



## The Once and Future King

By T. H. White

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**T. H. White's masterful retelling of the saga of King Arthur is a fantasy classic as legendary as Excalibur and Camelot, and a poignant story of adventure, romance and magic that has enchanted readers for generations.**

Once upon a time, a young boy called "Wart" was tutored by a magician named Merlyn in preparation for a future he couldn't possibly imagine. A future in which he would ally himself with the greatest knights, love a legendary queen and unite a country dedicated to chivalrous values. A future that would see him crowned and known for all time as Arthur, King of the Britons.

During Arthur's reign, the kingdom of Camelot was founded to cast enlightenment on the Dark Ages, while the knights of the Round Table embarked on many a noble quest. But Merlyn foresaw the treachery that awaited his liege: the forbidden love between Queen Guenever and Lancelot, the wicked plots of Arthur's half-sister Morgause and the hatred she fostered in Mordred that would bring an end to the king's dreams for Britain—and to the king himself.

**"[*The Once and Future King*]mingles wisdom, wonderful, laugh-out-loud humor and deep sorrow—while telling one of the great tales of the Western world."**—Guy Gavriel Kay

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“A fierce and damaged man, T. H. White wrote about fierce and damaged people—and children, and animals—with a brilliant, painful innocence that has no equal in literature. He is so good at hurt and shame—how did he also manage to be so funny? I have laughed at his great Arthurian novel and cried over it and loved it all my life.”—Ursula K. Le Guin

“Certain books offer pleasures so rich and enduring, they become part of what defines us. *The Once and Future King* is like that for me. It manages—by some miracle—to be about its own time, and a distant, legendary time, and about today. It mingles wisdom, wonderful, laugh-out-loud humor and deep sorrow—while telling one of the great tales of the Western world. I envy the reader coming to it for the first time.”—Guy Gavriel Kay

“White took hold of the ultimate English epic and recast it in modern literary language, sacrificing none of its grandeur or its strangeness in the process, and adding in all the humor and passion that we expect from a novel. What was once as stiff and two-dimensional as a medieval tapestry becomes rich and real and devastatingly sad.”—Lev Grossman

“Touching, profound, funny and tragic.”—*Los Angeles Times*

“Richly imagined and unfailingly eloquent and entertaining, its appeal is timeless and universal. If a reader reads only one Arthurian tale, let this be it.”—*Booklist*

“*The Once and Future King* is full of insights, scenes and flourishes that are really quite astonishing.”—*The Guardian* (U.K.)

#### About the Author

**T. H. White** is the author of the classic Arthurian fantasy *The Once and Future King*, among other works.

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### ONE

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales, while the rest of the week it was the Organon, Repetition and Astrology. The governess was always getting muddled with her astrolabe, and when she got specially muddled she would take it out of the Wart by rapping his knuckles. She did not rap Kay’s knuckles, because when Kay grew older he would be Sir Kay, the master of the estate. The Wart was called the Wart because it more or less rhymed with Art, which was short for his real name. Kay had given him the nickname. Kay was not called anything but Kay, as he was too dignified to have a nickname and would have flown into a passion if anybody had tried to give him one. The governess had red hair and some mysterious wound from which she derived a lot of prestige by showing it to all the women of the castle, behind closed doors. It was believed to be where she sat down, and to have been caused by sitting on some armour at a picnic by mistake. Eventually she offered to show it to Sir Ector, who was Kay’s father, had hysterics and was sent away. They found out afterwards that she had been in a lunatic hospital for three years.

In the afternoons the programme was: Mondays and Fridays, tilting and horsemanship; Tuesdays, hawking; Wednesdays, fencing; Thursdays, archery; Saturdays, the theory of chivalry, with the proper measures to be blown on all occasions, terminology of the chase and hunting etiquette. If you did the wrong thing at the mort or the undoing, for instance, you were bent over the body of the dead beast and smacked with the flat side of a sword. This was called being bladed. It was horseplay, a sort of joke like being shaved when crossing the line. Kay was not bladed, although he often went wrong.

When they had got rid of the governess, Sir Ector said, "After all, damn it all, we can't have the boys runnin' about all day like hooligans—after all, damn it all? Ought to be havin' a first-rate eddication, at their age. When I was their age I was doin' all this Latin and stuff at five o'clock every mornin'. Happiest time of me life. Pass the port."

