



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

THE STORY OF MERLIN

L'Estoire de Merlin

Volume of eight - Book II - 10 chapters

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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THE STORY OF MERLIN

Second branch of the Vulgate Cycle, the Lancelot-Grail, here retold from the Old French prose romance as edited by H. Oskar Sommer. Where the Estoire del Saint Graal carried the Grail across the sea to Britain, the Estoire de Merlin tells how the age of Arthur was made: the begetting of the prophet who was half a devil, the rise and fall of kings before him, the sword in the stone, the wars that forged the realm of Logres, and the love that locked the enchanter away from the world he had built. In the Old French it is called the L'Estoire de Merlin.

THE COUNCIL IN HELL

When Christ harrowed Hell and carried off the souls of the just, the devils gathered in council, and their rage was the rage of a lord who finds his stronghold broken and his captives carried off. They could not undo what had been done; but they could answer it. If God had sent His Son among men to draw them upward, the devils would send a son of their own - a man begotten of their nature, knowing all things that have ever been, cunning beyond any sage, who would walk among mankind and lead it astray. A counter-Christ. So they chose one of their number, skilled in entering the dreams and beds of mortals, and charged him with the getting of this child.

He found his ground in a rich and pious household, a family that feared God and kept the Church's seasons. Piece by piece the demon pulled it down: the wealth scattered, the father brought to despair, the sons taken off one after another, until of all that house only the youngest daughter remained - a maiden devout and steadfast, guarded in her soul by her confessor, the holy hermit Blaise. Night after night she armed herself with prayer and the sign of the cross, and the demon could not come near her.

But one evening she lay down angry and unshriven, her heart hot with some quarrel of the day, and in her bitterness she forgot her prayers. Her guard was lowered for a single night, and a single night was enough. The incubus took her in her sleep, and she woke knowing that something had been done to her that she could not name, and wept, and ran to Blaise.

The hermit heard her confession and saw farther than she could. The child she carried was the devils' work - but the devils had overreached themselves. For when the boy was born, hairy and strange and huge-eyed, Blaise baptised him at once, and the waters of baptism undid Hell's design at its root. The child kept his father's gifts: the knowledge of every past thing, of all that is said and thought in the world. But God, who will not be outplotted, gave him gifts His enemy never intended: free will, and the knowledge of things to come. They named him Merlin, after his mother's father.

THE INFANT ADVOCATE

The law of that land was not gentle to a woman who bore a child and could show no husband. Merlin's mother was seized and condemned to the fire, and her judge sat in his robes, well pleased with his own righteousness, to sentence her.

Then the child spoke. He was perhaps two and a half years old, still small enough to be held, and the court laughed to see him lifted up - until his voice came out clear and cold as well-water, and the laughing stopped.

He defended his mother as no advocate could have done, laying out the truth of her life and of the thing that had been done to her. Then he turned upon the judge himself. "You sit in judgement on a woman's begetting," he said, "yet you do not know your own. Shall I tell the court who your father was? Not the man your mother was married to, but the priest who came to her in her garden." And he named the man, and the place, and the hour, while the judge's face drained of colour. He went further: he prophesied that the priest would die by drowning, and in due course the priest, crossing a plank bridge, fell into the stream beneath it and was drowned, as Merlin had said.

The court freed the mother. The child owned plainly what he was - the son of a demon, gotten as the devils had planned - but he declared that he would serve God, not them; for baptism had made him his own. And when the storm of those days had quieted, Merlin came to Blaise with a charge that would outlive them both. "Take up your pen," he said, "and write. Write all that I tell you - my begetting, my birth, and all that I shall do and suffer, and all that will come after in the realm of Logres. For these things must not be lost." So Blaise withdrew to his hermitage in Northumberland and began the book that he called the estoire, the history; and whenever Merlin came back to him through the years, the hermit's pen took down what the prophet dictated. What you read here is, by its own account, that book.

