

The Sword in the Stone (The Legend of Arthur and Excalibur)

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The King was worse, was like to die.

The ominous news ran over the castle, and from the castle over the country, like the black brew from a pot that over-boils. At every street-corner women babbled it, men talked it over grave-faced and with surprise.

True, King Uther had ailed now for many weary months, and of a fatal malady. That the ardour of his illness should have increased surprised no one; it was the strange twist the malady had taken that awakened astonishment and dismay. For it was known that the King was dumb.

But a few days since, he had been borne, prone like a stricken lion, to the field of battle, that his presence might bring victory to his men. It had brought victory, victory for which the valiant monarch had paid dearly. He lay now facing death, and with dumb lips.

In the castle, in grey corners, the knights chattered. "All evil thing indeed is this that hath befallen the King, and the realm," murmured one, harping on the one note of complaint. "Since the King must die, the King must die – it is the lot of all men, and feared little by the valiant, rebut that King Uther should die having named no successor – there one has a grievance indeed!"

"With so many barons eager to snatch at the crown of this fair realm, it had been a good thing had the King left a

son to succeed him," said another.

"Ay, but since he hath not left a son," retorted the first, "it had been well had Providence left him the use of his tongue to declare his successor!"

Thus they brawled among them, till a sudden footstep made their glances turn, whereupon they became immediately silent.

Yet the footstep was not that of any mighty baron. Merlin the Enchanter it was who passed through the entrance-hall, his dark cloak drawn high around him, shadowing his face.

There was silence till he had passed.

"Merlin goes to the King's chamber," observed one of the gossips, his eye following the dark form.

"'Tis a sad day for Merlin, for he was a good friend of King Uther's," said another. "I have ever heard that by his charms he aided the King much in the matter of his marriage."

"He will aid him little now," muttered a third speaker. "Death is stronger than Merlin's arts, and he hath laid a finger upon the King."

At this moment appeared another loiterer, coming upon the group with eye agleam and a lip curled with the scorn of one who has knowledge of great events and would enlighten his neighbours' ignorance to the tune of his own rising importance.

"Saw ye Merlin pass?" asked he, with chin cocked and with an arrogant air.

"Ay, we saw him," was the response, "and right sombre was his step. He goes to visit the King, who may well expire before he reaches him."

"May the Saints forbid " ejaculated the new-comer. "That would be an ill thing for Merlin. Hath he not promised that to-day, in the witness of the Queen and barons, he, by his witchcraft, and with the aid of Heaven, will make the King speak?"

At this choice news all mouths fell agape; and eyes were rounded at the speaker, the while the gossips drew close.

The newsmonger, relishing the effect he had produced, proceeded with his tale, pouring out particulars with the air of one who dispenses a choice wine. And, as if it were a choice wine, his listeners drank in the story.

Meanwhile Merlin the Enchanter had found the King's chamber.

The door being closed behind him, he drew down his cloak from his face, surveying the assembled barons and the weeping Queen.

"The King still lives?" queried he harshly.

"He still lives, but that is all," one answered in a lamentable voice.

"And hath not spoken?"

"He hath spoken not one word," murmured a baron. "Remember, Merlin, thy promise, given to us yester-eve: 'Gather ye in the King's chamber to-morrow at this hour, and by the grace of God and the aid of my charms King Uther

shall name his successor to this realm '."

"It is a true remembrance," said the Enchanter indifferently. "Such indeed were the words I uttered."

He drew near to the King's bed, and a cloud gathered in his eyes as one may gather in the heavens before rain.

"It is the will of all," he spake, turning, "that I make the King speak, thus disturbing his drowsing spirit? Shall he name his successor to ye?"

"It is our will," said the barons; and the Queen answered also: "It is our will."

Merlin covered his eyes for a moment, then, turning toward the bed, "Sire," said he to the King, "tell us thy will concerning the welfare of thy kingdom. Is it thy will that thy son Arthur succeed thee, becoming ruler of this fair realm?"

