

# **King Arthur in Avalon**

**a play by**

**John Spurling**

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KING ARTHUR IN AVALON was first performed by the Cheltenham Ladies' College as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Cheltenham Festival of Literature, on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1999. The play was directed by Judi Bond, with the following cast:

GEORGIANA BURNE-JONES.....	Jo Moore
SIR EDWARD BURNE-JONES.....	Henry Moss-Blundell
THOMAS ROOKE, his studio assistant.....	Robert Huguenin
MORGAN.....	Camilla Nock
NIMUE.....	Katherine Bradley
ARANROD.....	Julia Chan
KING ARTHUR.....	Jessica Sidgwick
SIR KAY, his foster-brother and steward.....	Lucy Sharp
SIR BEDIVERE, his foster-brother and butler.....	Poppy Fildes
MERLIN.....	Lucy Wood
QUEEN GUENEVERE.....	Natalya Oram
SIR GAWAINE, son of King Lot of Orkney.....	Charlie Poole
QUEEN MARGAWSE, his mother, Arthur's half-sister..	Victoria Bavister
SIR LAMORAK, son of King Pellinore of Galis.....	Jolanda van Zeeland
SIR LAUNCELOT, son of King Ban of Brittany.....	Victoria Townsend
SIR GARETH, brother of Gawaine.....	Elizabeth Kaye
SIR AGRAVAINE, his brother.....	Alexa MacDermot
SIR MORDRED, his brother.....	Hannah Duncan
SIR GALAHAD, son of Sir Launcelot.....	Reiko Bridge

One-line parts

SIR COLGREVANCE.....	Melanie Gibbons
SIR MADOR.....	Sophie Wetherell
SIR GINGOLINE.....	Rebecca Heller
SIR MELIOT.....	Oki Hamilton
SIR PETIPASE.....	Lucy Nicholas

Non-speaking parts

ELAINE.....	Ellie Bruce
BOATMAN.....	Sara Kennedy.
CARRIER OF THE GRAIL.....	Amelia Heaton-Renshaw.
SIR GALLERON.....	Sophie Barrett
SIR MELION.....	Suzy Steer-Fowler
SIR ASTAMORE.....	Millie Stewart-Wood

LADIES: Robecta Ma, Eloise Donnelly, Sara Kennedy, Lorraine Jones, Louisa Wong, Amelia Heaton-Renshaw, Debra Chong, Jo Moore.

PAGES: Debra Chong and Jocelyn D'Arcy.

Costumes by Michelle Walton.

Harp played by Elizabeth Jane Baldry.

Fanfares composed by Paul Lewis.

The setting of Sir Lamorak's song composed by Philip Lane.

Incidental music from Bax's **Tintagel** and Elgar's **King Arthur Suite**.

Prologue

*Enter from one side BURNE-JONES and his wife GEORGIANA and from the other THOMAS ROOKE, lit at the front of the stage against darkness or a curtain behind*

GEORGIANA: Good morning, Mr Rooke!

ROOKE: Good morning, Lady Burne-Jones! Sir Edward!

GEORGIANA: You're sure you're not too tired, Ned, to tackle that monster painting today. The Last Sleep of Arthur, or whatever you're going to call it. You didn't sleep well at all.

JONES: At that rate I never would tackle it, would I? Not until I was sleeping the last sleep myself and then it would be too late.

GEORGIANA: Well, I'll see you both in good time for lunch. Mr Morris is coming, remember!

*She goes out. ROOKE and BURNE-JONES take off their coats and put on painting-smocks*

JONES: That cheers me up, as she knew it would.

ROOKE: Mr William Morris coming to lunch?

JONES: Nobody like Morris for making you laugh and giving you back your energy. I have such bad dreams, Rooke. Horrible dreams of needless journeys, gloomy waters, dark rooms, staircases, dreadful doors, footfalls following me. I seldom dream of anyone I love – never my daughter – sometimes my wife, but she's always unkind in dreams. Of course, that wild Greek woman came between us...

ROOKE: Mrs Zambaco? All the same, she made the perfect model for Nimue in your painting of the Beguiling of Merlin.

JONES: And I made a good Merlin, didn't I? Being beguiled. Yes, I was pleased with that painting, but my wife was not pleased with me. Well, I have been a bad man and am sorry for it, though not sorry enough to try to be a good one. *(sighs)* But in this dream I was talking to God. I knew it was He, but dared not look, and He said: "Jones...!" Yes, it was just Jones, not Burne-Jones, not Ned, and certainly not Sir Edward. I don't think they recognise baronetcies in Heaven. "Jones!" God said to me, "I have no money." Yes, the only personal communication He made to me. It sounds as if I'd been trying to borrow, doesn't it?

ROOKE: Or sell Him a picture.

JONES: *(laughs)* Or He wanted to commission one and couldn't pay. The opposite to poor George Howard who is only too eager to pay me for his commission for the library at Naworth Castle, which I don't seem to be able to get on with. I'm not in good spirits, Rooke, about **The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon**. It looks as though it might turn out no more than a piece of decoration with no meaning in it at all. And what's the good of that? I shall have to pull myself together and go at it with more fury.

ROOKE: Unfortunately, we've got so many things on hand that are more urgent.

JONES: Yes, dear, kind George Howard is too lenient with me. "Jones!" he ought to say to me, "I have no patience. It was your choice to cover an acre of canvas with a dream

of the death-bed of a King who probably never lived. Why didn't you pick something you could finish?"

ROOKE: What would you reply to that?

JONES: Why? (*pause, while he thinks about it*) Nothing was ever like **Morte d'Arthur**. I don't mean any one particular book or poem, but that story. Something that can never quite be captured and never goes out of the heart. That quest for something too sacred to be found, that strange land more true than real...

*During the last lines, the lights come up – or the curtain is raised – or ROOKE and BURNE-JONES draw back the curtains, revealing a tableau based on Burne-Jones's sketch of **The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon** from the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. At the centre, a bed or catafalque, on which lies the sleeping ARTHUR, turned towards the audience with his head on a pillow, one hand up beside his head, his shield just visible over the raised left shoulder. Pillars at the four corners of the bed support a sloping roof. In the background, apple-trees are in pink and white flower. In the foreground there is a flat, circular shore, with lake-water lapping it. In front of the bed, at either end, stand three figures holding box-like stringed instruments - Welsh 'crwth's'. To the right, in the foreground, two figures stand looking out to the right, the foremost holding a long shield and a spear. In the background on the right, with her back to the audience, stands a figure holding a long trumpet. On the left, at the back, a similar figure faces the bed and at the front, two figures hold long trumpets. All the figures wear dusky-blue robes, with hoods or leather helmets.*

BURNE-JONES: Was ever anything in the world beautiful as that is beautiful? If I might clear away all the work that I have begun and dedicate my last days to that story – if only I might!

*He and ROOKE go out.*

### Scene One

*Music. The figures in the tableau come to life and the three at the front – Celtic goddesses – holding the crwth's, chant or recite:*

MORGAN: Arthur sleeps in Avalon.  
He is not dead but sleeping,  
Not dead but dreaming.

NIMUE: Three winds visit Avalon,  
East, West and South,  
The North Wind never.

ARANROD: Three seasons visit Avalon,  
Spring, Summer, Autumn,  
But Winter never.

MORGAN:           The apple-trees in Avalon  
                           Bud, flower and fruit,  
                           Decaying never.

NIMUE:            Death never visits Avalon,  
                           Nor disease nor war,  
                           All wounds are healed here.

ALL:                Arthur sleeps in Avalon.  
                           He is not dead but sleeping,  
                           His wounds are healed here.

*ARTHUR stirs in his sleep*

ARANROD:         Twelve battles Arthur fought.  
                           Fire and Sword and Pestilence  
                           Wasted the land.

NIMUE:            Enemies from every quarter,  
                           North, South, West and East,  
                           Wasted the land.

MORGAN:         Starving, dying, the people fled,  
                           Cattle and crops, fields and farms  
                           Burning from sea to sea.

ALL:                Twelve battles Arthur fought,  
                           North, South, West and East,  
                           Riding from sea to sea.

ARANROD:         The sword Excalibur in his hand,  
                           Pendragon's shield on his arm,  
                           He slew the slaughterers.

NIMUE:            On the rivers Glein and Dubglas,  
                           In the forest Celidon, at the fort of Guinnion,  
                           He slew nine Kings.

MORGAN: In the City of the Legion, by the river Tribruit,  
On Mount Agned and at Badon Hill,  
He slew and conquered.

ARANROD: In twelve battles victorious,  
He won Pendragon's crown,  
Ruler from sea to sea.

NIMUE: Peace returned to the people,  
Justice went out from Camelot,  
Spring came back to the waste land.

MORGAN: Now Arthur sleeps in Avalon.  
He is not dead but sleeping,  
Not dead but dreaming.

*Wind and thunder. In semi-darkness all, except ARTHUR, go off.*

### Scene Two

*ARTHUR, tossing and turning, cries out:*

ARTHUR: Help me!

*He sits up as the lights come up again*

Where is my sword?

*KAY and BEDIVERE enter on either side at the back and, as ARTHUR turns and sees them, go down each on one knee*

ARTHUR: I saw my palace destroyed. My sister's sons shook the pillars and my Queen, with someone else whose face was hidden, broke open the roof.

*Enter MERLIN, carrying the sword Excalibur in a scabbard, with its belt*

MERLIN: Strange dream for your wedding day!

ARTHUR: It seemed more like my death day. I dreamed of a battle in which friends fought on both sides. I fought against my own son... I thrust, he parried... I thrust again... a horrible dream! What does it mean?

MERLIN: Who knows?

ARTHUR: Don't you?

MERLIN: *(sitting beside him on the bed)* Some dreams are prophesies, some are from over-eating. Yours, I should think, come from fighting too many battles. Killing disturbs the soul.

ARTHUR: But why should I dream I had a son? And why was I trying to kill him?

MERLIN: Don't ask me to interpret dreams? I leave that to charlatans. The first part might have a very simple meaning. You're afraid of your wedding day – or of your wife.

ARTHUR: Are you still against her?

MERLIN: 'Against' is too strong. She is a pretty princess, as charming as any you could find. I only question whether you really love her.

ARTHUR: I do love her.

MERLIN: Then there's no more to be said.

ARTHUR: I wish you'd be more open with me. There's something you know or think you know which you won't speak of.

*MERLIN, leaving the sword on the bed, gets up and walks away, signalling to BEDIVERE and KAY. They come forward and put a robe and crown on ARTHUR*

MERLIN: *(returning)* Don't imagine, just because I'm in touch with powerful spirits, that I know everything. On the contrary, knowing more only intensifies my ignorance. Gods work in aeons, men in days. These time-scales are not compatible. In the short term, men do as they please or can, but in the long term, the gods dispose. Sometimes they seem to take a hand in the short term too. But I suspect it doesn't suit them and they're just as likely to make a mess of the short term as we are of the long term. It was at their command that I visited your father's farm in the Forest of Dean and chose his third son... not his eldest, Kay, nor his next, Bedivere, but you, the youngest... to lead our people. It seemed at the time a foolish choice. An inexperienced boy without any proper pedigree. Almost every petty king in the land was infuriated and, to begin with, it caused even more strife than already existed. My attempt to prove that you really were Pendragon's son, born secretly to his second wife, Igraine, smuggled away and brought up in obscurity, convinced hardly anyone. I don't know how many times you had to draw the sword out of the stone and still people wouldn't accept you. Even magic is powerless against human self-interest and settled prejudice. However, the gods were determined to make a success of you. If a token sword in a stone was insufficient, then let it be a sword of real power! So they instructed me to take you to the lake and have you paddle your little coracle out over the empty water. When, behold, the arm in white samite broke the surface and gave you the sword Excalibur! Then both you and I believed what even we had begun to doubt. But whether it was your own natural courage, strength and strategy which defeated all your enemies and united the kingdom... or whether it was the invincible magic of the sword... I simply don't know. Nor do I know whether Guenevere is the Queen the gods have chosen for you... or whether they had someone else in mind... or whether they are simply indifferent. Therefore I can only advise you to be guided by your own feelings. After all, you never had any doubt that you could win your battles.

ARTHUR: My own feelings, then, should tell me what the gods really want?

MERLIN: Nothing is as easy as that.

*Bells begin to ring in the distance*

ARTHUR: Too late to have any doubts now.

MERLIN: Almost too late.

ARTHUR: Yes, I do love her.

*MERLIN gives him the sword with its scabbard and belt. ARTHUR buckles it on*

### Scene Three

*GUENEVERE enters, escorted by knights and ladies, including MARGAWSE and NIMUE, disguised now as a court lady. GUENEVERE and ARTHUR face one another as the bells fall silent. MERLIN comes between them, takes their hands and leads them down-stage, then releases their hands and, standing up-stage of them, produces a wreath of leaves and berries from his robes. He holds it high in the air and recites:*

MERLIN:               By oak and ash and mistletoe  
                               I invoke the spirits of trees and woods,  
                               Lakes, rivers, rocks and hills,  
                               Wind and rain and storm,  
                               And the gods of sky and sea,  
                               Sun, moon and stars,  
                               To bless this wedding.

*He puts the wreath on his own head and, taking their hands again, joins them and raises his arms in the air*

By oak and ash and mistletoe,  
 In the name of the spirits of our land  
 And the great gods of Heaven,  
 I call you husband and wife,  
 Arthur and Guenevere.

*Long, valveless trumpets play a short fanfare. GUENEVERE, at a nod from MERLIN, releases ARTHUR's hand and kneels in front of him. KAY comes forward and gives ARTHUR a crown, which he places on GUENEVERE's head, then, taking her hand, raises her to her feet. Another fanfare is played as ARTHUR leads GUENEVERE to the catafalque, where they sit enthroned side by side. MERLIN stands near ARTHUR, as knights and ladies come forward in turn and kneel in homage. When they have done so, GAWAINE comes hesitantly, awkwardly forward*

GAWAINE: I asked you a favour, uncle, which you promised to grant on your wedding day.

