

KING ARTHUR AND THE KNIGHTS OF THE BRIDGE TABLE

Nick Smith



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Contents

	page
Foreword by Mary Shelley	4
Editor's Note	6
Chapter	
1. Excalibur	7
2. Guinevere – la Belle Dame Sans Merci	15
3. The Green Knight's Challenge	28
4. ... or was it just a Dream?	35
5. Knight School	43
6. Tristan and Iseult	51
7. The Ace of Spades, the Ace of Spades	61
8. Iseult of the White Hands	73
9. The Monarch of the Glens	79
10. Judicial Process	86
11. Black Gold	96
12. The North Sea Tide	104
13. To the Winner, the Spoils	111
14. Sir Galahad and the Holy Grail	119
15. The Gold Cup Final	132
16. A Flitch in Time...	143
17. Lear on the Heath	148
18. Sir Bertilak's Hospitality	156
19. The Green Chapel	168
20. Cross Words	175
21. Sudden Death?	184
22. The End	190
Crossword	202

Foreword by Mary Shelley

This whimsical collection of Arthurian tales was composed, on and off, between 1817 and 1822, but has never been published. As my own sojourn in this vale of tears is shortly to end, the time is apposite to rectify that omission. In truth, this is a collaborative work as my late husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, pored over every word and every card, much as he had done with that other better-known peccadillo of mine, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, a fantastical tale whose popularity and notoriety is a burden I have carried all my days.

Long before we met, Percy and I had each been entranced by Malory's fifteenth-century romance, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, especially its elegiac coda and the rich Middle English dialect in which the tales of chivalry and betrayal had been rendered. Its influence may be seen, *inter alia*, in Percy's *Queen Mab* (1813), his first longer work. We talked idly of inventing our own Arthurian legends but did little about it.

If there was a single moment that prompted us to action, it was a dinner party at our friend Leigh Hunt's house in Hampstead on 14th February 1817. We were introduced to a young poet called John Keats who shared not only our interest in bridge but also a passion for chivalric lore. His ballad, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, about the curious interaction between a questing knight and an apparently malign faery-woman, was one of the finest of his tragically short life and has its echo here in the tale of the first meeting of Lancelot and Guinevere.

Each of us, in our different ways, was following in the footsteps of Thomas Chatterton, who was able to pass off his work as that of an imaginary fifteenth-century poet called Thomas Rowley, before dying aged just seventeen. If such a youngster could fool his peers with his cod-Middle English, what might a more experienced poet and philologist achieve? Percy set about inventing his own medieval language and metrical forms for poetic works full of kennings and alliteration. The most fully realised of these pseudographs told the story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. With the help of our good friend, Thomas Jefferson Hogg, I was able to publish this dark and beautiful tale a few years after Percy's death, indeed to pass the

manuscript off as a genuine fifteenth-century artefact recently discovered by the equally fictitious ‘Richard Price’.

That tale, in which the virtuous young knight, Gawain, confronts a superhuman other-worldly figure, the force of nature that is the Green Knight, also figures prominently in this compendium. Most of the other tales originate in Thomas Malory’s work – so many Thomases! – or from the sources that Malory relied on, notably the work of Chrétien de Troyes, the brilliant twelfth-century poet and *trouvère*.

I do not aspire to the strange and beautiful penmanship of these poets and storytellers. My own humble contribution to this crowded field is far more prosaic and, I hope, comedic. The stories that Malory recast as tragedy become black farce here as King Arthur struggles to retain his hold over a motley assemblage of glory-hunting ‘knights’ in a crumbling and insular Camelot. In this satirical context, bridge becomes a metaphor for the aspirations and failings of this ageing community, a pastime that distracts the players from the past times and chivalric values they have abandoned. But there are the seeds of hope as well and a tiny vindication of the rights of women.

I hoped my *King Arthur* would be published in 1822 or 1823 and spent many a happy hour on the beach at San Terenzo, not far from our home, the Casa Magni, proofreading the text. But my husband’s death and my own indisposition cut short all such aspirations. It has only gathered dust since then and the Golden Age of Bridge has long since passed. I fear there may be too few readers now. Still, I hope it may form some sort of imperfect adjunct to *Gawain* and Percy’s extraordinary collection of bridge problems submitted to his publisher just days before his death.

London, June 1844

Editor's Note

Despite Mary Shelley's evident intentions, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Bridge Table* was not published in her lifetime – she died in 1851 after a long battle with dementia. Nor was the identity of the so-called Gawain-poet ever revealed. It was only the discovery of Thomas Jefferson Hogg's own memoir in 2016 which confirmed that Shelley had himself written *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Hogg's account of the train of events which led to its subsequent publication may be studied at <https://tinyurl.com/2m53sh86>.

