4.7 The Sword in the Stone

*(**King Arthur**, famous in legends and history as one of the bravest and noblest Kings of Britain, grew up as an orphaned youth, before Destiny intervened, in the form of his protector and guardian, Merlin the Magician, to reveal his true identity to the people of Britain.)*

In ancient Britain, at a time when the land was invaded by wild barbarians, the good and noble Lord Uther fought them bravely and drove them away from his land. The people made him king of Britain and gave him the title, Pendragon, meaning Dragon's head. King Uther Pendragon ruled Britain wisely and well; the people were content. But very soon, the king died; it was thought that he had been poisoned by some traitors. There was no heir to the throne of Britain.

The powerful Lords and Knights who had been kept under control by King Uther, now began to demand that one of them should be crowned King of Britain. Rivalry grew amongst the Lords, and the country as a whole began to suffer. Armed robbers roamed the countryside, pillaging farms and fields. People felt unsafe and insecure in their own homes. Fear gripped the country and lawlessness prevailed over the divided kingdom.

Nearly sixteen years had passed since the death of Lord Uther. All the Lords and Knights of Britain had assembled at the Great Church of London for Christmas.

On Christmas morning, just as they were leaving the Church, a strange sight drew their attention. In the churchyard was a large stone, and on it an anvil of steel, and in the steel a naked sword was held, and about it was written in letters of gold, 'Whoso pulleth out this sword is by right of birth King of England.'

Many of the knights could not hold themselves back. Fancying themselves as future kings, they rushed to the stone and attempted to draw the sword from its steel anvil. They pulled with all their might, but none of them could so much as move the sword.

"Obviously, the man who might draw the sword and prove himself to be our rightful king, is not amongst us this morning," said the Archbishop. "However, every man who wishes to try his hand at drawing this sword, is free to do so, for the next few days. He who draws the sword will be crowned King. And to celebrate the appearance of this magnificent sword and prepare ourselves for the arrival of our future king, we will hold a magnificent tournament on New Year's Day."

On New Year's Day, a great number of young and brave knights gathered to attend the Church Service. After that, they met in the field nearby, to participate in the Great Tournament. Dukes and Counts, Earls, Barons and Knights crowded on to the field.

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Among them was Sir Ector, a noble knight. He was accompanied by his two sons, Sir Kay and young Arthur. Kay was his own son, who had been recently knighted; Arthur, whom he had brought up as a foster son, was actually an orphan whom he had raised as his own child. The good Sir Ector loved both his sons dearly.

As Sir Kay was preparing to join the tournament, he realized that he had left his sword behind, at home. Hastily he summoned his younger brother and said to him, "Arthur! You want me to win this tournament, don't you? Then you must help me out. Take my horse and gallop home as fast as you can. Get my sword and rush back here at once."

"I'm going," called Arthur, rushing off at once. "You shall have your sword sooner than you think!"

As he rushed past the church, a glint of steel caught his eye – the blade of a sword, shining brightly in the morning sun. The sword was mounted on an anvil on top of a block of marble, right in the middle of the churchyard. It was the magic sword in the stone; but Arthur knew nothing about it. All he saw was a sword that was available for taking. 'Kay shall have his sword straight away,' Arthur said to himself. He ran up to the stone, seized the sword by the handle and drew it out effortlessly. He rushed back to his brother and handed the sword to him, breathless with excitement.

"You are back very soon," Sir Kay said to him, "But hey, this is not my sword!"

"No, it isn't," smiled Arthur. "I thought it would take me too long to get home and bring your sword. I found this sword in the Churchyard. It looked good and I thought you could use it just for today. We will, of course, put it back when the Games are over."

Sir Kay stood speechless, staring at his younger brother. He knew all about the magic sword and what it signified; but Arthur was unaware of it all! Arthur had always been a brave and valiant boy, and he had excelled in fencing and archery, he adored his father and his half brother and his dream was to become the squire to his dashing brother! And now, without even knowing what it implied, Arthur had drawn the magic sword from the stone! Kay's mind was working rapidly. He actually held the Sword of the Stone in his hand; the very same sword that the strongest and best knights could not so much as grip or get hold of!

Sir Kay seized the sword and ran to their father, leaving a bewildered Arthur behind him. He said to Sir Ector, "Father, father! This is the Sword of the Stone and I have it in my hand! I am the rightful King of Britain!"

Sir Ector was a wise man. "How did you get hold of this sword, son?" he asked his eldest born.

"What does that matter? I have it in my hand. It was meant to be mine. Isn't that enough?" Kay retorted, angrily.

"That's not enough," said the father, quietly. "How did you get hold of this sword?"

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" I've got it, and that's what matters," Kay replied, stubborn as ever.

"Well then, come with me," Sir Ector said, and led his son inside the Great Church which was now empty. Taking the Holy Book from the choir, Sir Ector said to his son, "Swear on the holy book that you drew the sword from the stone."

Sir Kay lowered his eyes. He could not face his father now.

"How did you come by the sword, son?" Sir Ector asked him, once again.

"Arthur brought it to me, father," said Kay, still with his eyes lowered.

"Bring Arthur here, and let the three of us go to the churchyard," Sir Ector told him. "We have to know the truth about this."

Soon, the three of them were at the churchyard.

"Put the sword back on its anvil," Sir Ector said to Kay. But try as he might, Kay could not put the sword back. It struck the anvil and slid off the block.

