

Alliterative Morte Arthure

anon

late-fourteenth century, Middle English

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This romance has been translated and retold from the Middle English verse romance known as the Alliterative Morte Arthure found uniquely in Lincoln Cathedral MS 91, the Lincoln Thornton Manuscript, edited by Larry D Benson, revised by Edward E Foster in: *King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS, 1994. With reference also to Brian Stone, 1988. *King Arthur's Death: Morte Arthure and Le Morte Arthur*, Penguin Books Limited.

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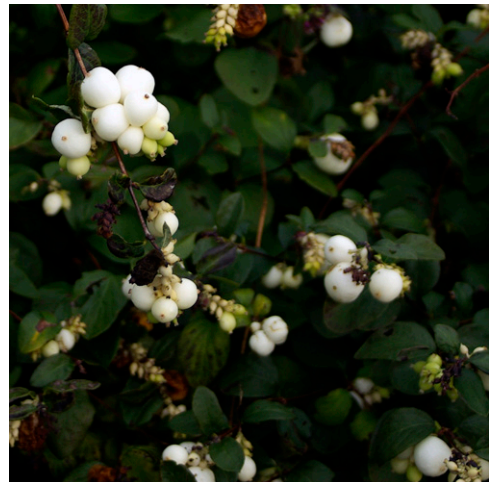
late-fourteenth century

Now grete glorious God · through grace of Himselven · and the precious prayer · of his pris Moder · sheld us fro shamesdeede · and sinful workes · and give us grace to guie · and govern us here – Now may great glorious God – through his grace, and through the precious prayers of his sweet mother Mary – shield us from sin and from all shameful acts. Give us the grace to be guided and governed in this wretched world through virtuous living, so that we may arrive at his court, which is the kingdom of heaven, when soul parts from body, to live with him forever, in bliss. And give me the skill to find words that are neither empty nor meaningless but are pleasing and profitable to those who will listen.

Let all who are eager, hear of those who came before us and lived a long time ago, of their strange and marvellous deeds and how they served God Almighty and loved him well. Listen to me and pay attention! I will tell you a tale that is true and worthy, about the noble knights of the Round Table. They were the flower of chivalry, accomplished in their affairs, skilful warriors, courageous and valiant, fearful of dishonour, courtly and courteous. I will tell you how they won great honour in war, and how they killed the wicked Lucius, who was the lord of Rome, and conquered that kingdom through force of arms. Bend your ears to me and hear a fine story!

When King Arthur had recovered the crown of those rich lands that Uther Pendragon had ruled over, and won castles, kingdoms and many countries through conquest – Orkney and Argyle and all the Outer Isles, the entire island of Ireland out to the ocean, rebellious Scotland to rule as he liked, Wales, Holland and Hainault, Flanders and France, Brittany, Burgundy and Brabant, Anjou, Poitiers, as far southwards as Toulouse and Provence, by cruel conquest; also Navarre and Normandy, Norway, Germany and Austria and still more countries: Gotland and Denmark, won by his own hands from Schouwen to Sweden with his sharp sword – when all this was accomplished, he dubbed his knights, apportioned dukedoms and earldoms and raised his kinsmen to kingship in the kingdoms where they most desired to rule.

When he had ridden through these realms and established his authority, he paused in his conquests to hold a Round Table. He wanted to rest for a season to enjoy some of the comforts of life in the island of Britain, which was always his prize possession. He went



into Wales with all his knights and noblemen to hunt stags in the Black Mountains, to have fun in Glamorgan, then he galloped into Gwent with his swift greyhounds and established a city which he named Caerleon, with some splendid walls beside a tidal stretch of the river Usk, so that he could quickly assemble his army whenever he wanted to go to sea.

Afterwards, he spent Christmas at Carlisle, presiding over dukes and high noblemen from many realms, earls and archbishops, knights in plenty, valiant warriors who would rally to his banner and follow his orders.

On this Christmas day, when they were all assembled, this fine conqueror commanded that nobody should excuse himself from the festivities until ten days had passed. Thus, he held his Round Table in royal splendour, with every comfort. Never, at any time before or since, had such a fine gathering assembled on the western edges of his high kingdom in midwinter, to taste such exquisite food.

On New Year's Day, in the early afternoon, as the king was being served his bread, a Roman senator suddenly appeared, followed by sixteen knights. He greeted King Arthur and extended this greeting to all those in the hall; to king after king he made his bows, he greeted Guinevere with courtesy then turned his attention back to King Arthur, and with firm resolution said:

'Sir Lucius Iberius salutes you as his subject. This emperor of Rome brings you his seal to show to you. Look! It is the seal that you rule under! On this New Year's Day, I summon you to come to Rome to explain yourself and I advise you to make sure that the emperor does not find you absent when the time comes for you to plead for your lands. Upon pain of death, you shall appear before him with all your Round Table, on Lammas Day next, when the emperor will assemble with his senators. There you will explain why you occupy lands that belong to him, lands that owe homage to his ancestors and to Rome, why you have invaded and pillaged, killed kings that were his kinsmen, and why you now withhold the tribute that is owed to Rome.

'If you ignore this summons, he sends you this warning: he will cross the sea with sixteen kings, cut down your knights and burn the Isles of Britain. You will find no rest even if you run to ground like a frightened dog, he will bring you

The late-fourteenth century Middle English Alliterative Morte Arthure is essentially a retelling of the second part of Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth century Latin account of King Arthur's reign in his work The History of the Kings of Britain. The anonymous author had access also to Wace's and Layamon's translations of Geoffrey's history, as well as other romances that were used to greatly adapt and expand the story into the alliterative masterpiece that has mercifully survived. There is no boat to take King Arthur to Avalon in this version.

Unlike Sir Thomas Malory, who abridged, truncated and adapted this poem into his own Tale of King Arthur and the Emperor Lucius, placing it well before the end of Arthur's reign and casting Sir Lancelot as his principal hero, the Alliterative Morte Arthure casts Sir Gawain as its principal protagonist, beside a very active and belligerent king. As King Arthur says when he holds the dead Gawain in his arms: 'You were worthy to be a king, although it is I who wore the crown.'

The story chronicles King Arthur's response to Roman demands that he gives up his newly conquered possessions and submits to Rome's authority. King Arthur cites the conquests of ancestral Celtic chieftains of the fourth century BC and then moves to emulate them by marching on Rome. Challenges to single combat, a preponderance of senators in the Roman army, hundreds of elephants in the Roman camp and a Celtic high king over Britain, Gaul and beyond all hint at an expanding Roman Republic of the first or second century BC led by a consul Lucius, but the atmosphere is also solidly Christian and indeed the warfare firmly fourteenth century. Such confused chronology is confirmed when Sir Priamus, challenging Sir Gawain, claims: '[My father's] grandfather's uncle was Hector of Troy.' And amidst these layers of historical recollection, the poem skilfully recreates the epic drama of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

in chains before him wherever he pleases. If you flee into France, or into Friesland, you will be fetched back with force! Your father paid allegiance to us, it is written clearly in our records, it is in the registry of Rome and is clear for all to see. So with no more chicanery, we ask you for the tribute that Julius Caesar won with his noble knights.'

King Arthur gave the man a stern stare, his face flushed with anger, biting his lip. His eyes burned like coals, as fiercely as a lion's. The Romans fell to the ground in fear and cowered there like cringing dogs, suddenly confused by the king's confidence.

The senator got to his feet and cried: 'King, worthily crowned, courteous and noble, for the sake of your honour, don't harm us, we're messengers! We are in your jurisdiction and we ask for your mercy! We come from Sir Lucius, who is the lord of Rome, the most powerful man who lives on this Earth. It is our duty to do what he commands us to, but forgive us for doing so. We've come here because we've been told to.'

King Arthur, the conqueror, replied scornfully: 'Ha, craven knight! You seem a coward to me. There are some in this hall whom you would not dare to look at, even if you had made them only the slightest bit angry. Not for all Lombardy would you dare!'

'Sir, replied the senator, quaking with fear, may Christ help me but the look on *your* face has terrified us enough. You are the noblest ruler that I have ever cast my eyes upon. Without any doubt, you seem like a lion!'

'You have given me my summons,' said King Arthur, 'and said your piece. Now, for the sake of your lord, I will let you live. But since I was anointed a king, no man has ever dared to speak to me as you have just done. I shall take counsel with kings, with dukes and archbishops, with peers of my parliament and the most worthy knights of the Round Table. I shall listen to the counsel of my most valiant warriors and follow the advice of these wise gentlemen.

'There is no virtue in saying more than is necessary, nor to gratify the anger that I feel against you. You shall remain here as guests of my noblemen and can lodge here for seven nights, to give your horses a good rest and so that you can witness for yourself the squalor that we live in, in these peasant lands!'

The king commanded Sir Kay: 'Look after these lords, in a way that does due honour to the magnificence of Rome. Let spacious and comfortable chambers be quickly found for them, see that their horses are well stabled and fed, and then bring this senator and his knights back into the hall to dine with us, so that they may see that there is no fault with our wine or with our candles, nor any lack of wealth in my hall. Give spices to the cooks and spare no expense, let there be lavish abundance and no lack whatsoever.'

The Romans were taken to their lodgings, as honoured guests, allowed to change their clothes in front of fireplaces with chimneys, then they were fetched from their chambers by noble knights, and soon the senator was seated at the king's table. Two knights attended him, and served him as conscientiously as King Arthur himself was served, on the king's right hand, at the Round Table; for the Romans were judged to be supremely

powerful and of the most royal descent that the world has ever known.

For the first course, the heads of boars were placed before the king, adorned with silver and accompanied by regal young men in elaborate dress, sixty in all, with meat killed in season, with breads and stuffing, wild game and other delicacies, peacocks and plovers on platters of gold. Then roast herons appeared, hiding beneath their own plumage, great swans on silver chargers and turkey flans for anyone to taste. Then delicious beef pasties, shoulders of wild boar, sliced thinly, goose and bittern in pastry cases, hawks baked in bread, more delicious than anything. Then came stews and gravies, pastries and other delights perfectly presented, then cranes and curlews, craftily roasted, rabbit poached in milk and coloured with spices, pheasants displayed in foil as if they were aflame.

Red wine from Bordeaux and from the Grecian islands was made to flow from elaborate silver spouts, then wines from Alsace, the Rhineland and from Spain, the finest to be had anywhere. White wine from Venice and Crete was served from faucets of gold, to be had for the asking.

The king's cupboards were framed in silver and adorned with jewels, and the chief butler was the noble knight Sir Kay, who was in charge of the wine. The king had sixty identical goblets, exquisitely encrusted with precious stones (no poison could endanger the drink, for the venom would be rendered harmless by virtue of these stones). And the conqueror himself was dressed exquisitely, in clothes adorned with gold. Wearing his crown, he sat on the high dais with his finest knights.

Deemed to be the most fearsome warrior on Earth, yet King Arthur spoke in a friendly way to the Roman lords and tried to cheer them up a bit with some colloquial conversation:

'Sirs, relax, like the knights that you are, and enjoy yourselves. We know nothing in this country of exotic foodstuffs, these barren lands breed nothing of any quality as you can see, so just force yourselves to eat.'

'Sir, may Christ help us,' replied the senator, 'I have never seen such a lavish spread in all my life, not even inside the walls of Rome! There is no bishop nor Pope nor prince on this Earth who would not be proud to prepare such a feast for his guests!'

When they had finished eating, this famous conqueror washed and went to the king's chamber with a great number of his knights. Sir Gawain led dame Guinevere and the spiced wine was brought out; Malmsey and Muscatel, those marvellous drinks, speedily served in golden cups to everybody, Roman and otherwise. King Arthur busied himself with arranging for musicians to play and for lords to accompany the senator to his chamber whenever he desired. Then the king, with his finest and most loyal noblemen, retired to the Giant's Tower with noble knights and men versed in law.

Sir Cador of Cornwall was the first to speak.

'Sir, this is splendid news!' he exclaimed. 'You will be dragged, I expect, unless you de-

cide otherwise! These letters from Sir Lucius make me laugh! We've been living the easy life for too long, we are losing the fame we have earned for ourselves. Now war is awakened! May Christ be praised! We shall conquer again, through valour and strength!

'Sir Cador,' replied the king, 'your counsel is noble, but you are truly a marvellous man to be so happy about it. There will be consequences which you are giving no thought to. But the summons has been issued and delivered to my hall, with heinous words so laden with loathing that I could hardly speak for anger when I was sitting listening to it. It seems that the emperor is a little angry with us. He has asked me like a tyrant for Roman tribute! That was all foregone in the time of my elders. These foreigners exacted it when there were no warriors in this land, as our chronicles explain. But it is I who have title to take tribute off Rome! My ancestors were emperors and earned it for themselves! Belinus and Brennos, and Baldwin was the third, they occupied Roman lands for seven score winters, one succeeding the other, as old men relate. They occupied the Capitol, knocked down the walls and hanged the Roman rulers by the hundreds!

'Since then, our kinsman Constantine has conquered it again, he was heir to England and Emperor of Rome and he conquered the cross that Christ was crucified on, by force of arms. So we have a right to ask what evidence he has, this emperor of Rome, in support of the control that he claims.'

King Angus of Scotland spoke up:

'There needs to be a high king to reign over all other kings,' he said. 'We have the wisest and worthiest and the most valiant in battle, the one most like us to have ever worn a crown. When the Romans ruled over Scotland they ransomed our elders, brought turmoil in their wake and ravished our wives. They stole all our property without reason or justice, and I swear by Christ and by the holy and virtuous Saint Veronica that I would like to have my revenge for that great villainy! To fight these venomous men I pledge twenty-thousand warriors, fathers and sons, all at my expense, to go where you want them to, and to fight with these enemies who treat us so unfairly.'

Then the king of Brittany gave Arthur his advice:

'I vow to Christ,' he said, 'and to his holy image on the cloth of Saint Veronica, that I shall never run through fear of any Roman who rules on this Earth, but will be at the forefront of any battle, armed and ready. I fear the blows from their weapons no more than I do the dew on the ground on a damp morning! I'll no more shrink from the swing of their sharp swords than I will from a pretty flower that grows in the meadow. So I implore you to answer these foreigners with stern words and to entice the emperor to cross over the mountains. I will bring thirty thousand knights to battle with me, within a month, to wherever you decide to send them to, whenever you wish.'

'Ah!' said the Welsh king. 'May Christ be worshipped! Now we can avenge our ancestors and satisfy their wrath! In West Wales, such atrocities were committed that everyone still weeps in sorrow when they think of that war. I ask to ride at the head of the army until

I have personally vanquished the viscount of Rome; for in Tuscany he once captured my knights for ransom – he did me this villainy as my pilgrimage took me past Pontremoli – and I will leave him in no doubt that the issue is not resolved, not until we have met one another in single combat and fought to the death! I will bring two thousand valiant men to this war, from Wales, from its surrounding marches and from the Isle of Wight, magnificently mounted, the bravest in all of the west of Britain.’



Sir Yvain, the son of King Urien, a nephew of King Arthur’s and a courageous knight in his own right, then asked: ‘Sir, are we to prepare immediately or to delay for a while? Tell us your intentions and we’ll comply at once.’

‘Cousin,’ replied King Arthur, ‘if you are asking me whether I am minded to invade these lands, then I tell you swiftly that by the beginning of June we shall have engaged the Roman army, and by Lammastide I will find leisure enough to enjoy my newly conquered lands, in Lorraine or in Lombardy, wherever

I choose! Then we’ll lay siege to Milan and undermine its walls, attack Pisa and march on Rome itself! We’ll spend six weeks replenishing our stores from the countryside. I’ll send fast riders to the best towns and cities and threaten them with capture if they don’t surrender to me quickly.’

‘I swear to you now,’ said Sir Yvain, ‘that if I come face to face with this miscreant who occupies your heritage, the empire of Rome, I will seize his banner myself, with its golden eagle, and rip it apart with my own hands! I will contribute to your army fifty thousand men on fine horses, to go where you think they will do the most good.’

‘By our Lord!’ exclaimed Sir Lancelot, ‘now I feel better! Thank God for these fine sentiments. But now that we have heard the finest men speak, let lesser men have their say: I will be amongst you, well-armed from the outset. I will level my lance against Lucius and all his giants, be they Genoese or other, and I’ll strike him harshly from his saddle by the strength of my hands. For all the slaughter in battle that lies in his steel, I will ride roughshod into Rome with my riotous knights!’

King Lot laughed and cried out: ‘I, too, am happy that Sir Lucius is looking for a bloody nose! Now that he’s seeking war, his sorrows will begin! It’s our destiny to avenge the wrongs that were committed against our ancestors, and I make my pledge to God and to the holy image of Christ on the cloth of Veronica that if I encounter the Romans disposed in their battalions, then I shall cut a wide path running with blood as my steed rushes through them, and the knights coming behind me will find many corpses lying in their way!’

King Arthur thanked all these knights for their heartfelt support, and praised them highly for their pledges.

‘May all-powerful God honour you all!’ he cried. ‘May I never be without you all the time that I reign in this world, you have conquered for me all that belongs to my crown. The king who leads such a retinue of knights need have no fear of anybody!’

When these discussions had finished, they blew the trumpets and went back down to the hall. The dukes and earls walked in together, and everybody sat quickly down to supper, courteously and respectfully, since it was now evening. Then the king announced a royal feast that would last for seven days, with every entertainment and every honour.

These festivities began, and on the day following, the senator boldly asked to be given the reply that he should take back to the emperor. Having secured agreement from his counsellors after the service of Epiphany, on 6 January, from the peers in his parliament, his bishops and others, the king summoned the senator and gave his answer to him personally.

‘Greet Lucius, your lord, and make this following statement clear to him: If you are truly loyal, let him be in no doubt that by Lammas-tide this summer I shall be relaxing in the enjoyment of those lands that he now holds, with plenty of my own noblemen to govern them, secure in my kingship and fully at ease. I will hold my Round Table on the banks of the river Rhone while I seize the wealth of the surrounding lands. Then I’ll march over the mountains – for all the menace of his might! – I’ll lay siege to Milan and undermine its walls, and from Lorraine to Lombardy no man will keep his life unless he transfers his loyalty wholly to me. Then I’ll move south into Tuscany and let my warriors run riot!’

‘So urge him to put up a strong defence, for his own honour. If he gets a move on he can meet me in open battle in France, on the first day of February! But I can give him this assurance: that within seven winters I shall be laying siege to the city of Rome itself.’

‘You have my safe passage, by personal decree. I shall assign places for you to spend the night on your way to the port, but you have only seven days to reach Sandwich – sixty miles a day, that’s not asking much. But you should use your spurs vigorously and don’t spare your horses. Travel by Watling Street, take no other paths, and when you stop for the night, remain where you are until morning, whether it be forest or farmland, just stay where you are. Tie your horses to a bush and sleep under a tree, wherever you think best. It is not fitting for aliens to be wandering about at night. These are my terms whether you like them or not, and be in no doubt that your lives depend on them. Even were Lucius to give you the lordship of Rome, if you are found to be a foot away from the sea coast when the morning bell is rung on the eighth day, you will be taken and hanged, and your bodies hung up for dogs to chew on. All the red gold in Rome won’t be enough for your ransom.’

‘Sir,’ replied the senator, ‘so help me Christ, not for any emperor on Earth shall I ever come to Arthur again to deliver a message. But I am here alone, with sixteen knights,

and I implore you, sir, that we may be allowed to return safely.’

‘Have no fear,’ said King Arthur. ‘My command shall be well proclaimed, from Carlisle to Sandwich, where your ship lies. You’ll be safe under my orders for sixty miles ahead, even were your chests to be crammed full of silver.’

They bowed to King Arthur, took their leave, then hurried out of Carlisle and gathered their horses. The courteous Sir Cadore accompanied them as far as Cataractonium, then bade them farewell. Then they dug in their spurs and galloped away, hired fresh horses as the need arose and took no rest, except to lie under the trees when the light failed and night fell. They searched out the shortest route and by the end of the seventh day they had never been happier than when they heard the sound of the sea and the bells of Sandwich! Without any delay they loaded their horses onto their ships and set sail, wearily, without pausing for breath; they weighed their anchors and fled on the tide.

After rowing to Flanders, they disembarked and took the best route that they could to Aachen, in Germany. They were still in Arthur’s lands, so they took a rugged route over the Alps via Mount Goddard and made it at last into Lombardy. They passed through Tuscany, with its high towers, changed into some fine clothes and spent Sunday in Sutri, resting their horses and seeking out as many saints as they could, to pray before! Then they galloped to the palace of Rome with its marvellous gates where Sir Lucius was residing with many of his noblemen. They bowed to him and handed over the letters that it was their duty to deliver.

The emperor was eager to learn what King Arthur had said, whether he was hostile to Rome and if so, what right he thought he had to be so.

