

On the battlements of their castle at Camelot, during an interval of peace between the two Gaelic Wars, the young king of England was standing with his tutor, looking across the purple wastes of evening. A soft light flooded the land below them, and the slow river wound between venerable abbey and stately castle, while the flaming water of sunset reflected spires and turrets and pennoncells hanging motionless in the calm air.

The world was laid out before the two watchers like a toy, for they were on a high keep which dominated the town. At their feet they could see the grass of the outer bailey—it was horrible looking down on it—and a small foreshortened man, with two buckets on a yoke, making his way across to the menagerie. They could see, further off at the gatehouse, which was not so horrible to look at because it was not vertically below, the night guard taking over from the sergeant. They were clicking their heels and saluting and presenting pikes and exchanging passwords as merrily as a marriage bell—but it was done in silence for the two, because it was so far below. They looked like lead soldiers, the little gallow-glasses, and their footsteps could not sound upon the luscious sheep-nibbled green. Then, outside the curtain wall, there was the distant noise of old wives bargaining, and brats bawling, and corporals quaffing, and a few goats mixed with it, and two or three lepers in white hoods ringing bells as they walked, and the swishing robes of nuns who were kindly visiting the poor, two by two, and a fight going on between some gentlemen who were interested in horses. On the other side of the river, which ran directly beneath the castle wall, there was a man ploughing in the fields, with his plough tied to the horse's tail. The wooden plough squeaked. There was a silent person near him, fishing for salmon with worms—the rivers were not polluted in those days—and further off, there was a donkey giving his musical concert to the coming night. All these

noises came up to the two on the tower smally, as though they were listening through the wrong end of a megaphone.

Arthur was a young man, just on the threshold of life. He had fair hair and a stupid face, or at any rate there was a lack of cunning in it. It was an open face, with kind eyes and a reliable or faithful expression, as though he were a good learner who enjoyed being alive and did not believe in original sin. He had never been unjustly treated, for one thing, so he was kind to other people.

The King was dressed in a robe of velvet which had belonged to Uther the Conqueror, his father, trimmed with the beards of fourteen kings who had been vanquished in the olden days. Unfortunately some of these kings had had red hair, some black, some pepper-and-salt, while their growth of beard had been uneven. The trimming looked like a feather boa. The moustaches were stuck on round the buttons.

Merlyn had a white beard which reached to his middle, horn-rimmed spectacles, and a conical hat. He wore it in compliment to the Saxon serfs of the country, whose national headgear was either a kind of diving-cap, or the Phrygian cap, or else this cone of straw.

The two of them were speaking sometimes, as the words came to them, between spells of listening to the evening. "Well," said Arthur, "I must say it is nice to be a king. It was a splendid battle."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course it was splendid. Look at the way Lot of Orkney ran, after I had begun to use Excalibur."

"He got you down first."

"That was nothing. It was because I was not using Excalibur. As soon as I drew my trusty sword they ran like rabbits."

"They will come again," said the magician, "all six. The Kings of Orkney, Garloth, Gore, Scotland, The Tower, and the Hundred Knights have started already—in fact, the Gaelic Confederation. You must remember that your claim to the throne is hardly a conventional one."

"Let them come," replied the King. "I don't mind. I will beat them properly this time, and then we will see who is master."

The old man crammed his beard in his mouth and began to chew it, as he generally did when he was put about. He bit through one of the hairs, which stuck between two

teeth. He tried to lick it off, then took it out with his fingers. Finally he began curling it into two points.

"I suppose you will learn some day," he said, "but God knows it is heartbreaking, uphill work."

"Oh?"

"Yes," cried Merlyn passionately. "Oh? oh? oh? That is all you can say. Oh? oh? oh? Like a schoolboy."

"I shall cut off your head if you are not careful."

"Cut it off. It would be a good thing if you did. I should not have to keep on tutoring, at any rate."

Arthur shifted his elbow on the battlement and looked at his ancient friend.

"What is the matter, Merlyn?" he asked. "Have I been doing something wrong? I am sorry if I have."

The magician uncurled his beard and blew his nose.

"It is not so much what you are doing," he said. "It is how you are thinking. If there is one thing I can't stand, it is stupidity. I always say that stupidity is the Sin against the Holy Ghost."

"I know you do."

"Now you are being sarcastic."

The King took him by the shoulder and turned him round. "Look," he said, "what is wrong? Are you in a bad temper? If I have done something stupid, tell me. Don't be in a bad temper."

