

The Time Before

The Birth of Arthur

It happened in the ancient days that Uther Pendragon, a warrior of old Britain, made war against the mighty princes of the land. And each prince made war on every other. All fought to gain the rulership of the land. And the fighting was bitter and blood soaked. But Merlin, the old wizard of Britain, had a vision of a land united by one king. Merlin arranged a truce between Uther and Cornwall, the mightiest of the warring princes, so that there might be peace and unity.

Merlin spoke: “There must be one land and one king. Only thus can there be peace. And that king shall be Uther Pendragon, for only he has the power to defeat any and all who would ruin that peace.”

And so Uther – that most violent of men – became the King of Britain, despite Merlin’s reservations.

In his triumph, King Uther sent for many dukes and ladies, and said there would be a great celebration to welcome the new peace and the unity. Uther sent invitation especially to the Duke of Cornwall, for he was known to have a beautiful wife. And the Duke of Cornwall came, bringing his wife with him. And she was a fair lady, and a passing beautiful one. Her name was Igraine.

When the duke and his wife were come unto the king, the king desired and hungered for this lady, for Uther thought that he should own all things of this world, including other men’s wives. He made great cheer at this

celebration, and too much drink; and he told Igraine that he desired to have her love. But she was a good woman, and would not give in to the king.

The celebration lasted well past the midnight, and so the princes of the land slept at Lord Uther's castle; and so did the Duke and Lady of Cornwall. And that night Igraine talked to her husband privately. "I suppose that we were sent for so that I should be dishonored by this King Uther. Husband, I tell you that we should depart from this place suddenly, and ride all the night unto our own castle." The Duke of Cornwall was angry for revenge against Uther, but he knew of the king's power, and so he agreed with his wife that they must leave immediately.

So they departed in the midnight blackness, and neither the king nor any of his councilors were aware of their departing. Riding through the night, they sped to the Duke's castle at Cornwall.

All so soon as King Uther knew of their departing, so suddenly was he overwhelmed with anger. He called to him his council, and told them of the sudden departing of the duke and his wife. Then they advised the king: "Send for the duke and his wife; and if he will not come at your summons, then may ye do your worst unto him, and make mighty war upon him.

So that was done, and the messengers soon had their answer. The answer was that neither Cornwall nor his wife would come to Uther. Then was the king Uther wonderfully angered. And then the king sent Cornwall plain word again, and that word was war. When the duke had this warning, at once he went and prepared two strong castles of his, of the which the one was named

Tintagil, and the other Terrabil. So his wife Lady Igraine he put in the castle of Tintagil, and himself and his fighting forces he put in the castle of Terrabil.

Then in all haste came Uther with a great army, and laid a siege to the castle of Terrabil. But Uther could not defeat the great walls of Castle Terribil. Then for pure anger and for great love of fair Igraine the king Uther called upon Merlin for remedy. "Give me Igraine," Uther demanded. "I am sick for anger and for love of fair Igraine, that I may not be a fit ruler for you Merlin."

Merlin needed Uther's service to deliver a land in unity and peace and strength, and so he gave in to Uther. "Well, my lord, said Merlin, I shall seek the magic to make you look like the duke her husband. And then you shall have her. But you must promise to give me in return anything for which I ask."

Uther agreed.

"I shall change you unto the likeness of the duke. Go to Igraine at Castle Tintagel. But wait ye make not many questions with her men, but say ye are diseased, and so go ye to bed. Igraine will see you in the likeness of her husband, and she will do your bidding."

So this was done as they devised.

But the duke of Cornwall saw how the king Uther rode from the siege of Castle Terrabil, and therefore that night he and his men followed, hoping to kill Uther. But the duke himself was slain in a fight even before he caught Uther. And so King Uther came to the castle more than three hours after Cornwall's death, and there he found Igraine, and before day came they had conceived a child.

The next morning, Uther in disguise kissed the lady Igraine and departed in all haste. But when the lady heard tell of the duke her husband, and learned from many voices that he had been killed the night before, she marveled at who that might have been that came to her in likeness of her lord and husband.

All who opposed Uther were now dead or subdued. And Uther came to Igraine and forced her to become his wife – such is the power of a king. And so she mourned privately and held her peace.

Now Igraine had a daughter who was called Morgana le Fay. And she was passing angered by the death of her beloved father. She was sent away by Uther and was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned the witching craft of necromancy.

Then the time came near that Queen Igraine should bear a child. So it happened within half a year from when King Uther was with his queen that he asked her, by the faith she owed to him, whose was the child that should be born. She was frightened to give answer. “Do not be Dismayed, said the king, but tell me the truth, and I shall love you the better.”

“Sir, said she, I shall tell you the truth. The same night that my lord was dead, on the very hour of his death, there came into my castle of Tintagil a man who looked like my lord in speech and in appearance, and so I welcomed him as I ought to welcome my husband. And that same night, as I shall answer unto God, this child was begotten.”

That is the truth, said the king, as ye say; for it was I myself that came in the likeness of your husband, and therefore dismay you not, for I am father of the child.”

And there he told her all the details of his disguise, and how it was by Merlin's advice and magical help.

And then Merlin came into the place where Uther and Igraine lived, and he spoke unto the king, and said, “Sir, ye must repay your debt unto me. Give me the child.” And over the screams of Igraine, Uther tore the child from its mother and gave the boy to Merlin.

So like as Merlin devised it was done. The child was delivered unto Merlin, and so he bare it forth unto Sir Ector, a fair, just, wise, and kindly knight. They made a priest to christen him, and named him Arthur; and so Sir Ector's wife nourished him with her own breast. And Sir Ector made pledge to nourish and raise the child as his own.

Then within two years King Uther's enemies came after him, and did a great battle upon his men, and slew many of his people. And Uther fell sick and died. Then stood the realm in great jeopardy for a long while; every mighty lord fought to become king. And again the land was without a king; and again the land was drenched in blood and cursed in the violence and chaos of war.

So stood the world before the coming of Arthur.