

STORIES OF
KING ARTHUR



STORIES OF KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS

RETOLD FROM MALORY'S "MORTE DARTHUR"

BY

U. WALDO CUTLER

*The goodliest fellowship of famous knights
Whereof this world holds record.*

TENNYSON



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Elaine

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Fv.

ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
ELAINE (J. M. Strudwick) <i>Frontispiece</i>	
THE DEDICATION (J. Pettie, R.A.) .	4
MERLIN AND NIMUE (Burne-Jones) .	30
SIR TRISTRAM AND THE FAIR ISOUD (D. G. Rossetti) .	102
SIR GALAHAD (G. F. Watts) .	134
SIR LAUNCELOT AT THE CROSS (Stella Langdale) .	144
ELAINE IN THE BARGE (Margaret W. Tarrant)	184
QUEEN GUENEVER (D. G. Rossetti) .	210

"We have from the kind Creator a variety of mental powers, to which we must not neglect giving their proper culture in our earliest years, and which cannot be cultivated either by logic or metaphysics, Latin or Greek. We have an imagination, before which, since it should not seize upon the very first conceptions that chance to present themselves, we ought to place the fittest and most beautiful images, and thus accustom and practise the mind to recognise and love the beautiful everywhere."

Quoted from Wieland by Goethe in his Autobiography

Introduction

AMONG the best liked stories of five or six hundred years ago were those which told of chivalrous deeds—of joust and tourney and knightly adventure. To be sure, these stories were not set forth in printed books, for there were no printed books as early as the times of the first three King Edwards, and few people could have read them if there had been any. But children and grown people alike were eager to hear these old-time tales read or recited by the minstrels, and the interest in them has continued in some measure through all the changing years and tastes. We now, in the times of the seventh King Edward, still find them far more worth our while than many modern stories. For us they have a special interest, because of home setting and Christian basis, and they may well share in our attention with the legends of Greece and Rome.

In these early romances of chivalry, Arthur and his knights of the Round Table are by far the most popular heroes, and the finding of the Holy Grail is the highest achievement of knightly valour. The material for the Arthur stories came from many countries and from many different periods of history. Much of it is wholly fanciful, but the writers connected all the incidents directly or indirectly with the old Briton king of the fifth century, who was the model of knighthood, "without fear and without reproach."

Perhaps there was a real King Arthur, who led the Britons against the Saxon invaders of their land, who was killed by his traitor nephew, and who was buried at Glastonbury,—the valley of Avilion of the legends; perhaps there was a slight historical nucleus around which all the romantic material was crystallising through the centuries, but the Arthur of romance came largely from the imagination of the early writers.

And yet, though our "own ideal knight" may never have trod the soil of Britain or Roman or Saxon England, his chivalrous character and the knightly deeds of his followers are real to us, if we read them rightly, for "the poet's ideal was the truest truth." Though the sacred vessel—the Holy Grail—of the Christ's last supper with His disciples has not been borne about the earth in material form, to be seen only by those of stainless life and character, it is eternally true that the "pure in heart" are "blessed," "for they shall see God." This is what the Quest of the Holy Grail means, and there is still many a true Sir Galahad, who can say, as he did,

"My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure,"

and who attains the highest glory of knighthood, as before his clear vision

"down dark tides the glory glides,
And starlike mingles with the stars."

We call these beautiful stories of long ago Stories of Chivalry, for, in the Middle Ages, chivalry influenced all that people did and said and thought. It began in the times of Charlemagne, a hundred years before our

own King Alfred, and only very gradually it made its way through all the social order. Charlemagne was really a very great man, and because he was so, he left Western Europe a far better place to live in than he found it. Into the social life of his time he brought something like order and justice and peace, and so he greatly helped the Christian Church to do its work of teaching the rough and warlike Franks and Saxons and Normans the gentle ways of thrift and helpfulness.

Charlemagne's "heerban," or call to arms, required that certain of his men should attend him on horseback, and this mounted service was the beginning of what is known as chivalry. The lesser nobles of each feudal chief served their overlords on horseback, *à cheval*, in times of war; they were called *knights*, which originally meant servants,—German *knechte*; and the system of knighthood, its rules, customs, and duties, was called chivalry,—French *chevalerie*.

