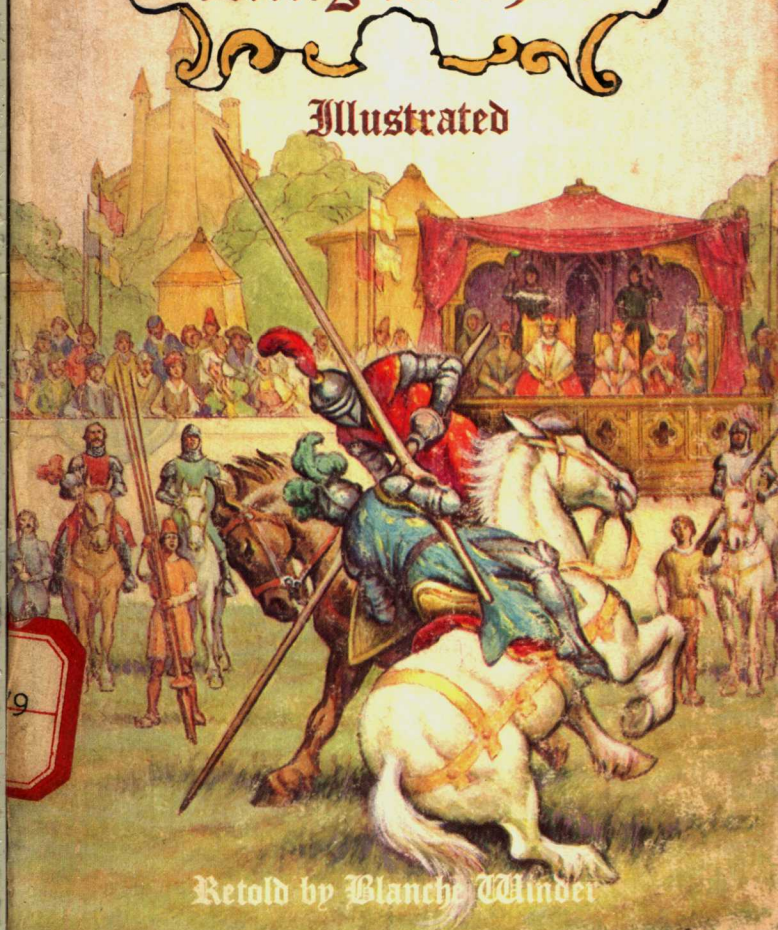


Stories of King Arthur

Illustrated



Retold by Blanche Winder

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Introduction

King Arthur was the hero-chief of ancient Britain, about whom stories were told and songs were sung from the fifth century to the fifteenth, when Sir Thomas Malory wrote his great book *La Morte D'Arthur*. But Malory's book does not contain all the tales; and many of those related in this volume are taken directly from other and earlier sources. The first British historian who wrote seriously of Arthur was a Welsh bishop, Geoffrey of Monmouth. He composed, in the twelfth century, a marvelous Latin book about the King, and also about Merlin. Other books followed, mostly in French, written by poets attached to the brilliant courts of the period. An old Welsh book, which was translated in the last century by Lady Charlotte Guest, under the name of *The Mabinogion*, also contains several stories of Arthur. One of these is retold in the following pages as the *Tale of the Pig-Sty Prince*. Again, many beautiful stories are told of the mysterious cup called *The Holy Grail*, and of the adventures of Arthur's knights as they searched for that lost treasure. The loveliest of these tales were used by Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King*. If it seems strange to read

of magnificent feasts and tournaments in connection with an ancient British chief, we must remember that most of the poems and stories were composed in the days of chivalry, and give us pictures of that period. A curious fact is that exactly the same tales were told in Brittany as in Wales; and Broeiliande, in the former country, is supposed to be the enchanted forest in which Merlin is now imprisoned. Many places, too, claim to be the real Avalon, the lovely island to which Arthur was taken after his last battle, and from which legend says he will one day come again. Indeed, there seems to be no end to the Arthur stories, which are contained literally in hundreds of books in English, French, and other Continental libraries.

Merlin

It was midnight. On top of a high mountain hundreds of wicked fairy-men were sitting or standing in strange shadowy groups under the tiny light of a new moon. They were talking eagerly and gloomily among themselves, and the low, deep murmur of their voices was like the sound of an angry sea. Below them were the dim houses of the villages, with many a shadowy church tower rising above the roofs. And the wicked fairy-men were saying to one another that there were too many such churches nowadays, and that every good man or good woman in the human world made the power of themselves, the spirits of evil, grow less.

A terrible-looking old wizard, with a face dark and knotted like the faces you may sometimes think you see among the tree boughs, and with a beard almost as long and gray as the long gray valley mists, spoke louder than the rest. He was as clever as he was wicked, and all the others hushed their talk to listen to him.

"What we must do," said he, "is to persuade a human maiden to marry one of us. Their children will, of course, be half-men and half-fairies. The

eldest child will soon belong entirely to us, and, through him, we can regain the power in the world that we are losing so fast."

All the wicked fairy-men nodded their heads and clapped their hands. And from the valley below, they might have been a lot of ragged creaking pine trees shaking their cones together in a high wind.

"Good! Good!" they said, all together. "Very good!"

They might more truthfully have said, "Bad! Bad! Very bad!" For that was what they really meant.

The terrible old wizard glanced round the circle of dim, moonlit faces in search of one that was nice looking. But each was uglier than the last. He shook his gray head doubtfully.

"A lovely Princess lives in the castle on the opposite side of the valley," he declared. "She is the maiden I have in mind. But I do not think she would be likely to fall in love with one of us!"

Then a dark fairy-man stepped out from the rest. For all that he was quite one of the youngest among them, he had just kept his thousandth birthday. His long, lean hands were like birds' claws as he held them up to command attention.

