



THE SWORD EXCALIBUR

ADAPTED FROM *THE ONCE AND
FUTURE KING* BY T.H. WHITE

CAST

ARTHUR	<i>Young King of Britain</i>
MERLYN	<i>Magician, Arthur's Tutor</i>
LOT	<i>King of Orkney</i>
KAY	<i>Arthur's Seneschal</i>
LADY	<i>Lady of the Lake</i>
SQUIRE	<i>Servant to a Knight</i>
THIEF	<i>Roadside Bandit</i>

NARRATOR: King Arthur was a young man, just on the threshold of life. He had fair hair and an open face with kind eyes and a faithful expression, as though he were a good learner who enjoyed being alive.

His tutor, Merlyn had made good on his promise to help him set up his kingdom. The castle of Camelot was established as the

home of Arthur's court. The call went out to all the lesser kings and lords of Britain for them to come to Camelot and pledge their loyalty to the boy-king. It was about that time that Lot, the King of Orkney and Lothian, began to grumble against Arthur's right to reign.

LOT: Why should an illegitimate brat be our king? So what if he was Uther Pendragon's son? How can a boy lead men? I am married to Uther's adopted daughter. I have more of a right to be king than he does! The Sword in the Stone was just a cheap trick devised by that old warlock Merlyn. I say we take Britain back! Who's with me?

(shouts of agreement)

NARRATOR: Lot found allies among the other kings of Britain, and together they began to muster their forces. News of Lot's amassing army reached Merlyn.

MERLYN: Arthur, an army of hostile knights is heading toward Camelot. It is led by King Lot of Orkney.

ARTHUR: I don't understand.

MERLYN: Orkney. It's a miserable chain of islands off the northern coast of Britain.

ARTHUR: No, I mean, why is he leading an army against me?

MERLYN: Oh, that's easy. He wants your head. Or, more specifically, what rests upon it. He's perfectly willing to remove the former in order to receive the latter.

ARTHUR: I can't believe he'd kill me just to get my crown. He doesn't even know me!

MERLYN: It's not personal. It's politics. Lot has convinced ten other kings to rally to his cause. He says that you're too young, you have no experience—plus, it's a known fact that teenagers have no common sense. All of his claims are true, of course...

ARTHUR: Hey!

MERLYN: Lot and his allies have been your sworn enemies even before you were born. Two of the kings who oppose you are married to your half-sisters, who hate you with a fiery passion.

ARTHUR: I have half-sisters? And even *they* want me dead?

MERLYN: Welcome to the Middle Ages! But as much fun as this look at your family tree is, we have to prepare for war!

NARRATOR: When Lot and his army arrived at Camelot, he found Arthur's own army of loyal knights arrayed upon the battle plain. That night Arthur and Merlyn viewed the thousand campfires of King Lot's army.

ARTHUR: There are so many. They have us easily outnumbered.

MERLYN: Don't fret. Command your men to prepare for battle.

ARTHUR: But it is evening time.

MERLYN: (*sarcastically*) Really? I was wondering why it was so dark. Of course, it is evening time. That's the best time to

launch a sneak attack, wouldn't you say? Lot's knights have just tucked themselves into bed.

NARRATOR: Arthur's army was quickly roused, and the boy-king sat astride his steed at the head of his knights. Merlyn rode forward on his white donkey.

MERLYN: Now to give you a slight advantage.

NARRATOR: The old wizard uttered some strange words, and across the valley the many tents of the enemy army simultaneously collapsed. (*whooshing sound*) Lot's men—trapped beneath the fallen tents—shouted in confusion. (*confused shouting*)

MERLYN: I just couldn't help myself! Now shout, "Charge!" already!

ARTHUR: (*shouting*) Charge!

(*battlecries, hoofbeats, sounds of battle*)

NARRATOR: Thanks to the bravery of Arthur and his knights, the army of Lot and his allies was routed. Arthur's rule was legitimized—once and for all.

The next day Arthur and Merlyn stood upon the castle ramparts watching the bustle of the city below.

ARTHUR: Camelot is safe again! It was a good battle, wasn't it?

MERLYN: (*sigh*) I suppose you will learn someday, but Heaven knows it is heartbreaking, uphill work.

ARTHUR: What do you mean?

