

The Axe of Albion

by Nicholas Richards

An Unfamiliar Adventure from the Dark Days before the Institution of
the Round Table

Characters: (13 - can be played by 9 actors)

King Arthur

Guinevere (wife of Arthur)

Sir Lancelot

Sir Kay

Sir Gareth

Sir Tristram

Sir Dagonet – Knights of the Empty Circle

Merlin – a wise magician

Messenger (often out of breath)

Oak – an old oak tree

Dryope – a well-meaning dryad

Crone – a Crone

The Cleaning Lady of Barbalot

Scene 1 **In which King Arthur and Guinevere welcome back some knights who
have been errant and a-questing.**

(Camelot. Guinevere enters, looking towards stage right.)

GUINEVERE: Arthur! Arthur..! Come now! Your knights return! Behold: ... Sir Kay...
Sir Tristram ...Sir Dagonet... Sir Gareth... And they seem full weary.
Arthur, come!

ARTHUR: *(Offstage left)* Have you seen my crown?

GUINEVERE: *(Impatiently)* You don't need your crown, Arthur. We all know who you
are.

ARTHUR: *(Offstage all the while)* It's not on the crown stand.

GUINEVERE: Didn't you leave it by the loop-hole in the north tower?

ARTHUR: No - that's my battle crown. I want my workaday crown. And I want it
now!

GUINEVERE: Believe me, Arthur, you won't stop being King just because you ...

(She breaks off as Kay, Gareth and Dagonet enter stage right with evident fatigue. Lancelot follows behind them, hidden from Guinevere's sight. The Knights bow as Guinevere addresses them by name.)

GUINEVERE: Sir Kay, Sir Gareth – welcome back to Camelot! Sir Dagonet! Sir Tristram!

SIR KAY: Thank you, Lady Guinevere!

GUINEVERE: You have been away many moons. I expect you have much to tell.

SIR GARETH: We have, my good lady.

GUINEVERE: Did you find what you were questing for?

KAY: My lady, our tale is a tale of wonders... of faraway lands and strange creatures... of joys and hardship...

GUINEVERE: *(No longer listening to Kay, peering over the Knights)* Is Lancelot with you?

KAY: ...of fights and captures and conquest...

GUINEVERE: Yes, I'm sure... Lancelot...? Is he returned safe and well?

(Lancelot bobs up from behind the others.)

LANCELOT: Here I am, Lady Guinevere! I wondered if you would miss me.

GUINEVERE: Lancelot! Still the same handsome, roguish Lancelot!

LANCELOT: And the king...?

(Enter Arthur, a battered circlet perched squiffily on his head.)

GUINEVERE: ...is here.

ARTHUR: Welcome, good Knights all! Welcome back to Camelot! You are weary from your journeys, I ween.

LANCELOT: Yes, my lord; *(looking at Guinevere)* but one mere glimpse of your beauty is enough to restore our weary spirits.

ARTHUR: Well flattered, Lancelot. I assume you were complimenting my wife. Now take your seats here, good knights. Circularly, as is our wont.
(The Knights sit on the floor in an open circle; then they realise that they are in the wrong places, so with much fuss they get up and settle in different positions - twice.)

GUINEVERE: Arthur, you are too mean! Your knights have no horses for their questing and no table for their meeting.

ARTHUR: We have all to be frugal in these difficult times.

LANCELOT: But just a simple wooden table would be welcome. Even the meanest of the Scots and most barbaric of the Saxons have tables.

ARTHUR: I've tried, Lancelot, I have tried – but no one in the Guild of Camelot Carpenters has ever heard of a round table.
(Arthur and Guinevere take their seats on thrones facing the audience.)

ARTHUR: But enough table talk! How are my travel-worn Knights of the Empty Circle?

KAY: Thankful to be back, sire!

TRISTRAM: Has there been much happening in Camelot since we went a-questing?

ARTHUR: Not much. The apple blossom is late this year. And I keep mislaying my crowns. Oh, and Galahad and I slew forty thousand Picts and a venomous dragon called Percy. Otherwise *(shrugs)*...life goes on...

GUINEVERE: And so we are looking forward to hearing about your quest for the...

ARTHUR: Yes, yes: tell us about the Quest!
(The knights deliberate who should begin to tell the tale of their quest. Their self-depreciating remarks overlap...)

KAY: Well... Do you want to start, Tristram?

TRISTRAM: No, no: let Gareth tell the tale.

GARETH: Lancelot has by far the sweetest voice...

DAGONET: Yes, let him recount our various and arresting adventures...

LANCELOT: No, really, I am but a poor teller of...
(...until they are all silenced by the arrival of a breathless Messenger.)

MESSENGER: *(Breathlessly)* My... lord, ... I have...news!
(Surprised pause)

ARTHUR: What news, breathless Messenger?
(Pause for breath)

MESSENGER: It concerns the ...Axe of ...

ARTHUR: The Axe of...?

MESSENGER: The Axe of Albion.

LANCELOT: The Axe of Albion...?

MESSENGER: Yes: the Axe of Albion.

KAY: That is kept in the Cave of Iswelt?

MESSENGER: The very same.

