

The Sword of Kingship

THOMAS WESTWOOD

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At Christmas–tide, while wassail mirth ran high,
To royal Uther, by his queen Igrayne,
Was born a son; whom, wrapp'd in swaddling clothes
Of cloth of gold, the monarch took, and charged
Two knights and two fair maids to bear away,
Adown the castle stair and through the night,
To one that waited by the postern door.
No question to be ask'd, no word be said.

Blank faces wore the knights, and puzzled looks
And dazed the damsels, but the king's command
Was peremptory; so adown the stair,
Close–clasp'd and warm, their precious freight they bore,
Across the courtyard, underneath the stars.
Beside the door stood Merlin, who the babe
Took in his arms, and, without word or sign,
Departed. Like a wraith beyond the moat
He stole, and vanish'd on the windy wold;
And as he vanish'd, lo! a luminous star
Rose in the heaven, and brighten'd as it rose,
And broaden'd till the land was full of light.
And one fair maid,—of sixteen summers she,—
Lifting her lily face in white amaze,
Thought, "Sure our blessed Lord is born again!"

Athwart the wold, and o'er th' untrodden snow,
Pass'd Merlin, a wierd shadow, without pause.
Around him, as he went, the wind, with sound
Of viols sweet and low, sang lullaby.
Above him, in its orbit, moved the star,
To marshal him the way that he should go.

It led him to a donjon, perch'd aloft,
Like falcon's eyrie, on a spire of crag—
Black chasms in front, and at its base the sea—
Sir Ector's donjon, in the western wilds.
Beside his yule–fire sate that peerless knight,
And read, from monkish page, the legend old
Of the Nativity—the Orient Star,
The mystic Magi, with their gift of myrrh,
The God–child in the manger. Dame Iseult,
His spouse, with awe–dilated eyes, drank in
The wondrous story. At their feet lay stretch'd

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A shaggy wolf-hound, huge of jaw and limb;
And nestling in the savage creature's fur,
Round-cheek'd and ruddy, slept their latest born.

No footfall—but, instinctive, both were 'ware
Of an unwonted presence in the hall—
Merlin's, whose ghostly shadow blurr'd the light.
To good Sir Ector salutation brief
The wizard gave—then with obeisance laid
His burden on the noble lady's knees,
Who call'd upon her saints. The bands unswathed,
Behold, the babe lay, like a folded rose,
In slumber; but anon, roused by the glare,
First crow'd, then whimper'd, till the pitying dame
Broke out in yearnings as of mother-love,
And caught him to her breast, and gave him suck,
And cherish'd him thenceforth as her own son.
And soon a priestly man, by Merlin sent,
Baptized the boy, and ARTHUR was his name.

Ere long the King fell sick, and while he lay,
Sore-stricken, a marauding host o'er-ran
His borders, and waged battle with his knights
At vantage, and his subjects vex'd and slew.
Then up spake Merlin: "King, no longer bide
Prone on thy couch, but to the strife of spears
Wend forth, in litter borne, if such must be,
High on the backs of men; for if thy foes
But see thee in the van, the day is thine!"

So was it done as Merlin had devised.
They bore the King in litter to the field—
A royal presence, with a deathly face—
And by St. Alban's, on a wild March morn,
'Mid road and river, met a mighty horde
Of Norsemen, and that day Sir Ulfius hight,
And stout Sir Brastias, did grand feats of arms;
And in the Northern battle Uther's men
Fought and o'ercame, and all his foemen fled.

And straight the King to London hied, and made
Much joy of his success; but, smitten anew
With mortal fever, three whole nights and days
Speechless he lay, and sore his barons grieved,
And help besought of Merlin in their need.

Quoth Merlin, "Help is none—Heaven's will be done!
But take this counsel,—at to-morrow's dawn
Seek the King's presence, and, with God's good grace,
His tongue shall be unloosed, and he shall speak."
And on the morrow, when the rising sun

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Redden'd the east, and from the sloping hills
Roll'd the mists upward, knights and barons went
With Merlin to the King, and Merlin spake:—

"By Christ, and the thrice-blessed Trinity,
King, I adjure thee, make thy purpose clear!
Shall Arthur, thy true son, when thou art gone,
Rule o'er thy realm and sit upon thy throne?
Before thy lieges all, and before God,
Speak, my Lord Uther, let thy will be known!"

