Agag.' Thereupon Eldol took his sword, led Hengist outside the city, and packed him off to Hell by cutting off his head. Aurelius, who was moderate in all that he did, ordered Hengist to be buried and a barrow of earth to be raised over his body, that being the pagan custom.

Then Aurelius led his army to York in order to besiege Octa, the son of Hengist. When Aurelius started investing the city, Octa had doubts as to whether or not he should resist and defend it against such a huge army. He took the advice of his men and then emerged with the more noble of those who were with him, carrying a chain in his hand and having coarse gravel on his head. He presented himself before the King and made the following speech: 'My own gods are vanquished. I do not doubt for a moment that it is your God who reigns supreme, for He has compelled so many noble men to appear before you in this manner. Accept, then, both our persons and this length of chain. If you are not prepared to grant us mercy, then have us bound, for of our own free will we are ready for whatever punishment you propose to inflict.'

Aurelius was filled with compassion; and he ordered a decision to be made on what should be done with the Saxons. When the

¹ 1 Samuel xv.33.

others had expressed conflicting opinions, Bishop Eldadus rose to his feet again and gave his own advice in the following words: 'The Gibeonites came of their own free will to seek mercy of the Children of Israel, and they received that mercy. Shall we Christians be harder than the Jews, and refuse mercy to these men? It is mercy they are asking for: let them have mercy, I say. The island of Britain is big enough; and in many parts there are no inhabitants at all. Let them occupy those places, then, and be our subjects for all time.' The King agreed to what Eldadus advised and took pity on the Saxons. Following Octa's example, Eosa, too, came in, and the others who had fled with him, and they received pardon. Aurelius granted them the region near Scotland and signed a treaty with them.

[viii.9] With his enemies beaten, Aurelius summoned to York his leading men and the princes of his realm, and ordered them to restore the churches which the Saxon people had destroyed. He himself began to re-build the metropolitan cathedral of that city and the other episcopal churches in the see. When fifteen days had passed and he had put the various craftsmen to work in the places concerned, he set off for the town of London, which the fury of the enemy had certainly not spared. Grieved as he was by the destruction of the town, he collected together from every quarter such citizens as were left alive, and began the task of re-building it.

It was from that city that he ruled his kingdom, bringing new life to laws which had been allowed to fall into disuse and restoring to their rightful heirs the scattered possessions of long-dead folk. Any estates which, in this major disaster, had no one left alive to inherit them, were shared among those who had fought at his side. The entire energy of Aurelius was devoted to restoring the realm, re-building the churches, renewing peace and the rule of law, and administering justice.

Next he went to Winchester, to restore that town as he had restored others like it. As soon as he had repaired everything that needed such attention if the town was to be restored at all, he took

the advice of Bishop Eldadus and visited the monastery near Kaercaradduc, which is now called Salisbury. It was there that were buried the leaders and princes whom the infamous Hengist had betrayed. A monastery of three hundred brethren stood there, on Mount Ambrius,¹ for it was Ambrius, so they say, who had founded the monastery years before. As Aurelius inspected the place in which the dead lay, he was moved to compassion and burst into tears. In the end he turned his mind to other considerations, asking himself what he could do to ensure that the spot should be remembered; for it was his opinion that the greensward covering so many noble men who had died for their fatherland was certainly worthy of some memorial.

Aurelius collected carpenters and stone-masons together from [viii.10] every region and ordered them to use their skill to contrive some novel building which would stand for ever in memory of such distinguished men. The whole band racked their brains and then confessed themselves beaten. Then Tremorinus, Archbishop of the City of the Legions, went to the King and said: 'If there is anyone anywhere who has the ability to execute your plan, then Merlin, the prophet of Vortigern, is the man to do it. In my opinion, there is no one else in your kingdom who has greater skill, either in the foretelling of the future or in mechanical contrivances. Order Merlin to come and use his ability, so that the monument for which you are asking can be put up.'