TRISTRAM: Beyond the Mournful Mountains?

MESSENGER: Indeed.

DAGONET: Near the Lake of Yglis?

MESSENGER: Erm...Not so sure about that.

ARTHUR: Let us hope that whatever news you bring of this axe is good. Proceed.

MESSENGER: The Axe of Albion that has protected all God-fearing Britons from invasion and pestilence for many years...

ARTHUR: Yes...?

MESSENGER: And which will continue to be the safeguard and protector of these isles - as long as it rests safely in the Cave of Iswelt...

ARTHUR: This is good so far, messenger – but it is not news.

LANCELOT: Indeed, messenger – for we all know of the power of the Axe of Albion to protect us from evil.

MESSENGER: The bad news, my noble lords, is that the Axe of Albion...is gone!
(Intake of breath)

ARTHUR: The Axe of Albion...?

LANCELOT: That protects the Britons from evil...?

KAY: As long as it is kept safe in the Cave of Iswelt...?

GARETH: ...in the Far Country...

TRISTRAM: ...beyond the Mournful Mountains...?

LANCELOT: ...in the Land of Barbalot, I believe...?

DAGONET: ...perhaps somewhere near the Lake of Yglis...?

MESSENGER: ...is gone.

ARTHUR: Is this news as bad as it seems?

MESSENGER: Only Merlin the Wise One could tell you that for sure, good King.
(Merlin appears behind Arthur's seat.)

ARTHUR: Where's Merlin when you're thinking of him?

MERLIN: Here, my lord.
(Arthur jumps.)

ARTHUR: Merlin, I do wish you would cough before you magically appear! Have you heard the news?

MERLIN: Nothing is news to Merlin.

LANCELOT: What should we do then, Wise One?

MERLIN: Remember the prophecy: *(Intones solemnly)* So long as the Battle-Axe of Albion abides in the Cave of Iswelt then shall Britain be safe from foe, fiend and famine. Therefore, noble Knights of the Empty Circle: if this Axe is lost... *(dramatically)* then so is Britain!

TRISTRAM: We must find the Axe!

MERLIN: Or we are doomed!

ARTHUR: Very well. Who will join a quest to find the Axe of Albion? I, of course, being King, must stay here and reign. Will you go, Merlin?

MERLIN: I am too old, sadly, for such a quest. It is a task for a young knight – such as Lancelot.

LANCELOT: It is indeed a mission for one such as I – were it not that my strong right hand is needed here in Camelot. Who knows what dreadful woes may menace the Court and Guinevere now the Axe is missing? I leave command of the new quest to the noble Sir Gareth.

GARETH: I would go...

ARTHUR: Good. Let us not keep you, Sir Gareth: be you on your way!

GARETH: *I would go – (wincing and shaking his head sadly)* but I cannot.

ARTHUR: Gareth, you must!

GARETH: I simply cannot. The last Quest has done me fell injury.

GUINEVERE: What fell injury, Sir Gareth?

GARETH: *(As if telling a long and harrowing tale)* After crossing the Great Plain of Samontyke and trekking through the Forest of Cwylem and climbing over the Pass of Penhalliwiggle... *(He pauses for breath.)*

LANCELOT: Yes...?

GARETH: I have blisters beyond bearing.

ARTHUR: Blisters?

GARETH: Beyond bearing. I cannot walk another furlong – let alone another league.

GUINEVERE: Do knights get blisters?

GARETH: Terrible ones. Beyond bearing.

DAGONET: Especially if they don't get horses.

ARTHUR: Then let Merlin the Wise One look at your blisters.

GARETH: Impossible.

LANCELOT: Your blisters are surely not beyond the medicine of Merlin the Magician.

GARETH: They are beyond all remedy.

GUINEVERE: *(Approaching Gareth's boots)* Perhaps I should have a look at...

GARETH: *(Rudely pulling away his feet)* No! Such blisters are not fit for the eyes of a queen.

ARTHUR: Very well. Sir Tristram, Sir Kay, Sir Dagonet... This urgent mission to find the Axe is yours to achieve.

MERLIN: Or we are all doomed.

KAY: But, my lord, we have just had a most wearisome and dangerous time...!

TRISTRAM: We have not even taken off our spurs...

DAGONET: Or told you the result of the Quest...

ARTHUR: There will be time later. When you have found the Axe and saved Britain.

DAGONET: But...

ARTHUR: And I shan't take 'but' for an answer.

TRISTRAM: And when we find the Axe...?

MERLIN: When you find the Axe you must replace it in the Cave of Iswelt...

GARETH: In the Far Country...

LANCELOT: In the Land of Barbalot, I believe.

TRISTRAM: ...beyond the Mournful Mountains.

MERLIN: Or we are all doomed.

KAY: And if we fail to find the Axe?

MERLIN: } *(Together)*

LANCELOT: }

ARTHUR: }

GUINEVERE: } We are all doomed!

KAY: Then we must to the Far Country...

TRISTRAM: Beyond the Mournful Mountains...

DAGONET: Perhaps somewhere near the Lake of Yglis...

