King Uther Pendragon, the lady Igraine, and the Birth of Arthur

First Three Chapters of Le Morte D'Arthur by
Sir Thomas Malory (slightly abridged)

CHAPTER I

How Uther Pendragon sent for the duke of Cornwall and Igraine his wife, and of their departing suddenly again.

IT befell in the days of Uther Pendragon, when he was king of all England, and so reigned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornwall that held war against him for a long time. And the duke was called the Duke of **Tintagil**[1]. And so by means King Uther sent for this duke, charging him to bring his wife with him, for she was called a fair lady and her name was Igraine.

So when the duke and his wife had come unto the king, by the means of great lords who accompanied them. The king liked and loved this lady well, and he made them great cheer out of measure, and desired to have lain by her. But she was a passing good woman, and would not assent unto the king. And then she told the duke her husband, and said, I suppose that we were sent for that I should be dishonored; wherefore, husband, I counsel you, that we depart from here suddenly, that we may ride all night unto our own castle. And just as she said so, they departed, that neither the king nor none of his council were aware of their departing. As soon as King Uther knew of their departing so suddenly, he was wonderly **wroth**[2]. Then he called to him his **privy**[3] council, and told them of the sudden departing of the duke and his wife.

Then they advised the king to send for the duke and his wife by a great charge; and if he will not come at your summons, then may ye do your best, then have ye cause to make mighty war upon him. So that was done, and the messengers had their answers; neither he nor his wife would come to him.

Then was the king wonderfully wroth. And then the king sent him plain word again, and **bade**[4] him be ready and **stuff him and garnish him**[5], for within forty days he would fetch him out of the biggest castle that he hath.

When the duke had this warning, **anon**[6] he went and furnished and garnished two strong castles of his, of the which one was named Tintagil, and the other castle named Terrabil. So his wife Dame Igraine he put in the castle of Tintagil, and himself he put in the castle of Terrabil, **which had many issues and posterns out**[7]. Then in all haste came Uther with a great host, and laid a siege about the castle of Terrabil. And there he pitched many pavilions, and there was great war made on both parties, and much people slain. Then for pure anger and for great love of fair Igraine the king Uther fell sick. So came to the king Uther Sir Ulfius, a noble knight, and asked the king why he was sick. I shall tell thee, said the king, I am sick for anger and for love of fair Igraine, that I may not be whole. Well, my lord, said Sir Ulfius, I shall seek Merlin, and he shall prepare you a remedy, that your heart shall be pleased. So Ulfius departed, and by adventure he met Merlin in a beggar's company, and there Merlin asked Ulfius whom he sought. And he said he had troubles to tell him. Well, said Merlin, I know whom thou seekest, for thou seekest Merlin; therefore seek no farther, for I am he; and if King Uther will well reward me, and be sworn unto me to fulfil my desire, that shall be his honor and profit more than mine; for I shall cause him to have all his desire. All this will I undertake, said Ulfius, that there shall be nothing reasonable but thou shalt have thy desire. Well, said Merlin, he shall have his intent and desire. And therefore, said Merlin, ride on your way, for I will not be long behind.

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[1] **Tintagil** – A historical castle and stronghold on the SW coast of England
[2] **Wroth** – adv. Angry
[3] **Privy** – adj. Private
[4] **Bade** – v. Commanded
[5] *stuff him and garnish him* – prepare for war
[6] **Anon** – adv. Quickly
[7] *which had many issues and posterns out* – well prepared for war

CHAPTER II

How Uther Pendragon made war on the duke of Cornwall, and how by the mean of Merlin he lay by the duchess and gat Arthur.