It had the effect of making the aged nigromant angrier than before.

"Tell you!" he exclaimed. "And what is going to happen when there is nobody to tell you? Are you never going to think for yourself? What is going to happen when I am locked up in this wretched tumulus of mine, I should like to know?"

"I didn't know there was a tumulus in it."

"Oh, hang the tumulus! What tumulus? What am I supposed to be talking about?"

"Stupidity," said Arthur. "It was stupidity when we started."

"Exactly."

"Well, it's no good saying Exactly. You were going to say something about it."

"I don't know what I was going to say about it. You put one in such a passion with all your this and that, that I am sure nobody would know what they were talking about for two minutes together. How did it begin?"

"It began about the battle."

"Now I remember," said Merlyn. "That is exactly where it did begin."

"I said it was a good battle."

"So I recollect."

"Well, it was a good battle," he repeated defensively. "It was a jolly battle, and I won it myself, and it was fun."

The magician's eyes veiled themselves like a vulture's, as he vanished inside his mind. There was silence on the battlements for several minutes, while a pair of peregrines that were being hacked in a nearby field flew over their heads in a playful chase, crying out Kik-kik-kik, their bells ringing. Merlyn looked out of his eyes once more.

"It was clever of you," he said slowly, "to win the battle."

Arthur had been taught that he ought to be modest, and he was too simple to notice that the vulture was going to pounce.

"Oh, well. It was luck."

"Very clever," repeated Merlyn. "How many of your kerns were killed?"

"I don't remember."

"No."

"Kay said——"

The King stopped in the middle of the sentence, and looked at him.

"Well," he said. "It was not fun, then. I had not thought."

"The tally was more than seven hundred. They were all kerns, of course. None of the knights were injured, except the one who broke his leg falling off the horse."

When he saw that Arthur was not going to answer, the old fellow went on in a bitter voice.

"I was forgetting," he added, "that you had some really nasty bruises."

Arthur glared at his finger-nails.

"I hate you when you are a prig."

Merlyn was charmed.

"That's the spirit," he said, putting his arm through the King's and smiling cheerfully. "That's more like it. Stand up for yourself, that's the ticket. Asking advice is the fatal thing. Besides, I won't be here to advise you, fairly soon."

"What is this you keep talking about, about not being here, and the tumulus and so on?"

"It is nothing. I am due to fall in love with a girl called Nimue in a short time, and then she learns my spells and

locks me up in a cave for several centuries. It is one of those things which are going to happen."

"But, Merlyn, how horrible! To be stuck in a cave for centuries like a toad in a hole! We must do something about it."

"Nonsense," said the magician. "What was I talking about?"

"About this maiden. . ."

"I was talking about advice, and how you must never take it. Well, I am going to give you some now. I advise you to think about battles, and about your realm of Gramarye, and about the sort of things a king has to do. Will you do that?"

"I will. Of course I will. But about this girl who learns your spells. . ."

"You see, it is a question of the people, as well as of the kings. When you said about the battle being a lovely one, you were thinking like your father. I want you to think like yourself, so that you will be a credit to all this education I have been giving you—afterwards, when I am only an old man locked up in a hole."

"Merlyn!"

"There, there! I was playing for sympathy. Never mind. I said it for effect. As a matter of fact, it will be charming to have a rest for a few hundred years, and, as for Nimue, I am looking backward to her a good deal. No, no, the important thing is this thinking-for-yourself business and the matter of battles. Have you ever thought seriously about the state of your country, for instance, or are you going to go on all your life being like Uther Pendragon? After all, you are the King of the place."

"I have not thought very much."

"No. Then let me do some thinking for you. Suppose we think about your Gaelic friend, Sir Bruce Sans Pitié."

"That fellow!"

"Exactly. And why do you say it like that?"

"He is a swine. He goes murdering maidens—and, as soon as a real knight turns up to rescue them, he gallops off for all he is worth. He breeds special fast horses so that nobody can catch him, and he stabs people in the back. He's a marauder. I would kill him at once if I could catch him."