THE TOWER THAT WOULD NOT STAND

In those days Britain had a king named Constant, and after him his son Moyne, called the Monk, because the churchmen had made a clerk of him and he had no more business on a throne than a cowl has on a charger. Vortigern, the dead king's seneschal, saw how it lay: he had the monk-king murdered and took the crown, and to hold it he bought peace with Hengist and his Saxons, heathen out of Germany who came first as sellswords and stayed as wolves stay. The men of Britain hated Vortigern for it, and loyal hands smuggled the two young princes of the true line - Pendragon and Uther, Moyne's brothers - overseas beyond his reach.

Hated men dream of safety. Vortigern set his masons to build a refuge-tower, the strongest in Britain, and every night what they raised by day fell down. Again they built, and again it fell, until the king's wise men and diviners, pressed for an answer, gave him the answer such men keep for last: the foundations must be mortared with the blood of a child who had no father.

Messengers rode out hunting such a child, and in one town they heard boys quarrelling at their games, and one boy jeering at another: "Hold your tongue - you who never had a father!" The fatherless boy was Merlin, then about seven years old. He came to Vortigern's tower not as a victim but as a judge. He mocked the diviners who knew neither what lay beneath the tower nor what hung above it. "Dig," he said. They dug, and found a deep pool; they drained the pool, and out of it rose two dragons, one red and one white, which closed upon each other and fought so savagely that the earth shook and the half-built walls swayed. All that day they fought, while the king and his people watched in dread, and at last the white dragon drove the red to the pool's edge and killed it - and then, grievously wounded, the white dragon died itself.

Merlin read the meaning as another man reads a psalter. The red dragon was Vortigern; the white was the party of the true princes, Pendragon and Uther, who were even then upon the sea with their ships. The white dragon would slay the red - and would die of the slaying, for the Saxons

would outlast Pendragon too. It fell out as he said. The brothers landed, the barons rose to them, and Vortigern perished in his burning castle. Pendragon was crowned, and Merlin stood at his right hand; with the prophet's cunning the king trapped Hengist and put him to death. But Hengist's people came back to avenge him, and in that war Pendragon fell, as the white dragon had died by the pool.

So Uther reigned, and took his brother's name for his own: Uther Pendragon. For Pendragon's memorial Merlin did a wonder that still stands on Salisbury Plain - he brought the great stones by his art out of Ireland and set them in their everlasting circle. And for Uther he made a greater wonder still. Two holy tables, he told the king, had gone before: the table of the Last Supper, and the table Joseph of Arimathea made for the Grail. Merlin founded the third, the Round Table, at Carduel, seating fifty chosen knights as equals about its rim. One seat he forbade any man to take - the Siege Perilous, which must stand empty until the knight should come who would achieve the Grail. Once, in Uther's day, a knight presumed to sit in it; the earth opened and swallowed him, and he was never seen again. After that the empty seat kept its own counsel, and men gave it a wide berth.

THE NIGHT AT TINTAGEL

At a Christmas crown-wearing, when the king kept high feast and all his barons with their ladies sat in the hall, Uther looked across the firelight at Ygraine, wife of the Duke of Tintagel, and desire went into him like a blade. He honoured her openly - too openly. Ygraine, who was loyal and shrewd, saw what was in his face and told her husband, and the Duke, furious at the insult, took her out of the feast without leave and rode for Cornwall. Uther demanded their return; they defied him; the king invaded.

The Duke split his strength. Ygraine he shut in Tintagel, the castle on the sea-cliffs that no army could take; himself he garrisoned at Terrabil, against Uther's host. And Uther, camped in the field, began to sicken with longing as men sicken of a wound. His knight Ulfius, riding out on the king's affairs, met a beggar by the road - a ragged, knowing beggar who told Ulfius his errand before he spoke it, and the king's sickness before it was confessed. It was Merlin, who knew all that had passed as his father knew all past things. His price, named before witnesses: Uther should have his desire of Ygraine, but the child conceived that night must be surrendered to Merlin to be disposed of as Merlin willed. The king swore it.

