

Opening extract from

Sir Gadabout: and the Camelot Calamity

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Problem Pets

A long, long time ago – well before fridge magnets were invented and everyone had to stare at boring white fridge doors all day long – there was a famous castle called Camelot.

Camelot was a mighty fortress hidden in a dim and misty corner of the land – which unfortunately made it quite tricky for the postman to find. One of the Knights of the Round Table sent a postcard from his holidays in Skegness in 1984 and it still hasn't arrived to this day.

Within Camelot lived King Arthur. He was famed for his wisdom and bravery – and also

his huge collection of Flags of the World stickers, which he ordered from *Majesty Monthly* magazine and stuck in a big album (free with Issue One). It was his ambition to become the first monarch to fill the album up, but he was still waiting for Serbia and Montenegro which he had ordered *ages* ago. He was beginning to wonder whether the postman had delivered it to Arthur King again, who lived in nearby Chipping Sodnorton. Arthur King had once received Equatorial Guinea by mistake and had been so reluctant to give it up that a deputation of knights had to be sent to get it off him.

Alongside King Arthur at Camelot was Queen Guinevere. Guinevere was not only beautiful and just as wise as King Arthur, but she was also very handy with her hammer and nails. Not a lot of people realise that Camelot's famous Round Table, which all the brave knights sat at, was originally square. Sir Andrew the Ample kept catching his legs on the corners and coming out in a nasty bruise, so in the end Guinevere got her

tools out, rounded the corners off, and while she was at it she evened up the wobbly legs and gave it a smart coat of varnish.

One bright summer's morning, King Arthur was on his way to the Post Office to enquire after his Serbia and Montenegro flag when Sir Lancelot happened to pass by with a dog on a lead.

"Morning, Sir Lancelot. I didn't know you had a dog," said King Arthur.

"Oh, I've only just got him, your majesty. He's very clever. Look at this—"

Sir Lancelot took off one of his boots and threw it as far as he could, crying, "*Fetch, Rover!*" The dog scampered off, picked the boot up in its mouth and returned it to the knight.

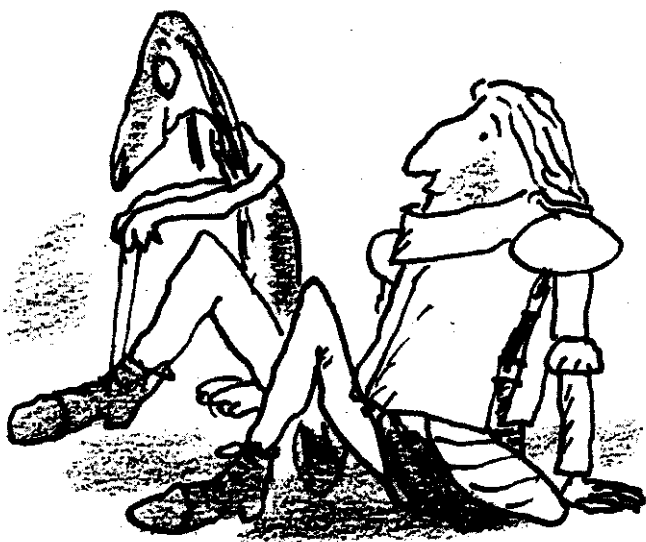
"Well, I think lots of dogs can do that, Sir Lancelot," said the king. "Maybe you could teach it to . . ."

He stopped what he was saying and began to stare open-mouthed. Not only had the dog brought the boot back, but he had put it back on Sir Lancelot's foot, and, by using

a clever combination of his paws, teeth and tongue, was tying the lace. And he did a double knot! (The laces were a bit too long and Sir Lancelot kept tripping over them.)

"That's amazing!" said King Arthur.

"That's not all," said Sir Lancelot proudly. He gave a few more commands, and Rover proceeded to write the answers to some very complicated sums by scratching with his paws on the dusty ground (including long division, which had always baffled King Arthur). He (Rover, not King Arthur) then



showed his athletic prowess by demonstrating two cartwheels, three back-flips, and a somersault. He finished on a Double-Eisenhower with pike, which even Olympic gymnasts have problems with. Rover finally landed on his head and managed to walk twelve metres using only his ears.

"And I haven't been training him for long," said Sir Lancelot proudly. "I only got him a week ago from Pittance's Pet Shop in Camelot village."

"I never knew he sold such amazing pets," said the king.

"It's under new ownership. Everything's changed there now!"

"It's a shame, because I liked old Simon Pittance who used to run it."

"Ah, but Mr and Mrs Twaddle who own it now have some *much* more exciting ideas!" said Sir Lancelot.

King Arthur carried on, and just before he reached the Post Office he came across Sir Gavin the Greasy. Sir Gavin seemed to be talking to someone, so the king didn't want

to disturb him. But on closer inspection, it didn't look like there was anyone actually with Sir Gavin. When the king got closer still, however, he could see a parrot sitting on a fence.