"Well," said Merlyn, "I don't think he is very different from the others. What is all this chivalry, anyway? It simply

means being rich enough to have a castle and a suit of armour, and then, when you have them, you make the Saxon people do what you like. The only risk you run is of getting a few bruises if you happen to come across another knight. Look at that tilt you saw between Pellinore and Grummore, when you were small. It is this armour that does it. All the barons can slice the poor people about as much as they want, and it is a day's work to hurt each other, and the result is that the country is devastated. Might is Right, that's the motto. Bruce Sans Pitié is only an example of the general situation. Look at Lot and Nentres and Uriens and all that Gaelic crew, fighting against you for the Kingdom. Pulling swords out of stones is not a legal proof of paternity, I admit, but the kings of the Old Ones are not fighting you about that. They have rebelled, although you are their feudal sovereign, simply because the throne is insecure. England's difficulty, we used to say, is Ireland's opportunity. This is their chance to pay off racial scores, and to have some blood-letting as sport, and to make a bit of money in ransoms. Their turbulence does not cost them anything themselves because they are dressed in armour—and you seem to enjoy it too. But look at the country. Look at the barns burnt, and dead men's legs sticking out of ponds, and horses with swelled bellies by the roadside, and mills falling down, and money buried, and nobody daring to walk abroad with gold or ornaments on their clothes. That is chivalry nowadays. That is the Uther Pendragon touch. And then you talk about a battle being fun!"

"I was thinking of myself."

"I know."

"I ought to have thought of the people who had no armour."

"Quite."

"Might isn't Right, is it, Merlyn?"

"Aha!" replied the magician, beaming. "Aha! You are a cunning lad, Arthur, but you won't catch your old tutor like that. You are trying to put me in a passion by making me do the thinking. But I am not to be caught. I am too old a fox for that. You will have to think the rest yourself. Is might right—and if not, why not, give reasons and draw a plan. Besides, what are you going to do about it?"

"What. . ." began the King, but he saw the gathering frown.

"Very well," he said. "I will think about it."

And he began thinking, stroking his upper lip, where the moustache was going to be.

There was a small incident before they left the keep. The man who had been carrying the two buckets to the menagerie came back with his buckets empty. He passed directly under them, looking small, on his way to the kitchen door. Arthur, who had been playing with a loose stone which he had dislodged from one of the machicolations, got tired of thinking and leaned over with the stone in his hand.

"How small Curselaine looks."

"He is tiny."

"I wonder what would happen if I dropped this stone on his head?"

Merlyn measured the distance.

"At thirty-two feet per second," he said, "I think it would kill him dead. Four hundred *g* is enough to shatter the skull."

"I have never killed anybody like that," said the boy, in an inquisitive tone.

Merlyn was watching.

"You are the King," he said.

Then he added, "Nobody can say anything to you if you try."

Arthur stayed motionless, leaning out with the stone in his hand. Then, without his body moving, his eyes slid sideways to meet his tutor's.

The stone knocked Merlyn's hat off as clean as a whistle, and the old gentleman chased him feately down the stairs, waving his wand of *lignum vitae*.

Arthur was happy. Like the man in Eden before the fall, he was enjoying his innocence and fortune. Instead of being a poor squire, he was a king. Instead of being an orphan, he was loved by nearly everybody except the Gaels, and he loved everybody in return.

So far as he was concerned, as yet, there might never have been such a thing as a single particle of sorrow on the gay, sweet surface of the dew-glittering world.

3

Sir Kay had heard stories about the Queen of Orkney, and he was inquisitive about her.

"Who is Queen Morgause?" he asked one day. "I was told that she is beautiful. What did these Old Ones want to fight us about? And what is her husband like, King Lot? What is his proper name? I heard somebody calling him the King of the Out Isles, and then there are others who call him the King of Lothian and Orkney. Where is Lothian? Is it near Hy Brazil? I can't understand what the revolt was about. Everybody knows that the King of England is their feudal overlord. I heard that she has four sons. Is it true that she doesn't get on with her husband?"

They were riding back from a day on the mountain, where they had been hunting grouse with the peregrines, and Merlyn had gone with them for the sake of the ride. He had become a vegetarian lately—an opponent of blood-sports on principle—although he had gone through most of them during his thoughtless youth—and even now he secretly adored to watch the falcons for themselves. Their masterly circles, as they waited on—mere specks in the sky—and the bur-r-r with which they scythed on the grouse, and the way in which the wretched quarry, killed instantaneously, went end-over-tip into the heather—these were a temptation to which he yielded in the uncomfortable knowledge that it was *sin*. He consoled himself by saying that the grouse were for the pot. But it was a shallow excuse, for he did not believe in eating meat either.

