

“Young Arthur” By Robert D. San Souci

King Uther heard the baby’s wail and leaped to his feet. There was a sharp rap at the chamber door, and a servant entered grinning happily. “You have a son,” he told the king. Uther’s joy knew no bounds. When he was ushered into Queen Igera’s bedchamber, Uther looked lovingly at mother and son. “The boy’s name shall be Arthur,” he declared, “and he shall be a great king. For Merlin [the magician] has foretold that he will one day rule the greatest kingdom under heaven.”

But Uther’s happiness did not last. His beloved queen died soon after Arthur’s birth, and sadness sapped the king’s spirit. He lost interest in ruling, and Merlin was unable to rouse him from his *melancholy*. “Unrest grows throughout the land,” Merlin warned. “Your old foes are rising in *rebellion*. Give the babe into my keeping, for you have enemies even at court.”

Anxious for his son’s safety, Uther agreed. So Merlin, disguised as a beggar, took the infant Arthur to sir Ector and his lady, who lived some distance from the court and all its dangers. He told them nothing about the child, save that his name was Arthur. The couple had recently lost their infant son and welcomed Arthur as their own. Soon rebellion divided the kingdom. Uther, *reclaiming* his old spirit, rallied his knights and barons. With Merlin always beside him, he drove back his enemies.

But as Uther celebrated his victory, in the town of Verulum, traitors poisoned the town’s wells. The king and his loyal followers were stricken. Merlin alone escaped. Though he tried his healing arts on Uther, he was forced to confess, “Sire, there is no remedy.”

“Then,” said the dying monarch, “I declare that my son shall be king of all this realm after me. God’s blessing and mine be upon him.” With these words, Uther died.

When the rebels entered Verulum, only Merlin was alive. “Tell us where Uther’s son is hidden,” they demanded, “so that we can slay him and end Uther’s line.” But Merlin vanished before their eyes.

Young Arthur was raised as a son in Sir Ector’s house. He learned to read and write alongside his foster brother, Kay, who was four years older. By the time he was fifteen, Arthur was a tall, handsome, quick-witted lad. Though he had great strength, he also had a gentle manner.

Kay, who had recently been knighted, decided to train Arthur in the knightly arts himself. But Kay was vain and jealous of the favor Arthur found with their father, so he was a harsh taskmaster. Arthur came away from his lessons in swordsmanship with many bruises and cuts. When he complained, Kay replied, “A knight must be thick-skinned and ready to bear even *grievous* wounds without flinching.” Yet if Arthur so much as pricked his brother, Kay would *bellow* loudly for the physician.

Eventually Kay appointed Arthur his *apprentice*. This was an honor the younger boy would happily have forgone. However, seeing that Sir Ector wished it son, Arthur sighed and agreed. But he felt in his heart that he already was a knight, though no lord had dubbed him such.

Both Arthur and Kay knew it was vital to learn the arts of war. The kingdom was still at the mercy of upstart lords who ruled by fire and sword.

The story of Uther’s lost son, the true heir to the throne, would have been forgotten but for Merlin. One Christmas Eve, the long-absent magician reappeared and summoned the bishops, lords, and common folk to London’s square. There he drove a broadsword halfway into a huge stone. Written on the blade in blazing gold letters were the words: “Whoso pullet out the sword from this stone is born the rightful King of England.”

In the days that followed, knights and barons cowherds, and bakers, an endless parade of would-be kings eagerly pulled at the sword. But none could loosen it, let alone draw it forth. When they accused Merlin of trickery, he said, “The rightful king has not yet come. God will make him known at the proper time.”

Now it happened that a great tournament was held in London. Among those who came were Sir Ector, Sir Kay, and young Arthur, who served Kay. So eager was the boy to see the *jousts* that he forgot to pack Kay’s sword. There was great upset when the mistake was discovered.

“Woe to you, boy,” snarled Kay, “if your error costs me the victory I would otherwise win today!” Even Sir Ector scolded Arthur and ordered, “Go back directly and fetch the missing sword.”

Angry at his carelessness and impatient to see the contests, Arthur started homeward. Then he suddenly reined in his horse.

In the deserted city square was a massive stone with a sword plunged into its center. “Surely that sword is as good as the one “left at home,” he said. “I will borrow it. When Kay is finished, I will return it to this curious monument.”

So saying, he **dismounted**, scrambled up the stone, took the sword handle, and tugged. The sword did not move. Impatient to return to the tournament, he pulled again. This time, the sword slid easily out of the stone. In his haste, he did not notice the words upon the blade. Shoving the weapon into his belt, he remounted and raced to where Sir Kay waited his turn upon the field. The moment he saw the golden words upon the blade, Kay began to tremble with excitement. When Arthur asked what was **amiss**, Kay shouted, “Go! Get away! You have caused enough trouble.”

But Arthur was curious. So he followed as Kay ran to Sir Ector. “Look, Father!” cried Kay. “Here is the sword of the stone. Therefore it is I who must be king of all the land!”

When Sir Ector and the others saw the sword and read the golden inscription, they began to shout, “The sword from the stone! The king’s sword!”

Hearing only this much, Arthur thought that he had stolen a king’s weapon. As people hurried excitedly toward Kay, Arthur spurred his horse away, certain he had committed a great crime.

Looking back, he saw Kay and Sir Ector ride off, surrounded by the greatest lords of the realm. Were they taking Kay to trial? he wondered. Had he brought ruin upon Sir Ector’s household?

“A true knight would not run away,” he said to himself, “and I am a true knight in my heart.” Fearful, but determined to do what was right, the boy wheeled his horse around. The great square was now filled with people. Just how terrible a crime had he committed?

Upon the stone stood Kay, holding the sword. The crowd shouted each time he held the blade aloft. Then silence fell over the throng: Merlin had appeared at the edge of the square. People stood aside to let the magician approach the stone.

“Are you the one who pulled the sword from the stone?” Merlin asked.

“I am holding it, am I not?” Kay replied.

“The rightful king could pull it free a hundred times,” said Merlin. “Slip the sword into the groove and pull it out again.”

With a shrug, Kay reinserted the sword. But when he tried to jerk it free, it would not budge. Suddenly all eyes turned toward Arthur, who was pushing his way through the crowd, bellowing at the top of his lungs. “It wasn’t Kay’s fault! I brought him the sword!”

Merlin peered closely at Arthur. Then he smiled and said, “Climb up and draw the sword from the stone.” Uncertainly, Arthur clambered up beside Kay. Grasping the **pommel**, he easily pulled the sword out. Then Merlin cried, “This is Arthur, son of Uther Pendragon, Britain’s destined king.”

An astonished Sir Ector knelt to pay the boy **homage**, followed by Kay and many others. But all around, there was growing confusion and dispute. Some cried, “It is the will of heaven! Long live the king!” while others cried, “It is Merlin’s plot to put a beardless boy, a puppet, on the throne, and so rule the land.”

[But] The cries of “Long Live King Arthur!” soon carried the day.