THEN Ulfius was glad, and rode with a quick pace till he came unto King Uther Pendragon, and told him he had met with Merlin. Where is he? said the king. Sir, said Ulfius, he will not dwell long. Then Ulfius was aware that Merlin stood at the porch of the pavilion's door. And then Merlin was bound to come to the king. When King Uther saw him, he said he was welcome. Sir, said Merlin, I know all your heart every detail; so ye will be sworn unto me as ye be a true king anointed, to fulfil my desire, ye shall have your desire. Then the king was sworn upon the **Four Evangelists**[8]. Sir, said Merlin, this is my desire: the first night that ye shall lie by Igraine ye shall get a child on her, and when that is born, that it shall be delivered to me to nourish as I please; for the child will be too valuable. I will, said the king, as thou wilt have it. Now make you ready, said Merlin, this night ye shall lie with Igraine in the castle of Tintagil; and ye shall be like the duke her husband, Ulfius shall be like Sir Brastias, a knight of the duke's, and I will be like a knight by the name of Sir Jordanus, a knight of the duke's. But don't talk to her nor her men, but say ye are diseased, and so off you to bed, and rise not on the morn till I come to you, for the castle of Tintagil is but ten miles hence; so this was done as they devised. But the duke of Tintagil **espied**[9] how the king rode from the siege of Terrabil, and therefore that night he issued out of the castle at a gate and was distressed by the king's host. And so, through his own issue, the duke himself was slain.

So after the death of the duke, King Uther lay with Igraine more than three hours after his death, and begat on her that night Arthur, and that day came Merlin to the king, and bade him make him ready, and so he kissed the lady Igraine and departed in all **haste**[10]. But when the lady heard tell of the duke her husband she marvelled who that might be that lay with her in likeness of her lord; so she mourned **privily**[11] and held her peace. Then all the barons by one assent prayed the king of union betwixt the lady Igraine and him; the king gave them leave, for pleased would he be to have been with her. So the king put all the trust in Ulfius to **entreat**[12] between them, so by the entreaty at the last the king and she met together. Now will we do well, said Ulfius, our king is a lusty knight and wifeless, and my lady Igraine is a passing fair lady; it were great joy unto us all, it might please the king to make her his queen. Unto that they moved it to the king. And anon, like a lusty knight, he agreed with good will, and so in all haste they were married in a morning with great **mirth**[13] and joy.

And King Lot of Lothian and of Orkney then wedded Margawse that was Gawaine's mother, and King Nentres of the land of Garlot wedded Elaine. All this was done at the request of King Uther. And the third sister **Morgan le Fay** [14]was put to school in a nunnery, and there she learned so much that she was a great clerk of **necromancy**[15]. And after she was wedded to King Uriens of the land of Gore, that was Sir Ewain's le Blanchemain's father.

CHAPTER III

Of the birth of King Arthur and of his nurture.

THEN Queen Igraine **waxed**[16] daily greater and greater, so it befell after within half a year, as King Uther lay by his queen, he asked her, by the faith she owed to him, whose was the child within her body; then she sore **abashed**[17] to give answer. **Dismay you not**[18], said the king, but tell me the truth, and I shall love you the better, by the faith of my body. "Sir", said she, "I shall tell you the truth. The

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[8] *Four Evangelists* – the four Gospels (i.e. the Bible)
[9] **Espied** – v. Saw
[10] **Haste** – n. Quickness