Arthur, who was riding watchfully like a sensible young monarch, withdrew his eye from a clump of whins which might have held an ambush in those early days of anarchy, and cocked one eyebrow at his tutor. He was wondering with half his mind which of Kay's questions the magician would choose to answer, but the other half was still upon the martial possibilities of the landscape. He knew how far the falcons were behind them—the cadger carrying the hooded

one of the Old Ones myself? My father was a demon, they say, but my mother was a Gael. The only human blood I have comes from the Old Ones. Yet here I am denouncing their ideas of nationalism, being what their politicians would call a traitor—because, by calling names, they can score the cheap debating points. And do you know another thing, Arthur? Life is too bitter already, without territories and wars and noble feuds.”

4

The hay was safe and the corn would be ripe in a week. They sat in the shade at the edge of a cornfield, watching the dark brown people with their white teeth who were aimlessly busy in the sunlight, rehandling their scythes, sharpening their sickles and generally getting ready for the end of farm year. It was peaceful in the fields which were close to the castle, and no arrows needed to be apprehended. While they watched the harvesters, they stripped the half-ripe heads of corn with their fingers and bit the grain daintily, tasting the furry milkiness of the wheat, and the husky, less generous flesh of the oats. The pearly taste of barley would have been strange to them, for it had not yet come to Gramarye.

Merlyn was still explaining.

“When I was a young man,” he said, “there was a general idea that it was wrong to fight in wars of any sort. Quite a lot of people in those days declared that they would never fight for anything whatever.”

“Perhaps they were right,” said the King.

“No. There is one fairly good reason for fighting—and that is, if the other man starts it. You see, wars are a wickedness, perhaps the greatest wickedness of a wicked species. They are so wicked that they must not be allowed. When you can be perfectly certain that the other man started them, then is the time when you might have a sort of duty to stop him.”

“But both sides always say that the other side started them.”

“Of course they do, and it is a good thing that it should be so. At least, it shows that both sides are conscious, inside themselves, that the wicked thing about a war is its beginning.”

“But the reasons,” protested Arthur. “If one side was starving the other by some means or other—some peaceful, economic means which were not actually warlike—then the starving side might have to fight its way out—if you see what I mean?”

“I see what you think you mean,” said the magician, “but you are wrong. There is no excuse for war, none whatever, and whatever the wrong which your nation might be doing to mine—short of war—my nation would be in the wrong if it started a war so as to redress it. A murderer, for instance, is not allowed to plead that his victim was rich and oppressing him—so why should a nation be allowed to? Wrongs have to be redressed by reason, not by force.”

Kay said: “Suppose King Lot of Orkney was to draw up his army all along the northern border, what could our King here do except send his own army to stand on the same line? Then supposing all Lot’s men drew their swords, what could we do except draw ours? The situation could be more complicated than that. It seems to me that aggression is a difficult thing to be sure about.”

Merlyn was annoyed.

“Only because you want it to seem so,” he said. “Obviously Lot would be the aggressor, for making the threat of force. You can always spot the villain, if you keep a fair mind. In the last resort, it is ultimately the man who strikes the first blow.”

Kay persisted with his argument.

“Let it be two men,” he said, “instead of two armies. They stand opposite each other—they draw their swords, pretending it is for some other reason—they move about, so as to get the weak side of one another—they even make feints with their swords, pretending to strike, but not doing so. Do you mean to tell me that the aggressor is the one who actually hits first?”

“Yes, if there is nothing else to decide by. But in your case it is obviously the man who first took his army to the frontier.”

“This first blow business brings it down to a matter of

nothing. Suppose they both struck at once, or suppose you could not see which one gave the first blow, because there were so many facing each other?"

"But there nearly always is something else to decide by," exclaimed the old man. "Use your common sense. Look at this Gaelic revolt, for example. What reason has the King here for being an aggressor? He is their feudal overlord already. It isn't sensible to pretend that he is making the attack. People don't attack their own possessions."

"I certainly don't feel," said Arthur, "as if I had started it. Indeed, I didn't know it was going to start, until it had. I suppose that was due to my having been brought up in the country."

"Any reasoning man," continued his tutor, ignoring the interruption, "who keeps a steady mind, can tell which side is the aggressor in ninety wars out of a hundred. He can see which side is likely to benefit by going to war in the first place, and that is a strong reason for suspicion. He can see which side began to make the threat of force or was the first to arm itself. And finally he can often put his finger on the one who struck the first blow."

"But supposing," said Kay, "that one side was the one to make the threat, while the other side was the one to strike the first blow?"

