



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

MALORY: LE MORTE D'ARTHUR

VOL. 1 THE RISE OF ARTHUR

Chapters 1-4

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not Malory's fifteenth-century English and not a scholarly edition.

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch.

CONTENTS

THIS VOLUME

VOL. 1 THE RISE OF ARTHUR

Chapter 1: The Sword in the Stone

Chapter 2: King of Britain

Chapter 3: The Round Table

Chapter 4: Lancelot, Best of Knights

ALL VOLUMES IN THIS RETELLING

Vol. 1 The Rise of Arthur (this file)

Vol. 2 Knights and the Grail

Vol. 3 The Fall of the Fellowship

CHAPTER 1: THE SWORD IN THE STONE

Uther Pendragon would not live out the winter, Merlin saw, unless he first destroyed himself. The king sat in his war tent above the Cornish coast with his fists clenched on the council board, and the name he would not stop saying was Igraine.

"She is another man's wife," said the Archbishop. "Duke Gorlois's wife, who shelters in Tintagel while her husband holds Terrabil against you."

"I know whose wife she is." Uther's face had the grey cast of fever. "I burn with it, Merlin. Make her mine, or make an end of me."

Merlin looked at him a long while. He saw past the tent, past years not yet born: a crown, a shining hall, a field of the slain. All of it hung on this sick man's longing. The price, when he named it, came out gently, because prices should.

"I can bring you to her for one night. You will wear her husband's face. But the child that is gotten that night shall be given to me, to rear as I will. Swear it, and you shall have her."

Uther swore before the words had died. Men always swore quickly, Merlin thought, when the cost lay in the future.

. . .

That night he worked the oldest craft he knew. Uther rode to Tintagel in the Duke's own likeness, and the porter opened the gates to his master without a question. Igraine received her husband gladly, for she did not know that hours before, Duke Gorlois had died at Terrabil with his host broken around him.

She was deceived, and there was no blame in her. Merlin held fast to that. But deceit is a seed like any other. It grows.

When the truth came out, Uther married Igraine within the month and was well content. Merlin said nothing of contentment. He was waiting for the price.

. . .

The child came at winter's end, a boy, red-fisted and squalling. Merlin took him from the postern before dawn, wrapped in a cloth of gold, while Igraine wept on the stair and did not follow. Uther had kept his oath. It was the one clean thing in all of it.

Merlin carried the boy to Sir Ector, a knight of good lands and a better heart, whose hall smelled of bread and woodsmoke and not of court.

"Name him Arthur. Raise him beside your own son Kay. Ask me nothing."

"Is he a king's son?" Ector asked, because he was not a fool.

"He is what Britain needs. That is riddle enough for one lifetime."

. . .

Uther sickened within two years and died without naming an heir, for none knew where his son had gone. The realm came apart like a cloak with the clasp cut, and every great lord measured the empty throne against his own shoulders.

Merlin let them quarrel for a season. Pride must spend itself before it will listen. Then he went to the Archbishop of Canterbury. "Bid every lord and baron to London at the New Year, for God will show us who should be king."

They came, grumbling. When they spilled into the churchyard after mass, there stood a stone where no stone had stood before, four-square like an altar, with a steel anvil upon it, and through the anvil a naked sword was driven into the marble to the hilt.

Letters of gold ran along the blade: WHOSO PULLETH OUT THIS SWORD IS RIGHTWISE KING BORN OF ALL ENGLAND.

The lords fell upon it like dogs on a bone. King Lot of Orkney pulled until the cords stood out in his neck. King Uriens pulled. The sword did not stir a hair's breadth for any of them.

"Then we must wait," the Archbishop said, "until God sends the man." So they held tourneys to pass the waiting, and Merlin waited too, with a patience that was not patience at all, since he knew the hour already.

. . .

It came on New Year's Day, by small means, as great things do. Sir Ector rode to the jousts with his son Kay, new-knighted, and Kay reached the field and found his sword left behind at the lodging.

"Arthur," he said to his foster-brother, a boy of fifteen who carried his shield, "ride back and fetch it."

The lodging stood locked and empty, every soul gone to the lists. Arthur, who hated to fail at any task set him, rode past the churchyard and saw the sword standing unguarded while all London shouted at the games. He thought only that a sword was a sword, and Kay needed one.

He took the hilt and drew it out as easily as a man draws breath.

Kay saw the blade and knew it, and claimed the deed for himself; the habit of command ran in him like a fault in stone. But Ector made him lay his hand upon the holy book, and the lie broke in his mouth. "It was Arthur drew it. He gave it to me."