"I know something of the Princess," said he. "She is a careless young thing. And now and then she goes to bed and to sleep without asking our



greatest enemies, the white spirits of the air, to protect her."

"Ah-h-h-h!" hissed all the wicked fairy-men together. "Then she puts herself in our power! Good! Good! Very good!" And, "Bad! Bad! Very bad!" went the echo of their words up to the silver stars.

The awful old wizard chuckled with delight. "Go quickly!" he cried to the young fairy-man who was a thousand years old. "Put on your bat's wings and fly to her window! If the white spirits of the air are not there, you will be able to get in, and to change yourself into anything you like!"

So the bad fairy-man fastened on his bat's wings and swept over the valley, quite hiding, for a minute, the pearly light of the moon. A jeweled lamp was set in the Princess's window, shining with a pretty golden light. But there were no white spirits hovering near. The poor little Princess had gone to bed, forgetting all about them.

So the fairy-man folded his black wings and slipped in at the open casement. And there, under the shadow of the soft silken curtains, the sweetest maiden in the world lay asleep, knowing nothing at all about her terrible visitor.

He tiptoed up to her, a dark, mysterious, cruel shadow. Then, all at once, she opened her eyes and saw him. But the good spirits were very far away, and could not show him as he really was.

And so the Princess smiled and lay looking at him. She was half dreaming; and in her dream, the old bad fairy-man seemed to be a beautiful gold-clad Prince. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her to the window sill. And then all the other wicked fairy-men came flapping about the castle on their great dark wings, so that you might have thought the roof was quite hidden by black clouds. But the little Princess was still dreaming of the beautiful Fairy Prince and of a wonderful palace, built of gold and mother-o'-pearl, where he lived with magnificently dressed courtiers to wait on him. In this dream, she married him with all the proper fairy ceremonies, and sat with him on his throne under a canopy of rubies and gold.

Night after night, the Princess dreamed this, but she always forgot all about her dream in the daytime. At last she seemed to go to sleep for a much longer time than usual, and to dream that a wonderful fairy-child was born in the gold and mother-o'-pearl palace, and that there were tremendous rejoicings all through the shining cloud-land where she and the Fairy Prince reigned as King and Queen.

Then, in her dream, there came to her for the first time the memory of the white spirits of the air. And she told the Fairy Prince, and all his courtiers, that the little baby must be christened immediately.

Behold! A great clap of thunder shook the air!

The golden light changed to darkness and the Prince and his courtiers into strange and terrible beings with wide black wings like bats. They flew hither and thither in a whirring angry crowd, and seemed to be calling to each other, "Bad! Bad! Very bad!" as they shook upon the air like storm-driven leaves. And the Princess woke in terror, to find herself quite alone, shut up in a big deserted tower, with nobody near but the fairy baby upon her knees.

She began to cry bitterly, when lo! a soft, kind little voice came from the rosy mouth of the tiny thing on her lap, which frightened her so much that she dropped the baby, but picked it up again as quickly as possible.

"Don't cry," said the little sweet baby. "I know a way to comfort and help you. And, through me, all sorts of wonderful things will come to pass."

The Princess held her little child more closely, already cheered, though still a good deal frightened, and wondering why she was shut up in a tower all by herself with the fairy baby. Then a step came up, up, up the long, winding stair, the key turned in the lock, the door opened, and a good and holy man called Blaise, who looked at her gravely but very kindly, stood on the threshold of the dreary room that was her prison.

"Oh, Blaise! Dear Blaise!" cried the poor little Princess. "What has happened?"

Blaise came up to her and put his hand on her long golden hair.

"My little Princess," said he, "it is for *you* to tell us what has happened. Strange stories are being told about you. People say that *you*—you who are a great and good King's daughter—have been, for many months, in the power of the wicked fairy-men who live on the mountain. They tell of seeing these dreadful people flying round the castle every night like enormous bats. And they declare that you have been married to one of them, secretly, and that the little baby in your arms is the son, not of a baptized human Prince, but of a Prince of wickedness and darkness, and terrible, cruel ways, like the ways of the wizards who are the enemies of men."

Then the Princess cried more bitterly than ever, and told Blaise all about it. For, at last, she remembered in the daytime the dreams of the handsome Prince, and the wonderful kingdom which he reigned over in his palace of crystal and mother-o'-pearl and gold.

"Oh, Blaise!" she sobbed. "I think it must have happened because I went to sleep without asking for the guardianship of the white spirits who love me! They went away and left me! But surely, surely, they can be brought back again!"

Then Blaise hurried off, and came back with a silver chalice full of water drawn from a well where the white spirits might often be seen flying

about at sunset. And, then and there, he christened the little fairy baby—who had been listening to and understanding every word that was said—naming him Merlin. And when the water from the well sparkled in bright drops all among the baby's golden hair, little Merlin laughed and shouted with gladness, and clapped his small white hands.

"I am a human baby now!" he cried. (He could still talk quite easily, which was the only sign of the fairies left about him.) "But still I know things that other human babies will never know! And when I grow up I shall be able to use all sorts of wonderful powers that I have inherited from the fairy-men of the high mountain. But I shall use them for good, and not for evil. For, through me, a Round Table shall be given to a great King, and many knights shall sit about it, and the deeds these knights shall do will be blessed by the poor and the weak and the helpless, and sung by golden-mouthed poets for hundreds and hundreds of years!"

Then the little Princess hugged the baby even more closely, and Blaise led her down the steep, winding staircase back to her own chamber, where the white spirits who loved her flew, like snowy birds, backwards and forwards before the window, so that the wicked fairy-men of the mountain were never again able to get in.