These words were scarcely uttered when the King replied, in his own voice, and without halt in the speech: "It is my earnest wish and desire that my son Arthur wear my crown. I bid him therefore that he claim it, when the right time comes, in a righteous and just spirit, knowing that to rule this realm is his duty and his responsibility. If he do not this thing, then shall he forfeit the blessing I bestow upon him now."

The King had hardly uttered these words, when, with a sigh, his breath went from him, and he died.

Then the barons, in despair and anger, began to accuse Merlin among themselves, calling him impostor, and other like names. "This is a trick of Merlin's," said they, "which he hath worked through the mouth of the King; for well does he

know that King Uther hath no son! It were better had he made the King name one of us to succeed him; then had the matter been a plain one, and the land not turned to confusion!"

Whispering thus among themselves, they cast angry glances at the Enchanter. But he, shrouding his face from them, turned, and without a word went away.

Thus died King Uther, having named as his successor a son, of whom the barons knew nothing; and for many years that fair realm which he had governed was torn by strife, by battle, and by bitter feud. For there was many a powerful baron who cast eyes upon the crown, and who would raise up a tempest of battle with a better grace than he would utter a prayer.

Thus the barons strove, quarrelled, and made warfare, the while the years passed, and the glory of the realm waxed dim. But there dawned a day when the barons were as weary of themselves, and their claims, as the country was, and were not unwilling that from among them one should be chosen to be king.

Then was Merlin the Enchanter seen again, passing in and out among the people, his dark cloak wrapping him round. It was known that he sought audience of the Archbishop of Canterbury. When he was come before the Archbishop, Merlin said:

"Is not this a grievous thing that the fair realm of England should be so torn, through the hopes of ambitious men? Yet dawns another day, and to thee may be a portion of its glory. Call together, I pray of thee, all the lords of this realm, and gentlemen of arms, that they may make prayer to God that

by some sign He shall reveal the rightful king of the realm."

The Archbishop pondered these words, and when he had examined well this advice of Merlin's, it seemed good to him, and well worthy a Christian people. Therefore he said: "I will call them together."

Merlin rested his eyes upon the ground, hiding his thoughts. After a while he said: "Call them together at Christmas-time, for since at that time God gave us the great gift of His Son, His heart may be inclined to give us other gifts."

When he had said this he went away. Where he went I know not; but for many a day men saw naught Of Merlin the Enchanter.

The Archbishop called together the lords and gentlemen of arms; and none knew that he had followed any thought but his own.

To London came they, in response to the call, and many a knight had fasted first, and others had otherwise mortified themselves, that their prayers might be the better heard in Heaven.

On Christmas Day they gathered together, and with them the common People, a goodly company, either in St. Paul's, or some other great church; and all men prayed with a marvellous earnestness that the sign should be vouchsafed to them which they craved.

One knight was there who, as he prayed, felt before his closed eyes a sudden flash, as it were of some great light. Whether he prayed more earnestly than his fellows, that a great matter should first be revealed to him, we know not, for

to judge of such things is beyond human wit. But it is known that, on uncovering his eyes and glancing about him, this knight beheld, through the open door of the church, something that shone with a great fury, and reminded him of the light he had seen. The which, when he had observed it for some time, he made out to be a great white stone, and in the stone an anvil, and, struck through the anvil and the stone, a golden sword.

When the youth was certain of these things, trembling seized him, for he perceived that they were not of earth. Whereupon he whispered to his neighbour of this strange happening, and his neighbour to another, and that other to whoso sat next; till at length the matter reached the ear of the Archbishop where he stood.

But he, setting first the glory of God, advised that the service should be finished before any should enquire into the thing.

Thereupon, when the service was over, all men passed out of church, agape to see the miracle; and found the matter even as the knight had declared.

The white stone lay in the churchyard, and in the stone was the anvil, and through anvil and stone was a golden sword. And about the sword were words written that shone like flames.