Many of the original Arthurian stories were set to music and Mary Shelley neglects to mention that she, her husband and their guitar-playing friend, Jane Williams, also composed lyrics and rudimentary tunes to tell Gawain's tale. A recording derived from this sheet-music is to be found at <https://tinyurl.com/59vfk9zn>.

Mary Shelley was perhaps the most accomplished bridge player of her generation and *Bridge and the Romantics* (Master Point Press, 2019), which I also put together from her husband's single-dummy problems, dairies and notes, is in many ways a tribute to her exceptional skill in card-play. That text also includes P.B. Shelley's extraordinary *Defence of Bridge*, a polemic which references *Le Morte d'Arthur*. But Mary's *King Arthur* shows that she was no mean analyst and storyteller in her own right. I have edited her text lightly, removing some of the more glaring anachronisms and using modern technology to check her analysis, quite unnecessarily, as it turns out. I have also taken the liberty of re-purposing some of her wonderful deals as double dummy problems. These are to be found at <https://doubledummy.net/index.html>.

Another golden age of bridge has come and gone since Mary Shelley penned her Foreword but I hope that, somewhere out there, a handful of discriminating readers remain.

Oxford, February 2026



Chapter One: Excalibur

Rural knights endlessly misruled by this man? (4,6)¹

“Rainy days and Mondays always get me down!” King Arthur grumbled to his oldest friend and confidant, Sir Bedivere, as a steady stream of water penetrated the battlements of Camelot and splattered down on the floor of the Great Hall.

“Oh, come, sire, things aren’t so bad, are they?”

“What I’ve got, they used to call the blues. Mordred wants my crown. The peasants are revolting because we seem to have ‘lost’ the Holy Grail. We’ve got no money. The Christmas party is going to be a complete shambles. Not one single knight has completed a quest this year. Guinevere is ... well, I think we all know what Guinevere is. It’s always raining. And worst of all, I no longer seem to be able to play bridge!”

“Nonsense, sire,” Bedivere insisted. “You are still the finest card player in the realm!”

“I was once...”

“That’s why you are the king, your majesty! You proved it on that famous day when you were able to pull Excalibur from the stone...”

“Did I, *really*?”

“That was how we recognised you as the true and rightful king.”

“I thought I was just an ordinary boy, making his way in the world. My only ambition was to be squire to some great knight, polish his armour, that sort of thing. I was happy. The idea of being a *king* had never even crossed my mind...”

It was hard to remember after all this time. As the younger son, or so he thought, of the modestly-successful knight, Sir Ector, the teenage Arthur had spent time as an apprentice to Sir Hugh of Darwen, a small town in the rainy north-west of the realm, where he had shown a remarkable aptitude for cards, a talent which Sir Hugh had fostered. Latterly, he had been accompanying his older brother, Kay, looking for adventures and opportunities for chivalry. It was during the strange interregnum after the death of the old king, Uther Pendragon, who had left no male heir to his throne (just two daughters, Morgause and Morgan le

¹ Each chapter begins with a crossword clue. The length of the word(s) in the answer is given in brackets.

Fay) and no instructions for its occupancy, other than that his subjects should be guided by a rather crotchety wizard called Merlin.

Kay and Arthur were riding through the woods near Logres one fine afternoon in summer when they happened to pass Merlin's cave.

"So what's the story with this Merlin chap?" Arthur asked his brother.

"It's something to do with a sword in a stone," Kay replied. "Excalibur, it's called. Apparently, only the future king is able to pull it out of the stone, so deep is it buried."

"Well, you're pretty strong, aren't you, Kay?"

"Some very strong men have tried. But there seems to be some sort of initial step that even the strongest and bravest knights are unable to get past. And you only get one go."

"Why don't *you* have a shot at it then?"

"I know my place," his brother sighed. "Perhaps, one day, when I've worked on these abs a bit?"

"But someone else will have beaten you to it by then!"

"I suppose..."

In the end, Kay plucked up the courage to knock on Merlin's door while Arthur tended the horses outside. Half an hour later, Kay emerged again, looking a little sheepish and certainly carrying no sword.

"No good, then?" Arthur had been quietly hopeful his brother would succeed. "Couldn't you pull the sword out?"

"I didn't even get that far. First there was a very different sort of challenge."

"Yes?"