‘You should have ripped the sceptre out of his hands!’ Sir Lucius exclaimed. ‘You should have sat at the high seat yourself, for the honour of Rome. You are a senator of Rome, he should have served *you* at the table.’

‘He will not do that for anyone,’ replied the senator, ‘not for anyone in the whole world. Many will lie dead on the battlefield before you’ll see him humble himself by bowing to you. I tell you, sir, Arthur is your enemy. He intends to overrun the whole empire of Rome, which he claims his ancestors once ruled.’

‘I spoke before Arthur himself,’ continued the senator, ‘and nine other kings, in the splendid surroundings of the Round Table. I summoned him to appear in Rome with all of his knights, and I can tell you that I’ve never been so frightened in all my life! I would rather be stripped of my honours in Rome than to be sent there again on a similar mission.’

‘He has been chosen as high king, chief of all others, for his warlike prowess and for his magnificent following, the wisest, the worthiest knights and the most skilful at arms of any in the whole world. He is the finest of all kings, of all conquerors crowned on Earth! He despises silver, cares no more for gold than for great cobblestones and gives no more thought to wine than to the water that runs out of a gushing spring! He cares nothing

for the wealth of this world, only for honour and prestige, but I have never seen such splendour as I did in his court. I counted at his Christmas festivities no less than ten anointed kings. He will wage war, I am certain, and I advise you to prepare for it. Gather your forces and guard your borders, make sure that your troops are equipped and ready to go, for if he reaches Rome, he will take it for himself. I advise you to waste no time, assemble your auxiliaries and send them to the Alps, for in three months at the latest he'll be invading your lands.'

'Then by Easter, said the emperor,' I will be in Germany, then I'll send men quickly into France, that fairest of realms, and try to apprehend this man. I will set guards, many giants of Genoa, magnificent with their lances, to meet him in the mountains and kill all his knights. They'll shepherd them into valleys and slaughter them ruthlessly. A tower shall be erected upon Mount Goddard, furnished and garrisoned with fine fighting men, with a beacon at the top to signal with, so that no army will be able to enter the mountains unobserved. Another shall be built upon Mount Bernard, filled with young knights and noblemen, and the passes into Pavia shall be guarded by knights.'

Then Sir Lucius sent letters carried by bold knights into eastern lands, to Albania, Arcadia and Alexandria, to India and Armenia, the lands of the Euphrates, Asia and Africa and eastern Europe, to Arabia and Egypt, to Damascus and the Dardanelles, to dukes and earls there. For fear of the emperor they mobilised at once; honourable kings of Crete and Cappadocia. Tartary and Turkey came at his command. Babylon and Bagdad responded to the muster, the men of Bayonne jumped to the summons. From Persia and from Christian lands far to the east, princes assembled their forces with speed, for they knew that if they dragged their feet, they would lose all right to their lands.

The sultan of Syria assembled his knights, from the Nile to Nazareth, from Gadara to Galilee. They gathered in huge numbers and sailed over the Aegean Sea with some gruesome weapons. The king of Cyprus joined the sultan's fleet, the nobility of Rhodes alongside him in great galleys glistening with shields, then they sailed with a side wind over the salt waves and made land safely at Corneto, sixty miles from the city of Rome.

By this time a great number of Greeks had assembled, men from Macedonia, with forces from Prussia and from Apulia, and an army from Lithuania with men enough! They all converged in their fleets, a vast army from far-flung lands.

When the sultan of Syria and sixteen kings arrived in the city of Rome, the emperor rode out to meet them, completely armed and accompanied by knights on magnificent steeds with sixty giants in front of him, the offspring of fiends and witches and warlocks, to guard his pavilions if the campaign was to unfold over winters and years. No horses could carry them, they rode camels draped in chainmail with high castles upon their backs.

Then the emperor travelled into Germany, that Arthur had won, by the Rhine and the Danube, causing havoc around him and prompting widespread fear in those mountains. In Westphalia he captured towns and cities at will, and rested near Cologne with his

Saracen host.

By the last week of January King Arthur was ready to embark.

‘Go to your countries and assemble your knights,’ he said. ‘Wait for me in Normandy, fully equipped and prepared; be at Barfleur upon the brisk sea with some sturdy ships and your best men. I’ll meet you there.’

King Arthur quickly sent out sergeants-at-arms to gather all his mariners and commandeer his ships, and within sixteen days his fleet was assembled at Sandwich, ready to sail. Meanwhile, King Arthur convened a parliament at York, with all the peers of the realm, bishops and others, and after the sermon, he announced in the presence of all his noblemen:

‘I am minded to venture along perilous paths, to humble my foe and, if I can, to conquer those lands that he occupies, the lands of my heritage, the empire of Rome. So I offer you a caretaker sovereign, to accept if you wish; he is my nephew, my sister’s son, Sir Mordred. He shall act as my lieutenant, with enough of my noblemen remaining behind to keep the peace.’

Then he spoke to Mordred alone: ‘I appoint you as guardian, sir knight, of many kingdoms, an esteemed warden to govern all my lands that I have won in war. I insist that Guinevere be treated with honour and given every comfort. See that my castles are properly maintained and provisioned, so that she can stay where she wants to, with trustworthy knights. See that my forests are protected, for my love, and that no one hunts my wild game except for Guinevere herself, and only in the proper season. Appoint chancellor and chamberlain as you wish, choose officials and officers of the law for yourself, assign judges and juries and make sure that crimes are properly punished.

‘If I am destined to die, by God’s will, then you shall be my executor, to distribute my property for the maximum good of my soul, so give generously to the poor and the destitute, and to the friars. Accept control of all of my great treasure, and don’t betray me. Remember that you will answer for your actions before the High Judge who wields this world as he wishes, so see that my last will and testament is carried out. I give you all the power that belongs to the crown, control over all my possessions, and over my wife as well. See that you remain faithful and true to me. If you promise me the grace to conduct yourself properly, then I will crown you as king with my own hands.’

Sir Mordred knelt before King Arthur and replied: ‘I beseech you, lord, as my king and uncle, do me the favour of choosing another! I am not able to pretend to be princely. If you elevate me like this, the people will be deceived! In comparison with so many who have already proved themselves in battle, my worth will be judged to be small. I’m ready to travel with you and raring to go, all my knights are equipped and eager as well.’

‘You are my nephew, my nearest relation, a child of my chamber, so for our family’s sake, don’t go against my will and refuse this office.’

Now King Arthur takes his leave from his noblemen and his liege-men, and goes to his chamber to comfort the queen. She was in some distress. Sobbing gently, she kissed Arthur and spoke to him tenderly through her tears: 'I curse the man who started this war, for he denies me the company of my wedded lord. All my pleasure in life is vanishing away and I am left a mere shell. Why can I not die in your arms, my love, before I have to endure without you this eternity of suffering?'

'Guinevere, for God's love, don't be sad at my departure. It will turn out well, you'll see! Your sorrow and your weeping wound my heart. I cannot blame you for being so upset, but I have appointed a steward, one of your own knights, to govern all of England under your authority. It is Sir Mordred, whom you have often praised. He will be your puppet, my dear, to do as you like with while I'm away.'

The king took his leave from the ladies in their chamber, kissed them kindly and commended them to Christ. Guinevere fainted when Arthur asked for his sword, she swayed as though she was going to fall to the ground. Then the king fetched his riding horse with some of his noblemen and sped away from the palace with his finest knights. He headed for Sandwich and Guinevere lost sight of him; he was gone.

In Sandwich, the greatest and the good were gathered, with knights in high spirits, camped out in the fields in splendid arms. Dukes and high noblemen were riding about, earls of England with armies of archers. Shouts of command rang from company commanders eager to impress the noblemen milling around. Troops of men were assigned, gathered on the seashore and made ready to set sail when the order came.

Ships were untied and rowed over to the bank, horses were loaded aboard, magnificent armour, war steeds safely secured, tents and other tools, splendid shields, chests and cloth-sacks, riding horses, war horses, all the stuff needed by valiant knights.

When everything was aboard, they didn't linger but quickly untied the ropes so that they could catch the tide. All sorts of ships then raised their sails. At the command of King Arthur, they swiftly and skilfully weighed their anchors, hauled at ropes on the foredeck, pulled sails up masts and turned their bows towards open water.

Fine ships now prove their seaworthiness, driving under full sail through the bouncing waves to the sound of hard effort and loud singing. Tenders are hauled in and safely secured, portholes closed and the lead swung to test the depth of the channel. And when darkness descended, the Pole Star was sought, using skilful navigation when the clouds parted, then with needle and loadstone on the night tides. The fleet slowed down out of caution. All the sailors struck sail at once.

The king was in a great cog with many of his knights, in a private cabin that was suitably furnished. He was resting on a comfortable bed, and the rocking of the sea lulled him to sleep. He dreamed that a ghastly dragon came flying over the water, steadily from the west lands, approaching menacingly over the surging waves. The dragon's head and neck

were covered in scales of azure enamel, his shoulders were scaled in silver, like chainmail, his wings and abdomen were of a dazzling colour. As he reared in threatening display, it was clear that whomever he touched would be dead in an instant! His feet were black with claws of gold, and such a venomous flame shot from his mouth that it looked like a stream of fire!

Then from the east a black bear appeared, from up in the clouds, with huge paws and perilous claws and with disgusting hair that was dangling and matted. He was foaming at the mouth, the foulest creature that has ever been formed, dancing about and grimacing, making himself ready to fight with his outrageous claws. He bellowed and roared, and rocked the Earth as he stamped on it joyously with his huge feet.

The dragon turned to face this bear and gave him a blow that sent him far into the sky. Soaring like a falcon, the dragon attacked again with his feet and with fire, both at the same time, but the bear seemed to be the bigger of the two, and bit at the dragon fearlessly with terrible fangs. He gave such blows with his huge claws that the dragon's body was soon covered in gore. Blood fell like rain as the bear reared and fought so violently that the whole Earth shook! He would have exhausted the dragon by sheer strength alone were it not for the fire that the dragon was able to defend itself with.



The dragon descended once more through the clouds and struck at the bear, tearing a huge chunk out of his back with his talons. The wound was ten feet long, it was the bear's death wound and he fell dead into the sea – let him float where he likes!

The king woke up in a very anxious state, without any benefit from the sleep he had just had. He quickly sought the advice of two philosophers who always travelled with him, the most intelligent clerics in Christendom and the most learned men in the seven sciences. He recounted his dream to them.

‘Menaced by a dragon and a huge bear, Christ knows, I’ve woken up exhausted!’ he explained. ‘Interpret this dream for me.’

‘Sir,’ they replied at once, these wise philosophers, ‘the dragon that you dreamed of represents you yourself, we are certain of it. The colours on his wings represent all the kingdoms that you rule and all the knights and men who are sailing over the sea with you. The bear that was defeated in the clouds represents a tyrant who threatens your people, or else some giant that you will encounter on your journey. And through the grace of God the victory will be yours. So don’t fret over it any more. Give it no further thought, but, sir conqueror, let it comfort you and allow it to provide reassurance to all those who sail with you.’

Then with trumpets blaring out, they gathered together the sails, took to the oars, rowed over the water and by evening, the coast of Normandy was in sight. They made land at Barfleur and here a great fleet was already assembled, the flower and the fair folk of fifteen realms. Kings and noblemen were waiting as Arthur had commanded, already disembarked and camped in tents.

A Templar knight came galloping up to the king.

‘Sir, a tyrant nearby is tormenting your people!’ he exclaimed. ‘A great giant of Genoa, engendered by devils! He has killed and eaten five hundred of your folk already, and as many infants. He has sustained himself on this dreadful diet for five winters now. In the country of Constantine there is no family untouched by him, except for those with a strong castle to hide in. Many families have lost every male child; he takes them to this crag where he lives and has eaten them all. And today he has seized the duchess of Brittany, as she rode with her knights outside the city of Rennes. More than five hundred of us chased after him, knights and city folk, but he made it to his lair on the mountain where he lives and intends to ravish her while she still breathes. Her screams will live with me for the rest of my life! She is the flower of all France, of five realms, one of the fairest ladies ever to be born. She is your wife’s cousin, sir, from one of the wealthiest families in any kingdom on Earth. As our rightful king, please take pity on your people and seek revenge on behalf of all those people he has killed.’

‘Alas,’ cried King Arthur. ‘This is dreadful news! If I had known about it sooner, I might have righted this wrong already. That this fiend should kill a fair lady in this way! I would give all of France – its rule for fifteen winters – to have been within a furlong of this giant when he seized this lady. I would have given my life to save her. But if you can lead me to the crag where this giant lives, I’ll confront him with these unspeakable crimes and persuade him to stop, at the very least, until I have more time to deal with him.’

‘Sir,’ replied the knight, ‘can you see that foreland over there, with two fires burning? That’s where he lives, at the top of that crag, beside a cold spring that runs like a waterfall over the cliff. There you will find the ground scattered with corpses, with more coins strewn about than there are in the whole of France, and more treasure than there was in Troy when it was captured.’

The king cried out in pity for the folk around him, then strode to a tent and wrung his hands. Nobody knew what he was going to do. He called Sir Kay to him, who served him his wine, and Sir Bedevere, who carried his sword.

‘See that you are fully armed,’ he told them, ‘and be on horseback soon after evensong. When my noblemen are served with their supper I will travel secretly on pilgrimage; I want to visit the shrine of a saint beside the sea, on Mont Saint-Michel, where miracles are seen.’

After evensong, King Arthur went to his wardrobe and threw off his clothes, then put on a padded garment to wear under chainmail, over this a leather jerkin and over that

his coat of mail. He pulled on a sleeveless surcoat with scalloped edges and put on an exquisite helmet burnished with silver, adorned with gold and jewels and with clever protection at the front and rear. His gauntlets were decorated with gold and embellished with pearls and colourful gems. Then he took up a broad shield, asked for his sword and walked over to where his bay horse was standing; he put his foot in the stirrup, hauled himself aloft, made himself comfortable and turned his horse towards the place where he had told Sir Kay and Sir Bedevere to meet him. They were fully armed and waiting for him when he arrived.

The three of them rode beside a river that was coursing like a torrent, with trees bending over it with stately boughs. Roe deer and reindeer were running beside it, amongst thickets and clearings resplendent with flowers, with falcons and pheasants in dazzling colours, every kind of bird imaginable could briefly be seen, the cuckoo was calling loudly in the forest groves, the nightingale was singing beautifully and every bird seemed happy to be doing what it was doing; they warbled and twittered three hundred at a time so that, with the cascading of the water and the singing of the birds, it might have brought relief and cure to a man with the most intractable of illnesses.

At last they dismounted and tied their fair horses with good space between them. Then the king keenly commanded his knights to stay with their horses and to wait.

‘I will seek this saint by myself,’ he said. ‘I’ll engage with the man who has commanded this mountain, and afterwards, you can make your offerings to the esteemed Saint Michael, that confidante of Christ.’

King Arthur climbed up the mighty hillside with its rocky ravines, made it to the very top and put up his visor, with his back to the cold wind. He had a good look around and could see two fires with flames rising high. He walked the distance of a quarter of a furlong towards them, following the course of a steam that issued from a spring. Trying to find where this warlock lived, King Arthur made his way to the first fire and found a woeful widow there, wringing her hands and weeping over a freshly-dug grave. He greeted this sorrowful lady with appropriate words, then asked where he might find the fiend who was causing all this suffering.

The lady greeted him, put her hands together and whispered: ‘Be careful, kind sir, you’re speaking too loudly. If this warlock hears you, he’ll bring grief to us all! Do you mean to kill him with your magnificent sword? If you were mightier than Wade, or Sir Gawain even, you would win no accolades here. May the man be cursed who so deprived you of your wits as to make you wander up here. I warn you, you’re asking for trouble. What are you doing here, noble knight? You don’t seem to be under God’s blessing. You crossed yourself clumsily before coming, I can tell you. Six men wouldn’t be enough to take him on. When you look at him, you’ll freeze with fear, he is so huge. You look noble and valiant, and still very young – if there were fifty like you on a field of battle, he’d knock you all flat with his fist!

She sighed. ‘Lo! Here is the dear duchess. She was captured today and is buried already. I

don't know all the circumstances, but he forced himself upon her and left her dead from the ordeal. He crudely killed her by opening up her entire abdomen. So I prepared her body properly and buried her here, for none of her friends dared to follow, to see if they could rescue her; none but myself, who for fifteen winters have been her foster mother. I have no desire to leave this craggy foreland now. I'll remain here until I'm lying dead and cold myself.'

King Arthur replied: 'I have come from the noble and courteous King Arthur, as one of the finest and most valiant of his knights, to deliver tidings to this tyrant. The king wants to broker some sort of truce and apportion the lands until some more permanent solution may be found.'

'Then you're wasting your breath,' replied the old woman. 'He cares nothing for lands or titles, and gives not a straw for rents or red gold. He just does what he wants, he conforms to no law and cares nothing for honour; he is master here without the permission of any prince. But he wears a robe that he keeps for himself, the cloth was woven in Spain by special maidens and then expertly tailored in Greece, and it is woven with hair and tasselled with the beards of valiant knights, combed and washed so that warriors may recognise the king that each beard once belonged to. He seizes for himself the princely shavings of fifteen realms and every Easter, whenever it falls, they faithfully send it to him under the protection of certain knights, in order to keep the peace. He has asked for King Arthur's these seven winters past, and that's the reason that he's here, committing outrage on Arthur's people, and he'll continue doing so until this king of the Britons has made his chin shine as brightly as a boy's, and sent his beard here in the company of his finest knights.'

'So unless you have brought this beard, I wouldn't go any further. Anything else is pointless. He has more treasure to do what he likes with than Arthur has ever owned, or any of his ancestors, but if you have brought this beard, he will be more delighted than if you have come to offer him Burgundy or the island of Britain! But see that you don't say anything. Just give him your gift and don't burden him with any demands, for he is eating his supper and he'll be quickly annoyed.'

'If you'll take my advice, you'll take off your armour, kneel before him in your shirt and call him your lord. Every day for supper he eats seven boys chopped up with pickle and spices on a silver dish, and he drinks spiced wine from Portugal by the gallon. Three sorrowful women turn his spits, and wait beside his bed in case he wants to have his way with them; four like them will be dead within as many hours if he satisfies his lust and fills them with his filth!

'Yes, I have brought that beard,' replied Arthur, 'so I'll get going now and present it to him myself. But tell me, my dear, where can I find him? Then I shall be forever in your debt, if I live, may Our Lord help me!'

'Go quickly to the fire where the flames are rising high,' she said. 'That's where he's eating. He'll be there for a while I expect, but approach a little further to the south or you'll

be suffocated by the smell.'

King Arthur approached the source of this stench, crossed himself carefully, reached the giant just behind his line of sight and saw how that ogre was eating alone. He lay stretched out on the cold ground, holding the thigh of a man's limb by the buttock. His back was to the fire and he was warming his bare bottom, surrounded by unsavoury roasts and unseemly food, men and animals spitted together, a tub crammed full of children, some others on spits that were being turned by the maidens.

This fine king, through pity for his people, felt his heart ache with anguish and took up his shield, grasped his sword by its burnished hilt and rushed towards the giant. The glutton noticed the approaching figure and threw a menacing stare at King Arthur, snarled like a dog and showed his canines, opened his mouth and let out a roar.

'May all-powerful God, whom we honour, bring you sorrow!' King Arthur shouted angrily. 'Prepare yourself, dog's son, the devil take your soul! You shall die this day by dint of my hands! You're the foulest freak that ever lived! Your food is disgusting! This is a miserable meal, this carvery of cadavers! You have killed these christened children, roasted them on a spit and pulled them apart with your bare hands; you have made martyrs of them all and I shall give you the reward that you deserve for it, through the power of Saint Michael, whom this mount belongs to!

The giant's hair was matted together and his chin was bathed in a sort of foam that dribbled from his mouth. The skin of his face was mottled like a frog's, his nose was like a hawk's, he had hairs over his eyes on prominent brows and skin like that of a dogfish. His ears were huge and ugly, his eyes piercing, his lips flat like a flounder's and his gums as inflamed as a bear's. He had a black beard which hung down to his chest. His body was as large and as fat as a whale's. He was bull-necked, very broad at the shoulders and with a chest like a boar's, with bristles to match. His arms were like the branches of an oak tree with gnarled bark; his limbs were truly hideous, believe me! He had great shovel-like feet and his legs were crooked, his knees knocking together as he moved, and his thighs were enormous. He was thirty feet in height, from his face to his feet, if anyone cared to measure it!