That evening Merlin wrought his deepest mischief. He changed Uther's face and form into the very likeness of the Duke of Tintagel, and himself and Ulfius into the shapes of the Duke's two knights, Bretel and Jordanus. In these borrowed faces they came to Tintagel at nightfall, and the porters, seeing their lord home with his familiar men, opened the gates. Uther lay with Ygraine, and she received him believing she received her husband.

That same night, miles away, the real Duke made a sally from Terrabil and was killed in the fighting - so that the man in Ygraine's bed wore the face of a corpse, and she lay with a stranger in the hour she became a widow. In that night Arthur was conceived: the greatest of kings, begotten between a deception and a death. The old book softens nothing of this: the whole golden age was founded on a lie told in the dark.

In time the truth came out, and the dead Duke's honour was answered as it could be: Uther married Ygraine. Her daughters by her first husband Hoel and by the Duke - five maidens in all - were married into the highest houses of the realm: one to King Lot of Orkanie, one to King Nentres of Garlot, others to Uriens and to King Briadas; and the youngest, Morgan, was sent to a nunnery to be schooled, where among the psalters she found other books, and learned the arts of necromancy. When Ygraine's son was born, Merlin came for his price. The newborn was given out by a privy postern gate into the hands of the waiting enchanter, who carried him to Antron - whom later ages call Sir Ector - a loyal lord of small fame, to be raised as Antron's own son, foster-brother to his boy Kay. The child was baptised, and they named him Arthur. No one in the realm knew whose son he was. That, too, was Merlin's design.

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

Ygraine did not live to see her son a king. About two years before Uther's own end she died, and with her died the one living soul besides Merlin who could have sworn to the boy's begetting. Uther declined after her, in body and in fortune; the Saxons pressed in again upon the realm, and the old king, too weak to sit a horse, had himself carried to battle on a litter, and lying in it he won his last victory. On his deathbed Merlin came to him and promised that his son would be king after him and would accomplish the Round Table and all that was ordained for it. Uther died with that promise in his ears - but to the barons of Britain he died childless, and they fell at once to quarrelling over the crown, and sent for Merlin to give them a way.

Merlin's way was God's. Let the lords assemble at Logres at Christmas, he said, and pray for a sign. They gathered, and on Christmas morning, coming out of mass, they found in the churchyard a thing that had not been there at dawn: a great block of stone, and upon the stone a steel anvil, and through the anvil and into the stone a sword driven to the hilt. Letters written upon it promised the kingdom of Britain to the man who could draw it out.

Every great man there tried - dukes, kings, earls, each one certain the sign was for him - and the sword did not stir for any of them. So they set guards upon it and agreed to hold a tournament at the New Year, and to pray on.

To that tournament came Antron with his sons: Kay, newly knighted, and Arthur, his squire, a boy of fifteen who rode well and carried himself as though the world were a gift someone had just handed him. In the press of the morning Kay found he had left his sword at their lodging and sent Arthur back for it. Arthur found the lodging locked and empty, every soul gone to the lists; and being a boy who solved the problem in front of him, he rode to the churchyard - where the guards, too, had gone to watch the jousting - took the sword from the stone as easily as a man draws from a scabbard, and carried it to his brother.

Kay knew the sword at once, and for a moment grasped at glory; but Antron made the truth come out of him, and then made Arthur put the blade back and draw it again before witnesses. And then Antron knelt to his foster-son, and told him what he had never told him: "I am not your father."

The barons could not swallow it. A beardless boy, of no name and no house, was to be their king because of a conjurer's trick in a churchyard? They forced delay after delay: let it be tried again at Candlemas - and Arthur alone drew the sword; again at Easter - and Arthur alone drew it; again at

Pentecost. But by then the commons of the realm had seen enough. God's will, they cried, was written plain as the letters on the blade, and they would have no king but the one God had given them. At Pentecost Arthur was crowned.