Chivalry belongs chiefly to the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries,—to about the time between King Richard of the Lion Heart and Prince Hal. There is no trace of ideas peculiar to it in the writings of the old Anglo-Saxons or in the *Nibelungen Lied* of Germany. Geoffrey of Monmouth, who died, it is said, in the year 1154, is about the earliest writer who mentions customs that belong especially to chivalry. The Crusades, of Geoffrey's century and of the one following, gave much opportunity for its growth and practice; but in the fifteenth century chivalrous fashions and fancies began to seem absurd, and later, perhaps partly through the ridicule of that old-time book "Don Quixote," chivalry was finally laughed quite out of existence.

The order of knighthood was given only after years of

training and discipline. From his seventh year to his fourteenth the nobleman's son was a *page* at the court or in the castle of his patron, learning the principles of religion, obedience, and gallantry. At fourteen, as a *squire*, the boy began a severer course of training, in order to become skilled in horsemanship, and to gain strength and courage, as well as the refinements and graces necessary in the company of knights and ladies.

Finally, at twenty-one, his training was complete, and with elaborate and solemn formality the *squire* was made a *knight*. Then, after a strict oath to be loyal, courteous, and brave, the armour was buckled on, and the proud young chevalier rode out into the world, strong for good or ill in limb, strong in impenetrable armour, strong in a social custom that lifted him above the common people about him.

When rightly exercised chivalry was a great blessing to the people of its time. It offered high ideals of pure-minded, warm-hearted, courtly, courageous Christian manhood. It did much to arouse thought, to quicken sympathy, to purify morals, to make men truly brave and loyal. Of course this ideal of character was not in the days of chivalry—ideals are not often now—very fully realised. The Mediæval, like the Modern, abused his power of muscle, of sword, of rank. His liberty as a knight-errant sometimes descended into the licence of a highwayman; his pride in the opportunity for helpfulness grew to be the braggadocio of a bully; his freedom of personal choice became the insolence of lawlessness; his pretended purity and justice proved wanton selfishness.

Because of these abuses that crept into the system, it is well for the world that gunpowder at last came, to break through the knight's coat of mail, to teach the nobility

respect for common men, roughly to end this age of so much superficial politeness and savage bravery, and to bring in a more democratic social order.

The books of any age are for us a record of how the people of that age thought, how they lived, and what kind of men and women they tried to be. The old romances of chivalry give us clear pictures of the knights and ladies of the Middle Ages, and we shall lose the delight and the profit they may give us, if we think only of the defects of chivalry, and close our eyes to the really worthy motives of those far-off times, and so miss seeing what chivalry was able to do, while it lasted, to make men and women better and happier.

Before reading the Arthur stories themselves it is well to know something about the way they have been built up, as one writer after another has taken the material left by predecessors, and has worked into it fresh conceptions of things brave and true. First there was the old Latin chronicle of Nennius, the earliest trace of Arthurian fact or fancy, with a single paragraph given to Arthur and his twelve great battles. This chronicle itself may have been based on yet earlier Welsh stories, which had been passed on, perhaps for centuries, by oral tradition from father to son, and gradually woven together into some legendary history of Oldest England in the local language of Brittany, across the English Channel. This original book is referred to by later writers, but was long ago lost. Geoffrey of Monmouth says it was the source of his material for his "*Historia Britonum*." Geoffrey's history, in Latin prose, written some time about the middle of the twelfth century, remains as the earliest definite record of the legends connected with King Arthur.

Only a little later Geoffrey's Latin history was translated by Wace and others into Norman French, and here the Arthur material first appeared in verse form. Then, still later in the twelfth century, Walter Map worked the same stories over into French prose, and at the same time put so much of his own knowledge and imagination with them, that we may almost say that he was the maker of the Arthur romances.

Soon after the year twelve hundred,—a half century after Geoffrey of Monmouth first set our English ancestors to thinking about the legendary old hero of the times of the Anglo-Saxon conquest—Layamon, parish priest of Ernly, in Worcestershire, gave to the English language (as distinct from the earlier Anglo-Saxon) his poem "Brut." This was a translation and enlargement of Wace's old French poem having Arthur as hero. So these stories of King Arthur, of Welsh or Celtic origin, came through the Latin, and then through French verse and prose, into our own speech, and so began their career down the centuries of our more modern history.

