

THE SWORD IN THE STONE

by Sir Thomas Malory, retold by Keith Baines

BACKGROUND

"The Sword in the Stone" tells the story of Arthur, son of Igraine and King Uther of England. Many men wanted Uther's throne, and so any heir would be seen as a dangerous rival. A wise man named Merlin took Arthur from Uther, fearing for the child's safety. Arthur was raised by Sir Ector and his wife alongside their own son, Kay. As this story begins, King Uther has just died, and a contest is being set up to decide the next king of England.

A LANGUAGE COACH

Look at the word *archbishop*. What is the prefix of this word? What do you think the prefix means? Use a dictionary to check your answer.

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The archbishop held his service in the city's greatest church (St. Paul's), and when matins¹ were done, the congregation filed out to the yard. **A** They were confronted by a marble block into which had

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been thrust a beautiful sword. The block was four feet square, and the sword passed through a steel anvil² which had been struck in the stone and which projected a



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1. **matins** (MAT uHNZ): morning prayers.
2. **anvil** (AN vuHL): iron or steel block on which metal objects are hammered into shape.

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STONE AND ANVYLD IS RIGHTWYS KYNGE BORNE
OF ALL BRYTAYGNE **B**

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The congregation was awed by this miraculous sight, but the archbishop forbade anyone to touch the sword before Mass had been heard. After Mass, many of the nobles tried to pull the sword out of the stone, but none was able to, so a watch of ten knights was set over the sword, and a tournament³ proclaimed for New Year's Day, to provide men of noble blood with the opportunity of proving their right to the succession.

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Sir Ector, who had been living on an estate near London, rode to the tournament with Arthur and his own son Sir Kay, who had been recently knighted. When they arrived at the tournament, Sir Kay found to his annoyance that his sword was missing from its sheath, so he begged Arthur to ride back and fetch it from their lodging. **C**

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Arthur found the door of the lodging locked and bolted, the landlord and his wife having left for the tournament. In order not to disappoint his brother, he rode on to St. Paul's, determined to get for him the sword which was lodged in the stone. The yard was empty, the guard also having slipped off to see the tournament, so Arthur strode up to the sword and, without troubling to read the inscription, tugged it free. He then rode straight back to Sir Kay and presented him with it. **D**

Sir Kay recognized the sword and, taking it to Sir Ector, said, "Father, the succession falls to me, for I have here the sword that was lodged in the stone." But Sir Ector insisted that they should all ride to the churchyard, and once there, bound Sir Kay by oath⁴ to tell how he had come by the sword. Sir Kay then admitted that Arthur had given it to him. Sir Ector turned to Arthur and said, "Was the sword not guarded?"

"It was not," Arthur replied.

- 3. tournament** (TUR NUH MUHNT): sport in which two knights compete on horseback, trying to unseat each other with long pole-like weapons called lances.
- 4. oath** (OETH): serious promise or declaration; vow.

B LITERARY ANALYSIS

Why do you think the words on the anvil are spelled so strangely?

C VOCABULARY

Word Study

Sheath is a noun meaning "case or covering for the blade of a sword." What might the verb form of *sheath* mean?

D QUICK CHECK

Why does Arthur pull the sword out of the stone?

A VOCABULARY

Selection Vocabulary

Use context clues to write a definition for the word *tumultuous*.

50 “Would you please thrust it into the stone again?” said Sir Ector. Arthur did so, and first Sir Ector and then Sir Kay tried to remove it, but both were unable to. Then Arthur, for the second time, pulled it out. Sir Ector and Sir Kay both knelt before him.

“Why,” said Arthur, “do you both kneel before me?”

“My lord,” Sir Ector replied, “there is only one man living who can draw the sword from the stone, and he is the true-born king of Britain.” Sir Ector then told Arthur the story of his birth and upbringing.

60 “My dear father,” said Arthur, “for so I shall always think of you—if, as you say, I am to be king, please know that any request you have to make is already granted.”

Sir Ector asked that Sir Kay should be made royal seneschal,⁵ and Arthur declared that while they both lived it should be so. Then the three of them visited the archbishop and told him what had taken place.

All those dukes and barons with ambitions to rule were present at the tournament on New Year’s Day. But when all of them had failed, and Arthur alone had succeeded in drawing the sword from the stone, they protested against one so young, and
70 of ignoble blood, succeeding to the throne.

The secret of Arthur’s birth was known to only a few of the nobles surviving from the days of King Uther. The archbishop urged them to make Arthur’s cause their own; but their support proved ineffective. The tournament was repeated at Candlemas⁶ and at Easter, with the same outcome as before.

Finally, at Pentecost,⁷ when once more Arthur alone had been able to remove the sword, the commoners arose with a tumultuous cry and demanded that Arthur should at once be
80 made king. **A** The nobles, knowing in their hearts that the

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5. **seneschal** (SEHN UH SHUHL): person in charge of the king’s household. This was a powerful and respected position.
 6. **Candlemas** (KAN DUHL MUHS): Christian festival on February 2, remembering purification of the Virgin Mary after the birth of Jesus.
 7. **Pentecost** (PEHN TUH KAWST): Christian festival celebrated on the seventh Sunday after Easter, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles.



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commoners were right, all knelt before Arthur and begged forgiveness for having delayed his succession for so long. Arthur forgave them and then, offering his sword at the high altar, was dubbed⁸ first knight of the realm. The coronation took place a few days later, when Arthur swore to rule justly, and the nobles swore him their allegiance. **B C D**

B VOCABULARY

Academic Vocabulary

Why do you think this story has been *recounted*, or told, over and over for generations?

C READING FOCUS

Are all of the events in this story told in **chronological order**? If not, what events are told out of order?

D LITERARY FOCUS

In what ways is “The Sword in the Stone” a **legend**?

8. **dubbed** (DUHBD): conferred knighthood on by tapping on the shoulder with a sword.