

But you must not think that Malory did nothing but copy and translate the French stories. He did a great deal more than that. He chose from them those that he thought most interesting and beautiful, altered them when he saw fit, added to them, or left out parts, arranged them all into one long story, beginning with King Arthur's birth, and clothed them all in his own beautiful language. He made the first great book of English prose, as Chaucer did the first great book of English poetry. But Malory's English, though it is less than a hundred years later than Chaucer's, is easier for us to read. In fact, we very rarely come upon a word that we do not understand.

The Round Table was made by Merlin, the magician,—

In tokenness of the roundness of the world, for by the Round Table is the world signified by right. For all the world, Christian and heathen, repair into the Round Table, and where they are chosen to be of the fellowship of the Round Table, they think them more blessed than if they had gotten half the world.

Uther Pendragon, Arthur's father, gave the Round Table to Leodogrance, King of Cameliard. After Arthur was made king, he wanted Guenever, the daughter of Leodogrance, for his wife, and sent Merlin to ask for her.

"That is to me," said King Leodogrance, "the best tidings that ever I heard, that so worthy a king of prowess and noblesse will wed my daughter. And as for my lands, I will give him wist I it might please him, but he has lands enough, him needeth none, but I shall send him a gift shall please him much more, for I shall give him the Table Round, the which Uther Pendragon gave me, and when it is full complete there is an hundred knights and fifty. And as for an hundred good knights I have myself, but I lack fifty, for so many have been slain in my days. And so King Leodogrance delivered his daughter Guenever unto Merlin, and the Table Round, with the hundred knights, and so they rode freshly, with great royalty, what by water and what by land, till they came nigh unto London."

Arthur was more pleased with the gift of the Table Round than if it had been right great riches. And he sent Merlin to seek through all the land for fifty knights of great valour and renown to fill up the seats. Merlin could find only twenty-eight, but afterwards the number was made up all but two, and the Archbishop of Canterbury came and blessed the seats with "great royalty and devotion."

All this we read in the third book of "Le Morte Darthur," and the story goes on to tell of all the adventures of the king and his knights, until,

through treachery and evil, "the noble fellowship of the Round Table is broken for ever."

Although the real Arthur lived in the sixth century, the manners and customs that are shown us in "Le Morte Darthur" belong to a time five or six hundred years later. It was a time when war was going on everywhere. War was the natural state of things. Everyone had to fight against the invaders of his country, and the destroyers of his home, against the heathen, against robbers. All men were born either freemen or serfs, and every free born boy was educated to fight. Every boy of noble birth looked forward to being a knight, and for this he went through a long and careful training, first as a page, then as a squire, and then when he had proved himself worthy, and done some brave deeds, he "won his spurs," and was knighted. But though most knights were of noble birth, a low born man, even a serf, might become a knight if he showed himself brave and gentle. We must understand that this knighthood was a very important thing. In times of constant war and unsettled government there was a great deal of cruelty and savage barbarism; but there would have been much more if it had not been for knighthood or chivalry. The knight was trained and bound by his vows to be not only brave, but gentle, loyal, courteous; to relieve the oppressed, to defend the weak, to care for all women, to make travelling safe, and to put down tyranny.

For King, for Faith, for lady fair,
See that thou fight.

says Douglas to Ralph de Wilton when he knights him, and that is what a knight was expected to do. You remember Chaucer's description of the "very perfect, gentle knight." Here is a picture from Malory to put beside it. When Sir Ector finds his brother, Sir Launcelot, who was the greatest of Arthur's knights, lying dead, he mourns for him in these words:

"Ah, Launcelot," he said, "thou were head of all Christian knights; and now I dare say, said Sir Ector, thou Sir Launcelot, ther thou liest, that thou were never matched of earthly knight's hand; and thou were the courtliest knight that ever bare shield; and thou were the truest friend that ever bestrode horse; and thou were the truest lover of a sinful man that ever loved woman; and thou were the kindest man that ever strake with sword; and thou were the goodliest person ever came among press of knights; and thou was the meekest man and the gentlest that ever ate in hall among ladies; and thou were the sternest knight to thy mortal foe that ever put spear in the rest."

(To be continued).