ARTHUR: *(standing up and speaking publicly)* Yes, Gawaine, and I will keep my promise. Your father, King Lot of Orkney, was my most bitter foe. He died valiantly in battle, contesting to the last my right to Pendragon's throne. It was not my own hand that killed your father and I much regret his death, but I cannot regret that my claim has been vindicated by that victory. Your mother, Margawse, daughter of the King of Cornwall and his Queen Igraine, is my half-sister. For Queen Igraine, after the death of the King of Cornwall, married the great Pendragon and bore a son in secret. I was that son. Your presence here at my wedding, Gawaine, you, the eldest of King Lot's sons, together with your mother and your three young brothers – Agravaire, Gareth and Mordred – is living proof that the bad times are past. Your mother graciously accepts me as her half-brother and successor to the throne of Pendragon. In the same spirit, I gladly acknowledge you and your brothers as my nephews, nearest and dearest to my throne, chief pillars of my kingdom. You asked me to make you a knight on my wedding day and that I most gladly do.

*Putting his hand on GAWAINE's head, he gently makes him kneel down, then, taking the sword from GAWAINE's side, touches him on both shoulders with it. Then, taking GAWAINE's hand, he helps him to his feet*

You are my knight now, Sir Gawaine, and I entrust you with the defence of my kingdom and myself to your life's end.

*He holds the sword horizontally across the palms of both hands and offers it to GAWAINE*

GAWAINE: *(kissing the blade of the sword)* I swear to fight for you and no other, at all costs, for as long as I live.

*ARTHUR gives him the sword and embraces him, then motions him to stand near the throne*

LAMORAK: *(coming forward)* You made the same promise to me, Sir.

ARTHUR: And will keep it, Lamorak. Your father, King Pellinore of Galis, fought at my side and helped me win my victories. Alas, he fell in our last battle. But in making you my knight I shall do more than pay the debt I owe your father. For it was he who slew King Lot, father of my nephew Gawaine. Therefore, by making both of you knights on my wedding day – you, the heirs of these deadly enemies – I declare an end to all those hatreds which divided our land.

*Putting his hand on LAMORAK's head, ARTHUR makes him kneel, then, taking the sword from LAMORAK's side, touches him on both shoulders with it. Then, taking LAMORAK's hand he helps him to his feet*

You are my knight now, Sir Lamorak, and I entrust you with the defence of my kingdom and myself, to your life's end.

*He holds the sword out horizontally on his palms and offers it to LAMORAK*

LAMORAK: *(kissing the sword's blade)* I swear to fight for you and no other, at all costs, for as long as I live.

*ARTHUR takes GAWAINE's right hand and places it in LAMORAK's*

ARTHUR: Sir Gawaine and Sir Lamorak, let my kingdom rest on your strong arms, joined in brotherhood, cancelling all blood-feuds between your families, here and hereafter.

*He releases their hands and they fall back to stand either side of him as he addresses all those present:*

ARTHUR: This is a joyful day. I am more used to rallying soldiers for battle and taking violent victory against any odds than joining hands in friendship or for that matter kissing the lips of ladies...

GUENEVERE: *(quietly)* And so far you have not done so.

ARTHUR: *(glancing at her and smiling)* I have left the best till last.

*He kisses her and all applaud*

This is a very joyful day. We need no longer think of battle but of peace and how best to keep it. The strategy of peace is as unfamiliar to me as making peace-time speeches, but my beloved Queen's father, King Leodegrance, has shown me how to begin. For, in addition to his daughter and a company of fifty knights, he has sent me a munificent wedding-present. A dining-table.

*Laughter*

No ordinary table. In the first place it belonged, when the land was formerly united and at peace, to the great Pendragon. Secondly, it is not rectangular but round. Thirdly, it seats one hundred and fifty for dinner. Some say that it was made by magic and possesses the miraculous power to set at ease all who sit there. But whether that is true or not, it surely has a meaning and a purpose. We shall all dine at this mighty table: I, your King, and one hundred and forty-nine knights chosen from all the leading families in the land. So we shall be rid of the quarrels and resentments which divide kingdoms and destroy peace and plenty. And the plenty and fellowship we shall enjoy at this table shall be a constant reminder to us of the terms on which we enjoy it. That we mean to see plenty spread through the whole land. That we mean never again to let it be scarred and wasted with war. And to that end, we shall not be slow to drive away invaders from beyond the sea or to put down and punish those within our realm who resort to violence. That we shall defend the weak – especially women and children, the old and the sick – against the strong. That we shall always be merciful and courteous. That we shall value no one and nothing above this equal fellowship of the Round Table, neither family nor friends nor material goods nor our own lives. And now this marvellous gift is already unpacked and assembled in my hall and the wedding feast awaits us.

*Loud cheers and applause. Fanfare. Lights down and everyone goes off, except ARTHUR, MERLIN and NIMUE.*

#### Scene Four

*ARTHUR reclines on the catafalque, in the shadows. MERLIN, kneeling at NIMUE's feet, lit at the front*

MERLIN: Beautiful goddess, Nimue, you have secretly honoured our ceremony with your presence. Does this mean that the bride was well chosen and the wedding fortunate?

NIMUE: The bride's wedding-gift was well chosen.

- MERLIN: But not the bride herself?
- NIMUE: She is a fine, fair lady of good birth, though her father's kingdom is small.
- MERLIN: True, there were better alliances available. But Arthur no sooner saw her at her father's castle than he was eager to have her. And she, whether she loved him or not, seemed eager to be his Queen.
- NIMUE: And is now his Queen.
- MERLIN: You imply that her satisfaction will be short-lived?
- NIMUE: For mortals that is normal.
- MERLIN: Yes, and she is certainly a very normal mortal. You suggest then that he has married unwisely and will soon be sorry?
- NIMUE: He will be glad to have the table.
- MERLIN: The Fellowship will be a success, but the marriage not?
- NIMUE: Mortal success is never not mixed with pain.
- MERLIN: Is there no remedy?
- NIMUE: *(smiling)* Let no knight from beyond the sea come to his court!
- MERLIN: Ah! You know very well that this is a condition he cannot meet. Arthur's chief ally in his victories was King Ban of Brittany. Now his son, Launcelot du Lac, has already crossed the sea to join the Fellowship of the Round Table. Too late to stop him and, in any case, Arthur could never show such discourtesy to the son of a man to whom he owes so much. Is there no other remedy?
- NIMUE: *(smiling)* None.
- MERLIN: You seem to be amused.
- NIMUE: Mortals take their short lives too seriously.
- MERLIN: Wouldn't you, if you were one of us? Do you have no feelings for us at all?
- NIMUE: Pity, sometimes. Admiration, occasionally. And, very rarely, love.
- MERLIN: Love?
- NIMUE: Why not? At your best you are beautiful creatures.
- MERLIN: You love us, then, as we love horses?
- NIMUE: No, much as you love each other, but only as long as your beauty lasts.
- MERLIN: And does none of you love Arthur enough to spare him this unhappiness?
- NIMUE: What do you think?
- MERLIN: It was you who gave him the sword Excalibur.

NIMUE: Think again!

MERLIN: It was you who sent me to find him at the farm in the Forest of Dean. It was you who told me he was Pendragon's son and gave him the miraculous power to draw the sword out of the stone. But if he was indeed Pendragon's son, who was his mother? For, in spite of the story I put about, I do not really believe it was Queen Igraine. Of course, Pendragon slept around and must have left many royal urchins to grow up in obscure farms all over the country. But why was this the one you picked out and protected? And why is he to suffer now for choosing an unsuitable wife?

NIMUE: *(turning away)* I shall be blamed for leading you too near the truth.

MERLIN: Blamed by whom?

NIMUE: You would be better not to pursue this. *(she retreats into the shadows)* Be warned!

*She goes out*

MERLIN: Yes, one of you does love him! So much that she can't forgive him for loving Guenevere! *(pause)* I begin to understand.

*He goes out.*

### Scene Five

*Sound of trumpets, then galloping horses and the clash of arms and armour, with the shouts and cheers of a large crowd. Lights up to reveal a bright canopy over the catafalque. ARTHUR and GUENEVERE, with MARGAWSE, BEDIVERE and other knights and ladies, stand in front of the catafalque, watching a tournament. ARTHUR raises his hand, the trumpets sound again, followed by another battle, followed by another burst of cheering*

ARTHUR: Magnificent! *(to MARGAWSE)* Gawaine is unbeatable. What a horseman and what a fighter! Look how he spurs his horse up to the very last moment! Look how precisely he aims the tip of his lance! My nephew is bigger and fiercer and braver even than his father was.

MARGAWSE: His father trained him to fight against you. You were lucky I thought him too young.

ARTHUR: *(putting hand on her arm)* I'm sure you kept him at home for a better reason. Because you knew we were really blood relations.

MARG: Do you believe that?

ARTHUR: Of course I do. Merlin vouched for it.

MARG: That mountebank! Let us agree to be half-brother and –sister, by all means, if it keeps the peace and if Gawaine is your chosen successor! But we don't need to pretend between ourselves.

*Trumpet call and shouts*

GUENEVERE: *(to ARTHUR)* What's happening now?

ARTHUR: Gawaine is the clear winner of all the melees. Now he is challenging any knight who still thinks he can overthrow him, to single combat.

MARG: *(to ARTHUR)* Has she never seen a tournament before?

ARTHUR: Not on this scale.

MARG: Of course, her father's kingdom is tiny. Some amateur horseplay on the village green, I daresay.

*Shouts*

GUEN: Someone has come forward. No, there are two. Surely he can't fight them both?

ARTHUR: One at a time.

MARG: They could come three at a time and my son would send them sprawling.

*Trumpet call*

ARTHUR: *(peering into the distance)* It looks like Mador's shield.

*Galloping hooves, clash of arms, cheering*

MARG: Well, it hardly matters who. Gawaine's knocked him over his horse's tail at the first encounter.

ARTHUR: The next one seems to be Lamorak.

MARG: A better match. Lamorak is a clever horseman, but Gawaine is bolder and stronger.

ARTHUR: Yes, and today he's exhilarated by his success, full of himself, more than himself. Victory breeds victory.

GUEN: But isn't Lamorak the son of King Pellinore, who killed Gawaine's father? And won't Gawaine try to take revenge?

MARG: You are tactless, my dear. We are supposed to have put all that behind us.

ARTHUR: This is sport, not war. Lamorak and Gawaine are friends now. Friends can fight one another in sport and remain friends.

*Trumpet call. Galloping hooves. Clash of arms. Cry from the crowd*

GUEN: Oh! I thought Gawaine would fall.

MARG: No, he deliberately swayed in the saddle to spoil Lamorak's aim.

ARTHUR: Lamorak defended well, but his shield is shattered and now Gawaine has a clear advantage.

*Galloping hooves. Clash of arms. Cheers. MARGAWSE and GUENEVERE both clap*

ARTHUR: Down he goes! Gawaine has it.

MARG: He's simply the best knight you have.

ARTHUR: I'm well aware of it.

*Cheering continues. BEDIVERE comes forward with a golden goblet*

ARTHUR: *(to GUENEVERE)* Now you must give the champion his prize.

GUEN: *(with a touch of asperity)* Surely his mother should do that?

MARG: No, my dear, you do it! You are the Queen of the Tournament.

*Trumpet call*

ARTHUR: What now? Another challenger?

MARG: Gawaine is ready for him. He's lowered his visor and raised his lance.

*KAY enters*

ARTHUR: Who is this knight, Kay? I don't recognise the shield.

KAY: A stranger, Sir. The Marshal sends me to ask what he's to do. This knight took no part in today's fighting, but has only just this moment ridden in.

ARTHUR: Ridden from where?

KAY: From some distance. He has five or six other knights with him.

ARTHUR: His name?

KAY: He declined to give it until presenting himself to you, Sir. But I believe he has crossed the sea from France.

ARTHUR: King Ban's son, could it be? What does the Marshal think about him taking part?

KAY: He thinks it irregular and unfair to Gawaine, since Gawaine has been fighting all day and this knight is fresh.

MARG: Let him be as fresh as he likes, Gawaine will take the bloom off him.

ARTHUR: Not all that fresh, if he's ridden so far. What do you think, Kay?

KAY: We know nothing about this knight, Sir. Most likely Gawaine will throw him at the first charge. But suppose not! Suppose a passing Frenchman drops in and beats our champion, either by luck or because, having the prize already in his grasp, Gawaine's concentration slips! Not a good story to go around.

ARTHUR: You're right. Tell the Marshal that the stranger is too late. The day is over and Gawaine has the prize.

*KAY bows and goes out*

MARG: Gawaine won't thank you for diminishing his glory.

ARTHUR: He can augment it, then, in tomorrow's tournament. If the stranger cares to renew his challenge then.

*Trumpet call and cheering*

But if this is indeed the son of King Ban, to whom I owe more than any man living, I should be equally sorry to see either him or Gawaine humiliated in a hasty bout at the end of the day.

*GAWAINE enters, in armour but without his helmet. ARTHUR pats him on the shoulder*

You excelled yourself, Gawaine. Well done indeed!

GAWAINE: Thanks!

MARG: We expected no less.

GAWAINE: *(kissing her cheek)* Thanks, mother.

*BEDIVERE holds out the golden goblet on a cushion to GUENEVERE*

GUEN: *(shyly)* Here is your prize, Sir Gawaine.

*She takes the cup from the cushion and presents it to GAWAINE*

GAWAINE: Thanks!