"Oh, go and put your head in a bucket. I'm not suggesting that all of them can be decided. I was saying, from the start of the argument, that there are many wars in which the aggression is as plain as a pike-staff, and that in those wars at any rate it might be the duty of decent men to fight the criminal. If you aren't sure that he is the criminal—and you must sum it up for yourself with every ounce of fairness you can muster—then go and be a pacifist by all means. I recollect that I was a fervent pacifist myself once, in the Boer War, when my own country was the aggressor, and a young woman blew a squeaker at me on Mafeking Night."

"Tell us about Mafeking Night," said Kay. "One gets sick of these discussions about right and wrong."

"Mafeking Night..." began the magician, who was prepared to tell anybody about anything. But the King prevented him.

"Tell us about Lot," he said. "I want to know about him, if I have to fight him. Personally I am beginning to be interested in right and wrong."

"King Lot..." began Merlyn in the same tone of voice, only to be interrupted by Kay.

"No," said Kay. "Talk about the Queen. She sounds more interesting."

"Queen Morgause..."

Arthur assumed the right of veto for the first time in his life. Merlyn, catching the lifted eyebrow, reverted to the King of Orkney with unexpected humility.

"King Lot," said he, "is simply a member of your peerage and landed royalty. He's a cipher. You don't have to think about him at all."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, he is what we used to call in my young days a Gentleman of the Ascendancy. His subjects are Gaels and so is his wife, but he himself is an import from Norway. He is a Gall like yourself, a member of the ruling class who conquered the Islands long ago. This means that his attitude to the war is the same as your father's would have been. He doesn't care a fig about Gaels or Galls, but he goes in for wars in the same way as my Victorian friends used to go in for foxhunting or else for profit in ransoms. Besides, his wife makes him."

"Sometimes," said the King, "I wish you had been born forwards like other people. What with Victorians and Mafeking Night..."

Merlyn was indignant.

"The link between Norman warfare and Victorian foxhunting is perfect. Leave your father and King Lot outside the question for the moment, and look at literature. Look at the Norman myths about legendary figures like the Angevin kings. From William the Conqueror to Henry the Third, they indulged in warfare seasonally. The season came round, and off they went to the meet in splendid armour which reduced the risk of injury to a foxhunter's minimum. Look at the decisive battle of Brenneville in which a field of nine hundred knights took part, and only three were killed. Look at Henry the Second borrowing money from Stephen, to pay his own troops in fighting Stephen. Look at the sporting etiquette, according to which Henry had to withdraw from a siege as soon as his enemy Louis joined the defenders inside the town, because Louis was his feudal overlord. Look at the siege of Mont St. Michel, at which it was considered unsporting to win through the defenders' lack of water. Look at the battle of Malmesbury, which was

given up on account of bad weather. That is the inheritance to which you have succeeded, Arthur. You have become the king of a domain in which the popular agitators hate each other for racial reasons, while the nobility fight each other for fun, and neither the racial maniac nor the overlord stops to consider the lot of the common soldier, who is the one person that gets hurt. Unless you can make the world wag better than it does at present, King, your reign will be an endless series of petty battles, in which the aggressions will either be from spiteful reasons or from sporting ones, and in which the poor man will be the only one who dies. That is why I have been asking you to think. That is why. . . ."

"I think," said Kay, "that Dinadan is waving to us, to say that dinner is ready."

5

Mother Morlan's house in the Out Isles was hardly bigger than a large dog kennel—but it was comfortable and full of interesting things. There were two horseshoes nailed on the door—five statues bought from pilgrims, with the used-up rosaries wound round them—for beads break, if one is a good prayer—several bunches of fairy-flax laid on top of the salt-box—some scapulars wound round the poker—twenty bottles of mountain dew, all empty but one—about a bushel of withered palm, relic of Palm Sundays for the past seventy years—and plenty of woollen thread for tying round the cow's tail when she was calving. There was also a large scythe blade which the old lady hoped to use on a burglar—if ever one was foolish enough to come that way—and, in the chimney, there were hung some ash-rungs which her deceased husband had been intending to use for flails, together with eel skins and strips of horse leather as hangings to them. Under the eel skins was an enormous bottle of holy water, and in front of the turf fire sat one of the Irish Saints who lived in the beehive cells of the outer islands, with a glass of water-of-life in his hand. He was a re-

lapsed saint, who had fallen into the Pelagian heresy of Celestius, and he believed that the soul was capable of its own salvation. He was busy saving it with Mother Morlan and the usquebaugh.