KAY: } *(Together, holding up their right fists with a show of bravery)*

TRISTRAM: }

DAGONET: } ...to find the Axe of Albion!

ARTHUR: Fare ye well, brave knights! The well-being of the land is in your hands. At least we hope it will be.

LANCELOT: And remember: if you fail in this quest...

KAY: Yes, we know...

All: WE ARE ALL DOOMED!

(Exeunt omnes: Tristram, Kay, Dagonet stage right; the rest stage left.)

Scene 2 The Quest is afoot

(The edge of a wood. Oak, a friendly Oak, takes up a central position. Dryope, a flighty Dryad, flits on and around. Hoot of an owl.)

OAK: How now, Dryope! What news as the day ends?

DRYOPE: *As night approaches, o mighty Oak,
So do travellers - weary folk.*

OAK: What manner of travellers? How many? Whither are they bound?
Wherefore do they journey?

DRYOPE: *Three errant knights on an urgent quest.
They make for the Far Country... I know not the rest.*

OAK: They are brave to come to the Wood of Weremore!

DRYOPE: *How brave they are I cannot say.
I rather think they have lost their way.*
But soft – see where they come!
*(Dryope hides behind Oak, who adopts a still and benign mien. Enter the
Knights. They are even more tired than before. Kay is limping)*

KAY: Yes, knights can get blisters. Bleeding blisters beyond bearing!

DAGONET: If only we could afford horses.

TRISTRAM: We must rest. Let us tarry here awhile. By this sturdy Oak.
*(They drop down by Oak's roots; Kay leans on Oak's trunk. Oak winces
with pain.)*

DAGONET: I am so tired I could sleep for Britain!
(They make themselves wearily comfortable.)

KAY: No; we must not fall asleep at the edge of this mysterious wood. *(He
yawns.)*

TRISTRAM: Many are the tales of knights who have fallen asleep...by the edge of a dark
wood...and never...awoken...to tell their...terrible...
*(They doze off. Sleepful breathing; cry of owl. Dryope emerges from
behind Oak and peers at the knights. Dagonet stirs. Dryope disappears
behind Oak. This happens twice.)*

DAGONET: Tristram...?

TRISTRAM: Yes?

DAGONET: I think we are being watched. *(He stands.)* There is someone behind the tree
– I feel sure of it!
(Tristram stands.)

TRISTRAM: Stand and show thyself – if thou be-est a man!

DAGONET: Or a woman. Or an imp. Or some evil spirit of the woods that lures good
knights to destruction.

TRISTRAM: Yes – show thyself in all those cases. We are brave and stern knights and
won't take eerie silence for an answer.

(Tristram puts a hand on Oak and peers around him. Oak's branches shake as he tries to suppress Oakish laughter.)

DAGONET: Why are you shaking, o mighty Oak?

OAK: You are tickling me!

TRISTRAM: Sorry, I didn't think that, er...

DAGONET: Let us go around this bulky Oak and see if someone is hiding behind it.

(They walk widdershins around Oak. Dryope moves the same way in pantomime fashion so they do not see her. Kay wakes.)

KAY: What are you about?

TRISTRAM: We seek the being that is watching us.

KAY: I am watching you. *(Noticing Dryope)* And so is this strange creature of the wood.

DRYOPE: I am Dryope the Dryad. O fearless knights, fear not!

TRISTRAM: We don't – much.

DRYOPE: Well you would if you knew what lurks in yon wood.

DAGONET: What then lurks in yon wood?

TRISTRAM: Apart from you and your fetching fellow dryads?

DRYOPE: Things too dreadful to describe.

KAY: We'd have you know, Dryope the Dryad: we're errant knights. We've pretty much seen it all.

DAGONET: Except for the Axe of Albion.

DRYOPE: Then you will know about the Wolves of Weremore?

(Blood-chilling howl of wolf)

TRISTRAM: Tell us more.

DRYOPE: So you do *not* know of the Wolves of Weremore?

(Another howl; Oak shakes his branches fearfully.)

DRYOPE: There is no time. You must be on your way. To the Far Country.

DAGONET: How do you know that we must be on our way to the...?

DRYOPE: I am Dryope the Dryad. I know much. Not all – but much.

KAY: Perhaps then you can tell us of the best route to the Far Country?

DRYOPE: *(To Oak)* The Far Country is *(pointing vaguely stage left)* ... that way, is it not?

(Oak shakes his boughs and points a bough to stage right, but Dryope does not see this.)

DRYOPE: Keep to the edge of the Wood. Go west for many leagues. But not too many – if you come to the *Further Country* you will have gone too far.

DAGONET: What is there at the *Further Country*?

DRYOPE: No one knows...*(ominously)* for no one has ever returned thence.
(A third howl)

KAY: Thank you, Dryope the Dryad. We shall be on our way.

DRYOPE: Go now. There is danger here!
(The Knights depart stage left.)

OAK: Such nice knights! Do you think they will make it?

DRYOPE: I do hope so.

OAK: Then why did you send them in the wrong direction?

DRYOPE: *(Realising her mistake)* Oh no! Why did you not say anything?

OAK: I am an Oak. Do you think they would take directions from an old tree like me?
(Dryope rushes off after the Knights.)