"A *bridge* challenge! I had to make this 3NT contract. I could see all the hands, but..."

"But what? Did you write the hand down?"

"That was forbidden. And when I failed, I had to drink this frothing potion which instantly erased what memory I had of the deal in question. I can't remember a single card. And now my chance is gone!"

"Surely you were *born* to be king, Kay? K for king?"

"In the bridge world, maybe. You're a better player than I am, Artie..."

Arthur laughed at the idea.

"You think *I* should have a go? But I'm not even a proper knight!"

"What have you got to lose, then?"

Eventually, to keep his brother happy, Arthur also ventured into the lair of the king-maker. Merlin was a relative youngster in those long-gone days,

probably no more than a hundred years old, and by no means as irritable and cantankerous as he became in later years. His beard was barely down to his waist but he was stroking it furiously as he opened the great oak door.

“Yes, what now, boy?” he growled.

“I’ve come about the sword in the stone,” Arthur started.

“Yes, what about it?”

“I thought I might try to pull it out. Is that not possible?”

The wizard laughed long and hard.

“It’s only the future king who can possibly do that! What makes you think you...”

“Nothing ventured, and all that?”

“Right in the middle of my siesta! Very well, if you must...”

Merlin ushered the boy into his cave and they walked on through to a smaller cave decorated with stalagmites and stalactites. There it was – the sword in the stone! And what a magnificent sword Excalibur was, glistening in the candlelight, its handle decorated with a variety of precious jewels. Excalibur was half-buried in a huge anvil-shaped slab of rock partially submerged in a cave-pool.

“Can you read the runes, young man?” Merlin asked. “Numbers and letters?”

“Yes, of course...”

The top face of the stone was etched with what Arthur immediately realised was a layout of 52 cards. This must be the bridge problem Kay had mentioned. Here was the deal.

	♠5		
	♥10983		
	♦98742		
	♣J104		
♠10987	N	♠Q643	
♥QJ7652	W E	♥K4	
♦QJ	S	♦653	
♣8		♣KQ97	
	♠AKJ2		
	♥A		
	♦AK10		
	♣A6532		

Excalibur was lodged between the hearts and diamonds of the North hand.

“Legend has it that this was the very first bridge hand ever, dealt by Druid elders around two thousand years ago,” the wizard explained. “To mark the moment, the details were carved in this rock. To the Druids, it was a holy relic...”

“Wow! Must have added a bit to the price of this cave!”

“You are South, in 3NT,” Merlin went on, ignoring Arthur’s

impertinence. "I will play the West and East hands and I won't make it easy for you, except at the opening lead. As you can see, you have a princely 23-count to work with in the South hand."

"Yes, but dummy has almost nothing. There's absolutely no way of getting to table."

"Then you will fail. Only if you reach dummy will you be able to pull on the sword that is stuck in it. And only if you make your contract will you be able to pull it out. You have five minutes to make a plan. If you fail, you must drink this potion. It will make you forget the whole thing. Do you accept the challenge?"

"Yes, yes, of course." Arthur was already thinking frantically. Five minutes was not a long time to tackle a problem like this. "What's your lead?"

"The eight of clubs. Take your time..."

Think, *think*, he said to himself. The diamonds appeared kindly placed indeed, with the queen and jack coming down doubleton. Perhaps if he played off the \spadesuit AK10, he could eventually throw East in and use him as an unwitting stepping-stone to the bigger stone in front of him? Yes, that had to be the general strategy. He would play the \clubsuit 10 from dummy at the first trick. East would have to cover, otherwise he would be in dummy straightaway and a spade finesse would give him nine easy tricks. It was too early to leave East on play as he would just exit with a diamond or the \heartsuit K so Arthur would win the trick with the \clubsuit A. But then what?

How about three top diamonds, the \spadesuit AK and then the \spadesuit 2? West would probably win that and play back a small heart to East's king or a further spade. East could be left on play with the fourth round of spades but he would still have a heart to exit with. No, it seemed hopeless that way...

"Time's up," Merlin said.

"How do you know? There's no sundial in here!"

"Don't be cheeky, boy. It's time to have your go and then I can get back to my siesta, assuming there are no other children out there planning to waste my time this afternoon."

"Very well. I will play the \clubsuit J from table."

"A good start! The queen from me."

"And I will win that with the ace. Now I will play ... the jack of spades!"

Arthur had no idea why he was playing this card. It was more that everything else looked hopeless. It was a bridge problem, after all, so something a bit out of the ordinary was needed. Merlin looked momentarily stunned. Perhaps he was onto something?