And Utherpendragon turn'd him on his bed,
And moan'd, and raised a ghastly face at length,
In the blear light, and cross'd himself, and said:—
"Before my lieges all, and before God,
I bless my son! God's blessing and the saints'
Befall him! He is king. My work is done.
But if he claim not this my crown and realm,
Or make not good his claim, with knightly feats,
And kingly wisdom, as befits my son,
Perish my blessing—it is none of his!"

Then suddenly Utherpendragon dropp'd
Dead on his couch, as drops a canker'd pine
When the bolt cleaves it, and all heads were bow'd,
And all hearts sorrow'd; and with regal pomp,
And long procession down cathedral aisles,
'Neath pall, and floating plume, and level shield,
They bore him to his rest. And Igrayne wept.

Then year on year in grievous jeopardy
The realm remain'd. For prince and paladin
Made trial of their might, in deadly feuds,
With plot and counterplot, through covert hope
Of kingship; and the sea grew black with barks
Of Vikings, that like kestrels round the coast
Hover'd, and froze the people's hearts with fear.
At dead of night the hills broke out ablaze
With beacon-fires—wild Norsemen scour'd the plains,
And drove the herds—and wives, that sat at home,
Wept wearily for those that came no more.

But, when the gloom was deepest, Merlin pray'd,
Th' Archbishop Engelbert, who held his court
At Canterbury, in his diocese,
To issue edicts, bidding all true knights
Repair to London, at the time of Yule,
On pain of penance and anathema.
"For peradventure, on that day," quoth he,
"On which our Saviour Lord from heaven came down,
God may vouchsafe a miracle, and show

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Whose head shall wear the crown." The Primate did
As Merlin counsell'd, and the barons came,
Obedient, to the tryst. The frosty roads
Rang with the dint of hoofs. Long trains of knights,
Pages, and dames in litters, silken-draped,
And pursuivants, in brilliant tabards, wound,
Like party-colour'd serpents o'er the meads,
And through the snowy passes of the hills.

On Christmas-eve, at nightfall, a great host
Encamp'd about the minster, and a troop
Of holy men from tent to tent pass'd round,
And shrived the knights, and left them pure of sin,
And ready for the chrism, and for the crown.

In clouds the Christmas morning dimly dawn'd;—
Grey gloom'd the minster aisles; but ere the mass
Was ended, an effulgent sunshine broke
Through the east oriel, and all men were 'ware
That by the altar stood a snow-white stone,
Four-square, and on its summit, in the midst,
An anvil, holding in its iron bulk
A naked sword, along whose edges ran
This legend: "**Whoso plucks me from my place
Is England's rightful king. Amen. Amen.**"
Then shook the multitude with sudden stir
Of passion, as the woodland summits shake,
When, swooping from a cloud, Euroclydon
The storm-wind strikes them; but the Primate knelt,
And quell'd the growing tumult with his prayer,
And, after, preach'd of peace and pure intents.

The benediction utter'd, one by one,
Princes and paladins he bade approach,
And try their prowess on the magic sword.
Then were gaunt arms of Titan strength outstretch'd,
To which the sinews clung, like knotted cords;—
Then was the sword clutch'd by as gnarlèd fists,
As his that slew the Hydra. Faces flush'd
Purple, and foreheads became ridged, like backs
Of Berkshire wolds; broad shoulders stoop'd and rose;
Oaths, fierce as thunder-claps, were smother'd back
'Twixt gnashing teeth—in vain, in vain, in vain!
Immoveable within its sheath the sword
Stood, its gold legend glittering in the sun.

Then spake the Primate: "God's Elect is not
Amongst you here this day. Now note my will.
Let ten true knights be chosen, of noble strain,
And constant, day and night, keep watch and ward,
Beside the stone and the miraculous sword,

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Till he shall come, who is ordain'd of Heaven."

So said, so done. Ten knights of noble strain
Were chosen, five by five, to keep the watch.
And the suns rose, and set, and rose again,
And down the frozen aisles the winter's wind
Blew shrilly, and the winter moon shone cold.
And not a knight in Christendom but tried
To win the sword . . . except the Elect of God.