The giant raised himself powerfully onto his two strong legs and caught hold of a club made of beaten iron. He would have killed King Arthur at once, but by the grace of God the villain managed to strike only a glancing blow, knocking away the crest of the king's helmet and the clasps of silver. The club crashed down, King Arthur raised his shield, covered himself well, then delivered a blow of his own with his shining sword, wounding the top of the giant's head as he stooped down to lift the club back up again. The giant wiped his face with his cruel hands and then aimed another blow fiercely at King Arthur's face. The king sidestepped quickly away, advanced again and gave the giant another blow, up into his groin. The sword dug half a foot into the flesh, the blade penetrated to the giant's innards and sliced away his testicles. The hot blood flowed down onto the hilt of the king's sword.

The giant bellowed and roared, aimed another harsh blow at King Arthur and his club dug into the earth a sword's length from the king. But Arthur was not fazed: he hurried once more into the attack, swung his sword, struck the giant's belly and the guts and the gore began to burst out, making the ground slippery and treacherous with the blood. The giant threw away his club and on the crest of the crag he grabbed the king with both hands and squeezed him as tightly as he could, crushing his ribs. The sorrowful maidens fell to their knees, clasping their hands and crying: 'Christ, bring your aid to this knight and keep him safe. Don't let this fiend kill him!'

The giant rolled King Arthur over and over, holding him so hard that his heart nearly burst. They angrily wrestled and fought, writhing in the undergrowth, tumbling down the slope and tearing their clothes, fighting each other as they rolled down, now Arthur on top, now beneath, from the top of the hill to the hard rocks below, never giving an inch until they were at the edge of the sea. Then King Arthur drew a dagger and stabbed the giant repeatedly, right up to the hilt. The villain in his death throes squeezed Arthur so hard that three of his ribs broke.

Sir Kay rushed towards the king. 'Alas!' he cried. 'We are lost! My lord has been overcome by a fiend! We're done for!'

They heaved off the king's coat of chainmail and examined his injuries: his thighs and his body right up to the shoulders, his sides and his loins, his back, his chest and his arms, and were delighted when they could discover no wounds. They ended the examination with great joy, these noble knights.

'Our king seeks saints but seldom,' said Sir Bedevere, 'but he embraces them all the more tightly when he does, by God! He's dragged this one from out of his high cliffs to put him in a silver casket! By Saint Michael, I'm astonished that our Lord ever suffered this fellow to be in heaven in the first place! If all the saints who serve our lord are like this one, I don't ever want to be made a saint!'

The king laughed at Sir Bedevere. 'I have sought this saint out especially, so help me God. So draw your sword and stab him through the heart to be sure of your safety. He has given me nothing but grief. I haven't had such a hard fight these fifteen winters past; except in the mountains of Arabia where I met another like him. But this one was stronger by far and nearly got the better of me. If luck hadn't been on my side, he would have killed me. So cut off his head and put it on a stake, then give it to your squire, for his horse is fresh and strong, and ask him to carry it to Sir Howell. Tell him to take heart, for his enemy is destroyed. Then take it to Barfleur, put it in an iron cage and set it on the barbican so that every knight can see it.

'But my sword and my shield are still lying on the ground at the top of the crag. The giant's iron club will be lying nearby. Go up and fetch them for me, then we'll return to our ships. If you want to collect any treasure, then take what you like, just leave me the beard-robe and the club and bring me my sword and shield.'

So these handsome knights went up to the peak and brought down King Arthur's sword and his shield. Sir Kay carried down the robe and the club, and then they returned to their ships so that King Arthur could show off these trophies to all the kings and noblemen.

Soon a great clamour arose. The common people of the district knelt before King Arthur and cried: 'Welcome, our liege lord! Most noble sir, we are delighted to see you! You have destroyed the enemy who has run roughshod over your people and killed all their children! Never before has such a troubled realm been so quickly relieved!'

'Give your thanks to God for this grace and to nobody else,' replied the king. 'It was no man's deed but through the power of the Almighty, or a miracle from his mother perhaps, who is gentle and kind.'

Then the king summoned all the mariners to help his knights. 'Take this vast treasure that the giant has stolen and distribute it amongst all the common folk of this country, the clergy and everybody else, and do it to everyone's satisfaction. See that there are no complaints.' Then he commanded Sir Kay to have a church built on the top of the crag, with a company of monks to serve Christ within it, to sing services for the soul of the poor duchess who lay buried there.

King Arthur set off from Barfleur the next morning with his whole army, making for the White Castle. He headed for a ford over the river on a plain beside a ridge of white hills, and when he had crossed it he ordered all his tents and pavilions to be erected on a narrow stretch of land that was easily defensible.

Just after midday, two messengers arrived from neighbouring lands, from the Marshal of France. They greeted King Arthur courteously.

'Sir, your marshal asks for mercy and for your immediate help,' they said. 'Your people are in great peril. The Emperor of Rome has marched into France with a huge army. All your towns and cities in Burgundy have been burnt to the ground, he is capturing castles and lands that belong to your realm and killing indiscriminately. He's cutting down forests, pillaging the land and advancing with great military skill. Anybody speaking French is killed at once. His German troops are putting every nobleman they can find to the sword. All the lords and ladies of the land therefore beg you to wage war on him as soon as you can, for the love of Saint Peter! The emperor is already in those hills over there, waiting beneath the high trees of that forest with an army of heathen knights. For God's sake, send us some help!'

The king called Sir Bois to him. 'Go quickly, and take Sir Berille and Sir Bedevere with you. Take Sir Gawain also, and Sir Grime, those fine knights, and carry a message for me into those green woodlands. Tell Sir Lucius that he is acting like a common criminal, spreading terror amongst my people like this. Those who fight alongside him will pay a high price. Command him resolutely, with stern words, to leave my kingdom at once. If he won't, then, if it pleases him, let him encounter me alone and we'll settle this matter

very quickly. We'll determine what right he thinks he has to invade this land and murder its people, may God do at Doomsday whatever he likes!

They made themselves ready, these jolly knights; glittering with gold and mounted upon great warhorses, they set off for the greenwood with their weapons freshly sharpened, intent upon greeting this lord whom they hoped to give grief. They paused at the top of a hill where the forest opened out, saw the pavilions of the heathen kings and heard the sound of hundreds of elephants in their stables, trumpeting loudly. The pavilions were like palaces, adorned with silk and purple, decorated with precious stones, there were flags and standards displaying the coats of arms of wealthy princes in full sight of everybody in the middle of a meadow. The Roman noblemen had pitched their tents beside a river, under the shelter of a slope, with the emperor's pavilion right in the middle, adorned with the emblem of an eagle.

King Arthur's knights, looking on, saw a sultan and sixteen kings accompanying the emperor, along with many senators, walking towards a refectory which they soon entered (these dignitaries were dining with the emperor and looking forward to enjoying some fine cuisine).

Just as the emperor's guests were washing and sitting themselves down to eat, our knights crossed over the river; they rode through woodland towards the pavilions and Sir Gawain addressed the occupants grimly as he entered their tent.

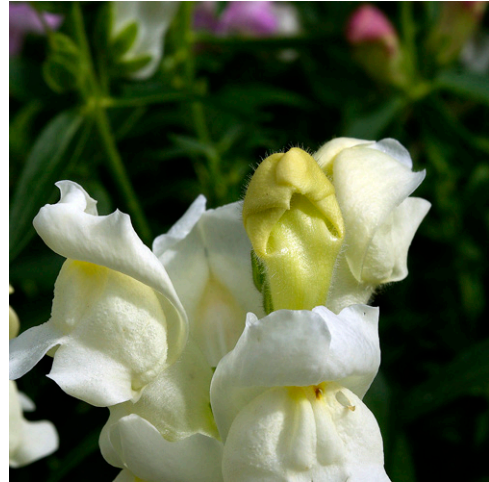
'May the might and the majesty that makes us all what we are, which was formed and made through the power and glory of God Almighty, send unimaginable horrors to you all!' he cried. 'May every harm come upon every one of you! And the upstart scoundrel who calls himself emperor, who governs the empire of Rome through some dreadful mistake – because it is the heritage of the honourable King Arthur, whose ancestors have ruled over it, except for Uther Pendragon alone – may that same curse infect you, sir, that Cain was stricken with. You ridiculous buffoon! You laughing-stock! How dare you assume the crown! My lord is truly astonished that you murder his people without any cause, common people of the countryside, clergymen and others, blameless though they are and with no means of fighting back. The noble King Arthur commands you, sir emperor, to return from whence you came! And if this is not to your liking, then, for your own honour, you should meet him alone in single combat. Since you aspire to this crown, then show that your courage matches your words. I say this before all your knights and noblemen, and it is all that I have to say. Answer me at once, so that we can ride from here as fast as we can and deliver your reply with all the speed that we can.'

'You are messengers from my enemy, King Arthur?' replied the emperor with controlled rage. 'Then it will be dishonourable for me to do you any violence. You are just angry men doing his bidding, although if it wasn't for the fact that this is my dining hall, I would make you bitterly regret this offensive language! That a clown like you should address such noblemen and their retinues in this way! But return to your sovereign and tell him that I send him these words: I shall stay here for as long as it suits me to, and then I

will follow the river Seine and lay siege to all the towns and cities on the coast. Then I'll occupy the valley of the Rhone and destroy all his castles there. Soon there'll be nothing left of Paris, let him see if there is!

'I'm amazed that an elfin dwarf like you dares to utter such words as these,' replied Sir Gawain. 'I would rather fight you alone in single combat than be given the whole of France to rule over!'

Sir Gayous could hold his tongue no longer. He was an uncle of the emperor and an earl himself: 'These Britons have always been embarrassingly boastful!' he shouted. 'See how arrogant they are? Here he stands in his pretty armour, letting us all believe that he intends us to feel the edge of his sword? This little boy would benefit from a good box around the ear!'



Sir Gawain strode angrily towards the man, drew his sword and sliced his head clean off his shoulders. Then he returned to his horse and he and his companions rode away. They galloped past the sentries and avoided a host of men who were trying to stop them; then, through the strength and skill of their horses, they crossed back over the river and stopped at the edge of the forest to pause for breath. By now a multitude of men were following them on foot, and Roman knights were already in pursuit on horseback, on chalk-white steeds. They chased our knights across a clearing of fields and on into the main forest. A warrior adorned with fine gold and sable was galloping at the head of this pursuit, in shining armour and on a Frisian warhorse. He placed his lance into battle readiness and galloped eagerly at our knights, shouting fiercely.

The good Sir Gawain, upon a grey steed, turned and readied his own spear. He delivered a fearsome blow to his pursuer, impaling him through the liver and up through the heart. The knight lay on the ground beside his great horse, groaning with pain and with grief from his wound.

Another knight spurred furiously into the fray, gloriously armed in purple and silver and riding a brown horse. He was Persian and was met by Sir Bois, who rode against him and landed a ferocious blow. The man quickly lay on the ground with his broad shield beside him. Sir Bois drew his sword and rode back to his companions.

Sir Feltemore rode menacingly at Sir Gawain, grief-stricken to see the head of Sir Gayous lying on the ground. He charged at Sir Gawain ferociously. Sir Gawain was delighted! He turned his horse to face him, struck the knight with his sword Galuth and cut the man into two pieces; divided cleanly from the head down, this mighty warrior, this man well-praised, was brought to grief by this famous sword.

A Roman nobleman gathered the pursuers together. 'We will come off worst if we follow

them any further!' he cried. 'They are bold braggarts indeed who can do all this!'

The Roman knights pulled on their bridles, turned their horses around and returned to their tents in a very sad state. They told their lords how they had left Sir Marshall de Mowne lying on the ground, ignominiously defeated for all his great boasts.

But other Roman knights were chasing down our men. Five thousand upon fine horses! They quickly pursued them across another river into a forest which lay beside a huge estuary that filled with seawater from fifty miles away. But here the Britons were lying in ambush, King Arthur's highest dukes and earls. They saw their compatriots being chased and picked off at will, so they broke cover at once and intercepted the Romans who were riding beside the forest, the highest nobility of Rome.

Led by Sir Bedevere, these Britons took them by surprise; they eagerly rode into the attack, earls of England, crying: "Arthur!" and punched through chainmail and shield with their bright swords. Here the Romans were trampled under the horses hooves, cruelly wounded and captured as criminals by our exuberant knights. The Romans fled in disarray – through sheer terror!

A messenger raced to the senator Peter: 'Sir, our knights have been ambushed!' he stammered.

At once, the senator Peter assembled ten thousand men and they attacked immediately, near the waters of the estuary. The Britons were taken by surprise themselves, for a short while, but then managed to rally and make inroads of their own. Sir Bois and his bold men made the Romans suffer! But the Romans regrouped and charged once more. On fresh horses, they caught up with and overtook the finest knights of the Round Table and wreaked havoc amongst our men. The Britons galloped from the open ground and fled into the forest, abandoning the field of battle. Sir Berille was unhorsed and Sir Bois captured. The best of our bold men were savagely wounded.

Our knights rallied on a hill, still stunned from the assault, and they cried out in anguish for the capture of Sir Bois, asking God to send help, as soon as he liked! Then the Roman Sir Indrus appeared with five hundred men, all magnificently armed and horsed. He asked enquiringly, to the captured Britons, whether their friends had gone very far when they had fled the fighting like cowards.

'May God help me, ' cried Sir Gawain, 'we have been chased down like hares today and made to look like fools as we cower in culverts like miscreant criminals! I will never be able to look King Arthur in the eye again if we, whom he loves, put so little effort into helping him now.'

Then the Britons urged their horses once more into the attack and galloped again across the field of engagement. All those in the vanguard cried out their battle cries. They had only gone into the forest to rest for a moment! The Romans prepared to resist this new attack; beside the estuary they organised their battalions and readied their weapons. Sir Bois endured his capture with quiet trepidation.

Battle commenced once more beside the creeks of the estuary, blows rang out, knights crashed together with their lances lowered on galloping steeds. Men were impaled on sharpened steel, groaning loudly with twisted faces, sword strokes rained down and severe wounds were given and received. Great lords of Greece were brought to grief and those who were cut down breathed their last. The ground was soon strewn with unhorsed knights.

The gracious Sir Gawain worked tirelessly, greeting the most magnificent of knights with a swing of his sword and some grisly wounds. He and Sir Galuth cut down the bravest and the best. His anguish at the capture of Sir Bois made his sword arm deadly. He fought his way magnificently towards the place where Sir Bois was being held, slashing through coats of chainmail until at last he managed to rescue him and carry him back to safety.

The senator Peter pursued Gawain across the field of battle with his finest knights, sparing no effort to recapture Sir Bois. He displayed his fine skill, with his best horsemen, and struck Sir Gawain an angry blow on the left hand. He hit him fiercely again with his weapon of war, splitting Gawain's coat of chainmail across the back. And yet, Sir Gawain managed to bring Sir Bois to safety. Then the Britons boldly blew their trumpets, and with joy at the rescue of Sir Bois they threw themselves once more into the fight, swinging their swords, cutting through chainmail, bringing down horses and giving a hard time to all those who dared to stand in their way.

Sir Idrus, the son of Sir Yvain, cried: 'Arthur!' and attacked the senator's forces with sixteen of the finest knights on our side. They attacked the senator's men suddenly, in a small group, fighting their way through with shimmering swords and leaving many lying dead on the ground. This advance took place a little way away from the senator, by some freshwater streams that fed into the creeks, but then Sir Idrus chanced his arm, he made a rapid change of direction, attacked on his own, cornered the senator and seized his horse by the bridle. His gamble had paid off.

'Yield to me at once, sir, if you value your life!' he cried angrily. 'Don't try to bribe me with gifts. If you play any games or try to trick me you will die in an instant, I promise you.'

'I agree,' said the senator. 'May Christ help me, I surrender! There's no need to kill me. My ransom will be huge if you bring me safely before your king.'

'It will be up to the king to determine the terms of your capture,' answered Sir Idrus, austere. 'His decision may be that you should be killed, in front of all his knights.'

The senator was led back and his armour removed. Sir Lionel was set to guard over him, along with his brother Sir Lowell.

Sir Lucius's noblemen have been soundly defeated! The senator Peter has been taken prisoner!

Down on the low ground, beside the rivers and creeks, many fine knights from Persia and Port Jaffa caused their own deaths by trying to cross the river in disarray. Many were drowned in the water. A large number of Romans lay dreadfully wounded, trampled under horses hooves by knights of the Round Table.

Beside the estuary, King Arthur's knights straightened and adjusted their armour, which was red with the blood of their enemies, and rested their horses. Then they placed their Roman prisoners in a rear-guard, to be ransomed for red gold and royal steeds, and returned with their spoils.

A knight galloped ahead and brought word to the king:

'Sir, we come with good news! He exclaimed. 'The Romans have been matched today by men of valour and hacked to pieces in the wetlands beside the river! We fought with the bravest knights that your enemies possess; fifty-thousand fierce men-at-arms lie dead on the field, their bodies are strewn for hundreds of yards!

'Sir, God granted us good fortune against the Roman knights. A man of high nobility will sue for peace and for your mercy, in person, the chief chancellor of Rome no less! And the senator Peter has been taken prisoner as well. A huge number of pagan knights from Persia and Jaffa came galloping against us, only to earn themselves the luxury of a spell in your prison. I implore you, sir, to say what you want us to do with them. You might obtain for the senator sixty horses laden with silver. By Saturday! And for the chief chancellor, cartloads of gold I should imagine! The rest of the Romans are under guard as well, until their wealth back in Rome can be ascertained. I implore you, sir, let your noblemen know whether you want to keep them here, or send them back to Britain. All your principal knights are believed to be alive and well, except for Sir Yvain, who is wounded in the side.'

'May Christ be thanked, and his mother Mary!' exclaimed King Arthur. 'God looked after you well, as he is well able to. His enemies cannot escape him. Destiny, deeds of arms, all is dictated and delivered by Christ! And thank you for speeding here to tell me.

'Sir knight,' King Arthur continued, 'as a reward for bringing me this news, I shall give you the city of Toulouse to rule over, the benefit of its tolls and its income, its taverns and its castles, all that is not due to the Church, for as long as I live. But tell the senator that there is no silver that can save him unless Sir Yvain recovers. I would rather see him sink into the sea than that Sir Yvain should fall sick and succumb to his wounds.

'I shall divide the prisoners and send each of them individually into diverse lands. It becomes no king who is worthy of the name to bargain with his captives in the hope of some silver. It is not in the nature of knighthood to do business like a merchant, and it is no business of prisoners to petition their overlords. The senator may never again see his colleagues alive, nor sit with them in the assembly at Rome. Command the constable of the castle to guard him securely and keep a close watch on him. I will issue further orders before midday tomorrow, and decide to which far-flung kingdom I intend to consign

him.’

They marched the prisoner Peter to the constable, as the king had commanded, then returned to convey to King Arthur the reply that the Emperor Lucius had given to his message.

The noble King Arthur, the greatest of all lords, at the dinner table that evening, praised his warriors in lavish terms. ‘I ought to honour them above all things on Earth,’ he thought. ‘In my absence, they showed their initiative and their bravery. I shall love them while I live, so help me God, and give them wealthy landholdings, wherever they want. They shall reap only gain from this endeavour, as long as there is breath in my body, whatever may happen to them later.’

When dawn broke, the dear king commanded Sir Cador, Sir Cleremus, Sir Cleremond, Sir Clowdmur and Sir Cleges to convey some prisoners to Paris, with a good force of armed men alongside them. Sir Bois was sent along to accompany them, Sir Berille and Sir Baldwin with banners displayed, Sir Brian and Sir Bedevere and Rowlaunde’s children Sir Raynald and Sir Richer, to ride alongside the Roman prisoners and to guard them closely.

‘Ride secretly to Paris with the prisoner Peter and his knights,’ the king instructed. ‘Then hand them over to the provost, in the presence of noblemen, and remind him of the responsibility that I am entrusting him with. They must be guarded well, on pain of his life. He should find reliable men and not spare for any silver. This is my warning, let him heed it if he wishes.’

The king’s orders were carried out. The Britons readied their horses, displayed their banners and took the way towards Chartres, these chivalrous knights, and rode towards some fair fortune in the countryside of Champagne. For the Emperor Lucius had given orders to two honourable kings, Sir Utolf and Sir Evander, and earls of the Orient with some fearsome knights, the most valiant in all his host – as well as Sir Sextynour of Libya with many senators, the King of Syria with numerous Saracens, and the seneschal of Sutri – and he had instructed all these to set off for Troyes, on the river Seine, to establish an ambush there, to lay a trap for our knights as they travelled to Paris; for King Arthur’s intentions had been spied upon and discovered, that Peter was to be taken to Paris to be imprisoned. So they set off at once, with their banners flying, and they hid themselves in woodland with some huge warhorses.

‘Here is the Close of Clime, with some high cliffs,’ said Sir Cador of Cornwall as they approached the rocky gully. ‘Sir Cleges, Sir Cleremus and Sir Cleremond, make sure that the way ahead is secure. There are many blind bends, so search all the woodland and make certain that it is safe to proceed. An ambush is hard to defend against.’