“The jack of spades, you say?”

		♠5		
		♥10983		
		♦98742		
		♣J104		
♠10987	N		♠Q643	
♥QJ7652	W E		♥K4	
♦QJ	S		♦653	
♣8			♣KQ97	
		♠AKJ2		
		♥A		
		♦AK10		
		♣A6532		

“Yes, indeed, pitching a diamond from table. Will you take the trick with East’s queen?”

“Perhaps! Let’s say I do ... I will play back a second spade.”

“OK, I take that with the ace. And now I cash the ♦A and the ♦K...”

“Yes, and then?”

Arthur was about to play the ♦10 as well but stopped just in time, realising that it would give West the chance to discard a spade. No, it was surely vital to play the ♥A first to see whether East would retain the king

or the four. Merlin puffed out his cheeks.

“The ace of hearts? Perhaps I have underestimated you!”

“Which card will you keep in the East hand?”

“Which, indeed? Let’s say I keep the king...”

Arthur was gaining confidence now.

“If you do that, I will cash the ♦10 and the ♠K, discarding a heart, then exit with my last spade. It doesn’t matter which defender wins it. West only has hearts left and must lead one to East’s king. East has just ♣K97 left and so must give dummy two tricks with the ♣J and the ♦9. Does that make nine tricks?”

“Who’d have thought it?” whispered Merlin. “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! And what if I play the ♥K under your ace?”

“Then East is out of the game. I can play off the ♠K and exit with my last spade, throwing both my remaining clubs from table. West is on play with just ♥QJ765 left and he too must concede the lead to dummy sooner or later. I can discard the blocking ♦10 from hand and make three tricks on table, a heart and the ♦98.”

Merlin shook his head in admiration.

“Card perfect!” he marvelled. “No one has ever found a way to dummy before. That ♠J at trick 2 was inspired – anything else and you have no chance. But even after that, you still have to get all the leads and discards in exactly the

right order. Fair play to you. What would you have done if I'd ducked the ♠J? I'll give you a moment to think about it..."

The key now was surely to get East to make that heart decision as early as possible.

"I'll lead the ♥A," he said tentatively.

"OK, I'll offload East's king on that. Now what?"

Arthur could see that playing off his spade and diamond winners and exiting with the fourth spade would be no good – dummy would have to retain ♣Jx and so would be forced to let go of too many red cards. No, the ♠2 had to be lost right now...

"I will lead the ♠2, discarding a diamond," he said.

"Too good!" Merlin cooed. "Let's say the defence plays back a diamond. That's as good as anything."

"Then I win with the ace, cash my ♠AK for club discards and exit with the ♦10 to West's queen. West must play hearts and once again I can discard the ♦K and make three tricks in dummy."

"Astonishing!" Merlin shook his head. "I think we're done. There are a few other minor variations but it's clear you have an answer to everything the defence can try."

"I reached dummy. Does that mean I have the chance to try to pull the sword from the stone?"



"It does, indeed..."

Arthur summoned up all his strength and took the great handle of Excalibur in his own tiny hands. He pulled with all his might but the effort was hardly necessary. Excalibur slid out from its position between North's hearts and diamonds like a knife out of butter.

"Congratulations, your majesty! And I haven't even asked your name..."

"My name is Arthur, younger son of Sir Ector."

"Sir Ector! That would explain a lot..."

SOME CHIVALRY AND COURTLY LOVE... BUT MOSTLY BRIDGE

King Arthur, tired and depressed, is holed up in a crumbling Camelot while half his knights vie to depose him. Cuckolded by his wife, Guinevere, he tries to find solace in bridge, but even there the skills that made his name as a young man have deserted him. There are newer stars at the famous Camelot bridge table — notably, Tristan, Galahad and young Gawain, one of five brothers from Orkney, who must take on the challenge of the Green Knight. Even as Arthur faces a final showdown with his nemesis, Mordred, the bridge deals dazzle and astonish.

Full of dark humour and brought to life by Howard Pyle's illustrations, *King Arthur and the Knights of the Bridge Table* is one of the most beautiful and brilliant bridge books ever composed.



NICK SMITH is a Grand Master and international player from Oxford, representing England in the Teltscher Trophy in 2021 and 2024. His previous books for Master Point Press include *Bridge Literature* (1993), *Bridge and the Romantics* (2019), *More Bridge Literature* (2020), *Sublime Declarer Play* (2023), *Bridge and the Victorians* (2024) and the forthcoming *Bridge and the Tudors*. He is also the author of numerous novels and plays.