

THE ROUND TABLE, or King Arthur's Feast

Thomas Love Peacock

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introduction

KING ARTHUR is said to have disappeared after the battle of Camlan, and to have never been seen again; which gave rise to a tradition, that he had been carried away by Merlin, a famous prophet and magician of his time, and would return to his kingdom at some future period.—The Welch continued to expect him for many hundred years; and it is by no means certain that they have entirely given him up. He is here represented as inhabiting a solitary island, under the influence of the prophet Merlin; by whose magic power he is shown all the kings and queens who have sat on his throne since his death, and giving to them a grand feast, at his old established round table, attended by their principal secretaries, dukes, lords, admirals, generals, poets, and a long train of courtiers. The kings are of course mentioned in the order of their succession. The allegory is illustrated as concisely as possible in the notes. So many histories of England being published for the use of young persons, we have only attached the names of the kings, and to such instances as might not be considered sufficiently explanatory.

KING ARTHUR sat down by the lonely sea-coast,
As thin as a lath, and as pale as a ghost:
He looked on the east, and the west, and the south,
With a tear in his eye, and a pipe in his mouth;
And he said to old Merlin, who near him did stand,
Drawing circles, triangles, and squares on the sand,
"Sure nothing more dismal and tedious can be,
Than to sit always smoking and watching the sea:
Say when shall the fates re-establish my reign,
And help my round-table in Britain again?"

Old Merlin replied: "By my art it appears,
Not in less than three hundred and seventy years;
But in the mean time I am very well able
To spread in this island your ancient round table;
And to grace it with guests of unparalleled splendour,
I'll summon old Pluto forthwith to surrender
All the kings who have sat on your throne, from the day
When from Camlan's destruction I snatched you away."

King Arthur's long face, by these accents restored,
Grew as round as his table, as bright as his sword;
While the wand of old Merlin waved over the ocean,
Soon covered its billows with brilliant commotion;
For ships of all ages and sizes appearing,
Towards the same shore were all rapidly steering,
Came cleaving the billows with sail and with oar,
Yacht, pinnace, sloop, frigate, and seventy-four.

King Arthur scarce spied them afar from the land,
Ere their keels were fixed deep in the yellow sea-sand;

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And from under their canopies, golden and gay,
Came kings, queens, and courtiers, in gallant array,
Much musing and marvelling who it might be,
That was smoking his pipe by the side of the sea;
But Merlin stepped forth with a greeting right warm,
And then introduced them in order and form.

The Saxons came first, the pre-eminence claiming,
With scarce one among them but Alfred worth naming.
Full slightly they looked upon Canute the bold,
And remembered the drubbing he gave them of old:
Sad Harold came last; and the crown which he wore
Had been broken, and trampled in dust and in gore.

Now the sun in the west had gone down to repose,
When before them at once a pavilion arose;
Where Arthur's round table was royally spread,
And illumined with lamps, purple, yellow, and red.
The smell of roast beef put them all in a foment,
So they scrambled for seats, and were ranged in a moment.

The Conqueror stood up, as they thought, to say grace;
But he scowled round the board with a resolute face;
And the company stared, when he swore by the fates,
That a list he would have of their names and estates;
And lest too much liquor their brains should inspire
To set the pavilion and table on fire,
He hoped they'd acknowledge he counselled right well,
To put out the lights when he tinkled his bell.

His speech was cut short by a general dismay;
For William the Second had fainted away,
At the smell of some New Forest venison before him;
But a tweak on the nose, Arthur said, would restore him.

But another disturbance compelled him to mark
The pitiful state of Henry Beauclerk;
Who had fallen on the lampreys with ardour so stout,
That he dropped from his chair in the midst of the rout.
Arthur surprised at a king so voracious,
Thought a salt-water ducking might prove efficacious.

Now Stephen, for whom some bold barons had carved,
Said, while some could get surfeited, he was half-starved:
For his arms were so pinioned, unfortunate elf!
He could hit on no method of helping himself.

But a tumult more furious called Arthur to check it,
"Twixt Henry the Second and Thomas a Becket.
"Turn out," exclaimed Arthur, "that prelate so free,
And from the first rock see him thrown in the sea."
So they hustled out Becket without judge or jury,

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Who quickly returned in a terrible fury.
The lords were enraged, and the ladies affrighted;
But his head was soon cracked in the fray he excited;
When in rushed some monks in a great perturbation,
And gave good King Henry a sound flagellation;
Which so coolly he took, that the president swore,
He ne'er saw such a bigoted milk-sop before.

But Arthur's good humour was quickly restored,
When to lion-hearted Richard a bumper he poured
Whose pilgrim's array told the tale of his toils,
Half-veiling his arms and his Saracen spoils;
As he sliced up the venison of merry Sherwood,
He told a long story of bold Robin Hood,
Which gave good King Arthur such a hearty delight,
That he vow'd he'd make Robin a round-table knight.