DRYOPE: *Knights! Return! That's not the way!*
Dryope erred and sent you astray!
(Exit Oak stage right shaking his branches.)

Scene 3

In which Arthur plays chess with Lancelot, and Guinevere looks out of the window.

(Camelot. Arthur and Lancelot pore pensively over a chess board. Guinevere looks out of the window stage right. Arthur moves a piece. Guinevere turns towards the board.)

GUINEVERE: What are you doing, Arthur?

ARTHUR: King's Bishop's Pawn has just taken Lancelot's King's Knight and looks set to become a Queen, threatening a crushing mate.

GUINEVERE: Is that supposed to make things clearer?

ARTHUR: A crushing mate, I say!

LANCELOT: You cannot do that, sire.

ARTHUR: How dare you tell Arthur, King of the Britons, Defender of the Isles, Vanquisher of the Saxons what he can or cannot do!

LANCELOT: You are in check.

ARTHUR: Oh, so I am. *(He takes back the piece and rests chin in hands thoughtfully. He looks up and notices Guinevere.)* Still here, Guinevere?

GUINEVERE: I mean to say: What do you think you are doing, playing games, when your knights are in peril?

LANCELOT: This is no ordinary game, my Lady Guinevere. This is a game of powerful queens, crafty knights and slow-moving kings!

ARTHUR: *(To Guinevere)* How do you know my knights are in peril?

GUINEVERE: I feel a cold chill in my bones; and dark clouds gather in the west.
(A moment's silence while chess continues.)

GUINEVERE: *(Looking through the window again)* They may get wet! Imagine, Arthur: your brave knights all soaked through and chattering cold!

ARTHUR: It's a risk I'm prepared to take.

GUINEVERE: Perhaps you should go after them with towels and dry clothes.

ARTHUR: And leave you alone in Camelot?

GUINEVERE: Lancelot will take care of me.

LANCELOT: Knight takes Queen!

ARTHUR: How dare you, Lancelot!

LANCELOT: I have you in...checkmate!

ARTHUR: *(Leaving sulkily)* No more of this silly game! Give me real life any day!

GUINEVERE: You have won, Lancelot! Clever knight!

LANCELOT: Yes, I took his queen. From under his nose! *(He takes her hand and leads her off stage right.)* But as Arthur said: Give me real life any day!
(Exeunt Lancelot and Guinevere merrily.)

Scene 4 A Nameless Place where the Knights are given fresh directions by a Nameless Crone

(Crone enters stage left with a broom.)

CRONE: *(Self-pityingly, listlessly plying her broom)* No one comes to visit me. No one says hello. All alone am I.
(Enter Knights stage right.)

TRISTRAM: Hello, old Crone! All alone? Let us keep you company awhile.
(The Crone jumps, then attacks Tristram with the broom.)

CRONE: Who dares come hither? Away with you, strangers!

TRISTRAM: Please...!

KAY: We are lost, Crone, and need direction.

CRONE: Whither would you wend?

KAY: To the Far Country.

CRONE: The Far Country?

TRISTRAM: Aye, the Far Country. Beyond the Mournful Mountains.

DAGONET: I wager you know the Mournful Mountains.

CRONE: I was born in the Mournful Mountains!

DAGONET: Thought so.

CRONE: Many, many scores of years ago!

DAGONET: Makes sense.

CRONE: And I can tell you: you are headed in the wrong direction.

TRISTRAM: So the Far Country is...? (*Pointing behind him*)

CRONE: Thither, aye – whence you came.

TRISTRAM: Then Dryope lied to us!

DAGONET: I'll never trust another dryad.

CRONE: Who is this...Dryope, who so treacherously deceived you?

KAY: A beautiful creature of the wood with the sweetest voice you can imagine!

CRONE: I hate her!

TRISTRAM: Then which way should we proceed, o haggard and ill-tempered Crone?

CRONE: Do not start from here...

DAGONET: Whence then should we start?

CRONE: Between here and the Far Country is the Lake of Yglis...

DAGONET: I was right!

CRONE: You must traverse this lake. Then you will come to the Far Country.

KAY: Thank you, Crone! We shall be on our way beyond the Lake of Yglis.

CRONE: The Lake of Yglis is a hard barrier.

KAY: We shall find a boat.

CRONE: No boat can cross the Lake of Yglis.

TRISTRAM: Then we shall go around the lake.

CRONE: You cannot. The lake lies between huge, insurmountable mountain ranges.

DAGONET: Then we shall swim.

CRONE: No man can swim across the Lake of Yglis!

KAY: So how do we get across?

CRONE: Walk.

TRISTRAM: Walk? No man has walked across a lake for over four centuries.

CRONE: You must walk like a bear!

DAGONET: The Crone speaks queerly. Let us be on our way!

KAY: Aye! We have a lake to cross; we have no time for riddles!

CRONE: You have time, I think; but you lack the wit. Begone then, fools!

(Exeunt the Knights stage right.)

CRONE: No one keeps me company. No one says goodbye. All alone am I!

(Exit Crone with broom stage left.)

Scene 5

In which Sir Gareth consoles Arthur after his defeat at chess.