*He turns round and holds up the goblet for the crowd to see. Burst of cheering. Those around him applaud*

GAWAINE: *(to ARTHUR)* I wish you'd let me take on that latecomer, uncle. The crowd wanted it and so did I.

*LAUNCELOT, in armour without his helmet, enters behind GAWAINE. He is taller than GAWAINE, but not so broad*

It was only some foreign clown and I'd have given him a mouthful of English turf before he could even say mercy boocoo.

LAUNCELOT: *(smiling and speaking with a French accent)* Merci beaucoup! You can introduce me to your turf tomorrow, Sir Gawaine. Unless I am able to make you eat both your words and your English turf together.

*He kneels to ARTHUR*

My name is Launcelot du Lac, Sir. I bring you love and all good greetings from my father, King Ban of Brittany.

ARTHUR: *(raising him up and embracing him)* You are very welcome, Launcelot. Please forgive my nephew his native sense of humour. This is my sister, Gawaine's mother, Queen Margawse of the Orkneys...

*LAUNCELOT bows to MARGAWSE and kisses her hand*

LAUNC: Madame!

ARTHUR: And this is my Queen, Guenevere.

*LAUNCELOT turns and bows to GUENEVERE and looks at her, ready to kiss her hand, but she forgets to offer it to him. She looks at him, opens her mouth to speak, but says nothing.*

LAUNC: *(bowing to her again)* Madame!

ARTHUR: *(putting one arm round LAUNCELOT's shoulders and the other round GAWAINE's)* Now we must celebrate my nephew's triumph and the safe arrival of my old friend's son. What knights did you bring with you, Launcelot?

LAUNC: My cousins Bors and Blamor, with Ector de Maris, Menaduke, Lionel...

*They all go off, as the lights go down.*

### Scene Six

*ARTHUR reclines on the catafalque. Half-darkness. Sound of wind and angry sea breaking on rocks. Enter NIMUE and MERLIN*

MERLIN: This is a desolate place. Why did you bring me here?

NIMUE: My sister Morgan has sent for you, as I said.

MERLIN: Does she live among black rocks and sea spray?

NIMUE: When the mood takes her.

MERLIN: Is she angry with me?

NIMUE: She was angry with me.

MERLIN: Because I guessed the truth about Arthur's birth?

NIMUE: Because I helped you guess.

MERLIN: I have told no one.

NIMUE: She knows that.

MERLIN: And never will.

NIMUE: That would be foolish.

MERLIN: I am not such a fool. After all, I too had an immortal mother.

NIMUE: You must go on now alone. Down those rough stairs and through that opening in the rock.

*MERLIN looks at the way down and then at her*

What are you waiting for?

MERLIN: Can I trust you?

NIMUE: You always have. And your trust has been rewarded.

MERLIN: True. But I have been useful to you too. Whenever you wished to intervene in human affairs.

NIMUE: You have done all we required of you.

MERLIN: *(beginning to descend)* I can hardly see my way.

NIMUE: You're not afraid, are you?

MERLIN: More curious than afraid. The great goddess Morgan, I suppose, is as beautiful as you are?

NIMUE: A thousand times more so.

MERLIN: I've always longed to catch sight of her. But I'd have preferred to do so when she was pleased with me, not angry.

NIMUE: You can put all the blame on me.

MERLIN: Well, I will excuse myself as best I can.

NIMUE: I'm sure she'll forgive you. Once she's sure that you won't betray her secret.

MERLIN: *(now almost invisible in the darkness below)* Through here? It's so dark I can hardly find the opening. *(his voice echoing)* Are you sure this is the right place? Nimue?

NIMUE: Certainly the right place...

*She raises her hand and there is the sound of falling and grinding rock*

The only place for those that cannot die but know secrets which must never be revealed.

*She goes out. MERLIN's voice is heard, echoing very faintly:*

MERLIN: Nimue! Nimue! Nimue!

### Scene Seven

*Enter GUENEVERE, meeting LAUNCELOT*

GUEN: Sir Launcelot!

LAUNC: Madame!

GUEN: Walk in the garden with me!

LAUNC: Madame!

*They walk together for a while in silence*

GUEN: You'll take part in the tournament today?

LAUNC: Of course.

GUEN: And mean to be the champion?

LAUNC: Certainly. But Gawaine is strong and skilful.

GUEN: Not in your class, though.

LAUNC: What makes you so sure? You've never seen me fight.

GUEN: Oh, I know nothing about fighting. But I saw at first glance what sort of man you are. *(smiles)*

LAUNC: *(also smiling)* I too, seeing you... But first glances can deceive.

GUEN: You think so?

LAUNC: Not in this case.

*Pause. They look one another in the eyes*

GUEN: I want you to wear my favour on your crest.

LAUNC: You do me great honour. But, alas, how can I wear your favour when you are the Queen?

GUEN: Because I am the Queen and command you to be my knight.

LAUNC: I cannot do it.

GUEN: Cannot?

LAUNC: Should not. The King is my father's friend and already mine. It would not be right to wear his Queen's favour.

GUEN: I want you to wear it.

LAUNC: It would cause a scandal.

GUEN: For such a small thing?

LAUNC: For what it would signify.

GUEN: Perhaps you don't want to wear it? There is someone else?

LAUNC: No one else.

GUEN: But you lack the courage.

LAUNC: It is a question of loyalty, not courage.

GUEN: Loyalty to the King, but not the Queen?

LAUNC: I have a better idea. If I cannot wear your favour, I will wear no one else's. So my no favour will in effect be your favour.

GUEN: Yes. I like that. Come here, then, Launcelot!

*He moves towards her*

GUEN: Kneel!

*He does so. She kisses him on the head*

There is my favour and you are my champion, Sir Launcelot. In this and every battle you fight, now and in the future.

*She raises him up*

Now kiss me! (*turning her cheek towards him*)

LAUNC: If someone were watching...

GUEN: No one is watching.

*He kisses her cheek*

Don't you kiss both cheeks in France?

*LAUNCELOT kisses her other cheek. She kisses his lips. He pulls away abruptly.*

LAUNC: We should not do wrong to the King.

GUEN: It was wrong of him to marry me before I had met you and knew better.

LAUNC: I can find no fault in him for choosing to marry you.

GUEN: I gave him my hand, not my heart. And if you had come sooner, he would not have had either.

LAUNC: An unlucky accident of time!

GUEN: Love is not measured by time. Love is not chosen but chooses. Love chose Launcelot for Guenevere and Guenevere for Launcelot long before Arthur chose his Queen.

LAUNC: If only it had been otherwise!

GUEN: How could it have been? If Arthur had not taken me away from my father and brought me here, you and I would never have met. Love knew better.

LAUNC: So it was all meant to be just as it is?

GUEN: Just as it is.

LAUNC: I will take that as my motto. *Comme il est.*

*Trumpet call in the distance*

GUEN: *Comme il est. (puts hand on his head)* Now you are wearing my invisible favour. Now go and be my secret champion! Take the prize away from Gawaine!

*They go out.*

### Scene Eight

*Trumpet call. Clash of arms. Galloping hooves. Cries. Cheering. ARTHUR, MARGAWSE and GUENEVERE seated on the catafalque, with knights and ladies standing round*

ARTHUR: The French are having it all their own way.

MARG: They all work together. Isn't that against the rules?

ARTHUR: Why should it be?

MARG: Our knights always fight singly, every man for himself. These French tactics may be all very well in France, but here they ought to fight by our rules.

ARTHUR: Perhaps we'd be better to learn their rules, since they seem to be so successful.

MARG: I think it's cheating.

*Trumpet call. Shouts*

GUEN: *(excitedly)* Launcelot has won the melees.

MARG: Does that give you so much pleasure?

GUEN: Will anyone dare challenge him to single combat?

*Shouts*

ARTHUR: Kay is one.

MARG: And Gawaine, of course.

ARTHUR: Yes, Gawaine is the other.

*Trumpet call. Galloping hooves, clash of arms. Shouts*

ARTHUR: Poor Kay! His courage always outruns his skill. And now Gawaine will have his chance. Though, I'm afraid...

MARG: What? You think he's not a match for this thin Frenchman?

ARTHUR: Yesterday he might have been. Today he's lost some of his confidence. And Launcelot is truly formidable.

MARG: His French tactics won't be much use to him now, without his friends to help him.

*Trumpet call. Galloping hooves. Clash of arms. Shouts*

ARTHUR: His tactics, I think, were more for his friends' benefit than his own. We have not seen Launcelot at full tilt until now.

*Galloping hooves. Clash of arms. Shouts*

MARG: Gawaine is less in awe of him than you are.

ARTHUR: Yes, I'm proud of my nephew. To have kept his saddle twice against that whirlwind.

*Galloping hooves. Clash of arms. Huge shout, mainly of dismay*

GUEN: Gawaine's down. Launcelot has won.

MARG: Oh, you want him to, I'm sure. But don't be too sure! Gawaine is on his feet and drawing his sword.

GUEN: Must they fight on foot now?

MARG: If Launcelot has the courage.

ARTHUR: And the courtesy. The victory is already his, unless he cares to hazard it again on foot.

GUEN: Yes, Launcelot is dismounting and drawing his sword.

*Trumpet call*

What are they waiting for?

ARTHUR: Your signal. They may easily give each other serious wounds now. So you have the option of stopping the fight and giving the prize to Launcelot. You will please neither Launcelot nor Gawaine by doing so, but the choice is yours.

GUEN: What do the people want?

ARTHUR: What they always want. More fighting and more blood. But the decision belongs to you.

GUEN: What do you think I should do?

ARTHUR: Raise your arm and stop the fight!

MARG: Gawaine will never forgive you if you do, nor will the crowd. In this battle on foot, sheer strength will decide. If you care anything for the honour of your native land, point your arm downwards and let Gawaine win the victory he deserves!

*GUENEVERE looks at her and smiles, then points her arm downwards. Tremendous cheering. Trumpet-call. Clash of arms continuing under the following, interspersed with shouts and cheers.*

MARG: You see, the Frenchman is not as strong as he thinks. Gawaine is forcing him back.

GUEN: But look at that stroke! He has broken Gawaine's helmet.

MARG: And look at that! He's hacked off the Frenchman's shoulder-piece.

- GUEN: Now he's pushing Gawaine back.
- MARG: No, he's made the Frenchman stagger.
- GUEN: No, he only stepped sideways. It was Gawaine who stumbled and nearly fell. But why does Launcelot draw back?
- ARTHUR: He could have killed Gawaine then and didn't wish to.
- MARG: Now Gawaine is truly angry. He hates to be given grace when he hasn't asked for it. Look at that furious attack!
- GUEN: But Launcelot meets and breaks it with two blows for every one.
- MARG: He'll soon tire.
- GUEN: No, it's Gawaine who is tiring.
- ARTHUR: I think so too.
- GUEN: He's pressing forward now. Gawaine stumbles again. And again Launcelot holds back...
- ARTHUR: Enough!

*He raises his arm. Trumpet call. Shouts*

- GUEN: Why did you stop them?
- ARTHUR: There's no purpose in more bloodshed. Launcelot is the clear winner.
- MARG: You have shamed your nephew.
- ARTHUR: No shame to lose to such an opponent. Even Gawaine must concede that he couldn't win. You see, he's turning away and leaving the field.
- MARG: And I shall leave it too. I shall not stay to see you give the prize to this foreigner. You have humiliated our House.

*She goes out*

- ARTHUR: Would she prefer to see her son dead or disabled?
- GUEN: She has three or four other sons, after all.

*LAUNCELOT enters, without his helmet, one arm bare of armour and bleeding. GUENEVER takes a gold cup from the cushion held out by BEDIVERE, kisses it and presents it to LAUNCELOT, as the lights go slowly down. ARTHUR watches as LAUNCELOT turns the cup, kisses the side where GUENEVERE kissed it, meets her eyes, then slowly turns to hold up the cup for all to see. All go out, except ARTHUR, who remains on the catafalque.*

Scene Nine

*The three GODDESSES enter and stand beside the catafalque as before, singing or reciting:*

MORGAN:           Arthur sleeps in Avalon,  
                           He is not dead but sleeping,  
                           Not dead but dreaming.

NIMUE:             Many years his kingdom prospered,  
                           The harvests grew and ripened,  
                           The land was plentiful.

ARANROD:          His knights rode out from Camelot,  
                           The people's cries were heard  
                           And their oppressors slain.

MORGAN:          Looters and torturers,  
                           Rapists and robbers  
                           Found no hiding-place.

NIMUE:             Peace returned to the people,  
                           Justice went out from Camelot,  
                           Spring and summer blessed the land.

ALL:                 Arthur sleeps in Avalon,  
                           He is not dead, but sleeping,  
                           Not dead but dreaming.

*They go out, as the lights go down.*

Scene Ten

*Noise of rough sea on rocks. ARTHUR cries out. GUENEVERE enters with a candle*

ARTHUR:   Merlin?

GUEN:     Merlin?

ARTHUR:   *(sitting up)* I was going down slippery steps. He was trying to tell me something. But the sea was crashing on the rocks below and his voice echoed. I couldn't catch what he said.