Aurelius asked many questions about Merlin; then he sent a number of messengers through the various regions of the country to find him and fetch him. They travelled through the provinces and finally located Merlin in the territory of the Gewissei, at the

1. There is a curious confusion here. By *Mount Ambrius*, the *Cloister of Ambrius*, etc., Geoffrey may be thinking of Avebury and muddling it with Amesbury. When Merlin brings the stones of the Giant's Ring from Mount Killaraus in Ireland, he re-erects them as Stonehenge. Geoffrey repeatedly treats Stonehenge and Avebury/Amesbury as if they were one place. Cp. my index for individual references.

Galabes Springs, where he often went. They explained to him what they wanted of him and then conducted him to the King. The King received Merlin gaily and ordered him to prophesy the future, for he wanted to hear some marvels from him. 'Mysteries of that sort cannot be revealed,' answered Merlin, 'except where there is the most urgent need for them. If I were to utter them as an entertainment, or where there was no need at all, then the spirit which controls me would forsake me in the moment of need.'

He gave the same refusal to everyone present. The King had no wish to press him about the future, but he spoke to him about the monument which he was planning. 'If you want to grace the burial-place of these men with some lasting monument,' replied Merlin, 'send for the Giants' Ring which is on Mount Killaraus in Ireland. In that place there is a stone construction which no man of this period could ever erect, unless he combined great skill and artistry. The stones are enormous and there is no one alive strong enough to move them. If they are placed in position round this site, in the way in which they are erected over there, they will stand for ever.'

[viii.12] At these words of Merlin's Aurelius burst out laughing. 'How can such large stones be moved from so far-distant a country?' he asked. 'It is hardly as if Britain itself is lacking in stones big enough for the job!' 'Try not to laugh in a foolish way, your Majesty,' answered Merlin. 'What I am suggesting has nothing ludicrous about it. These stones are connected with certain secret religious rites and they have various properties which are medicinally important. Many years ago the Giants transported them from the remotest confines of Africa and set them up in Ireland at a time when they inhabited that country. Their plan was that, whenever they felt ill, baths should be prepared at the foot of the stones; for they used to pour water over them and to run this water into baths in which their sick were cured. What is more, they mixed the water with herbal concoctions and so healed their wounds. There is not a single stone among them which hasn't some medicinal virtue.'

When the Britons heard all this, they made up their minds to

send for the stones and to make war on the people of Ireland if they tried to hold them back. In the end the King's brother, Utherpendragon, and fifteen thousand men, were chosen to carry out the task. Merlin, too, was co-opted, so that all the problems which had to be met could have the benefit of his knowledge and advice. They made ready their ships and they put to sea. The winds were favourable and they arrived in Ireland.

At that time there reigned in Ireland a young man of remarkable [viii.12] valour called Gillomanius. As soon as he heard that the Britons had landed in the country, he collected a huge army together and hurried to meet them. When he learned the reason of their coming, Gillomanius laughed out loud at those standing round him. 'I am not surprised that a race of cowards has been able to devastate the island of the Britons,' said he, 'for the Britons are dolts and fools. Who ever heard of such folly? Surely the stones of Ireland aren't so much better than those of Britain that our realm has to be invaded for their sake! Arm yourselves, men, and defend your fatherland, for as long as life remains in my body they shall not steal from us the minutest fragment of the Ring.'

When he saw that the Irish were spoiling for a fight, Uther hurriedly drew up his own line of battle and charged at them. The Britons were successful almost immediately. The Irish were either mangled or killed outright, and Gillomanius was forced to flee. Having won the day, the Britons made their way to Mount Killaraus. When they came to the stone structure, they were filled with joy and wonder. Merlin came up to them as they stood round in a group. 'Try your strength, young men,' said he, 'and see whether skill can do more than brute strength, or strength more than skill, when it comes to dismantling these stones!'