While Merlin to fetch Robin Hood was preparing,
John Lackland was blustering, and vapouring, and swearing,
And seemed quite determined the roast to be ruling;
But some stout fellows near him prepared him a cooling;
Who seized him, and held him, nor gave him release,
Till he signed them a bond for preserving the peace.

While Henry the Third, dull, contemned, and forsaken,
Sat stupidly silent, regaling on Bacon,
The First of the Edwards charmed Arthur with tales
Of fighting in Palestine, Scotland, and Wales;
But Merlin asserted his angry regards,
Recollecting how Edward had treated the Bards.
The Second, whose days in affliction had run,
Sat pensive and sad 'twixt his father and son.
But on the Third Edward resplendently glance
The blazons of knighthood, and trophies of France;
Beside him his son in black armour appears,
That yet bears the marks of the field of Poitiers.

From the festival's pomp, and the table's array,
Pale Richard of Bordeaux turned sadly away;
The thought of that time his remembrance appals,
When Famine scowled on him in Pomfret's dark walls.

Beside him sat Bolinbroke, gloomy and stern,
Nor dared his dark eyes on his victim to turn;
The wrinkles of care o'er his features were spread,
And thorns lined the crown that encircled his head.

But Harry of Monmouth some guests had brought in,
Who drank so much liquor, and made such a din,
(While Arthur full loudly his mirth did disclose
At Falstaff's fat belly and Bardolph's red nose)

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That he turned them all out with monarchial pride,
And laid the plumed cap of his revels aside,
And put on the helmet, and breastplate, and shield,
That did such great service on Agincourt's field.

And now rang the tent with unusual alarms,
For the white and red roses were calling to arms;
Confusion and tumult established their reign,
And Arthur stood up, and called silence in vain.

Poor Harry the Sixth, hustled, beaten, and prest,
Had his nosegay of lilies soon torn from his breast;
And, though Margaret, to shield him, had clasped him around,
From her arms he was shaken, and hurled to the ground;
While Edward of York flourished over his head
The rose's pale blossoms, and trampled the red;
Though Warwick strove vainly the ill to repair,
And set fallen Henry again on his chair.

The children of Edward stood up in the fray,
But, touched by cruel Richard, they vanished away;
Who, knowing none loved him, resolved all should fear him,
And therefore knocked every one down who was near him.
Till him in his turn Harry Richmond assailed,
And at once, on his downfall, good order prevailed;
And Richmond uplifted, to prove the strife ended,
A wreath where the white and red roses were blended.

With his Jane, and his Annes, and his Catherines beside,
Sat Henry the Eighth, in true Ottoman pride,
And quaffed of with Wolsey the goblet's red tide;
But over the head of each lady so fair
An axe was impending, that hung by a hair.

Bold Arthur, whose fancy this king had not won,
Look'd with hope and delight on young Edward his son;
But had scarcely commended his learning and grace,
Ere he found his attention called off to the place
Where the infamous Marg polluted the feast,
Who sat drinking blood from the skull of a priest.

But he struggled his horror and rage to repress,
And sought consolation from worthy Queen Bess,
Who had brought Drake and Raleigh her state to sustain,
With American spoils and the trophies of Spain;
While Shakspeare and Spenser, with song and with fable,
Enchanted King Arthur and all round his table.

Now the First of the James's complained of the heat,
And seemed ill at ease on his ricketty seat;
It proved, when examined (which made them all stare),

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A gunpowder barrel instead of a chair.

The First of the Charles's was clearing the dishes,
Taking more than his share of the loaves and the fishes,
Not minding at all what the company said,
When up started Cromwell, and sliced off his head.

Charles the Second, enraged at the villainous deed,
Tried to turn out old Cromwell, but could not succeed;
But he mastered young Dick, and then cooled his own wrath
In syllabub, trifle, and fillagree broth.

James the Second, with looks full of anger and gloom,
Pronounced nothing good but the cookery of Rome;
So begged of King Arthur, his dear royal crony,
To make all the company eat Macaroni;
But Arthur bade Mary an orange present,
At which James grew queasy, and fled from the tent.
So she placed on his seat honest William, her spouse,
And with laurel and olive encircled his brows;
Wreath of glory and peace, by young Freedom entwined,
And gave him a key to the lock of the mind.

Now as Arthur continued the party to scan,
He did not well know what to make of Queen Anne;
But Marlborough, he saw, did her credit uplift,
And he heartily laughed at the jokes of Dean Swift.

Then shook hands with two Georges, who near him were seated,
Who closed in his left, and the circle completed;
He liked them both well, but he frankly averred,
He expected to prove better pleased with the Third.