

The Passing Of Uther Pendragon

A drama for the stage in one act

Arranged for informal presentation by two players

Performance length: Approximately 50 minutes.

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Introduction

This version of the play is arranged for very informal presentation by two actors without stage setting and with little preparation. They read from scripts in hand. Of course it would be best for them to walk about a bit, pose and gesture some, and especially touch each other when mentioned in the script, and most especially perform the final embrace at the end. But on the other hand, none of that is definitely required. They might even just sit still the whole time and concentrate on good dramatic voice. Thus, in a pinch, one single rehearsal shortly before the show might possibly be enough.

The two parts are denoted "Woman" and "Man" but please do not feel bound by gender. It would be best if the players have distinctly different voices but they needn't be female and male. In any case, whatever else, their voices should express their parts. The Man is usually militant, willful, demanding, while the Woman is most often cool, contemplative and deep.

Plain dark colored clothes would certainly serve, but you might prefer a bit of dash. If you have a shirt with stars and moons printed on it, considering that the play takes place under a midnight sky, that might be ideal. Not too much dash, however. Don't let your clothing distract the audience from their imaginings. They need to see you as many different characters.

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Finally, a very brief note on the play's style. This piece owes its life and breath to Dylan Thomas and the countless other great Welsh bards who preceded him for so many generations.

The Script

Woman

The Passing of Uther Pendragon. A dramatic play by Stone Riley.
The audience all take their seats. House lights down.

Man

Curtain up. A few plain wooden chairs at center stage. Stage lights up but dim; light like guttering torches; shadowy, complex and flickering. In fact, the stone walls at the backdrop of the stage show that we are in a torch-lit medieval castle hall. Perhaps there are festive ornaments hung about the walls, for we have come here to a feast.

Woman

No. No ornaments are hung about at all. The dark high stone walls are bare except for one tall wide stone-built window over there, up stage left, that now stands shuttered tight.

Man

Actually, see, this great window over there is a screen on which various pictures will be projected as the play goes on. It looks like great wooden shutters now, with a bar across, but that's just the picture projected on it now when the curtain goes up.

Woman

Hush! The Young Man enters at stage left.

A spotlight follows him.

This Young Man wears a jester's suit, for he's a comic entertainer, and in his hand he grasps the scepter of his office, a stick with on its end a grinning puppet's skull. The Young Man enters; he runs and dances toward the further wing.

Man

Hark! My Mistress comes! Oh, she is good! You'll see!

Lady! Please! Thy noble audience awaits!

Oh no! She tarries. Oh, I know that cook. That sweaty cook! He drips into his awful pastries. He wants her in his bed. Oh! He touches her! She touches him! Oh! But who am I to say her nay? Such comfort I would gladly give myself, but she'll have none of that from me. That cook! That cook! That is the man I know! He is a thief. Last Sabbath afternoon, I beat him good at bowls and he would not pay! I pulled his nose. Now, what is that? That is a pasty from the Duke's own table! I saw them there myself! And look, my Lady gives a kiss for it! Oh! Oh!

Oh, she is good. See how she kisses. See that hand? Each move is grace. Oh, comforts I would gladly give indeed. Yet, she is old. She is old. That silver hair! Those knowing eyes! That magic giving touch. She tells me, find a girl. A girl! There's what she says to me. Once the covers are tucked up beneath her chin, I am sent scuttling away.

She carries.

Behold! My Mistress comes!

So, enter now the Muse, old and hobbling on a cane, stage right.

The Young Man tries to help her to a chair, but no: she stands. She speaks.

Woman

A long long time ago -- but not so long ago as you might think -- the people of Britain trembled in fear of coming civil war, for Great King Uther lay dying with no heir. Yes, good Uther The Dragon who had held the British folk steady through the long and bitter Saxon Wars, held them steady in his gentle hand; yes, strong Uther of the Dragon's Head who had held the British army steady in his mighty hand all through those bloody Saxon Wars; he had come down to his end without a child; and the soldiers who had fought those wars were already brawling now every day in violent contentions in the streets of several towns, for championship, vying which of their captains now should take the crown. Yes, even with Good Uther gone sick-a-bed this week ago, dying of an ancient flake of poisoned spear point that had lodged inside a scar inside his ribs, many years ago, on a day of battle, and dying of his weary heart.

Man

A childless king, aye, so thought the world and so thought he as well, for he had loved one woman in this world; and the woman whom he truly loved and who loved him in truth; they had shared one single night of carefree bliss. They had shared one single night together thigh to thigh in naked trust in all their lives -- one night -- because she was the good wife of another man.

