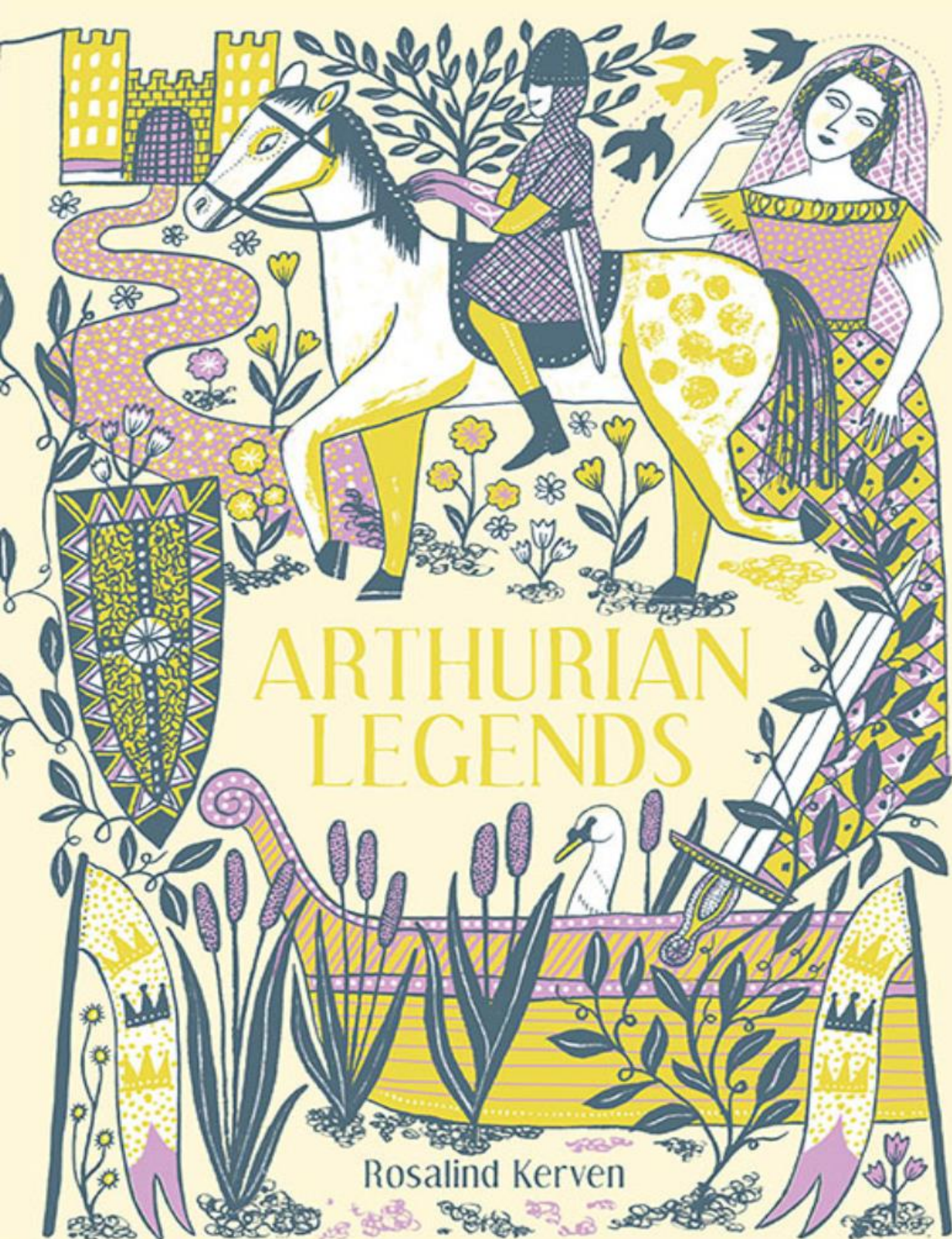
