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A SHORT PLAY IN THREE ACTS

King Arthur's Calamity

by

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THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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(KING ARTHUR'S CALAMITY)

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To Joe Mooney
for trust, friendship and wisdom

KING ARTHUR'S CALAMITY
A Short Play in Three Acts
For Seven Men and Five Women
Extras

CHARACTERS

CECILIA - a townswoman
MAUDE - another townswoman
QUEEN JENNIFER
EDITH, THE NURSE
ARTHUR
MERLIN
TOWN CRIER
CASTLE GUARD
EARL OF NASTY
LADY NASTY
HENCHMEN OF THE EARL
TOWNSPEOPLE

TIME: 481 A.D.

PLACE: *Camelot.*

ACT ONE

Scene 1

(The curtain opens on the town square in medieval Camelot. Lights come up on the left half of the stage. At LC we see trees, foliage, and a town well. Two townswomen, CECILIA and MAUDE, enter with buckets and go to the well. During the scene, they draw water from the well and fill their buckets.)

MAUDE. Oh, deary, I've just heard the most delicious piece of news!

CECILIA (curious). What is it?

MAUDE. I really don't know if I should. It's a rather saucy story. And anyway, his carryings on are his business, not mine.

CECILIA. Can't you tell me just a little snatch?

MAUDE. No, I'd better not.

CECILIA. Just a little bit?

MAUDE (thinking). No.

CECILIA. Just an itty-bitty hint?

MAUDE (coming to a hard decision). Well, all right. . . . Well, I heard from my sister's aunt who knows a butcher who talked to the Duke's carriage driver who sees the Duke on Tuesdays and Thursdays, that the Duke has been carrying on with Lady Farthington.

(Pause.) That's only a hint, mind you.

CECILIA. Oh, but everyone knows that. (Pause.)
I have an even juicier piece of news than that.
And it's about someone much more important
than the Duke.

MAUDE. Oh, really? Who?

CECILIA (looking about to make sure that no one is
listening). Queen Jennifer.

MAUDE. Our Queen Jennifer?

CECILIA. Yes.

MAUDE. Oh, come on, out with it. Tell me.

CECILIA. This is very important. No one can
overhear. (She whispers in MAUDE'S ear.)

MAUDE (excited). You don't mean to say that the
Queen is going to retire!

CECILIA. Shhh!

MAUDE. That's impossible. Why would Queen
Jennifer want to retire?

CECILIA. Quiet, silly! I heard--from reliable
sources, of course--that she thinks that she
is getting too old for the job.

MAUDE. Oh, piffle.

CECILIA. It's true, I swear it.

MAUDE. I don't believe it. She's such a good
queen. She wouldn't quit, and if she did, who
would replace her?

CECILIA. Some member of her court, I suppose.

MAUDE. Certainly not that foul Earl of Nasty.

CECILIA. I hope not. Such a wicked man I have
never known.

MAUDE. I shudder to think of what would happen
if he were king.

CECILIA. He'd raise the taxes first, three or four
times what we pay now. We'd never afford it!

MAUDE. He'd be a terrible tyrant. I saw him once,
at a parade. He has beady little eyes that make
chills run up and down your spine.

CECILIA. Well, I wouldn't worry. I'm sure the Queen will think of a way to put someone worthy on the throne.

MAUDE. We'll see.

CECILIA. Oh, but did you hear . . . (They exit gossiping.)

(Lights fade as MAUDE and CECILIA exit gossiping, and come up UR on:)

Scene 2

(The castle of Queen Jennifer. The QUEEN is pacing about holding her back. Arthritis, whether it is real or not, afflicts her. She is attended by a NURSE.)

QUEEN. Oh, these pains in my back! They'll be the end of me yet. That is, if old age doesn't get me first.

NURSE. Really, Queen Jennifer, you musn't talk like that. You still have many good years ahead of you.

QUEEN. Don't patronize me, Edith. I'm getting too old for this job. (Sits on throne.) Has Merlin mixed up those potions for me yet?

NURSE. Yes, right here. (She produces pills from a stand and gives them to the QUEEN.)

QUEEN (after swallowing pills). It's such a shame to put a magician to such a use, but I have to have my medicine. (She suddenly has a pain in her foot.) Oh, there go my corns again!

NURSE. I sometimes wonder if all of these pains aren't in your head.

QUEEN. They may be. But my age is entirely on the outside--anyone can see that.

NURSE. Old age is nothing to be ashamed of.
Wisdom comes with age.

QUEEN (a pain in her neck this time). Oh, that
crick in my neck again! (They massage it.)
Seriously, Edith, I think that it's time I retired.
The country is in need of a more youthful
leader.

NURSE. And who do you think that youthful leader
is going to be? Remember, you have no sons
or daughters. There's no one to take your place.

QUEEN. Surely there must be someone in Camelot
who could take the throne.

NURSE. But none as worthy as you.

QUEEN. Oh, come now, Edith.

NURSE. And if there were such a person, how
would we find him?

QUEEN. A test, perhaps. (Pains now in her
stomach.) Aaghh! Stomach pains. That
does it, there is no way that I can remain
queen. I'll just have to step down.