Woman

So now this man lain down in a shadowed lamp-lit chamber all hung with painted canvasses, done by masters, but built of stone, this loving man; the heartbeat slow, the brow grown cold; up he strained from fitful dream and heaved a mighty sigh: "Aah!" so that the captains and the servants gathered there all drew close. He raised a trembling hand toward the shuttered window and commanded: "Show me the stars."

Two elder servants hurried to push tall rattling shutters back, the old nurse who, as a little girl, had helped to wash him at his birth, and the hobbling hooded master brewer who was the nurse's bedmate now. And there the great window stood open; open to the glories of a midnight sky all pricked through up and down by needle points from the dense atmosphere of brilliant suns that blaze away far out there, far out there beyond the heavy thick veil of watery dark that cloaks our realm; and yet a very fluid Earthy sky this was, whose scented substance softly glowed blue-green with cool moonlight.

Man

Now the window breeze, the easy breath of a rare calm autumn night beside the cold and stormy Narrow Sea -- this wind which now these people surely must feel as if it were the breath of stars -- this entering breeze brushed gently by the small bouquets of green silk Chinese ribbon twined into a garland that was hung high from the rough tall posts of the royal bed, and it touched Uther's face and naked breast, as cold as he but pressing hard, so that the wounded man was suddenly pressed down hard by an amazing weight and he fell heavily into the pillow and, almost uttering a silent cry, surrendered all the meager power that he found still within his grasp, surrendered any hope of further struggle; and all of this while his dim eyes stared unblinking outward from that seaside tower toward the midnight sky.

But then a great annoyance suddenly came to life within the sick man's mind, a great annoyance at himself for having not yet thrown away the line and made a sail to seek some passage toward the further stars. He twisted then about in his frustration, wrestling blindly with the swan's down coverlet until, except one leg and foot, except the big thick ever-seeping bandage on his lower left side, now torn aside to let the bleeding show, and the glistening cup-shaped wound, Uther lay completely naked.

Woman

He felt as if some landsman's type of little carrack shell -- the kind of tiny boat that any good farmer's boy and girl might build in half an afternoon from naught but hairy hide and sticks and grassy twine and wax -- with naught but small things in their hands for tools and stumps and rocks for cobbler's anvil -- that just that sort of landsman's boat was being held ready for him now.

Man

He felt as if he only need look over his shoulder in some new direction, and there would be his first loyal boyhood pal, fine in manhood now, standing waiting, smiling, with the tiny leather boat pulled out beside a tree. The time had come now when they could let it down there into the broad estuary by the castle's lower gate, with the ebb tide tugging firm and impatient on the ropes, and Uther would just hop down like a young man would into the fragile shell. He would take to the oars at first, he decided now, because he had to test himself; he needed, first of all, to see how soon that fabled ethereal tide would force him to rig the linen gull's-wing sail that would stand head-high, and let himself lie back for a rest. He even heard that good fellow standing by the tree call out and laugh gaily and saw the beckoning arm gesturing among the trees.

Woman

But even now this dying king spared a glance about the place where his body lay. He twitched his head to cast the glance. He wished to spy the reason for his bitterness. He wished to know what should be done before he turned away And with surrender come and gone, and with this new intention known, Uther felt himself overtaken suddenly by another dream. He felt the sky wind lift him up and set him down too soon with feet upon that bridge of nearer stars that spans our sky -- set him down with feet on the first climbing steps of that glorious shining bridge of the Milky Way that you and I now know as the span of our own galaxy -- so that the wind pushed at his back and he must walk with feet stirring up the glowing dust, he must walk the bridge most spirits walk away, but living still, in wondrous dream.

And soon came he to ground amid a little camp of sleeping cattle guards. T'was in some snow-specked frosty valley pasture way far north of there, he thought, and some good man with his sons come out to mind a herd, and all the hearty fellows wrapped in blankets by the low fire with weapons close to hand and wrapped in slumber. The herding dogs perked up to see him pass but their old bitch judged best to keep the moonlight's peace and this old lady of the pack hushed them all again with a long whisper of a growl, and then stern looks, and then raised her white brows and winked at him and cast a look down toward his feet.

And so he found there then beside that dwindling fire a certain boy. Beside that boy he felt compelled to kneel and gaze upon a pensive face.

Man

So stirred the boy and glanced up in his eyes, almost awake.

Woman

So spoke the man, seeing there these eyes which he had seen in many yearning dreams before; so spoke the man: "This is my child."

Man

So awoke the man. So awoke the dreaming man when the fading campfire rose up in shooting embers that shot now in a fountain from his opened eyes for all to see. And though he could not rise, a fair great bellow rolled up from Uther's rasping chest, and with fingers bending back around the bed board, he gasped out loud the name "Igraine". So was named the absent mistress of his heart.