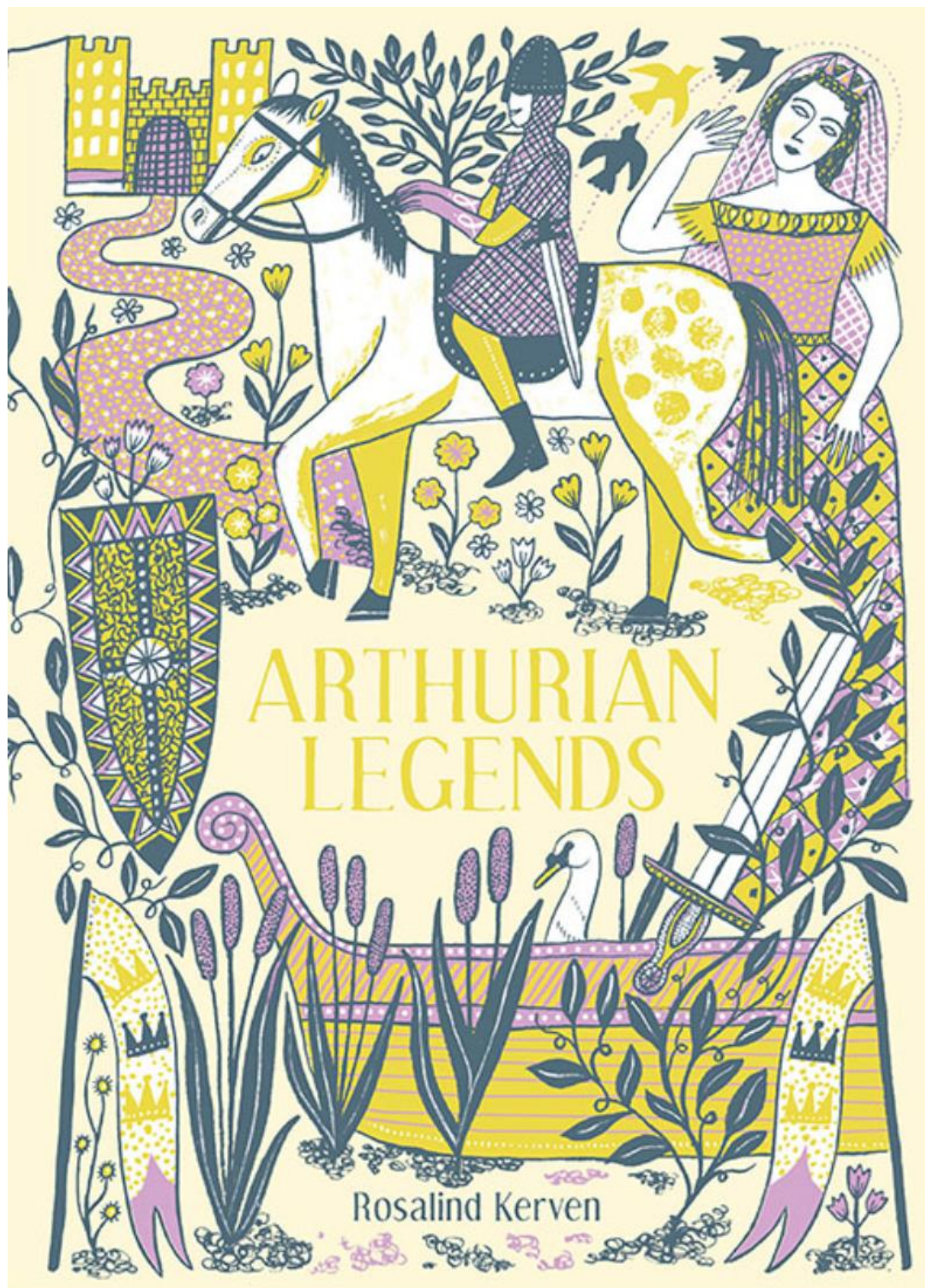




