

THE LAST BATTLE

King Arthur and his army were encamped upon the Plain of Camlann not many days later, and scarcely a mile away Mordred waited for him with a great gathering of knights and men-at-arms who had thrown in their lot with him, choosing rather his easy and lawless rule than the high service of Arthur the good King of Logres.

After the Battle of Dover, Mordred had fled away defeated; but in a very little while news came that he was marching into the west country, harrying the lands of all those who would not fight for him. Then Arthur marched swiftly towards Cornwall and Lyonesse, and came one night to Camlann near where, so many years before, Merlin the good enchanter had brought him to receive his sword Excalibur from the Lady of the Lake.

That night Arthur could not sleep: for he knew that on the morrow there would be a great battle in which many more of his knights would fall, and he feared that this was the last of all his battles, which Merlin had foretold, when the realm of Logres should pass into the darkness. For already the Saxons, hearing of the strife and civil war, were pouring into Britain from the north and east – for the first time since the battle

of Mount Badon twenty-one years before – and now there was no fellowship of the Round Table ready to ride behind King Arthur at a moment's notice and drive out the barbarians wherever they might chance to land.

Arthur tossed and turned upon his bed in the royal tent until, near morning, he grew still. And then, neither sleeping nor waking, he beheld a strange thing. For suddenly it seemed to him that Sir Gawain, who lay buried in Dover Castle, came to him attended by a train of fair ladies:

'Welcome, dear nephew,' King Arthur said, or seemed to say, 'I thank God that I behold you alive whom I thought was dead. But tell me whence you come, and why attended by these ladies.'

'My dear lord king, my very dear lord king,' Sir Gawain answered, or seemed to answer, 'all these are ladies in whose cause I fought when I was a living man: for ever I fought in righteous quarrels only – and for this cause God has been very merciful to me, and has sent them to bring me hither to warn you of your passing. For if you fight with Sir Mordred this day, both of you will fall, and the most part of your people also. But I come to warn you, by God's grace, not to fight this day, but to make a truce with Sir Mordred, whatever his terms – a truce for one month. For within a month Launcelot will come with all his noble knights, and you and he together will slay Sir Mordred and overcome all that hold with him.'

Then Sir Gawain and the ladies vanished away, and in a little while King Arthur arose from his bed and called to him Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere. And when he had told them of how Sir Gawain had visited him,

and what his counsel had been, he bade them take two priests with them and go to make a month's truce with Sir Mordred.

'And spare not,' added the King, 'but offer him lands and goods as much as you think reasonable.'

So they came to where Mordred was with his great host of a hundred thousand men, and they treated with him for a long time. And at last he agreed to have Cornwall and Kent to be his at once, and the rest of Britain after King Arthur's death.

It was arranged that Arthur and Mordred were to meet midway between the two armies each attended by fourteen men only. Then King Arthur gave orders to his men: 'If you see any sword drawn, charge fiercely, and slay that traitor Sir Mordred, for I do not trust him.'

And Sir Mordred spoke likewise to his army: 'If you see any sword drawn, come on and slay them all! I do not trust this treaty, and I am sure that King Arthur is eager to be revenged on me.'

So they met as had been arranged, and the agreement was drawn up and signed by both of them. Then wine was brought, and they drank together. But while this was happening an adder came out of the heather, as evil as the serpent which tempted Eve, and stung one of Mordred's knights on the heel. When the knight felt himself stung he looked down and saw the adder; and then, without thinking, he drew his sword and killed it.

But when the two armies saw the light flashing on the drawn sword, a great shout arose from either side, and in a minute they were charging at one another across the plain of Camlann.

'Alas, this unhappy day!' cried King Arthur. Then he and Mordred leapt each upon their horses and rode into the battle.

Never since that day in any Christian land was there seen a sadder or more dreadful battle. There was rushing and riding and striking; and many a grim wound was given, and many a deadly stroke. And ever King Arthur rode in the heart of the battle doing mighty deeds; and this time Mordred fought well also, and did not think of flight. But every man there fought only to kill: and thus the battle lasted through all that long day, and never ceased until all those noble knights were laid upon the cold earth.

The evening fell, dark and ominous, and the dreadful hush of death spread over the battlefield; and King Arthur wept to see all his people slain. For he looked about him and could see only two of all his knights left alive – Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere – and both of these were sorely wounded.