Sir Grummore Grummursum, who was staying the night because he had been benighted out questin' after a specially long run, said that when he was their age he was swished every mornin' because he would go hawkin' instead of learnin'. He attributed to this weakness the fact that he could never get beyond the Future Simple of Utor. It was a third of the way down the left-hand leaf, he said. He thought it was leaf ninety-seven. He passed the port.

Sir Ector said, "Had a good quest today?"

Sir Grummore said, "Oh, not so bad. Rattlin' good day, in fact. Found a chap called Sir Bruce Saunce Pitē choppin' off a maiden's head in Weedon Bushes, ran him to Mixbury Plantation in the Bicester, where he doubled back, and lost him in Wicken Wood. Must have been a good twenty-five miles as he ran."

"A straight-necked 'un," said Sir Ector.

"But about these boys and all this Latin and that," added the old gentleman. "Amo, amas, you know, and runnin' about like hooligans: what would you advise?"

"Ah," said Sir Grummore, laying his finger by his nose and winking at the bottle, "that takes a deal of thinkin' about, if you don't mind my sayin' so."

"Don't mind at all," said Sir Ector. "Very kind of you to say anythin'. Much obliged, I'm sure. Help yourself to port."

"Good port this."

"Get it from a friend of mine."

"But about these boys," said Sir Grummore. "How many of them are there, do you know?"

"Two," said Sir Ector, "counting them both, that is."

"Couldn't send them to Eton, I suppose?" inquired Sir Grummore cautiously. "Long way and all that, we know."

It was not really Eton that he mentioned, for the College of Blessed Mary was not founded until 1440, but it was a place of the same sort. Also they were drinking Metheglyn, not port, but by mentioning the modern wine it is easier to give you the feel.

"Isn't so much the distance," said Sir Ector, "but that giant What's-'is-name is in the way. Have to pass through his country, you understand."

“What is his name?”

“Can’t recollect it at the moment, not for the life of me. Fellow that lives by the Burbly Water.”

“Galapas,” said Sir Grummore.

“That’s the very chap.”

“The only other thing,” said Sir Grummore, “is to have a tutor.”

“You mean a fellow who teaches you.”

“That’s it,” said Sir Grummore. “A tutor, you know, a fellow who teaches you.”

“Have some more port,” said Sir Ector. “You need it after all this questin’.”

“Splendid day,” said Sir Grummore. “Only they never seem to kill nowadays. Run twenty-five miles and then mark to ground or lose him altogether. The worst is when you start a fresh quest.”

“We kill all our giants cubbin’,” said Sir Ector. “After that they give you a fine run, but get away.”

“Run out of scent,” said Sir Grummore, “I dare say. It’s always the same with these big giants in a big country. They run out of scent.”

“But even if you was to have a tutor,” said Sir Ector, “I don’t see how you would get him.”

“Advertise,” said Sir Grummore.

“I have advertised,” said Sir Ector. “It was cried by the *Humberland Newsman and Cardoile Advertiser*.”

“The only other way,” said Sir Grummore, “is to start a quest.”

“You mean a quest for a tutor,” explained Sir Ector.

“That’s it.”

“Hic, Haec, Hoc,” said Sir Ector. “Have some more of this drink, whatever it calls itself.”

“Hunc,” said Sir Grummore.

So it was decided. When Grummore Grummursum had gone home next day, Sir Ector tied a knot in his handkerchief to remember to start a quest for a tutor as soon as he had time to do so, and, as he was not sure how to set about it, he told the boys what Sir Grummore had suggested and warned them not to be hooligans meanwhile. Then they went hay-making.

It was July, and every able-bodied man and woman on the estate worked during that month in the field, under Sir Ector’s direction. In any case the boys would have been excused from being eddicated just then.

Sir Ector’s castle stood in an enormous clearing in a still more enormous forest. It had a courtyard and a moat with pike in it. The moat was crossed by a fortified stone bridge which ended half-way across it. The other half was covered by a wooden drawbridge which was wound up every night. As soon as you had crossed the drawbridge you were at the top of the village street—it had only one street—and this extended for about half a mile, with thatched houses of wattle and daub on either side of it. The street divided the

clearing into two huge fields, that on the left being cultivated in hundreds of long narrow strips, while that on the right ran down to a river and was used as pasture. Half of the right-hand field was fenced off for hay.