So these knights hurried forwards into the forest and quickly came across armed men mounted on fine warhorses at the edge of the woodland, just around the next bend.

With calm courage, Sir Cleges called out to the enemy:

‘Is there any noble knight here of high rank willing to display, for his emperor’s love, his skill at arms? We are of the Round Table and come from the king of this rich country seeking warlike jousting against worthy knights. So is there any nobleman here, any earl or other, who loves his emperor enough that he is prepared to risk his life against one of us?’

An earl shouted back an angry answer: ‘I have no love for Arthur and his noble warriors who occupy these lands without any right to them. He angers his earthly lord, who is the Emperor Lucius of Rome, to whom the rents and royalties of this region are rightly due. Arthur will have to explain himself very soon, if we have our way, for extending his lands at the expense of Rome and many of you will come to regret that he has adopted such arrogance.’

‘Ah,’ cried Sir Cleges, ‘so Christ help me! I can tell from your tone that you are an accountant! But be you auditor or earl, I will speak on behalf of my king, the noble King Arthur, the royal sovereign who rules over us all. He has closed his account and cancelled his subscription! And because you are hounding him for it, he now demands a refund! There will be a day of reckoning. He will seize what is owed to him from the wealthy men of Rome, and there will be much in the way of grief before this debt is cleared. Therefore we ask, for your courtesy, for three single combats, fought according to the rules of knighthood. You are playing for time and you intend treachery, we know, so select your knights, or yield to me now.’

‘So save me Our Lord!’ cried the King of Syria. ‘Do you intend to chatter away like this all day? It won’t do you any good. Who do you think you are? Can you confirm, through reliable noblemen, that the crest you carry and your coat-of-arms is genuine, that you are who you say you are and that you possess extensive lands?’

‘Sir king,’ answered Sir Cleges, ‘your anxiety marks you out as a true nobleman! But I think it is cowardice that is causing you to hesitate. My arms are clearly displayed and my emblem has been well recognised since the time of Brutus. It was seen in the city of Troy when it was besieged, and in many an assault by noble warriors, and Brutus brought all my stern ancestors to Britain in his ships.’

‘Sir,’ said King Sextynour, ‘you can say all you like, but we will deal with you as we choose. So put your trumpet away and don’t waste any more time. No Roman who rides in my company will suffer rebukes from any low-born arsehole like you, while I reign in this world!’

Sir Cleges inclined his head to the king, then rode back to Sir Cador.

‘We have found over there in the forest, concealed under the leaves, fifty thousand fierce warriors, their spears at the ready,’ he explained. ‘They’re on horseback and waiting in ambush in a beech wood beside the way, with banners displayed. They’re guarding a ford. I can see no other option but to fight our way through. So that’s the choice, either

to risk turning back or to fight. The call is yours.'

'May Christ help me!' exclaimed Sir Cador. 'It would be shameful for us to turn back in the face of so few! Sir Lancelot shall never have cause to joke in the king's presence that I ran away! I'll be dead and buried before I give way here for fear of any dog's son who lurks in those woods!'

Sir Cador then, with eager courage, gave a pep-talk to his people:

'Think of the valiant prince who endows us with lands and lordships wherever we choose,' he cried. 'He has dubbed us knights and given us dukedoms, rewarded us with gold and many rich gifts, greyhounds, great horses and all sorts of opportunities for advancement. Think of the great renown of the Round Table! Are we going to let it all be taken away from us by sniffing Romans? Use all your strength, therefore, fight faithfully like the courageous warriors that you are and hold back for no weapon. For myself, I would rather be boiled alive than fail in my duty today.'

Then Sir Cador dubbed a dozen new knights, Aladuke, Howell and Hardolf amongst them, then assigned certain lords: Sir Gawain, Sir Uryelle and Sir Bedevere, and Rowlaunde's sons Sir Raynald and Sir Richer, to guard the senator Peter with their finest knights. 'If we earn the good fortune of gaining the upper-hand,' he told them, 'then remain here and don't do anything. But if it happens that we are overrun, then flee to some castle and defend yourselves, or better still, if you can, ride back to the king and ask him to come quickly to rescue his knights.'

Then the Britons sternly donned their shields, put on their helmets, chose their lances and rode towards the enemy in battle formation, five hundred in the vanguard, with lances levelled. Trumpets sounded out, cornets and clarions. Then all of a sudden the horses were given the spurs, they broke into a gallop and started the attack as the sun glinted on the leaves ahead of them. The Romans retreated a little, fell back to their rear guard, those regal knights, they turned their horses and gave ground so quickly that the noise from the harness, the clinking of rivets and chainmail, filled the air with sound.

Then out of the forest fringes on either side emerged an ambush, with sharp weapons of war, shield-bearers and bowmen, shooting wildly. The King of Libya led the attack, his loyal knights giving out a blood-curdling cry. This cruel king set his lance in readiness, chose a horse to attack and made straight for it, he galloped towards Sir Berille and gave him a fierce blow right in the throat! The knight and his horse soon lay motionless on the ground; Sir Berille cried gravely to God and gave up his soul.

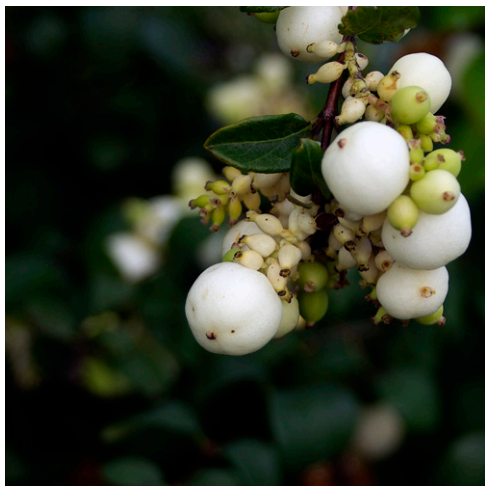
Sir Cador of Cornwall was grief-stricken, he keened for his kinsman, embraced the body and kissed it, ordered that the corpse be surrounded by knights and protected. The Libyan king laughed meanwhile:

'That's one down and hooray to that!' he shouted. 'He won't trouble us any more now, may the devil have his bones!'

‘This king is full of talk,’ Sir Cador shouted back, ‘because he has killed a valiant knight, but he will pay the penalty, make no mistake. May Christ help me, but as sure as wind turns a windmill I will make him pay, with his own life or with those of his friends.’

Then Sir Cador set his lance at the ready, cried: ‘Cornwall!’ at the top of his voice and galloped into the thick of the fighting, striking down many fierce warriors. When his lance was broken he drew his sword and carved a wide path for himself, wounding knights to left and to right, hewing at the hardest so that men were soaked in their own blood wherever his horse went. He toppled tyrants from their horses, emptied saddles, and when he thought that the time was right, he fell back to take a rest. Many noble warriors lay dead from his efforts.

The Libyan king cried out angrily to him: ‘You have won yourself much worship and wounded a great many knights! You think, because of your valour, that the world is yours! But I shall wait for my chance. I am watching you, so beware!’



With cornets and clarions, the newly-made knights readied their lances and attacked the front of the Roman lines, felling fifty in an instant on their iron-grey steeds. They pierced through the wall of shields and shattered their lances, casting many noble warriors into an inglorious heap. Thus nobly our new men tested their strength!

But a new turn of events is troubling me. The king of Libya has mounted a fresh horse and rides in magnificently bearing silver lions on his arms. He and his forces gallop forward and surround these new, inexperienced knights. They drive them apart and with chasing spears they manage to pick off many and kill them in the open: Sir Aladuke is killed, Sir Achinour wounded, Sir Origge and Sir Ermyngall cut to pieces! Lewlin is captured, and his brother also, by lords of Libya, and led away as prisoners.

Sir Cador saw an opportunity and readied his lance, then he galloped at the king of Libya and hit him high on the head with his hard weapon. Blood poured down the king’s arm and dripped from his hand. The powerful heathen king lay on the ground with a mortal wound that would prove to be his death.

‘Now you’ve got your comeuppance!’ cried Sir Cador, derisively. ‘May God send you sorrow! You killed my cousin so you can lie there and rot! Cool yourself off in the cold clay, why don’t you? As you give, so shall you receive! What goes around comes around!’

The king of Syria was very upset to see the king of Libya so brutally brought down in a surprise counterattack; he gathered Saracens, and many senators, and made a charge upon our knights. Sir Cador of Cornwall quickly turned to face them, in the company of his well-armed companions. Along the open ground at the edge of the forest, fifty

thousand of the enemy were quickly toppled from their steeds, the most accomplished knights on the Saracen's side were knocked clean off the backs of their horses. The Britons broke down a wall of shields and thrust spears through plate armour, shot arrows through breasts; arm guards were shattered, shields covered in gore, great warhorses hacked to pieces with swords of steel! The Britons achieved such an overwhelming victory that the field of battle soon ran with blood!

Sir Kay captured a high-ranking knight. Sir Cleges galloped in and seized another – the ruler of Cordova no less, second only to the king of Spain himself. The two kings Sir Utolf and Sir Evander were taken prisoner by Sir Ioneke, along with the Earl of Africa and other great lords. The King of Syria yielded his sword to Sir Cador, and the seneschal of Sutri surrendered to Sagremour.

When the enemy knights saw that their commanders had all been captured or killed, they fled towards the thickest of the forest, but exhaustion soon overcame them and they tried to hide in terror amongst the ferns and the bracken. Our knights rode through the scrubland picking them off at will, adding dreadful wounds to their existing injuries. Shouts rang out to reveal locations and the enemy were cut to pieces in their hundreds like this. Along the edge of the forest our chivalrous knights hunted them down. A few made it to a castle, but they were the only ones to escape.

Then the knights of the Round Table rallied, regrouped, and searched the woodland where Sir Berille had met his end. They took up their comrades who had fallen in the fighting, and Sir Cador had the bodies placed in carts, with dignified coverings. He ordered them to be carried to King Arthur, accompanied by his best knights, while he, himself, escorted the prisoners onwards to Paris, to pass them into the care of the provost there.

Sir Cador paused only long enough in Paris to have a quick bite to eat in a tower before hurrying back to King Arthur, to tell him what had happened:

‘Sir, he said, ‘we were taken by surprise today in the countryside, by kings and commanders and by well-armed knights. They were hiding in ambush in the forest with some formidable warriors, beyond a bend in the road where the passage was restricted. But we gave a good account of ourselves. The king of Libya is dead, he lies where he fell, along with many of his liege men. Other lords have been captured and taken prisoner, from many different countries; we have them all in custody now, to remain alive for as long as you wish them to. Sir Ioneke captured the kings Sir Utolf and Sir Evander, and we have earls of the Orient, some of the highest-born noblemen in the emperor's army. We've captured the senator Carous, the merciless captain of Cornetto, the king of Syria, the seneschal of Sutri and numerous other Saracens.

‘We lost fourteen of our own, though, and I won't hide the truth from you. Sir Berille was killed during the first moments of the engagement. Sir Aladuke of Towell, among the newly-made knights, he was felled by Turks, we found his body later, along with those of Sir Mawrelle of Mawnces, his brother Mawrene, Sir Meneduke and others.’

King Arthur winced, screwed his face in distress and the tears trickled down his cheeks. He cried out to Sir Cador: ‘Sir, your courage will destroy us! To put men in unnecessary peril is no mark of excellence! Only if the sides are well-matched and you hold a strong position – unless you want to destroy all my finest knights?’

‘Sir,’ replied Sir Cador, ‘you know well that you are king here and can say what you like. But I would take such a reprimand from nobody else who sits at your table, nor will I let it prevent me from doing my duty. If men are sent out on a mission they should be properly equipped for it, this is a land of narrow and twisting lanes! I did my best today, let my peers judge me as they will. I put my life on the line. Is a rebuke all the thanks I get for it?’

Although Arthur was angry, he answered measuredly. ‘You have performed well with your hands, and you did your duty,’ he said. ‘Therefore you shall be counted as one of my bravest amongst dukes and earls. I have no son, you are likely to be my heir, or one of your children; you are my sister’s son, so I will never forsake you.’

The king commanded that a table be set inside his tent, then he called the exhausted warriors to their dinner with a fanfare of trumpets and served them with the finest food, on silver dishes.

When the Roman senators heard what had happened, they said to their emperor: ‘Your enemy has vanquished the finest kings and noblemen, those who rode to rescue your captured knights. The warriors you most trusted have been confounded! You may as well surrender now!’

The emperor was angry, his heart smouldered within him to think that our valiant warriors had inflicted such an ignominious defeat upon him. He called his counsellors, kings and commanders, rulers of Saracens and many senators, to an assembly.

‘My heart is set, if you are in agreement,’ he said, ‘to send my army into Soissons to try to provoke my foe into battle there. And if this doesn’t work and Arthur doesn’t take the bait, then to go to Autun and stay in that city. We can take our rest there and enjoy ourselves until Sir Leo arrives with lords of Lombardy and all their knights, to stand in Arthur’s way.’

Our wise king is cautious and takes his army out of the forest, ignites flaming pyres with towering flames, then packs up securely and continues his advance.

Arthur went as quickly as he could towards Soissons, and at dawn he divided his forces and sent them to surround that city on seven sides. The king appointed Sir Valiant of Wales to be the leader of the first assault with his chivalrous knights, for the king of Wales had openly declared that he would challenge the viscount of Rome to single combat and he admired his eagerness. Then King Arthur spoke with his most trusted

warriors, took command of the main division himself and assigned foot soldiers and bowmen, placed his finest knights in the vanguard and ordered archers with shields to protect their flanks, and to fire whenever they wished. He kept valiant knights to the rear, knights of the Round Table, Sir Raynald, Sir Richer and the wealthy duke of Rouen with his many knights. Sir Kay, Sir Cleges and other fine knights were to lie in reserve by the river. Sir Lot and Sir Lancelot, those noble warriors, were to wait on the left flank, with plenty of support, to advance at dawn when there might be a mist to conceal them. Sir Cador of Cornwall and his keen knights were to a keep lookout at a major cross-roads. At other places, too, the king positioned princes and earls, to prevent any of the emperor's forces from prowling about unseen.

The emperor rode openly into the valley with some honourable knights and earls and came unexpectedly across the forces of King Arthur. To add to the emperor's misfortune, King Arthur himself was riding in plain view with his battle formations spread out and his banners displayed. He had the city surrounded, both the gullies and the cliffs, by fierce warriors, the soft ground and the soggy ground, with huge warhorses, a great multitude of men facing the emperor.

When Sir Lucius saw this, he said to his men: 'This traitor has set a trap! He has the city already surrounded on all sides, the gullies, the cliffs, the soft ground, everywhere! We have no other choice but to give battle, for we are certainly not going to flee!'

The emperor quickly organised his legions, gave orders to his Romans and his noble knights. The viscount of Rome rode at the head of the cavalry; from Viterbo to Venice they came, and they raised their dragon of gold, awesomely adorned with eagles enamelled on sable. They drew wine from tuns and drank to steady their nerves, dukes and barons, and freshly-dubbed knights. German cheerleaders threw and caught banners as bagpipes blared loudly to stir up the blood. Sir Lucius called out to all his men:

'Think upon the fame and renown of you fathers!' he cried. 'Think of the power of Rome, its lords and its conquerors who have overrun the entire world by strength of arms! We have encroached upon the whole of Christendom. In every campaign we have gained the victory. We defeated the Saracens in seven winters! From Port Jaffa to the gates of Paradise! If a realm rebels, it is nothing for us to worry about. It is right and reasonable that this king should be restrained! So let us go into battle, he deserves no more leniency! There can be no doubt that this day shall be ours!'

The Welsh king Sir Valiant became aware that battle was imminent and issued his challenge courageously: 'Viscount of Valence,' he shouted, 'your pride will not help you! The people of Viterbo will today be avenged! Meet me now, and I shall never flee from this place, while I still live!'

The noble viscount, issuing orders with a strong voice, took up a shield bearing a dragon gorging upon a dolphin, signifying that King Arthur was doomed and would be killed by the strokes of swords – for nothing but death can be expected when this dragon is raised – and then he turned his horse and rode forwards from the head of his army.

The Welsh king readied his lance, galloped forwards and struck the viscount right in the short ribs, a span above the waist, skewering spleen with steel and impaling the knight on his spear. Blood gushed out as the horse pranced and kicked, and the man sprawled quickly onto the ground where he spoke no more.

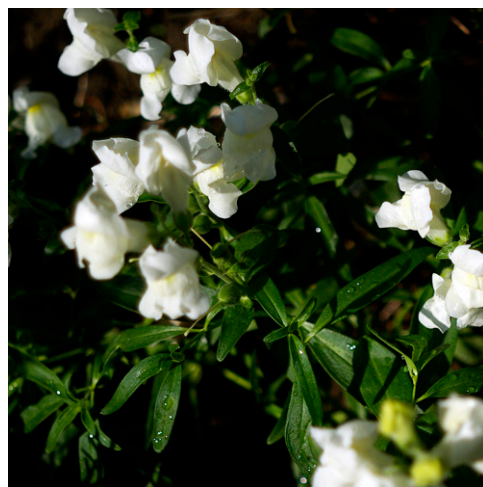
Thus did Sir Valiant hold to his vow; he defeated the viscount who had fully expected to gain the victory.

Yvain son of King Urien eagerly rode towards the emperor, intending to seize the Roman eagle. He galloped through the enemy ranks, swiftly drew his sword, snatched the Roman standard and galloped away with it. He rode back into the thick of King Arthur's knights holding the eagle in his hands, displaying it openly for the Romans to see.

Sir Lancelot galloped at Sir Lucius and struck him a ferocious blow. He struck both plate and chainmail so that the proud pennon on Lancelot's lance jammed against Lucius's stomach and the tip of the lance grazed the flesh, emerging half a foot or more behind him! Horse and man tumbled to the ground, Lancelot struck down a flag and then galloped back to his comrades.

'I like this!' cried Sir Lot. 'These lords have done exactly what they said they would today and now my reputation will be destroyed, and my life afterwards, if some of those over there don't lose their lives very quickly!'

He galloped forwards and charged the enemy on his fine warhorse. The first he encountered was a giant and he impaled him on his lance. Elated with battle-fury, this noble knight jousted with another, then carved a wide passage for himself, terrifying all those who found themselves in his way. Wounding all those who fought against him, he advanced two hundred yards, sending many valiant knights sprawling to the ground before riding back to safety, when he deemed the time to be right.



British archers released a volley of arrows against the Roman soldiers; fletched and finely-feathered, they quickly hit their targets, piercing through chainmail – it was horrible to see, sticking out of the flanks of steeds. German soldiers released a volley of crossbow bolts in return, knocking holes in shields and passing through knights! The iron hurtled so fast there was no time to evade it.

But the Romans were so cowed by the incoming arrows that the phalanx started to shudder and then to retreat. The fine horses rushed at the scattering legion and soon an entire hundred had fled to a heath. Yet the noblest of the enemy, heathens for the most part, made a counter-attack, hoping to inflict harm in return. At their head rode giants engendered by fiends; they attacked Sir Jonathal and noble knights, with clubs of pure steel crashing down upon heads, clanking against helmets and smashing brains to pulp.

Horses were killed, knights chopped in half; no steel, and no horse, could stand against them, all were beaten down. Then Arthur attacked with his knights.

‘Are Britains going to be crushed by such a puny gang of children?’ cried the king, ferociously, as he drew Excalibur – it shone like the sun. He attacked Golopas with it, who was giving our forces some cruel attention, cutting off both his legs at the knees.

‘Come down and speak with me!’ King Arthur cried. ‘You’re too high by half! I’ll improve your looks even more if you like, with God’s help!’ and he cut off his head with Excalibur. Then he attacked another giant; more than sixty were destroyed by our knights.

The Romans and King Arthur’s knights fought hand-to-hand, smashing swords and maces against helmets and ripping chainmail. They fought valiantly and with great skill, our noble warriors, they gave themselves room to attack again and again, delivering cruel blows with flashing spears and tearing the ornaments from shields, until so many lay dead upon the battlefield that every stream ran with blood. Knights lay bleeding to death, swords lay broken, horses cantered about with lifeless riders on their backs and many fine fighters lay wounded, their matted hair framing faces screwed up in pain as horses trampled over them. The finest warriors that the world has ever seen could be seen strewn for a furlong, a thousand unhorsed.

The Romans were getting the worst of it and began to retreat. Our prince pursued them with his knights, Sir Kay, Sir Cleges, the noble Sir Cleremond, trapped them against a cliff, they fought savagely, spared no weapon and killed five hundred in this attack. The Romans did their utmost to fight back, they still had strength in numbers and they counterattacked, putting their spears to good use.

The keen Sir Kay readied his lance and galloped at a king, striking him so severely that the point smashed through shield and armour and his liver and lungs were left dangling from his lance. But then a knight struck Sir Kay as he turned his horse away, wounding him so badly through the abdomen that his bowels were pierced and his innards spilled out. Sir Kay knew at once that he had received a mortal wound. But he turned his horse around and rode to attack this royal prince.

