

THE STORY OF KING ARTHUR AND HIS KNIGHTS

By Howard Pyle

HOW KING ARTHUR HELD A ROYAL WEDDING, AND ESTABLISHED THE ROUND TABLE.

AND now was come the early fall of the year; that pleasant season when meadowland and wold were still green with the summer that had only just passed; when the sky, likewise, was as of summertime-extraordinarily blue and full of large floating clouds; when a bird might sing here and another there a short song in memory of springtime (as the smaller fowl doth when the year draweth to its ending); when all the air was tempered with, warmth and yet the leaves were everywhere turning brown and red and gold, so that when the sun shone through them it was as though a cloth of gold, broidered with brown and crimson and green, hung above the head. Now was come the early autumn season of the year, when it is exceedingly pleasant to be afield among the nut-trees with hawk and hound, or to travel abroad in the yellow world, whether it be ahorse or afoot.

Such was the time of year in which had been set the marriage of King Arthur and the Lady Guinevere at Camelot, and at that place was extraordinary pomp and glory of circumstance. All the world was astir and in a great ferment of joy, for all folk were exceedingly glad that King Arthur was to have a queen.

In preparation for that great occasion the town of Camelot was entirely bedight with magnificence, for the stony street along which the Lady Guinevere must come to the royal castle of the king was strewn thick with fresh-cut rushes, smoothly laid. Moreover, it was in many places spread with carpets of excellent pattern such as might be fit to lay upon the floor of some goodly hall. Likewise all the houses along the way were hung with fine hangings of woven texture interwoven with threads of azure and crimson, and everywhere were flags and bannerets afloat in the warm and gentle breeze against the blue sky, so that all the world appeared to be alive with bright colors.

Thus came the wedding-day of the king-bright and clear and exceeding radiant.

King Arthur sat in his hall, surrounded by his court, awaiting news that the Lady Guinevere was coming thitherward. And it was about the middle of the morning when there came a messenger in haste riding upon a milk-white steed. And the raiment of that messenger and the trappings of his horse were all of cloth of gold embroidered with scarlet and white, and the tabard of the messenger was set with many jewels, so that he glistened from afar as he rode, with a singular splendor of appearance.

So this herald-messenger came straight into the castle where the king abided waiting, and he said: "My Lord King, the Lady Guinevere with her father, the King Leodegrance, and their court draweth nigh unto this place."

Upon this the king immediately arose with great joy, and straightway he went forth with his court of knights, riding in great state. And as he went down that marvelously adorned street, all the people shouted aloud as he passed by, wherefore he smiled and bent his head from side to side; for that day he was wondrous happy.

Thus he rode forward unto the town gate, and out therefrom, and so came thence into the country beyond, where the broad and well-beaten highway ran winding down beside the shining river betwixt the willows and the osiers.

And, behold! King Arthur and those with him perceived the court of the princess where it appeared at a distance, wherefore they made great rejoicing and hastened forward with all speed. And as they came nigh, the sun falling upon the apparels of silk and cloth of gold, and upon golden chains and the jewels that hung therefrom, all of that noble company that surrounded the Lady Guinevere's litter flashed and sparkled with a marvelous radiance.

For seventeen of the noblest knights of King Arthur's court, clad in complete armor, and sent by him as an escort unto the lady, rode in great splendor, surrounding the litter wherein the princess lay. And the framework of that litter was of richly gilded wood, and its curtains and its cushions were of crimson silk embroidered with threads of gold. And behind the litter there rode in gay and joyous array, all shining with many colors, the court of the princess—her damsels in waiting, gentlemen, ladies, pages and attendants. And the sun shone with surpassing brightness, and the river lay like a silver shield, darkened where the small winds breathed upon it; and the swallows darted over the water, dipping here and there to touch its smooth surface; and everything was so exceedingly cheerful with the beauty of the young autumn season that the heart of everyone was expanded with entire joy.

So those parties of the king and the Lady Guinevere drew nigh together until they met.

Then straightway King Arthur dismounted from his noble horse, and, all clothed with royalty, he went afoot unto the Lady Guinevere's litter, whilst Sir Gawaine and Sir Ewaine held the bridle of his horse. Thereupon one of her pages drew aside the silken curtains of the Lady Guinevere's litter, and King Leodegrance gave her his hand, and she straightway descended therefrom, all aglow, as it were, with her exceeding beauty. So King Leodegrance led her to King Arthur, and King Arthur came to her, and placed one hand beneath her chin and the other upon her head, and inclined his countenance and kissed her upon her smooth cheek. And all those who were there lifted up their voices in great acclaim.