ARTHURIAN LEGENDS

Rosalind Kerven



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RETOLD FROM MEDIEVAL TEXTS
WITH EXTENDED NOTES



ROSALIND KERVEN

BATSFORD

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NOTE



These stories were first written down during the Middle Ages. However, their roots lie in much older, oral storytelling tradition, so that there are many different versions of each one.

Arthur was High King over the numerous smaller realms that made up Britain. The other kings who appear in these tales were thus not rivals to him, but all reigned under his ultimate authority.



THE COMING OF KING ARTHUR

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Britain was a broken country: a wasteland of anarchy, conflict and fear.

Its towns had crumbled into weed-infested ruins and its churches had been pillaged: learning, law and God's word were all but forgotten and shunned. Only the foolhardy dared to travel, for the overgrown, potholed roads were constantly plagued by bandits. The Great Forest ran wild, its fences long fallen under winter storms, choking the fields with brambles, bringing ever closer the bone-chilling howl of the wolf. Waves of barbaric invaders swarmed into this turmoil, seizing everything of value, defiling the women and burning down all the farms.

For a while, the country's numerous petty kingdoms clung together in a loose alliance under High King Uther Pendragon. But when Uther died, he neither left an heir, nor named a successor. So a bitter, futile, bloody war broke out for the crown, crushing the people with despair and terror.

Then unsettling rumours began to spread like wildfire. They claimed that a bizarre man – a charismatic, wind-battered, greybeard – was wandering through the derelict towns and highways. It was whispered that he was a wizard who had emerged from some lost corner of the forest; that his father was a demon; and that he could read the future, speak in tongues and pass freely in and

out of the hidden faery realms. His name was Merlin. Everyone was in awe of him.

As the endless battles raged, Merlin turned up in London, ranting about destiny and mysterious omens. It was impossible to ignore him: even the most savage thugs stopped in their tracks to listen. He told of a miraculous sword, thrust deep into a marble stone in the grounds of London's Great Church; and announced a contest to see if anyone could pull it free. He prophesied that only one man in the whole world would be able to achieve this – and that whoever he was, that man was the rightful new High King.



The day of this contest dawned. Hundreds of warriors, warlords and thugs thronged into the churchyard, jostling greedily for turns to try to pull the sword from the stone. But it was so tightly lodged that even the brawniest could not shift it. The air filled with menacing complaints that Merlin had hoodwinked them.

Suddenly, an unknown youth pushed his way to the front. He gave his name as Arthur. Then he strode towards the marble stone, gripped the sword and pulled on it with effortless grace. At once, the sword slipped free!

Outrage thundered around the churchyard. Who was this brazen, smooth-chinned upstart? How dare he claim the crown they had all coveted for so long! The ill-favoured throng surged towards Arthur, brandishing spears, swords, knives, axes and slings.

But he was ready for them. He struck back with the miraculous sword, fearlessly, nimbly, deflecting every

blow, fighting in all directions at once. His opponents had never encountered anyone like him, let alone one so young! They tried to overwhelm him by shouting unreasonable demands and distracting him with tricks, but Arthur kept his grip on the fight and easily outwitted them all. Gradually, their resentment turned to grudging admiration. As the moon rose over the gathering darkness, they unanimously acknowledged him as victor.





So Arthur was crowned High King of all Britain. Under the wise guidance of Merlin, he made his court at Camelot, and his fame spread far and wide, even across the sea. He had a flair for inspiration and generosity, distributing such rich parcels of land and treasure to all his old enemies that everyone clamoured to be at his side. Together they expelled or slew all the foreign barbarians, and strengthened the defences to prevent any more invasions. For the first time in many decades, Britain was blessed with plenty, prosperity and peace.

Arthur matured into a magnificent king: bountiful, tireless and infinitely hospitable. His guiding light was God. His only ambitions were for harmony, virtue and glory. He married a beautiful, intelligent, high-spirited lady called Guinevere, who was in every way his equal. On their wedding day her father, King Leodegrance of Camelot, presented them with a magnificent table, crafted from an ancient oak tree and shaped as round as the sun. No sooner had Arthur installed this in his hall, than many exceptional warriors began to arrive at Camelot, offering to sit at this Round Table and serve as his loyal and noble knights.

A nymph from the faery realms gifted Arthur a magnificent sword called Excalibur, and a magic scabbard to protect him from all wounds. With these he became truly invincible, and victorious in every war he entered. The whole of Europe submitted to him, and Arthur was crowned Emperor of Rome.





After this triumph, he returned to Camelot and from there he ruled zealously and joyfully for many years. His reputation towered above his peers. Queen Guinevere too was much admired and loved: her influence softened Arthur's belligerence and inspired his followers to more gentle chivalry. The Knights of the Round Table became as acclaimed as Arthur himself, ever willing to defend their country and its good citizens to the death. The court at Camelot became the envy of the world for its dancing, hunting parties and feasts.

It was truly a Golden Age!





