

Introduction

1

Hello. My name's Amory; I only have the one.
I don't know how old I am.

If you were to pass me in the pedestrian precinct, or stand next to me on the platform at the railway station, or catch sight of me sitting on the grass in the Cathedral Close, you might take me for thirteen, but I'm older than I look.

I'm small for my age in any case—everyone was in the days when I spent my childhood in the Convent of Saint Syncletica, somewhere on the road to the west—but I've also spent a lot of time in other worlds.

I say "somewhere" because I've walked the modern road that follows the same route all the way from Winchester to the Great Ridge and back again without being able to identify the spot on which the convent stood.

I say "the road to the west" because that's what we called it, though not in what you'd call English. We'd lost the Roman names by then, for the road and for the towns it once connected. It was the road to Camelot, but we didn't call it that, and it wouldn't be very helpful if I called it that now, because you have no idea where Camelot was. History was another of the things we'd lost with the Romans, although we didn't know it, because we'd lost the idea of history along with the thing itself.

In the other worlds where I've spent time, the flow and pace of life is very different. If there were days in the land of the fair folk, one day there could be a year or more here; if there were days in the Dark Land and years in Faerie, one day in the Dark Land could be a year or more there.

You have such wonderful ways of keeping track of time that I can guess, within a hundred years or so, how long I was away from your world the second time I was taken out of it, but I'm not exactly sure how much time went by for me.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that if memories were merely something to be counted and added up, I'd probably be entitled to think of myself as sixteen, going on seventeen.

If quality counted as well as quantity, I'd be prepared to believe myself a good deal older than the average boy my age, but I guess I'm not alone in thinking my own experience unusually rich and varied. By your standards, it might seem absurdly narrow, given that so much of it was spent in slow and stagnant worlds, where the hectic pace of yours would have been unimaginable.

I couldn't have figured out your world in a hundred years, if I hadn't had magic to help, but one of the benefits of being away so long is that you come back fully charged with potential. I write your hideously complicated language like a native, don't I?

Well, perhaps not exactly like a native, but hopefully well enough to make myself clear.

At sixteen, I'm the same biological age as someone born in 1989. While I was with the fair folk for the second time, though—especially while I was in the Dark Land—more than fourteen hundred years went by in this one: a century, or thereabouts, for every year I spent in Arthur's kingdom of the Britons. I don't know for sure how long I was with the fair folk as a changeling, so even with the aid of history I can't tell which century I was born in, let alone what year, but it was probably a little while after the year that you'd call 500 A.D.

We wouldn't have called it 500 A.D., of course. When we numbered our years we counted from something people could remember. The nuns who raised me were Christians but they didn't have any idea when Christ had been born. Like everybody else in the neighborhood, the Sisters of Saint Syncletica thought of the year I was laid on their doorstep as the fifth year of Arthur's reign as King of the Britons, and the year when Merlin took me for his apprentice was the sixteenth.

They didn't know any better. They didn't even know that they were ignorant. Most of the people I knew, especially Merlin and Mother Leocadia, would have been appalled if anyone had told them that they were living in the "Dark Ages". Mother Leocadia couldn't read, and Merlin never wrote a book, but neither of them thought that their dependence on legend was a bad thing, or that writing could possibly be the basis of an "Age of Enlightenment".

I can see why you think differently, though. That's one of the reasons why I'm taking the trouble to write my story down. I wouldn't want it to be lost. It's not the main reason, though. The main reason is that I got hooked on story-telling while I lived in Cokayne.

The fair folk loved to listen to my tales of Arthur, Merlin and the knights of the round table, and I became fond of telling those tales. I was an accomplished liar then, so I made a lot of them up, but I don't have to do that any more. The truth is more than strange enough to amaze and amuse a modern audience.

Maybe writing it all down will help me to figure it out a little bit better and help me decide exactly what I'm going to do with my life now that I'm here, but anything of that sort will be a bonus. My first purpose is to let you in on the secret of what really went on in Camelot, and how it came to fall and vanish. It's a story that only I can tell, not merely because I happen to be the sole survivor of those distant times, but because I was the only person, even at the time, who knew the whole story.

Well, maybe not the whole story. A lot happened after I left, and Lancelot didn't take the trouble to fill me in on a lot of the details when he came to Cokaygne to kill me, twenty years later. Also, a lot happened before I ever got to Camelot, and I have to admit that Merlin wasn't the best teacher in the world when it came to matters of newsworthy detail. Then again, I could only be in one place at a time while I was actually living in Camelot as Merlin's spy, and the gossip to which I listened so carefully wasn't always completely reliable. Even so, there are things I know about the fall of Camelot that no one else knew, even at the time—things that are vital to an accurate understanding of the collapse of Merlin's dream.

So, even if I don't know the whole story, I know enough to know that without hearing my story, no one else could possibly know the half of it—certainly not Thomas Malory, so-called knight, or Chrétien de Troyes, cleric for hire, who had to rely on sources that were very unreliable indeed.

There's a lot that even I have to guess, but I trust my guesses far more than anyone else's, because I was actually there.

You'll be interested in my story, I know. My world was the stuff of legend then, and it still is—which makes it even more familiar to you, in a funny sort of way, than the worlds before and after it, which are far better illuminated by history. You still know enough about it to get a grip on it, even though everything you know seems unreliable because nothing was written down at the time.