At his bidding they all set to with every conceivable kind of mechanism and strove their hardest to take the Ring down. They rigged up hawsers and ropes and they propped up scaling-ladders, each preparing what he thought most useful, but none of these things advanced them an inch. When he saw what a mess they

were making of it, Merlin burst out laughing. He placed in position all the gear which he considered necessary and dismantled the stones more easily than you could ever believe. Once he had pulled them down, he had them carried to the ships and stored on board, and they all set sail once more for Britain with joy in their hearts.

The winds were fair. They came to the shore and then set off with the stones for the spot where the heroes had been buried. The moment that this was reported to him, Aurelius dispatched messengers to all the different regions of Britain, ordering the clergy and the people to assemble and, as they gathered, to converge on Mount Ambrius, where they were with due ceremony and rejoicing to re-dedicate the burial-place which I have described. At the summons from Aurelius the bishops and abbots duly assembled with men from every rank and file under the King's command. All came together on the appointed day. Aurelius placed the crown on his head and celebrated the feast of Whitsun in right royal fashion, devoting the next three days to one long festival. As part of this, he bestowed lands on those who had no holdings of their own, thus rewarding them for the efforts they had made to serve him. The two metropolitan sees of York and the City of the Legions were without incumbents. With the general consent of his people, whom he wished to consult in this matter, Aurelius gave York to Samson, a most distinguished man who was famous for his great piety. The City of the Legions he bestowed upon Dubricius, whom divine providence had already singled out as one suitable for promotion there.

Once he had settled these matters, and others of a similar nature, Aurelius ordered Merlin to erect round the burial-place the stones which he had brought from Ireland. Merlin obeyed the King's orders and put the stones up in a circle round the sepulchre, in exactly the same way as they had been arranged on Mount Killaraus in Ireland, thus proving that his artistry was worth more than any brute strength.¹

1. See p. 19 and n.28.

At this same time Paschent, the son of Vortigern, who had fled ^[viii.13] to Germany, was stirring up every armed soldier in that kingdom against Aurelius Ambrosius. His great desire was to avenge his father. He promised the Germans limitless money in gold and silver, if only he could subdue Britain with their help. In the end, when he had suborned all the young men with his promises, he fitted out the greatest possible fleet, landed in the northern regions of the island and began to lay waste to them. This was reported to the King. He summoned his own army, hastened to meet Paschent and challenged the raging enemy to combat. They in their turn came out to fight and joined battle with the local inhabitants. By the grace of God they were deprived of victory and were forced to take flight.

Once he had been compelled to run away, Paschent did not dare ^[viii.14] to return to Germany. Shifting his sails, he went off to Gillomanus in Ireland and was well received by him. Gillomanus took pity on Paschent when the latter explained his misfortune. He promised Paschent help and himself complained of the injury which Uther, the brother of Aurelius, had done him, too, by coming to seek the Giant's Ring. A treaty was agreed upon between them. They fitted out ships, went on board and then landed near the town of Menevia. As soon as this was known, a force of armed men was assembled and Utherpendragon set off for Kambria to fight them. His brother Aurelius was lying ill at the time in Winchester and was unable to be present. When this was made known to Paschent, Gillomanus and the Saxons who were with them, they were delighted, for they thought that with Aurelius ill the kingdom could easily be conquered.

While the people were discussing what had happened, one of the Saxons, called Eopa, came to Paschent. 'How much will you give the man who kills Aurelius Ambrosius for you?' he asked. 'If only I could find a man who was prepared to do that,' answered Paschent, 'I would give him a thousand pounds of silver and my own friendship as long as I lived. If by good fortune I win the

crown of this island, I will make him a captain in my army, and that I will promise on oath.' 'I have learned the British language,' said Eopa, 'I am familiar with the habits of the people, and I have some knowledge of medical practice. If only you will fulfil what you promise, then I will disguise myself as a Christian and a Briton, I will gain admittance to the King's presence by pretending to be a doctor, and I will mix for him a potion which will kill him. To enable me to gain an audience more readily I will pretend that I am a monk, as devout as can be and learned in all dogma.' As soon as he had made this suggestion, Pascent came to an agreement with him, confirming on oath what he had already promised.