The Archbishop read them, stooping, his hands upon his knees.

"Whoso shall lift this sword from the stone and the anvil" – so read he, for so it was written "the same is rightly born King of England."

At these words the lords and gentlemen looked one at another; and the commons shot out their lips and looked at the Archbishop. And he, having bent his head some minutes longer, as hearing some voice in the words which others heard not, said: "The sign is given, are ye content to abide by it?"

And they replied, with one voice: "We are content."

Then said the Archbishop: "God having vouchsafed us this sign of the sword in the stone and the anvil, at Twelfth Day it shall be given to any man to try his skill at withdrawing the sword. Until that day let all be patient, and until then shall certain knights of pure fame be set to guard the stone."

Having arranged these things, the Archbishop went his way, bearing a joyful heart within him; and he contrived that on New Year's Day there should be jousts and a tournament, and other fine doings, that the lords and commons should be kept together till the king should be revealed.

On New Year's Day the roads were gay with the bravery of the lords and commons who were on their way to the fields, the lords to show their skill, the commons to behold it and make holiday.

With the throng rode Sir Ector, a noble knight and one who had loved King Uther well, and in his company his son Sir Kay (who had received his knighthood but last Hallowmas), and young Arthur his adopted son, who was but a stripling.

Young Arthur rode a pace or two behind, but that was his own doing. In his eye was the glamour of the road, in his heart quaked a happy wonder at the gay world and its happenings. These emotions so held him that he perceived

not the confusion of his brother, whose face grew suddenly red and halfshamed.

At length Sir Kay brought his horse up with so sudden a jerk that Arthur had almost been upon him.

"Why, brother," cried he, amazed, "what ails thee? My head was in the clouds, in truth, but thou hadst almost brought it to the earth in thy hurry!"

Sir Kay's visage was like a harvest moon, but held nothing of jollity: "I have forgotten my sword; a fool's trick!" mumbled he, sputtering over the words. "Now it falls upon me to wind back the length of the road and fetch it."

"Nay," said the boy quickly, "that were an unnecessary to do. Haste thee on with our father, I will return to the town at a great speed, and will fetch thy sword."

With that he turned about, right glad to have excuse to time his horse's pace nearer to that of his blood. Youth rose high in his heart, touched his pulse, quickened his eye. With a clatter he flew along the road upon which he alone turned his face to the city; and heedless of any glance, grave or tender, made his way to his lodging.

Having reached the house, he reined in his horse, and battered hard upon the door. The blows rang out finely, but they brought never a response. Young Arthur twitched his brows, brought out another volley of blows, listened. There was a quiet in the street like that of the tomb.

The boy clapped his hand upon his side so that his horse started. "The tournament, the tournament! – it hath sucked them in, every one of them!"

And so indeed it had.

Meanwhile Sir Ector and Sir Kay went plodding on, Sir Kay enlarging upon his plight, and young Arthur's tardiness. Ever and anon he would cast an anxious glance behind him, pitching a new lament to his father's ears as the glance found naught. At length he perceived a cloud of dust. It came nearer and nearer, thickened, rose high. Arthur rode from the midst of it, his hair blowing in the breeze he made.

"See, brother, a sword to thy hand!" cried he. "Say not that I failed thee, though thine own sword lay behind barred doors!"

Sir Kay grasped the sword, well satisfied. His eye ran down it, and as the glance grew, his cheek paled. He trembled, then rode on.

But young Arthur, perceiving nothing, fell again behind, taking up his thoughts.

Sir Kay hastened to rejoin his father, full of tidings.

"Sir," cried he in a tremulous tone, "surely I, and none other, am chosen to be King of England, since in my hand I bear the sword of the stone!"

At this speech Sir Ector turned, and, having beheld the sword which his son carried, he saw that it was indeed the sword of the stone.

"Tell me, didst thou pluck it from the stone " asked he.