It chanced, on New Year's Day, a joust was given
With open lists; and to the tourney came
Sir Ector, with his handsome son, Sir Key,
Just dubb'd a knight, and Sir Key's brother-in-arms,
Arthur, a stalwart youth, straight as a pine;
With eyes as blue and bland as the June heaven,
Broad brow set round with curls, and royal mouth,
Firm-shut, and strong. These twain rode side by side,
Scanning the silken litters as they pass'd,
And chuckling, when the rose on maiden's cheek
Deepen'd to damask at their saucy smiles;
But near the lists, the scatter-brain'd Sir Key
Bethought him he had left his sword at home,
And pray'd young Arthur to ride back at speed,
In quest of it. This did he; but arrived
Before the mansion, every door was shut,
And window barr'd; Sir Ector's dame had gone
To see the jousts with her bower-maidens all.
Then Arthur stamp'd a hasty foot, and vow'd
That not for want of glaive Sir Key should miss
His jousting. "To the church I'll hie, and snatch
The sword they prate of from the wizard stone!"
Wide open stood the minster doors, and deep
The sacred silence; of the watching knights
No vestige; tourney sports had lured them thence.
Straight up the aisle young Arthur strode, and bent
A reverent knee beside the altar step,
And breathed a prayer; then pluck'd the magic sword
Out of the anvil, brandish'd it aloft,
And, without further tarrying, hurried back,
Alert, to find Sir Key. But he with awe
Gazed at the golden legend on the blade,
And call'd his sire, and cried aloud: "This brand
Is mine, and mine, too, England's realm and crown!"
Much marvell'd good Sir Ector; but in doubt
Of what was best, to the Lord Primate went,
And told his tale; who, when the jousts were o'er,
Bade all the knights and nobles meet anew,
Within the minster walls. There question'd he
By what strange sleight Sir Key had won the sword?
Sir Key, with pucker'd lips and stammering speech,

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The truth avow'd. "Youth," said the Primate then,
Turning to Arthur, "since the skill was thine
To take the sword, say, canst thou thrust it back
Into its iron sheath?" "Small feat were that!"
Quoth Arthur, with a smile; and, stepping up,
Into the anvil thrust the naked blade.
"Now pluck it forth, Sir Key!" the Primate urged,
"And prove thy right." And bold Sir Key began
To tug, to haul—and tugging, hauling still,
The sweat—drops roll'd in rivers down his cheeks,
And angry flashes glinted from his eyes.
Then Arthur jeer'd him: "Nay, hast lost thy wits,
Good gossip mine? See, 'tis no more than this!"
And, with the slightest twitch of fingers twain,
Out came the sword, and a wild sunbeam ran
Along the steel and lit the legend up,
In diamond sparkles. Then Sir Ector knelt
At Arthur's feet, and hail'd him Lord and King,
While bold Sir Key stood blushing, half in wrath,
And half compunction. But the assembled peers
Look'd on, with lowering brows and sullen lips,
Or mutter'd: "It were shame this nameless boy
Should sit on Uther's throne and wear his crown!"
And soon a conflict rose, and swords were bared
In menace, till the Primate spake, and bade
Young Arthur thrust the sword into its place,
And tarry further ordeal, at the feast
Of Candlemas ensuing—the ten knights,
Meanwhile, to keep impregnable watch and ward.

This did they, five by five, as at the first.
And the suns rose, and set, and rose again;
And down the frozen aisles the winter's wind
Sang shrilly, and the winter moon shone cold.
But as at Christmas, so at Candlemas;
Save Arthur's only, not an arm was found
To wield the sword, though from the Cornish hills
Came Caradoc, a caitiff knight, of frame
Like to Goliath's; heavy was his spear,
As any weaver's beam—his stature huge,
His rigid chest, a rock—on either fist
Six fingers—on each monstrous foot six toes.
This giant, with a thunderous laugh, that woke
The echoes of the hills ten leagues away,
Thrust back to right and left the puny crowd,
As sheers a ship its course through summer seas,
And, to the altar stalking, clutch'd the sword
Contemptuous, as it were a baby's toy,
And pull'd. Loud laugh'd the multitude, to see
The tawny Cyclops foaming at the mouth,
Furious, because no whit the blade would budge.

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He pull'd with strength that would have torn an oak
From its seven centuries' hold beneath the rocks—
He pull'd till, spent and breathless, his eyes stood
Out of his head, with wonder and despite.
But Arthur, on a merry mischief bent,
Pluck'd forth the glaive, and springing down the steps,
Fenced at Goliath for a minute's space,
With rapid cut and thrust, achieving thus
The giant's downfall and discomfiture;
For gibes and jeers, like whistling arrow-flights,
Hail'd on him; till, with buffetings of all
That cross'd his path, out of the doors he dash'd,
Half mad, and like an evil hurricane,
Rush'd howling homeward to his Cornish hills.