Eopa thereupon shaved off his beard, had his head tonsured, took the habit of a monk and set off for Winchester with a load of pots which he had filled with medicines. As soon as he arrived in the town, he offered his service to the King's retainers, who received him warmly. No one could have been more welcome than a doctor. Eopa was told to come in and they led him to the King. He promised that he would restore the King to health, if only the latter would swallow his medicines. Eopa was ordered to prepare a draught immediately. He mixed a poison and gave it to the King. Aurelius took it and drained it at a gulp; then he was told by the accursed Ambro to snuggle down under the bed-covering and to go to sleep: this so that the noisome poison could work the more efficaciously. The King immediately obeyed the advice of the man who had betrayed him, and dropped off to sleep, imagining that he was about to recover his health. The poison ran quickly through his veins and the pores of his body; and thus death, which has the trick of sparing no man, came to him while he slept. Meanwhile the accursed traitor slipped away in the crowd and was nowhere to be found in the court.

While these things were happening at Winchester, there appeared a star of great magnitude and brilliance, with a single beam shining from it. At the end of this beam was a ball of fire, spread out in the shape of a dragon. From the dragon's mouth stretched forth two

rays of light, one of which seemed to extend its length beyond the latitude of Gaul, while the second turned towards the Irish Sea and split up into seven smaller shafts of light.

This star appeared three times, and all who saw it were struck [viii.15] with fear and wonder. Uther, the King's brother, who was hunting for the enemy army, was just as terrified as the others. He summoned his wise men, so that they might tell him what the star portended. He ordered Merlin to be fetched with the others, for Merlin had come with the army so that the campaign could have the benefit of his advice. As he stood in the presence of his leader and was given the order to explain the significance of the star, he burst into tears, summoned up his familiar spirit, and prophesied aloud. 'Our loss is irreparable,' he said. 'The people of Britain is orphaned. Our most illustrious King has passed away. Aurelius Ambrosius, the famous King of the Britons, has died. By his death we shall all die, unless God brings us help. Hasten forward, most noble leader! Hasten forward, Uther, and do not put off for a moment making contact with the enemy. Victory shall be yours and you will be King of all Britain. The star signifies you in person, and so does the fiery dragon beneath the star. The beam of light, which stretches towards the shore of Gaul, signifies your son, who will be a most powerful man. His dominion shall extend over all the kingdoms which the beam covers. The second ray signifies your daughter, whose sons and grandsons shall hold one after the other the kingship of Britain.'

Although he remained in some doubt whether or not what [viii.16] Merlin had prophesied was true, Uther nevertheless continued to advance against the enemy as he had begun. He had now come within half a day's march of Menevia. As soon as his approach was announced to Gillomanius, Pascent and the Saxons who were there, they marched out to meet him and do battle with him. The moment the armies came in sight of each other, they drew up their lines of battle on either side, marched forward to make contact, and so began the fight. As usually happens in such a combat,

soldiers were slain on both sides as they fought. In the end, when much of the day had passed, Uther proved the stronger and won the victory, killing Gillomanius and Paschent in the process. The barbarians turned in flight and ran to their ships, and in their retreat they were cut down by the islanders who pursued them.

By the grace of Christ victory thus came to our leader. After this great undertaking, Uther set out for Winchester with all possible speed. Messengers who came to meet him told him of the King's death, saying that Aurelius was soon to be buried by the bishops of the country near the monastery of Ambrius and inside the Giants' Ring, the construction of which he had himself ordered during his lifetime. When they heard of his death, the bishops, abbots and all the clergy of that diocese had assembled in the town of Winchester. They arranged his funeral in a way becoming to so great a King. Since, while still alive, he had ordained that he should be put to rest in the cemetery which he had himself prepared, they bore his body thither and buried him there with royal pomp.