- GUEN: Merlin? We haven't seen or heard of him since our wedding day. What could the dream mean?
- ARTHUR: What you said last night must have preyed on my mind and I wanted his reassurance.
- GUEN: What did I say last night?
- ARTHUR: You sighed deeply and said that nobody lived here any more. And when I counted the empty places at the Round Table, I realised that half the knights are missing.
- GUEN: The best half.
- ARTHUR: Kay is missing, Ector, Lionel, Lucan, Constantine, Gawaine and all three of his four brothers, Lamorak...
- GUEN: Lamorak went north with your sister, Margawse. So did two of Gawaine's brothers – the unpleasant ones, Agravaine and Mordred.
- ARTHUR: Yes, that was strange and strangely unwise. Lamorak, son of the man who killed King Lot, goes boldly into the heart of Lot's territory...
- GUEN: Not strange, considering you made them swear eternal friendship. How could Lamorak refuse when your sister asked him to escort her?
- ARTHUR: But why did she ask him?
- GUEN: She likes him.
- ARTHUR: Likes?
- GUEN: Or a stronger word.
- ARTHUR: I hope nothing evil comes of it.
- GUEN: *(looking out of the window)* Dawn! Gawaine and his brother Gareth – the nice one – went into Galis. And Launcelot left soon afterwards.
- ARTHUR: Yes, that's why the place seems so empty. We're both missing Launcelot.
- GUEN: Both?
- ARTHUR: You and I are not very close. Our interests seldom coincide. We have no children. Launcelot unites us. My friend and yours, the best fighter in the world, the most graceful courtier. When we talk of him, we both feel happier.
- GUEN: You're not jealous?
- ARTHUR: Should I be?
- GUEN: Most people think so.
- ARTHUR: If Launcelot were really your lover, I should be the first to know it.
- GUEN: And if I told you that I love him?

ARTHUR: I know you do. But does he love you?

*The light from the window increases slowly through the following:*

GUEN: He wears no one else's favour, since he cannot wear mine.

ARTHUR: True. He is courteous and correct as well as invincible. But he has a child, you know.

GUEN: A child?

ARTHUR: A son. Nearly grown-up now.

GUEN: Whose child?

ARTHUR: You've never met her. Nor have I.

GUEN: How do you know about this?

ARTHUR: He told me himself. It amused me... how guilty he felt... both towards you and – for the opposite reason – towards me.

GUEN: Amused you?

ARTHUR: It touched me. Every woman, married or not, is in love with Launcelot. Yet he tries to be loyal to the wife of his best friend, to whom he also tries to be loyal.

GUEN: That should make you angry.

ARTHUR: I can never be angry with Launcelot.

GUEN: Another difference between you and me.

ARTHUR: Yes, he feared your anger. He who fears nothing else. That was why he told me about the child and asked me to tell you.

GUEN: He asked you!

ARTHUR: I promised to find a suitable moment. But I'm afraid I have not.

GUEN: There could not be a suitable moment to tell me this.

ARTHUR: Probably not.

GUEN: What is the woman's name?

ARTHUR: That's a secret I shall keep.

GUEN: I shall get it from him.

ARTHUR: For what purpose?

GUEN: To ruin her life.

ARTHUR: And if so, also his.

- GUEN: What else does he deserve? I shall never speak to him again.
- ARTHUR: Well, I warned him. He replied that when the child grew up, he could not deny being its father and therefore you must be told.
- GUEN: What sort of woman is she? A servant? A whore?
- ARTHUR: Neither.
- GUEN: Where did he pick her up?
- ARTHUR: He was wounded in a savage battle. The head of a lance broke off and stayed in his side. She healed him. He would have died but for her skill and care.
- GUEN: And for this nursing service, he forgot the service he owed me.
- ARTHUR: *(angrily)* What service? You're forgetting who you are and who I am. The one service Launcelot cannot owe you by any stretch of your imagination is in bed.
- GUEN: No, you're not jealous, are you? You're not jealous, because you hate me.
- ARTHUR: *(joining her at the window)* How could I hate you? I chose you to be my Queen. You accepted. We are bound together. I am sorry for you, sorry for myself, sorry for Launcelot. Neither anger nor hatred can release us. But kindness and courtesy can make our misfortune easier to bear.

*It is now full day outside the window. ARTHUR blows out GUENEVERE's candle*

Kindness and courtesy also towards him, who is courtesy and kindness itself.

*He takes her hand. She makes no response, but continues to look out of the window*

- GUEN: Look! Down there on the road!
- ARTHUR: Armed horsemen! A long cavalcade. Are they coming to attack the city? I hope the watchmen are awake.
- GUEN: The one in front has reached the gate...

*BEDIVERE enters in great excitement*

- BEDIVERE: Sir, the watchmen have reported... Ah, you've seen for yourself.
- ARTHUR: Friends or enemies?
- BEDIVERE: Oh, Sir, old friends! Kay is in front... behind him a whole company of the Round Table... fifty or sixty knights... Aglovale, Durnore, Tor, Ector, Lionel, Griflet, Lucan, Brandiles, Constantine, Dinas, Fergus, Guyart, Anguish, Gawaine and his brother Gareth...
- ARTHUR: Wonderful!
- GUEN: But not Launcelot?
- BEDIVERE: They did not report his shield among the others.

GUEN: It would surely have been the first they noticed?

BEDIVERE: I think so.

ARTHUR: I must go down and greet them.

GUEN: If Launcelot is among them, after all... Please tell him I have no wish to see him. I will not see him.

*BEDIVERE goes out one side, GUENEVERE the other. ARTHUR sits on the catafalque as the lights go down.*

### Scene Eleven

*Lights up on the Round Table. ARTHUR sits at the centre of the catafalque, with GAWAINE on his right. The place on the left is vacant. The other knights form a semi-circle radiating from either side of the catafalque, KAY immediately to one side of it, GARETH to the other. They all hold wine-cups*

ARTHUR: The Round Table is almost complete again. My happiness is almost complete. In the days ahead we shall hear all your separate adventures, the deeds you've performed. But tonight let us hear how it came about that after leaving Camelot one by one, over many months, you all happened to return together like a triumphant army, bringing us this sudden festival.

*He raises his cup. Trumpets sound. All drink*

Gawaine!

GAWAINE: Let Kay speak first!

KAY: How shall I begin? At the far side of a great forest there was a long meadow beside a river. Beyond the river rose a castle of red stone, with a round keep, surrounded by a broad moat. The river was crossed by a ford – deep at the time I reached it in early spring, shallower when I crossed it again only a few days ago in late summer...

ARTHUR: Keep your own adventures for another time, Kay! Tonight I want to hear the story of how you all came together.

KAY: This is that story, Sir.

ARTHUR: Go on, then!

KAY: Beside the ford there was a tree. A fine oak-tree, all decorated with shields..

ARTHUR: Decorated?

KAY: They were strapped to the branches, stirring in the wind, flashing in the sun...

ARTHUR: How many shields?

KAY: Forty... fifty. At the base of the tree, from the lowest branch, hung a huge copper basin.

- ARTHUR: Did you recognise any of the shields?
- KAY: When I saw whose shields they were, I must admit that my first thought was to turn back into the forest and pretend I'd never seen that place.
- ARTHUR: Whose shields were they?
- KAY: Most belonged to your own knights, Sir, the knights of the Round Table, many of them much better fighters than I am. And I thought that if all these had come to grief under this tree by this ford, what hope had I?
- ARTHUR: You never lack courage, Kay.
- KAY: Oh, I often lack it, Sir. But then I lack the courage to show it. So, seeing that I had already been spotted from the castle wall, I concealed my fear and beat the basin with the butt of my lance. It made a very loud noise, though quite melodious, echoing round the meadow. But before the echoes had died away, I saw the castle draw-bridge lowered and a knight in black armour riding out of the gate. Both horse and man were enormous. As they crossed the ford, the water, which would have reached my saddle, only came up to his horse's knees. He cantered straight up to me and greeted me by name. "Sir Kay," he said, "have you come to add your shield to my collection?"
- ARTHUR: Did you know him?
- KAY: Not at all. He was the ugliest man I've ever seen. Only his bloodshot eyes, his purple bulbous nose and his great yellow teeth were visible through the mat of black hair that covered his face. But he knew the shields of all the knights of the Round Table as well as I do. Not because he admired our fellowship, but because he loathed it.
- ARTHUR: For what reason?
- KAY: He gave no reason. He closed his visor, turned his horse to the far end of the meadow... I turned mine the other way... we turned again... galloped together... and the fight began. It was soon over. I was too frightened to aim straight and besides this man really was a giant. His lance was half again as long as mine. Three men could have floated downstream on his shield. His sword was about my height and nearly as broad as my body. (*turning to the other knights*) Am I exaggerating?
- GARETH: Not in the least. Each of his hands seemed to me as big as my head.
- KAY: I lay there half-stunned, waiting for death, as he unlaced my helmet. Then he stripped me completely – armour, clothes, underclothes – and tied my arms and legs. Then he tore a large thorn-bush out of the undergrowth and beat me with it until I was running all over with streams of blood. Finally he slung me over the back of his huge horse, splashed through the river and entered the castle. There, in the dungeon, I found a quarter of our fellowship, all of whom had suffered the same treatment. Some of them had been there for months, still naked, half-starved, frequently beaten.
- ARTHUR: But he killed nobody?
- KAY: He was waiting, I think, until his collection was complete. It was a round dungeon he kept us in and whenever he brought in his next victim --there were several after

me – he would say: “I know you like to sit in a ring like monkeys, so you’ll feel quite at home here.” That was how we all came together.

ARTHUR: But how did you escape?

KAY: Let Gareth tell you!

GARETH: I came to the same meadow by the same ford, with the same tree covered in shields – Kay’s among them – and the same red castle beyond. And I hammered the copper basin with the butt of my lance and met with the same fate. Except that just as this giant – his name by the way was Turquine – was pulling up a bramble-bush to beat me with, another knight rode into the meadow. The moment he saw me lying there naked, with the shields on the tree above me and Turquine approaching with his armful of brambles, this new knight shouted: “Get up on your horse, you brute, and guard yourself!”

ARTHUR: Did you know him?

GARETH: His shield had no device, his face was shadowed inside the helmet, but how well I knew his voice!

ARTHUR: Your brother? Was it you, Gawaine?

GAWAINE: No, not I.

GARETH: They fought on horseback and then on foot for three hours and at last stopped to rest. Then Turquine asked this unknown knight – unknown to him because of the blank shield: “Are you one of the Round Table?” “I am,” he replied. “Then if you are not the single person I hate above all others, I shall release all your comrades whose shields hang on my tree and whose bodies rot in my dungeon.” “Who is the person you hate so much?” asked the unknown knight, “and why?” “I hate him,” said Turquine, “because he killed my brother, Carados.”

GAWAINE: This Carados, I should explain, was another giant, another monstrous warlord with a record of murder, rape, robbery and mayhem all over the south of Galis...

GARETH: “If you are anyone else but my brother’s killer,” said Turquine, “I will be reconciled to the Round Table, because you have fought too well for me to despise that fellowship any longer. But if you are Launcelot du Lac, I must have your head.” The unknown knight laughed and gripped his sword. “Fight on, then!” he said. “I came to lop your hideous, hirsute, overgrown head, as I lopped your brother’s.”

GAWAINE: And, except that the brother’s hair and beard were red instead of black, they must have been almost identical. Carados even took the same pleasure as his brother Turquine in stripping his victims naked and beating them with thorns.

ARTHUR: You were with Launcelot, then, when he killed Carados?

GAWAINE: In a manner of speaking. I was in the same case as my brother Gareth with Turquine. I was stripped and bound in a forest glade, where I had fought and lost to Carados, when Launcelot rode into the glade and dispatched red-bearded Carados as he later dispatched black-bearded Turquine.

GARETH: Yes, after they had rested, Launcelot's strength seemed to increase as Turquine's faded. And at last he threw the giant to the ground, unlaced his helmet and severed that monster neck with a single blow.

KAY: And so brought all of us out of Turquine's dungeon and here we are!

ARTHUR: But where is Launcelot?

KAY: He rode another way, not telling us where he was going.

GAWAINE: But I can tell you where. After saving my life from Carados, he took me to the castle of Corbin, where King Pelles rules over the Marches. There, the daughter of King Pelles, Elaine, undertook to heal me of my wounds. And that was where Launcelot went after saving you all from Turquine. Arriving at the Castle of Corbin, he found me fully recovered and sent me to join you on the road to Camelot.

ARTHUR: *(raising his cup)* Was there ever such a knight as Launcelot?

GARETH: Never.

KAY: Never.

ALL: Never.

*All raise their cups*

GAWAINE: Never, unless it is the boy I saw at Corbin, Launcelot's son Galahad.

*Lights and/or curtain down and all go off.*

INTERVAL

Interlude

*Enter BURNE-JONES and ROOKE at the front*

ROOKE: Have you got the brushes you want?

JONES: Shan't want any small ones today. Only thumpers and whackers.

*He holds up two or three very large brushes he is carrying, then sits down on chair at edge of stage*

I'm caving in a bit, Rooke. Feeling always giddy and sick. Overdone rather. Been working too hard, it's too hot, and I'm anxious about Morris...

ROOKE: Mr William Morris? He's not well?

JONES: Not at all. We're the oldest of old friends. We met at Oxford, you know – both going to be clergymen – only we made a trip to Italy and decided to go for beauty instead. Same thing, really, isn't it?

ROOKE: But Mr Morris took up Socialism.

JONES: Such a pity! Though it had its funny moments. I remember he'd been preaching at a street corner that we should all own everything in common. Then he came round to our house in terrible indignation because, during the night, somebody had got into his garden and stolen his grapes. But what wouldn't I give that he'd never had anything to do with all those 'causes'? Such a waste of the energy and time and talent of that king among men!

ROOKE: Isn't it any relief that at least it's public-spirited and in the interest of the less fortunate?

JONES: Not in the least. Those Socialists are too busy doing each other down, making factions and then excluding all the others, to be much interested in anyone beyond themselves. But Morris has a real vision of the truth and joy and dignity that can be given to people's lives and when he took up with Socialism, I thought he would have subdued the ignorant, conceited, mistaken rancour of it. But he did them absolutely no good. They got complete possession of him. Yet what the Socialists don't do, the Christians have done a thousand times over. Christianity will lick Socialists into nothing, if only by the beauty of it.

ROOKE: But you don't go much to church yourself.