'Oh God!' cried King Arthur, 'what has become of all my noble knights? Alas that ever I should see this doleful day! But now I know that the end has come . . . Yet I would that I could find that traitor Sir Mordred, the cause of all this sorrow and destruction.'

Then, as King Arthur looked about him, suddenly he saw Sir Mordred, who stood leaning upon his sword among great heaps of dead men.

'Now give me my spear,' said King Arthur to Sir Lucan, 'for yonder I see the traitor who has brought about all this woe.'

'Let him be, my lord,' answered Sir Lucan, 'for he is accursed. And, moreover, if you can pass this unfortunate day, you shall be right well avenged. And,

noble sir, remember your night's dream and what the spirit of Sir Gawain told you: for God of His great goodness has preserved you through this battle. By His blessing you have won the field – for there are three of us, while Sir Mordred stands alone. If you leave him now this wicked day of destiny is safely past.'

'Come life or death,' cried King Arthur, 'I will do justice upon this man who has brought destruction upon the realm of Logres.'

'God speed you well,' said Sir Bedivere.

Then the King took his spear Ron in both his hands and ran towards Sir Mordred shouting:

'Traitor, now is your death upon you!'

And when Mordred saw King Arthur, he ran at him with drawn sword; but the King smote Sir Mordred under the shield with a feint of his spear and ran him through the body. But when Mordred felt that he had his death-wound, in his hatred and fury he thrust himself forward upon the spear and gripping his sword in both hands smote King Arthur upon the head so hard that it cut through the helmet and deep into the



head beneath. Then Sir Mordred fell to the ground and died screaming.

But King Arthur fell without a sound, and Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere came to him and raised him with difficulty between them. And so by gradual stages, for they were both sorely wounded, they carried him to a little deserted chapel not far from the mysterious sea where the mist lay red like blood in the last rays of the setting sun. And then Sir Lucan fell down and died, for the strain of lifting was more than he could stand with a mortal wound already tearing his vitals.

'Alas,' said the King, who had recovered from his swoon, 'this is a heavy sight to see this noble knight die for my sake – for he had more need of help than I had.'

And Sir Bedivere knelt by Sir Lucan and wept, for the two were brothers and had loved each other dearly.

The sun had sunk and now the moon flooded the field of battle with cold white radiance and grim shadows; and the mysterious waters were veiled in long bars of silver mist.

Then King Arthur said to Sir Bedivere:

'Now leave your weeping and mourning, gentle knight, for it is of no avail – and my time is short. But now, while yet I am with you, you may do me one last service. Take my good sword Excalibur and go up over yonder ridge; and there you will come to a dark lake in the mountain pass; and when you come there I charge you to throw my sword into that water and come back and tell me what you saw.'

'My lord,' answered Sir Bedivere, 'your command-

ment shall be done, and I will bring you word at once of what I see.'

So Sir Bedivere departed, carrying the sword Excalibur. And as he went he looked at the sword, admired the precious jewels in the handle, and said to himself: 'If I throw this valuable sword into the water no good will come of it, only harm and loss.' So, when he came to the dark lake in the mountain pass he hid the sword amongst the rushes and hastened back to King Arthur, saying that he had thrown it into the water.

'And what saw you there?' asked King Arthur.

'Sir,' answered Sir Bedivere, 'I saw nothing but the wind stirring the dark waters of the lake.'

'Then you do not speak the truth,' said King Arthur. 'Therefore go quickly and throw the sword far out into the lake!'

So Sir Bedivere returned again and took the sword in his hand; but again he thought what a shame it was to throw away such a noble sword. So he hid it once more and returned to the King.

'What saw you there?' asked King Arthur.

'Sir,' answered Bedivere, 'I saw nothing but the dark waters stirred by the moaning wind.'

'Ah, traitor and liar!' cried King Arthur, 'now you have betrayed me twice! Who would think that I had loved you so well, and that you had been so noble a Knight of the Round Table, when now you would betray your king for the value of this sword. Go again swiftly and do my bidding; for this long waiting puts me in danger of my life, and I grow cold in this chill night air.'

Then Sir Bedivere was ashamed, and he ran swiftly over the brow of the hill to the dark lake in the pass of

the mountains. He came to the waterside, took the sword in his hands, and flung it as far out from the shore as he could. And as the blade flashed away in the moonlight there came a hand and an arm up out of the dark waters, the arm clothed in shining white samite, mysterious and wonderful, and caught the sword by the hilt. Three times it brandished the sword on high, and then vanished with it beneath the water, and the lake grew dark and still once more.