[11] **Privily** – adv. Privately
[12] **Entreat** – v. Plead; implore
[13] **Mirth** – n. Happiness
[14] **Morgan le Fay** – AKA Morgana; Arthur's half-sister; very important in future stories
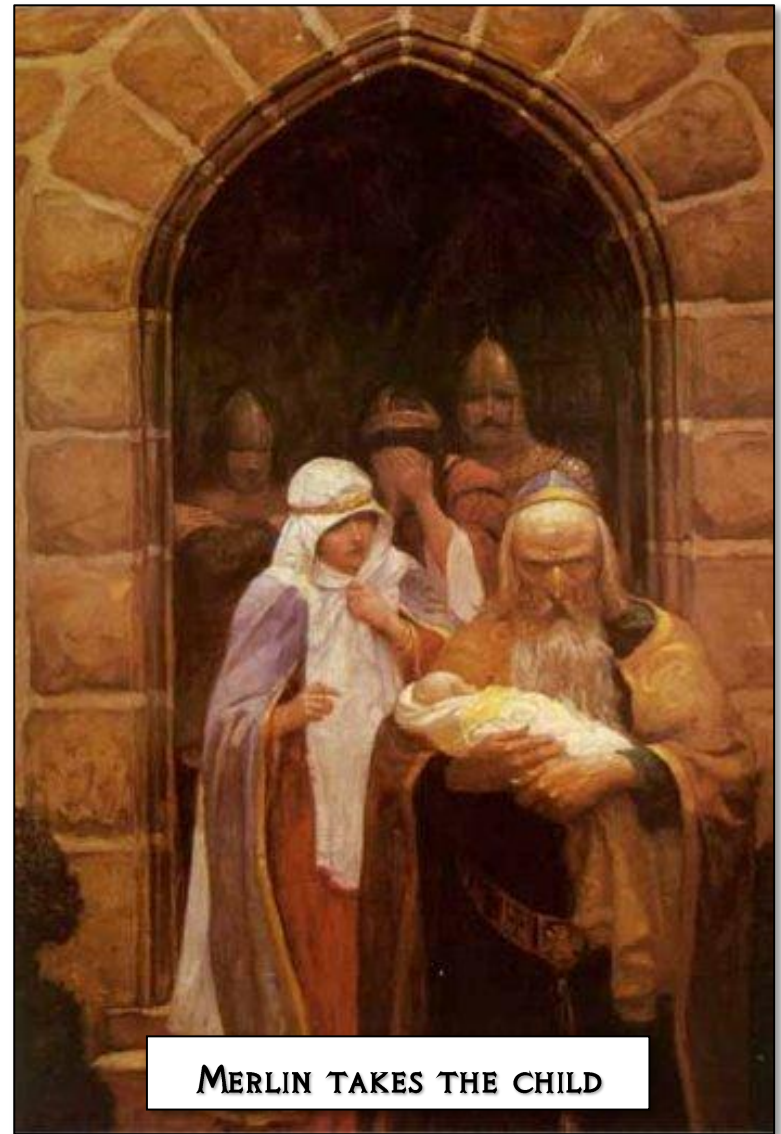[15] **Necromancy** – n. Dark arts; sorcery
[16] **Waxed** – v. Grew; swelled
[17] **Abashed** – adj. Ashamed
[18] *Dismay you not* – don't be upset

same night that my lord was dead, the hour of his death, as his knights record, there came into my castle of Tintagil a man like my lord in speech and in **countenance**[19], and two knights with him in likeness of his two knights Brastias and Jordanus, and so I went unto bed with him as I ought to do with my lord, and the same night, as I shall answer unto God, this child was begotten upon me". "That is truth", said the king, "as ye say; for it was I myself that came in the likeness, and therefore dismay you not, for I am father of the child"; and there he told her all the cause, how it was by Merlin's counsel. Then the queen made great joy when she knew who was the father of her child.

Soon came Merlin unto the king, and said, "Sir, ye must give up the nourishing of your child". "As thou wilt", said the king, "be it". "Well", said Merlin, "I know a lord of yours in this land, that is a passing true man and a faithful, and he shall have the nourishing of your child, and his name is Sir Ector, and he is a lord of fair livelihood in many parts in England and Wales; and this lord, Sir Ector, let him be sent for, for to come and speak with you, and desire him yourself, as he loveth you, that he will put his own child to nourishing to another woman, and that his wife nourish yours. And when the child is born let it be delivered to me at yonder privy postern **unchristened**[20]." So, as Merlin devised, it was done. And when Sir Ector came he made compact with the king to nourish the child like the king desired; and there the king granted Sir Ector great rewards. Then when the lady was delivered, the king commanded two knights and two ladies to take the child, bound in a cloth of gold, and that ye deliver him to what poor man ye meet at the postern gate of the castle. So the child was delivered unto Merlin, and so he bore it forth unto Sir Ector, and made a holy man christen him, and named him Arthur; and so Sir Ector's wife nourished him with her own **pap**[21].

MERLIN TAKES THE CHILD

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[19] **Countenance** – n. Facial expression

[20] **Unchristened** – adj. Unbaptized

[21] **Pap** – n. Child