JONES: No. It's a good thing I gave up my idea of being a clergyman. I wasn't cut out for it.

*Lights come up on tableau of **The Sleep of Arthur in Avalon**, or BURNE-JONES draws curtain to reveal it*

People should do what they're best at.

ROOKE: You paint what you believe.

JONES: *(pause, while he considers this)* I like that story of the Samoan chief being pestered by a missionary. The tiresome fellow was trying to pin him down on what he

believed in, what sort of God, and the chief just said: "We know at night Some One goes by amongst the trees. But we never speak of it."

*BURNE-JONES and ROOKE go out.*

Scene Twelve

*The tableau as in Scene One, the light low except centre. Music. The figure standing at ARTHUR's head sings: [words by Thomas Love Peacock, based on a Welsh bardic song]*

LAMORAK: Fair the gift to Merlin given,  
Apple-trees seven score and seven;  
Equal all in age and size;  
On a green hill-slope, that lies  
Basking in the southern sun,  
Where bright waters murmuring run.

MARGAWSE: *(the figure at the centre in front of the catafalque)* You sing well, dearest Lamorak. You have so many accomplishments which my sons do not.

*She sits down with her back against the catafalque*

LAMORAK: Gawaine is the better fighter.

MARG: He lacks your courtesy and he cannot sing. Won't you sing some more?

LAMORAK: Just beneath, the pure stream flows;  
High above, the forest grows;  
Not again on earth is found  
Such a slope of orchard ground:  
Song of birds, and hum of bees,  
Ever haunt the apple-trees.

MARG: Where did you learn the song?

LAMORAK: In the country of Galis, where I come from. It is supposed to have been composed by Merlin himself.

MARG: Sit beside me and sing again!

*LAMORAK sits beside her*

LAMORAK:        Now from echoing woods I hear  
                         Hostile axes sounding near  
                         On the sunny slope reclined,  
                         Feverish grief disturbs my mind,  
                         Lest the wasting edge consume  
                         My fair spot of fruit and bloom.

MARG:            I'm sorry the song turns sad.

LAMORAK: Most of our songs of Galis do – except those about drinking. I suppose we have had a sad history.

MARG:            Put away your harp now and lay your head in my lap, dearest Lamorak!

*He does so and she caresses his face and hair*

                         You are a sweet singer, a strong fighter, a very courteous man and far more handsome than ever was my husband, King Lot.

*Two of the sentries, one with a spear, the other with a sword, who have been standing to right and left, turn inwards and move quietly towards the couple seated in front of the catafalque*

LAMORAK: Better not to say so.

MARG:            Why not? He's dead.

LAMORAK: If his ghost walks, it will give him pain.

MARG:            You are such a sensitive man. But he was not. Anger was his chief emotion. If his ghost did walk, we should certainly hear it shouting.

LAMORAK: Better, in any case, not to remind ourselves...

*The figure with the spear, AGRAVAINE, steps forward and points the spear at LAMORAK's chest*

AGRAVAINE: Remind ourselves of what, Lamorak? That your father killed mine?

MORDRED: *(the figure with the sword, also coming closer)* It's not something we can forget, Lamorak.

LAMORAK: *(getting to his feet)* We buried this quarrel on King Arthur's wedding day.

AGR:              You and Gawaine buried it.

MORDRED: But not Agravaine and I.

AGR:              Not Mordred and I.

*LAMORAK seizes the shaft of AGRAVAINE's spear and forces him backwards. They struggle to and fro. When it appears that LAMORAK is proving too strong for AGRAVAINE, MORDRED stabs LAMORAK from behind with his sword*

MORDRED: We have buried it now.

*As LAMORAK falls with a cry of pain, MARGAWSE rushes to take him in her arms*

MARG: My dearest!

LAMORAK: His ghost, you see, was angry... did walk...

*He dies*

MARG: *(to her sons)* Savages! Cowards! He was unarmed. You gave him no chance at all.

MORDRED: What chance did we owe him? To take my father's place in your bed?

MARG: *(cradling LAMORAK's head)* Blame me for that, not him! He was the son I never had.

MORDRED: We are the sons you had, mother.

AGR: Your husband, mother, was a fierce and powerful King. He taught his sons to defend what is ours, to be true to our own blood, to avenge our wrongs. But you made peace with the upstart Arthur and gave away our family's claim to Pendragon's throne. You betrayed your husband's memory and fondled the son of the man who killed him. You have disgraced us all.

MORDRED: You are a bad example to your sons, mother.

AGR: You are a wicked woman and deserve to die with your fancy-boy.

*He points his spear at her*

MARG: Kill me, then! Go on!

AGR: If you were not my mother...

MARG: Don't let that stop you! Cancel the connection! How I long to forget that I ever gave birth to such abortions as you and Mordred.

MORDRED: *(stabbing her with his sword)* Forget it, then, for ever!

MARG: Ah, Mordred, you were always the most like your father... without pity or kindness... the worst...

*She dies. ARTHUR cries out and half sits up on the catafalque, as AGRAVAINE and MORDRED drag off the bodies of LAMORAK and MARGAWSE. Then he speaks to the figure still standing by the catafalque at his feet*

ARTHUR: Merlin! What does this terrible dream mean?

MERLIN: It means what it seems.

ARTHUR: Lamorak was my sister's lover?

MERLIN: True.

ARTHUR: And both were murdered by my nephews?

MERLIN: True.

ARTHUR: Yet I forgave them and let the matter rest.

MERLIN: You were urged to do so by Lamorak's young brother, Percival, who was noble enough to put peace before vengeance.

ARTHUR: There was right and wrong on both sides. It still preys on my mind. But at least you've come back to me, Merlin.

MERLIN: *(retreating slowly backwards)* No. You're still dreaming. But this part of the dream is not true.

ARTHUR: I know your voice.

MERLIN: *(retreating further into the shadows)* You only imagine it...

ARTHUR: Merlin!

MERLIN: Wanting this false dream to soften the unpleasant truth of the other...

ARTHUR: Merlin!

*MERLIN disappears into the darkness, as two more figures from the back of the tableau, BEDIVERE and KAY, hurry forward to calm ARTHUR*

KAY: There is no one here, Sir.

ARTHUR: Kay? Bedivere?

BEDIVERE: No one but us. You were dreaming, Sir.

ARTHUR: You are very loyal to me, Kay and Bedivere, very gentle with me. It's as if you had never been my elder brothers in that former life, when you sent me to milk the cows and feed the pigs.

KAY: And spread the dung on the fields. We were not so gentle then.

ARTHUR: You had no reason to be.

KAY: But if we'd known who you really were...

ARTHUR: But was I? Am I? I begin to doubt all that magic brought about by Merlin. It seems to have disappeared with his disappearance.

BEDIVERE: *(taking sword from catafalque)* He has left you Excalibur.

ARTHUR: With Excalibur I won wars. But Merlin gave me no magic weapon for managing peace. The kingdom is less contented than it was. Evil men are flourishing again and some of them, I'm afraid, are at my Court. The people – or their children – have forgotten what they suffered in war and begin to be greedy at each other's expense. I am full of misgivings and uncertainty. My dreams plague me, warning me that

magic is wearing thin. Inside the King, crowned by supernatural power, is an echoing cave. Sometimes I think I hear Merlin's voice there, but it always turns out to be delusion. I would like to see him again, if only to tell him that he may have made a mistake in choosing me. I am tired of being King.

BEDIVERE: You say so in private to us alone, after a bad night. But no one seeing you in public, feasting, hunting, smiling at adoring crowds, seated among your knights at the Round Table, or leading them in tournaments, could believe it. Launcelot, Gawaine, Percival, Bors, Gareth and a hundred others – there are no better knights in the world than yours, no kingdom better governed. If it was Merlin's magic that brought this about, then we are still enjoying its benign influence.

KAY: Magic or not, he made no mistake when he chose you to be King.

ARTHUR: Dear Kay, dear Bedivere, you are my brothers still.

*Lights down. KAY and BEDIVERE go off.*

### Scene Thirteen

*Lights up. GUENEVERE enters with attendants. ARTHUR meets her*

ARTHUR: I have been looking for you.

GUEN: I always walk in the garden at this time of day.

ARTHUR: I thought you might have heard the news and gone down to the courtyard.

GUEN: What news?

ARTHUR: I thought you might be there to greet Launcelot.

*All the attendants show excitement, but GUENEVERE suppresses hers*

GUEN: *(coldly)* Launcelot?

ARTHUR: He has returned.

GUEN: Why should that interest me?

*ARTHUR signals to the attendants to leave and they do so*

ARTHUR: Must you keep up this foolish pretence?

GUEN: There's no pretence. I've forgotten the person you mention.

ARTHUR: Who could be happier than I, if you really had? But the truth is that you keep this absence closer to your heart than my presence.

GUEN: I've no wish to see him.

ARTHUR: Why should I plead his cause with you?

GUEN: Why should you? It's ridiculous.

ARTHUR: Because I value Launcelot more than my own pride. The lustre of the Round Table is dimmed without him. Your love for him ruins my marriage. But your quarrel with him threatens the kingdom. I'm afraid that if you refuse to see him, he will go back to France.

GUEN: Let him! But you're wrong. He'll go back to that woman with whom he had a child.

ARTHUR: He has parted with Elaine.

GUEN: He parted with her once before. I forgave him and he made me many promises. But no, the smell of her bed was in his nostrils and he couldn't keep away.

ARTHUR: It was the child he went back to see.

GUEN: The child! I hope it dies before it becomes a man! If not, he will no doubt be as faithless as his lying father.

*LAUNCELOT enters at the side, unseen by GUENEVERE or ARTHUR*

He wore that woman's favour in a tournament, though he promised me never to wear any favour since he couldn't wear mine.

LAUNCELOT: It was not for her sake I wore it.

GUEN: *(to ARTHUR)* Why do you allow this person into my private garden? I have no wish to speak to him.

ARTHUR goes aside, signalling to LAUNCELOT to answer her

LAUNC: In this very garden, Madame, you solicited me to be your knight and fight only for you. Which I promised and have faithfully done, except on that one occasion...

GUEN: Breaking your promise and proving your disloyalty.

LAUNC: On that occasion I did not want to fight as Launcelot, but as an unknown stranger. What better disguise – since everyone knows I never wear any favour for want of yours – than to wear one?

GUEN: Are we talking about wearing favours?

LAUNC: I hope so. Here, in the presence of the King your husband, it should be clear that that was the duty I owed you and no other. I was your champion and therefore, in a manner of speaking, his also.

GUEN: Well, you are very pure and stainless, Launcelot. Except when no one can see you.

LAUNC: Then how is it that everyone seems to know my faults?

GUEN: They are too large to be concealed. And the worst is treachery.

LAUNC: I think so too. And before leaving the city of Corbin, I confessed all my sins – especially that one – to a Christian priest.

- ARTHUR: A Christian?
- LAUNC: Yes, Sir. I was baptised. My host, King Pelles, and most of his city have kept their Christian faith since Roman times.
- GUEN: His daughter too, I daresay.
- LAUNC: Yes, she too. And so, when I had confessed my sins and been baptised, I had either to marry her or leave her for ever.
- GUEN: *(trying to sound off-hand)* You are married, then?
- LAUNC: No, Madame. That would have been treachery, since I could not give my whole heart to her.
- GUEN: So you took her religion and left her? *(smiling cheerfully)* That was treachery, wasn't it?
- LAUNC: She herself urged me to put truth and my new faith before all else.
- ARTHUR: Poor lady!
- LAUNC: She is very strong in her faith.
- ARTHUR: Why did you want to join it?
- LAUNC: I was granted a vision. I saw the Holy Grail – the cup from which Jesus Christ drank before He was crucified. I did not, I mean, see the Grail itself, which was covered. But it was carried before my eyes by an angel. The vision was so piercing to my sinful soul that I fell down on the floor...
- ARTHUR: Where did this happen?
- LAUNC: In the chapel of King Pelles' castle at Corbin. The Grail was brought to this country by a rich man called Joseph of Arimathea, who lent Christ the cup for His Last Supper and who buried Him after He was crucified. King Pelles and his ancestors have been the Grail's guardians from then until now.
- ARTHUR: Has Pelles any sons?
- LAUNC: Elaine is his only child.
- ARTHUR: So by refusing to marry her, you also refused to become the next guardian of the Grail?
- LAUNC: It will not remain on earth after King Pelles' death. A few pure souls will see it plain, without any covering. Then this period of grace will end and the world descend again into anarchy and destruction.
- ARTHUR: And you hope to see the cup yourself...?
- LAUNC: I may hope. How much I want to see it! But whether I shall....
- GUEN: No, you will not. You are not a pure soul.
- LAUNC: But am trying to become one...

GUEN: *(smiling)* Well, I'm sure I shall never see it. Because I don't even want to. A cup! Encrusted with jewels, I suppose?

LAUNC: I doubt it. Christ had no use for luxuries.

GUEN: But you said it was lent him by a rich man. I should think it would be gold at least and have a few rare jewels stuck round it.

LAUNC: I should think the cup itself would be quite ordinary. What counts is the purpose for which it was used and the Person who drank from it. God Himself. *(crosses himself)*

GUEN: Will Arthur see it? He's a goodish sort of man. At anyrate, whoever does happen to see it can tell me what it looks like.

*She goes out*

ARTHUR: *(cheerfully, taking LAUNCELOT's arm)* She has recovered her spirits. She soon forgot that she'd forgotten who you were.

LAUNC: *(gloomily)* I should not have come back. Seeing her again has already weakened the promises I made to my confessor and myself.

ARTHUR: Now that you're a Christian, I suppose everyone will want to be. But between the magic of your cup and the magic of my sword Excalibur, which do you think is stronger?

LAUNC: I have no doubt that Christ is stronger. But His Kingdom is not of this world.

