Name: _____ Date: _____

The Round Table

Reading level 14 · 1217 words

Arthur had spent a month thinking about a single face. Ever since he lay wounded in a hermit's cell, and a lady named Guinevere had come in from the forest and bent over him like an angel, he had been unable to eat his supper without wondering where she was. When he heard that a cruel duke was trying to force her into marriage, he had put on a disguise, ridden into her father's country, helped to drive off the enemies who threatened it, and finally revealed who he was. Now the whole kingdom was celebrating, because King Arthur was to marry the Lady Guinevere at Camelot, on a bright autumn morning when the leaves had turned scarlet and gold.

The town had been magnificently adorned for a week. Fresh rushes carpeted the cobbled thoroughfares, tapestries were draped across the steepest slopes, and from every window hung banners of crimson and azure that rippled in the breeze. When the herald galloped in to say that the bride was near, Arthur went out through the gate to meet her, with seventeen of his finest knights riding around him. The multitudes who lined the road acclaimed him so loudly that the birds fled from the trees. Down by the river, under the willows, he saw her litter of gilded wood, with curtains of embroidered silk, and beside it a long, resplendent procession of courtiers, pages and attendants moving toward him through the golden light.

Arthur dismounted and walked the last steps on foot. Guinevere's father helped her down from the litter, and when she stood before the king, he bowed, took both her hands in his, and kissed her cheek, and a great shout went up all along the river. Afterward it was universally agreed that nobody who witnessed that meeting ever forgot it, for it was filled with elegance and genuine joy. They married that noon in the cathedral, with every bell in Camelot ringing, and the feast that followed was set for four hundred and eighty-six guests, among them kings, queens and a considerable number of former adversaries who had concluded that friendship was wiser.

But the wedding was only the first half of the day. In the afternoon, Arthur and Guinevere followed Merlin, the enchanter, across the courtyard to a place where he had built a vast pavilion, partly through enchantment and partly through extraordinary craftsmanship, and he drew back the curtain with the air of a conjurer unveiling his most spectacular illusion. The walls inside were gilded and painted with saints and angels playing golden instruments. The ceiling was a blue sky scattered with stars, and in the center of it blazed a golden sun. The floor was a pavement of black, white, red and blue marble. And in the middle of everything, glowing in the light, stood an enormous round table with fifty places set about it.

At every place sat a golden cup of fragrant wine, and beside it a golden plate holding a small

loaf of white bread. Music began, though nobody could discover who was performing it. Merlin took Arthur's hand and conducted him around the table, explaining its marvels one at a time. This chair, built of precious wood and carved with gold, was the Seat Royal, and as he spoke, letters appeared across the back reading ARTHUR, KING. The chair directly opposite, he said, was the Seat Perilous, and no one but a single knight, who had not been born yet, could ever sit in it; any other man who tried would meet disaster, or even death.

"Then let us fill the table at once," said Arthur, who had never been patient. Merlin regarded him with a long look and a smile that was not entirely cheerful. "Why such haste, my lord? When every seat is filled, your glory will be complete, and then your day will begin to decline. When a man has done all that he was meant to do, God breaks him, as you might break a goblet from which a perfect wine has been drunk, so that no lesser wine can ever be poured into it." Arthur looked at him steadily. "Old man, you speak great truths," he said. "But if I am to be broken when my work is finished, I would rather do the work." And Merlin, who had expected no other answer, bowed his head.

Only thirty-two knights in all of Britain were worthy to sit down there on that first day, he said, and he would choose them himself. The first he selected was King Pellinore, the knight Arthur had fought on a bridge not long before, who was now generous toward the poor and so formidable in combat that Merlin could not determine which of the two kings was more to be feared. Pellinore sat down, and his name sprang up in golden letters upon the back of his chair. One by one, Merlin walked around the table, taking each knight by the hand: Gawaine and Ewaine, Kay, Pellias, Geraint, Lamorack and so many others that the entire pavilion seemed to resound with names, and with every touch another chair began to shine.

When all thirty-two had been chosen, Arthur noticed that the chair at his right hand was still empty and had no name on it. "That seat will carry a name soon," said Merlin, "and the man who sits in it will be the finest knight alive, until the one arrives who is meant for the Seat Perilous. He will surpass everyone in strength and in beauty and in grace." "I wish he were here now," said Arthur. "He is coming," said Merlin. The Archbishop of Canterbury then walked from seat to seat, blessing each one with incense and singing, and every knight took his place, and behind each stood a squire holding a small banner over his master's head.

Then the knights rose, and each drew his sword and held its cross-shaped handle before him, and they swore, word for word as Arthur spoke it, to be gentle to the weak and brave against the strong. They swore to be terrible to the wicked and to defend anyone who called for help. They promised to treat all women with honor, to stand up for one another, to be merciful to everyone, and to be gentle in all they did, steady as friends and true in love. Each of them pressed his lips to the cross of his sword. A great shout of joy rang through the pavilion, and the knights sat down together and broke bread from the golden plates, and drank the wine.

And so the Round Table was established, on the very afternoon of the wedding, with the

Queen at the king's side and the sun painted overhead. It was unquestionably the proudest hour of Arthur's life. Merlin watched him from the doorway, very still, as the music went on and the golden names glittered, and thought about everything that he knew and had not said. The empty seat sat waiting beside the king, with its blank back. Across the table, the Seat Perilous waited too. Somewhere in the world, two young men who would one day sit in those two chairs were learning to hold a sword, and neither of them had any idea.

Questions

1. Why was the wedding of Arthur and Guinevere celebrated by the whole kingdom?

A. Arthur had saved her kingdom and won her heart
B. She was Merlin's daughter
C. It ended a long drought

2. What did the letters on the Seat Royal say?

A. ARTHUR, KING
B. MERLIN THE WISE
C. FOR THE BRAVEST KNIGHT

3. Why did Merlin tell Arthur not to hurry to fill the table?

A. He wanted to build more chairs
B. When it was full, Arthur's glory would be complete and begin to fade
C. He did not like the knights

4. Which knight did Merlin choose first, after Arthur?

A. Gawaine
B. Kay
C. Pellinore

5. In "the Seat Perilous," what does perilous mean?

A. Comfortable
B. Full of danger
C. Very old

6. What does the oath the knights swear show about what a knight should be?

A. Strong only in battle
B. Brave, merciful and loyal, not just strong
C. Rich and famous

Words to know

pavilion: large ornate tent
enchanter: user of magic
litter: a carried bed

perilous: full of danger
incense: sweet-smelling smoke

Answer key: The Round Table

1. A. Arthur had saved her kingdom and won her heart
2. A. ARTHUR, KING
3. B. When it was full, Arthur's glory would be complete and begin to fade
4. C. Pellinore
5. B. Full of danger
6. B. Brave, merciful and loyal, not just strong