For the sword itself bore its name in its letters: ESCALIBOR, which in the old tongue means that it cuts iron and steel and wood. In this telling - the true telling of the Vulgate book - the sword in the stone and the great sword of Arthur's wars are one and the same. No lady's hand rose from any lake to give him another.

THE BASTARD KING

Six kings came to the young king's coronation feast, and Arthur, generous as he would always be, received them with high honour. They took his gifts and despised him for them. He was low-born, they said among themselves, a bastard of nobody's getting; shall kings kneel to a stable-boy? Lot of Orkanie was the loudest of them, and behind him stood Uriens of Gorre, Nentres of Garlot, Angusel of Scotland, Carados Briefbras, and Yder - and their rebellion grew, in time, to eleven crowned kings.

Merlin came before them with the plain truth: this boy was Uther Pendragon's son, begotten on Ygraine, given out at birth to fostering by Uther's own sworn bargain. They laughed in his face. A witch's word against what their eyes could see - a squire with no pedigree. But the commons of Logres did not laugh; they had seen the sword, and they closed their ranks around their king. In the fighting that followed Arthur bore Escalibor in his first war, and the six kings were routed from the field.

Afterward, Merlin sat with Arthur and told him his whole story, beginning to end - the night at Tintagel and the Duke's death, the postern gate, the fostering at Antron's house, and the five half-sisters married into the great houses of the realm, whose sons would be the flowers of his court: Gawain, Lot's heir; Yvain, Uriens's son. With Ygraine dead and Uther in his grave, Merlin's word was the only proof the boy-king had; Ulfius and Antron stood witness to the bargain and the fostering. Arthur heard it all, and grieved for the father he never knew, and went on.

Merlin knew that swords alone would not make this king. He sent Arthur across the sea to Ban of Benoic and Bors of Gaunes, brother kings whose lands the warlord Claudas gnawed at year by year; and the two kings came with three hundred knights, and there was a great tournament where Kay and Lucan and young Girflet carried off the prizes, and for a day the war was forgotten in the brightness of lances. But before they would kneel, Ban and Bors - kings themselves, and careful what king they served - demanded proof of the boy's blood.

Then Merlin did the thing that stilled every tongue in the hall. He had the sacrament brought, and the enchanter who never in his life laid a hand on any man laid his hand upon the body of Christ and swore that Arthur was Uther's son, conceived and born as he had told it. Men might mock a witch's prophecies; no man believed even a devil's son would damn his soul for a lie. Ban and Bors rose and did homage, and the three of them made their plan: first to crush the rebel kings, then to ride to the aid of Leodagan of Carmelide, beset by the Saxon King Rion - and in time, Arthur should wed Leodagan's daughter Guenevere, the fairest lady in the world.

THE MIRROR OF TINTAGEL

Now comes the dark stroke in the pattern, and the book does not flinch from it.

King Lot was called away early from the court to a council, and his wife - Arthur's own half-sister, though neither of them knew it - remained behind. Arthur desired her, and as his father had once gone in another man's likeness to Ygraine's bed, so the son went in darkness to the bed of Lot's wife. Half-asleep, she believed him her husband returned. It was Tintagel again, with the generations shifted one step on: the same deception, the same night-born child. That night Mordred was conceived, and the narrator of the estoire pauses to spell out the lineage, as a man spells out a debt that will come due: Arthur's son, by Arthur's sister, King Lot's wife.

Merlin, who had never yet been wrong, prophesied openly that a knight already conceived but not yet born - a child whose birthday would be the first of May - would destroy King Arthur and lay waste the realm of Logres.

What Arthur did then was the first great sin of his reign. He had the nobly born infants of the May Day gathered up, and they were put to sea in a ship - whether he meant their deaths outright, as later retellings charge him, or meant to cast their fate upon God and the water, the versions of the book tell it differently, and men blamed Merlin's counsel as much as the king's deed, though they kept their blame behind their teeth. The ship foundered. All the children of the May perished - save one. Mordred's mother had sent her son out secretly, and he alone was cast ashore alive, and a good man took him and fostered him. So the destroyer was preserved by the very water that was meant to take him, and grew up far from the court he would one day burn.

