Sword in the Tree
By Clyde Robert Bulla

Chapter One: Weldon Castle

The boy sat up in bed. A sound in the night had wakened him. His room was so dark he could see nothing, but he could hear steps outside his door. He held his breath and listened.

"Shan!" said a voice.

He let his breath go. It was his mother, calling his name.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it?"

Lady Marian came into the room. She had a candle in her hand, and the light moved over the stone walls.

"Shan, I'm glad to find you here," she said. "I was afraid you had gone with your father."

"Where has my father gone?" asked Shan.

"One of the servants just wakened him and they went away together," she said. "I heard them speak of a wounded knight."

"A wounded knight?" said Shan.

"Yes," said Lady Marian. "Shan, what does it mean? Is someone making war on us? Are there enemy soldiers outside?"

"Don't be afraid, Mother," said Shan. "Our good King Arthur has beaten all our enemies. And even if there were enemies, we would be safe here. There is no stronger castle in England than ours."

He went to the window. A light was moving in the courtyard below.

"Mother, I'm going down there," he said.

"I don't think you should go," said Lady Marian.

"No one is fighting," he said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

He put on his clothes. He ran down the stairs and into the courtyard. There was a light near the castle gate. He went toward it.

At the gate he found his father. Some of the servants were there, too. One of them had a lighted torch in his hand.

"Father—" Shan stopped. On the stones at his father's feet lay a man. A long, black beard hid his face. Two of the servants were taking off his armor.

"Who is he?" asked Shan.

"No one knows," said his father. "He beat on the gate. We let him in, and he fell in a faint."

"My lord, I have found his wound," said one of the servants.

Shan's father looked at the wound in the man's side. "Bring him into the castle at once," he said.

The servants lifted the wounded man. They carried him into a bedroom in the castle.

"Has he lost much blood?" asked Shan.

"I think so," said his father. "The wound is deep."

"Shall I bring Nappus?" asked Shan.

"Nappus?"

"Yes. Nappus is a man of magic. He can make the knight well."

"Poor Nappus." Shan's father shook his head. "He knows no magic. But he was once the best of doctors."

"He is still the best of doctors," said Shan. "Remember how he took the fishbone from your throat? Remember how he bound up my arm when it was broken?"

"Yes, yes," said his father. "Go and bring him if you wish."

Shan took a lighted torch from one of the servants and ran out across the courtyard. He opened a door in the castle wall. It was the door to Nappus' room.

Nappus was sleeping, with his cloak over his head. Shan touched him. Nappus looked out from under the cloak.

He was a small man. His hair was white. He could neither hear nor speak, but his eyes were keen and bright.

"There is a wounded knight in the castle," said Shan. "Come and dress his wound."

Nappus watched Shan's lips, reading the words. He nodded to show that he understood. From a box in a corner he took some jars and bottles. He tied them up in a cloth.

Shan led the way to the castle. Nappus knelt by the wounded man. He washed the wound and dressed it. He opened the man's mouth and poured a little red wine down his throat.

The man moved. His eyes opened, and he looked at Nappus. "Lord Weldon!" he said in a whisper. "Where is Lord Weldon?"

Shan's father came forward. "I am Lord Weldon. You are safe in Weldon Castle."

The wounded man tried to lift himself. "Brother–!" he said. Then he fell back and was still.

Shan's father bent over the man and looked into his face. He cried out, "Lionel!" His voice shook with excitement. He said to Shan, "This knight is my brother. I am sure of it. Shan, this is your Uncle Lionel. After these many years, your Uncle Lionel has come home!"

Uncle Lionel

Shan had heard many tales of his uncle. Now he wanted to hear more. "Tell me about my Uncle Lionel," he said to his father.

"Wait until he is strong," said Lord Weldon, "and he will tell you himself."

Shan asked his mother, "Will you tell me about my uncle?"

"I never knew him well," she said. "He sailed from England long before you were born. He was wild when he was a boy. He was never a kind and gentle knight, and he was never as brave as your father."

"Did he live here at Weldon Castle?" asked Shan.

"No," said Lady Marian. "He had a castle of his own, but he sold it and quickly spent the money. Then he went away to France and Spain and other far places."

"Do you think he will tell me about those far places?" asked Shan.

"He may," said his mother, "when he is strong again."

Every day Shan sat for a while by Lionel's bed. Most of the time his uncle slept. When he looked about him, his eyes were bright with fever and he knew no one.

But one morning, when he woke, the fever was gone from his eyes. He looked at Shan.

"Why do you sit there?" he asked.

Shan looked at him in surprise.

"Why do you sit and look at me?" cried Lionel. "Speak, you young dog!"

Shan jumped to his feet. "I am no dog. I am the son of Lord Weldon."

"You lie! My brother has no son."

"I do not lie, and you have no right to say so!" Shan turned and walked out of the room.