MERLYN: (*mockingly*) What do you mean? What do you mean? Is that all you can say? You are just like a schoolboy!

ARTHUR: Be careful, Merlyn. I am king now. I can have your head cut off, you know.

MERLYN: Cut it off. I'd be glad of it. Then I would not have to keep tutoring you!

ARTHUR: What is the matter, Merlyn? Have I done something wrong. I am sorry if I have.

MERLYN: It is not so much what you are doing. It is what you are thinking. If there is one thing I can't stand, it is stupidity!

ARTHUR: Tell me what I've done then.

MERLYN: Tell you? I have you tell you? What is going to happen when nobody is around to tell you the answers? Think for yourself already! What will you do when I am locked away forever and can no longer help you?

ARTHUR: Was it something I said? All I said was that it was a good battle.

MERLYN: Exactly. There is no such thing as a good battle. I had hoped you would have realized that by now.

ARTHUR: But...it was a good battle. We won. I had fun.

MERLYN: Did you? How many of your soldiers died during this "fun" battle?

ARTHUR: Uh...

MERLYN: Seven hundred to be exact. I bet *they* had fun...dying!

ARTHUR: But none of the knights died.

MERLYN: And only the knights matter?

ARTHUR: And I fought, too.

MERLYN: Yes, I'd forgotten about those two bruises you have.

NARRATOR: Arthur lowered his head.

ARTHUR: (*sheepishly*) I was only thinking of myself, wasn't I? I didn't think of the people who fight without armor.

MERLYN: You didn't think at all.

ARTHUR: (*angrily*) I hate it when you are a testy, old prig like this, Merlyn. I really am trying, you know!

MERLYN: That's better! Stand up for yourself. Think for yourself! Now that you've won your war, it is time to think! It is time to think of a better solution than all this running around whacking each other with swords.

ARTHUR: I'll try, Merlyn.

MERLYN: Now, concentrate! I want you to think of the most evil knight you can. What makes him evil?

ARTHUR: He stabs people in the back. He murders maidens. He attacks people in the forest.

MERLYN: But, you see, I don't think he's much different from any other knight. What

is all this chivalry, anyway? It simply means being rich enough to have a castle and a suit of armor. And when you have them, you make the peasants under you do whatever you want! “Might means Right” is this country’s motto. King Lot is an example of this. He thought if he beat you, it would prove he is the rightful ruler. If you beat him, it proves that you are right.

ARTHUR: Oh. Might *isn’t* right, is it?

MERLYN: Oh no you don’t. There you are again—trying to get me to do the thinking! You decide! Is might right? And if not, give me reasons why.

ARTHUR: But...(sigh) Very well. I will think about it.

NARRATOR: Arthur had been playing with a loose stone in Camelot’s wall, and he pulled it free. Below he could see the people walking to and fro. One, in particular, caught his eye. He turned to Merlyn coyly.

ARTHUR: See that peasant there? He is so small.

MERLYN: Tiny. Insignificant.

ARTHUR: I wonder what would happen if I dropped this brick on his head?

MERLYN: At thirty-two feet a second, it would kill him dead.

ARTHUR: I have never killed anybody like that.

MERLYN: You are the king. Nobody can say anything to you if you want to try it. You have the power.

NARRATOR: Arthur held the stone out over the side of the wall as if he were going to drop it on the peasant’s head. Then swiftly he turned and slung it toward Merlyn—knocking the magician’s hat from his head.

ARTHUR: Think fast, Merlyn!

NARRATOR: Then he ran to escape the fury of the wizard.

MERLYN: Argh! Get back here, you rogue!

NARRATOR: Once Merlyn had chased Arthur until he could no more, he called for a truce.

MERLYN: (*breathing heavily*) What were we talking about?

ARTHUR: How I shall rule my kingdom.

MERLYN: Oh yes. The first order of business is this: What will you do with these eleven traitorous kings who have rebelled against you? They have already sent envoys to beg you for mercy.

ARTHUR: What would my father have done?

MERLYN: He would have executed them and not thought twice about it.

ARTHUR: What shall I do?

MERLYN: Think twice.

ARTHUR: Hmmm. I will spare them. If they will pledge themselves to me, I will forget the past.

NARRATOR: The old wizard smiled.

MERLYN: The boy may make a good king after all.