THE VALLEY OF BEDEGRAINE

The rebel kings regrouped and swelled to eleven, and came against Arthur with an army that should have buried him. Merlin's answer was the war's great sleight of hand: by his art he ferried the whole host of Ban and Bors - ten thousand mounted men - secretly across the sea, and hid them in a deep valley of the forest of Bedegraine, where no scout's eye would find them.

The battle joined without them, and the eleven kings pressed Arthur hard, and the young king fought in the thickest of the press with Escalibor doing its named work. Then, at the moment Merlin had chosen, the hidden host broke out of the valley like a river through a breached dam. Ban and Bors fell upon the rebels' flank, and the army of the eleven kings came apart - shattered, ridden down, the survivors limping home with their crowns askew. And there the bitterest jest of the war awaited them: while they had marched to pull down a bastard boy, the Saxons had crossed into their own undefended lands, and the rebel kings came home from rebellion to defend their smoking fields from the heathen.

In these days the maiden Lysanor came to do homage to the king, and Arthur lay with her, and of that gentler night was born his son Loholt - a good knight in the years to come, whose fate belongs to another part of the great book.

While their fathers fought the Saxons for their own lands, the sons of the rebel kings made a different choice. Young men know glory when they see it, and glory had gone over to Arthur.

Gawain, Lot's eldest, came with his brothers Agravain, Guerrehet, and Gaheriet; with them came Galegantin, Nentres's son, and Sagremor, and Dodinel, and the two Yvains - the young generation of the Round Table arriving all at once, like a spring flight of birds. Merlin took them in hand, and the road to Arthur's court became one of his great games of disguise. He met them as a lamenting old man and tested their courtesy; to Arthur himself he came as a ragged bird-catcher and mocked the young king's stinginess to his face, while the court marvelled at the beggar's insolence; he sent ahead a forged letter that set the court guessing; he drove a riderless horse with a bloody saddle galloping past his own friends, so that the young knights spurred after it in grief and fury, believing their prophet murdered. Still squires, untested and half-armed, the youths beat the Saxons in fight after sharp fight. Through those same Saxon lines the infant Mordred passed in a squire's charge, one more refugee child among the war's debris; and Gawain, who did not yet know the half of his own house's secrets, fought through an assault to rescue his mother with his own hands.

THE WARS OF THE YOUNG KING

On Merlin's counsel, Arthur and Ban and Bors rode without banners, incognito as errant knights, to the relief of Leodagan, whom the pagan Saxon King Rion had besieged in Carmelide. The battles there were the making of Arthur's name. Leodagan himself was taken in one melee and rescued at the lance's point; Cleodalis, the steward whose wife Leodagan had wronged long ago, fought loyally for the king who had shamed him, and the book honours him for it. At the victory feast Arthur and Guenevere, Leodagan's daughter, saw one another across the hall, and what passed between their eyes was the beginning of the whole after-history of the realm.

In the climactic battle Guenevere herself armed Arthur for the field, fastening his harness with her own hands - a queen's service performed before ever she was a queen. Arthur felled the giant Jonap; and Merlin, standing apart as he always stood, raised a supernatural wind that tore through the heathen ranks, burned their banners where they stood, and hung a single flame burning in the empty air above the field. Rion fled, leaving behind his sword: Marmiadoise, which had been Hercules' own blade in the ancient world. Arthur took it up and wielded it thereafter - and not long after, at the great dubbing in Logres where Gawain and all the young company were made knights, Arthur gave Escalibor into Gawain's hands, where the sword of the stone would do famous work.