(Arthur and Gareth enter mid-conversation.)

GARETH: It has happened to me too, sire.

ARTHUR: A humiliating checkmate! I have lost respect at court. Even my wife laughs at me.

GARETH: *(With a comforting arm around Arthur's shoulder)* I know, I know... So do I.

ARTHUR: Do you think Lancelot...?

GARETH: Sire?

ARTHUR: Do you think that Lancelot cheats?

GARETH: Of course he does. Everyone knows that.

ARTHUR: I thought as much! What should I do, Gareth? How to keep hold of my queen?

GARETH: There are books, sire. Books that can...improve your game.

ARTHUR: What books? Where are these books, Sir Gareth?

GARETH: In Merlin's library. On a very high and dusty bookshelf. Merlin has shown me them.

ARTHUR: I am not sure that a Dark Age king should be reading books. It seems somewhat...unwholesome. And for that reason I have never learned to read.

GARETH: That does rather affect my suggestion.

ARTHUR: Perhaps you can read these books to me, Gareth. *(Looking at Gareth beadily)* No, you can't read either, can you?

(Arthur looks aside and sighs. Meanwhile Gareth slips away to be replaced by Merlin – as if by magical metamorphosis.)

ARTHUR: Where's Merlin when you need his advice on chess strategy?

MERLIN: Keep your queen by the castle, my lord – do not let her run free around the board until the game is yours.

ARTHUR: Sound advice, perhaps – but is it what Merlin himself would counsel?

(Arthur then sees it is Merlin himself and jumps with surprise.)

ARTHUR: Will you please give me a cough, Merlin!

(Merlin coughs.)

ARTHUR: *Before* you appear! O Merlin, what to do? Will you with your bookish wisdom and your sly magical trickery help me?

MERLIN: If you follow my advice and accept my supernatural aid, soon you will be cornering and crushing Lancelot like a beetle under a boot! At chess, that is.

ARTHUR: Excellent! You know, Merlin...

MERLIN: Yes, sire.

ARTHUR: I blame all this...losing crowns and queens...and... *(looking around)* Whatever happened to Gareth...?

MERLIN: You were saying, my lord?

ARTHUR: I blame it all on that missing Axe.

MERLIN: Then let us hope those errant knights shall soon recover the Axe of Albion. Or...

ARTHUR: } *(Together)*

MERLIN: } We are doomed!

ARTHUR: *(Leaving)* What *has* happened to GARETH?
(Exeunt.)

Scene 6 In which our brave Knights traverse the Frozen Lake of Yglis:

(The Errant Knights enter, Kay ahead.)

KAY: Onward march, good fellows! Stride forward like the valiant knights you are!
(Kay skids and topples humiliatingly. The others laugh.)

DAGONET: What was that, Kay? *(Mimicking Kay's pompous march and voice)* 'Stride forward like the valiant knights you...?'
(Dagonet also slips and falls. Tristram careers into him. The Knights get up gingerly, then wobble and slip again.)

KAY: What devilish witchery is this?

TRISTRAM: Our powers of stability are quite gone!

DAGONET: We slip and slide and slither like ducks on a...

All: ... FROZEN LAKE!

KAY: A frozen lake! Of course! Now I recall the full name of this lake: The *Frozen* Lake of Yglis.

TRISTRAM: We are slipping and sliding on slippery, slithery ice.

DAGONET: We must walk like...

All: ...BEARS!

(They traverse the frozen lake in the manner of polar bears and leave stage right.)

Scene 7 In which Lancelot explains the rules of chess to Guinevere.

A room in the Castle at Camelot.

GUINEVERE: *(Holding up a pawn.)* What does this do?

LANCELOT: It is a pawn. It marches straight at the enemy.

GUINEVERE: How brave!

LANCELOT: But you would not want to spend your free afternoon with one.

GUINEVERE: Why not?

LANCELOT: Stupidly loyal like a sloppy puppy - and quite as dull!

GUINEVERE: Like Sir Tristram?

LANCELOT: I could not say.

GUINEVERE: *(Picking up the white queen)* Here is a fine looking piece!

LANCELOT: Yes: that is the queen. She can do more than anyone to change the course of the game.

GUINEVERE: *(Picking up a black knight)* And this?

LANCELOT: Ah! The knight! The pièce de résistance! A heroic warrior, leaping around and over silly pieces... like the king. *(He takes the knight from her and moves it in the air.)* See what a crafty, curious mover is your knight! You never know just where he is next to strike... *(He describes a circle in the air around her nose with the piece.)*

GUINEVERE: What a wicked game!

LANCELOT: What a naughty knight!

(He chases her off, brandishing the knight before him.)

Scene 8 Where the Knights reach the Cave of Iswelt and ask after the Axe.

(The Cleaning Lady of Barbalot enters with a duster and sets about cleaning. To the side, stage left, is a row of 13 axes.)

CLEANING LADY: *(Half singing, half bleating)*

Here in the Cave of Iswelt

No smudge nor stain nor spot

Will escape the Magic Duster

Of the Cleaning Lady of Barbalot.