Arthur saw what was happening, and thought that his father was angry with them because he thought the sword was stolen. Sir Ector had always told his sons, "What matters most for a knight is integrity, being honest and truthful at all times, on all occasions."

Arthur stepped forward impulsively. "Here, let me put it back," he said. And, taking the mighty sword from his elder brother, he thrust it back on the anvil and it slipped in, neatly.

"I assure you father, I did not steal the sword. Kay needed a sword urgently, and I did not want to keep him waiting. Rather than ride all the way home, I decided to take the sword which I found in the churchyard. And see, it is back in its place now. I fully intended to put it back in place after the tournament." And glancing at his brother, he added, "I am sure that is what Kay would have told me to do, wouldn't you, brother?"

Sir Kay did not speak a word.

"Alright Arthur, I believe you," said Sir Ector. "Now let me see you draw that sword out as you did the first time. First, you, Kay."

But try as he might, Kay could not so much as grip the handle. And he could not move the sword however hard he tried.

"Now, it is your turn Arthur," said Sir Ector, sternly.

Arthur gripped the handle of the sword and drew the sword out, gently but firmly.

Sir Ector made him repeat the action again, and again. Each time, Arthur gripped the handle and drew the sword out, without any hesitation.

Sir Ector was overwhelmed. He fell on his knees before his young son who held the mighty sword in his hand, and bowed his head in deep devotion. Wordlessly, Kay followed his example.

Arthur jumped back in surprise. "Father, why do you kneel before me? Am I not your son?"

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"That is what I had thought, until now," Sir Ector replied. "But now, I know better. I know whose son you are. You are the son of the good King Uther Pendragon, and I bow to you, as you are the King of Britain now."

"How could that be? You and I know that I was an orphan boy entrusted to your care."

Silently, Sir Ector pointed to the inscription on the stone which Arthur

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had not seen until now. 'Whoso pulleth out this sword is by right of birth King of England.'

"But it can't be me! Father, I am your son, and I shall always remain your son!"

There was a flash of light, and Merlin appeared before them, a hooded figure with bright, shining eyes and a bewitching smile. Lovingly, he laid his hand on Arthur's head and said to him, "Indeed, I was the one who entrusted you to good Sir Ector, for your own safety. Your father and I knew that great danger lay ahead for the kingdom and yourself. No sooner than you were born, your father blessed you and handed you over to me, with the solemn request that you would take your rightful place on the throne of England when it was safe for you to do so."

Turning to Sir Ector, Merlin said, "In the name of the Late King Uther, I thank you. You have done a splendid job of bringing up the heir to the British throne. Now, you must inform the Archbishop and your fellow Knights of all that has happened here. I shall await your return."

Forthwith, Sir Ector called upon the Archbishop and all the Lords assembled at the Tournament. Holding Arthur by the hand, he announced to the assembly, "Behold, the rightful King of England."

For a moment, there was silence. And then, the crowd burst out in angry protests. "How can we believe you?" "Who is this unknown boy?" "Where did he come from?" "How is he any better than one of us?"

The Archbishop took them all to the churchyard. The entire assemblage watched in awe, as Arthur inserted the sword in the anvil and drew it out effortlessly. Some of the Lords and Knights also tried to draw the sword, but failed to do so.

Again, and yet again, Arthur drew the sword from the stone before his people. Each time, cheers went up, and each time, more and more Knights drew their swords and held them high, in a gesture of loyalty to their newfound prince. Loud cheers rose from the common people, who had surrounded the churchyard, eager to greet their new king.

Now, Merlin stepped out of the shadows and addressed the crowds, "Behold, O People of Britain, I present to you, the one and only son of King Uther Pendragon and his queen. He is your rightful king!"

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- **Archbishop:** An Archbishop is a bishop or priest of the highest rank.
- **Merlin:** In the legends of King Arthur, Merlin is portrayed as a great wizard who helped, advised and guided Arthur. Merlin, with the help of the Archbishop, had arranged the 'sword in the stone' so that Britain would get its rightful king.

POINTERS

1. Read the passage. Underline the new words. Guess their meaning from the context. Verify it from a good dictionary.

2. Put the following events in chronological order.
   (a) The sword in the stone appeared in the churchyard.
   (b) Lord Uther died.
   (c) Lord Uther drove the barbarians away.
   (d) The Lords and knights began to fight for the kingdom.
   (e) Sir Kay left his sword behind at home.
   (f) Merlin announced that Arthur was the son of Lord Uther.
   (g) Arthur brought the sword from the churchyard.
   (h) Ancient Britain was invaded by wild barbarians.
   (i) Many knights tried to pull the sword out of the stone.
   (j) Arthur grew up in Sir Ector's house.
   (k) Merlin entrusted a baby to Sir Ector.

3. What do the following events/actions tell us about the characters? Discuss.
   (a) The Archbishop announced that everyone was free to try his hand at the sword and called all the Lords to a Tournament.
   (b) Arthur agreed to bring Sir Kay a sword at once.
   (c) Sir Ector asked Sir Kay to show him whether he could draw the sword out of the stone.
   (d) Sir Ector kneeled before Arthur.

4. Write five words each –
   (a) with the suffix • –less • –ly • –ness
   (b) with the prefix • un– • in–

5. Visit a library : Read the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

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