There were gentler interludes too, for the book is woven of many threads: the knight Guinebal found love and enchantment in a forest; Bors of Gaunes killed his old enemy Ameus and settled that long account. Then came Trebe. Claudas of the Land Laid Waste besieged the castle where Ban's and Bors's queens were shut in, and the allies came to raise the siege. Ban fought Claudas hand to hand; young Gawain, burning in his new knighthood, struck Claudas from his horse; the two queens watched the whole battle from the walls, their hearts going up and down with the tide of it. When the fight hung even, Merlin himself led the charge beneath the dragon standard, and the enemy broke. Claudas escaped - as he always escaped, to trouble the book again - but Trebe held.

And because the estoire will have its jest as well as its battles, it tells how Merlin went to Rome, where the emperor - whom the romance, caring nothing for chronology, calls Julius Caesar - lay haunted by a dream no sage could read. Merlin came into his forest as a stag, and then as a wild

man of the woods, and laughed when they caught him; for only he could read the dream, and its reading was a scandal: the empress kept her lovers in her chamber disguised as ladies-in-waiting. More than that, Merlin unveiled Caesar's own trusted seneschal, the grave Grisandoles, as a woman - the exiled princess Avenable, who had lived as a man and governed an empire. The empress was executed; Caesar, nothing daunted, married Avenable, and Merlin departed from Rome as strangely as he had come to it.

The wedding of Arthur and Guenevere was held at Carhaix in Carmelide, and it was beset as no wedding should be. King Lot plotted to seize the bride from the very feast, and was foiled by Merlin, forewarned as always. Closer and stranger was the second plot: Guenevere had a half-sister, begotten by Leodagan on the same night the queen herself was begotten, upon the unwilling wife of his steward Cleodalis - and this False Guenevere, with her treacherous knight Bertelay, schemed to steal her sister's face, her name, and her throne. That plot too was broken, and the false sister and Bertelay were driven into exile; but the book lets the threat stand over the feast like smoke: one day, it promises, she will indeed supplant the queen. Guenevere's dowry was the Round Table itself, kept at her father's court since Uther's death - and Merlin, giving away the bride, spoke the warning he always spoke in full knowledge: that Guenevere would love, and be loved by, the best knight in the world, who was not Arthur. Arthur heard him, and married her anyway, as Merlin knew he would.

After the wedding came the peace-making, and it was Gawain who made it. He went to his own father Lot and persuaded him to submit; then Lot, Gawain, and his brothers rode the perilous embassy to the other rebel kings. All the powers of Britain assembled on the Plain of Salisbury; a truce was sworn; and the combined host, rebels and allies shoulder to shoulder at last, fell upon the last Saxon army in Britain and crushed it for good. The peace of Logres became permanent. Then Lucius, Emperor of Rome, sent his challenge to Arthur, and the king campaigned on the Continent and stripped the Romans of their lands - until word came that Leodagan was dead, and the host turned home to Logres.

THE CAROLE AND THE TOWER OF AIR

Through all these wars and weddings one thread runs underneath, surfacing and sinking again as the book weaves it: the thread of Merlin and Nimiane.

In the forest of Brocéliande there lived a vavasour named Dyonas, and his daughter Nimiane had been from her girlhood under the protection of Diana, goddess of the woods, who had foretold to her family the stranger who would one day come to the fountain. Merlin, for his part, had already told Blaise the whole story before it began - how he would love this maiden, and teach her, and how it would end. He knew, and he went.

He came to the fountain disguised as a squire of surpassing beauty, and told her he was a wanderer seeking his old master. And to dazzle her he worked the loveliest of all his enchantments: he conjured a carole - an orchard where none had stood, full of knights and ladies dancing hand in hand in the green shade, singing as they turned. The song they sang runs through the whole love story in advance, like a refrain heard from the far side of a hill: truly, love begins in joy and ends in sorrow.

Nimiane was not dazzled past thought. She set her terms with the composure of a queen: she would be his amis, his love, but she would keep her virginity, and he would teach her his arts - all of them. Merlin, who could see the end of this road as clearly as the beginning, accepted. Meeting by meeting, between his journeys - to Rome, to the mustering of Arthur's allies, even to Jerusalem, where he converted King Flualis - he came back to Brocéliande, and lesson by lesson she drew his knowledge out of him: the arts of illusion, the making of phantoms, and the spell for putting a man to sleep, which she tried first upon her own father, gently, and found it good. She was the aptest pupil he ever had. He was, though he never said it plainly, teaching his own jailer her trade.