THE ENCHANTMENT OF MERLIN

THE ENCHANTMENT OF MERLIN



In the ruinous years long before King Arthur was crowned, the Great Forest's tangled roots and branches crept far across the broken land. Few people ever dared to enter it, for fear of the wild beasts and vagrants said to lurk amongst its overgrown, labyrinthine paths. Moreover, it was rumoured that some of the crevasses, pools and decaying wells that riddled the forest were really hidden doorways; and that unwary travellers might fall through these into the perilous faery realms.

At that time, the great wizard and soothsayer Merlin came down from the Welsh mountains in a frenzy of madness. Fearing neither predators nor enchantments, he entered the Great Forest and wandered alone through it, visiting every glade, thicket and corner; feasting on toadstools; burrowing into the ground to sleep like an animal. He searched and he watched; he stood on hilltops and read the stars. Season by season, the forest's green stillness seeped into his blood, filling his mind with wondrous visions.

These led him through endless stands of entangled, lichen-covered trees to the shores of a lake, thickly shrouded in mist. Merlin waited there patiently for many hours and days, watching the swirling vapours until slowly they crystallised into a female figure of improbable grace and loveliness.

As she came drifting towards him over the water, he called to her, 'Lady! Grant me a boon!'

'Who are you, daring to demand such a thing?' the Lady of the Lake answered; and her voice was sweet as a breath of wind running through summer grasses.

'Oh, it is not for me, Lady,' said Merlin. He stepped closer to the shoreline, letting the water lap over his battered boots. 'I ask this for one who is not yet even born. He will need it, Lady, to fulfil his destiny.'

'How can that be, old man?' she said.

'I have dreamed the future,' Merlin replied, 'and seen your role within it, Lady. For one day my powers will grow strong enough to move God's hand. Bitter wars will be fought. Reckless lust will be satiated, causing a child to be born in the darkness. He will rise to become an extraordinary king. He is the one who needs your gift.'

The Lady of the Lake considered his words. Then she said, 'If your prophesy is false, old wizard, or if this king proves treacherous to his people, may the wilderness swallow you up for the sin of blasphemy! But if it proves true and the king you speak of is indeed crowned – then bring him to me! Meanwhile, I will go far across the water and beyond the mist, to the island of Avalon. There I will search for something fitting for such a hero. I shall bring it back to this lake, and wait for him to come.'

The lady turned and shimmered and faded. Soon she had completely vanished. Merlin stood alone again on the shore beneath the trees, his sagging belly rumbling with hunger and his eyes brimming with tears.



Years passed. Merlin used his weird powers to oversee the wars and passion that led to the birth of Arthur, then brought him to the throne of Britain. When Arthur became the greatest king in Christendom, the old wizard's prophecy was fulfilled. He stayed close to the young king's side, always ready to help him with wise advice.

Content and secure under Arthur's rule, the people of Britain built strong new fences that kept the Great Forest at bay. But Merlin pined for it. He often spoke of it in riddles to Arthur, hinting that soon they must visit it together and seek out the gift promised him by the mysterious lady.

At last he rode with Arthur deep into the trees, to the lonely shores of the lake. The old wizard had judged the hour exactly, for the lady was already waiting for them there, soft upon the water.

A little boat was moored by the shoreline. She called Arthur to row it towards her. Then she gave to him the magnificent sword Excalibur, which she had brought for him from the mysterious land of Avalon, encased in a scabbard enchanted to protect him from wounding. But she paid no heed to Merlin.

From then on, Arthur consulted Merlin less and less, relying increasingly on his own resources and growing wisdom. Merlin did not complain, but spent ever more time poring over his ancient books and runes, fasting and studying the stars.

One day he went to Arthur, saying, 'I have come to bid you farewell forever.'

Arthur was shocked, and overcome by sorrow. 'But where are you going?' he said. 'Can your journey really be so hazardous that your occult skills cannot ensure your safe return?'

‘Alas, Arthur,’ the wizard answered, ‘those skills are melting away under a force so great that even I have no power to oppose it. My fate is written among the planets: I am cursed.’

‘Whatever is this dark force that has such a hold on you?’ King Arthur exclaimed. ‘You assured me long ago, Merlin, that the demon who fathered you can no longer touch you, and it is clear to all who know you that God walks at your side. Knowledge is strength. In foreseeing your fate, old friend, surely you can change it?’