ARTHUR: Magic is so tricky! Merlin would never give me direct answers either.

*Lights down as they move down-stage, where they are met by KAY*

KAY: Sir, there is a strange barge on the river.

ARTHUR: What is strange about it?

KAY: It's all black, with a canopy of black samite. It came down the river with the current, steered by a single boatman. Under the canopy lies the body of a woman, dressed like a princess, with a letter clutched in her dead hand. The boatman will say nothing, except that the letter is for Sir Launcelot or the King.

ARTHUR: We will both go and see.

#### Scene Fourteen

*Lights up on the catafalque, draped in black. On it lies the dead ELAINE, her face veiled, holding a letter in her hand. Nearby stands the BOATMAN with his pole. A crowd, including knights and ladies and GUENEVERE, gathers beside the catafalque as ARTHUR and LAUNCELOT, followed by KAY, approach it.*

ARTHUR: *(to BOATMAN)* Who was this poor lady?

*BOATMAN says nothing, but points towards letter*

*(to LAUNCELOT) She wears no ring.*

LAUNC: *(head bowed)* But I recognise her hand.

GUENEVERE enters with her attendants and stands at the side

ARTHUR: Will you take the letter?

LAUNC: You take it, Sir, if you will.

*ARTHUR gently removes the letter from the fingers of the corpse*

ARTHUR: *(offering it to LAUNCELOT)* Will you read it?

LAUNC: You read it, Sir.

ARTHUR: *(opening letter)* It's addressed to you.

LAUNC: You read it, Sir. Aloud.

ARTHUR: *(reading)* "Most noble knight, Sir Launcelot, I was your lover and the mother of your child and I bear witness that you are not to blame for my death. For, though you left me and told me you would never see me again, no one can be made to love the person he does not love, just as no one can help loving the person she loves. I did not die deliberately, but fell ill and could not get well again without your love. My father, King Pelles, is also near death and begs you to come to his castle at Corbin for his blessing. He blames you no more than I do. It is all God's will. Pray for my soul, noble Sir Launcelot, as you are the best knight in all the world and the one I loved best. Except our son, Galahad. You must make him a knight now and bring him to the Round Table. This is the last request of your loving Elaine."

*All are weeping, including GUENEVERE. LAUNCELOT steps forward and removes the veil from ELAINE's face, kisses her brow, then looks at her for a while in silence. GUENEVERE comes forward and takes his hand*

GUEN: Poor lady! I'm so sorry. So sorry that I was angry with you.

LAUNC: Be angry as often as you like! No one can help loving the person he loves.

ARTHUR: *(to KAY, showing the crucifix on a chain round ELAINE's neck)* She was a Christian. Find a Christian priest and let her be buried by their rites and with the honours of a princess!

*Attendants carry the body of ELAINE solemnly out. Lights down.*

Scene Fifteen

*The Round Table. ARTHUR is seated in the middle of the catafalque, with GAWAINE on his right, an empty place on his left. The other knights radiate in a semi-circle from either side. All looks restless and uncomfortable. KAY steps forward*

KAY: Sir, the food is cooked and the wine warmed.

ARTHUR: I know that, Kay.

KAY: It has been ready and we have all been waiting for an hour.

ARTHUR: I am still expecting Launcelot.

GAWAINE: How long are we wait for him, uncle?

ARTHUR: Until he comes.

GAWAINE: A month? A year?

ARTHUR: If he was seriously delayed, he would send word.

GAWAINE: Unless he has been knocked on the head or taken prisoner. He would be sorry to get here at last only to find a ring of skeletons at the feast.

ARTHUR: He asked particularly that we should neither eat nor drink before his arrival. I should be sorry if he found us so devoted to material comforts that we could not wait for an hour or two.

GAWAINE: An hour or two! Well, if it is a test of our stamina, why so little? Why not twenty-four hours? I suppose we are allowed to doze off? *(closes eyes and lets his head drop)*

*Enter LAUNCELOT and GALAHAD, both in armour – the latter's red – but without helmets*

LAUNC: *(bowing to ARTHUR)* Sir, I have brought my son Galahad to sit at the Round Table.

ARTHUR: You are both welcome, Launcelot.

GAWAINE: More than welcome. We have all been hungry and thirsty to see you.

ARTHUR: Take your place beside me, Launcelot, and let your son find a place where he can!

LAUNC: No, Sir, forgive me, but let Galahad sit beside you! I will find another place.

ARTHUR: I am not accustomed to give precedence to untried knights or to sons over fathers.

LAUNC: I have tried him myself, Sir, and can promise you he is far my superior. Only he deserves to sit in that seat.

ARTHUR: What do you say, Galahad?

GALAHAD: My father is right, Sir. I will sit beside you.

GAWAINE: This is an arrogant fellow.

ARTHUR: Obedient, perhaps, more than arrogant. Sit here, then, Galahad!

*GALAHAD sits beside ARTHUR, while LAUNCELOT takes a place somewhere among the other knights*

KAY: Is the meat and wine to be served now, Sir?

ARTHUR: By all means!

GAWAINE: No need to hurry, Kay. You know we care nothing for our material comforts.

*A tremendous thunderclap and blast of wind. All the doors and windows slam shut, the candles blow out and the stage is in semi-darkness. A momentary pause, in which everyone is silent, then a hooded and robed figure, almost invisible, carries a golden tray across the stage at the front. On the tray is the Grail, covered in red samite, brightly lit as if it glowed from within. Music. The figure with the tray goes out as silently as it entered. All draw breath together in a collective sigh. The lights come up again and the music fades. GALAHAD and LAUNCELOT are on their knees, their heads bowed*

GAWAINE: Extraordinary! I feel as if I had dined on all the meats and wines I could ever imagine.

*The rest murmur agreement*

ARTHUR: *(going on his knees)* The Christian God is evidently a powerful one. We should thank him for this sign of his favour.

*All kneel*

Was this what you told me of, Launcelot? The Holy Grail?

LAUNC: This was the Grail, Sir. But covered, just as I saw it in the chapel of King Pelles' castle, and carried by an angel.

GAWAINE: Is it ever to be seen uncovered?

LAUNC: This was only a vision, Gawaine. It is not for ordinary men to see the Grail itself.

GAWAINE: Are we ordinary men? If not we, who can see it?

LAUNC: He that is to see it must be baptised a Christian, must have confessed his sins and purged himself of all worldly thoughts. And he must gain admittance to the place where the Grail has gone.

GAWAINE: And where is that?

LAUNC: If I knew that, I should already be on my way to it.

GAWAINE: You hope to see it yourself?

LAUNC: No one can be sure of being found worthy.

GAWAINE: Not even your son Galahad?

GALAHAD: Not even I.

- GAWAINE: Well, I will see it too if I can. Tomorrow I shall find a Christian priest and be baptised and then I shall begin the search. It must be in a Christian chapel somewhere, I suppose. I will hardly be under a hedge. And there are not so many Christian chapels that one couldn't visit them all inside a year. *(puts hand on heart)* I make a solemn vow that I shall not return in less than a year unless I have seen the Grail uncovered.
- GARETH: *(with hand on heart)* And I make the same vow as my brother.
- BEDIVERE: *(with hand on heart)* And I make the same vow.
- OTHERS: *(with hands on hearts)* And I make the same vow.
- KAY: *(hand on heart)* And I...
- ARTHUR: No, Kay! Don't make the vow! Someone must remain behind.
- GAWAINE: Don't worry, uncle! Whether we have seen it or not, we shall all be back within a year and a day.
- ARTHUR: Will you all? Many, I'm sure, will die in the search for this unearthly thing. I'm afraid this is the end of our fellowship and the last time we shall all be gathered round this table. I wish you had never made such a vow, Gawaine.
- GALAHAD: It is the will of God, Sir.
- ARTHUR: No doubt it is, Galahad. But he is not my god. I belong to the old order, which has other gods. I wish your quest well, but I wish you were not taking so many of my knights with you.
- GALAHAD: Many will return.
- GAWAINE: And how many will see it?
- GALAHAD: Few, if any. It is not like seeing a mountain or a rare bird or a rainbow.
- ARTHUR: But perhaps a unicorn?
- GALAHAD: Do unicorns truly exist, Sir? We know that the Grail does.
- GAWAINE: And you mean to see it?
- GALAHAD: I believe I may.
- ARTHUR: And return to tell us?
- GALAHAD: No.
- ARTHUR: The mere sight of it is deadly?
- GALAHAD: You have experienced its power, Sir, even when covered. Those whose thoughts were on food and drink partook of a heavenly feast. But if you saw it plain, it could only be because all your thoughts were of God.
- LAUNC: And to experience God...

ARTHUR: Do you still think this quest is for you, Gawaine?

GAWAINE: I have made my vow and I must take my chance.

KAY: Is the meal to be served, Sir? Or are we to go to bed on spiritual fare alone?

ARTHUR: Let it be served, Kay! But bring up more wine from the cellars and let this be the greediest and most material feast we ever enjoyed at this table in this company! Since it is likely to be the last.

*Fanfare and joyful music. Lights down. All go off, except ARTHUR.*

### Scene Sixteen

*Music to signify the passing of more than a year. Lights up. ARTHUR, lying on the catafalque, wakes and sits up as KAY enters with BEDIVERE*

KAY: Bedivere is back, Sir.

ARTHUR: *(rising and embracing BEDIVERE)* How glad I am to see you! Were you successful?

BEDIVERE: *(gloomily)* Did you think I would be?

ARTHUR: I have not heard that anyone was. At least half the knights that went have not returned, while those that have are glum and discontented, with nothing to do but brood on their own inadequacies and complain about each other's. Gareth tries to cheer his brother up, but Agravaine and Mordred say it was all a trick organised by Launcelot and his family to prove their superiority. Gawaine and many others are only too inclined to believe them.

BEDIVERE: If it was a trick, then Launcelot was as much deceived as the rest of us.

ARTHUR: You've heard news of him?

BEDIVERE: He's on his way back.

KAY: Even he was unsuccessful?

BEDIVERE: I'm afraid so. And he's very dejected.

ARTHUR: We must think of something to lift this cloud of gloom and failure.

KAY: I suggested a tournament.

ARTHUR: No one is in the mood for one. Their arms are rusty from travelling, their competitive spirit mildewed, their confidence drooping.

BEDIVERE: The worst part of the quest was its loneliness and austerity. We were all trying to be so good. Half-starved, never touching alcohol, constantly on our knees praying instead of getting a good sleep on our backs, wearing hair-shirts, worrying about the state of our souls, conversing only with smug, hortatory hermits – no wonder we've all become neurotic. And then as I rode back sadly through the autumn forest, with

the leaves still on the trees but the colours turning, I began to remember the hunts we used to have, the extraordinary pleasures of good company, people laughing, horns blowing, hounds crying, the smell of venison roasting in the open air...

ARTHUR: A royal hunt! That's what we must have.

KAY: And a great feast afterwards, with the autumn fire sacrifice, as we always did it in the time of Merlin.

BEDIVERE: But so many of us now are baptised Christians.

ARTHUR: Then, since it's Christianity that has ruined our fellowship, the more reason to remember the old gods and recover the old ways. Take off your hair-shirt, Bedivere, and after the hunt and the feast you can chuck it on the bonfire!

*BEDIVERE and KAY goes out. ARTHUR remains lying on the catafalque.*

### Scene Seventeen

*LAUNCELOT enters with GUENEVERE*

GUEN: Who did see it then, if not you?

LAUNC: Bors, Percival and Galahad saw it. I was outside the open door of the chapel, but when I tried to enter, I could not. I saw the priest lift the Grail covered in red silk and for a moment I thought the covered cup became the figure of Christ Himself – and the priest staggered with the weight. But as I went forward to help him, unseen arms thrust me back and the doors of the chapel slammed in my face.

GUEN: The other three were allowed inside?

LAUNC: I alone was found wanting.

*He sits on the ground at the front of the stage, half-reclining with his legs stretched out, utterly dejected*

Yet I had done everything, I believed, to drive all thoughts of this world out of my mind.

GUEN: *(sitting near him)* All thoughts?

LAUNC: Galahad helped me. We were brought together for some weeks on board a ship and came to know and love each other as fellow-penitents and –aspirants better than ever we had as father and son. At that time I truly believed we would go forward together into that other world. But in the end I could not follow where he led. His heart was true and mine was not.

GUEN: Your heart was still in this world?

*LAUNCELOT bows his head. She puts her hand on his arm*

Poor Launcelot, it is all very sad.

- LAUNC: I allowed myself to hope too much.
- GUEN: And is nothing left for you now in this world?
- LAUNC: Nothing but contempt. For myself, my hopes, my insufficiency.
- GUEN: But if your heart was too much in this world to be true to that other, then there must be something left here which does not fill you with contempt. Something you still value? Perhaps it is my love for you.
- LAUNC: It was not your love for me that held me back. No more than Elaine's love, whose fruit, after all, was Galahad, the purest and best knight that ever lived.
- GUEN: Then what?
- LAUNC: My love for you. That was where I stumbled and fell. I could not root out my love for you.
- GUEN: Though you wanted to?
- LAUNC: How I wanted to! How I tried! Through every penance, every prayer, every long night of watching and meditating. But I loved you still. Even in the chapel doorway, with the Grail before my eyes, it was not God's face I was looking for, but yours...
- GUEN: My face? Even in the doorway of the chapel?
- LAUNC: Yours.
- GUEN: Why? I am nothing, Launcelot. Nothing but the bad wife of a good King. Why was I worth so much to you? Especially when you wanted to forget me?
- LAUNC: I don't know. I have tried to forget you from the first moment I saw you, at that tournament when Gawaine took the prize. Our eyes met and in that moment I took the King's prize away from him. Not willingly, but with a sense of biting guilt, deep horror that I could be so treacherous to a King I admire so much. And there was nothing I wanted more from seeking the Grail than to be able to burn out of my soul that moment when our eyes met for the first time.
- GUEN: *(stroking his head)* But you could not help wearing my favour, you see. And its motto: *Comme il est*.
- LAUNC: The Christians have a hell as well as a heaven. A flaming pit where sinners burn for ever. I have tried to find my way to the door of heaven, but you and I, Guenevere, were reserved for hell.