Woman

The air was still for a minute then, and then extended whispering, and some rude discourteous shoves, and then a bearded captain of the royal guard was shoved up forward to stand by his pillow.

The fellow bent down close. Though Uther saw naught else, for all else was a haze of broken memories, and darkness that seemed reflected in the countless glittering bits, yet Uther watched this fellow through an oval tinted pane that seemed clear enough, that seemed to shade in green the only window that seemed open to that world where he had walked in light so well.

Those who stood back further were urging the fellow to speak.

Man

"Sir King!" the fellow shouted.

Woman

Uther answered with a faintly waving hand.

Man

"Do you know me?" The fellow shouted loud. Then, seeing that the glowing eyes flicked in seeming proof of conscious thinking cognition, the captain hurried quick and loud into the duty of his report, in quite the very way as if he'd come upon his dying king atop some quaking wall amid whistling cannon shell. "Do you know me?" The fellow bent again closer to the eyes and turned his face side and side one time to help them see. Peering closer still,

he judged it was no use to call a lamp, for the eyes themselves seemed definitely to shine, now seeming quite like Baltic amber.

"I am your Lady's paramour!"

No further flicker came and so the fellow hurried on: "The Dukes and Council all as one sent me pelting forth, before last dawn, with horses ready at the stations from the trumpet call, to beg the Lady's presence, and I have just returned, still in my muddy gear and spittle beard, as all may see, but she will not come. I hurried up the stairs and then I heard the shout. I begged with every trick a paramour can know -- for all those tricks I know from easy practice, as many good wives will testify if asked at law -- and I have conjured them on her very earnestly and earned fine smiles, but she will not come. I finally asked if she would come to your command, Sir King, and she answered this: 'That is men's work.' There's what she said. She has already sent from her retinue just some old nurse who, she claims, was present at your birth and has the power of benediction. But now she refuses to send more, nor better medicines to boot. Men's work, she says. She will not come."

Woman

All the gist of that long report flowed through Uther's ears in twisted sound, and yet a point stuck in his consciousness that Igraine could not be found, not even here now at the end. So he gathered up two rasping breaths and turned his head to whisper to the crowd; "Merlin Emrhys." He vigorously blinked his eyes to

gather up a hold on vision, and there then Merlin stood. The king's fingers reached and twined into the old magician's woolen hood.

Man

Hovering in the oval lighted space of Uther's vision, the Great Druid spoke: "I am here, old friend."

Woman

The muttering breath then was quite inaudible to other ears, but came to the great philosopher perfectly plain. Now they stood in some other place. Standing, hands holding each other's arms, Uther spoke to Merlin thus: "Merlin! You prophesied a boy! You spoke it twice I heard myself, and all of it seemed perfectly plain." Smiling warily, hands on each other's arms, they began to circle one another very carefully step by careful step, and the king went on: "So. What then? Did I fail you in some contract in some way since then? Or was it just that little hop and skip in my dancing-bear routine, that I never did learn to your satisfaction? Or were some gods displeased somewhere, with my hopes of advancement? No, I would have seen that much if that were true, seen it with just that silver looking glass you gave me. No; so then, wherein lies the failure?"

Man

Uther got a momentary grip on Merlin's shoulder, lost it, got his thumb into the arm pit which was left unguarded for an instant. Thus restrained, Merlin let himself grow bull-like, with horns and ears and snout and hooves, so that he was a great-humped minotaur. Seeking then a real true grip into the arm pit's flesh, the king said:

Woman

"A-hah old chum, perhaps then this riddle can be taken by the bones; yea e'en by the bull's own bones. Perhaps I have it right here, eh?"

Man

Oof!

Woman

It that right yet? No? How's this: My nonexistent son was never truly prophesied at all; was he, friend? Truly? It was my very dream to have a boy, and yet you lied."

Man

And Merlin answered, loud for all to hear in every realm a human voice might reach; "Yea, Friend Uther! Your child was truly prophesied by me! A child to be the finest king to ever stand between these shores!"

Woman

So Uther gathered up three rasping breaths, and shouted toward the world which he had known, with all of his own strength and more. He shouted thus: "Where is my son?"

Man

"Peace, old friend," the prophet spoke; "he is hid safe in love's embrace till now and all will be fulfilled in time."

Woman

"Can it be?" spoke Uther in that other place. "I should have known."

