

The Once and Future King

by

T. H. White

This is a corrected version, based on a Flamingo edition published in 1984 by Fontana Paperbacks, ISBN 0-00-654010-4. I have done my best to correct the hundreds of errors which I found in the pirated PDF which is floating around the Internet, and the result is a great improvement, but many errors probably remain. It still doesn't look quite as nice as that old paperback edition. The paragraphs are separated rather than indented, and so on. But I have put back the original italics where they belonged, and recreated some of the other formatting.

TERENCE HANBURY WHITE was born in 1906 in India, where his father was a member of the Indian Civil Service, and educated at Cheltenham and Cambridge. For many years he was an English master at Stowe.

The author of poems, books about hunting and other sports and even detective stories, his first real success was *The Sword in the Stone* (1939), a brilliantly imaginative retelling of King Arthur's early life. He continued the story in *The Witch in the Wood* (1940) and *The Ill-Made Knight* (1941). In 1958, he wrote what was believed to be the final volume of his Arthurian saga, *The Candle In the Wind*, and published it together with revised versions of his earlier books as *The Once and Future King*. He died in 1964.

After T.H. White's death, a further manuscript, concluding the story, was discovered among his papers at the University of Texas. It has been published under the title *The Book of Merlyn*.

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The critics on T. H. White's THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING

"A glorious dream of the Middle Ages as they never were, but should have been"

—New York Times

"Intensely contemporary and pungent . . . not only better . . . and richer for being a retelling, it is also more original ... In fact, there is everything in this great book."

—*Saturday Review*

"... should be enormously popular and become one of the curious classics of English literature."

—David Garnett

Other Books by T. H. White

THE BOOK OF MERLYN

ENGLAND HAVE MY BONES

LETTERS TO A FRIEND

THE MAHARAJAH AND OTHER STORIES

MISTRESS MASHAM'S REPOSE

THE SWORD

IN

THE STONE

*She is not any common earth
Water or wood or air,
But Merlin's Isle of Gramarye
Where you and I will fare.*

1

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 Pité 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 Newsmen 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 startled 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.

The Mews was one of the most important parts of the castle, next to the stables and the kennels. It was opposite to the solar, and faced south. The outside windows had to be small, for reasons of fortification, but the windows which looked inward to the courtyard were big and sunny. The windows had close vertical slats nailed down them, but no horizontal ones. There was no glass, but to keep the hawks from draughts there was horn in the small windows. At one end of the Mews there was a little fireplace and a kind of snuggery, like the place in a saddle-room where the grooms sit to clean their tack on wet nights after foxhunting. Here there were a couple of stools, a cauldron, a bench with all sorts of small knives and surgical instruments, and some shelves with pots on them. The pots were labelled Cardamum, Ginger, Barley Sugar, Wrangle, For a Snurt, For the Craye, Vertigo, etc. There were leather skins hanging up, which had been snipped about as pieces were cut out of them for jesses, hoods or leashes. On a neat row of nails there were Indian bells and swivels and silver varvels, each with Ector cut on. A special shelf, and the most beautiful of all, held the hoods: very old cracked rufter hoods which had been made for birds before Kay was born, tiny hoods for the merlins, small hoods for tiercels, splendid new hoods which had been knocked up to pass away the long winter evenings. All the hoods, except the rufters, were made in Sir Ector's colours: white leather with red baize at the sides and a bunch of blue-grey plumes on top, made out of the hackle feathers of herons. On the bench there was a jumble of oddments such as are to be found in every workshop, bits of cord, wire, metal, tools, some bread and cheese which the mice had been at, a leather bottle, some frayed gauntlets for the left hand, nails, bits of sacking, a couple of lures and some rough tallies scratched on the wood. These read: Conays 1111 1111, Harn 111, etc. They were not spelled very well.

Right down the length of the room, with the afternoon sun shining full on them, there ran the screen perches to which the birds were tied. There were two little merlins which had only just been taken up from hacking, an old peregrine who was not much use in this wooded country but who was kept for appearances, a kestrel on which the boys had learned the rudiments of falconry, a spar-hawk which Sir Ector was kind enough to keep for the parish priest, and, caged off in a special apartment of his own at the far end, there was the tiercel goshawk Cully.

The Mews was neatly kept, with sawdust on the floor to absorb the mutes, and the castings taken up every day. Sir Ector visited the place each morning at seven o'clock and the two austringers stood at attention outside the door. If they had forgotten to brush their hair he confined them to barracks. They took no notice.

Kay put on one of the left-hand gauntlets and called Cully from the perch—but Cully, with all his feathers close-set and malevolent, glared at him with a mad marigold eye and refused to come. So Kay took him up.

"Do you think we ought to fly him?" asked the Wart doubtfully. "Deep in the moult like this?"

"Of course we can fly him, you ninny," said Kay. "He only wants to be carried a bit, that's all."

So they went out across the hay-field, noting how the carefully raked hay was now sodden again and losing its goodness, into the chase where the trees began to grow, far apart as yet and parklike, but gradually crowding into the forest shade. The conies had hundreds of buries under these trees, so close together that the problem was not to find a rabbit, but to find a rabbit far enough away from its hole.

"Hob says that we must not fly Cully till he has roused at least twice," said the Wart.

"Hob does not know anything about it. Nobody can tell whether a hawk is fit to fly except the man who is carrying it.

"Hob is only a villein anyway," added Kay, and began to undo the leash and swivel from the jesses.

When he felt the trappings being taken off him, so that he was in hunting order, Cully did make some movements as if to rouse. He raised his crest, his shoulder coverts and the soft feathers of his thighs. But at the last moment he thought better or worse of it and subsided without the rattle. This movement of the hawk's made the Wart itch to carry him. He yearned to take him away from Kay and set him to rights himself. He felt certain that he could get Cully into a good temper by scratching his feet and softly teasing his breast feathers upward, if only he were allowed to do it himself, instead of having to plod along behind with the stupid lure. But he knew how annoying it must be for the elder boy to be continually subjected to advice, and so he held his peace. Just as in modern shooting, you must never offer criticism to the man in command, so in hawking it was important that no outside advice should be allowed to disturb the judgment of the austringer.