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CLASSICS

ROGER LANCELYN GREEN

# King Arthur

and his Knights of the Round Table

INTRODUCED BY DAVID ALMOND

## *The Two Swords*

**A**fter wicked King Vortigern had first invited the Saxons to settle in Britain and help him to fight the Picts and Scots, the land was never long at peace. Although so much of it was covered with thick forests, much also was beautiful open country, with little villages and towns, country houses and cottages, as the Romans had left it not many years before. Having once seen it, the Saxons could never again be contented with their savage, unfruitful homes in Germany and Denmark; and year by year more and more of them came stealing across the North Sea in their long ships, to kill or drive out the Britons and settle in their homes.

Vortigern was dead, and Aurelius Ambrosius, last of the Romans, was dead too, when Uther Pendragon, whom some call the brother of Ambrosius, led the Britons. He defeated the Saxons in many battles, and brought peace to the southern lands where he was king – to London, and to Winchester, which was then called Camelot, and to Cornwall where Gorlois his loyal follower was duke.



But Uther fell in love with Gorlois's wife, the lovely Igrayne, and there was battle between them, until Gorlois fell, and Uther married his widow.

He visited her first in the haunted castle of Tintagel, the dark castle by the Cornish sea, and Merlin the enchanter watched over their love. One child was born to Uther and Igrayne – but what became of that baby boy only the wise Merlin could have told, for he carried it away by a secret path down the cliff side in the dead of night, and no word was spoken of its fate.

Uther had no other children, though Igrayne and Gorlois had three daughters: two of these were grown-up when Igrayne became queen, and were married – Morgawse to Lot, King of Orkney, and Elaine to Nantres, King of Garlot: they had sons who in after days were among the bravest Knights of the Round Table. But the third daughter, Morgana le Fay, was still only a child, and she was sent to school in a nunnery; yet, by some means, she learnt much magic, which she used wickedly.

King Uther Pendragon had only a little while of happiness with the fair Igrayne, for soon the Saxons made war against him once more, and sent a traitor to serve him, who poisoned the King and many of his followers.

Then the land fell upon days more evil and wretched than any which had gone before. King Uther's knights fought amongst themselves, quarrelling as to who should rule; and the Saxons, seeing that there was no strong man

to lead the Britons against them, conquered more and more of Britain.

Years of strife and misery went by, until the appointed time was at hand. Then Merlin, the good enchanter, came out from the deep, mysterious valleys of North Wales, which in those days was called Gwynedd, through Powys or South Wales, and passed on his way to London. And so great was his fame that neither Saxon nor Briton dared molest him.

Merlin came to London and spoke with the Archbishop; and a great gathering of knights was called for Christmas Day – so great that all of them could not find a place in the abbey church, so that some were forced to gather in the churchyard.

In the middle of the service, there arose suddenly a murmur of wonder outside the abbey: for there was seen, though no man saw it come, a great square slab of marble-stone in the churchyard, and on the stone an anvil of iron, and set point downwards a great, shining sword of steel thrust deeply into the anvil.

‘Stir not till the service be done,’ commanded the Archbishop when this marvel was made known to him. ‘But pray the more unto God that we may find a remedy for the sore wounds of our land.’

When the service was ended the Archbishop and the lords and knights who had been within the abbey came out to see the wonder of the sword. Round about the anvil



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