[viii.17] Uther, the brother of Aurelius, convened the clergy and the people of his kingdom and took into his safe-keeping the crown of the island. With the agreement of everyone present he was appointed King. Mindful of the explanation given by Merlin of the star about which I have told you, he ordered two Dragons to be fashioned in gold, in the likeness of the one which he had seen in the ray which shone from that star. As soon as the Dragons had been completed – this with the most marvellous craftsmanship – he made a present of one of them to the congregation of the cathedral church of the see of Winchester. The second one he kept for himself, so that he could carry it round to his wars. From that moment onwards he was called Utherpendragon, which in the British language means 'a dragon's head'. He had been given this title because it was by means of a Dragon that Merlin had prophesied that he would become King.

[viii.18] Meanwhile Octa the son of Hengist, and his kinsman Eosa, considering themselves freed from the treaty which they had made

with Aurelius Ambrosius, did everything they could to harass the King and to over-run his dominions. They started by allying to themselves those Saxons whom Paschent had brought over, and then they sent their messengers to Germany to summon the rest of them. Octa put himself in the centre of this huge army and invaded the northern provinces. He went on satiating his lust for cruelty until he had destroyed all the towns and strong-points from Albany as far as York. Finally, just as he had begun to besiege that town, Utherpendragon arrived with the entire strength of his kingdom and met Octa in a pitched battle. The Saxons resisted manfully. They remained unbroken in the face of the assaults by the Britons and in the end they drove their enemy back in flight. Having once gained the victory, they pursued the Britons as far as Mount Damen, continuing as long as the sun gave light to see by.

This hill was a steep one. On its summit it had a hazel wood, and half-way up there were jagged rocks well suited to be the lairs of wild animals. The Britons occupied the hill and spent the night among these rocks and hazel-bushes. Then, as the Plough began to revolve its pole, Uther ordered his leaders and princes to be summoned to him, so that with their advice he might decide how they could attack the enemy. They all came together in the King's presence; and he ordered them to say what they advised. He asked Gorlois, the Duke of Cornwall, a man of great experience and mature years, to give his opinion first. 'This is no moment,' said Gorlois, 'for chattering or empty beating about the bush. While we see that some of the night still remains, we must act boldly and bravely – that is, if we expect any longer to enjoy either life or liberty. The numerical strength of the pagans is very great and they are spoiling for a fight. We, on the other hand, have far fewer men. If we once wait for day to dawn, I see no point in our attacking them at all. Let us move, then, while the darkness lasts. We must clamber down in close formation and surprise them in their camp by the very unexpectedness of our attack. Without any shadow of doubt we shall triumph over them, if only we attack them all

together in the boldest possible fashion, for they will not have foreseen anything of this sort, nor will they have expected us to attack in this way.'

The advice of Gorlois pleased the King and all the others, too, and they carried out his suggestions. As soon as they were armed and drawn up in companies, they set out for the enemy's camp, with the intention of mounting a mass assault; but as they moved forward the sentinels observed their coming and awakened their comrades, who were sound asleep, by blowing on their cornets. The enemy were surprised and thrown into confusion. Some of them rushed to arm themselves and others were so terrified that they ran off in whatever direction the impulse of the moment suggested to them. The Britons moved forward in close formation and soon came to the camp itself. They charged forward with drawn swords, located the gateway and rushed in among the enemy. Engaged as they were at a moment when they least expected it, the enemy offered no effectual resistance. Our own men, on the other hand, became more and more bold as they saw their plans succeeding. The Britons made every effort to press forward eagerly. They butchered the pagans with might and main, killing off some thousands of them. In the end Octa and Eosa were captured and the Saxons were completely routed.

[viii.29] After this victory Uther went to the town called Alclud, and while there he settled the affairs of that region and restored peace everywhere. Then he visited all the lands of the Scots and reclaimed that rebellious people from their state of savagery; for he administered justice throughout the regions in a way that none of his predecessors had been able to do. In his time those who had committed any crime were greatly terrified, for they were punished mercilessly. When he had finally pacified the northern provinces, he moved to London. He ordered Octa and Eosa to be kept in prison there.