Thus did King Arthur give welcome unto the Lady Guinevere and unto King Leodegrance her father upon the highway beneath the walls of the town of Camelot, at the distance of half a league from that place. And no one who was there ever forgot that meeting, for it was full of extraordinary grace and noble courtliness.

Then King Arthur and his court of knights and nobles brought King Leodegrance and the Lady Guinevere with great ceremony unto Camelot, and thereby into the royal castle, where, befitting their several states, apartments were assigned unto all, so that the entire place was all alive with joyousness and beauty.

And when high noon had come the entire court went with great state and ceremony unto the cathedral, and there, surrounded by wonderful magnificence, those two noble souls were married by the archbishop.

And all the bells did ring right joyfully, and all the people who stood without the cathedral shouted with loud acclaim; and, lo! the king and the queen came forth all shining, he like unto the sun for splendor and she like unto the moon for beauty.

In the castle a great noontide feast was spread, and there sat thereat four hundred eighty and six lordly and noble folk-kings, knights, and nobles, with queens and ladies in magnificent array. And near to the king and the queen there sat King Leodegrance, and Merlin, and Sir Ulfius, and Sir Ector the Trustworthy, and Sir Gawaine, and Sir Ewaine, and Sir Kay, and King Ban, and King Pellinore, and many other famous and exalted folk—so that no man had before that time beheld such magnificent courtliness as they beheld at that famous wedding-feast of King Arthur and Queen Guinevere. So have I told it unto you, so that you might behold, however so dimly, how marvelously pleasant were those days in which dwelt King Arthur and his famous court of knights.

And that day was likewise very famous in the history of chivalry: for in the afternoon the famous Round Table was established; and that Round Table was at once the very flower and the chiefest glory of King Arthur's reign.

For about mid of the afternoon the king and queen, preceded by Merlin and followed by all that splendid court of kings, lords, nobles, and knights in full array, made progression to that certain place where Merlin, partly by magic and partly by skill, had caused to be builded a very wonderful pavilion about the Round Table where it stood.

And when the king and the queen and the court had entered in thereat, they were amazed at the beauty of that pavilion, for they perceived, as it were, a great space that appeared to be a marvelous land of fay. For the walls were air richly gilded and were painted with very wonderful figures of saints and of angels, clad in ultramarine and crimson. And all those saints and angels were depicted playing upon various musical instruments that appeared to be made of gold. And overhead the roof of the pavilion was made to represent the sky, being all of cerulean blue sprinkled *over* with stars. And in the midst of that painted sky was an image as it were of the sun in his glory. And underfoot was a pavement all of marble stone, set in small squares of black and white, and blue and red, and sundry other colors.

And in the midst of the pavilion was the famous Round Table, with seats thereat exactly sufficient for fifty persons. And the table was covered with a table-cloth of fine linen, as white as snow and embroidered at the hem with threads of silver. And at each of the fifty places was a chalice of gold filled with fragrant wine, and at each place was a platter of gold bearing a manchet of fair white bread. And when the king and his court entered into the pavilion, lo! music began of a sudden for to play with a wonderful sweetness, so that the heart was overjoyed for to listen to it.

Then Merlin came and took King Arthur by the hand and led him away from Queen Guinevere. And he said unto the king: "Lo, Lord King! Behold, this is the Round Table."

And King Arthur said: "Merlin, that which I see is wonderful beyond the telling."

Then Merlin discovered unto the king the marvels of the Round Table. For first he pointed to a high seat, very wonderfully wrought in precious woods and gilded so that it was exceedingly beautiful, and he said: "Behold! Lord King, yonder seat is called the Seat Royal, and that seat is for thyself." And as Merlin spake, lo! there suddenly appeared sundry letters of gold above that seat, and the letters of gold read the name

And Merlin said, "Lord, yonder seat may well be called the center seat of the Round Table, for, in sooth, thou art indeed the very center of all that is most worthy of true knightliness. Wherefore that seat shall still be called the center seat of all the other seats."

Then Merlin pointed to the seat that stood opposite to the Seat Royal, and that seat also was of a very wonderful appearance, being all of crimson and of azure inlaid with many cunning devices, and with figures of silver inset into the wood. And Merlin said unto the king: "My Lord King, that seat is named the Seat Perilous; for no man but one in all this world shall sit therein, and that man is not yet born upon the earth. And if any other man shall dare to sit therein that man shall either suffer death or a sudden and terrible misfortune for his temerity. Wherefore that seat is called the Seat Perilous."

"Merlin," quoth the king, "all that thou tellest me passeth the bound of understanding for marvelousness. Now I do beseech thee in all haste to find forthwith a sufficient number of knights to fill this Round Table, so that my glory shall be entirely complete."

