

MELUSINE'S GIFT

THE CHILDREN OF ARTHUR, BOOK TWO

TYLER R. TICHELAAR

Melusine's Gift: The Children of Arthur, Book Two

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Marquette Fiction
1202 Pine Street
Marquette, MI 49855
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www.ChildrenofArthur.com

ISBN-13: 978-0-9791790-9-9

ISBN-10: 0-9791790-9-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014920813

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Printed in the United States of America
Publication managed by Superior Book Productions
www.SuperiorBookProductions.com

“My son, eat thou honey, because it is good; and the honeycomb,
which is sweet to thy taste: So shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto
thy soul: when thou hast found it, then there shall be a reward, and
thy expectation shall not be cut off.”

— Proverbs 24: 13-14

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PROLOGUE

RONCESVAUX PASS IN THE PYRENEES BETWEEN FRANCE AND SPAIN AUGUST 15, 778 A.D.

WHEN ROLAND WOKE, he felt immense relief—he had been dreaming—or had he been? His body was still exhausted. Was it true? Had they been ambushed? He remembered marching with the army, and then—yes, there had definitely been a battle. He remembered the feel of his sword as he slid it out of a Saracen throat and the sight of the blood squirting out, and then—and then a great soaring pain through his whole body, but most of all in his chest, as another Saracen sliced—but—was he dead then?

His eyes bolted open, and he tried to sit up, but the pain soared through his chest again so that he was quickly afraid to move and hurt himself worse. He bit his tongue, trying to keep from screaming over the agonizing pain that shot through his body.

After a moment, when the pain lessened, Roland looked about him, conscious that it was now night. He strained his eyes to see anything

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he could about him, but he could only make out shadows—of what he knew not. Where was he? Lying on the battlefield, not quite dead? Was the enemy still near? He closed his eyes again, fearing that if an enemy warrior or a grave robber should come and see he lived, he would be struck dead. He listened, waiting to hear footsteps, but all he heard was the great squawking of birds—carrion birds come to feast on the dead. In a moment, no doubt, they would be nibbling on him. He had to get up and make his way to shelter somehow—to see whether any of King Charles' brave men remained to look after the dead and wounded—or were they all dead or wounded?

“Be still.”

He jerked in fright at the unexpected voice. He had not heard anyone approach, but it sounded like a male voice, and an elderly one. It spoke to him in French, not the Saracen tongue, and not the tongue of the surrounding provinces—rather the French of Paris, the French of King Charles' court.

“It's all right. You're safe now.”

He slowly opened his eyes; it took a minute for them to adjust. It was growing dark, the sun nearly set now. Beside him knelt a shadowy figure.

“Lie still; your wounds mustn't be exasperated further. I've given you some medicine to help with the pain—that is what woke you, when I poured it down your throat. It should numb the pain in a few more minutes.”

“My men, what of them?”

“Most are slaughtered; a few escaped; a few were taken prisoners.”

“Oliver and Ogier, what of them?”

The old man hesitated a moment, then said, “Ogier survived.”

Roland struggled to hold back his grief over the death of Oliver, his

companion since childhood. After a moment, he asked the old man, “Can I speak to Ogier?”

“Ogier is gone now. The king and his men all thought you dead. They could not find your body. You were buried beneath the corpse of the Saracen who tried to slay you; he fell dead upon you when another struck him from behind. He covered your body, protecting it from further harm, but hiding it from view. Nevertheless, Ogier is the one of all King Charles’ court whom you will see again when the time is right.”

“Right for what?”

“That is too difficult a question to answer at this moment, but it will all be revealed.”

“If my body was buried beneath another,” Roland asked, “how did you find me?”

“I have my ways. I watched the battle from up in the mountains. I kept an eye on you.”

“Thank you. Then you were not with the army?”

“No.”

“But you know me and my companions?” Roland tried to read the old man’s eyes in the dim light as his own eyes finally began to focus in the darkness.

“Yes, I know you, Roland, King Charles’ nephew,” the man solemnly replied.

A bolt of fear swept through Roland’s body. How did the old man know him if he were not with the army? Roland knew he wore nothing to distinguish himself as the king’s nephew.

“How do you know who I am?” he asked.

“Why, all your life I have watched you—I knew you when you were yet in your mother’s womb.”

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“Who are you?” Roland asked, fearing he might have fallen into the hands of a sorcerer.

“I have many names,” said the man, leaning back. “You would be surprised by them all.”

Roland’s eyes widened as the man spoke. Although the sun had set and there was no candle or other source of light, the man’s face suddenly became illuminated. He was bearded—a long white beard, his hair long and falling about his shoulders—and his eyes were ancient, wise, and mesmerizing.

“Who are you?” Roland repeated, his eyes growing with amazement.

“I am of your father’s people, the Britons,” the man replied, “although perhaps even you yourself do not know of that aspect of your heritage after all these generations, but no matter, I am many other things as well.”

“I don’t understand,” Roland replied. “Where did you come from? How did you get here, and what is your interest in me?”

“Most recently, I have resided in the Forest of Broceliande. In a cave where it is said by mortals that I sleep; if you think upon it, you will know me.”