‘Defend yourself, coward!’ he cried and delivered a massive blow with his sword that cut the man in half. ‘Had you fought fairly, I would have forgiven you for killing me!’ he shouted.

Then Sir Kay rode to King Arthur.

‘I am mortally wounded,’ he said. ‘I have no hope of recovery. Do things that will bring you glory, as the world desires, and then bury me properly. This is all I ask. Greet my lady the queen for me, if you survive this, and all the fine ladies in her chamber. And greet my wife, who has never angered me. Ask her to have services sung for the benefit of my soul, and to the credit of hers.’

The king’s confessor came with a holy wafer, and with Christ in his hands, he gave Sir

Kay absolution. The knight bravely got to his knees and received his Creator, who is the comfort of us all.

King Arthur rode back onto the battlefield, his heart filled with pity and anger, and galloped into the thickest of the fighting, bent upon revenge. He met with a princely knight, the heir of Egypt and those eastern lands, and cut him in half with Excalibur. With sad resolve, he met with another and slashed at his middle so severely that the chainmail was no protection to him. The man's intestines spilled out over his horse's flanks and onto the ground.

King Arthur galloped through the Roman ranks with Excalibur, slashing at men and slicing through chainmail, tearing down banners and shattering shields. He brought shining steel to work his revenge, wounding his enemies, attacking knights with all his strength and skill as his anger found its release, fighting backwards and forwards through a phalanx thirteen times, pushing his advantage and letting no one escape alive.

The good Sir Gawain, with a company of knights, galloping to the front, near the edge of the forest, became aware of the emperor Lucius on some open ground, surrounded by the most senior of his noblemen and foreign kings.

'What do you want?' the emperor shouted, spotting Sir Gawain. 'Some work for your weapon? If you fancy a good beating I'll deliver it to you myself, you wretch, for all your bravado!'

The emperor drew a long sword, but galloped instead at Sir Lionel, hitting him so hard upon the head that his helmet burst open, exposing a head-wound a hand's breath wide. He attacked the whole of Gawain's contingent then, fighting ferociously and wounding many. Sir Lucius fought with the sword Florent, the finest of weapons, so fervently that the foaming blood ran from the blade to his hand.

Seeing Sir Lucius throwing himself so energetically into the fight, the Romans regrouped and launched a counterattack, their horses now rested; they galloped to give aid to their emperor, scattering our knights and cutting them down. Sir Bedevere was struck by a sword blow that wounded him through the chest; the steel slid into his heart and he fell dead to the ground. Alas! King Arthur quickly saw what had happened and rode with his company to bring grief if he could, even to capture the emperor's standard, with a great cry of: 'Arthur!'

The emperor Lucius struck a blow at Arthur's visor, hitting him awkwardly on the nose. Blood ran down past Arthur's mouth and chin and onto his chest. His shield and his chainmail glistened with his own blood. Arthur quickly turned his horse and struck a return blow with the shining Excalibur that tore through chainmail and armour, cutting Lucius from throat to chest with a single slash.

So ended the emperor, at the hands of King Arthur.

Terror spread through the Roman forces now. Pursued by our valiant knights, they raced

towards the forest beside the river and those few who managed to reach it fled in new-found fear of their lives.

‘Cousin of Cornwall,’ cried King Arthur, ‘make sure that no commanders are captured alive for ransom, before the death of Sir Kay has been properly avenged!’

‘No, so Christ help me!’ called back Sir Cador. ‘There is no emperor nor king who reigns under Christ who will not be struck down by this sword in my hands!’

Commanders on chalk-white horses were chased and cut down, chivalrous knights, the wealthiest Romans, kings and royalty slashed with steel, their ribs cut to pieces, brains burst through helmets, swords slashed at sultans, Saracens and Roman senators, hewn down in their hundreds at the edge of the forest. No silver could save them.

At last, the knights of the Round Table returned to the open space beside the river and camped by the cool streams, down by the water’s edge, those noble warriors. Then they went to the enemy camp and took what they liked: camels and crocodiles, chests full of treasure, horses of all description, packhorses, ponies and warhorses, the pavilions and provisions of heathen potentates; they led out dromedaries and milk-white mules and other marvellous beasts, Arab stallions and enormous elephants that had come from the Orient with their honoured kings.

After this, King Arthur went to where the emperor Lucius lay dead and had him carried with dignity by noble knights to his own pavilion, in the company of kings. Then heralds quickly, at the request of the lords, located the bodies of the principal heathens on the surrounding hillsides – the sultan of Syria and certain kings, sixty of the chief senators of Rome. He had them carried down and their bodies embalmed. They sewed them into fine linen and encased them in lead to protect them from damage and deterioration, so that they might arrive safely in Rome enclosed in their coffins, their banners flying above them, their badges beneath, so that every knight would know who they were and their countrymen could claim them.

On the second day, soon after dawn, two senators appeared with some knights, hoodless. They had come from the heath and the forest barefoot, and now they knelt and offered King Arthur their swords, hilt first, and regardless of whether he chose to hang them, behead them or to spare their lives, they knelt unarmed before him with suitable humility and said:

‘We are two senators, citizens of Rome, who have saved our lives beside this river. We hid in the high woodland with the help of Christ! And we implore you for mercy to grant us our lives with a liberal heart, as our sovereign lord, for the love of he who has granted you this lordship on Earth.’

‘I grant it,’ replied the good king, ‘I grant you your lives. Your lives and your freedom if you will carry a message for me faithfully to Rome, and convey the words that I shall tell you to issue, openly in front of all my knights.’

‘Yes,’ said the senators, ‘we promise you this, and we give you our word that we will faithfully repeat your message. We will let no one hinder us, neither king nor pope, nor any noble prince! We would rather die than fail to deliver it!’

Then the noblemen of Britain led them to a pavilion where barbers were brought, with basins raised high. The senators were splashed with warm water and their heads shaved, to signify surrender and to make their captivity clear to the Romans when they arrived before them. Then they quickly roped the coffins of kings onto camels, asses and Arab horses. The emperor, for his honour, lay all by himself on an elephant, draped in his eagle standard. Then King Arthur summoned all to hear him, and said to the senators:

‘Here are the boxes. Take them over the mountains. They are filled with the tribute that Rome asked for, carefully counted, the tax and the tribute of ten score winters that was painfully lost to us in the time of our elders. Say to the senator who controls Rome now that I send him this sum, he may wish to check it carefully. And ask them never to dare again to give battle for my broad lands, for as long as my descendants rule, or to pretend to any right to tax or tribute, except for such treasure as they see before them.’

The two senators took the quickest route back to Rome. The bells on the Capitol Hill rang out and an assembly was called. The sovereigns and senators who ruled the city were given the baggage train and the boxes, as King Arthur had instructed.

‘We have faithfully worked to fetch back what was owing,’ the shaven senators said, ‘the tax and the tribute of four score winters, from England and Ireland and all the Outer Isles, that Arthur in the west occupies. He asks you never to be so bold as to enter his lands again, for as long as his descendants rule, nor to ask for any more tax or tribute except for such as he sends to you now, for as long as he lives.’

Then: ‘We fought in France and we were mauled!’ they exclaimed. ‘Our fine warriors lie dead, all our people are slain. No commanders have escaped the slaughter, and no knights have either, they were cut down as they fled, so complete was the catastrophe. We advise you to quarry as much stone as you can and reinforce the walls of Rome. You have awoken disaster, if you dare to acknowledge it!’

This all happened in the calends of May. King Arthur rested by the coast with his Round Table, on the coast of Normandy by the clear waters, basking in his glorious victory over the Romans.

When the field was won, King Arthur commanded that his brave knights should be properly buried, those who had died of their wounds in battle. Sir Bedevere was buried at Bayeux, Sir Kay at Caen in a crystal chest. Then in Burgundy the king ordered more knights to be buried, Sir Berade and Sir Baldwin, and Sir Bedwar. Sir Cayous had already been buried in Caen, as his ancestry compelled.

By August, King Arthur was in Germany, resting his knights in Luxemburg, letting their

wounds have time to heal and presiding like a lord in his own lands. On Saint Christopher's Day he held a meeting of counsellors, with kings and commanders, clerics and others, and urged them insistently to focus their minds upon how he could conquer the lands that he sought. Courteously and with great sovereignty, King Arthur addressed his assembly:

'There is a knight hereabouts, deep within these hills, whom I have long wanted to meet because of his reputation,' he said. 'I'll be honest with you, he is the lord of Lorraine and the land he rules over is a fine one, I am led to believe. I will deal with that duchy to my own satisfaction and then deal with the duke himself, if destiny allows. This rebellious duke has lent constant support to the Romans and been willing, always, to help them run riot through my lands and insult my Round Table. We will settle who has the right to this land, by God of heaven! And after that, I would like to go into Lombardy to establish my laws there, then bring a little grief to the tyrants of Tuscany. I'll get their noblemen on my side. To all the Pope's lands I will offer my protection. I will fly my flag of peace to all the people there, for it is folly to offend our father under God, nor Peter nor Paul, nor the apostles of Rome. If we grant immunity to the clergy we'll progress the better for it, so while I have breath left in my body, nothing belonging to the Church shall be taken or tampered with.

Without any further ado, these valiant knights mounted their horses and rode to the outskirts of Metz. This was a city praised in Lorraine as much as London is here, it was the place where the duke resided, and the king rode on a fair steed with Sir Ferrer and Sir Feraunt and four other knights and these seven sought the swiftest way to the city, to survey the walls and determine where to set up the siege engines. Those in the city cranked up their crossbows, shot hostile expressions at the king quickly followed by equally hostile crossbow bolts, hoping to hit him, or his horse.

The king asked for no shield and didn't hold back, but rode openly before them inspecting the walls, trying to determine the lowest and weakest point.

'Sir,' said Sir Ferrer, 'you are being very unwise going completely unarmed and wearing just a surcoat so close to these walls. You endanger us all! Let's go quickly away before they manage to hit you, or your horse. Let's not risk that catastrophe!'

'If you are afraid, then I advise you to go back,' replied the king, 'I have no fear, may God help me. Although children may be frightened, I am not afraid at all. It seems that you would jump back in terror if a fly landed on your arm! They don't impress me in the slightest, they're just wasting their arrows. They'll have expended everything before I go, I'll lay my head on that! Villains will never find the good fortune to kill an anointed king in this way, by the grace of Our Good Lord!'

Soon the scouting knights arrived, fearsome warriors, followed by the rest of their companions, shouting wildly! Foragers appeared on iron-grey horses, looking to seize what they could. These were all magnificent knights, the cream of the Round Table, and the finest men of France followed behind, splendidly turned out and in perfect array; they

drew their horses to a halt, paused, then suddenly altered the stance of their steeds in order to show the full magnificence of their armour, their flying banners, their broad shields and shining helmets, pennons and pennisels proudly displaying each lord's emblem, encrusted with pearls and precious stones. The metal from shield and weaponry glinted in the sunlight like flashes of lightning.

Then each knight suddenly gave his horse the spurs and they launched into an advance, approaching the city on all sides, converging upon its walls, ransacking the outlying buildings and, here and there, disturbing archers concealed under cover. Skirmishes broke out with the bowmen, their scouts and shield-bearers, and barricades were broken down and destroyed. Some of the defences around the main gate were captured, our knights made it onto the drawbridge and if its defenders had not been as good as they were, the city would have been captured there and then.

Our men withdrew a little for fear of being killed as the drawbridge was raised. They retreated to where the king was waiting with his finest battalion, horsed on steeds. King Arthur was given the spoils of the foraging, places for pavilions were allocated, tents erected and preparations made for a protracted siege. They took their time and did things properly, set scouts to keep watch and ordered the construction of siege engines.

One Sunday, when the sun had begun to blaze in the sky, King Arthur called Sir Florent to him, that flower of knights:

'The Frenchmen are getting dispirited,' he told him. 'They find themselves out of their comfort zone in these marginal lands, and no wonder, they are missing their venison and their fine food. There are great forests about us on all sides, but everything within them has fled away in terror, both man and beast.'

'You shall go into the wild lands and scour the mountains. Take Sir Ferewnte and Sir Floridas with you. We must get some fresh meat to our people who are used to feasting on game. Sir Gawain can go with you, if he so wishes. He knows what he's doing with a hunting horn in his hands! Also Sir Wetcher and Sir Walter. Take all the most alert and intelligent knights from Britain and the western marches, Sir Cleges, Sir Claribald and the constable of Cardiff, the noble Sir Cleremond. Go now, alert all the watch, Gawain and others, and set off at once without any more talking.'

Now these warriors set off for the forest and the wild places, over hills and along valleys, through ancient forest and woodlands of hazel, over moors and moss, and over high mountains. And on a misty morning they came across a clearing that had been mown for hay; it lay unstacked, still drying, mountains of it, full of sweet flowers. The knights dismounted and let their horses feast on it, as the sun, that messenger of Christ, climbed into the sky.

Sir Gawain went off, that valiant and intelligent knight, driven by curiosity to see what wonders he might find, and was suddenly aware of someone superbly well-armed, rest-

ing his horse by a riverbank at the edge of the forest. The man was wearing a bright coat of chainmail, wore a large shield and was sitting on a warhorse with no one else for company except for a lone boy, sitting on another horse and carrying his lance. His shield bore three greyhounds picked out in black against a background of gold; the dogs wore collars of silver and above them on the shield was a precious stone that sparkled like diamond. He seemed a chief among men, challenge him who dared!

Sir Gawain looked at this knight with a smile on his face and selected a great spear from his squire, who was riding alongside him. He jumped his horse over a stream and rode towards this ferocious-looking warrior with an eager cry of: 'Arthur!' in English.

The other shouted back angrily in the language of Lorraine, so loudly that he might have been heard a mile away: 'Where are you going, loudmouth? You'll find no prey here, however much you shout. Unless your heart is as big as your mouth is, you'll soon be my prisoner, for all your arrogance.'

'Sir,' replied Gawain, 'so help me God, but I have no fear of knights like you who just like the sound of their own voice. If you care to make yourself ready for battle, the grief will be yours I can assure you, for all your fine words.'

They took up their lances, these noble warriors, galloped at one another on their grey horses with their long spears and hit each other with skill of arms, shattering both lances with the impact, but not before the tip of each had torn through shield and shattered chainmail around each other's shoulders, six inches wide. They were both wounded from the blow they'd received, but neither had any intention of backing away. They pulled at their reins, turned their horses, quickly drew their swords and struck at each other hard on the helmet, slicing at chainmail with weapons of steel. Their blows were immense, these mighty warriors! They thrust at the midriff with the points of their swords, attacked and defended with such vigour and strength that sparks flew from helmet and blade.

Sir Gawain took a telling blow and reacted with anger, striking back with his excellent sword – its name was Galuth – cutting his opponent's shield in two with it. From the left side, as his horse turned, one could have seen the knight's liver exposed in the sunlight! The knight groaned in grief at this grisly wound and as their horses turned once more he struck another blow at Sir Gawain. Striking him aslant and carving off a piece of armour protecting Gawain's upper-arm, the envenomed sword edge slid quickly down, doing further damage to the silver guard around Gawain's elbow, cutting into the velvet cloth beneath and severing a vein, which burst so severely that the blood splattered against Gawain's visor and chainmail in an instant, reddening his armour and stunning him momentarily. The savage knight turned his bridle and shouted angrily: 'You'll need a tourniquet now! All the barber-surgeons in Britain won't stop all that bleeding. A wound from this sword edge will bleed you all out.'

'Oh yes?' shouted Sir Gawain. 'You don't frighten me! You're trying to scare me. You're trying to defeat me with words, when blows haven't worked. You going to get what's

coming to you before you turn from here. But tell me quickly – how can I stop this bleeding? It seems to be coming so fast?’

‘I’m telling you the truth, I promise. No physician on Earth can help you now. Your only hope is to help me, I want you to hear my confession and prepare me for death, then I will quickly demonstrate my power to you, for the sake of your Christ.’

‘Alright,’ said Sir Gawain. ‘So help me God, I’ll grant you all that you wish, although you deserve a lot worse! Provided that you tell me truthfully what you are doing here and what you’re looking for, all alone, and what faith you believe in – tell me the truth – and what lands you control and the name of your overlord.’



‘My name is Sir Priamus, my father is a royal prince, esteemed in his land by honoured kings; in Rome, where he reigned, he is loved and respected. But he has rebelled against Rome and trampled their territory, waging war with discretion he’s acted with courage, with wisdom and cunning and carved out new lands. He’s related to Alexander the Great, that overlord of kings. His grandfather’s uncle was Hector of Troy! In my family I can count Judas Maccabeus and Joshua. I am my father’s heir apparent, the eldest of my siblings, and I already govern Alexan-

dria in Africa and all the outlying lands. All the prized cities that belong to that port are governed by me, I enjoy their wealth and their revenue for as long as I live.

‘For many winters I was so proud and secure that I thought myself to be twice as high as anybody else. So I was sent by my father with seven score knights to take part in this fighting and join against Arthur. But because of my pride I’ve been shamefully beaten, disgraced forever by this cruel mischance of meeting with you. So, now I have told you who I am and of what lineage. Will you, for your knighthood, do me the same courtesy and tell me your name?’

‘By Christ,’ exclaimed Sir Gawain, ‘I was never a knight! I’m a servant of the king’s chamber. I work in his wardrobe, I’ve done so for years, looking after his long armour and helping to put up his pavilions, dressing his dukes and earls in their doublets and maintaining the clothes that he’s been wearing beneath his armour for eight winters now. He made me a yeoman at Christmas and gave me some great gifts, a hundred pounds and a horse, and some lovely armour.’

‘If I have the good fortune to serve King Arthur, then, I’ll be healed in no time, I’m sure, if his servants are like you. His knights must be magnificent! He is invincible and will emulate Alexander and have the world at his feet, he’ll earn more renown than Hector of Troy ever did. So for the holy water that you felt on the day that you were christened, whether you are a knight or a nobody, the truth is now known.’

‘My name is Sir Gawain, I will admit this to you. I am King Arthur’s nephew, a knight of his chamber and reckoned to be the finest of all warriors. He knighted me with his own hands, before all the knights of the Round Table. I don’t say this to brag, it is a gift of God and the praise should go to him.’

‘Peter!’ exclaimed the knight. ‘Now I feel better! I feel better than if I’d been appointed prince of Provence, or Paris even! I’d rather have been stabbed through the heart than have an ordinary rider get lucky and win me in combat like this! But be warned: nearby in these dense forests are whole battalions lying in wait. The Duke of Lorraine, whose cruelty knows no bounds, has gathered his finest knights, the bravest in Dauphine, along with many Dutch and Germans, the rulers of Lombardy, the garrison of Mount Goddard, warriors of Westphalia, of Saxony and Syria, pagans enough, all fully accounted for, more than sixty thousand I believe. Unless we flee this open ground at once we’ll both be in trouble, for unless my wound is soon attended to, I’m a dead man. So tell your squire not to make a sound with his horn, or you’ll be quickly cut down and hewn into pieces. They are all my men and they ride where I command them to, and no warriors more eager for battle exist in this world. If you are caught, that will be the end of you. The ransom on your head will be impossible to pay.’

Sir Gawain rode off with the wounded Sir Priamus as quickly as he could and made his way back to the hillside where his companions were grazing their horses on the high meadow. Noblemen were relaxing against shining shields, there was laughter and delight at the birdsong from larks and linnets. Some were taking a nap, lulled by the carefree cadences that rang around the open grassland and from the edges of the surrounding forest.

Sir Wicher realised at once that Sir Gawain was wounded and went up to him weeping and wringing his hands. Sir Wechard and Sir Walter hurried over with great concern, these experienced knights; they met Gawain as he approached them on horseback, amazed that he had overcome such a fierce warrior carrying such a wound himself. ‘All our hopes are dashed,’ they cried. ‘We are undone!’

‘For God’s love, get a grip of yourselves!’ Sir Gawain scolded them. ‘This is nothing that a nobleman can’t expect. Although my shoulder is torn and my shield broken, and I’ve difficulty moving this arm, this prisoner, Sir Priamus, who is wounded far worse than I am, has medicinal ointments that will heal us both.’

Knights rushed to his stirrup and helped Sir Gawain to dismount; he gathered his bridle and let his strong warhorse graze on the grass and the flowers, as he took off his helmet, some armour, leaned on his shield and bowed low to the ground. There was not a drop of blood left in his body!