So Sir Bedivere came back to the King and told him what he had seen.

'Now help me hence,' said King Arthur, 'for I greatly fear that I have tarried here too long.'

Then Sir Bedivere supported the King down the grassy slope, where the dew glimmered like magic diamonds in the moonlight; and they came to the shore of the mysterious sea. And then out of the white mist came a barge as if to meet them; and in it were many fair ladies, all veiled in black. And among them was Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, and the Lady of the Isle of Avalon was there also, and Queen Morgana le Fay, Arthur's sister. And a sad, low cry rose from them when they saw King Arthur.

'Now place me in the barge,' said King Arthur to Sir Bedivere.

And so he did as he was commanded, and the three ladies received him tenderly, and laid him down with his head resting in the lap of the Lady of the Isle of Avalon.

And then Queen Morgana le Fay, who knelt at his feet, wept softly, and said:

'Ah, my dear brother, why have you tarried so long from us? Alas, the wound in your head has caught over-much cold.'



Then the barge moved slowly out from the land and Sir Bedivere stood alone upon the shore and cried aloud:

'Ah, my dear lord King Arthur, what shall become of me now that you go and leave me here alone?'

'Comfort yourself,' answered King Arthur, 'and do as best you may. For you remain to bear word of me to those who are yet alive. For I must go into the Vale of Avalon there to be healed of my grievous wound. But be you sure that I will come again when the land of Britain has need of me, and the realm of Logres shall rise once more out of the darkness. But if you hear never more of me, pray for my soul.'

Then the barge floated away into the mist and was lost to sight. But a strange low cry of mourning came over the waters until the sadness passed from it and it was lost in a quiet whisper beyond the distance.

EPILOGUE

AVALON

Sir Launcelot landed at Dover and asked of the townspeople where King Arthur was. They showed him the grave of Sir Gawain, and there he knelt long in prayer, sorrowing for the death of a very noble knight who had been his friend: but of King Arthur they had no tidings, except that he had marched westward nearly a month before.

Then Launcelot left all his men at Dover under the command of his cousin Sir Bors de Gannis, and rode away alone to the west. And after eight days he came to Almesbury and, as the night was falling, sought shelter in the great nunnery there. The abbess received him kindly and led him towards the guest-chamber. But as they passed by the cloisters there came a nun who cried aloud when she saw Sir Launcelot, and fell down in a faint. And when they bent down beside her, behold, it was Queen Guinevere!

That evening she told Sir Launcelot of a message that had come to her from Sir Bedivere telling of the dreadful battle of Camlann on the day of destiny; and of how he had seen King Arthur borne away sorely wounded into the unknown land of Avalon. And Sir Bedivere had made his way to the Abbey of Glastonbury which was not very far from the battlefield, and

had there become a hermit, meaning to spend the rest of his days as a monk.

And Guinevere told Launcelot of her sorrow and repentance:

'For it is through our love that my lord King Arthur is slain, and with him most of the noblest knights of the world. And this land of Britain is laid open to the heathen Saxons, and the holy realm of Logres is no more. Therefore I came secretly hither and made my vows to dwell a nun all the days that are left to me, praying God to forgive me my grievous sin.'

'Now, my sweet lady,' said Launcelot, 'I will never be false to you. For here I swear that I too will take the vows that you have taken, and pass the rest of my days in prayer and fasting.'

Then they said good-bye to one another, knowing that this was the last time they would ever meet on earth. And in the morning Launcelot rode away until he came to Glastonbury; and there he found the ancient Archbishop of Canterbury and Sir Bedivere who had become a monk. Gladly they welcomed Launcelot to their company, and in a little while he had flung away his sword and armour and was clad in the coarse robes of a simple friar.

There, many months later, Sir Bors came to join him when he had sent away the great army which had come over from France. For Constantine the Duke of Cornwall was king now: but little of the land of Britain could he keep from the Saxons.

Years passed, and one night Launcelot dreamed that Guinevere lay dying and called to him. In the morning he and seven of his fellow monks set out to Almesbury and found that she had died quietly during the night.

Then Launcelot brought her to Glastonbury and himself spoke the burial service over her when she was laid in her deep grave near the high altar.

But within a few weeks he too fell sick, and passed away quietly as one who had no longer any will to live.