Roland barely dared think the name that came into his mind, but as he stared at the old man, trying to regain his ability to speak amid his astonishment, a glow slowly lit the old man’s face, emanating from a ball the man held up near his chin. Roland had never seen this man before, and yet, he knew instinctively who he was, and finally, the name came to his tongue.

“Mer-lin?”

The ancient wizard nodded, and then the light diminished from his face.

“But—but,” Roland stuttered in confusion, “I thought you were

enchanted, in a cave, unable to.... Oh, how can this be? It doesn't make sense. Am I dreaming? I don't understand. Am I dead? Is that why you are here?"

"I am very much alive, brave Roland, and so are you. It is foolish, the stories men sometimes tell—that a great enchanter like I, one with such wisdom to live for centuries, could fall for a mere mortal woman barely past her youth and allow her to enchant and trap me. You mortals want to think romantic love is everything and even the greatest of wizards will fall for it, but it is not so. Most of the stories you have heard about me have been tainted by the fears of men and bear little resemblance to the truth, but just wait until you have lived long enough to hear the stories they will create about you."

"Can I have some water?" Roland asked, beginning to cough from the dryness in his throat.

"You are thirsty. That is the healing potion taking effect. I gave it to you before you woke. Wait a few more moments and we will be ready to leave."

"Leave? How? Do you think I'll be able to walk?"

"You will be healed completely; you may feel some bodily exhaustion for a day or two, but after that, you will be your old self."

"I don't believe this. I can't be alive; I must be dead or at least dreaming."

Merlin placed a drinking flask to his lips.

"Here, this will make you feel alive still."

The water was cold and felt wonderful on Roland's parched lips. He had not tasted water since early that morning before the ambush that had caused his companions' deaths.

"Will you take me to the army, to my uncle the king?" Roland asked when he had drunk his fill, and far more than he would have

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imagined could fill the small flask.

"No," said Merlin. "You have other work to do."

"I will need my sword and a horse and my men to pursue the Saracens."

"No, your fighting days have passed," said Merlin. "You have a more important task now."

"I am the king's nephew, one of his paladins; I fight by King Charles' side. There is no more important task."

"Do you think that I, who served the great King Arthur, do not know better than you?" Merlin asked. "You men and your wars. Trust me. You need not worry about your honor. Your uncle the king will claim to have your body so he may give you a fitting burial in the great tomb of the Kings of France at Blaye. Your great deeds will be remembered in song and story for more than a thousand years to come. You have no need to worry."

"What of Alda, my betrothed?"

"She—I'm sorry to say that she will be heartbroken to know you are dead; she will go to an early grave. It is sad, but you will see her in the next life, though it will be many, many years from now."

"I need to go to her. I cannot break her heart that way."

"No, you will not be returning to France," Merlin repeated.

"Who are you to tell me where I may go?" snapped Roland, his strength having now been restored to him, and with it came the full pain of knowing that he would never again see his dead companions and his fiancée.

"I serve a higher power than you or your king," said Merlin, "and now it is time for you to do the same."

"What do you want with me, wizard?" Roland demanded. "I'll have none of your trickery."

Roland sat up in anger, but although he winced in anticipation of pain at the effort, he was amazed to feel his chest and stomach whole again.

“Trickery, hey?” said Merlin. “I suppose my healing you was trickery.”

Roland looked only amazed, and perhaps he felt a bit of fear, for swords he knew of, battles he could fight, but from sorcery he did not know how to defend himself, and sorcery that called him to serve a higher power than his king—that was frightening indeed.

“You will know soon enough what is wanted of you,” said Merlin, rising to his feet. “Come; you are able to stand and walk now. We must hurry before the Saracens return.”

“Where are you taking me?” asked Roland, first kneeling and then standing, amazed by his sudden renewed vigor; unbelievably, he felt stronger than he had before the battle.

“We go south, to your grandfather,” said Merlin, turning and beginning to walk away.

“My grandfather? I know no grandfather.”

“No, you wouldn’t; he retired to the monastery at Montserrat before you were born,” Merlin called over his shoulder.

“I don’t understand,” said Roland.

“Your father’s father,” said Merlin, turning back to look at Roland, “Raimond, the former Count of Poitou.”

“I did not know my father’s father lived. My father died before I was born so I never met my grandfather.”

“Come; you have much to learn that you were never told before. You, my boy, are far more than the nephew of a king—even if that king will soon title himself Holy Roman Emperor. You come from a far more ancient line. It is time you learn the truth of your family.”

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“The truth of my family?” Roland whispered to himself. What was it Merlin had said at first, that he was of “his father’s people”—that he was a Briton? But how could any of that be? He knew his father had been born in France, and Raimond of Poitou—he remembered hearing the name—from his mother’s lips when he was a child, after his father had died. But he had dim memories of what his mother had said, not remembering much beyond that revelation that she was the king’s sister, that he was the nephew to the great King Charles of the Franks. There had been something more—about his father’s past and about a strange legend that his grandmother...but his thoughts felt all muddled. He could not remember it all at the moment...

And Merlin was walking off into the darkness.

Roland quickly ran after him, no longer doubting that he was healed and well.

“Here is a horse,” said Merlin when Roland was beside him again. In actuality, there were two horses hidden behind a rock in the pass. In another moment, the wizard and the warrior were mounted and galloping south, toward the monastery of Montserrat—where secrets were kept that Roland could scarcely imagine.