NURSE. And do you know what will happen if you
step down just like that? It will be chaos.
Everyone will want to take your place. Anyone
might be king--including the Earl of Nasty.

QUEEN. A horrible thought! We must devise a
foolproof test to insure that a deserving and
capable person takes over.

NURSE. But how?

QUEEN. There is only one man I know that could
devise a proper test.

(ARTHUR, a twelve-year-old castle page boy, enters
R.)

ARTHUR. Excuse me, your Highness. Merlin
the Magician has sent me to tell you that the
rest of your medicine is ready.

QUEEN. Excellent! Precisely the man I wanted to see. (To ARTHUR.) Page boy, run to get Merlin and bring him here.

ARTHUR. Yes, your Highness. (He hurries out R.)

QUEEN (to NURSE, after ARTHUR exits). Sweet lad, isn't he?

NURSE. Yes, indeed.

QUEEN. And there's that infernal itching again! (She is furiously scratching.) I hope that Merlin is better at devising tests than preparing medicines.

NURSE. I'm sure he is.

QUEEN. You know, I have a certain love for this castle and this throne. I'll hate to leave them.

NURSE. You don't have to leave them, Queen Jennifer.

QUEEN. We've already settled that.

(ARTHUR enters R.)

ARTHUR. Your Majesty, Merlin is here.

(MERLIN enters R. He is near-sighted and quite clumsy. Upon entering, he stumbles over his own foot. ARTHUR exits.)

MERLIN. Oops! Pardon me, pardon me.

QUEEN. Hello, Merlin.

MERLIN (grandly). Greetings, Queen Jennifer. I trust my treatments worked well.

QUEEN. No, they didn't--as usual. But that's not what I want to talk to you about.

MERLIN. My deepest apologies for the medicine, your Highness. What did you want to see me about?

QUEEN. I'm going to retire, Merlin. I want you

to figure out some kind of test to choose a new ruler.

MERLIN. A test?

QUEEN. Yes.

MERLIN. What sort of test, your Majesty?

QUEEN. A test that will fairly choose a new king or queen for the kingdom.

MERLIN. A test, huh?

QUEEN. Yes, a test.

MERLIN (thinking). So you want a test?

QUEEN (getting a little disgusted). Yes. A test. Can you handle that? (MERLIN is deep in thought. He paces about, stumbling, and finally says:)

MERLIN. I've got it!

NURSE. Yes?

MERLIN. First I must have my Magical Dictionary of Elixirs and Spells.

QUEEN. I'll send for it. (Yells.) Page boy!

(ARTHUR arrives R.)

ARTHUR. Yes, your Majesty?

MERLIN. What's your name, son?

ARTHUR. Arthur.

MERLIN. I have an errand for you, Oscar. Go to my laboratory and fetch my magic book.

ARTHUR. Yes, sir. (He rushes out R.)

MERLIN. Fine boy, I always liked him. What's his name again?

QUEEN. Arthur.

MERLIN. And his last name?

NURSE. He doesn't have one.

MERLIN. But everyone should have a last name. At least, I think they should.

QUEEN. Arthur is an orphan. He was found one day in a basket by a peasant woman and she

brought him here.

MERLIN. I see. (MERLIN begins pacing about and accidentally steps on the QUEEN'S sore toes. The QUEEN screams. MERLIN falls back in surprise.) I know the story is sad, but we musn't become hysterical.

QUEEN. You stepped on my foot, you fool!

MERLIN (very apologetic). Oh, I'm sorry, your Majesty! (He goes over to apologize, and steps on her other foot. The QUEEN screams.) Oh, pardon me. I didn't mean to step on your feet. (Pauses.) I know, I have a magic potion that will soothe your feet.

QUEEN (still in pain and afraid of any more magical clumsiness). Stay away from me! Stand over there! Don't come near me!

(ARTHUR comes in R, staggering under the weight of MERLIN'S huge magic book. He gives it to MERLIN, who falls over backward from the book's weight.)

ARTHUR (going to help MERLIN up). Oh, my goodness!

QUEEN. Now I'm getting dizzy. (NURSE goes to her aid.)

MERLIN (getting up). Yep--that's my Magical Dictionary of Elixirs and Spells, all right. (He takes the book over to a table and starts leafing through it.)

ARTHUR. Do you need me for anything else, your Majesty?

QUEEN (quite recovered). No, Arthur, you may leave. (ARTHUR leaves R.)

MERLIN. A test, hmmm? (Continues to leaf through the book.) Let's see--serpents, sorcerers, toads . . . aha!

QUEEN. Did you find something?

MERLIN. Indeed I did.

NURSE. A test? Will it work?

MERLIN. Believe me, my Queen, it's foolproof!

BLACKOUT

Scene 3

(Lights come up immediately on the town square.

Present are MAUDE, CECILIA, and other TOWNSPEOPLE.)

MAUDE. What's all the excitement about, deary?

CECILIA. Haven't you heard?

MAUDE. I wouldn't ask if I knew.

CECILIA. But it's all over town.