"I'm very pleased with you, Polly," Sir Gavin the Greasy was saying. "You have learned to talk so quickly!"

"Being of South American descent, I found your rather thick West Country accent quite hard to understand at first," replied Polly. "But I must admit I am quite pleased with my progress thus far."

King Arthur could hardly believe his ears. "That's the cleverest parrot I've ever seen or heard!" he exclaimed.

"Actually, the ability to talk is not always a sign of cleverness," Polly pointed out. "Many birds can mimic the human voice and other sounds without actually understanding what they are saying. In my case, however, you are right – I am extremely brainy."

"Er . . . oh, I'm sure you are," said the king.

"Funnily enough, Your Majesty," said Sir

Gavin, "Polly was saying only the other day that she would quite like to have a debate with you – about whether countries should be run by a monarchy or an elected parliament."

King Arthur wasn't quite sure what all that meant, but he somehow didn't like the sound of it. "I'd love to, but I must get along to the Post Office. Where did you get her from, anyway?"

"*She's* got a name, you know!" said the parrot.

"Sorry – where did you get Polly from?"

"Simon Pittance's pet shop in Camelot village. It's great since Mr and Mrs Twaddle took over!"

"So I've heard. I quite liked old Mr Pittance, but never mind."

Just as the king was leaving, Sir Gavin the Greasy proudly called after him, "She can also say *Who's a pretty Polly?*, Your Majesty. I taught her that yesterday!"

King Arthur thought he heard the parrot let out a long sigh.

Once he got back to Camelot (sadly, still without his flag sticker) King Arthur was walking past the room where the Crown Jewels were kept when he saw Queen Guinevere standing at the open door.

"Hello, my dear," he said. "Are you inspecting the Royal Valuables?"

"I'm not – it's Sir Bumptious and his pet."

"Not another one . . ."

"He's got a magpie and it's sorting everything out in here. It *was* rather a mess – and it's amazing what the bird can do."

"Well, my dear, it's well known that magpies are attracted to shiny things and like to pick them up and move them around."

"Yes, my love, but this one is arranging them into categories according to value, rarity and hallmark. He's just sorted the rubies from the emeralds."

King Arthur poked his head around the door. The magpie was standing on top of a heap of glittering gold crowns, diamond brooches, tiaras and other impressive items. He was picking them up with his beak and

throwing them into different piles all around him.

"That's worth a bob or two," he said, tossing a silver bracelet with inlaid diamonds. "That's a load of rubbish," he continued, throwing a golden goblet with sapphires round the rim onto a different pile.

"Oh, and he can talk," added Queen Guinevere.

"I noticed. But that goblet is worth millions!" cried the king. "It was given to us



by Sir Frederick the Futile as an anniversary present."

"Worthless tat, gov'n'r," insisted the magpie. "Just a bit o' polished brass and coloured glass. I could get you something better by hooking a duck at a fair."

"Isn't he wonderful?" said Sir Bumptious. "I got him—"

"Let me guess — from Pittance's Pet Shop?" said the king wearily.

"How did you know?"

"It seems like everyone at Camelot's got a pet from there these days."

"Except us!" said Guinevere. "We've always wanted a nice little kitten — I'm told they've got some really cute ones. Shall we?"

"Well . . ."

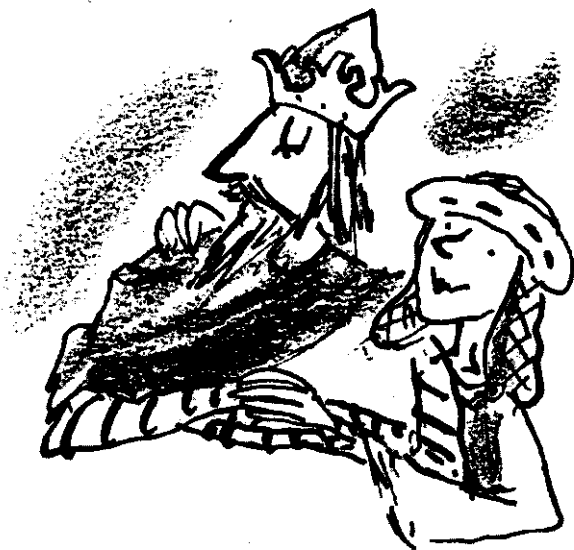
"Please?!"

"Well . . ."

"Pretty please?!"

"Oh, all right then!"

King Arthur was very impressed by the pets that seemed to be coming from Pittance's Pet Shop, and he liked the idea of



a cute kitten as much as Guinevere. It was just that he was sad about going back to the pet shop now that old Mr Pittance had gone. And anyway, there was something that didn't seem quite right about the things these wonderful animals that all the knights were getting could do . . .

