

KING ARTHUR THE PANTO

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Act One - Scene One

The Green outside Camelot.

An idyllic, lush-looking spot, with the famous castle, bathed in sunlight, seen on the hilltop behind, pennants fluttering from its turrets. On the left, a big gorse bush. Upstage centre, a maypole, and to one side a flower-bedecked throne, where Lady Rowena is seated, flanked by Dilly and Dally. Merlin and Nimue are on hand, and the chorus as knights, ladies, maids of honour and pages, is celebrating May Day.

Song A: Camelot

After the number, the chorus splits up into groups, a page steps forward with a circlet of flowers on a cushion and Merlin crowns Rowena with it.

Merlin: Lady Rowena, I hereby pronounce you Queen of the May. *(There are cheers all round. She comes downstage and various chorus step up to congratulate her, while others make murmurs of approbation – “Doesn’t she look lovely?” “What gorgeous flowers!” “I remember when I was chosen to be May Queen.” etc. Enter Morgan, left, disguised as an old gypsy woman. She has a bright shawl over her head and shoulders and an apron with pockets, and carries a basket with assorted trinkets and bunches of heather. As she moves among the chorus, the happy atmosphere turns to grumbles of discontent.)*

Rowena: Thank you Merlin; thank you everyone. I’m so happy, and oh, isn’t it a lovely day!

1st chorus: It certainly is.

2nd chorus: Another perfect May Day!

Morgan: Buy my lucky heather! Buy my lucky heather!

3rd chorus: But then, it always is.

4th chorus: Yeah, just the same as every other day here.

5th chorus: That’s right - nothing but sun from six o’clock in the morning until nine o’clock at night, day after day after day.

1st chorus: Why can’t we have a decent thunderstorm for once?

2nd chorus*(indicating with hand):* Or snow this deep– it’s years since I did any sledging!

Morgan *(coming down to Rowena):* Buy my lucky heather lady! Only a penny a bunch.

Rowena: Well, why not – here you are, old lady. *(She hands over a coin and takes a bunch.)*

Morgan: Bless you, my dear. *(As she hobbles away, Rowena puts a hand up and fidgets with the flowers on her head.)*

Rowena: Oh, Merlin, this crown is SO uncomfortable. It feels as though it’s full of thorns! *(Morgan cackles and exits. As she passes them, some of the pages start fighting.)*

Nimue *(striding over to sort out the fracas):* Now, come on, lads, behave yourselves, or I’ll bang your heads together. *(A fanfare sounds)* Listen – King Arthur’s coming. He’ll have your guts for garters if he catches you carrying on like young hooligans.

Page: Yes Nimue. (*As she moves away he pulls a face behind her back. A murmur goes round the crowd: "The king's coming." Arthur strides on and everyone but Merlin bows or curtsies.*)

All: Good morning, Your Majesty.

Arthur: Good morning everyone. Oh, do get up. Let's not stand on ceremony today of all days. Now, are you all enjoying yourselves? (*There are a few half-hearted responses.*) What's this – why all the long faces? It's May Day. It's a holiday, with music and dancing, and making merry! Come on! Let's see a few smiles, eh Merlin? I say, Merlin, you're all right aren't you?

Merlin (*rubbing his back*): Well, actually, Arthur, my rheumatism's playing up a bit, and I simply didn't sleep a wink last night. I couldn't get that awful battle out of my mind – the one where old Harold got killed when he copped that arrow in his eye, you know. (*Arthur looks blank, chorus exchange puzzled looks and shrugs*) Bother! Of course you don't – it hasn't happened yet! Dear, oh dear. It's just too confusing for words, remembering things FORWARDS as well as BACKWARDS! (*He moves away mumbling.*)

Arthur: I know someone who'll be happy today. Rowena, my dear - congratulations on being chosen to be the May Queen. (*He takes her hands and kisses her on the cheek.*) Are you having a good day?

Rowena (*with false enthusiasm*): Of course I am, Uncle Arthur. (*she sighs*) Just like last year, and the year before – and every year before that since I was eleven. I know it's an honour to be chosen, but sometimes I can't help feeling that everyone picks me just because I'm your ward.

Dilly: It would be really nice if someone else could have a turn. (*Murmurs of agreement*)

Arthur: Well, I just can't understand what's got into you all! I mean to say – life here in Camelot is just a bowl of cherries, isn't it?

All: Yes, Your Majesty.

Arthur: We've vanquished all our enemies, Merlin here ensures there's always a good harvest – and haven't I built you the most splendid castle to live in? (*All turn to look at it*)

All: Yes, Your Majesty.

Dilly (*to Dally*): It's a bit draughty though!

Arthur: And as for the weather – isn't it just perfect all the time?

All: Yes, Your Majesty.

Arthur: So what on earth have you got to worry about? (*A significant pause, then 1st chorus steps forward*)

1st chorus: Well, that's just it, Your Majesty – there is nothing to worry about.

2nd chorus: You see, Sire, life is just TOO perfect.

1st chorus: We're sick of the weather always being the same ...

2nd chorus: And it's so boring with nothing to do day after day but enjoy ourselves....

3rd chorus: It's YEARS since anyone went on a decent quest ...