Noble knights rushed over to attend to Sir Priamus; they helped him off his horse, took off his helmet and his coat of chainmail and, observing the pain that he was in, removed all his clothes and let him lie flat on the ground, or in whatever way he found more comfortable. They discovered a golden flask about his waist that was full of the finest

water that flows from Paradise, from the four springs into which much fruit falls; if this is laid against flesh in which sinews have been cut, a man will be as fit as a fiddle within four hours! So with clean hands, they removed the clothes of these warriors and a knight bathed their wounds with this clear water, cooling them and bringing comfort to their hearts. When their wounds were clean, they were bandaged and made good. Then wine casks were broken open, goblets filled, and some fine bread and roast meats brought to the wounded pair. When they had eaten, they donned their armour once more.

Then: 'Now, to arms!' cried Sir Gawain. A loud clarion call on a trumpet summoned an assembly so that the two knights could convey the gravity of the situation.

'In an oak woodland there is a whole army hiding,' explained Gawain, 'seasoned warriors according to Sir Priamus, the fiercest in battle in the whole of Christendom! Go men, look into your hearts, and see if you have the courage to canter into those woods after these great lords? If we go back empty-handed, King Arthur will be cross. He'll say that we are cowards, that we're frightened of our own shadows. Sir Florent is in charge of us today, the flower of France who has never fled in his life. He was chosen to be our captain in the King's chamber, so whether he decides to fight or to flee, we shall follow him faithfully. For myself, I shall never fall back out of fear of my foe!'

'Wise Sir,' said Sir Florent, 'you've explained the situation admirably. 'But I am a novice in this kind of warfare and if I get it wrong we may cause a calamity. If you may excuse me for saying so, I'm not the man that you think I am. You are our warden, so you make the decision.'

Sir Priamus stepped forward to speak: 'You are at most only five hundred strong,' he said, 'and that is far too few to fight with them all. Servants and huntsmen will be of little help; for all their great boasts, they'll flee for their lives. So I advise you all to behave intelligently, like the wise warriors that you are, and creep cunningly away with your honour intact.'

'You may be right, may God help me!' exclaimed Sir Gawain, 'but here are some valiant knights who deserve their reward. They are the most fearsome warriors in the king's chamber, whose boasts carry weight over drinking tables at night. We can prove that today and win the prize!'

Knights rode out into the woodland and in a good open area they dismounted, looked for tracks and then cantered off again, intent upon hunting down their enemies. Sir Florent and Sir Floridas followed through the forest with a hundred knights and found the way. Soon they were bearing down upon the opposing forces. Riding out to confront them appeared five hundred fearsome knights, dashing through the forest on fresh horses, led by Sir Feraunt on a mighty warhorse. He had been brought up on Cyprus and his father was the devil!

Sir Feraunt galloped at Sir Florent crying: 'Are you running away, false knight? May the fiend have your soul!'

Sir Florent, delighted to see some action, set his lance in its rest, spurred Fawnell of Friesland into a gallop, gave rein and guided the horse straight at his attacker. Urging his steed into its maximum speed, he hit his opponent square on the forehead, smashing helmet and face with his grisly weapon, forcing the point into the man's brain and throwing his neck back with such a jolt that his spine snapped and he breathed his last.

'You have killed stone dead the king of all knights!' cried the dead man's cousin, ferociously. 'Tested in battle in fifteen realms he's never yet found any knight who can match him, until now. You shall die today, at my own hands, you and that rabble who ride with you!'

'Fy!' shouted back Sir Floridas. 'You snivelling wretch! You fluke-mouthed leech!'

Sir Floridas spurred his horse, raced up to this knight and galloped past, swinging his sword and catching him in the midriff, so that all the knight's guts and intestines spilled out and trailed about his horses hooves as it trotted away.

A knight galloped over to lend whatever help he could; he was Reynald of Rhodes, a rebel to Christ who had been converted to paganism and had won much martial honour in Prussia. Sir Richard of the Round Table rode against him, mounted on a regal-looking steed; he thrust his lance through a red shield and drove it right through Sir Reynald's heart. The knight twisted away in agony and fell to the ground, screaming out coarsely; but his fighting days were over.

Five hundred then fell upon Sir Florent and his five score of knights in a frenzy of attack. When Sir Priamus saw how they were performing, he was sorry in his heart that he wasn't in a position to lend them his aid, and he rode up to Sir Gawain and said: 'Your best knights are going to be overwhelmed, can't you see? Will you allow me, Sir, for the sake of your Christ, to lead a small contingent of your men and lend them my support?'

'I don't mind at all,' said Gawain. 'The honour will be theirs and they will gain ample reward from King Arthur as well. But these warriors of France are testing themselves, they haven't been off the leash for fifteen winters, not in full-scale conflict, and I'll not move half a horse-length with my company unless they're facing more knights than I can see attacking them at the moment.'

But then Sir Gawain became aware, at the edge of the forest, of knights of Westphalia galloping out on strong horses, bristling with weapons of war. An old earl, Anteller, was leading them, surrounded on both sides by eight thousand knights, and with more archers and shield men than any Earthly prince had ever commanded before. Then the Duke of Lorraine appeared with twice this number, pagans of Prussia, magnificent horsemen galloping across with Priamus's own knights.

'I am genuinely angry at Arthur's knights,' said the old earl to his brother Algerer. 'They ride eagerly at our great army just to chance their arm! They'll be destroyed very shortly, before nine o'clock I expect. How ridiculous to engage us on the field of battle like this. It'll be a wonder if they're not all killed. If they had more sense and were to go on their

way, gallop home to their prince and leave us alone, they might lengthen their lives with no loss to themselves, and it would lighten my heart, to be honest.'

'Sir,' replied Sir Algerer, 'they don't seem very accustomed to being outclassed in combat. What angers me more is that, however tiny their force may be, our most valiant knights are going to be dead before very long!'

The gracious and noble Sir Gawain cried out enthusiastically to his knights: 'Don't be afraid of shining shields, good men, however magnificent these boorish braggarts may look on their fine horses. Noblemen of Britain, raise up your spirits! Don't be in awe of these dressed-up children, their boasts are nothing but the taunts of infants. If we fight today, the field shall be ours. The knights in front of us are untested in battle, just look at them! They are heathens and pay allegiance to the devil himself! When we are most in need of help, we shall pray to Mary, who is our master's saint and in whom he places all his trust. Whoever prays to this maiden will suffer no misadventure. Our deeds will be acclaimed in the presence of princes, we'll be praised and loved by ladies everywhere, we'll surpass the valour of all of our ancestors. Even Unwin of the Goths and Absalon will have done nothing to compare with what we are about to do now!'

By the time that these words were ringing in everybody's ears, knights were bearing down on them no more than the length of a field away, with cries of 'Lorraine!' Then never before had such a jousting been seen!

The knights of the Round Table galloped into the advancing onslaught on their swift steeds, charging so aggressively with their steel spearheads to the fore that the enemy were soon terrified and quickly fled back into the forest, content to cringe back to their castles with their tails between their legs.

'Peter!' exclaimed Sir Gawain, 'this gladdens my heart! I don't think we'll be getting any more trouble from them, they're too busy hiding themselves amongst the trees. There are fewer of them on the field now that there were at first. This gaggle of children has just run away!'

But there was one, a huge giant of a man named Jolyan of Genoa, who attacked Sir Geraint, a Welsh judge, but the Welshman stabbed him through his shield and through his coat of chainmail. Geraint was happy and had a good laugh.

But then the horsemen of Genoa regrouped and rode to the fore, five hundred strong. A knight named Sir Frederick with a great many others galloped into the attack, shouting loudly and racing towards our knights who were still on the field. The princely knights of the Round Table responded in earnest and galloped against them, careering straight into the centre and engaging such a multitude of men that it is truly marvellous to tell. Genoese coats of chainmail were torn to shreds, hearts pierced, helmets smashed to pieces and hilted swords run through to the heart. The Saracens soon discovered that the ruler of Saxony had been slain. The renowned warriors of the Round Table turned the assault into a rout, cutting down earls and dukes with some dreadful blows.

Sir Priamus, that prince, fought his way through against high noblemen to where his standard was raised and snatched it up, reversed it and galloped back with it to the knights of the Round Table. In great haste, his men galloped after him; they could see who he was from the marks on his shield and they poured out from the front of the enemy vanguard like sheep from a fold, galloping across open ground to stand with their lord.

They sent a message to the Duke of Lorraine, which read: 'We have served you as soldiers for six years and more, but today we abandon you, by the will of our noble lord. We have ridden with our sovereign lord through many kingdoms, and haven't been paid for four years. You are feeble and unfaithful and your words are nothing but hot air. Our wages are lacking and the war is worn out, so we can now honourably go wherever we like. We advise you to stop this pretence and agree to a truce, or else you will lose another ten thousand men before nightfall.'

'Go to hell!' cried the duke when he heard this. 'The devil have your bones!'

He donned his shield and chose an Arabian camel to ride, then raced at Sir Gawain with some fearsome knights, many from Grenada on fresh horses, and they rode straight at our knights, killing forty in their first attack – forty who had already fought against five hundred and were tired and weakened, which should come as no surprise. Sir Gawain gripped his spear, met the marquis of Metz and ran him through.

A squire named Chasteyalne, a young man of the king's chamber who was a ward of Sir Gawain in the western marches, chased Sir Cheldrik, a noble chieftain, and by a stroke of luck managed to impale him with a throwing spear. He was pursued at once, escape proved impossible and Swyan of Sweden cut his neck bone in two with the edge of his sword. The young man's body fell to the turf and was quickly lifeless.

This young man was a fine fellow, still learning his skills, personable and good-humoured and when Sir Gawain saw what had happened to him, the tears streamed down his cheeks.

'For the sake of this young squire, may I lose all that I have if I don't slay that man who has just killed him!' he exclaimed.

Sir Gawain gathered himself and rode at the duke, but his way was blocked by Sir Dauphin the Cruel, so Gawain readied his lance and the sharpened point slid into the man's heart. Eagerly, he thrust out and hurt another, a heathen knight named Hardolf, impaling him through the throat. Gawain lost a grip of his lance and it slid from his hands, but already sixty good warriors lay dead on that slope, ready to be kicked into a ditch! Although Sir Gawain was still grief-stricken, he bided his time and then caught sight of that knight who had killed the young squire. With his sword he swiftly dispatched Swyan of Sweden so that he fell to the ground and lay very still.

Then Sir Gawain attacked all around him, striking helmets, tearing chainmail, shattering shields until he had ridden through the thick of the melee, through the rear guard

and found himself on open ground once more. He reined in his horse and returned quickly to the knights of the Round Table.

Our chivalrous men changed their horses, chased and chopped down many noble chieftains, hit heartily on helmets and shields, hurting and hewing down heathen knights, cleaving kettle-helmets down to the collarbone! Never had such a clamour of battle been heard on Earth before. Noble sons of kings were captured, land-holding knights from wealthy districts, lords of Lorraine and of Lombardy taken prisoner and led away by our loyal knights. Those who had fled into the forest were seen to be the lucky ones!

When Sir Florent had won the field, he rode at the head of his five score knights, rounding up all the prisoners, archers, shield-bearers and infantrymen, organising their transportation while good Sir Gawain guided his knights, with the help of scouts, to secure the quickest and safest route back with the spoils, lest any ambush by the enemy should take them by surprise. They posted guards at mountain passes and places of danger and waited there until all the prisoners and booty had safely gone past.

When they came in sight once again of the city that King Arthur was besieging, Sir Florent and his commanders sent a herald ahead of them to the encampment. The herald quickly made his way to King Arthur's tent and told the king as accurately as he could what had happened:

'Your men are all safe, sir, whom you sent out to forage, Sir Florent, Sir Floridas and all their fierce knights. They have fought an engagement with a great army and killed a huge number of your foes. Sir Gawain has done brilliantly! He's captured a duke and killed the Sir Dauphin the Cruel, slain many other worthy men and won a great deal of honour for himself. He's captured princes and earls and holds prisoners of high prestige. And all your knights are safe: except that a young squire was killed, the child Chastelain.'

'Fine sir!' exclaimed the king. 'Good herald, by Christ, you have healed my heart. You shall have rents in Southampton worth a hundred pounds!'

The king then organised an assault on the city, with portable towers shielded everywhere. He urged his shield-bearers forwards, men scaled the walls and every sector had its assortment of experienced sappers. The beams of trebuchets were bent and missiles hurled, pellets packed onto pallets and flung over the walls. Monasteries and hospitals were pounded into the ground, white chapels and churches toppled, steeples lay supine, stretched out on the street, houses with chimneys and sturdy inns were pounded into piles of timber and plaster. The screaming of people was pitiful to hear.

The duchess gathered her well-dressed ladies, including the countess of Crasine with her beautiful maidens, and they went and knelt above the battlements, in front of King Arthur who was magnificently attired and mounted on a fine horse. They knew him by his bearing, and cried as loudly as they could:

'Rightfully crowned king, please listen to us! We beseech you, sir, as sovereign and lord,

to save us today for the sake of your Christ! Help us, and come to terms with the people before the city falls to carnage and mayhem!’

King Arthur raised his visor with a noble expression, and with a virtuous and good-natured look, he replied mildly: ‘No one will harm you, madam, who answers to me. I shall offer you terms of peace now, for yourself and for all the children, churchmen and chivalrous knights in this city. The duke is in danger, he knows this for certain, but you’ll not be made destitute, this I will pledge.’

King Arthur sent out the command to cease the assault, for the city was surrendering. The earl’s eldest son was sent out with the keys, and the city was seized that same night, by unanimous assent of the noblemen inside.

King Arthur, in faith, had never been happier! He stood on a hill, looked at the walls of Metz and said: ‘I see by that banner that the city is now ours!’ Then he entered with his army and gave a stern command, shouting loudly to everyone, on pain of life and limb and the loss of all lands that no loyal liegeman should lie forcefully beside any lady or any maiden, or any burgess’s wife, and no citizens in the city should be harmed.

When the city was wholly subdued and the castle secured, all the warriors of Lorraine, the captains and constables, recognised Arthur as their lord. He apportioned amongst a number of his noblemen responsibility for the upkeep of the duchess’s household and the care of her children, and appointed governors and administrators to take care of the lands that he had won. The duke was taken to Dover with all his dear knights, to live in dismal discomfort for the rest of his days.

And so King Arthur sojourned in Lorraine as its lord and ruler, making laws as he thought fit, and according to his wishes.

At Lammas, the king travelled to Lucerne and stayed there for a while. His galleys were prepared, a great many of them, glistening like glass beneath the green hills, with sheltered cabins fit for a king and cloth-of-gold to shade his knights. Then they stowed aboard all their stuff, stabled their horses and rowed over the water into the deep valleys.

Now Arthur moves his powerful army with a happy heart, over the high mountains with its marvellous passes, by way of Mount Goddard, giving the garrison there some cause to grieve! When the mountains were behind him, he gazed out with his whole army across the Vale of Lombardy and exclaimed: ‘Over all this lovely land, I am lord I believe!’

With kings and noblemen, Arthur approached the well-known city of Como, which he knew was the key to controlling the district. Sir Florent and Sir Floridas went on ahead with some fine knights of France, at least five hundred, and sought a secluded route that would bring them to the city unseen. They set a place of ambush very near to the walls, where they thought it was best.

Early in the morning scouts issued from Como, guiding their horses cleverly and skipping over the hills, looking for hostile scouts or for soldiers skulking so that no harm could come to that city through the use of surprise. Herdsmen and land-workers issued out afterwards, taking pigs to pasture through the fine gates, while servant boys laughed at a pig that was racing off by itself down a grassy slope.

Then our ambush burst out and quickly won the bridge into the city. They poured into Como with banners high, stabbing and wounding all those who stood against them, destroying four streets before they came to a halt.

From out of the gate on the far side of the city poured a stream of folk, fleeing for their lives, for fear of Sir Florent and his fierce knights. They ran out of the city and fled to the forest with food and belongings, precious vessels and things from the churches. The knights of King Arthur erected a banner above the wide city gates.

Now that King Arthur was in Como, he held court within its famous castle, with his noblemen and anointed kings, reassuring the common folk of the district and consoling the care-worn with comforting words. He promoted one of his own knights to govern the city. The district and he were soon fully in accord.



The Duke of Milan heard that Como had been captured and sent to King Arthur certain lords along with sixty horses laden with gold, imploring him as sovereign to look after the people, assuring him of his loyalty and promising that he would be his subject forever and hold his lands from him. He offered Arthur fine cloth and precious stones if he would let him keep control of the cities of Piacenza, Ponte and Pontremole, as well as Pisa and Pavia. He offered fine riding ponies, warhorses, and for Milan, a million ounces of gold every year, and to offer it all on

Saint Martin's Day, and that he and his heirs would acknowledge King Arthur as their overlord, without question, for as long as he lived. King Arthur, having taken advice, accorded a safe conduct to the duke and received him at Como, where the duke knelt in submission.

King Arthur next advanced into Tuscany when the time seemed right, and quickly took its towns with their high towers. He overturned walls, toppled buildings and made widows keen for loved ones and wring their hands until their fingers bled. But they hurried on and spread out, plundering piteously and destroying the vines, bringing destruction to both buildings and possessions, consuming without stint what had been carefully stored, and sped towards Spoleto with weapons enough!

News of King Arthur's rampage spread from Spain to Prussia, and there was a great deal of concern and indignation over it. King Arthur guided his forces towards Viterbo where he paused to replenish his stores and to hearten his knights with some white

wine and baked venison. He decided to linger for a while in the viscount's lands; his knights quickly dismounted and strolled through the vineyards. King Arthur rested in this glorious valley to wait and see if any word might arrive from the Roman senators. In the meantime, they all had some fun, this king and his knights of the Round Table, revelling with the wine, with mirth and melody and all sorts of games. Never had men been merrier!

On a Saturday at noon, a full week later, the canniest cardinal that Rome could claim knelt before King Arthur and pleaded for peace. He implored Arthur to take pity on the Pope; his holiness was placed in a difficult position and sought assurances, for the sake of Our Lord, that a truce might be held for seven nights to give time for a gathering to assemble in Rome. There, they would meet with King Arthur on the Sunday after, receive him as their rightful ruler, crown him kindly, anoint him appropriately, give him his sceptre and sword and acknowledge him as their sovereign and lord.

For Arthur's own assurance they had brought with them hostages, a hundred and forty children, the sons and heirs of kings and senators, splendidly clothed in Chinese silk, which they placed in the keeping of the king and his noble knights.

When the truce was agreed and trumpets had announced it, they all went into a pavilion where tables were waiting. The king sat with his highest lords beneath a canopy of silk, happy and fully at ease. The senators were placed by themselves and served solemnly with delicious foods. The king laughed happily and entertained the Romans with cheerful conversation, brought comfort to the cardinal, who was a noble man himself, and gave honour and respect to all the Romans, as romance tells us. But those who were wise knew when it was time to leave and made their excuses, returning to Rome that very same night, as quickly as they could, leaving the hostages with King Arthur.

'Now we may rest and rejoice, for Rome is ours!' said King Arthur. 'Make our hostages happy, those delightful children, and make sure that you guard all those prisoners that we're holding. We'll soon be rulers of all that exists on this Earth! I'll arrange the coronation for Christmas Day. Then I'll hold my Round Table with all the revenue of Rome at my disposal, and we'll sail over the Mediterranean Sea to the Holy Land with good men of arms, to avenge the Saviour who died for us there on the cross.'

Then this magnificent king, as the chronicles tell us, went cheerfully to bed. He threw off his clothes, removed his belt and sank swiftly into a deep slumber. But at around one o'clock in the morning, his mood changed. He experienced, during the night, a horrible dream, and when it had run its course the king awoke in terror. He quickly sent for philosophers and told them what he had just endured.

'I've never been so frightened in all my life,' he confessed. 'Do your best and tell me what this dream means. I'll relate it to you as accurately as I can.'

'I dreamed that I was in a forest, all alone, and I had no idea which way I should go.'

The place was crawling with wolves and wild boar and other ravenous creatures, lions licked their lips and their long fangs, enjoying the taste of the blood they'd been lapping up. It was the blood of my loyal knights. I fled through this forest and came to where I might hide from the danger, a place where the flowers were high, and the meadow was surrounded by mountains, the most beautiful on Earth that a man might behold! It was wonderfully safe and enclosed, full of clover and green grasses and there were silver vines growing everywhere with grapes of pure gold, the largest grapes I'd ever seen. Surrounding this meadow were all kinds of trees, and all the fruits that flourish on Earth were growing on their boughs. There was no dampness that might harm them and there were animals grazing beneath, shading themselves from the sun, and the flowers were all dry in the heat of the day.

'Then down through the clouds and into the valley descended a lady, she seemed like a duchess, exquisitely dressed in a garment of silk of the most astonishing colours, patterned and edged with otter fur and adorned with embroidery that was trimmed with gold ribbon, broaches and gemstones, front and back. The fashionable drapes from her headdress hung a yard long and she wore a net of gold on her head and a diadem so beautifully coloured that it was unlike anything that I'd ever seen before.