"God and Mary to you, Mother Morlan," said Gawaine. "We have come for a story, ma'am, about the shee."

"God and Mary and Andrew to you," exclaimed the beldame. "And you asking me for a story, whateffer, with his reverence here among the ashes!"

"Good evening, St. Toirdealbhach, we did not notice you because of the dark."

"The blessing of God to you."

"The same blessing to you yourself."

"It must be about murders," said Agravaire. "About murders and some corbies which peck out your eyes."

"No, no," cried Gareth. "It must be about a mysterious girl who marries a man because he has stolen the giant's magic horse."

"Glory be to God," remarked St. Toirdealbhach. "It does be a strange story yer after wanting entirely."

"Come now, St. Toirdealbhach, tell us one yourself."

"Tell us about Ireland."

"Tell us about Queen Maeve, who desired the bull."

"Or dance us one of the jigs."

"Maircy on the pair bairns, to think of his holiness dancing a jig!"

The four representatives of the upper classes sat down wherever they could—there were only two stools—and stared at the holy man in receptive silence.

"Is it a moral tale yer after?"

"No, no. No morals. We like a story about fighting. Come, St. Toirdealbhach, what about the time you broke the Bishop's head?"

The saint drank a big gulp of his white whisky and spat in the fire.

"There was a king in it one time," said he, and the whole audience made a rustling noise with their rumps, as they settled down.

"There was a king in it, one time," said St. Toirdealbhach, "and this king, what do you think, was called King Conor Mac Nessa. He was a whale of a man who lived with his relations at a place called Tara of the Kings. It was not long before this king had to go out to battle against thim bloody O'Haras, and he got shot in the conflict with a magic ball.

ing—for they could tell by the armour—and, if so, knights of that very King Arthur against whom their own king had for the second time revolted. Had they come, with typical Sassenach cunning, so as to take King Lot in the rear? Had they come, as representatives of the feudal overlord—the Landlord—so as to make an assessment for the next scutage? Were they Fifth Columnists? More complicated even than this—for surely no Sassenach could be so simple as to come in the garb of the Sassenach—were they perhaps not representatives of King Arthur at all? Were they, for some purpose almost too cunning for belief, only disguised as themselves? Where was the catch? There always was one in everything.

The people of the circle closed in, their jaws dropping even further, their crooked bodies hunching into the shapes of sacks and scarecrows, their small eyes glinting in every direction with unfathomable subtlety, their faces assuming an expression of dogged stupidity even more vacant than they actually were.

The knights drew closer for protection. In point of fact, they did not know that England was at war with Orkney. They had been involved in a Quest, which had kept them away from the latest news. Nobody in Orkney was likely to tell them.

"Don't look just now," said King Pellinore, "but there are some people. Do you think they are all right?"

6

In Carlion everything was at sixes and sevens in preparation for the second campaign. Merlyn had made suggestions about the way to win it, but, as these involved an ambush with secret aid from abroad, they had had to be kept dark. Lot's slowly approaching army was so much more numerous than the King's forces that it had been necessary to resort to stratagems. The way in which the battle was to be fought was a secret only known to four people.

The common citizens, who were in ignorance of the

higher policy, had a great deal to do. There were pikes to be ground to a fine edge, so that the grindstones in the town were roaring day and night—there were thousands of arrows to be dressed, so that there were lights in the fletchers' houses at all hours—and the unfortunate geese on the commons were continually being chased by excited yeomen who wanted feathers. The royal peacocks were as bare as an old broom—most of the crack shots liked to have what Chaucer calls peacock arwes, because they were more classy—and the smell of boiling glue rose to high heaven. The armourers, accomplishing the knights, hammered away with musical clinks, working double shifts at it, and the blacksmiths shod the chargers, and the nuns never stopped knitting comforters for the soldiers or making the kind of bandages which were called tents. King Lot had already named a rendezvous for the battle, at Bedegraine.

The King of England painfully climbed the two hundred and eight steps which led to Merlyn's tower room, and knocked on the door. The magician was inside, with Archimedes sitting on the back of his chair, busily trying to find the square root of minus one. He had forgotten how to do it.

"Merlyn," said the King, panting, "I want to talk to you."

He closed his book with a bang, leaped to his feet, seized his wand of *lignum vitae*, and rushed at Arthur as if he were trying to shoo away a stray chicken.