4th chorus: And as for a good battle, well ... (*murmurs of agreement.*)

Merlin: Now, if you're talking about battles! I remember, during the war –(*All groan*)

Dilly: Oh, no!

Dally: Not again, Merlin! (*A jingling of bells is heard off, and Jingles appears, joke book tucked under his arm, dejectedly trailing his balloon on a stick.*)

Arthur (*brightly*): Ah, good old Jingles! He'll cheer us up in no time with his jests and merry wit!

Jingles: I think I ought to tell you that I'm feeling *very* depressed.

Arthur: Yes, everyone's a bit glum today. We need you to tell us one of your jokes.

Jingles: You don't really want to hear any of my jokes.

Nimue: Oh, but we do, Jingles.

Jingles: No, I can tell you're not really interested.

Nimue: I tell you we do, Jingles! Don't we?

All: Yes!

Jingles (*indicating audience*): And all these people here – do they want to hear one of my jokes?

Nimue (*to audience*): Do you?

Audience: Yes!

Jingles: Well - (*everyone leans forward in anticipation*) – nope. It's no good trying to engage my enthusiasm, because I just haven't got any.

Arthur: Just get on and tell the joke!

All: Yes, give us a joke, Jingles!

Jingles: Oh, all right – but I don't think you're going to like it. (*consults joke book*) I say, I say, I say – have you heard about the pony with the sore throat? He was a little horse. (*He finishes with a feeble flourish of his balloon. The joke is received by all on stage with stony silence.*) I said you wouldn't like it.

Nimue: Try another, Jingles. (*she thumbs through his joke book.*) Here, what about this one on page 43; it's really funny.

Jingles: I say, I say, I say – Why did the orange go to the doctor? It wasn't peeling very well. (*same reaction*)

Arthur: Honestly Jingles, sometimes I wonder why I employ you as my court jester.

Jingles: So do I. I can't bear jokes.

Arthur: I know what will put us all in a good mood. It's time we went down to the woods to gather may blossom to decorate the castle for tonight's feast. Come on, this will give all you lads something to do – and we'll need you youngsters to hold the baskets for us. While we're gone you ladies can enjoy a nice cosy girly chat. That'll cheer you up, Rowena. Merlin, we must talk! (*Arthur takes Merlin's arm and sweeps out, followed by Nimue, the knights, children and, trailing unenthusiastically behind, Jingles. The girls and Dilly and Dally gather round Rowena.*)

Rowena: Oh dear, I hope Uncle Arthur isn't cross with me. He's such a sweetie and I do try to please him, but sometimes he can be so annoying. Nice cosy, girly chat indeed! Well, girls, what are we going to "chat" about?

1st lady: What about the weather?

Rowena: I think we've already exhausted *that* topic.

2nd lady: Our embroidery and tapestry work?

Rowena: Hmm! I'm sure His Majesty and all his noble knights would like to think that's all we women ever talk about!

3rd lady: Or what about ... men? (*murmurs of enthusiasm all round. Dilly and Dally nudge one another and giggle.*)

Rowena: It's all very well you two laughing. But when you're older you'll understand how important it is to be sure that the knight who comes along to sweep you off your feet is The Right Knight.

Dilly and Dally: Yes, mistress.

Rowena: There again, it would be nice if any knight at all came along to sweep me off my feet!

1st lady: But you have lots of suitors, Rowena.

Rowena: Yes, but none of them quite *suit* me!

1st lady: What about Sir Kay?

Rowena: Far too skinny.

2nd lady: Sir Gareth's a fine figure of a man.

Rowena: But old enough to be my father.

3rd lady: Sir Agravaine *swears* he'd die for you.

Rowena: Sir Agravaine is just too full of his own importance.

4th lady: And Sir Bedivere's always making sheep's eyes at you.

Rowena: Would you marry a sheep?

5th lady: There's always (*sighs*) the Gorgeous Galahad!

Rowena (*looks round then whispers*): Knobbly knees! (*all giggle*)

Dilly: Don't worry mistress.

Dally: You're so pretty that The Right Knight is bound to come along one day.

Rowena: We get so few new knights at court these days that I'll be old and grey before he does! But I can still hope.

Song B: Matchmaker

Rowena: Come on. Let's go and see how those poor men are getting on without us. (*All exit, Rowena following. Morgan enters down left and holds out a hand to detain her.*)

Morgan: Wait a moment, my pretty one. (*Rowena turns back*)

Rowena: What is it, old lady? Aren't you the gipsy who sold me the lucky heather?

Morgan: Yes - I couldn't help overhearing just now, and I may be able to lend a helping hand.

Rowena: How can you help me?

Morgan: Let me tell your fortune. My crystal ball could show you where your heart lies.

Rowena (*uncertain*): Oh, I don't think Master Merlin would like that!

Morgan: Merlin! That grey-bearded old fool! What does he know of young love? I can show you the path to your destiny – and the knight of your dreams.

Rowena: It's very tempting. I must go now – but I'll think about it. (*She runs off. Morgan calls after her.*)

Morgan: Don't think too long, my pretty. You may find it's too late! (*She exits, cackling. Merlin and Nimue enter down right.*)

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