NARRATOR: Soon the rebellion of the eleven kings became a distant memory. Under Merlyn's tutelage Arthur grew into his position as High King of Britain.

Arthur was happy. He was like Adam in Eden before the fall. As far as he was concerned, there was not a single particle of sorrow on the surface of the dew-glittering world.

Merlyn often traveled afar for months at a time—carrying news of Camelot to the far reaches of Britain and returning with honorable knights to boost Arthur's court.

Once while Merlyn was gone on one of his missions, a terrified squire brought news to the young king.

SQUIRE: Sire! A rogue knight has set up a tent along the roadside. He's challenging any virtuous knight who passes to combat. He's crushed my master's body, and I only escaped with my life to bring you this news!

ARTHUR: Who does this man think he is? I'll have no rogue knights in *my* kingdom! Ready my horse!

NARRATOR: Arthur donned his armor and rode forth. (*hoofbeats*) As Arthur galloped through the forest, a scruffy, old beggar man shot out of a thicket—running for all he was worth.

ARTHUR: Halt! What is the meaning of this?

MERLYN: (*frantic, old man voice*) No time! No time!

NARRATOR: A band of thieves burst out of the underbrush—following hot on the beggar's heels.

THIEF: Give us your purse, you old coot, or we'll cut your throat!

ARTHUR: Halt, dogs! I am Arthur! Leave that old man alone!

NARRATOR: The bandits stopped short and for the first time noticed Arthur.

THIEF: Ah! A knight! Run!

NARRATOR: King Arthur did not pursue them but turned to the old man to see if he was all right. The beggar looked up, and beneath his scraggly beard was an all-too-familiar face.

ARTHUR: (*amazed*) Merlyn? What are you doing here?

MERLYN: (*huffing, puffing*) Running for my life. What does it look like?

ARTHUR: It thought you were away on one of your missions.

MERLYN: I was, but when I arrived in Camelot, they told me that you had ridden out to challenge a rogue knight yourself! You know, most kings just send their knights to do this kind of thing for them!

ARTHUR: Why should my knights get to have all the fun?

MERLYN: Yes, but if *you* are killed in battle, all of this land will be lost. The hope of a thousand people will be extinguished.

ARTHUR: I think I can handle a simple battle.

MERLYN: Ha! Don't grow too confident that you lose sight of your own human weaknesses.

ARTHUR: You are one to talk. You were just being chased by that band of ruffians. Even with all your magic, they would have cut your throat if I hadn't stopped them.

MERLYN: Exactly, you dunce! I was trying to prove a point to you. Even I—an all-powerful wizard—am mortal, and I should be careful what situations I put myself in.

ARTHUR: Merlyn, thank you for the lesson. But I am off to challenge this rogue knight.

MERLYN: This challenger is a mighty foe named King Pellinore, and he will cut your head off if you are not careful.

ARTHUR: We shall see, Merlyn. We shall see.

MERLYN: Fine! Don't say I didn't warn you! Why listen to Merlyn? He can only see the future—nothing much!

NARRATOR: Arthur had been on the receiving end of Merlyn's tantrums time enough, so he quietly rode on while the magician continued to rant.

MERLYN: I'm just like Cassandra of Troy! Nobody listened to her either, and then guess what happened?

NARRATOR: The old wizard suddenly realized the king was gone.

MERLYN: Oh thank goodness. I thought he'd never leave. I'll let him try it on his own for a while and see how it goes.

NARRATOR: Much satisfied, Merlyn sat down beneath a tree and listened to the sounds of swords crashing far away. (*distant clanging of shield and sword*) Then he rose.

MERLYN: (*happily*) He will have himself in a fine pickle by now, I assume.

NARRATOR: And, sure enough, he came into a clearing where an enormous knight stood with his sword raised over the weaponless Arthur.

MERLYN: (*booming*) King Pellinore! Stay your hand!

NARRATOR: Merlyn's cry caused the huge knight's descending blade to stop in midair. Indeed Pellinore had almost brought Arthur to the point of death.

MERLYN: Do not slay this man! Do you not know who he is? He is King Arthur, and if you slay him, this kingdom will fall into utter darkness.

ARTHUR: (*angrily*) Merlyn! I have this completely under control.

MERLYN: (*parent-like*) Shush!