Man

"Peace, old friend," the prophet said, "and easy loose your lines. Voyage forth in peace, old friend, and steady breeze. Mind the current drift round Virgo's Shoals and the Whirlpool of the Mighty Forge. Steady steer for the one light at the dark edge of the Moon, then find a coastward wind along that shore to fetch you home. And run to port in rising dawn. Fly from this battlefield in peace, honored friend, for when you go, the new man comes."

Woman

So then, standing in that other place, the aged priest spat into his own left hand and reached, with thumb and fingers spanning toward the ears, to press a few dry drops of spittle into the royal brow, while the king let his head bow down as one must do to undergo that bit of Druid ritual. And with that bit of ritual, Uther felt as if a new eye opened, an eye that seemed to gaze perpetually into the stars both up and down. For a moment to him too, it seemed as if the glittering shapes that had been jostling round him for these hours, now had surprisingly formed into a shadow of an all-encompassing shape of every color, many colors that were far too dim or brilliant for an eye to see. And yet somehow he felt as if he caught the outline of its shape. It seemed to be a picture of some harbor town spread out upon a pretty spit of land that curved around to make the harbor mouth from either side. He thought a tide must be pouring in to fill the tiny anchorage just now, so looked the action of the ripples far and wide.

Now to minister to the king in proper legal order, the mourners found and carried and stood the aged midwife there. The only females in the room were she and a whelping rat and the rat's last cub beneath inside the floor. The midwife's palsied hand produced and then held forth a tiny vial of fluid, a green glass vial with gold cap dangling from a cunning hinge wrought at some Fairy hearth with tiny pliers and hammer; fluid to be dripped upon the head.

Man

At once, several willing hands of magistrates and dukes, horny hands far more accustomed to the grip of war, all reached out at once in hopes to catch the jewel-like trembling vial in case it fell.

Woman

But in Uther's staring eyes she was all women.

Man

The curving cheek was like all other cheeks, the eyes and chin and brow all like the female countenance itself, and of these countless forms it took inside his eyes, the form which shaped itself most certainly for him was this: Igraine. Here was Igraine. Here was Igraine on that warm summer's day of flowers bending to the breeze, when they had kissed their fill and promised more. Here was Igraine. Here was Igraine reclined, with eyes startled wide in wonder and then languid in release when he had proved his cunning skill. Here was Igraine. Here was Igraine rose up beside to stand upon their sheltered mossy bed, against the brilliant light; and she, holding open her linen robe like lifted wings fluttering wide above them both, and standing as a bird must stand in air to soar, and laughing bright, she'd bathed her bones and spirit in the wind.

Woman

But now the face of all women spoke. And she said this: "Do ye know me, Child?"

Man

"I know you, Mother."

Woman

So then ye hearken to me, Son. Ye hark?"

Man

"I hearken, Mother."

Woman

"That crescent land where thou art bound to dwell a space; ye've seen the chart?"

Man

"I've seen the place meself, in dream I think it was; and too, I have been told the way by a friendly well-trying mariner who even gave me guided study of his charts one night, with lens and candles. And he said that I understood them well! Mind the drift at Virgo's Shoals, he said deliberately for me to hear not more than half an hour ago, and also mind the Whirlpool of the Mighty Forge, if such a spectacle with such a name as that should chance to heave in view. Make for the one light at the dark edge of the Moon. There catch a coasterly for home."

Woman

"Ye'll run to port in rising dawn? It would not suit to fail the inward tide, hearken ye, for others long before yer time have missed it, and the tale was told and retold since then about their homeless wanderings. Fail not yer first in-going tide at Troytown Spit!"

Man

"I'll run to port in rising dawn indeed."

Woman

"Ye'll be a shining prince in that fair land."

Man

"Mother! Shall I?"

Woman

"Ye'll bend the harp and sing the melodies right from the birdies' throats, me well-beloved, and father many men."

Man

"Mother! Shall I?"

Woman

"Ye be me truest well-beloved, me one, and all that shall be done is done, and all that shall be done is done by thee."

Man

"Mother! Shall I go? Now?"

Woman

"And blessed; go."

And so, in the death bed chamber, the falling droplets from a sacred well came down, cascading billowing scent of white and scarlet rose among the wettened stones.

Man

And so the bended fingers on the bed board quite fell slack, the glowing eyes reduced to shiny coal. A final tremble, and the thighs came up as if set fit to dance a piper's tune, and one final bloody gout from the wound to soak the mattress through, to drip into the soil and rocks below to mark the place as sacred altar where this man passed.