"My lord," said Merlin, "I may not fill the Round Table for thee at this time. *For*, though thou hast gathered about thee the very noblest court of chivalry in all of Christendom, yet

are there but two-and-thirty knights here present who may be considered worthy to sit at the Round Table.”

“Then, Merlin,” quoth King Arthur, “I do desire of thee that thou shalt straightway choose me those two-and-thirty.”

“That will I do, Lord King,” said Merlin. So Merlin cast his eyes around, and lo! he saw where King Pellinore stood at a little distance. Unto him went Merlin and took him by the hand. “Behold, my Lord King,” quoth he unto Arthur, “here is the knight in all of the world next to thyself who is at this time most worthy for to sit at this Round Table. For he is both exceedingly gentle of demeanor unto the poor and needy, and at the same time is so terribly strong and skilful that I know not whether thou or he is the more to be feared in an encounter of knight against knight.”

Then Merlin led King Pellinore forward, and behold! upon the high seat that stood upon the left hand of the Seat Royal there appeared of a sudden the name —Pellinore— and the name was emblazoned in letters of gold that shone with extraordinary luster. And when King Pellinore took this seat great and loud acclaim long continued was given him by all those who stood round about.

Now after Merlin had chosen King Arthur and King Pellinore, he chose from out of the court of King Arthur knights two-and-thirty in all, and they were knights of greatest renown in chivalry who did first establish the Round Table of King Arthur.

And among these knights were Sir Gawaine and Sir Ewaine, who were nephews unto the king, and they sat nigh to him upon the right hand; and there was Sir Ulfius (who held his place but a year and eight months unto the time of his death, after the which Sir Geharris, who was esquire unto his brother Sir Gawaine, held that seat); and there was Sir Kay the Seneschal, who was foster-brother unto the king; and there was Sir Baudwain of Britain (who held his place but three years and two months until his death, after the which Sir Agravaire held that seat); and there was Sir Pellias, and Sir Geraint, and many others, so that the world had never before seen such a splendid array of noble knights gathered together.

And as each of these knights was chosen by Merlin, and as Merlin took that knight by the hand, lo! the name of that knight suddenly appeared in golden letters, very bright and shining, upon the chair that appertained to him.

And when all had been chosen, behold! King Arthur saw that the seat upon the right hand of the Seat Royal had not been filled and that it bore no name upon it. And he said unto Merlin: “Merlin, how is this, that the seat upon my right hand hath not been filled and beareth no name?”

And Merlin said: “My lord, there shall be a name thereon in a very little while, and he who shall sit therein shall be the greatest knight in all the world until that knight cometh who shall occupy the Seat Perilous.”

And King Arthur said, “I would that he who shall sit at my right hand were with us now.” And Merlin said, “He cometh anon.”

Thus was the Round Table established with great pomp and ceremony of estate. For first the Archbishop of Canterbury blessed each and every seat, progressing from place to place surrounded by his court, the choir whereof sang most musically in accord, whilst others swang censers from which there ascended a vapor of frankincense, filling that entire pavilion as with an odor of heavenly blessedness.

And when the archbishop had thus blessed everyone of those seats, the chosen knights took each his stall at the Round Table, and his esquire came and stood behind him, holding the banneret with his coat of arms upon the spear-point above the knight’s head. And all

those who stood about that place, both knights and ladies, lifted up their voices in loud acclaim.

Then all the knights arose, and each knight held up before him the cross of the hilt of his sword, and each knight spake word for word as King Arthur spake. And this was the covenant of their knighthood of the Round Table: that they should be gentle unto the weak; that they should be courageous unto the strong; that they should be terrible unto the wicked and the evil-doers; that they should defend the helpless who should call upon them for aid; that all women should be held unto them sacred; that they should stand unto the defense of one another whensoever such defense should be required; that they should be merciful unto all men; that they should be gentle of deed, true in friendship, and faithful in love.

This was the covenant unto which each knight vowed upon the cross of his sword, and in witness thereof did kiss the hilt thereof, and thereupon all those present once more gave loud acclaim. Then did all the knights of the Round Table seat themselves, and each knight brake bread from the golden paten and quaffed wine from the golden chalice that stood before him, giving thanks unto God for that which he ate and drank.

Thus was King Arthur wedded unto Queen Guinevere; and thus was the Round Table established. Wherefore all these things have I told unto you that ye might know how that glorious order of knighthood was first established.

And King Arthur was exceedingly uplifted with the great joy that possessed him. Wherefore he commanded that all of Camelot should be feasted at his expense.

And he also proclaimed that there should be feasting and jousting in his court for three days.