NARRATOR: Merlyn flailed his arms about in the air, babbled some strange words, and the massive form of Pellinore fell backward into the grass. (*crashing sound*)

ARTHUR: You killed him!

MERLYN: Relax. It is only a sleep-spell.

NARRATOR: Loud snoring escaped the visor of Pellinore's helm. (*snoring*)

MERLYN: That should hold him for several hours. He will catch up on his beauty rest, and you will get safely on your way.

ARTHUR: (*furious*) I can't believe this! I had him right where I wanted him.

MERLYN: Really? Standing over you ready to slay you was right where you wanted him? Interesting.

ARTHUR: Well, I would rather die than be called a coward.

MERLYN: So said Caesar—and he did.

ARTHUR: I can't be saved by my court magician every time I get into a scrape!

MERLYN: (*angrily*) Who are you calling a "court magician"? Would you like to find out what it's like to be a horse's behind?

ARTHUR: I'm sure you would know plenty about that!

MERLYN: Hmph!

NARRATOR: Merlyn stuck the end of his beard in his mouth and chewed it angrily. A slow smile spread across Arthur's face.

ARTHUR: I am willing and thankful for your help. But just for the record, I had this knight mostly beaten. You just came in at the last minute and finished him off.

MERLYN: Keep telling yourself that.

NARRATOR: Merlyn motioned to the sleeping form of Pellinore.

MERLYN: You may not believe it, but one day he will be one of your greatest allies. You will give many aimless knights like him a cause to fight for. But for now let's leave him to his dreams of dragons and damsels. We have adventuring to do.

ARTHUR: I can't. I have broken my sword in battle. It just shattered in my hand!

MERLYN: I expected as much. That sword has outlived its usefulness. Let's go.

ARTHUR: But where?

NARRATOR: Merlyn was already walking briskly away through the trees. Arthur dashed to catch up.

ARTHUR: Hey! Wait up!

MERLYN: There is a sword that was crafted by the magic of the faeries—on Avalon, the isle of magic.

ARTHUR: Is it a sword for me?

MERLYN: No, it's for Henry the stable boy. Of course, it's for you! The sword is Excalibur, and none may stand against it.

ARTHUR: It sounds like a mighty weapon.

MERLYN: It is. You will require only the finest of swords to protect you. With Excalibur you will bring freedom and peace to Britain for many years. But a sword is only as good as the man who uses it. So you must guard it—and yourself—very carefully. Now, watch your step.

NARRATOR: They descended down a slippery pile of rocks. Merlyn almost fell several times and grumbled loudly. Finally, they reached the bottom, and through a small stand of trees, Arthur saw a great lake spread out before them.

ARTHUR: (*in awe*) Heaven preserve us!

NARRATOR: The water was of the clearest blue Arthur had ever seen. Mists covered what lay in the distance.

MERLYN: Beyond the mist lies the isle of Avalon and further on the plain of Camlann, where the last battle shall be fought—where you shall be killed by an evil knight.

ARTHUR: (*determined*) I shall face that day bravely.

MERLYN: And that is what will get you killed! But I have said too much. Behold! In the middle of the lake, what do you see?

ARTHUR: (*looking, slowly*) I can barely see ...a hand! A hand coming up from the water! It's clad in a shining material decorated with sparkling jewels.

MERLYN: That is pure samite, my boy!

ARTHUR: And it's holding something out of the depths...a sword! The finest I have ever seen.

MERLYN: As it should be. It is Excalibur!

ARTHUR: How shall I reach it, Merlyn?

MERLYN: Don't ask me! Ask her!

NARRATOR: Then Arthur beheld her, the glowing image of a woman, walking across the misty lake. Where her feet touched the water's surface, no ripples appeared, and as she came, Arthur heard a faraway music. (*heavenly music*) He was entranced.

ARTHUR: (*stunned*) Who is she?

MERLYN: The Lady of the Lake. Don't just stand there like a stump! Go out to her!

NARRATOR: There was a tiny boat on the shore of the lake. Arthur heard that in the lady's song she was beckoning to him. He got into the boat, and it began to move across the waters of its own accord.

LADY: (*musically*) Arthur. Arthur. I am the Lady of the Lake. Do you desire the sword in the midst of this lake?

ARTHUR: I do, my lady.