"Go away!" he shouted. "What are you doing here? What do you mean by it? Aren't you the King of England? Go away and send for me! Get out of my room! I never heard of such a thing! Go away at once and send for me!"

"But I am here."

"No, you're not," retorted the old man resourcefully. And he pushed the King out of the door, slamming it in his face.

"Well!" said Arthur, and he went off sadly down the two hundred and eight stairs.

An hour later, Merlyn presented himself in the Royal Chamber, in answer to a summons which had been delivered by a page.

"That's better," he said, and sat down comfortably on a carpet chest.

"Stand up," said Arthur, and he clapped his hands for a page to take away the seat.

Merlyn stood up, boiling with indignation. The whites of his knuckles blanched as he clenched them.

"About our conversation on the subject of chivalry," began the King in an airy tone. . . .

"I don't recollect such a conversation."

"No?"

"I have never been so insulted in my life!"

"But I am the King," said Arthur. "You can't sit down in front of the King."

"Rubbish!"

Arthur began to laugh more than was seemly, and his foster-brother, Sir Kay, and his old guardian, Sir Ector, came out from behind the throne, where they had been hiding. Kay took off Merlyn's hat and put it on Sir Ector, and Sir Ector said, "Well, bless my soul, now I am a nigromancer. Hocus-Pocus." Then everybody began laughing, including Merlyn eventually, and seats were sent for so that they could sit down, and bottles of wine were opened so that it should not be a dry meeting.

"You see," he said proudly, "I have summoned a council."

There was a pause, for it was the first time that Arthur had made a speech, and he wanted to collect his wits for it.

"Well," said the King. "It is about chivalry. I want to talk about that."

Merlyn was immediately watching him with a sharp eye. His knobbed fingers fluttered among the stars and secret signs of his gown, but he would not help the speaker. You might say that this moment was the critical one in his career—the moment towards which he had been living backward for heaven knows how many centuries, and now he was to see for certain whether he had lived in vain.

"I have been thinking," said Arthur, "about Might and Right. I don't think things ought to be done because you are *able* to do them. I think they should be done because you *ought* to do them. After all, a penny is a penny in any case, however much Might is exerted on either side, to prove that it is or is not. Is that plain?"

Nobody answered.

"Well, I was talking to Merlyn on the battlements one day, and he mentioned that the last battle we had—in which seven hundred kerns were killed—was not so much fun as I had thought it was. Of course, battles are not fun when you come to think about them. I mean, people ought not to be killed, ought they? It is better to be alive.

"Very well. But the funny thing is that Merlyn was help-

ing me to win battles. He is still helping me, for that matter, and we hope to win the battle of Bedegraine together, when it comes off."

"We will," said Sir Ector, who was in the secret.

"That seems to me to be inconsistent. Why does he help me to fight wars, if they are bad things?"

There was no answer from anybody, and the King began to speak with agitation.

"I could only think," said he, beginning to blush, "I could only think that I—that we—that he—that he wanted me to win them for a reason."

He paused and looked at Merlyn, who turned his head away.

"The reason was—was it?—the reason was that if I could be the master of my kingdom by winning these two battles, I could stop them afterwards and then do something about the business of Might. Have I guessed? Was I right?"

The magician did not turn his head, and his hands lay still in his lap.

"I was!" exclaimed Arthur.

And he began talking so quickly that he could hardly keep up with himself.

"You see," he said, "Might is not Right. But there is a lot of Might knocking about in this world, and something has to be done about it. It is as if People were half horrible and half nice. Perhaps they are even more than half horrible, and when they are left to themselves they run wild. You get the average baron that we see nowadays, people like Sir Bruce Sans Pitié, who simply go clod-hopping round the country dressed in steel, and doing exactly what they please, for sport. It is our Norman idea about the upper classes having a monopoly of power, without reference to justice. Then the horrible side gets uppermost, and there is thieving and rape and plunder and torture. The people become beasts.

"But, you see, Merlyn is helping me to win my two battles so that I can stop this. He wants me to put things right.

"Lot and Uriens and Anguish and those—they are the old world, the old-fashioned order who want to have their private will. I have got to vanquish them with their own weapons—they force it upon me, because they live by force—and then the real work will begin. This battle at Bedegraine is the preliminary, you see. It is *after* the battle that Merlyn is wanting me to think about."

Arthur paused again for comment or encouragement, but the magician's face was turned away. It was only Sir Ector, sitting next to him, who could see his eyes.