They set the sword back and bade the boy draw it again before them all, and he did, while lords who had strained red and sweating could not move it a finger's width. Then the commons set up a cry that shook the frost from the rooftrees: We will have Arthur for our king! Small folk trust what they can see.

Ector knelt to his foster-son with tears in his beard and asked one boon, that Kay should be the king's steward all his days. Arthur granted it, weeping too, for he had lost a father in the gaining of a crown.

. . .

So Arthur was crowned. But in the north the kings who had pulled and failed stood with their jaws set, and King Lot said aloud what the rest were thinking: he would never kneel to a nameless boy, sword or no sword.

Merlin watched from the abbey door as the boy took the throne, so young, gripping the sword that had made him, and felt the whole long future lean on that slim hand. Glory and grief together, always together. It must be, he thought, and the thought gave him no comfort at all.

CHAPTER 2: KING OF BRITAIN

Eleven kings rose against him before the year turned. Arthur, crowned less than a season, sat his horse above the valley where their host lay camped, and the banners seemed numberless.

His own lords murmured of terms. King Lot of Orkney led the rebels, and had said plainly what they all believed: no beardless boy pulled from a churchyard would rule men who had worn crowns while Uther lived.

Arthur heard it and felt the fear under the murmuring like frost under grass. He was afraid too. He would not say so, and he would not wait.

"They expect a boy to hesitate," Merlin said. "Strike at dawn."

Arthur struck at dawn and led the charge himself. In the first press of spears he came on Lot's standard-bearer and drove the sword from the stone through shield and shoulder both. The Orkney banner went down; a shout ran through his men, and they went in after it. The rebels fought for their pride, and Arthur's men fought for their king, and pride tires sooner than love.

Then two kings came over the sea to his aid, Ban of Benwick and Bors of Gaul, who had loved Uther and now his son, and their fresh knights broke the rebel flank.

Lot was driven from the field, and over that hard year the rebels yielded or fell. Arthur buried his dead with his own hands, and the ground stayed under his nails for days, for he would not wash it out.

. . .

He paid for his victories the next spring, at a ford where a knight in strange arms barred his way.

They jousting, and the knight put Arthur in the dirt. He rose and fought on foot, and twice the knight's shield was there before his blade, until the sword from the stone met a blow it could not answer and snapped in his hand like rotten wood. He stood holding a hilt and six inches of blade, and understood that he was about to die.

But the strange knight lowered his point, for Merlin had cried out who Arthur was. "I will not slay a king swordless," he said. His name was Pellinore, king of the far islands, come over the sea hunting a beast no hound could run down. He said it as other men mention the weather, and Arthur, wiping the mud from his eyes, laughed, and liked the man before he could help it.

"Your sword served its purpose," Merlin told him. "It named you king. Now you need a sword for what comes after."

He brought Arthur to a lake of black water, so still the cliffs stood doubled in it, and an arm rose out of the deep, clothed in white samite, holding a sword whose brightness hurt the eye. A Lady of the Lake stood upon the shore.

"That sword is Excalibur," she said, "and you shall have it, if you will give me a gift when I ask it."

Arthur promised. He was young, and had not yet learned what it costs to promise unborn things. He rowed out and took the sword, and the hand went down without a sound.

"Which is better," Merlin asked him, "the sword or the scabbard?"

"The sword," Arthur said, for it shone.

"The scabbard is worth ten of the sword. While you wear it, you shall lose no blood, though you be wounded to the death." Arthur buckled it on and did not understand, and that too would be paid for.

. . .

In the days of the wars Lot had sent his wife to spy out the court, Morgawse of Orkney, with her young sons. She was tall and royal, and Arthur, knowing nothing of his own begetting, loved her, and she did not refuse him. It was a short season and a sweet one, for he did not know she was his mother's daughter.

Merlin told him, after she had gone home.

"She is Igraine's child by Gorlois. Your sister, in the half that matters. And she carries your child, who shall be born on May Day, and he shall destroy you and all your works."

Arthur sat very still. Somewhere below the hall a groom was singing to the horses. "Then the child must not be born," he said, and his own voice sounded like another man's.

"It is born already in what is done. You can only meet it."

. . .

In those days the knight Balin came to court, a poor man of the North with a temper like a drawn knife. A damsel came girt with a sword no man could draw unless he were clean of his deeds; the best of the court failed; Balin drew it easily, and would not give it back, though she warned it would slay the man he loved best.

Then the Lady of the Lake rode in to claim the gift Arthur owed her, and asked for Balin's head, for he had slain her brother. Balin, before the whole court, took her head instead, for she had caused his mother's death. Arthur banished him that hour. "You have shamed my hall, and no man does that twice."