The next Eastertide Uther told the nobles of his kingdom to assemble in that same town of London, so that he could wear his

crown and celebrate so important a feast-day with proper ceremony. They all obeyed, travelling in from their various cities and assembling on the eve of the feast. The King was thus able to celebrate the feast as he had intended and to enjoy himself in the company of his leaders. They, too, were all happy, seeing that he had received them with such affability. A great many nobles had gathered there, men worthy of taking part in such a gay festivity, together with their wives and daughters.

Among the others there was present Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, with his wife Ygern, who was the most beautiful woman in Britain. When the King saw her there among the other women, he was immediately filled with desire for her, with the result that he took no notice of anything else, but devoted all his attention to her. To her and to no one else he kept ordering plates of food to be passed and to her, too, he kept sending his own personal attendants with golden goblets of wine. He kept smiling at her and engaging her in sprightly conversation. When Ygern's husband saw what was happening, he was so annoyed that he withdrew from the court without taking leave. No one present could persuade him to return, for he was afraid of losing the one object that he loved better than anything else. Uther lost his temper and ordered Gorlois to come back to court, so that he, the King, could seek satisfaction for the way in which he had been insulted. Gorlois refused to obey. The King was furious and swore an oath that he would ravage Gorlois' lands, unless the latter gave him immediate satisfaction.

Without more ado, while the bad blood remained between the two of them, the King collected a huge army together and hurried off to the Duchy of Cornwall, where he set fire to towns and castles. Gorlois' army was the smaller of the two and he did not dare to meet the King in battle. He preferred instead to garrison his castles and to bide his time until he could receive help from Ireland. As he was more worried about his wife than he was about himself, he left her in the castle of Tintagel, on the sea-coast, which he

thought was the safest place under his control. He himself took refuge in a fortified camp called Dimilioc,¹ so that, if disaster overtook them, they should not both be endangered together. When the King heard of this, he went to the encampment where Gorlois was, besieged it and cut off every line of approach.

Finally, after a week had gone by, the King's passion for Ygernia became more than he could bear. He called to him Ulfín of Ridcaradoch, one of his soldiers and a familiar friend, and told him what was on his mind. 'I am desperately in love with Ygernia,' said Uther, 'and if I cannot have her I am convinced that I shall suffer a physical breakdown. You must tell me how I can satisfy my desire for her, for otherwise I shall die of the passion which is consuming me.' 'Who can possibly give you useful advice,' answered Ulfín, 'when no power on earth can enable us to come to her where she is inside the fortress of Tintagel? The castle is built high above the sea, which surrounds it on all sides, and there is no other way in except that offered by a narrow isthmus of rock. Three armed soldiers could hold it against you, even if you stood there with the whole kingdom of Britain at your side. If only the prophet Merlin would give his mind to the problem, then with his help I think you might be able to obtain what you want.' The King believed Ulfín and ordered Merlin to be sent for, for he, too, had come to the siege.

Merlin was summoned immediately. When he appeared in the King's presence, he was ordered to suggest how the King could have his way with Ygernia. When Merlin saw the torment which the King was suffering because of this woman, he was amazed at the strength of his passion. 'If you are to have your wish,' he said, 'you must make use of methods which are quite new and until now unheard-of in your day. By my drugs I know how to give

1. Near the village of Pendoggett, some $5\frac{1}{2}$ miles south-west of Tintagel, lies a great encampment of three concentric ramparts and ditches, some 448 yards in overall diameter, which bears the name of Tregeare Rounds and is known locally as Castle Damelioc.

you the precise appearance of Gorlois, so that you will resemble him in every respect. If you do what I say, I will make you exactly like him, and Ulfín exactly like Gorlois' companion, Jordan of Tintagel. I will change my own appearance, too, and come with you. In this way you will be able to go safely to Ygernia in her castle and be admitted.'