And when he lay waiting for burial his brother Sir Hector de Maris came and stood beside his bier.

'Ah, Launcelot,' he said, 'you were the best knight in all Christendom. You, Sir Launcelot, who lie there never had nor never will have any to rival you. And you were the most courteous knight that ever bore shield, the truest friend that ever bestrode horse, you were the truest lover that ever loved woman, and the kindest man that ever wore a sword. You were the finest man that ever was seen in a company of knights, and the meekest and most gentle among ladies, but the sternest knight to your mortal foes that ever put spear in rest.'

And when Launcelot was buried, Sir Hector and Sir Bors, Sir Blamour and Sir Bleoberis, the only knights left living of all the fellowship of the Round Table, set forth on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and there ended their days.

So ended the realm of Logres and all those who had lived and fought for the glory of God and the spreading of His Will on earth. For very soon the Saxons had conquered the whole of Britain and the Dark Ages descended upon all the western world.

But never was King Arthur forgotten, and always the belief endured in Britain, and in Wales particularly, that he would come again to save his land in the hour of its deadliest danger; that once more Britain should become the holy realm of Logres, the land of peace and righteousness and of true Christian living.

Round about the year 1200 it was announced suddenly that King Arthur was indeed dead – for the monks of Glastonbury had found his bones laid in a stone coffin buried in their precincts near to those of Queen Guinevere. This must be true, they reported, for beneath the coffin was a stone with a leaden cross sunk into it and a Latin inscription saying: 'Here lies King Arthur in this tomb with Guinevere his wife, in the Isle of Avalon.' The bones, they said, were of more than mortal size, and there were many more signs and wonders proving that here indeed lay King Arthur.

The story, it seems, was invented by the monks to bring fresh glory to their Abbey – and also to please the Norman kings of England, who did not like their conquered subjects to believe that King Arthur might return any day and release them from their new overlords.

But we may think, if we like, that it was Launcelot and not Arthur whom the monks dug up in the reign of Richard Cœur de Lion and reburied with all honour in a marble tomb.

And we may believe, too, that King Arthur still sleeps in some enchanted cave – perhaps in some 'Vale of Avalon' in the deep mountain fastnesses of Wales. For there, so the legend is told still in the haunted land of Gwynedd, a shepherd once met with a strange and mysterious man.

'Beneath the tree from which that staff was cut,' said the Stranger, pointing to the hazel crook in the shepherd's hand, 'lies hidden a vast hoard of treasure!'

And when the shepherd inquired further, he was told the secret of the cave:

'In the doorway hangs a great bell,' the Stranger told him, 'and you must not touch it, for if you do the Sleepers in the Cave will wake.' And when he had said this the Stranger vanished mysteriously and the shepherd rubbed his eyes, thinking that he had dreamed a dream.

But not long afterwards, while seeking for a lost sheep high up among the mountain crags, he came to a little valley, and recognized the hazel tree at the head of it as that from which he had cut his crook when climbing among the rocks as a boy.

So he went up to the tree, and there under its roots, sure enough, was a narrow cave entrance. Into it he went on his hands and knees, and presently found himself in a great, dark cavern. Here he struck a light and lit a candle which he happened to have in his pocket, and holding it above his head, he beheld the marvels of the place. All around in a great circle lay warriors sleeping, each of them clad in old armour and with a sword by his side; and upon a couch in the midst lay an ancient king who wore a golden crown and held in his hand a shining sword with a jewelled cross-hilt, while at his feet lay great heaps of gold and silver.

Amazed at what he saw, the shepherd stepped backwards suddenly and by ill luck struck against the great bell which hung over the doorway. And as its deep tones echoed through the cavern the old king on the couch woke out of his sleep and sat slowly up.

'Is it day?' he asked.

And the shepherd, trembling in terror, cried, he hardly knew why: 'No, no! Therefore sleep on!'

And then the King said: 'You say well; I will sleep

once more until the day comes when I shall rise and bring victory to the people of Britain. Take of the silver and gold that lies before you, and get you gone speedily: for if my knights awake before it is time they will slay you – and then there will be none to speak the words which you have spoken, and which send me now back to my long rest.’

Then the King slept once more; and the shepherd took up as much gold and silver as he could carry and fled from the place. But never again, though he sought for it often, could he find the cave under the hazel tree which led to the mysterious cavern where sleep King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.