LADY: Then bring your craft forward and take it. For many years, I have guarded this sword. Now, I give it freely to you, if you will give it back when the time comes.

ARTHUR: I will, my lady.

NARRATOR: Arthur was in the center of the lake now. The samite-clad hand was within his reach—dutifully holding the sword aloft. He noticed draped across the arm was also a shimmering scabbard of gold.

LADY: Take the sword. It is Excalibur. It shall serve you well.

NARRATOR: The music grew louder in his ears, and he reached out. His fingers

brushed upon the sword-hilt, and he felt its power go through him. He gripped it strongly. The mystical hand let go and sank beneath the waves. Excalibur and its scabbard were his own now.

ARTHUR: (*breathlessly*) Thank you! This is the greatest gift I have ever received!

NARRATOR: Arthur looked up to thank the Lady of the Lake, but she was not there, and, indeed, the mist had risen. All magic had left the place.

ARTHUR: (*shouting*) Merlyn! Look! The sword is mine!

MERLYN: (*shouting back*) Of course, it is! Now row back here quickly!

NARRATOR: Arthur found the oars within the boat and grudgingly put down his new sword to take them up. As the sword moved through the air, it sang the same song he had heard the lady sing. Somehow, it soothed him. Arthur's boat once again reached the shore.

MERLYN: Did you get the scabbard as well?

ARTHUR: Yes. I have them both.

MERLYN: (*calmly*) Come. Let us go. Tell me, which do you like better? The sword or the scabbard?

ARTHUR: The sword, of course! With it, I may cut down any enemy with a single stroke.

NARRATOR: Arthur gleefully swished the sword through the air.

MERLYN: But the scabbard is the true prize. It is worth ten swords.

ARTHUR: How?

MERLYN: Well, when the scabbard is worn, no matter how badly you are wounded, you will not bleed. Keep it close. One day, a woman will steal it from you if you are not careful.

ARTHUR: (*laughs*) A woman? Come on, Merlyn. Surely, you do not think me weak enough to be tricked by a woman.

MERLYN: We shall see.

NARRATOR: And so the two left that place, and far away, the Lady of the Lake, in her invisible kingdom, began to sing once again.

Once back at Camelot Arthur showed Excalibur to Kay, his foster-brother, who had become his seneschal, the overseer of all his lands.

KAY: Arthur, it is a mighty weapon! Too bad you did not have this when you fought against King Lot! No man could stand against such a blade.

MERLYN: Exactly. Arthur, have you thought any more about what we talked about before—power and the right way to use it?

ARTHUR: I have. I realize this is a large amount of Might I have been given.

KAY: Merlyn, you are not going to turn him against war, are you? War is a way of life.

MERLYN: You know, when I was a young man—far in the future, of course—there was an idea that it was wrong to fight in wars of any sort.

ARTHUR: Perhaps they were right.

MERLYN: Wars are a wickedness—perhaps the greatest wickedness of a wicked species. But there is one fairly good reason for fighting one: If the other side starts it.

KAY: But both sides always say that the other side started the war.

MERLYN: True, but that is good. At least it proves that deep inside, both sides know it is wicked to start one.

KAY: But is it always wicked, Merlyn? What if you were a king who knew there was a way to save your people from destruction—a new way of life—but you would have to start a war to do it? If your people were too stupid or too wicked to accept this plan, you might have to enforce it upon them.

NARRATOR: The magician clenched his fists, twisted his gown into screws, and began to shake all over.

MERLYN: Thank goodness you did not receive Excalibur! When I was young, there was a man just like the one you describe. He was an Austrian who had a tiny moustache and tried to impose his views by the sword. He threw the entire world into misery and chaos!

NARRATOR: Merlyn calmed. Kay looked pale but still obstinate.

MERLYN: In the Holy Scriptures you *claim* to follow there is the example of Jesus Christ. Jesus knew how to save people, but he didn't do it by turning his disciples into stormtroopers, burning down Jerusalem, and conquering the world. On the contrary, he made it clear that the business of a philosopher is to make ideas *available* and not to *impose* them on people.

KAY: Let's talk about something else. I'm sick of these discussions about right and wrong.

NARRATOR: Arthur listened to this thoughtfully—staring at Excalibur.

ARTHUR: I will think more on this, Merlyn.