Balin rode out to win back his honour, and the tale came back by degrees, in the mouths of wounded men. How he hunted the knight Garlon, who rode invisible and slew unseen, and followed him into Pellam's castle.

There, weaponless and bleeding, Balin saw a spear on the chamber wall, the very spear, the wounded men swore, that had pierced Christ's side. He took it and drove it into the king, and the stroke threw the castle down on them both.

Men called it the Dolorous Stroke ever after. Pellam lived, maimed past all healing, and his land withered with him: fields untilld, wells gone bitter, three counties wasted by one blow. Nor could he rise until the best knight in the world should come and ask the question that heals.

Riding on, Balin met a knight in unknown armour by a castle moat, and they fought and gave each other death. It was his brother Balan, whom he loved best. They knew each other only when the visors came off, and were buried in one tomb.

Arthur heard it all in silence. Kin slaying kin, each a stranger to the other. He thought of a lady gone home to Orkney, and Merlin's words lying in him like a second wound the scabbard could not stanch.

Far in the North, in his ruined castle, King Pellam lay waiting for a healing no one understood. Nearer home there was peace, and peace had its own questions.

CHAPTER 3: THE ROUND TABLE

The realm was at peace, and peace gave Arthur no rest. War had told him what to do; peace only asked what he was for. His lords filled the silence with counsel: the king must marry, and beget heirs, and make an order of knights worthy of the years he had won.

He knew already whom he would wed: Guinevere, daughter of King Leodegrance, seen once and dreamed of since, proud and golden, who looked at a man as if weighing him for a crown.

He told Merlin first, as he told him everything. He expected a blessing. He got a long silence.

"You could choose better," Merlin said at last, "and worse. I tell you true: Guinevere is not wholesome for you. She is fair and she is a king's daughter, and where her heart will go, no man may command. And there is one coming, the best knight the world will hold, whom she shall love, and he her."

"Then I will trust her," Arthur said, "and him." His voice came out harder than he meant. The words settled into the dark room of his mind where the May-child already waited.

He sent for her anyway. A man does not escape his fate by knowing it. Leodegrance wept for joy at the match, and sent his daughter to Camelot with a dowry beyond gold: a great round table that Uther had given him long ago, with seats for a hundred and fifty knights.

Arthur was married at Pentecost, when the world is green and no man believes in winter. At the feast he set his knights around the Table, and the Table became the realm's new heart.

For at a round table there is no head. That was the whole of it. No knight sat above another; the king sat among them as first in oath, not in pride. They swore it there, every man, and swore it again each year after: never to do outrage nor murder, to give mercy when it was asked, to fight for any lady wronged, and to take no battle in a wrongful quarrel, for love or worldly goods.

Arthur watched them swear and felt what he had not felt since the sword came out of the stone: that a thing was being made which would outlast him. If the May-child was coming to destroy him, let it come. This would remain.

One seat stood empty among the rest, and no man would take it. Merlin had letters put upon it in gold: THIS IS THE SIEGE PERILOUS.

"Only one knight shall ever sit there," Merlin said, "the best in the world, he who shall achieve the Holy Grail. Any other who sits there dies that day."

"Then it waits for a man not yet born," Arthur said.

"It waits," said Merlin, and would say no more.

. . .

In the days after the wedding, Merlin began to go from the court, following a damsel of the Lake whose name was Nimue. She was cool-eyed and courteous, and she learned from Merlin all that he would teach, and he would teach her everything. That was the trouble.

"She is afraid of you," Arthur told him once. "She thinks you will have your will of her by craft."

"She is wise to be afraid," Merlin said. "I am old, and I know I go to my end, and I cannot turn from the road. I made you, Arthur. I cannot make myself."

Arthur begged him to stay. Merlin only smiled. "You will have your queen and your Table and your wars. You will not have me. Glory and grief together, always together. It must be."

In the summer the word came, carried by Nimue herself, who told it without tears. Traveling in Cornwall, Merlin had shown her a great stone under a cliff, where a cave ran into the rock. There she worked upon him the very enchantment he had taught her, and the stone closed over him as water closes over what is thrown into it. Alive or asleep or dead, no one knew; some said that on quiet nights travelers heard a voice talking under the ground.

Arthur rode to Cornwall and stood on that stone a whole day. Nothing answered him but the gulls and the tide working at the cliff. He came home heavier than he went.

Then in the autumn his sister Morgan le Fay, schooled in the dark arts and smiling like honey, stole away from the court in the night with Excalibur's scabbard, which she had begged leave to handle for its beauty. Arthur pursued her through two counties. Cornered at a lake shore, she cast the scabbard into the deepest water rather than yield it, and rode from him laughing. They dragged the lake a week. The water kept what it was given, as that other lake kept his debt.