Woman

And so the sacred waterfall washed down. At last his vision cleared. Wipe clean the windows of perception, and throw wide the windowed doors. The countless glittering crystal bits of every hue, each with its sound and taste and calendar and isolated meaning, came all translucent to him now like glistening glass; they smoothed like sun-warmed ice to form the moonlight's colored warp and weft. And then the moonlight was the ever-intertangling sap-filled vine of leaf and stem and bud that makes our realm, and out through the castle's postern gate, there among the leafy shrubs, his old chum grinned and waved most energetically.

Man

"Come on! Uther now, come on! The tide's still good!"

Woman

They could not help but kiss like girls, then, muscled arm round muscled back and thigh to thigh, to jig the opening steps of Dance For Joy, for which the guardian spirits of that wooded shore produced a lively breezy tune.

But then when the new boy hopped down to the fragile shell, then the mortal blood dripped down through rock to water veins, so that the people gathered about the death bed, one and all alike, could feel the fluid virtues of the air drain down out of that place, leaving the chamber's air most strangely warm and thin and still. The scents of various meats and herbs then were plain.

Man

A seagull then was seen!

A young cadet who had snuck in the door in simple hope of seeing miracles, his simple plan to pose there as a messenger till senior rank might send him packing; this young cadet shouting while he ran to point out of the window at the sight:

Woman

The white bird painted by the dappled moonlight gleaming from the waves below, its wings held wide and turning far out of view across the sinking water, just the way a single one of them will often do to track the smallest kind of fishing craft.

Man

And then a slapping wind came up to knock the shutters from their hooks. Just as neatly as an oaken gate that turns on iron pins, the rattling shutters closed and latched themselves at once, and then the mighty crossbar fell, and so the window stood there well and truly shut.

Woman

King Arthur started, dreaming of the distant noise. No king in that realm then, he was a boy of twelve. The sharp pebble that had teased his scalp all night, there beside the dwindling fire where this secret king lay in a woolen wrap among his fellow cattle guards, this sharp pebble may have pricked a nerve just then, or else the distant sound itself was loud enough to wake him with a jerk.

Man

He knew it was a dream again at once, not thinking that the trouble was a crafty band of wolves or thieves. He plainly felt, clinging to his mind, the plastic flesh of someplace he had been, or such as that, or else he heard the faces pulled out of shape speaking to him from behind.

Woman

The thing which he'd done with these weirding dreams so far was to lean back on his elbows and gaze half way up beyond the horizon at the countless sharp points that are often brightest there. At home he'd moved his bed, to the foot of his foster father's bed to find this kind of view, that gentle good old knight, and had been blessed with a transit of Venus. Sometimes the clarity of the stars would lift the dreamy cobwebs and all would disappear like foot-sore dust into the holy dew.

Man

His elder brothers, all of them elder by numerous years, clumped in drunk one night, protesting to their Knight as a legalized committee, having dragged in a magistrate's most disgruntled clerk from the town with his bowl and scroll to witness any deal, that the family's foundling foster brother should not take the liberty to move his bed, even with no spoken leave from anyone, even usurping that so-far unalloted space where he was at that moment somehow loath to rest his little butt. The good knight smiled but

shut his lips, pressed them with his fingertips. The band of brothers stepped back to a corner, taking time to plan another speech. But then Arthur had calmed them all by standing tall on his bed and giving a very formal wave of his hand; three waves, in fact. He had laughed then, and claimed a championship that he had won from them at draughts.

And there, tonight, he spied the lower cloud of stars which in that latitude must look to any human eye just like a flight of hillside stairs, seen in profile on the hill, just beyond some near-by valley, up to the Milky Way. To win such spectacles as that at draughts is quite a play.

Woman

But now he found a different thing. He realized tonight this view would let the weird dream's full memory take shape before his eyes instead of only in his brain. He held his thumb and fingers up as if to make a peephole in a screen. He beheld now in memory what he had seen before in dream, awake now to judge the sights and sounds of it against his little hoarded self-learned store of wisdom. Our brave boy beheld this: A man-like being robed in glittering light, his brow encircled by a wreath of green silk Chinese bows. This peculiar spirit descends down those hillside stairs and, taking royal shape and face, strides here across the intervening valley. A goddess green willow tree, beneath whose canopy he finds himself -- whose ancient roots run through this ground -- she smiles down. The Great King kneels therefore within the canopy, and looks to

Arthur's face. The royal eyes drip tears to see his face, and droop their lids in pity, so that a bleeding wound opens somewhere in the sky to sprinkle on his head like rain.

Man

And then the Great King spoke those words which he, the boy, had found no wit nor dare to even hearken in a dream:

Woman

Here is my child.

Action

(If it can be done gracefully, the Woman and the Man embrace.)

Man

Curtain.

Woman

Applause!!

(End of play)