NARRATOR: So the topic was dropped for several weeks before it was brought up again. Merlyn sitting in his tower one day, trying to remember where he had put a certain spell, when Arthur suddenly appeared there.

ARTHUR: Merlyn, we need to talk. I came to fetch you.

MERLYN: (*angrily*) What is the meaning of this?

NARRATOR: Merlyn rushed at the young king with his wand, as if he was shooing away a stray chicken.

MERLYN: (*angrily*) Shoo! Get out of here! You are the King of England. You don't go looking for people! You summon me to you! Now go and do it right!

ARTHUR: But I am already here.

MERLYN: No, you are not.

NARRATOR: (*sound of door slamming*) He slammed the door in Arthur's face. Then the king trudged down the 208 stairs to his throne room and sent a servant to summon Merlyn to him.

When Merlyn entered the hall, the magician noticed Kay, Sir Ector, and many other of Arthur's trusted knights were gathered there as well.

ARTHUR: (*grandly*) Merlyn, I, Arthur the ruler of all England, have summoned you here—by my servant—for a council.

MERLYN: Much better. I approve.

ARTHUR: I have been thinking about Might and Right.

NARRATOR: Merlyn was immediately watching Arthur with a sharp eye.

MERLYN: Are you sure that you didn't summon me here to do the thinking for you?

ARTHUR: No.

NARRATOR: Merlyn's knobbed fingers fluttered among the stars of his gown. This was the critical moment of his career—the moment towards he had been living backward for heaven knows how many centuries. Now he was to see whether or not he had lived in vain.

ARTHUR: I don't think things should be done because you are *able* to do them. I think they should be done because you *ought* to do them. War is not a good thing.

People ought not to die in a war. It is better that they stay alive.

KAY: But you just fought a war, and Merlyn helped you win that war.

ARTHUR: I know. That's what puzzled me, too. Why did Merlyn help me fight a war if they are bad things?

NARRATOR: Nobody spoke. Merlyn looked to the ceiling.

ARTHUR: Then I realized Merlyn wanted me to win this war, so that I could become the master of my kingdom and put an end to war forever.

NARRATOR: Arthur turned to Merlyn.

ARTHUR: Have I guessed it? Was I right?

NARRATOR: Merlyn turned his head away.

ARTHUR: Ah-ha! I was right!

NARRATOR: Then he began talking so quickly he could barely keep up with himself.

ARTHUR: You see, Might is *not* Right. But there is a lot of Might knocking about in this world of ours. Something has to be done about it. When evil people become mighty, they use their might to steal, rape, plunder, and torture. People become beasts. But Merlyn helped me so that I can stop all this. He wants me to put things right.

KAY: How can you change that?

ARTHUR: I will make a new order of knights—knights from all over Britain. The knights in my order will ride throughout the world, but they will only strike to help the oppressed and protect damsels and so forth. They will use their might for the greater good. What do you think?

KAY: How will you start a new tradition?

ARTHUR: The most important thing will be to catch them young. The old knights will be too old to learn. We must breed up a new generation of chivalry for the future.

KAY: I think there will be a lot of jealousy. All the knights in this order will be saying they are the best one and wanting to sit at the head of the table.

ARTHUR: Then we must have a round table—one with no head and no foot. We could call them the Knights of the Round Table!

NARRATOR: Arthur turned to his old mentor.

ARTHUR: Now, what do you say, Merlyn? Have I finally learned my lesson? What do you think?

NARRATOR: Merlyn simply pursed his lips together, folded his arms, and said nothing. But there were tears in his eyes, and they spoke volumes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

3. **Connect:** Merlyn mentions an Austrian with a tiny moustache. Who is he talking about? What leaders from history have used their might and power for evil?
 4. **Compare and Contrast:** How is Excalibur similar or different from the sword that Arthur pulled from the stone?
 5. **Characterization:** What qualities make Arthur a good king? Explain.
 6. **Connect:** How can you use your own power or influence for good rather than evil?
 7. **Analyze:** Has Merlyn’s education of Arthur been successful? Explain.
 8. **Symbol:** How is the shape of the Round Table symbolic of Arthur’s philosophy on power?
1. **Opinion:** Is war a necessary evil? When is it okay to make war? Explain.
 2. **Theme:** What lesson does Arthur learn about Might and Right?