"Now what I have thought," said Arthur, "is this. Why can't you harness Might so that it works for Right? I know it sounds nonsense, but, I mean, you can't just say there is no such thing. The Might is there, in the bad half of people, and you can't neglect it. You can't cut it out, but you might be able to direct it, if you see what I mean, so that it was useful instead of bad."

The audience was interested. They leaned forward to listen, except Merlyn.

"My idea is that if we can win this battle in front of us, and get a firm hold of the country, then I will institute a sort of order of chivalry. I will not punish the bad knights, or hang Lot, but I will try to get them into our Order. We shall have to make it a great honour, you see, and make it fashionable and all that. Everybody must want to be in. And then I shall make the oath of the order that Might is only to be used for Right. Do you follow? The knights in my order will ride all over the world, still dressed in steel and whacking away with their swords—that will give an outlet for wanting to whack, you understand, an outlet for what Merlyn calls the foxhunting spirit—but they will be bound to strike only on behalf of what is good, to defend virgins against Sir Bruce and to restore what has been done wrong in the past and to help the oppressed and so forth. Do you see the idea? It will be using the Might instead of fighting against it, and turning a bad thing into a good. There, Merlyn, that is all I can think of. I have thought as hard as I could, and I suppose I am wrong, as usual. But I did think. I can't do any better. Please say something!"

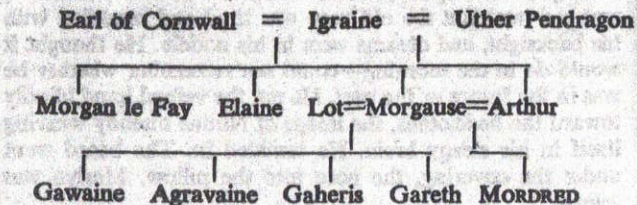
The magician stood up as straight as a pillar, stretched out his arms in both directions, looked at the ceiling and said the first few words of the Nunc Dimittis.

7

The situation at Dunlothian was complicated. Nearly every situation tended to be when it was connected with King Pellinore, even in the wildest North. In the first place, he was in love—that was why he had been weeping in the boat. He explained it to Queen Morgause on the first opportunity—because he was lovesick, not seasick.

What had happened was this. The King had been hunting the Questing Beast a few months earlier, on the south coast of Gramarye, when the animal had taken to the sea. She had swam away, her serpentine head undulating on the surface like a swimming grass-snake, and the King had hailed a passing ship which looked as if it were off to the Crusades. Sir Grummor and Sir Palomides had been in the ship, and they had kindly turned it round to pursue the Beast. The three of them had arrived on the coast of Flanders, where the Beast had disappeared in a forest, and there, while they were staying at a hospitable castle, Pellinore had fallen in love with the Queen of Flanders' daughter. This was fine so far as it went—for the lady of his choice was a managing, middle-aged, stout-hearted creature, who could cook, ride a straight line, and make beds—but the hopes of all parties had been dashed at the start by the arrival of the magic barge. The three knights had got into it, and sat down to see what would happen, because knights were never supposed to refuse an adventure. But the barge had promptly sailed away of its own accord, leaving the Queen of Flanders' daughter anxiously waving her pocket handkerchief. The Questing Beast had thrust her head out of the forest before they lost sight of land, looking, so far as they could see at the distance, even more surprised than the lady. After that, they had gone on sailing till they arrived in the Out Isles, and the further they went the more lovesick the King had become, which made his company intolerable. He spent the time writing poems and letters, which could never

Whatever the explanation may have been, the Queen of Air and Darkness had a baby by her half-brother nine months later. It was called Mordred. And this, as Merlyn drew it later, was what the magician called its pied-de-grue:



Even if you have to read it twice, like something in a history lesson, this pedigree is a vital part of the tragedy of King Arthur. It is why Sir Thomas Malory called his very long book the *Death of Arthur*. Although nine tenths of the story seems to be about knights jousting and quests for the holy grail and things of that sort, the narrative is a whole, and it deals with the reasons why the young man came to grief at the end. It is the tragedy, the Aristotelian and comprehensive tragedy, of sin coming home to roost. That is why we have to take note of the parentage of Arthur's son Mordred, and to remember, when the time comes, that the king had slept with his own sister. He did not know he was doing so, and perhaps it may have been due to her, but it seems, in tragedy, that innocence is not enough.

EXPLICIT LIBER SECUNDUS

*Incipit Liber
Tertius*

THE
ILL-MADE
KNIGHT