'She whirled a wheel about her with her white hands, very cleverly controlling it with consummate skill. This wheel was of red gold with precious stones, adorned with rubies and other fine gems. The spokes were of silver, a spear length long, and there was a chair at the top encrusted with rubies that sparkled with red against chalk-white silver. And all around the edge there were kings clinging on, and the crowns they were wearing were crumbling to pieces.

'Six of these kings suddenly fell off, one after the other, and each of them cried as he dropped: "A curse that I ever ruled on this wheel! I'd no other thoughts but for hunting and revelry, ransoming people, and therefore I'm damned!"

'The lowest to fall was a little man, his limbs were thin, his hair was grey and hung a yard below his chin, his face was haggard, his body crippled: "I was a lord with extensive lands," he complained, "everybody bowed to me, but now I haven't so much as a rag to dress myself with."

'The second one seemed stronger and more determined, but he cried out: 'I sat on a throne, a sovereign lord, but now my lordships are all gone!'

'The third was stocky and broad at the shoulders, a man whom thirty would think twice about threatening. His crown was encrusted with diamonds but it had slipped badly as he cried out: "I was feared in my days, in many realms, but now I'm destined to be dead, a damnable fate!"

'The fourth was very handsome and well-muscled. "I was famous for defending my faith," he boasted. "While I reigned on Earth I was judged to be the flower of all kings. But now my face is shrivelled and I'm left friendless."

‘The fifth was fairer than all the others, a forthright man and fierce with it: he clung on determinedly for dear life, and yet failed and fell fifty feet. But he sprang up again and cried out to the spokes: “I was unequalled in eminence and governed many kingdoms, but now I am fallen completely away, because of my sins!”

The sixth carried a psalter, beautifully bound with a silken cover that was marvellously stitched. He carried a harp and a sling, with some hard stones, but cried out all the harms that he’d suffered: “I was judged in my day, of deeds of arms one of the doughtiest that dwelled on this Earth. But I was brought down in my prime by this maiden so mild that moves us all!”

Two kings were clambering up and trying to climb to the very top of the wheel. “This throne of ruby,” they said, “we claim as our own!” The young men had gone white with exertion and their cheeks were straining with the effort, but they never achieved the top chair. The nearest was very noble-looking with a high forehead and with the most handsome features. He was dressed in royal blue with fleur-de-lis of gold emblazoned all over. The other was clad in a coat of silver with a beautiful cross of gold on it. Four little crosses were placed beside the large one, therefore I recognised that the king was probably a Christian.

‘As they were scrambling upwards, I approached that dazzling lady and greeted her graciously.

“Welcome,” she replied. “It is good that you have come. You ought to honour me, if you know how, because, of all the valiant men who have ever been born in this world, all your victories in war have been orchestrated by me. I have been friendly to you, fighting man, and hostile to others. You have discovered this, in faith, and so have many of your knights. I brought down Sir Frollo for you, and put all the wealth of France into your hands, to wield as your own. You shall achieve this chair because it’s you whom I have chosen, before all of the chieftains who’ve been cherished on Earth.”

She lifted me up softly with her graceful hands and set me gently into the chair at the top. I reached for the sceptre. She carefully combed my hair, then placed a light but magnificently jewelled crown upon my head, and offered me an orb set with precious stones, enamelled with azure, with the Earth depicted upon it, surrounded by the salt sea on all sides, as a sign that I was truly the sovereign of Earth. Then she brought me a sword with a marvellous hilt and urged me to brandish this blade as I wished.

“The sword is my own,” she said. “Many men have lost their lives through a single swing of it and while you wield it in anger it will never fail you.”

‘Then she peacefully departed and went to rest near the edge of the wood, and commanded the boughs to bend down and bring into my hands the best fruit that they possessed. The highest branches in every group obeyed her at once. She urged me not to hold back but to try every fruit, and I guessed that there were no orchards so full of fruit anywhere on Earth, except for in Paradise itself.

“Eat of the finest,” she told me. “Reach for the ripest, indulge yourself. Take your ease, you fabulous warrior, for Rome is yours. I will whirl the wheel at just the right moment and serve you wine in the most spotless of goblets.”

‘Then she went to a spring at the edge of the wood; it flowed with wine and she caught up a cupful and gave it to me, and told me to drink her a toast. Then she led me about this way and that for a whole hour, with all the love and friendship that any man might cherish.

‘But when noon arrived her mood changed, her words became menacing and when I asked her to tell me what was the matter, she frowned and said to me: “King, you waste your breath. By Christ who made me, you will lose all this favour and afterwards your life. You have lived in delight and in lordships enough.”

‘Then she whirled her wheel and cast me down, so violently that I was crushed and flattened, every bone in my body was broken, the edge of the chair caught me in the throat and I felt that it took my head clean off at the neck! And I awoke.

‘I awoke exhausted. Now you know how it ended, so say what you like. I have shivered in cold fear ever since I woke up.’

‘Sir,’ said the philosopher, ‘your good luck has run out. Fortune is now your foe. You have reached your zenith. Whatever you do now, your advancement will stall. You have been given a warning, sir king, so take heed. A fatal setback is in store for you. I advise you to found abbeys – the benefit will be yours – for Frollo and Feraunt and for all the fierce knights whose corpses you left lying in the fields of France. You have shed much blood and destroyed a great many men in numerous kingdoms, through your pride. Admit to this shame, make confession and prepare for your end. For your dream reminds you of other kings who were famous in their day as conquerors. The most ancient is Alexander, whom all the world bowed to. Another is Hector of Troy, that chivalrous knight, and Julius Caesar, who was a giant among men and conducted himself nobly in all his campaigns. The fourth was Sir Judas, a noble knight, the masterful Judas Maccabeus, and the fifth was Joshua, that fine warrior who achieved so much joy for the men of Jerusalem! The sixth was dear David, esteemed amongst kings; he was one of the most valiant men ever to be knighted, for he slew the giant Goliath with a single sling shot, by the skill of his aim, and then he wrote all those lovely psalms that are found in the Psalter.

‘One of the climbing kings is ambitious and cruel and will be counted as a conqueror in many fair countries; he’ll capture the spear that pierced Christ to the heart when he hung on the cross. He’ll seize all those cruel nails for Christian’s to keep. The other is Godfrey, who will avenge God on Good Friday with his valiant knights; he’ll be duke of Lorraine as the heir of his father, and King of Jerusalem too, for he will recover the cross by force of arms and be crowned and anointed as king in that land. No duke in his day will achieve more, nor suffer as much, if the truth be told.

‘And Fortune has summoned you to be the ninth: ninth of the nine worthiest and noblest on Earth. It will be judged on Doomsday that these were the nine whose deeds of arms were the finest ever witnessed. This will be read in romance by excellent knights and acknowledged and accepted by conquering kings. Noblemen and men of letters will celebrate your achievements and record your conquests in chronicles that will last for all time.

‘But the wolves in the wood, and the wild beasts where your dream began, are those wicked men who threaten your realm. They’ve encroached in your absence and harm all your people, with aliens and armies from overseas lands. You’ll get word within ten days, I believe, that some trouble has erupted since you left the shores of Britain. I advise you to seek your confessor, unburden your heart, or your pitiless actions will come home to haunt you. Man, take better counsel before the worst happens, and ask mercy, for the good of your soul!’

The king arose and put on his clothes, a quilted jacked with embroidered roses – the finest of flowers – then an armoured neckpiece, a stomach guard and a magnificent belt. He put on a scarlet hood, placed a fine hat upon his head, encrusted with pearls from the Orient and precious stones, slipped on some gorgeous gloves decorated with gems, asked for his greyhound and his sword, and that was all, and then went out alone to ride over the wide grassland, with a troubled heart.

He followed a trail by the edge of the forest and paused at a wide pathway and stared into space. And as the sun rose he saw hurrying along that road – which led the shortest way to Rome – a man wearing a large cloak and baggy clothes, a hat and sturdy boots cut for comfort. Fastened all over his body were flat, round coins, and many bits of cloth dangled alongside scallop shells as he carried a satchel and a staff, as any good pilgrim should.

The man greeted King Arthur and bade him good morning. The king replied courteously in the language of Rome, somewhat garbled but generously meant: ‘Where are you going to, all on your own? There is war in this land and it isn’t safe to travel alone. There’s an army encamped over there, beyond those vineyards, and if they see you here you can expect to suffer, unless you have a safe-conduct from the king himself. Or ruffians may rob you and leave you for dead. If you take the high way you’ll fare no better either, unless you can summon the help of the king’s knights.’

Sir Craddock replied to the king: ‘I’ll forgive any man who can manage to kill me in fair fight, may God help me! Let the keenest warrior come and I’ll face him as a knight. No war will stop me from going where I want to, nor any mortal man, for I intend to go along this road in pilgrimage to Rome to purchase a pardon from the Pope himself, to be spared the severest of punishments in purgatory, then I’ll seek out my sovereign lord, King Arthur of England, for he is in this empire, fighting in these eastern lands with valiant knights.’

‘Then you have proceeded wisely and searched well, brave fellow,’ said the king. ‘But

where do you come from? You know of King Arthur and his knights? Were you ever at his court? I can tell that you are a British knight by your accent. Your speech is so familiar that it warms my heart.'

'I ought to know my king, he is my noble lord and I was a knight of his chamber. My name is Sir Craddock, I was the constable of Caerleon and accountable only to the king himself. But I've been chased away, for that stronghold is occupied by foreigners now.'

Then the king took off his helmet, held him in his arms and kissed him. 'May Christ help me, but welcome Sir Craddock!' he exclaimed. 'But dear cousin, your appearance brings me anguish. How are things in Britain? How are all my knights? Are they in trouble? Tell me the truth, as I know that you will.'

'Sir, your warden is wicked and does what he likes. Since you left Britain's shores we've seen nothing but sorrow, he's captured your castles and crowned himself king! Sir Mordred is malign, so completely out of control that he's seized all the revenue of the Round Table, assumed complete control for himself and appointed Danes as dukes and earls by getting rid of the old ones in any way that he can. He has destroyed cities and gathered an army of Saxons and Saracens, mercenaries from South Wales, Picts and pagans, knights from Ireland and Argyle, outlaws from the mountains; he's made them all knights and now they think they're in charge! Sir Childrik is leading them and causing great hardship, stealing from abbeys and monasteries, raping your nuns, robbing the poor and riding roughshod over all the regions from the Humber to the Tweed. He has also seized control of Kent, all its castles that are rightfully yours, its forests and ancient woodlands and its white cliffs, everything that Horsa and Hengist once held. There are a hundred and forty ships lying at Southampton, full of foreigners, fighting men, waiting to engage you in battle as soon as you return to Britain's shores.

'And you haven't heard the worst of it yet. He has married Guinevere! He's taken her into the safety of the west Marches and she's carrying his child, so people say. But he has failed miserably in his duty to protect women. Of all the people on Earth, may he receive the greatest sorrow!

'Sir, I've crossed over the mountains in order to make you aware of everything that is happening.'

The king became deadly pale. 'By the Holy Cross!' he exclaimed. 'I shall avenge all this harm that Mordred is doing. He will come to dearly regret it!'

Weeping in distress the king returned to his pavilions and woke all his warriors, ordered trumpets to sound to convene an assembly, to summon kings and noblemen so that he could tell them the grave news.

'I am the victim of betrayal,' he announced when they were gathered. 'Our work is lost, it has all been for nothing. But the perpetrator of this treason will pay for his crimes once I get my hands on him, I swear this to you now! It is Mordred! The man whom I most trusted! He has captured my castles and crowned himself king. He has seized all

the riches, the revenues of the Round Table, conferred knighthoods upon knaves and renegades of his own, given my lands to mercenaries, heathen foreigners, and even had the gall to marry my wife Guinevere. She is carrying his child, for God's sake!

'They have assembled a fleet of a hundred and forty ships, full of foreign fighters to do battle with us as soon as we get back. So we must return to the Isles of Britain as soon as we can and destroy this bastard who has blasted all our hopes!

'No warrior shall come with me without being given fresh horses to ride and the finest of provisions. I shall take the flower of all my knights. Sir Howell and Sir Hardolf, you shall remain here to govern these lands that I have won. Keep your eye on Lombardy and see that no rebellion breaks out, pay attention to Tuscany and receive the revenues from Rome when they are ready to be seized. Take possession of it all on the day when it is due, and if it fails to materialise then hang all the hostages, every single one of them.'

Now the valiant King Arthur rides away with his best knights, organises his provisions and gallops off, making haste through Tuscany, resting but little, taking no pause in Lombardy but hurrying northwards. He rides over the mountains by astonishing paths, speeds swiftly through Germany and arrives in Flanders with his fearsome knights.

Within fifteen days his fleet was assembled, then he took ship and sailed with a perfect wind through translucent waters and at last rode at anchor beside cliffs where the traitors' ships floated at the full of the tide. Their vessels were chained together but stuffed full of warriors, the stern castles crammed with crested helmets and with hundreds more heathens hidden below hatches. The Danes had protected their ships with painted cloths, proudly portrayed and skilfully sewn together, doubled in thickness with a heavy backing so that no arrow or crossbow bolt could find its way through.

King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table arrayed their ships in red. The king conferred knighthoods that day, awarded dukedoms and had galleys and barges loaded with stones, stuffed the top castles with slings, had crossbows cranked and armaments prepared, tackle tightened and made ready to fling brass casings loaded with stones and shot. Grappling irons were prepared, weapons distributed, steel spikes and magnificent lances raised at the ready. Helmeted warriors in stern castles were given their weapons and fighting men on the lee side, lords and others, placed painted shields as protection as ships prepared to manoeuvre to gain maximum advantage. Men-at-arms looked magnificent in their menacing garb.

King Arthur in a barge rows from vessel to vessel, bare-headed with his hair blowing in the wind. A warrior standing beside him carries his sword, a fine helmet with silver chainmail and a coronet encircling it, as the king directs his barge to every vessel, crying loudly to Sir Cleges and then to Sir Clermond. Then: 'Oh Gawain, Oh Sir Galyran! Fine men that you are!'

He shouted to King Lot and to Sir Lionel, and then spoke some noble words to Sir Lancelot du Lake. 'Let us reclaim this land, it is ours to recover! Let us drain them of blood, all those dogs over there! Cut them down on their decks and then burn them to ashes! They're the sons of whores, you have my word on it, so hack them down heartily, those heathen hounds!'

Then King Arthur returned to his vessel and weighed anchor, put on his fine helmet and raised his flags and banners of scarlet and gold. But his principal emblem was a chalk-white maiden with a child in her arms; she who is the ruler of heaven – these were King Arthur's principal arms throughout his entire life.

Mariners got to work, ship's masters cried out orders, crewmembers happily shouted to one another and the air teemed with technical terms as sails were unfurled, hatches secured, swords drawn and trumpets blown. Men stood ready at the bows while those at the stern steered the ships through the waves towards the enemy fleet. A fierce wind arose from out of the west, filled the warriors' sails and drove the fleet forcefully towards the enemy until contact was made. Timbers cracked, keels groaned, bows crashed into sterns so severely that steering gear was ripped away, then ship-to-ship combat began, grappling irons were thrown, ropes cut so that masts might collapse. There was keen contact, the splintering of ships! Vessels broke apart, cabins were shattered and cables torn away. Knights and marines lunged at the enemy! Stern castles were shattered for all their fierce weaponry, and for all their beautiful decoration. Mainstays were severed, a swing of a sword sent a mast crashing down, crushing fighters on the foredeck and leaving many dead.



Then armoured knights boarded the ships behind a cascade of stones that beat down defenders and broke open hatches. Knights used spikes of iron to stab below decks – for all their fine clothing the men there quickly covered steel in gore! – while English archers cheerfully shot arrows, hammering home some hearty blows through hard steel! Soon the heathen knights were so injured by iron that they were completely overwhelmed and could see no way out.

Pitched battle commenced, lunges with spears, the bravest and the finest fighting at the front, each man testing his strength, eager to engage with his feisty weapons. In this way they battled, these noble knights, until the Danes were all dead and thrown into the water. The British warriors fought fiercely with their swords and climbed the rigging up to the top castles. When the foreigners jumped into the sea, laughter rang loudly from British lungs.

The damage by now was immense. Spaniards jumped overboard, others were killed stone dead and flung into the sea, men of courage, knights and others, the sweat quickly washed from their cold necks. Heathens heaved against closed hatches but nevertheless

they all drowned in their sinking ship, seven hundred and more.

Sir Gawain distributed the spoils of war, the huge vessels of the enemy, to his knights, Sir Garin, Sir Griswold and other great lords. Then he instructed Sir Galuth to cut off the heads of any fighting men who remained. No mercy was shown. The foreign folk were all sent to the depths.

And yet, the traitor Mordred remains on land with his knights, they are all trotting about on magnificent horses with trumpets blaring, their shields on display, making no attempt to conceal themselves. The attentions of King Arthur and Sir Gawain are directed towards sixty thousand who have emerged into view.

Now the battle was over, the tide had fallen and the beach was a spread of rock-pools and shallow stretches of water ranging widely across the shore. This prevented the king from landing so he remained at sea, for fear of losing horses and to gather together those warriors and knights of his who were injured but whose lives might be saved.

Sir Gawain boarded a galley, rowed into a creek with some good men-at-arms and when the vessel grounded, he leapt into the sea and began to wade ashore in all his fine clothes, the water up to his waist. He hurried up onto the sand in sight of all of Mordred's knights with only a small number of companions, much to my sorrow. With his banners flying, he stood on the bank, in his bright clothes, and told his standard-bearer: 'Go quickly forwards, towards that battalion over there, the one that's poised on that sand dune. I'll be right beside you, so have courage. See that you fear no sword, no bright weapon, but attack the ablest and cut them to pieces. Don't be in awe of them but stand your ground. You've carried my banner in many a fierce battle, and we'll overcome these heathens today, may the devil have their souls! Fight well, and the field shall be ours!'

'And if I can catch up with that traitor who has brought such destruction down on my dear lord,' thought Gawain, 'then woe betide him! From such an incestuous conception comes little joy, as I shall confirm very shortly.'

Sir Gawain and his small company made their way across the sand and attacked the nearest, delivering blows and piercing shields with lances that were foreshortened for hand-to-hand combat. Dreadful blows were dealt with these dangerous weapons and soon many lay dead upon the dunes, knights and dukes and other high noblemen; the most valiant from Denmark were utterly destroyed, their coats of chainmail ripped apart by countless blows and the thrusts of spears. Our knights fought through the thick of them and cut them to the ground, three hundred of the best in the enemy ranks. But unfortunately Sir Gawain gripped a spear – he couldn't stop himself – and ran at a man who bore arms of red with silver embellishments, stabbed him in the throat with his grim lance; the sharpened point did its work and the man, who was a formidable warrior and the king of Gotland, began to breath his last. The foremost warriors all fell back then, vanquished entirely by our brave fighting men, and suddenly exposed lay the middle guard, led by Mordred himself. Our men rushed forwards, overcome with ambition, much to their misfortune! If Sir Gawain had had the grace to hold this green

hill, he would have won high honour indeed.

But Sir Gawain saw an opportunity to take revenge upon the criminal who had caused all this carnage. He moved towards Sir Mordred who was standing with all his great warriors, the Montagues and other great lords, and in an almost blind rage he raised his spear and cried: 'You illegitimate blaggard! The devil take your bones! Fy on you, felon, for these infamous deeds! You shall be dead and undone for this dreadful deceit, or I shall die myself this day!'

Then his enemy, with his host of outlaws and renegades, surrounded our small force of excellent knights, for this was Mordred's tactic. He ordered Danish dukes into position, leaders of Lithuania with lances enough. They surrounded our men with keen spears, heathens and mercenaries from many lands, sixty thousand well-armed men assembled for ambush, now able to entrap our seven score knights beside the salt sea. Sir Gawain's grey eyes wept when he realised what he'd allowed to happen, to men he should have guided better. He knew that they were wounded and exhausted from fighting, and at the enormity of it, suddenly, his wits deserted him. With tears streaming down his face, he cried:

'We are surrounded by Saracens on all sides! I grieve not for myself, so help me lord, but to see you all in danger cuts me to the quick. For the sake of dear Drighton today, fear no weapon! We shall end this day as excellent knights, with eternal joy to look forward to, in the company of spotless angels. Although we have unwittingly sacrificed ourselves, we shall work our utmost to the worship of Christ! Because of these Saracens, I give you my pledge that we will dine with Our Saviour in heaven tonight, in the sight of He who made us all! So let us advance on these criminals, and if anyone yields or surrenders while he is still capable of fighting, let him never be saved, nor receive Christ's blessing, but let his soul sink with Satan into the fires of hell!'