The King agreed and listened carefully to what he had to do. In the end he handed the siege over to his subordinates, took Merlin's drugs, and was changed into the likeness of Gorlois. Ulfín was changed into Jordan and Merlin into a man called Britaelis, so that no one could tell what they had previously looked like. They then set off for Tintagel and came to the Castle in the twilight. The moment the guard was told that his leader was approaching, he opened the gates and the men were let in. Who, indeed, could possibly have suspected anything, once it was thought that Gorlois himself had come? The King spent that night with Ygernia and satisfied his desire by making love with her. He had deceived her by the disguise which he had taken. He had deceived her, too, by the lying things that he said to her, things which he planned with great skill. He said that he had come out secretly from his besieged encampment so that he might make sure that all was well with her, whom he loved so dearly, and with his castle, too. She naturally believed all that he said and refused him nothing that he asked. That night she conceived Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery.

Meanwhile, when it was discovered at the siege of Dimilioc [viii. 20] that the King was no longer present, his army, acting without his instructions, tried to breach the walls and challenge the beleaguered Duke to battle. The Duke, equally ill-advisedly, sallied forth with his men, imagining apparently that he could resist such a host of armed men with his own tiny band. As the struggle between them swayed this way and that, Gorlois was among the first to be killed. His men were scattered and the besieged camp was captured.

The treasure which had been deposited there was shared out in the most inequitable way, for each man seized in his greedy fist whatever good luck and his own brute strength threw in his way.

Not until the outrages which followed this daring act had finally subsided did messengers come to Ygernia to announce the death of the Duke and the end of the siege. When they saw the King sitting beside Ygernia in the likeness of their leader, they blushed red with astonishment to see that the man whom they had left behind dead in the siege had in effect arrived there safely before them. Of course, they did not know of the drugs prepared by Merlin. The King put his arms round the Duchess and laughed aloud to hear these reports. 'I am not dead,' he said. 'Indeed, as you see, I am very much alive! However, the destruction of my camp saddens me very much and so does the slaughter of my comrades. What is more, there is great danger that the King may come this way and capture us in this castle. I will go out to meet him and make peace with him, lest even worse should befall us.'

The King set out and made his way towards his own army, abandoning his disguise as Gorlois and becoming Utherpendragon once more. When he learned all that had happened, he mourned for the death of Gorlois; but he was happy, all the same, that Ygernia was freed from her marital obligations. He returned to Tintagel Castle, captured it and seized Ygernia at the same time, she being what he really wanted. From that day on they lived together as equals, united by their great love for each other; and they had a son and a daughter. The boy was called Arthur and the girl Anna.

[viii.22] As the days passed and lengthened into years, the King fell ill with a malady which affected him for a long time. Meanwhile the prison warders who guarded Octa and Eosa, as I have explained above, led a weary life. In the end they escaped with their prisoners to Germany and in doing so terrified the kingdom: for rumour had it that they had already stirred up Germany, and had fitted out a huge fleet in order to return to the island and destroy it. This, indeed,

actually happened. They came back with an immense fleet and more men than could ever be counted. They invaded certain parts of Albany and busied themselves in burning the cities there and the citizens inside them. The British army was put under the command of Loth of Lodonesia, with orders that he should keep the enemy at a distance. This man was one of the leaders, a valiant soldier, mature both in wisdom and age. As a reward for his prowess, the King had given him his daughter Anna and put him in charge of the kingdom while he himself was ill. When Loth moved forward against the enemy he was frequently driven back again by them, so that he had to take refuge inside the cities. On other occasions he routed and dispersed them, forcing them to fly either into the forests or to their ships. Between the two sides the outcome of each battle was always in doubt, it being hard to tell which of them was victorious. Their own arrogance was a handicap to the Britons, for they were unwilling to obey the orders of their leaders. This undermined their strength and they were unable to beat the enemy in the field.