Sir Kay's face fell, but he answered stoutly: "Nay, I plucked it not from the stone. My brother Arthur, who returned to seek what I had forgotten, he brought me the

sword."

Then said Sir Ector to Arthur: "Tell me, didst thou pluck the sword from the stone?"

Thus was the boy awakened from his dreams of sweet wit, and he confessed how, having found all doors barred upon his brother's sword, he made all haste to the churchyard and plucked the sword from the stone that rested there.

"Were none there," asked Sir Ector, "to forbid the act?"

"Nay," said the boy, "they had gone, every one, to the tournament."

This was true, for the knights had gone to try their skill.

Then was Sir Ector thoughtful, and he would have it that they turned about, all three, and rode back to the churchyard, that lay some distance behind them. This being done, young Arthur replaced the sword in the anvil and the stone.

"My son, draw out the sword," said Sir Ector to Sir Kay.

And Sir Kay essayed, bending down, the better to use his strength. Once he strove, and twice, his muscles cracking and his face aflame; but he could not withdraw the sword.

"Yield place to me," said Sir Ector, and, laying his hands upon the sword, he, too, strove to wrest it from the anvil and stone, but he could not move it one hair-breadth from its

place.

But when Arthur laid his hand upon the sword, it slid from the stone as a sunbeam across a wall. And when he had replaced it, it stuck as fast as before.

Then said Sir Ector to the boy: "By King Uther's desire wert thou entrusted to me, whilst yet a babe, and of thy parentage would the King reveal nothing. Now I begin to think that thou art of a higher destiny than I thought of. Let us travel to the Archbishop, and tell him of these events."

And straightway they went to the Archbishop, who was struck with a great wonder on hearing their story; but he advised that nothing should be said of the matter, since Twelfth Day was near at hand, when it would be given to every man to try his skill.

Now when Twelfth Day was come all the world was agog, since there were few who did not wish to see the judgment of the sword. Like twining ribbons were the roads of the city, being gay with the costumes of those that thronged to the churchyard. Barons and gay gentlemen, young and old, rich and poor, lords and commons, these encountered at street corners, and jostled as they passed by. To the churchyard stretched the hopes of all; and in the churchyard were bright hopes to be shattered. For there the game went merrily, yet with a sharp echo to its music; many a fine fellow trying his skill with a cheerful heart, and having striven till he was like to break in two, going on his way with puckered chin, not having moved the sword the breadth of a hair. Ever the crowd of champions grew; but as it grew fat on one side it waxed thin on another, as one strong fellow after another grasped the sword with hope and left it with despair.

"'Tis as if some massive chain bound sword and stone," said one disappointed gentleman.

"'Tis as if great nails fastened it," said another, flourishing a white handkerchief about his brow.

"Here comes a fine fellow!" cried a spectator of a lower order. He nudged his neighbour. "'Tis a fine knight; surely if any can move the sword 'twill be this same."

"It is Sir Kay, son of Sir Ector; may he have joy of his task!" quoth the other, scowling. "He begins well. Ah, he means to have the sword!"

It was well said that Sir Kay meant to have the golden sword. Many a bold knight had striven hard, but he strove hardest of all. Evening was now come, and but few remained to try their skill. Everywhere were to be seen crowds of scowling or bantering faces – it is as disappointment affects a man, – the faces of those who had grasped the Sword, only to loose the grasp and leave it. Sir Kay's brows bent fiercely; had not the sword rested in his hand before to-day? If he did not gain it 'twould be because it was not to be gained. If he could not wrest it from the anvil, 'twould be because the task was beyond any man. His face grew livid, his teeth closed tight as he tugged, and pulled, bent himself over the sword, reared above it, knelt, doubled, twisted. That was a sight – to see him! Of all gay knights he laid longest and bravest siege to the sword in the stone.

"What now, hath he gained the sword " asked a rosy-cheeked lad at last of his elders. He reared upon his toes, kicking the heels of his neighbours.