But vain these portents of the Elect of God.
The peers, obdurate, claim'd a new delay
Till Easter, and the Primate, moved with hope
By sage concessions to enforce Heaven's will,
Ordain'd fresh trial on that holy day.

And still the knights kept watch beside the stone,
With pacings to and fro, till through the pane
A blander moon shed silver on the sword,
And the wind, wandering 'mid the pillars, brought
Odours and omens of the coming Spring.

But as at Candlemas, at Easter too,
One issue, one resolve,—defeat, delay,—
With strife amongst the noblest—gauntlets flung
And lifted, ay, and knightly battle waged
"A outrance," in the lists. The Archbishop then
Convoked the estates of Britain for the eve
Of Pentecost, in ultimate ordeal;—
Too long, he said, had England's realm remain'd
Kingless, with peril gathering round the throne.

So the suns rose, and set, and rose again,
In slow succession, till the season turn'd,
And to the knights in vigil came the scent
Of beanflowers, and the smell of growing corn.

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Over the pleasant meads, at Pentecost,
The minster bells rang out a merry chime,—
Over the bean-tufts, with their brindled bloom,
Over the corn-fields, with their waving corn;
No cloud in Heaven, and the long-harass'd earth
Calm, with the foretaste of a rest to come.

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At gloaming, back the minster portals roll'd,
And knights and nobles, in a stormy throng,
Choked nave and chancel. Vespers o'er, at once
The Primate summon'd whoso dared resist
God's judgment, thrice made manifest, to brave
The final ordeal. Then upsprang a band
Of paladins, such as the world ne'er saw,
Fit framers of the famous Table Round,
Heroic shapes, that with untoward fate
Strove, as the demi-gods of heathen tale,
Strove in their war with Heaven—like them to fall.
For vain their chivalry and pure intents—
Vain strength of soul and strength of arm—all vain!
Immoveable within its sheath the sword
Stood, its strange legend burning like a flame.

Then Arthur, at the Primate's bidding, came,—
A youth as fair as he, who in the vale
Of Elah, with a sling and with a stone,
The champion of the Philistines o'erthrew,
Before the hosts of Israel. Meek, he knelt
Beside the altar, while the priestly palms
Were laid, in blessing, on his comely head,
All cluster'd over with thick golden curls.
"King Arthur, God's Elect, draw forth the sword!"
And lightly stepp'd he, lightly drew the sword,
And having drawn it, lo! a luminous star
Rose in the heaven, and brighten'd as it rose,
And broaden'd, till the fane was full of light.
And in that sudden glory men were 'ware
That, from their station by the altar side,
Anvil and stone had vanish'd like a dream.
Then swift emotion shook the hearts of all,
Half awe and half remorse; and with a sound
Of seas that surge, and sweep o'er shingly shores,
A tumult grew and spread, and broke at length
Into a vehement shout, "Long live the King!
Long live King Arthur!" from ten thousand throats,
Not one dissentient. Through the minster doors
The uproar burst, and fill'd the streets, and ran
Like wild-fire through the town—beyond the town—
For as the lightning speeds from cloud to cloud,
So sped the gladness through the length and breadth
Of England, till its every corner rang
With universal shouts of jubilee.
And the wind swept the shoutings out to sea,
And paled the Vikings' ruddy cheeks with fear,
And drove their black barks from the British main.

So Arthur won King Uther's crown and throne!
And when his seat was sure, and not a knight—

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Save caitiff Caradoc, the Cornish bear—
But had sworn fealty, wizard Merlin told
To him and to Igrayne his wondrous tale.
Great joy had Queen Igrayne; her widow'd heart
Wax'd warm with household cheer; but evermore
To good Sir Ector and his dame the King,
From old respect and dear familiar use,
Clung, with the love and duty of a son.
Sir Ector, his high chancellor he made,
Sir Key, his seneschal; and when the dame
To Camelot in early summer came,
He saw, and ran to meet her from afar,
And kiss'd her mouth, and kiss'd her wrinkled cheeks,
And knelt before her, as had been his wont,
For daily blessing in the years that were.

Here ends the story of the magic sword
Of Arthur, Builder of the Table Round.