After giving ideas to generation after generation of romance writers of many countries and in many languages, these same romantic stories were, in the fifteenth century, skilfully brought together into one connected prose narrative,—one of the choicest of the older English classics, "*Le Morte Darthur*," by Sir Thomas Malory. Those were troublous times when Sir Thomas, perhaps after having himself fought and suffered in the Wars of the Roses then in progress, found some quiet spot in Warwickshire in which to put together in lasting form the fine old stories that already in his day were classics.

Malory finished his book in 1470, and its permanence

for all time was assured fifteen years later, when Caxton, after the "symple connyng" that God had sent him (to use the quaint forms of expression then common), "under the favour and correctyon of al noble lordes and gentylmen emprysed to emprynte a book of the noble hystories of the sayd Kynge Arthur and of certeyn of his knyghtes after a cople unto him delyuerd whyche cople Syr Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensche and reduced it in to Englysche." This hard-headed business man,—this fifteenth-century publisher,—was rather doubtful about the Briton king of a thousand years before his day, and to those urging upon him the venture of printing Malory's book he answered: "Dyuers men holde oppynyon that there was no suche Arthur and that alle suche bookes as been maad of hym ben fayned and fables by cause that somme cronycles make of him no mencyon ne remember him noo thyng ne of his knyghtes."

But the arguments of those in favour of the undertaking prevailed, greatly to the advantage of the four centuries that have followed, during which "*Le Morte Darthur*" has been a constant source of poetic inspiration. Generation after generation of readers and of writers have drawn life from its chapters, and the new delight in Tennyson's "*Idylls of the King*," almost of our own time, shows that the fountain has not yet been drained dry.

Malory's "*Morte Darthur*" is a long book, and its really great interest is partly hidden from us by forms of expression that belong only to the time when it was first written. Besides this, the ideas of what was right and proper in conduct and speech—moral standards—were far lower in Malory's day than they are now.

The purpose of this new little volume is to bring the old tales freshly to the attention of young people of the present time. It keeps, as far as may be, the exact language and the spirit of the original, chooses such stories as best represent the whole, and modifies these only in order to remove what could possibly hide the thought, or be so crude in taste and morals as to seem unworthy of the really high-minded author of five hundred years ago. It aims also so to condense the book that, in this age of hurry, readers may not be repelled from the tales merely because of their length.

Chivalry of just King Arthur's kind was given up long ago, but that for which it stood—human fellowship in noble purpose—is far older than the institution of knighthood or than even the traditions of the energetic, brave, true, helpful King Arthur himself. It links us with all the past and all the future. The knights of the twentieth century do not set out in chain-armour to right the wrongs of the oppressed by force of arms, but the best influences of chivalry have been preserved for the quickening of a broader and a nobler world than was ever in the dreams of knight-errant of old. Modern heroes of the genuine type owe more than they know to those of Arthur's court who swore :

“To reverence the King, as if he were
Their conscience, and their conscience as their King,
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honour his own word as if his God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they won her.”

"Antiquity produced heroes, but not gentlemen," someone has said. In the days of Charlemagne and Alfred began the training which, continued in the days of Chaucer and Sir Thomas Malory and many, many more, has given to this our age that highest type of manhood, the Christian gentleman.

U. W. C.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	xi
CHAPTER	
I. OF THE BIRTH OF KING ARTHUR	i
II. UTHUR'S SON, RIGHTWISE KING OF ALL ENGLAND	4
III. HOW ARTHUR GAT HIS SWORD EXCALIBUR	9
IV. BALIN AND BALAN	13
V. THE NOBLE ORDER OF THE ROUND TABLE	21
VI. THE LADIES' KNIGHT	26
VII. WISE MERLIN'S FOOLISHNESS	30
VIII. A STAG-HUNT AND WHAT CAME OF IT	33
IX. THE TREACHERY OF MORGAN LE FAY	40
X. SIR LAUNCELOT OF THE LAKE	45
XI. A NIGHT-TIME ADVENTURE OF SIR LAUNCELOT	48
XII. HOW SIR LAUNCELOT CAME INTO THE CHAPEL PERILOUS	53
XIII. THE KNIGHT, THE LADY, AND THE FALCON	57
XIV. HOW A KITCHEN-PAGE CAME TO HONOUR	60