Then grimly Sir Gawain gripped his weapon and prepared to fight against that great encircling force. He adjusted the chains on his fine sword, thrust out his shield and forced his way forwards, holding back no longer but fighting madly, recklessly, lunging at the foremost, delivering grisly wounds to his wretched enemies, each one gushing with blood as he turned to another. And although he was desperately grieved, he didn't hesitate for a moment, so intent was he upon avenging his lord to the exclusion of all else. He stabbed horses and knights so savagely that many lay stone dead with their feet still in the stirrups. He cut through steel, shattered links of chainmail and no man could stop him. His wits had all gone.

Like a berserker he fights in a frenzy of fierceness, fights and cuts down all who stand there before him and never did fortune so favour the brave. He ran headlong into the whole battalion and injured the most indomitable fighters on Earth, he launched himself like a lion through lords and leaders of men, not hesitating in the slightest but wounding his enemies with some terrible blows, like a man who cares nothing for his own safety and whose reason has failed him, only savagery is left. He struck like a wild beast at all he

could reach, and waded through their blood as he fought his way forwards. He moved towards Sir Mordred, who was amongst all his knights, struck him in the middle of the shield and hammered his spear into Mordred's body. Mordred sank back from the blow and aimed one of his own at Sir Gawain, wounding him in the ribs; the shaft shuddered and blood began to pour down Gawain's leg, besmirching his shining shin-guard from a wound that was six inches wide. They pushed and shoved at one another and Mordred fell backwards from the force of Gawain's spear and landed on his shoulder, badly wounded. Sir Gawain leapt onto the man and seized him by the head. His grief was ready for this moment but so, unfortunately, was destiny. He pulled out a short knife from a silver sheath intending to stab Mordred in the throat with it; but the cut never occurred. His hand slipped and slid on shiny chainmail as Mordred slyly shot a hand under the man on top and heaved him off, then drew a knife of his own and stabbed Sir Gawain through a gap in his helmet, through his head and into his brain.

Sir Gawain was gone, that good man of arms.

Sir Gawain is gone. Sir Gawain, that great encourager and guide to others. From Gower to Guernsey, all the great lords of Glamorgan, the whole of Wales, those valiant knights, at the thought of this horror they'll never laugh again.

King Frederick of Friesland enquired of Sir Mordred who this fierce knight had been. 'Have you ever seen him in your lands before?' he asked. 'Which family does he come from, tell me the truth? Who was he, in these colourful arms, this griffin of gold that's now covering his face? He has grieved us sorely, so help me God, he's cut down our good men and brought us much sorrow, but he must have been the most valiant warrior ever to wear armour in battle. He's destroyed an entire battalion all by himself!'

'He was a giant amongst men, that's for sure,' Sir Mordred agreed. 'This was the good Sir Gawain, the most considerate, the most gracious man ever to live under God's Earth, the strongest with weapons, the happiest in battle and the noblest and most courteous in the king's hall. He was openly praised as having the bravery of a lion and if you had known him, sir king, in the land where he lived, his wisdom, his knighthood, his accomplishments, his leadership, his courtesy, his courage, his fighting skills, then you would lament his death for the rest of your life.'

This traitor allowed a tear to trickle down his cheeks. Then he turned around and said no more but went away weeping, cursing the day that destiny had dealt him such a blow. The thought of what had just happened pierced him to the heart. He had killed his own cousin. He rode away sighing, remembering the laughter and the camaraderie of the Round Table, and regretting, now, everything that had taken place and all that he had done. But he rode away with his warriors, reluctant to remain where he was under the threat of King Arthur's imminent arrival.

So he rode towards Cornwall with great apprehension, still grief-stricken for Gawain whom he had left lying by the sea. He paused often, with great anxiety, seeking for news, but then erected his pavilions beside the River Tamar, with treason in his heart, for he

sent a messenger to Guinevere to tell her how things were swiftly developing and how King Arthur had arrived with a fleet, gained a decisive victory at sea and how she should flee as far as she could with her children and wait for him there. He would take the first opportunity to come and see her, but she should go into Ireland, to those far mountains, and live in the wilderness in those deserted lands.

Guinevere, on hearing this, lay sobbing in her chamber in York, groaning and signing and shedding tears. Then she left the palace with all her favourite maidens and was guided in a carriage to Chester. She was so upset she wanted almost to die. So she went instead to Caerleon and took up the veil; she put on a nun's habit in honour of Christ, and all because of her falsehood and fraud, and for fear of her husband.

When our wise king saw that Sir Gawain was landing he wrung his hands, cried out in anguish and immediately ordered his boats to be launched into the low water. He landed like a lion with his valiant knights, slipped in the pools and splashed ashore with his sword drawn, organised his battalions, raised his banners and raced over the broad sand with anger in his heart. He advanced onto the field of battle where the dead were strewn and, of the treacherous men on their well turned-out steeds, ten thousand were killed if the truth be known, and on our side, seven score knights were lost, along with Sir Gawain.

The king rolled over every dead knight that was lying on the ground, earls of Africa, Austrian warriors, knights of Argyle and Orkney, Irish kings, the noblest of Norway in large numbers, Danish dukes and noblemen and the king of Gotland himself, in his red and silver arms; he lay groaning on the ground with a grisly wound to his throat. King Arthur searched with pity in his heart as he turned over all the slain knights of the Round Table who were lying together in a small area, encircled by all the Saracen dead. And there was the good Sir Gawain! In his magnificent arms, lying face down on the grass, his red banners cast down, his sword and his broad shield running with blood.

The king stared with sorrow in his heart. Never had anything ever saddened him so much as the sight that he was looking at now. He groaned and wept, knelt down beside the body and took it up in his arms. Removing the visor, he kissed Sir Gawain, saw that his eyelids were as still as a stone, his lips the colour of lead, his face ashen. The king cried out: 'My dear nephew, my time has passed, my wars are over! Upon you rested all my hope, all my ambition, my stamina and my strength; you were my counsellor, my comfort and my heart was yours. Of all my knights, you were the king, by Christ! You were worthy to be a king, although it is I who wore the crown. My honour and renown throughout all the world was won through you alone, and through your strength and your wit.

'Alas!' the king cried. 'Now my sorrows are increased! I am utterly undone in my own lands! Oh fearful, cruel death, you delay too long! Why do you linger and hesitate for me? You drown my heart!'

King Arthur fell in a faint, then staggered onto his feet and kissed Sir Gawain until his beard was soaked in his nephew's blood. Had not Sir Yvain and other great lords quickly approached him, his heart may have broken right there and then; he might have succumbed entirely to his grief.

'Stop!' exclaimed these bold men. 'You harm yourself! This is pointless distress and it will do you no good. There is no honour,' they said, 'in wringing your hands and weeping like a woman. It just makes you look foolish. Carry your grief with a knightly countenance, as a king should, and stop all this silliness for the love of God!'

'I will never stop for one who was so close to me, not until my head bursts, or my heart does,' replied King Arthur. 'Never has grief sunk so deeply into my soul. It is Gawain! It is my fault that he lies here, now, like this.'

The king knelt again: 'Oh righteous God,' he cried, 'behold my sadness and my pity. Look at this royal red blood that stains the ground! It is worthy to be mopped up and placed in a shrine, for it is spotless of all sin, so help me God!' and kneeling with sorrow in his heart, King Arthur tried to scrape the blood into a helmet, achieved little and covered it with a cloth. Then he lifted the body from the place where it had fallen and cried:

'Here I pledge my promise to Christ and to Mary, the mild Queen of Heaven, that I will never unleash a hound again, against any roe deer or reindeer that runs upon Earth, I'll never let a greyhound run free or a goshawk fly, never see a bird caught again that flies with wings, I'll let no falcon alight upon my fist nor will I sit in royal splendour nor preside over the Round Table until your death, my darling Gawain, has been avenged.'

Then Sir Gawain's body was taken up with great sorrow and carried on a warhorse, with the king constantly in attendance. They took the shortest way to Winchester, weary and faltering with many wounded knights. The prior of the place came out to greet them with his monks, all in procession, and King Arthur gave into his care the corpse of his noble nephew.

'See that this body is properly prepared,' said the king, 'and look after it in your church. Sing all the services that pertain to the dead. Make sure that he is honoured with Masses to the benefit of his soul. See that no candles are lacking, and nothing else either, and that the body is properly embalmed and committed to the earth at the proper time. If you will do this for me, then ask for your reward when I come again, if Christ allows it, but please delay the burial until those who brought about this war have been justly dealt with.'

Then the wise Sir Wychere spoke: 'I advise you, sir, to go carefully and to plan well. Stay in Winchester, this wealthy city, and assemble your army. Send word to all those knights who owe allegiance to you in distant countries and pick from garrisons the finest fighters to be had, for there are too few of us here to fight with all those we saw assembling on the coast.'

'I advise you to have no fear,' replied King Arthur, fiercely. 'Were I by myself and com-

pletely alone, if I saw him and could lay my hands on him I would hammer him into the ground, however many men he had around him! I shall strike him in his fury and destroy him forever, I swear this to Christ and to his mother Mary. I will never rest comfortably nor be content anywhere on Earth, nor will I sleep, however tired I may be, until this criminal who killed Sir Gawain lies dead at my feet and the pagans have been punished for harming my people.’

The king seemed so stern at the losses he had suffered that none of the Round Table dared to argue against him or make any sort of petition, or look him in the eyes even. He acted swiftly and rode into Dorset, sorrowful and weeping often, then rode on towards Cornwall with care in his heart, following the trail of the murderous Mordred. He turned south along the Tamar, seeking that scoundrel, and found him in a forest on the following Friday. The king dismounted and gave out a cry, and in the presence of his esteemed entourage he chose the field of battle.

The enemy broke cover at the edge of the forest and Sir Mordred emerged with his alien army on many sides, in seven great battalions, sixty thousand men in all. The force was substantial, all fighting men from faraway lands, well-equipped and riding in orderly array by those clear inlets. The sum total of King Arthur’s knights was less than two thousand; it was going to be an uneven match, by Christ!

King Arthur, riding a fine warhorse, deployed his forces to fight at the edge of the forest and organised his knights as he thought fit – at the very forward positions Sir Yvain and Sir Eric and other great lords, in the centre: Sir Merrack and Sir Meneduke, mighty warriors, with their charming children Sir Idrous and Sir Alymer and seven score knights: in the rear guard, some rancorous men of the Round Table. He arranged his battle formations, then cried words of comfort and encouragement to his knights:

‘I urge you, sirs, for the sake of Christ, to do well this day and to fear no weapon. Fight fiercely, defend yourselves furiously, cut down these condemned folk and make the field ours! They are Saracens, they’re rabble, they’ll not last the distance, so set upon them savagely for the sake of Our Lord!

‘If we are destined to die today, we’ll be lifted into heaven while our bodies are still warm, so be sure that you stop for no man before this game is at an end. Give these men grief, and pay no attention to me or what I am doing, just be busy around my banners with your bright weapons so that my standards are well protected by valiant knights and always flying aloft for everyone to see. If anybody seizes them, rescue them quickly.

‘Uphold my reputation. This is my last battle. You know my pride and you know my sorrows, now go and do your best. May Christ comfort you all. You are the finest knights that a king ever led and it is with the greatest pride and joy that I give you all my blessing, you and all Britons. Now go forward with energy and enterprise, and give it your all!’

The pipes began to play and they started to move forwards towards the enemy. It was

the middle of the morning, trumpets and cornets sounded out and men stretched their muscles as the charge began in earnest. With the enemy in sight they spurred into a gallop, and a more gladsome gallop had never been enjoyed! These Christians set their shields, crossed themselves and placed their lances into position in readiness for the fight. They thrust their shields forwards, yelled at the tops of their voices and blasted into the battalion that was barring their way, struck through shields, ripped chainmail apart with razor sharp steel, crushed helmets, hewed heathen men down and hacked off heads. The foremost defenders were very soon defeated.

But then heathens of Argyle and Irish kings came forward to engage our knights, trying to encircle our most esteemed warriors like venomous vermin, Picts and pagans with perilous weapons, spears that did a great deal of damage, hewing down the honourable with nasty hits. Through the whole battle these pagans stood firm and fought fiercely on all fronts, spilling much blood. King Arthur was so involved in his own fighting that he did not stir a step, but fought for himself, until three companies had been destroyed by his sword alone.

But then King Arthur noticed what was happening.

‘Sir Idrous,’ he cried, ‘I can see Sir Yvain being overwhelmed by the enemy. You must go there immediately. Get ready to rescue your father. Take some knights with you and punch a way through that encirclement of Saracens.’

‘He is my father, it is true, I will never forsake him,’ replied Sir Idrous. ‘He raised me and fed me, and all my dear brothers, but I refuse to do this, so God help me! Of all my relatives I will help only you. I have never refused my father’s commands, not for anyone, but have always been as obedient as an ox to his wishes and he charged me very clearly that I was to stay with you and not to leave your side for anything. I will keep his command, may Christ give me the strength to! He is older than I, and we will both meet our end. He will go first and I will go later. If he is destined to die today on this Earth, then may Christ with his lovely crown look after his soul!’

Hearing this, the king cried out for pity, raised his hands to the heavens and cried: ‘Why, then, did Drihton not choose as my destiny me as the one who should die here today! I would rather it was I than rule over all the lands that Alexander conquered!’

Sir Yvain and Sir Eric, those excellent warriors, had made inroads into the enemy and struck out eagerly, they hacked at the greatest with sharpened swords, hewed at hauberks with their hard weapons and cut down those criminals, those heathens of Orkney and Irish kings, with some loathly strokes. Shoulders and shields they sliced to the midriff, middles through chainmail they cut to the bone! But they had drunk nothing all day and at last their hearts were dried out; they died drained and parched, the more’s the pity.

Never did earthly kings earn such posthumous honour for themselves in battle as these two – with the exception of King Arthur himself.

Now our middle battalion engaged with the enemy. Sir Mordred with his host of people had remained hidden until now at the edge of the forest and had watched the battle unfold, seen how our chivalry had fared and knew, now, that we were starting to tire and were likely to fade. So he turned his thoughts suddenly towards attacking King Arthur. But this despicable coward had changed his arms; he had removed his scalloped saltire and taken up three lions of white silver standing on their feet against a purple background, expecting that the king would not know it was him. His cowardice made him cast off his insignia, but it didn't deceive King Arthur for more than a moment.

'I can see the traitor coming towards us,' he said to Sir Cador. 'That lad with the three lions, that will be him. He'll regret the day he was born if I can get hold of him, for all his scheming and cunning, I swear by my crown! Today Clarent and Excalibur shall meet together and we'll find out which of them is the sturdier and sharper of edge! For that sword that he's holding is marvellously fashioned, beautifully balanced and has never been damaged in battle 'til now. Clarent is very dear to me, it was my cherished weapon, I kept it for coronations, for the crowning of kings and for conferring dukedoms and earldoms. I kept it clean and locked away, and seeing it now, this crown of swords, I can only imagine that my wardrobe at Wallingford has been ransacked and rifled, and Guinevere is the only one who knew where it was. The keeping of this famous weapon was in her hands alone, and all the accompanying chests that belong to the crown, rings and relics and all of the French regalia that was found on Sir Frollo when he was killed in France.

Sir Merrak rode out with grim resolve to confront Sir Mordred and smashed him over the head with a heavy mace, breaking the edge of Mordred's helmet and causing blood to run over his shiny chainmail. Sir Mordred was stunned by this blow but, flushed with anger, stood his ground like a wild boar and prepared to counterattack. Drawing the sword Clarent that shone like silver – for it had belonged to Arthur's father, King Uther Pendragon, and was rightfully King Arthur's – like a crazed dog he struck with it so savagely that Sir Merrak grew tired very quickly and had to fall back, for he was handicapped by his age and Sir Mordred was in the prime of his youth. Soon, no knight could get within a sword's length of Mordred without staining the ground with his own blood.

King Arthur saw what was happening and galloped in too quickly, he joined in the battle and gave it his all, came close to Sir Mordred crying: 'Face me, you foul felon! By great God, you will fall today by the strength of my fist! No knight will rescue you and no ransom will release you, not for all the wealth that resides on this Earth!'

King Arthur struck Sir Mordred with the sword Excalibur; the blade sliced away part of his shield and carved into Mordred's shoulder, quickly staining his chainmail with blood. Mordred shuddered and shrank back, but then shot forwards again; a felon with a fine sword, he struck the king savagely and cut away the rib plates on the king's right side, through chainmail and tunic and Arthur found himself suddenly with a wound that was a hand's breadth deep. This sharp wound will be his death. Yet with his sword

Excalibur he returned an excellent blow, thrust forward his fine shield, defended himself and struck off the sword hand as Mordred passed, severing it completely an inch from the elbow. Mordred fell to the ground and lay sprawling near to an armguard, chainmail and a hand clutching a sword, lying on the heath.

Quickly the king raised up the visor and thrust his sword in, up to the hilt. Mordred squirmed on the blade and quickly gave up the ghost.

‘In faith,’ said King Arthur, ‘I sorely repent that so treacherous a bastard as you should die honourably in this way, like a knight.’

When King Arthur and Mordred had finished this fight, the battle was already won. The ground was strewn with enemy dead. The survivors from Mordred’s army fled back into the forest and hid amongst the trees, followed by our fierce fighting folk who hunted them down like dogs. Marauders on the moors, they hewed at them without mercy and not one of them managed to escape alive, they were chopped down in the chase, and nobody gave a damn!

King Arthur found the bodies of Sir Yvain, and Sir Eric, and other great lords. He lifted Sir Cador up into his arms, then Sir Cleges, Sir Cleremond, Sir Lot and Sir Lionel, Sir Lancelot, Sir Lowes, Sir Marrak and Sir Meneduke. He took up these mighty warriors and laid them all together, looked at the heap of corpses and cried out with a loud voice like a man who has lost his will to live. He staggered as though all his strength had failed, he looked up to the heavens, his countenance changed and he collapsed to the ground, then he scrambled to his knees and cried:

‘Once a high king, now I am left in great care! All my noblemen are laid low, those who once showered me with gifts, who maintained my rule through their valour and their courage, made me worthy to rule and a sovereign on Earth, by the grace of God Almighty. What dreadful destiny has caused this carnage? That a traitor should destroy all my faithful lords! Here lies the peerless blood of the Round Table, destroyed by a devil!

‘I shall wander the heathlands of Cornwall, helpless and alone, like a woeful widow grieving for her husband. I may well weep and wring my hands, for my wisdom and honour have vanished forever. From my lords now I take my leave and go to my own death.’

The knights of the Round Table rallied and all of those who were remaining rode up to the king, seven score in all. They assembled in sight of their sovereign, who was obviously injured and in great pain and distress. The king knelt again and cried: ‘I thank you, God, for giving us the grace and the wit to vanquish this army and to gain victory over the foreign lords. You have never sent me shame or disgrace, but have always given me the upper hand over kings and emperors. I have no leisure now to seek other perpetrators of this carnage, for that treacherous tyke has wounded me sorely.’

Then turning to his knights: 'Let us go to Glastonbury, it will be for the best. There we can rest and recover and have our wounds treated. May Drihten be praised for this costly day's work and, for those whose days have ended, the comfort of dying in their own land.'

The knights of the Round Table immediately made preparations and took the quickest route to Glastonbury. They rowed to the Isle of Avalon, where Arthur alighted and went to a manor there, for he could travel no further.

A surgeon of Salerno searches his wounds and the king can see quite clearly that the prognosis is bad. He calls his most senior knights to his bedside:

'Get me a priest carrying Christ's body with him. I want to make my final confession and to be given the Sacrament, whatever the future may hold. My cousin Constantine shall be given the crown, he is the natural choice, if Christ will allow it. Please give our brave fallen an honourable burial, who in battle from sword blows were brought out of life. Then go swiftly to Mordred's children and see that they are killed and their bodies flung into a lake. Let no poison ivy spread to smother the ground; I warn you, heed this advice! I forgive all offences, for the love of Christ. And if Guinevere has found peace, then I wish her long life and happiness.'

Then he said: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit,' in Latin, very lucidly, in the place where he lay, and then his spirit departed and he spoke no more.

The noblemen of Britain then, dukes, earls and bishops, made their way to Glastonbury with heavy hearts, to bury their bold king and to commit him to the earth, with all the honour and adornment that anyone might desire. They rung the bells and sang the Funeral service, Masses and Matins with mournful tunes, clerics clothed in their finest attire, bishops and prelates resplendent in purple, dukes and dignitaries in their dole coats, countesses kneeling, clothed in the darkest of black, their hands clasped in prayer, ladies lamenting and knitting their brows, standing at the sepulchre, weeping profusely.

Was never such sorrow yet seen in their time.

Here ends a story of King Arthur – and of Sir Priamus, that prince who was praised to the rafters! – how he met his end, as authorities allege; he was descended from Hector, the Trojan king's son. It was from Troy that the Britons came, and all of their elders, into Britain the Broad, as the Brut tells.