*All the precious treasures
Of Roman, Saxon and Celt
Are kept ever a-glitter
In the spotless, sacred Cave of Iswelt.*

(Meantime the Knights enter, unseen by the Cleaning Lady. They look around amazed.)

Cleaning Lady: *The gold and copper and bronze
Put safe in this holy grot
Are kept ever a-gleaming
By the Cleaning Lady of Barbalot!*
(She approaches the Knights who remain a-gawp.)

CLEANING LADY: My, what dirty relics! Even my Magic Duster will struggle to make these grimy lumps shine!
(She passes her duster over the motionless form of Sir Kay. He sneezes. She jumps back in surprise.)

CLEANING LADY: Goodness me and bless you, sir!

KAY: Forgive me, good lady of the duster, for surprising you with my unexpected presence, my unappealing filthiness and my incontinent exhalation. I apologise also for my fellow knights: for they are even worse to behold and bewipe.

CLEANING LADY: *(Looking at Tristram and Dagonet with disgust)* They are beyond even the cleansing of the Magic Duster! But who are you that you come so filthily to the Cave of Iswelt?

TRISTRAM: *(With joy and relief)* Then we have in truth found the Cave of Iswelt?!

CLEANING LADY: The Cave has never been lost. Not something one can say about a certain silver artefact, however. But I ask again: Who are you?

KAY: We are Knights of the Empty Circle – followers of good King Arthur.

TRISTRAM: And you, my lady?

CLEANING LADY: I am the Cleaning Lady of Barbalot – *(presenting the duster)* and this is the Magic Duster. I keep clean the Cave of Iswelt - and many other caves, grottoes and caverns in this area. Why are you come hither?

KAY: We seek the Axe of Albion.

CLEANING LADY: But have you not heard? The Axe of Albion is lost!

TRISTRAM: That is why we are come here.

CLEANING LADY: But, o Knights of the Empty Circle: why come to the Cave of Iswelt when you know that the Axe is no longer here?

TRISTRAM: That is a good point. *(To Kay)* Why have we come to the one place where we know the Axe is not, Sir Kay?

KAY: *(Gnomically)* To catch a wandering beast you trace her footprints.

TRISTRAM: The footprints... of a battle-axe?!

KAY: *(To Cleaning Lady)* Perhaps you can tell us where you last saw the Axe of Albion?

CLEANING LADY: *(Going over to a corner of the cave)* In this niche. Where it says: *Here stands the Axe of Albion. So long as the...*

KAY: } *(Together, joining in as they read)*

TRISTRAM: }

DAGONET: } *...Battle-Axe of Albion lies safe in the Cave of Iswelt then shall Britain be safe from foe, fiend and famine.*

CLEANING LADY: At least that's what I think it says. My eyes are old. And besides I never learned to read.

KAY: When did you first notice the Axe had gone?

CLEANING LADY: Four winters and five summers past.

TRISTRAM: Four winters and five summers...! That's ...!

DAGONET: Four and a half springs!
(Tristram and Dagonet peer around the cave.)

KAY: Why did you not tell anyone before?

CLEANING LADY: I was too ashamed! I would have been axed from my position! And I felt sure it would turn up.

KAY: Does anyone else enter this cave?

CLEANING LADY: Only the Odd Job Man of Ug.

KAY: And he...

CLEANING LADY: Wouldn't know an axe from an anvil. But he's as straight as the Arrow of Astryll!

KAY: The Arrow of Astryll?

CLEANING LADY: Another story.
(Dagonet finds a row of axes.)

DAGONET: What are these?

CLEANING LADY: What? Oh, they are the Twelve Copper Axes of Afercromwyg.

TRISTRAM: The Twelve Copper Axes of Afercromwyg!
(Dagonet goes to the axes curiously. From amidst the twelve copper axes he picks out a silver one.)

DAGONET: But this...this is not one of the Twelve Axes, methinks.
(Pause as histrionic realisation dawns that Dagonet has the missing Axe.)

CLEANING LADY: *(Suddenly and hysterically)* The Axe of Albion! The Axe of Albion!
(All gather in a circle around the axe in Dagonet's hand.)

TRISTRAM: That is the Axe of Albion?

KAY: It is rather smaller than I had imagined.

DAGONET: And needs a good polish - perhaps with the Magic Duster.

CLEANING LADY: *(To Dagonet)* You, sir, have saved my cleaning job!
(She gives Dagonet a terrifying kiss, wrapping the Magic Duster around his neck.)

KAY: Sir Dagonet has saved the island of Britain, good Cleaning Lady!

TRISTRAM: And deserves another kiss.

DAGONET: Nay, I am well thanked, warm soul – but bestow your excess gratitude on my comrades, if you will.
(Tristram and Kay courteously fend off her exuberant embrace.)

TRISTRAM: We are happy for you, good Lady Who Does. But, Dagonet, how did you so shrewdly pick out the axe?

KAY: Yes, Dagonet – explain your quick reasoning.

DAGONET: Firstly: I saw *thirteen* axes. One therefore was not one of the Twelve Axes...

TRISTRAM: ...of Afercromwyg! Well spotted!

KAY: No baker's dozens in the world of talismanic axes, I ween.

