



***EDWIN
ARLINGTON
ROBINSON***

***MERLIN:
A POEM***

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Merlin: A Poem

EAN 8596547401216

DigiCat, 2022

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To
GEORGE BURNHAM

MERLIN

“Gawaine, Gawaine, what look ye for to see,
 So far beyond the faint edge of the world?
 D’ye look to see the lady Vivian,
 Pursued by divers ominous vile demons
 That have another king more fierce than ours?
 Or think ye that if ye look far enough
 And hard enough into the feathery west
 Ye’ll have a glimmer of the Grail itself?
 And if ye look for neither Grail nor lady,
 What look ye for to see, Gawaine, Gawaine?”
 So Dagonet, whom Arthur made a knight
 Because he loved him as he laughed at him,
 Intoned his idle presence on a day
 To Gawaine, who had thought himself alone,
 Had there been in him thought of anything
 Save what was murmured now in Camelot
 Of Merlin’s hushed and all but unconfirmed
 Appearance out of Brittany. It was heard
 At first there was a ghost in Arthur’s palace,
 But soon among the scullions and anon
 Among the knights a firmer credit held
 All tongues from uttering what all glances told

—

Though not for long. Gawaine, this afternoon,
 Fearing he might say more to Lancelot
 Of Merlin’s rumor-laden resurrection
 Than Lancelot would have an ear to cherish,
 Had sauntered off with his imagination
 To Merlin’s Rock, where now there was no
 Merlin
 To meditate upon a whispering town
 Below him in the silence.—Once he said
 To Gawaine: “You are young; and that being

so,
Behold the shining city of our dreams
And of our King.”—“Long live the King,” said
Gawaine.—

“Long live the King,” said Merlin after him;
“Better for me that I shall not be King;
Wherefore I say again, Long live the King,
And add, God save him, also, and all kings—
All kings and queens. I speak in general.
Kings have I known that were but weary men
With no stout appetite for more than peace
That was not made for them.”—“Nor were
they made

For kings,” Gawaine said, laughing.—“You are
young
Gawaine, and you may one day hold the world
Between your fingers, knowing not what it is
That you are holding. Better for you and me,
I think, that we shall not be kings.”

Gawaine,
Remembering Merlin’s words of long ago,
Frowned as he thought, and having frowned
again,
He smiled and threw an acorn at a lizard:
“There’s more afoot and in the air to-day
Than what is good for Camelot. Merlin
May or may not know all, but he said well
To say to me that he would not be King.
No more would I be King.” Far down he gazed
On Camelot, until he made of it
A phantom town of many stillnesses,
Not reared for men to dwell in, or for kings
To reign in, without omens and obscure
Familiars to bring terror to their days;
For though a knight, and one as hard at arms

As any, save the fate-begotten few
That all acknowledged or in envy loathed,
He felt a foreign sort of creeping up
And down him, as of moist things in the dark,
—

When Dagonet, coming on him unawares,
Presuming on his title of Sir Fool,
Addressed him and crooned on till he was
done:

“What look ye for to see, Gawaine, Gawaine?”

“Sir Dagonet, you best and wariest
Of all dishonest men, I look through Time,
For sight of what it is that is to be.
I look to see it, though I see it not.
I see a town down there that holds a king,
And over it I see a few small clouds—
Like feathers in the west, as you observe;
And I shall see no more this afternoon
Than what there is around us every day,
Unless you have a skill that I have not
To ferret the invisible for rats.”

“If you see what’s around us every day,
You need no other showing to go mad.
Remember that and take it home with you;
And say tonight, ‘I had it of a fool—
With no immediate obliquity
For this one or for that one, or for me.’”

Gawaine, having risen, eyed the fool
curiously:

“I’ll not forget I had it of a knight,
Whose only folly is to fool himself;
And as for making other men to laugh,
And so forget their sins and selves a little,

There's no great folly there. So keep it up,
As long as you've a legend or a song,
And have whatever sport of us you like
Till havoc is the word and we fall howling.
For I've a guess there may not be so loud
A sound of laughing here in Camelot
When Merlin goes again to his gay grave
In Brittany. To mention lesser terrors,
Men say his beard is gone."

"Do men say that?"

A twitch of an impatient weariness
Played for a moment over the lean face
Of Dagonet, who reasoned inwardly:
"The friendly zeal of this inquiring knight
Will overtake his tact and leave it squealing,
One of these days."—Gawaine looked hard at
him:

"If I be too familiar with a fool,
I'm on the way to be another fool,"
He mused, and owned a rueful qualm within
him:

"Yes, Dagonet," he ventured, with a laugh,
"Men tell me that his beard has vanished
wholly,
And that he shines now as the Lord's
anointed,
And wears the valiance of an ageless youth
Crowned with a glory of eternal peace."

Dagonet, smiling strangely, shook his head:
"I grant your valiance of a kind of youth
To Merlin, but your crown of peace I question;
For, though I know no more than any churl
Who pinches any chambermaid soever
In the King's palace, I look not to Merlin

For peace, when out of his peculiar tomb
He comes again to Camelot. Time swings
A mighty scythe, and some day all your peace
Goes down before its edge like so much
clover.

No, it is not for peace that Merlin comes,
Without a trumpet—and without a beard,
If what you say men say of him be true—
Nor yet for sudden war.”

Gawaine, for a moment,
Met then the ambiguous gaze of Dagonet,
And, making nothing of it, looked abroad
As if at something cheerful on all sides,
And back again to the fool’s unasking eyes:
“Well, Dagonet, if Merlin would have peace,
Let Merlin stay away from Brittany,”
Said he, with admiration for the man
Whom Folly called a fool: “And we have known
him;
We knew him once when he knew
everything.”

“He knew as much as God would let him know
Until he met the lady Vivian.
I tell you that, for the world knows all that;
Also it knows he told the King one day
That he was to be buried, and alive,
In Brittany; and that the King should see
The face of him no more. Then Merlin sailed
Away to Vivian in Broceliande,
Where now she crowns him and herself with
flowers,
And feeds him fruits and wines and many
foods
Of many savors, and sweet ortolans.