*They embrace passionately. Lights down.*

Scene Eighteen

*Lights low. The sound of hunting horns and dogs barking, joyful shouts and horses' hooves. ARTHUR, lying on the catafalque, stirs and props himself on his elbow*

ARTHUR: What have I done? How could I allow it? But how could I not? This is the end of all our joy.

*He lies down again, as a group of armed and armoured knights enters, led by AGRAVAINE and MORDRED*

AGRAVAINE: Are we all here?

*MORDRED sits on the catafalque, in front of ARTHUR*

MORDRED: All we need.

AGR: Colgrevance, Mador, Gingaline, Meliot, Petipase, Galleron, Melion, Astamore, Gromore, Curselaine... and Mordred.

*Each knight, except MORDRED, nods at his name*

*(irritably)* Why are you sitting on the King's throne, Mordred?

MORDRED: Why not? I'm fourth in line to it, aren't I? Or do you want to sit here yourself, Agravaine, as second in line?

AGR: That would be presumptuous.

MORDRED: Yes, I am the heir presumptuous.

AGR: *(to the others)* You are all of our blood or alliance. The King, as you know, has gone hunting...

MORDRED: For stags. But we have his permission to stay behind and catch a bigger stag ourselves.

AGR: That foreign interloper and foul traitor to the King, Launcelot du Lac. Everybody knows about him and the Queen, but only Mordred and I had the courage to speak out about it to the King. It's poisoning the atmosphere, we said. Something must be done about it or the kingdom will fall apart.

MORDRED: And, after all, it will be Gawaine's kingdom one day, then Agravaine's, then Gareth's and then mine.

COLGREVANCE: Where are Gawaine and Gareth? Why are they not with us?

MORDRED: They didn't want to know.

AGR: Launcelot saved their lives, they said, from Turquine and Carados.

MADOR: That's true.

MORDRED: Sentimentality!

GINGALINE: He saved many of our lives.

MORDRED: Does that give him the right to sleep with the Queen? And what about her? When did she save anyone's life?

MELIOT: What did the King say?

AGR: He said he knew what people were saying about Launcelot and the Queen, but there was no proof that they had ever done anything wrong.

MORDRED: All right, we said. If proof is what you want, we'll get it. You go hunting, pitch your pavilions and send for your cooks – showing you intend to be away all night – and see if Launcelot happens to stay behind!

AGR: Then we will also stay behind and find ten or twelve stout fellows to keep us company.

MORDRED: The truth has to come out sometimes, doesn't it, we said? It's not your fault, Sir, it's not ours, but if Launcelot does take this opportunity to betray your trust, he's only got himself to blame. And of course Arthur had to agree.

AGR: So we warned you all to be ready for action...

MORDRED: And action is what we've got.

AGR: Launcelot has stayed behind.

MORDRED: And any minute now he'll be tiptoeing his way to the Queen's bedroom.

*A PAGE enters and nods excitedly to AGRAVAINE, who nods back and gestures to him to go. PAGE goes off*

AGR: He's in there!

PETIPASE: Are there enough of us? If Launcelot is armed...

MORDRED: That's the beauty of it! He'll have nothing but his night-shirt. If that.

AGR: We've got him!

MORDRED: *(jumping off catafalque)* Let's go!

*He leads them out.*

Scene Nineteen

*ARTHUR, lying on the catafalque, raises himself on his elbow*

ARTHUR: Did I dream, as I lay in my hunting pavilion in the forest? Of the Queen's bedroom high in the castle tower? Of the door that opened with hardly a sound in the darkness to admit Launcelot? And was closed again from inside?

*GUENEVERE enters and stands near the catafalque. LAUNCELOT, wearing a thick mantle over his night-shirt, his sword under his arm, enters from the other side, where there is a small door just visible in the gloom*

LAUNC: You sent for me, Madame?

GUEN: Put the bar across the door!

*He does so*

ARTHUR: No, it was not a dream. I never slept that night. I saw it with my waking mind. And the rest was told me afterwards.

*He lies down again, almost invisible in the low light*

GUEN: Why did you bring your sword?

LAUNC: Friends warned me that there might be an ambush.

GUEN: *(very alarmed)* Then you should never have come.

LAUNC: You sent for me. Of course I came.

*He lays the sword on the floor, throws the mantle down on top of it and embraces her. As they embrace, there is a loud knocking on the door. Beyond it, vaguely visible, a close crowd of the KNIGHTS from the previous scene, led by AGRAVAINE and MORDRED*

AGRAVAINE: *(in a loud voice)* Traitor knight, Sir Launcelot du Lac, we know you're in there with the Queen.

MORDRED: We're here to fetch you out, Launcelot.

*Brief silence, while GUENEVERE, terrified, clings to LAUNCELOT*

KNIGHTS: Traitor knight! Sir Launcelot!

GUEN: *(in a whisper)* We're ruined.

LAUNC: *(looking round room)* Do you have any armour?

GUEN: What? Armour!

LAUNC: On the walls? Under the bed? In a cupboard?

GUEN: Don't be ridiculous! I don't even have a dagger to stab myself with.

KNIGHTS: Traitor knight! Launcelot du Lac! Launcelot du Lac!

*Banging on door*

GUEN: How many of them are there?

LAUNC: *(going round room)* What does it matter? If I could find something that could serve as armour.

AGR: Traitor knight! Come out and surrender!

GUEN: They'll murder you and I shall be burned for treason.

MORDRED: The window is too high to jump from, Launcelot, unless you want to kill yourself. We're all fully armed and we've brought a bench up from the hall to beat down the door.

LAUNC: Just a shield would help.

*He gives up the search and stands for a moment in thought. KNIGHTS attack the door with their bench. GUENEVERE kneels down and covers her head*

They are deliberately shaming us. The whole palace must be awake.

GUEN: Perhaps your friends will hear and come to our help?

LAUNC: Some are hunting with the King. The others are in lodgings the other side of the city.

GUEN: Then there is no hope at all.

*Battering continues. LAUNCELOT goes to the door*

KNIGHTS: Launcelot! Traitor! Traitor Launcelot!

LAUNC: *(speaking through door)* Fair lords, you can stop your knocking and save your breath. I will open the door.

*Noise stops*

AGR: Open it, then!

MORDRED: Do it!

LAUNC: *(embracing GUENEVERE)* If I should be killed and you condemned to the fire, my cousins and friends will save you. Look to Sir Lavaine and Sir Urre!

GUEN: If you are killed, why should I live? No, I will go out to them and they can take me to be burned on condition they set you free. I am the guilty one.

*LAUNCELOT smiles and shakes his head*

LAUNC: I will try not to be killed.

AGR: Open the door or we knock it down!

LAUNC: *(kisses GUENEVERE)* Jesu keep you, Guenevere! And may He forgive us both! *(he makes the sign of the cross)* I will just see what can be done.

*Battering begins again. LAUNCELOT picks up his mantle and wraps it tightly round his left arm, then puts his sword under the same arm. He goes to the door and lifts the bar. The noise stops*

LAUNC: Fair lords, you may come in now.

*Standing behind the door, he opens it a fraction, then takes his sword in his right hand. Through the narrow gap comes COLGREVANCE, fully armed, brandishing his sword. LAUNCELOT strikes him a tremendous blow on the helmet and as COLGREVANCE stumbles stabs him in the neck or through the visor. Then he slams the door behind the collapsing COLGREVANCE and slides the bar across it.*

LAUNC: We have some serviceable armour now. *(removes COLGREVANCE's helmet)* Colgrevice! A good knight, but in bad company. God rest his soul! *(makes sign of cross)* Quick, the breastplate!

*The beating on the door begins again, as GUENEVERE unbuckles COLGREVANCE's breastplate*

AGR: Come out, you coward! There are ten more of us here and you'll not play that trick again.

GUEN: *(pausing in despair with the breastplate in her arms)* Ten more!

LAUNC: Just put the breastplate on me and they will wish they had brought twenty. The passage is narrow and their numbers will be no advantage to them.

*She buckles the breastplate on him. The battering on the door continues*

MORDRED: Traitor, come out!

LAUNC: Stop your racket and I will. Better than that, if you go away quietly, I will appear before the King in the morning and you can accuse me of what you like and I will defend the Queen's honour and my own.

AGR: Honour? What honour? You are already a proven traitor to the King. He has put your fate in our hands. We have his permission to take you or kill you.

LAUNC: You offer me no grace?

MORDRED: None!

*LAUNCELOT now wears the breastplate. He puts on the helmet and buckles it, then picks up COLGREVANCE's shield. He smiles at GUENEVERE and blows her a kiss, unbars the door and steps through, lowering his visor as he does so*

LAUNC: Then keep yourselves!

*Dimly visible round the side and back of the stage, he attacks the KNIGHTS, driving them back in a long narrow huddle, striking them down one by one, until only MORDRED remains. GUENEVERE, meanwhile, stands rigid with terror as she listens to the ringing blows of steel, expecting any moment to hear LAUNCELOT's enemies shout in triumph. MORDRED runs through the doorway, looks for escape, turns back towards the door and is confronted by LAUNCELOT*

LAUNC: You are the last, Mordred. Will you die or yield?

MORDRED: Yield...

*But as LAUNCELOT lowers his sword, MORDRED darts past him and runs away*

MORDRED: .... Never!

*LAUNCELOT returns to GUENEVERE, removes his helmet and throws it down on the body of COLGREVANCE*

LAUNC: Now I am certainly King Arthur's enemy. I have killed several of his best knights and one of his scorpion nephews. A pity the other escaped! Our life here is over, Guenevere. You will have to escape now with me.

GUEN: Arthur always knew we loved each other. Why did he let this happen?

LAUNC: We must not blame him. He smiled and said nothing, but no doubt it preyed on his mind all these years like a wasting disease.

GUEN: If anyone is to blame, it is I. I will stand my trial and be burned.

LAUNC: No, I shall never allow you to be burned, that I promise. But if you choose to stay now and Arthur acquits you, this must be our parting. I have no choice but to return to France.

GUEN: I must not be less brave than you. I am his Queen and owe him that, to defend my honour at a public trial.

*She holds out her arms to him and he embraces her*

Now you must go or Mordred will be back with more armed men to take you. Go! Go!

LAUNC: *(bowing formally, as to a Queen)* Goodbye, Madame, unless we meet again at the fire.

*He goes out. Lights down.*

### Scene Twenty

*Lights up. Opening tableau, except that GUENEVERE remains standing where she was in the preceding scene. ARTHUR gets off the catafalque, comes forward and kneels to her*

ARTHUR: Guenevere, forgive me! My love for you was strong, but my loyalty not strong enough.

GUEN: Loyalty to me? I deserted you.

ARTHUR: What else could you do? When you bravely put yourself in my power, I hid my own feelings behind the law of treason and coldly condemned you to be burned. A sacrifice to what gods of spite and revenge?

GUEN: You knew Launcelot would come to save me.

ARTHUR: Yes, of course, I hoped he would. And left the city gates open to him. Gawaine too hoped he would come and refused to be present at the burning. Not because he did

not think you deserved the fire, but because he owed Launcelot his life and had no intention of fighting him. And Gawaine's brother Gareth felt the same. How can I forgive myself for that? Since Gawaine refused to be present, I ordered Gareth to attend, only for form's sake, conceding that he need not bear arms or fight to prevent your rescue. But when Launcelot and his knights did come, scattering the mob of sightseers and cutting through the guards round the bonfire, seizing you from the stake and riding away all in the space of a few minutes, how could he pick out every face in the crowd? So Gareth, whom Launcelot himself knighted, whose life he saved from the giant Turquine, who worshipped Launcelot, fell under his hero's sword.

*ARTHUR lies face down, feebly banging his outstretched hands on the ground in front of him. GUENEVERE retires to the side as NIMUE comes forward*

NIMUE: You blame yourself too much. Your mistake was to love Guenevere. When your wounds are healed, your bad dreams will disappear. Sleep now!

*The three GODDESSES begin to chant the verses from Scene One:*

NIMUE: Three winds visit Avalon,  
East, West and South,  
The North Wind never.

ARANROD: Three seasons visit Avalon,  
Spring, Summer, Autumn,  
But Winter never.

MORGAN: The apple-trees in Avalon  
Bud, flower and fruit,  
Decaying never.

*GAWAINE and MORDRED enter, both in armour*

GAWAINE: Sir, you must rouse yourself. Launcelot has taken the Queen to France. We must gather an army and go after them.

ARTHUR: Must we?

GAWAINE: Launcelot has killed my brother Gareth. Whether it was in malice or by mistake makes no odds. I have sworn to kill Launcelot or be killed. As for you, Sir, Gareth was your nephew and died loyally performing the service you required of him. Not only that, but Launcelot and your Queen have committed open treason against you. You must go to war with him and fetch her back for punishment.

ARTHUR: It seems we must. Kay! Bedivere!

*KAY and BEDIVERE enter*

ARTHUR: Bring my armour and my sword!

*They do so and help to arm him during the following:*

MORDRED: You were lucky to have so many loyal nephews, uncle. Two have been murdered by Launcelot, but Gawaine will exact vengeance and I will keep the kingdom against your return.

ARTHUR: Against?

MORDRED: A safe pair of hands until you return.