"Nay, he turns away in bitter confusion. Pale is his cheek, and cold his eye. But the sword remains in the

stone."

"It is like to remain there!" said the boy. "Who comes now?"

"Young Arthur, Sir Ector's adopted son. 'Tis said he is one of Merlin's changelings, foisted upon Sir Ector when a babe. Nay, thou mayest turn thine eyes away; he is but a stripling, scarce of greater height than thou art. He cannot withdraw the sword."

"I would fain see him," said the lad. "I have fear of Merlin; his eyes are like the water that lies behind the mill. Show me this changeling." He craned, and craned again, stretching out his thin young neck. "Is he fine-looking, neighbour? – I can see nothing of him. What a hub-bub! Speak, neighbour, what is the meaning of it?"

A thousand voices answered the question. "He hath worked the miracle, the sword is withdrawn! The stripling holds it! Didst thou notice? – it sprang to his hand as if it but waited for the touch!"

"Lift me up," said Master Rosy-Cheeks, his eyes shining. "I would see him." Someone raised him: he caught a glimpse of a fair young figure, of bright tost hair, of eyes that seemed to flash into his soul.

He saw in the hand of the valiant figure a sword that glittered as it were shrouded in fire. About it were words written that shone with the brilliance of stars.

The boy dropt to his heels, covering his face.

"How now?" queried his benefactor.

"I have seen the sun," muttered the boy, blinking, and dashing water from his eyes.

Still the clatter of tongues uprose, angry voices that merged into dispute.

Master Rosy-Cheeks came back to earth.

"The barons complain," his neighbour told him. "They say he is but a boy – in faith it is a true word! They say the realm cannot be rightly governed by an unbearded stripling. They complain that none knows whence he came; perchance, who knows, he may be some beggar's brat! See, he hath replaced the sword, and it sticks fast as before. The Archbishop hath yielded to the barons. At Candlemas men shall strive again to withdraw the sword."

It was a true word, the Archbishop had given way. At Candlemas there would be a new trial. The crowd, chattering over this, and, disputing, began to break.

At Candlemas young Arthur again withdrew the sword, and no other could move it from its place.

Wherefore again the barons disputed, casting waspish glances at the youth; and they demanded at Easter a new reckoning.

And at Easter the same matters befell, whereupon the matter was delayed till Pentecost.

And at Pentecost the sword leapt again to greet the stripling, and would yield itself to none other.

Then rose the commons, crying with one voice: "Arthur shall be our King! Hath not the sword revealed him to us,

and the voice of God? We will have no other than he, and no further delay in the matter. And our prayer is that he will pardon us for what delay hath been!" So they cried, bending their knees.

Whereupon many a gallant gentleman fell, too, to crying: "Arthur shall be our King !" and so great a noise was there, and clamour, that no other cry could be heard. And such as would have piped to a different tune had to swallow their grievance, with as good a grace as they could muster, and bend the knee with their fellows.

After this fashion was young Arthur acclaimed King of the realm of England, as revealed by God in answer to earnest prayer. The sword of the stone he laid straightway upon the altar, and he was made knight of the best man there.

Ere the year was old, Merlin the Enchanter was again seen among men, walking in ways few understood. Then, having come upon a concourse of barons who would have harboured still their discontent, he thus spake, throwing out at them the fire of his eyes.

"Know ye," said he, "that this beardless youth, whom ye have welcomed so tardily, is none other than the rightfully born son of King Uther, now rightfully reigning in his father's stead? Merlin the Enchanter it was who demanded the babe from the King as a price for service done to King Uther in the matter of his marriage, but privily for the babe's own weal. For the child was feeble, and the King near death and unable to protect him, and I knew the hearts of ye, that ye were bodeful men and would work the child ill. Wherefore I, Merlin, claimed this price from King Uther, bargaining that Sir Ector, that just knight, should rear the babe.

"Answer me now; ask ye from Heaven a truer King than this King is?"

Then were they all silent, hanging low their heads.