

The Palace of
Morgana
and other fantasy tales

by
John Sterling

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The Palace of Morgana and Other Fantasy Tales



BOOKSHIP



Portrait of John Sterling, 1830. (By J. Brown.)

Wisdom's Pearl doth often dwell
Closed in Fancy's rainbow shell.

— Sterling, "A Chronicle of England"

Contents

Introduction	9
The Palace of Morgana	15
A Chronicle of England	25
The Suit of Armour and the Skeleton	43
The Caterpillar	59
The Last of the Giants	63
The Shell	74
Zamor	78
Cydon	92
Melita: A Fragment of Greek Romance	114
The Lycian Painter	124
The Crystal Prison	134
The Sons of Iron	136
The Substitute for Apollo	142
Balthazar	148
Beatrice	155
Land and Sea	160

Introduction

One of the impulses that led Tolkien to create Middle-Earth and the whole “legendarium” set within it was his desire to make a mythology for England, a country he felt didn’t have a characteristic myth of its own. It’s too much to claim that so slight a tale (certainly in comparison to *The Lord of the Rings*) as John Sterling’s “A Chronicle of England” had similar ambitions, but it touches on the same territory. First published in 1840 in Blackwood’s Magazine, Sterling’s tale paints a poetic picture of a fairy-haunted isle, where the unending conflict between the sunlight-loving fairies and their dark, thunderous brothers, the giants, in the days before the land received its first human inhabitants seems, at times, to be a mythologising of that most English of preoccupations, the isle’s ever-changing weather, and a celebration of the many delicate shades of sunlight, cloud, mist and storm that, to a Romantic-minded writer such as Sterling, lent England its own particular type of enchantment.

It’s a tale that perhaps owes its greatest debt to Shakespeare, and the playfully elaborate fairy world he evokes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Similarly, Sterling’s 1837 tale, “The Palace of Morgana” — a virtually conflict-free idyll in which bright young things flit about the grounds of a paradisaal palace, amusing themselves with displays of magic — perhaps owes something to Shakespeare’s other great work of fantasy, with its magician figure possibly being a young and carefree pre-*Tempest*

Prospero.

This Shakespearean feel to what were two of the last stories Sterling wrote was a new element, both in Sterling's own writing, and the fantasy of his day, and points intriguingly at the direction he might have taken his writing, had he lived longer. Fantasy of Sterling's type, rooted in the Romantic ideal of seeking (as Shelley put it) "strange truths in undiscovered lands", and which was inspired by the darker literary fairy tales being written in Germany at the time, would be almost exclusively addressed to an audience of children throughout the rest of the nineteenth century in England (Sara Coleridge's *Phantasmion* (1837) and John Ruskin's *King of the Golden River* (1841) being two early examples), and it was not until the likes of Lord Dunsany's *King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924), and Hope Mirrlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist* (1926), that similarly enchanting fantasies were addressed to an adult audience one again. Sterling might have changed all that, but he died in 1844, aged 38, of the tuberculosis that had dogged his adult life.

Sterling was born in 1806, on the Scottish Isle of Bute, where his father, a former militia captain, rented a farm. The family moved to London in 1815, where Sterling's father became a political writer, and young John was educated at Greenwich, Blackheath and Christ's Hospital schools. During this time, as Thomas Carlyle writes in his *Life of John Sterling*:

"New brothers and sisters had been born; two little

brothers more, three little sisters he had in all; some of whom came to their eleventh year beside him, some passed away in their second or fourth: but from his ninth to his sixteenth year they all died; and in 1821 only [elder brother] Anthony and John were left.”

Between 1822 and 1824, Sterling studied at the University of Glasgow, then returned to England to enter Trinity College, Cambridge. Unable to choose between a career in law, politics, the church, or letters, he left without a degree.

With a friend, the theologian and writer Frederick Denison Maurice, Sterling founded a literary magazine, *The Metropolitan Quarterly*. A couple of years later, the pair took on proprietorship of *The Athenaeum* magazine (which continued publication, in other hands, until 1921). It was here Sterling published his first fantasy tales, including the mock-Oriental “The Caterpillar” (whose main virtue is the deliberate silliness of the moral he adds at the end), the poignant fifteenth-century-set “The Last of the Giants”, and “Zamor”, a mix of classical history and Gothic nightmare, a kind of *Vathek*-in-miniature built from three glimpses into the life of Alexander the Great.

By this time Sterling had become a disciple of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, visiting the elder statesman of Romanticism at his home on Highgate Hill. Now in his mid-fifties and having long since ceased to produce poetry, Coleridge, in Carlyle’s words, “had this dusky sublime character; and sat there as a kind of *Magus*, girt in mystery and enigma.” Sterling recorded many of the conversations the two had (which, according to Carlyle — certainly no Coleridgean — would have mostly consisted of the older

man rambling on various topics while Sterling listened), though these records were subsequently lost.