*GAWAINE, BEDIVERE and KAY go to the side. MORDRED sits on the catafalque*

ARTHUR: *(to NIMUE)* What could I do? Every mistake led inexorably, dream-like, to the next.

NIMUE: Even the gods cannot cancel the past.

ARTHUR: I left my kingdom to be ruled by the nephew I trusted least.

MORDRED: Think of me as your son, uncle! People welcome a change of leader from time to time. Youth and energy and new ideas!

NIMUE: Sleep now! Dream of your childhood, your happiness in the forest when you knew every tree, every path, every bank, every small stream...

*Music. ARTHUR lies down and relaxes, but soon begins to writhe and cry out*

ARTHUR: A fleet of ships... an army disembarking in France... the siege of Launcelot's castle... making war on my best friend for what cause? And at last Guenevere came out to me... Launcelot had more nobility than any of us with our primitive notions of pride and revenge... he gave her up on condition I forgave her and made her my Queen again. How ready I was to do both!

*GUENEVERE comes and stands over him*

GUEN: How can I be your Queen again? Who could accept or respect me? You must let me go. I have been baptised a Christian and the everlasting fires of hell leap up in front of my eyes, far more terrible than your quick pagan bonfire. I shall enter a nunnery and try to atone for my sin. That is the only chance for me now. I shall never see Launcelot again. Or you – most loyal, loving husband.

*She kisses him on the forehead and goes off. GAWAINE comes forward*

GAWAINE: Launcelot has surrendered the Queen. Now let him surrender himself!

ARTHUR: Can you not forgive him now, Gawaine?

GAWAINE: Never on this earth. Why is he afraid to meet me?

*LAUNCELOT appears, fully armed*

LAUNC: I am afraid of shedding more of your family's blood, Gawaine. Your brother Gareth's death weighs on my heart like a black stone. I will go on my knees the length of your country saying prayers in every chapel for his soul. Will that be enough to soften your anger?

GAWAINE: Nothing will be enough. Except your death or mine.

LAUNC: So be it!

ARTHUR: *(to NIMUE, still standing beside him)* So Launcelot came out to him alone in front of the castle...

*GAWAINE rushes at LAUNCELOT and they fight back and forth, GAWAINE getting the upper hand. They stop briefly to rest*

Gawaine's great fury gave him a giant's strength and Launcelot's sorrow for all the evil he had caused made him less than himself. Until they rested at noon, it seemed that the gods of our native land would give Gawaine the victory and revenge.

*GAWAINE and LAUNCELOT fight again, but now LAUNCELOT gets the upper hand*

But as evening came, the battle changed. Gawaine's strength was used up, he weakened and wilted, and Launcelot's strength prevailed.

*LAUNCELOT strikes GAWAINE down, but then stands back*

GAWAINE: Go on! Don't spare me this time! Strike! Strike! Finish it!

LAUNC: How can I? Gareth was like a brother to me as well as you. I cannot appease his spirit by killing you, Gawaine, my friend.

*He turns and goes out. GAWAINE remains lying on the ground*

ARTHUR: So we carried the wounded Gawaine to the ships and returned to our own land. And found it barred against us. An army was drawn up to drive us back into the sea.

MORDRED: *(still sitting on catafalque)* You always preferred Launcelot to your own kin, uncle. Are you even my uncle? You fought against my father, King Lot, and killed him and took Pendragon's throne. But your claim was shaky and you knew it. You had a magic touch to begin with, you were ingratiating, full of good intentions. But it faded. You gave offence to powerful interests. People of my generation consider you a weak ruler and politically inept. Your unlucky, childless marriage made you accident-prone. I have observed your methods – or lack of them – and shall do a lot better. Rulers have no business to be weak. The people have been told you died in France. Well, you probably will in due course, unless you go further afield. You are deposed, Arthur, and forbidden to set foot in your former kingdom.

GAWAINE: *(rising painfully, furious)* You are a foul traitor, Mordred. To your King and to me, your elder brother. I am glad that Launcelot spared me, so that at least I can make an end of you.

*Bowed and limping, he attacks MORDRED, who easily defends himself*

ARTHUR: At what cost we drove Mordred's army back and put it to flight! So many dead on both sides, all from our own people. And worst of all – Gawaine.

*GAWAINE falls. MORDRED withdraws to one side*

GAWAINE: *(to ARTHUR)* It is Launcelot's wound, re-opened by my treacherous brother. But tell Launcelot, the noblest and best knight I ever knew, that I absolve him of Gareth's death and that he bears no blame for mine. I brought it on myself. You

will need Launcelot's help now, uncle. Ask him, for God's sake, to bring his knights back to our country and help you destroy this poison-spider, bred out of our own blood!

*He dies. KNIGHTS enter and carry him out to solemn music. ARTHUR sleeps, the three GODDESSES begin to play music softly. Lights very low. Suddenly ARTHUR wakes again*

ARTHUR: Kay! Bedivere!

*Enter KAY and BEDIVERE, with Excalibur*

I was dreaming again of Gawaine's death. Is it morning yet? I long to destroy the last and worst of King Lot's sons.

KAY: Mordred has gathered all his forces on Barham Down.

ARTHUR: Then we will attack as soon as it is light.

KAY: Better to hold off and wait for Launcelot. Surely he will come?

ARTHUR: Why should he? He owes me nothing but sorrow and hatred.

BEDIVERE: I'm certain he will come.

ARTHUR: What need to wait? I never lost any battle with Excalibur in my hand.

*He takes the sword from BEDIVERE*

BEDIVERE: Mordred's army is larger than ours and its leaders younger and stronger.

ARTHUR: King Lot was a formidable leader and a great warrior, yet we beat him. Mordred is a coward and his knights must feel ashamed and reluctant to fight for such a traitor.

KAY: And if we wait for Launcelot many of them will surely desert Mordred and return to you.

ARTHUR: Do we want such people on our side?

KAY: With Launcelot in the field there may be no need to fight at all. Mordred will surely be glad to settle for peace and compromise and saving his own life.

ARTHUR: Are you afraid of dying, Kay?

KAY: Yes. But I am still more afraid of the many deaths on both sides and the deep chasm it will make in your kingdom. Even if we win, those that survive will have to learn to trust each other all over again.

ARTHUR: I have grown soft and weak. Mordred told me so himself. It is time to be hard and strong, as I was in earlier times. We will do battle at first light and spare no one until it is won.

*Light brightens slowly. Trumpets. War horses. Clash of arms and noise of battle. MORDRED enters, flanked by armed knights on either side. ARTHUR, flanked by KAY and BEDIVERE, advances to meet him. They fight. KAY fells his opponent, then sinks down, severely wounded. BEDIVERE fells his opponent and goes to KAY's assistance. ARTHUR and MORDRED fight on, until ARTHUR strikes MORDRED down*

MORDRED: *(lying on ground, speaking in a low voice)* Uncle! Forgive me!

ARTHUR *kneels beside him*

I wanted only to be your son.

ARTHUR: You would have been, could have been my son.

MORDRED: I couldn't wait. Forgive me, uncle!

ARTHUR: I do forgive you, Mordred.

*He leans down to kiss MORDRED, who suddenly lifts himself up and stabs ARTHUR with a concealed dagger*

MORDRED: Fool! You always were...

*MORDRED falls back and dies. ARTHUR reels away and falls. BEDIVERE leaves KAY and comes to ARTHUR*

ARTHUR: You must carry me down the hill, Bedivere. Bring Kay to help you!

BEDIVERE: Kay is dead. They are all dead. Two armies strewn on the hill. All that remains of the fellowship of the Round Table, united again now on the bare green ground. There never was such slaughter in all the battles we fought.

*He helps ARTHUR to his feet, then taking Excalibur in his free hand, supports him as they stumble forward*

ARTHUR: We won.

BEDIVERE: Did we? I think only Death was the winner of this battle.

ARTHUR: Put me down here!

*BEDIVERE puts him down where he was lying earlier, at the front of the stage*

My successor should be King Constantine of Cornwall, who took no part with Mordred and was my mother Queen Igraine's cousin.

*He closes his eyes for a moment, then rouses himself*

Kay! Bedivere!

BEDIVERE: It's only Bedivere now, Sir.

ARTHUR: At the bottom of this hill, Bedivere, there is a lake. *(holds up sword)* Take my sword Excalibur, go down to the shore and throw it in!

BEDIVERE: *(taking sword and turning it round to display its shining blade and jewelled hilt)* Throw it in?

ARTHUR: As far as you can throw. And come back and tell me what you saw!

BEDIVERE: *(showing him sword)* But, Sir...

ARTHUR: Do as I say!

*BEDIVERE goes out with sword*

NIMUE: Igraine was not your mother, Arthur. Surely you knew that?

ARTHUR: Was I not Pendragon's son?

NIMUE: You were his son, but your birth was higher than his.

ARTHUR: How could that be?

NIMUE: Pendragon was a great King, but mortal. My sister Morgan, goddess of earth, giver of plenty, loved Pendragon and bore him a son.

*BEDIVERE re-enters*

ARTHUR: You did it? You threw it in the lake?

BEDIVERE: Yes, Sir.

ARTHUR: What did you see?

BEDIVERE: See? Reeds with purple flowers growing at the edge... a heron flapping away... the orange sun touching the top of the hills...

ARTHUR: You lied to me, Bedivere. You did not throw Excalibur into the lake.

BEDIVERE: No, Sir. It is too good a sword.

ARTHUR: It is not yours, Bedivere. Nor is it any longer mine. Go and do as I said!

*BEDIVERE goes out. MORGAN comes forward*

MORGAN: You are my son, Arthur, whom I bore to Pendragon and, after his death, lent to Pendragon's people. So that you could restore his divided kingdom and bring peace and plenty to our land again for a generation.

*She retires a little as BEDIVERE re-enters*

ARTHUR: Did you do what I asked, Bedivere?

BEDIVERE: I did, Sir.

ARTHUR: What did you see?

BEDIVERE: One side of the lake was still in sunlight. The other side was shadowed by the hills. There was a light wind disturbing the surface of the lake... small ripples breaking on the shore at my feet...

ARTHUR: Nothing else?

BEDIVERE: A great splash, of course, as the sword entered the water...

ARTHUR: Nothing else?

BEDIVERE: Nothing.

ARTHUR: This is the second time you've betrayed me, Bedivere. I thought you at least were true and trustworthy. I never could have imagined that a jewelled sword would be worth more to you than your brother and King. The sun has almost set. I am growing cold and I'm afraid I shall die if you delay much longer.

BEDIVERE: This time I will do it.

*He goes out*

MORGAN: Alas, you would not listen to my servant Merlin when he warned you against marrying Guenevere. No one ever loved you or ever could love you as I do – your mother.

ARTHUR: You were jealous of a mere mortal?

MORGAN: Mere mortal she certainly was! How could you choose such a shallow woman? I was angry. And angrier still when you neglected the old, true gods of your own land and allowed your knights to follow this new trumpery god with his magic cup and his empty threats of everlasting punishment. You, my own beloved son, did this.

ARTHUR: I knew no better. I am sorry.

MORGAN: Well, it is all done now and I have come to take you home to Avalon.

*The GODDESSES retire as BEDIVERE re-enters.*

BEDIVERE: I threw the sword, Sir, and it seemed to fly with more than the force of my arm, high over the dark water. And as it fell a hand rose out of the lake and caught it and joyfully sliced the air with it three times and drew it under.

ARTHUR: *(shivering)* You must take me down to the lake-shore. I'm afraid I have been lying here too long. Is it quite dark?

BEDIVERE: *(picking him up)* No, look! The sky is still red.

ARTHUR: It seems quite dark to me. You must lay me in the barge now, Bedivere.

*The GODDESSES come forward and help BEDIVERE carry ARTHUR to the catafalque, where they lay him down in the position of the opening tableau*

These goddesses will take me over the black water to Avalon and heal my wound.

*BEDIVERE steps back and continues walking slowly backwards through the following:*

BEDIVERE: And will you come back? Shall I see you again, Sir? Must I lose all my friends and both my brothers and my King on the same day?

ARTHUR: I was never your brother, Bedivere. Put no more trust in me, but manage as you can in this hard world, where everything turns to dust and dung! Perhaps I shall return some day, but I think you left me too long on the hill. My wound burns and my body is cold.

*BEDIVERE crouches down and weeps as the GODDESSES begin to sing and the lights slowly fade on the opening tableau*

MORGAN:           The black barge sails to Avalon,  
                          Darkness falls on the kingdom,  
                          The King is leaving.

NIMUE:            The waves are dark round Avalon,  
                          The reeds rustling and sighing,  
                          The gods are leaving.

ARANROD:         Arthur will sleep in Avalon,  
                          He is not dead but sleeping,  
                          Not dead but dreaming.

MORGAN:         Now Arthur goes home to Avalon,  
                          To the island of healing,  
                          Even the gods are weeping...

#### Epilogue

*BURNE-JONES and ROOKE enter and close the curtains across the tableau – or the lights are lowered*

JONES:            I'm pleased with the likeness. It's just how he looked on his deathbed.

ROOKE:            Mr Morris? Yes, I thought I recognised your new version of King Arthur's face.

JONES:            He was a King. And, of course, that's the meaning of it, isn't it?

ROOKE:            Of Mr Morris's death?

JONES:            Of the story, the myth. Of the King who will return. He does return, from time to time, when most needed, but people don't realise until it's too late. Because he doesn't necessarily wear shining armour or brandish Excalibur or look like a hero. He may even get much too fat like Morris, though at the end he was no more than a glorious head on a crumple of clothes. But it makes no odds. Those who care about such things will always recognise him and follow him as best they can. Sometimes they give him a silly name – Topsy, I used to call him – but they know perfectly well who he really is, back for a while from Avalon.

*He staggers and stumbles, then leans on ROOKE's arm as they go out.*

The End