Almost all the island was laid waste. When this was made known [viii.22] to the King, he fell into a greater rage than he could really bear in his weakened state. He told all his leaders to appear before him, so that he could rebuke them for their overweening pride and their feebleness. As soon as he saw them all assembled in his presence, he reproached them bitterly and swore that he himself would lead them against the enemy. He ordered a litter to be built, so that he could be carried in it; for his weakness made any other form of progress impossible. Then he instructed them all to be in a state of preparedness, so that they could advance against the enemy as soon as the opportunity offered. The litter was constructed immediately, the men were made ready to start and the opportunity duly came.

They put the King in his litter and set out for St Albans, where [viii.23] the Saxons I have told you about were maltreating all the local population. When Octa and Eosa were informed of the Britons' arrival and of the fact that their King had been brought along in a

litter, they were too proud to fight him, on the grounds that he had had to be carried there. According to them Uther was already half-dead and it was not decent for such great men as themselves to fight with a person in that state. They thereupon retired into the town, leaving the gates wide open to show that they were not afraid of him. When this was reported to Uther, he immediately ordered the city to be besieged and an assault to be made on the walls from every side. The Britons obeyed him, investing the city and attacking its walls. They slaughtered some few of the Saxons, breached the walls and would have entered if the Saxons had not finally begun to resist.

The Britons were now having the best of it, so that the Saxons repented of their former arrogance and decided to defend themselves wherever they could. They climbed to the top of the walls and drove the Britons back with every weapon they could lay hands on. As the two sides fought each other, night came on, inviting them all to lay down their arms and rest. Many needed this repose, but the majority preferred some plan by which they could destroy their enemies.

When the Saxons realized what harm their arrogance had done them (for the Britons had been on the point of winning a victory) they determined to sally forth at daybreak and challenge their enemies to a pitched battle in the open field. That, indeed, is what they did. As soon as the rising sun heralded the day, they marched out, company by company, thus putting their plan into operation. As soon as the Britons saw this they divided their own men into companies and made the first attack. The Britons advanced and the Saxons stood their ground. Great slaughter was done on both sides. In the end, when the day was far advanced, the King of the Britons was victorious, Octa and Eosa were killed, and the Saxons turned tail. So overjoyed was the King at what had happened that, although he had previously been unable to lift himself up without the support of someone else, he now sat up straight in his litter after a little effort and suddenly seemed to recover his health.

'The Ambrones used to call me the half-dead King,' he said, and burst out laughing as he spoke. 'That was because I lay flat in my litter, greatly reduced as I was by my illness. Half-dead, indeed, I really was; but I would rather be half-dead and beat them than safe and sound, with a full expectation of life, and be beaten by them. Death with honour means more to me than living on in disgrace!'

Once the Saxons had been defeated, as I have explained above, [viii.24] they did not for that reason abandon their evil behaviour. On the contrary, they went off to the northern provinces and preyed relentlessly upon the people there. King Uther was keen to pursue them, as he had proposed, but his princes dissuaded him from it, for after his victory his illness had taken an even more serious turn. As a result the enemy became bolder still in their enterprises, striving by every means in their power to take complete control of the realm. Having recourse, as usual, to treachery, they plotted to see how they could destroy the King by cunning. When every other approach failed, they made up their minds to kill him with poison. This they did: for while Uther lay ill in the town of St Albans, they sent spies disguised as beggars, who were to discover how things stood at court. When the spies had obtained all the information that they wanted, they discovered one additional fact which they chose to use as a means of betraying Uther. Near the royal residence there was a spring of very limpid water which the King used to drink when he could not keep down any other liquids because of his illness. These evil traitors went to the spring and polluted it completely with poison, so that all the water which welled up was infected. When the King drank some of it, he died immediately. Some hundred men died after him, until the villainy was finally discovered. Then they filled the well in with earth. As soon as the death of the King was made known, the bishops of the land came with their clergy and bore his body to the monastery of Ambrius and buried it with royal honours at the side of Aurelius Ambrosius, inside the Giants' Ring.