Sterling married Susannah Barton in 1830. A year later, the couple moved to the Caribbean island of St Vincent where, through his mother's uncle, Sterling had inherited a plantation. He hoped the climate would help with the symptoms of tuberculosis that were starting to make themselves known. But these were the days of plantations worked by slaves, and Sterling's attempts to improve the quality of life and schooling of those on his own plantation evoked ill feeling, and even persecution, from his fellow plantation-owners. A son, Edward, was born to the couple, but the family home, including Sterling's library, was destroyed in a hurricane. After fifteen months, they left St Vincent.

1833 saw the publication of Sterling's novel, *Arthur Coningsby* (which was probably written as much as five years earlier). The tale of a young man's political awakening as he experiences the turmoil of post-revolutionary France, it contained several tales embedded within its main narrative, some of a fantastic or weird nature, including the short horror story "The Crystal Prison", (whose central idea would appear in "The Hell of Mirrors" by early-20th century Japanese writer Edogawa Ranpo), and "The Sons of Iron", a short fable about metal men. These, and several other tales, were later published in their own right in the posthumous, two-volume *Essays and Tales*. (*The Palace of Morgana and Other Fantasy Tales* collects two more stories taken from *Arthur Coningsby*, "Balthazar" and "Beatrice".)

The novel was a modest success, but Sterling's growing family (a daughter, Anna, was born in March the same year)

needed a more secure income, so he took up the offer of a position in the church, becoming curate at Hurstmonceux in East Sussex, where his former Cambridge tutor (and later literary executor along with Thomas Carlyle) Julius Charles Hare was vicar. (Sterling also finally completed his Bachelor of Arts degree at Cambridge before being ordained.)

He lasted just over half a year in the position. Either disagreements with the Church of England's ideas, or the dictates of his poor health, led to his resigning in February 1835. It was after this that his final series of tales, published in Blackwood's Magazine under the shared heading "Legendary Lore", began to appear, among which were his best yet, including "A Chronicle of England", "The Palace of Morgana", "The Suit of Armour and the Skeleton", and the ballad-like tale of the fateful draw of the ocean, "Land and Sea".

Double tragedy struck in 1843. Sterling received news of his mother's death and, barely two hours later, his own wife died, having recently given birth to their second daughter, Hester. He proposed to the Quaker and diarist Caroline Fox in the following year but was, by this time, in poor health, and Caroline's family advised against the match. He died in September 1844.

Care of Sterling's "literary Character and printed Writings" (as Carlyle put it) were given into the joint hands of Julius Charles Hare and Thomas Carlyle. When, in 1848, the two-volume *Essays and Tales* was published, it contained a biographical essay by Hare, and Carlyle took exception to Hare's preoccupation with "excusing and explaining" Sterling's "ecclesiastical heresies" at the expense of saying

much about the man himself. In response, Carlyle wrote his own *Life of John Sterling*, which was published in 1851.

During his lifetime, Sterling's work had been championed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had sought an American publisher for it. Sterling's fantasy short stories draw from the same source (German Romanticism) as those of his contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe, but, though Sterling's did sometimes touch on such Gothic-Romantic topics as madness, horror, fate, and the dreadful sublime, his tales have a greater degree of light and enchantment in them, making them generally very different in tone to Poe's.

What Sterling left behind is as much about the promise of what he might have gone on to do as what he actually achieved, but his better tales — “The Last of the Giants”, “The Palace of Morgana”, “A Chronicle of England”, “Zamor”, “The Suit of Armour and the Skeleton” — certainly make them worth reading by those who like the poetic, the enchanting, and the imaginative in fantasy literature.

Sterling is a worthy addition to any fantasy reader's library.

Murray Ewing

The Palace of Morgana

(From Blackwood's Magazine, 1837)

The Palace of Morgana was vast and beautiful, with many halls and galleries of marble, jet, crystal, and lapis lazuli. Cornices of gay colours, mosaic pavements, continuous paintings of the most fanciful arabesques appeared on all sides; and through the florid windows, which in that climate needed no glass to close them, was seen the prospect of the large and lovely gardens. These were full of ancient trees, green turf, and beds of red flowers, and were divided by marble terraces from the wooded walks around. Many bright fountains played their diamond arches against the sun. All the birds of fairy-land flitted across the avenues, or rested in the foliage. Beautiful statues, and pieces of fantastic sculpture were placed here and there in those pleasant grounds, or grew like alabaster lilies from unknown seeds beneath. In sight of these fair things, many colonnades and domes rose amid the masses of foliage, for the assembling or repose of the happy inhabitants.

There, at a certain season, which grave historians have generally omitted to speak of, were a party of young men and damsels. They spent their time in singing to each other, in gathering and braiding flowers, in sports and dancing, or in enjoying their light and gay repast beneath the shade. Their life was fit for spring-time, full of courtesy and honour; and all evil was as far from the thought of those youths and ladies, as was the appearance of aught foul or displeasing from their abode. Some of them were generally