But Merlin only shook his head. ‘No Arthur. I am helpless. I cannot loosen the chains that bind my heart and grow tighter, year by year. Satan could not wrestle them away; even Our Lord could not free me from them. For I am in love, Arthur: totally, hopelessly, desperately. I cannot rest but must follow where love calls me. There is no remedy for my despair. It will bring about my downfall.’



With these ominous words, he clasped Arthur in his crooked arms and showered him with blessings. Then he wrapped his cloak closely about himself, went out of Camelot and rode urgently into the Great Forest.



Deep in that wildwood, below the lonely, mist-shrouded waters, in the faery realm that few mortals have ever seen, the Lady of the Lake heard someone endlessly, mournfully calling her:

‘Oh, my Lady! Oh, Nimue! Oh, my Lady!’

She guessed that Wizard Merlin had found his way to the lake again and was closing in on her. Hearing that he had discovered her true name – though she had taken much care to keep it from him – she knew that all was lost.

‘Oh Nimue!’ he called again. ‘Nimue, my Lady!’

His calls grew louder and more frequent. Because of them, she could not sleep or even rest. She heard him praying as a Christian, begging her to come to him; she heard him summoning her with weird, devilish spells. Though it angered her much to let him have his way, she could not allow him to destroy the tranquillity of the Great Forest. So she rose through the water and went to meet him upon the shore.

‘So, old wizard,’ she said, keeping her distance, not stepping onto the land where he might touch her. ‘I kept my promise. I gave your protégé the gift you asked for. What more do you want?’

This time he answered her plainly: ‘I want your love, Nimue.’

‘I cannot give it to you,’ she said.

‘Then I will wait until you can,’ said Merlin.

‘Your wait will last beyond eternity,’ she said. ‘And even then, you will never have me.’

She turned and would have dissolved away into the safety of the water, but he called her back with a tormented cry.

‘Stay! Do not go until you have heard me through, Nimue! Know that even the thought of eternity does not daunt me. Long ago I mastered both patience and endurance. Before the first time I called upon you, I spent fifty years out of my mind in this very wilderness, waiting for the time to ripen when I could bring Arthur to become king. I did not give up until I had changed history in accordance with my dreams and drunk from the heady cup of worldly power! So do not think you can repel me so easily, sweet lady. I can wait for you for as long as you will it; and finally I will possess you.’

‘No, Merlin,’ she said. ‘You might wait until the world ends and the dead rise from their graves, but I will never give you my love. What do I care if you are a king-maker? That is of no concern to me, dwelling in the faery realms. It does not change the fact that you are a repulsive old man, with foul habits and suspicious intentions. Now go from here. Leave me alone!’

The mist coiled and swirled at her angry words, and the surface of the water seethed; even the leaves on the trees around the lake quivered, though the air was still. The lady sank away, leaving the old wizard standing ashen-faced upon the bank.

There he resumed the hoarse, irritating keening, ‘Oh Nimue, Oh my Lady!’ But when dusk fell, he wrapped his cloak around him – a billow of filthy rags incongruously

trimmed with pure white ermine – and shuffled away, leaving only owl shrieks to disturb the silence.

This calm lasted through damp autumn and the bitterness of winter, for Merlin was lying low. However, he was not idle, but engrossed in divination and developing spells. By the time the March equinox had passed and the forest was lightened by birdsong, he was ready.

He took an axe and, with strength unnatural to his great age, cut down many trees to create a sun-dappled glade. Here he lit a small pyre of dead wood and bones, dribbling rare herbs over it until the air was thick with their bitter smoke. As this cleared, the glade seemed to sweeten with rustling apple and plum trees. Finally, Merlin transformed himself into the shape of a handsome, splendidly dressed young knight. Then he sat beneath the enchanted boughs to wait.

Soon Nimue rose from the lake to savour the spring air, and the fragrance of fruit trees drew her into the glade. Merlin in his comely guise rose to greet her.

He claimed that he was passing through the forest on a quest for King Arthur, and would be happy to entertain her with news from Camelot. The lady, intoxicated by the vision he had conjured up, allowed herself to be deceived.

They spoke cordially for a while. Then the shape-shifted wizard drew an ancient, leather-bound book from his robe, and beckoned the lady closer to admire it.

‘What is it?’ she asked, gazing at the strange script and cryptic symbols scrawled across the yellowed pages.

‘It is the wisdom of the gods and druids that held sway over Britain before the Roman legions came,’ he answered.