DAGONET: Secondly, we know that the Axe of Albion is a battle-axe...

KAY: We do.

DAGONET: But all but one of these axes are mere chopping axes – for peasants and firewood and such.

KAY: Brilliant!

DAGONET: And lastly, observe that while the Twelve Copper Axes ...

TRISTRAM: ...of Afercromwyg...

DAGONET: ...are made of copper, this axe is made of silver. *(He turns it around in his hands.)*

TRISTRAM: Such powers of perception! It is indeed silver – while those are ruddy copper. Extraordinary!

DAGONET: Elementary, my dear knight!

KAY: But how did the Axe of Albion find its errant self amongst the Twelve Copper Axes of Afercromwyg?
(All eyes turn to the Cleaning Lady.)

CLEANING LADY: *(Flustered)* You're not suggesting that one day, absent-mindedly polishing the axe...and thinking of the Odd Job Man of Ug...

KAY: ...who cannot tell his axe from his anvil...

TRISTRAM: ...but is straighter than a certain very straight arrow...

CLEANING LADY: I misplaced this hallowed talisman in the wrong axe niche and then spread the false news that the Axe had gone from the Cave... are you?

DAGONET: That is exactly what we are suggesting! Since you ask.

CLEANING LADY: Oh mercy...! *(She crumples to the Knights' feet imploringly.)* Please...tell no one! My reputation for efficiency and order is at hazard!

KAY: Do not fear, poor Cleaning Lady of the Magic Duster. Perhaps... if we say we found it...in the cottage of some thieving old Crone near the Wood of Weremore...

TRISTRAM: ...who had bewitched the simple Odd Job Man of Ug to steal the Axe ...

DAGONET: Then you may avoid the inevitable angry fingers of blame and sharp swords of punishment for misplacing this *(turning the Axe reverently in his hands)* crucial piece.

TRISTRAM: Be careful, Dagonet: it is the sharpest axe in the cave. More than can be said for the ...

KAY: Manners, Sir Tristram! This poor Cleaning Lady made a foolish and humiliating mistake. Which of us has not put a silver battle-axe in the wrong place at some fraught moment in our lives? Let us accept her abject appeals for mercy and move on - with our good news!
Farewell, good Cleaning Lady of Barbalot!
Our Quest is done! And now we depart ...

KAY: } *(Together, jubilantly)*

TRISTRAM: }

DAGONET: } FOR CAMELOT!
(Exeunt Knights stage left. The Cleaning Lady lingers, a little puzzled by their taking away the Axe of Albion.)

CLEANING LADY: But you... *(shrugs)* are Knights of the Empty Circle and must know what you are doing.

(Exit Cleaning Lady with Magic Duster stage right.)

Scene 9 **In which Camelot gets a table and the Knights return bearing good news.**

(Enter Arthur and Gareth carrying a little table.)

ARTHUR: Here.

(They put the table down in the middle of the room. Lancelot and Guinevere enter.)

ARTHUR: Ah, Lancelot! What do you think?

LANCELOT: I think it is a table.

ARTHUR: Do you like it?

GUINEVERE: It is not very big.

LANCELOT; It is not very round.

GARETH: It was not very expensive.

GUINEVERE: At the least we have somewhere new to play our wicked game of Knights and Queens. *(She wanders over to the window stage right.)* Still not found your crown, Arthur?

(Arthur shakes his head with irritation and looks around the room.)

LANCELOT: Anyone for chess? Sire?

GARETH: Not now, Lancelot. You know how cross it makes Arthur when you keep taking his queen.

ARTHUR: It is not just my queen I keep losing. *(Sighing)* Where can they be? Now I have lost all three!

GUINEVERE: *(Looking through the window, as in the first scene)* I think I can see... Yes, it is they!

ARTHUR: They won't be *there*, Guinevere?

GUINEVERE: Your brave knights, of course. The three you thought you had lost.

LANCELOT: I think the king was thinking of his crowns.

ARTHUR: My battle crown, my workaday crown, my dress crown... All gone!

GARETH: Ever since the Axe of Albion...

LANCELOT: ...went missing...

GARETH: ...from the Cave of Iswelt.

(Arthur slopes off stage left.)

GUINEVERE: Arthur! Arthur..! Come now! Your knights return! Behold: ... Sir Kay...
 Sir Tristram ...Sir Dagonet... And they seem full weary. Arthur, come!
(The errant Knights enter stage right.)

GUINEVERE: Sir Kay, Sir Tristram – welcome back to Camelot! Sir Dagonet!

KAY: Thank you, Lady Guinevere!

GUINEVERE: Did your quest meet with success?

TRISTRAM: It did, my good lady.

DAGONET: For behold!
(Dagonet produces the Axe of Albion. General gasp. Arthur reappears.)

ARTHUR: The Axe of Albion!

KAY: That is kept in the Cave of Iswelt...

TRISTRAM: Beyond the Mournful Mountains...

DAGONET: Near the Lake of Yglis.

GARETH: Is safe in our hands.

DAGONET: *My* hands.

ARTHUR: This is wonderful news!