On his last visits to Blaise in Northumberland, Merlin unburdened himself. Long ago he had spoken a riddle-prophecy, of the wild man who would be bound by the she-leopard in circles neither of iron nor steel nor wood nor gold nor silver. Now he owned what the riddle meant: the she-leopard was Nimiane, the wild man was himself, and the binding would fall on him, and he could not guard against it - or would not; the prophet who had out-plotted kings and devils walked towards his own foreseen end with something like peace. This, he told Blaise, was the last time they would ever speak. Let the hermit write on: the adventures of the Grail would be accomplished in Arthur's day, and the book must be ready for them. Then he rode south to Brocéliande.

There came a day when Merlin lay down to sleep beneath a flowering hawthorn in the forest, and Nimiane walked her circle of enchantment around him as he slept. He woke inside a tower. It had no walls that hands could touch - not iron, not steel, not wood, not stone, but air alone, woven by the very spells he had taught her - and it was, as the book says plainly, the strongest prison in the world, never to be undone while the world endures. She could pass in and out; he could never leave. And here the Vulgate's telling parts company with all the later, harsher versions: Merlin does not rage and is not murdered. His Nimiane is no exasperated sorceress sealing a nuisance under a rock; she is his loving jailer, who keeps him faithfully and comes to him often, and he is the willing captive of his own teaching. He had sung the carole's refrain himself, long ago. Love begins in joy, and ends in this.

Merlin's absence began to trouble the court, and the knights of the Round Table swore the first quest the world had ever known - the pattern of every quest after it. Gawain, Sagremor, and Yvain rode out with twenty-four knights to find their prophet. Sagremor and Yvain failed and came home. Gawain's road was stranger: passing a lady in the forest, he failed in courtesy and did not greet her, and she cursed him into the shape of a dwarf. Dwarfish and questing still, he came at last to a place in the deep woods where there was nothing to see - only a mist like smoke hanging among the trees - and out of the mist came Merlin's voice.

The voice told him everything: the hawthorn, the circle, the tower that was no tower. Gawain asked how it might be undone, and the voice answered that it could never be undone, by him or by any man. "When you have gone from here," Merlin said, "I shall never speak with you again, nor with any other - save only with my love." Gawain wept, and rode on; the lady, satisfied at last by his amended courtesy, restored his own shape; and the dwarf-knight Evadeam, freed from an enchantment in those same adventures, came back with him to join the Round Table. Gawain stood before Arthur and reported the enchanter's fate, and the court mourned him as men mourn a mountain.

So the age of Merlin closed, and with his withdrawal from the world began the twelve-year peace of Arthur's golden age - the bright interval in which all the great adventures could happen, for only when the omniscient enchanter is locked away can chance and error and questing exist at all. Already the next story was gathering at the edges of this one: Ban and Bors had sons, and Ban's son was an infant named Lancelot; the wars with Claudas smouldered on in Benoic and Gaunes; the Siege Perilous stood empty at the Round Table, waiting; and Nimiane, keeper of the world's wisdom now, would one day take up a fatherless child and carry him down beneath the Lake. Where that child grew, and what he became, the third branch of the great book - the Lancelot Proper - now takes up the tale.

SOURCE NOTE

This retelling is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the Old French text and not a translation. It follows the book order of the complete retelling: Book I the History of the Holy Grail, Book II the Story of Merlin, Book III the Book of Arthur, Books IV and V Lancelot of the Lake, Book VI the Quest of the Holy Grail, and Book VII the Death of King Arthur. Checked against H. Oskar Sommer, *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 1908-1916. Ages 15 and up. © 2026 Mythopouch. www.mythopouch.com