It was July, and real July weather, such as they had in Old England. Everybody went bright brown, like Red Indians, with startling teeth and flashing eyes. The dogs moved about with their tongues hanging out, or lay panting in bits of shade, while the farm horses sweated through their coats and flicked their tails and tried to kick the horse-flies off their bellies with their great hind hoofs. In the pasture field the cows were on the gad, and could be seen galloping about with their tails in the air, which made Sir Ector angry.

Sir Ector stood on the top of a rick, whence he could see what everybody was doing, and shouted commands all over the two-hundred-acre field, and grew purple in the face. The best mowers mowed away in a line where the grass was still uncut, their scythes roaring in the strong sunlight. The women raked the dry hay together in long strips with wooden rakes, and the two boys with pitchforks followed up on either side of the strip, turning the hay inwards so that it lay well for picking up. Then the great carts followed, rumbling with their spiked wooden wheels, drawn by horses or slow white oxen. One man stood on top of the cart to receive the hay and direct operations, while one man walked on either side picking up what the boys had prepared and throwing it to him with a fork. The cart was led down the lane between two lines of hay, and was loaded in strict rotation from the front poles to the back, the man on top calling out in a stern voice where he wanted each fork to be pitched. The loaders grumbled at the boys for not having laid the hay properly and threatened to tan them when they caught them, if they got left behind.

When the wagon was loaded, it was drawn to Sir Ector's rick and pitched to him. It came up easily because it had been loaded systematically—not like modern hay—and Sir Ector scrambled about on top, getting in the way of his assistants, who did the real work, and stamping and perspiring and scratching about with his fork and trying to make the rick grow straight and shouting that it would all fall down as soon as the west winds came.

The Wart loved hay-making, and was good at it. Kay, who was two years older, generally stood on the edge of the bundle which he was trying to pick up, with the result that he worked twice as hard as the Wart for only half the result. But he hated to be beaten at anything, and used to fight away with the wretched hay—which he loathed like poison—until he was quite sick.

The day after Sir Grummore's visit was sweltering for the men who toiled from milking to milking and then again till sunset in their battle with the sultry element. For the hay was an element to them, like sea or air, in which they bathed and plunged themselves and which they even breathed in. The seeds and small scraps stuck in their hair, their mouths, their nostrils, and worked, tickling, inside their clothes. They did not wear many clothes, and the shadows between their sliding muscles were blue on the nut-brown skins. Those who feared thunder had felt ill that morning.

In the afternoon the storm broke. Sir Ector kept them at it till the great flashes were right overhead, and then, with the sky as dark as night, the rain came hurling against them so that they were drenched at once and could not see a hundred yards. The boys lay crouched under the wagons, wrapped in hay to keep their wet bodies warm against the now cold wind, and all joked with one another while heaven fell. Kay was shivering, though not with cold, but he joked like the others because he would not show he was afraid. At the last and greatest thunderbolt every man started involuntarily, and each saw the other startle, until they laughed away their shame.

But that was the end of the hay-making and the beginning of play. The boys were sent home to change their clothes. The old dame who had been their nurse fetched dry jerkins out of a press, and scolded them for catching their deaths, and denounced Sir Ector for keeping on so long. Then they slipped their heads into the

laundered shirts, and ran out to the refreshed and sparkling court.

“I vote we take Cully and see if we can get some rabbits in the chase,” cried the Wart.

“The rabbits will not be out in this wet,” said Kay sarcastically, delighted to have caught him over natural history.

“Oh, come on. It will soon be dry.”

“I must carry Cully, then.”

Kay insisted on carrying the goshawk and flying her, when they went hawking together. This he had a right to do, not only because he was older than the Wart but also because he was Sir Ector’s proper son. The Wart was not a proper son. He did not understand this, but it made him feel unhappy, because Kay seemed to regard it as making him inferior in some way. Also it was different not having a father and mother, and Kay had taught him that being different was wrong. Nobody talked to him about it, but he thought about it when he was alone, and was distressed. He did not like people to bring it up. Since the other boy always did bring it up when a question of precedence arose, he had got into the habit of giving in at once before it could be mentioned. Besides, he admired Kay and was a born follower. He was a hero-worshipper.

“Come on, then,” cried the Wart, and they scampered off toward the Mews, turning a few cartwheels on the way.

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