GUINEVERE: Britain is safe! And you should soon find your crowns, Arthur.

GARETH: And keep your queen securely on the board.

LANCELOT: Where is Merlin when you have good news to tell?
(There is a mighty fusillade of coughs. Then Merlin appears.)

MERLIN: I am glad you have found the Axe of Albion.

DAGONET: It was safe in the Cave of Iswelt all the time!

MERLIN: But if it was safe in the Cave of Iswelt all the time...?

KAY: Yes, Merlin...?

MERLIN: Why have you brought it here to Camelot?
(Uneasy pause)

ARTHUR: Merlin has a point.

MERLIN: Recall the prophecy: *(Intoning solemnly)* ‘So long as the Battle-Axe of
 Albion lies safe in the Cave of Iswelt then shall Britain be safe from foe,
 fiend and famine.’

GARETH: Now the Axe is no longer in the Cave...

MERLIN: ...Britain is no longer safe from...
(The Breathless Messenger arrives.)

MESSENGER: News, o king!

ARTHUR: Good? Or bad?

(Pause for breath)

MESSENGER: The Saxon army is again on the march! *(Each sentence is punctuated by a deep breath.)* Much of your realm is aflame! The Scots and Picts in fearsome alliance menace your frontiers! The plague has returned in the South! Another dragon has been worrying the flocks of the West. Rain is on the way.

ARTHUR: The news is bad.

LANCELOT: Kay, Tristram, Dagonet...! You have brought evil upon us! Take back the Axe, you foolish knights!

GARETH: Get ye back to the Cave of Iswelt...

ARTHUR: In the Far Country...

LANCELOT: Beyond the Mournful Mountains...

MERLIN: But do try not to go *via* the Frozen Lake of Yglis this time.

(Pause as the Knights take this in.)

KAY: Must we...?

LANCELOT: Yes.

TRISTRAM: Right this very...?

MERLIN: Yes.

DAGONET: Perhaps Sir Gareth could...?

GARETH: No.

ARTHUR: And hurry! The welfare of the kingdom is at hazard!

(The Knights wearily begin to leave, forgetting to pick up the Axe from the table.)

KAY: Off to the Far Country and the Cave of Iswelt?

LANCELOT: Fare ye well!

TRISTRAM: Beyond the Mournful Mountains?

MERLIN: That's the way.

DAGONET: Near – but not *via* - the Frozen Lake of Yglis.

ARTHUR: Make haste, will you! Or...

All: OR WE ARE DOOMED!

(Exeunt swiftly Kay, Tristram and Dagonet right.)

GARETH: What shall we do while we are waiting anxiously?

LANCELOT: Chess?

ARTHUR: Certainly not. You are all going to comb the castle from topmost turret to nethermost dungeon. If they can find the Axe of Albion you can find my crowns. Come on! I will need them in the coming catastrophe.

(Exeunt omnes stage left. The Axe of Albion stays conspicuously on the table. After a few moments Merlin reappears, looks at the Axe and shrugs with resignation.)

MERLIN: The Knights of the Empty Circle must know what they are doing – or so I have heard. *(Wry chuckle)* You try your best...but...what's the use with a court like this? Doomed if you do and doomed if you don't! Small wonder *(to the audience)* you call this the Dark Age!

(Merlin vanishes.)

FINIS

Production notes

This play has 13 parts but can be played by nine actors by doubling – for instance Dryope and the Crone, the Messenger and the Cleaning Lady – or even (with a little adaptation by assigning the Messenger's role to Merlin) by eight.

The set is simple: after all Camelot can hardly afford a table, and the Wood is represented by one actor.

The play began as a skeleton guide for improvisation, and would easily accommodate more characters and scenes. Other knights could appear, for instance, and go in a different direction through other fantastic places.

Costumes

This depends on how ambitious is the direction for such a short play, and how well supplied the wardrobe. It would be good to have the knights in surcoats and Merlin in something wizardly.

Props

Scene I	Circlet (in place of the missing crown) (Arthur)
Scene ii	Some foliage, perhaps s bough (Oak) Wolf and owl noises (Offstage)
Scene iii	Chess board and pieces (Ideally Lancelot and Arthur appear mid-game. This could be ready on the stage or a little 'travel set' could be brought on by Lancelot.)
Scene iv	Broom (Crone)
Scene vii	Chess game (as before)
Scene viii	Twelve miniature silver axes, one larger copper axe (on stage) Magic Duster (Cleaning Lady)
Scene ix	Small occasional table (Arthur, Gareth) Axe of Albion (Dagonet)

Characters scene by scene

1	Guinevere, Arthur, Kay, Gareth, Tristram, Dagonet, Lancelot, Messenger, Merlin
2	Oak, Dryope, Kay, Tristram, Dagonet
3	Arthur, Guinevere, Lancelot
4	Crone, Kay, Tristram, Dagonet
5	Gareth, Arthur, Merlin
6	Kay, Tristram, Dagonet
7	Guinevere, Lancelot
8	Cleaning Lady, Kay, Tristram, Dagonet
9	Arthur, Lancelot, Guinevere, Gareth, Kay, Tristram, Dagonet, Merlin, Messenger