

The Drawing of the Sword

by Andrew Lang

Long, long ago, after Uther Pendragon died, no king reigned in Britain, and every Knight hoped to seize the crown for himself. The country was like to fare ill when laws were broken on every side, and the corn which was to give bread to the poor was trodden underfoot, and there was none to bring the evildoer to justice. Then, when things were at their worst, came forth Merlin the magician, and fast he rode to the place where the Archbishop of Canterbury had his dwelling. They took counsel together, and agreed that all the lords and gentlemen of Britain should ride to London and meet on Christmas Day, now at hand, in the Great Church. So this was done. And on Christmas morning, as they left the church, they saw in the churchyard a large stone, and on it a bar of steel, and in the steel a naked sword was held, and about it was written in letters of gold, "Whoso pulleth out this sword is by right of birth King of England." They marvelled at these words, and called for the Archbishop, and brought him into the place where the stone stood. Then those Knights who fain would be King took firm hold of the hilt, and they tugged at the sword with all their might; but it never stirred. The Archbishop watched them in silence, but when they were faint from pulling he spoke: "The man is not here who shall lift out that sword, nor do I know where to find him. But this is my counsel—that two Knights be chosen, good and true men, to keep guard over the sword."

Thus it was done. But the lords and gentlemen-at-arms cried out that every man had a right to try to win the sword, and they decided that on New Year's Day a tournament should be held, and any Knight who would, might enter the lists.

So on New Year's Day, the Knights, according to custom, went to hear service in the Great Church, and after it was over they met in the field to make ready for the tourney. Among them was a brave Knight called Sir Ector, who brought with him Sir Kay, his son, and Arthur, Kay's foster-brother. Now Kay had unbuckled his sword the evening before, and in his haste to be at the tourney had forgotten to put it on again, and he begged Arthur to ride back and fetch it for him. But when Arthur reached the house the door was locked, for the women had gone out to see the tourney, and, though Arthur tried his best to get in, he could not. Then he rode away in great anger, and said to himself, "Kay shall not be without a sword this day. I will take that sword in the churchyard, and give it to him;" and he galloped fast till he reached the gate of the churchyard. He jumped down, tied his horse tightly to a tree, and, running up to the sword, seized the handle, and lightly and fiercely drew it out; then he mounted his horse again, and delivered the sword to Sir Kay. The moment Sir Kay saw the sword he knew it was not his own, but the sword of the stone, and he sought out his father Sir Ector, and said to him, "Sir, this is the sword of the stone, therefore I am the rightful King." Sir Ector made no answer, but signed to Kay and Arthur to follow him, and they all three went back to the church. Leaving their horses outside, they entered the choir, and here Sir Ector took a holy book and bade Sir Kay swear how he came by that sword. "My brother Arthur gave it to me," replied Sir Kay. "How did you come by it?" asked Sir Ector, turning to Arthur. "Sir," said Arthur, "when I rode home for my brother's sword, I found no one to deliver it to me, and as I resolved he should not be swordless, I thought of the sword in this stone, and I pulled it out." "Were any Knights present when you did this?" asked Sir Ector. "No, none," said Arthur. "Then you are the rightful King of this land," said Sir Ector. "But why am I the King?" inquired Arthur. "Because," answered Sir Ector, "this is an enchanted sword, and no man could draw it but he who was born a King. Therefore put the sword back into the stone, and let me see you take it out." "That is soon done," said Arthur, replacing the sword, and Sir Ector himself tried to draw it, but he could not. "Now it is your turn," he said to Sir Kay, but Sir Kay fared no better than his father,

though he tugged with all his might and main. "Now you, Arthur," and Arthur pulled it out as easily as if it had been lying in its sheath, and as he did so Sir Ector and Sir Kay sank on their knees before him. "Why do you, my father and brother, kneel to me?" asked Arthur in surprise. "Nay, nay, my lord," answered Sir Ector, "I am not your father, though till to-day I could not tell you who your father really was. You are the son of Uther Pendragon, and you were brought to me when you were born by Merlin himself, who promised that when the time came you should know from whom you sprang." When Arthur heard that Sir Ector was not his father, he wept bitterly. "If I am King," he said at last, "ask what you will, and I shall not fail you. For to you, and to my lady and mother, I owe more than to any one in the world, for she loved me and treated me as her son." "Sir," replied Sir Ector, "I only ask that you will make your foster-brother, Sir Kay, Seneschal of all your lands." "That I will readily," answered Arthur, "and while he and I live no other shall fill that office."

Sir Ector then bade them seek out the Archbishop with him, and they told him all that had happened concerning the sword, which Arthur had left standing in the stone. And on Twelfth Day the Knights and Barons came again, but none could draw it out but Arthur. When they saw this, many of the Barons became angry and cried out that they would never own a boy for King whose blood was no better than their own. So it was agreed to wait till Candlemas, when more Knights might be there, and meanwhile the same two men who had been chosen before watched the sword night and day; but at Candlemas it was the same thing, and at Easter. And when Pentecost came, the common people who were present, and saw Arthur pull out the sword, cried with one voice that he was their King, and they would kill any man who said differently.

Then rich and poor fell on their knees before him, and Arthur took the sword and offered it upon the altar where the Archbishop stood, and the best man who was there made him Knight. After that the crown was put on his head, and he swore to his lords and commons that he would be a true King, and would do them justice all the days of his life.

Source:

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