He told no one what the loss meant. Merlin had said it long ago: the scabbard is worth ten of the sword; while you wear it you shall lose no blood. Now it lay in dark water, and Merlin lay under the stone, and the Round Table sat full and bright in Camelot's hall, with one seat empty, waiting.

The realm must stand now on the oath alone. Arthur looked down the hall at his knights, at Guinevere beside him, and wondered whether he had built a wall or a door, and what would come through it.

CHAPTER 4: LANCELOT, BEST OF KNIGHTS

Lancelot was eighteen when he left Benwick for Britain, and his father King Ban wept to see him go, and blessed him, and let him. He had been raised, men said, by the Lady of the Lake in her hall under the water, and he carried her gift in him: he had never in his life been afraid. He did not yet know what that would cost him.

He wanted one thing only, and it was not glory. It was to kneel to King Arthur and mean it. His father had crossed the sea for that king, and had told him what the oath of the Round Table was worth. But when Lancelot came to Camelot, he said nothing of whose son he was. He came in plain arms, a stranger, and asked to be tried.

They tried him. A knight of the North, Sir Turquine, had waylaid the roads for a year and held four and threescore knights in his dungeon, men of Arthur's own Table among them. Three good knights had ridden against him and joined the prisoners. Lancelot asked the quest as his proving, and the court smiled kindly at the nameless boy, and let him go.

He was gone nine days. On the tenth he came back with Turquine's shield at his saddle-bow and four and threescore freed knights riding behind him, loud as a wedding, and the court stopped smiling.

Then Arthur had him called by name, and when he heard whose son he was, he rose from his throne and kissed him on both cheeks. "Your father was my strength when I had none," he said. "Now I see where his went." He made him knight of the Round Table, and no man said the seat was given for Ban's sake. They had all seen the road.

After that it seemed the world had been waiting to be beaten. Quest after quest, joust after joust, there was no knight in Britain who could keep his saddle against Lancelot, and few who could keep their temper, for he unhorsed men gently and helped them up, which was harder to bear than blows. He spoke little. When they praised him he turned it aside onto God, or his horse, or the skill of his enemies, until men stopped offering praise and simply told one another what they had seen.

. . .

In those years came the war with Rome, and Lancelot crossed the sea with the host. It wants a book of its own and shall have a page: how the Emperor Lucius demanded tribute of Britain; how Arthur answered that he owed Rome nothing Rome had not first taken; how the king left his realm in good hands and sailed, and fought through France and over the mountains, against giants and emperors and the gathered kings of the East; and how at last, in Rome itself, the pope crowned him Emperor with his own hand. It was the summit of the world, and the men who came home believed that whatever Arthur's fellowship made would stand forever.

Lancelot remembered the crowning differently. A Christmas morning, breath white in the cold church, the smell of wax and incense, a circle of gold settling onto Arthur's brow, and with it a thought as sudden as an arrow: this is as high as it goes; everything after is down. He never knew where the thought came from. He was ashamed of it. He kept it.

. . .

Back in Britain, Arthur named him the queen's champion, for what knight was fitter to keep her honour than the knight who had never lost?

Lancelot had spoken to Guinevere perhaps a dozen times before that day, at feasts, at the rail of the lists, the way a man speaks to the sun: courteously, and without looking straight at her. Now, as champion, he knelt in the hall to take the charge, and she gave him her hand to kiss, and said, "I could not be safer, unless God sent an angel."

"Your Grace has had an angel's patience with rough knights," he said, and raised his eyes.

She was looking at him. Not weighing him, not dealing out the queen's smile she gave like alms. Only looking, the way one looks at weather coming from far off. It lasted no longer than a breath. Then she withdrew her hand and turned to Arthur, and the hall moved on around them, and nothing had happened.

Nothing had happened. Lancelot stood among the greatest fellowship the world had known, sworn to a king he loved above any man, charged before God with the honour of that king's wife, and he understood all at once why men prayed not to be led into temptation. The prayer had never made sense to him before. He had thought it meant the sin.

It meant the wishing.

SOURCE NOTE

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch. This retelling is original educational wording by Mythopouch, based on the Arthurian romance compiled by Sir Thomas Malory and printed by William Caxton in 1485. Malory's work is in the public domain. This file is not a diplomatic edition of Malory and not a modern copyrighted scholarly translation. Ancient and medieval stories are not owned by Mythopouch. The sentences on these pages are. Written for readers aged 15 and up. www.mythopouch.com