MAUDE (becoming frustrated). What is?

CECILIA. I heard that the Queen is supposed to be here today.

MAUDE. Here? Today? Ooh, how exciting!

(Loud murmurs are heard through the crowd.

Shouts of, "Look, the Queen approaches!" etc., are heard. MERLIN, the TOWN CRIER, and the CASTLE GUARD enter from the right, carrying the sword in the stone. They are followed by the QUEEN, the EARL OF NASTY, and LADY NASTY.)

LADY NASTY. What's going on here? What's going on?

EARL. I don't know, but I suspect that it's something very important. (MERLIN, the TOWN CRIER and the GUARD plunk down the stone, stage C. MERLIN, exhausted, sits on the stone and wipes

his brow. The TOWN CRIER pulls out a scroll and begins reading.)

TOWN CRIER. Hear ye! Hear ye! All able-bodied citizens of Camelot, lend an ear! Her Majesty, Queen Jennifer I, hereby makes a formal notice of her plans to retire from her throne. (General disappointment.) In order to fairly choose a new ruler to take her place, a test has been worked out by Merlin the Magician. (MERLIN stands and takes grandiose bows.) Whoever is able to pull this sword from this stone, shall be the new ruler of Camelot. (His speech is followed by general excitement.)

LADY (nudging the EARL). This is our chance!
This is our chance!

EARL (wringing his hands). I know.

TOWNSMAN. Anyone can try?

QUEEN. Anyone. (More excitement.)

MAUDE (to CECILIA). Did you hear that? That means that we can try, too.

CECILIA. Yes, yes.

EARL (shoving his way through the crowd). Make way, make way. I'll be first. (EARL prepares to pull sword from the stone as MAUDE and CECILIA speak.)

CECILIA. Oh, gracious. The Earl of Nasty is going to try!

MAUDE. I hope he can't do it. He's an evil man, he'd make a terrible king.

CECILIA. Cross your fingers, deary. (EARL attempts to pull sword out, but fails. There is general relief. He tries a second time, and fails once more. EARL goes to LADY to pout.)

EARL. It's impossible. No one will ever pull it out. (The TOWN CRIER tries and fails. Then the GUARD tries, followed by MAUDE, who tells

CECILIA "Here I go, deary!" Both fail. Several TOWNSPEOPLE try and are unsuccessful. At each attempt, MERLIN says, "This is my invention." "I made this, you know." Finally, the EARL pushes his way back to the stone.)

EARL. Wait a minute. I didn't try hard enough the first time. I deserve another chance!

QUEEN. Very well. (EARL tries tremendously hard, grunting and groaning. He fails and goes back to his wife to pout. The rest of the people, including LADY NASTY and MERLIN, try. No one succeeds. MERLIN falls down on his attempt.)

MERLIN. Well, it doesn't look like there is a king among us. (QUEEN whispers something to the TOWN CRIER.)

TOWN CRIER. Hear ye! Hear ye! The Queen requests that the word be spread across the land that the Queen and her court will meet here tomorrow at noon for another attempt to find a ruler. (The EARL steps up once more.)

EARL. Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I must be king. One last try. (He tries.) Wait a minute, the sun got in my eyes--I'll try again. (He tries again.) The wind was wrong that time. (Licks his finger and sticks it up in the air to test the wind direction. He tries again. The TOWNSPEOPLE begin drifting off stage, laughing at the EARL.) Maybe if I got a running start! (He goes back and takes a leap at the sword. Nothing happens. Everyone is leaving. By this time he is wild with rage.) No, no, no, no, no! I must be king. I have to be king. Nothing will stand in my way. (Everyone is gone but LADY NASTY. EARL goes and sits on the edge of the stage, defeated.)

LADY. Mother warned me not to marry you. She always told me you were a weakling. (LADY exits L.)

EARL. I must become king. I want to be king so badly. Just think, I would be the richest ruler that ever lived. I would have gold and diamonds and furs. Some people would call it stealing. Not me, I would call it taxes! I must be king! (He rises and tries the sword once more--he fails. The EARL kicks the stone and sits on it.)

(ARTHUR enters from R, whistling. He sees the sword and stone.)

ARTHUR. What's this thing for, mister?

EARL (annoyed). Go away, kid. This doesn't concern you.

ARTHUR. But someone left his sword here. Whose is it?

EARL. Oh--I suppose that it belongs to the Queen. Now go away.

ARTHUR. Oh, the Queen? In that case, I'd better return it to her. (He steps up to the stone and easily pulls the sword out of the stone.)

EARL (ignoring him). Return it to her--sure!

ARTHUR (as he goes). Thanks a lot.

EARL (thinks about it and turns slowly to find that the sword is gone from the stone). Hey, you!
Wait a minute!

ARTHUR. Is something wrong?

EARL (with an evil gleam). No, nothing's wrong. It's just that I'd like to return it to the Queen myself.

ARTHUR. Well, I'm going there anyway. You needn't trouble yourself.

EARL. No trouble at all, no trouble at all.

ARTHUR. Well . . . (EARL snatches the sword.)