The images you have of them might be mistaken, but Arthur, Merlin and Lancelot are all familiar to you, in a far more intimate way than any of the victorious vandals who tore Camelot down and scattered its stones, or any of the petty kings who reigned in Arthur's wake, and in his stead.

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Before I start my story, though, I'd like to introduce myself a little more fully. If you're to understand my viewpoint as well as my tale, you need to understand what a strange fellow I am.

Try to imagine, if you will, how different my situation is from yours. I was a creature of three worlds before I arrived in yours; now I'm a creature of four.

Legend, however badly corrupted it may have been in the intervening fourteen or fifteen hundred years, still provides you with an approximate insight into my world—a way of stepping into my shoes, to see Camelot as I saw it, and understand Camelot as I understood it. You have a little knowledge of the world of Faerie too, and will understand easily enough what I have to tell you about the land of Cokaygne. The Dark Land is a slightly different matter, but, like my master Merlin, you know the myth of Orpheus, and you have a wealth of literature that deals with strange worlds.

I had no such resources when I was hurled into your world: nothing at all to prepare me for what I found.

Even Merlin, who fancied himself as a prophet and had the kind of second sight that could discern something in the mists of the future, never had the least inkling of the kinds of magic you take for granted.

Not that he'd have admitted it, of course. If Merlin were here instead of me—and what a conspiracy of chance and choice it was that gave the opportunity to me, his stupid apprentice, and not to him!—he wouldn't admit that it's more than he could ever have imagined. When he visits as a ghost, in fact, he boasts that this is exactly the world he wanted to build, with not a single feature that he wouldn't have included in his plans—not even atom bombs and global warming.

His ghost is a liar, though. Merlin made plans of Camelot for the stonecutters and their laborers, and he sketched the round table for the carpenters and joiners, but he never made a plan of anything like this—and not just because we had no paper then, and parchment was too expensive even for a king's magician to waste.

Merlin imagined himself the architect of the world that would emerge from Camelot, but even if he had succeeded in his dream, he couldn't have begun to imagine the twenty-first century. He would have

loved every one of the miracles that I love—baked potatoes, flush toilets, widescreen TV, pale blue plastic buckets, soluble aspirin, ornamental fountains, left-handed screwdrivers, privet hedges, Sainsbury's supermarkets, and so on—but he couldn't have foreseen any one of them, any more than I could. His ghost gives that away, every time he loses his temper and shouts at me, as he used to when he was alive, calling me “stupid fool!” or “wretched changeling!” and telling me that “if I still had magic to waste, I'd turn you into a toad!”

He still repeats all his old catch phrases, even though he's been dead for fourteen hundred years. He never visits anyone but me; Tom Rhymer came into the Dark Land with me, but Tom didn't come out with the ability to see ghosts.

“Every man may know his future,” Merlin used to say, when I asked him whether he was sure that I really was a rejected changeling—and why, if so, I had been thrown out of Faerie instead of being allowed to grow up there. And then he'd add: “but none may know his past.”

At the time, I used to think that it was a rebuff: a cruel refusal to give me a straight answer. I know better now. Merlin meant that I ought not to waste my time in thinking about a past I couldn't remember and couldn't understand. He meant that I ought to look forward instead of back, to consider what I ought to make of myself rather than what accidents of past happenstance had given to me in the way of a bad beginning.

I suppose, in a way, I'm still ignoring that advice. Writing my story, in Merlin's eyes, would be looking back instead of looking forward, turning my back on the wild and wonderful world of modern magic instead of hurling myself wholeheartedly into it.

I don't think so. I think writing my story is a way of hurling myself into the modern world. After all, it's not as if I'm using a quill pen, or scratching away on ragged parchment. What could be more wonderful than typing? And what could be more wildly wonderful than typing into a computer? All stories happen in the past, but all tellings are addressed to the future.

It's not the boy who scurried like a busy rat through the walls of Camelot who's writing these pages but a creature of four worlds—including yours. I couldn't tell the story properly if I weren't.

I can see, now that I've spent time in your world and learned the meaning of the word psychology, that Merlin's saying wasn't just advice. It wasn't just something he used to say to me, when I pestered him about my dubious origins. It was something he used to say to himself, as a spur to his own ambitions and a vital item of his faith.

He was an old man when I knew him, and one of the things he meant by “every man may know his future” is that we all know that we'll grow increasingly decrepit with age, unless or until death arrives to claim us, and that we must make our plans accordingly. He meant, too, that no matter how young or old we are, we still have influence to wield over the shape that the future will take—not merely our own future, but the future of others, and the future of the world. He meant that every action we take is a cause, whose effects might be small or large, negligible or infinite, good or bad.

As for “but none may know his past”—well, he too had been with the fair folk, and had been disconnected from the flow of this world's time in consequence, but that wasn't what he meant at all. He meant that the forces that make us what we are, to start with, are a complete mystery: a mystery hidden in the forgotten events of infancy and the dabbings of one's ancestors. And so they are—even for you, who have history, archaeology and genetics as well as legend to tell you where you came from, and how.

I didn't know that then. I never made the kind of reply to my master that might have convinced him that I wasn't such a stupid fool, or a wretched changeling, or a toad in human form, as he thought me to be.

All I could say for myself, then, was: “If I'm a changeling, why did the fair folk throw me back? What was wrong with me, that they should repent of having stolen me?”

I didn't say it in English, of course, and I admit that my translation is very free, but I'm a writer now, in a world that has paper and ink in glorious abundance, and fabulous machinery to facilitate its distribution. I hope you'll forgive me for needing to make the boy I used to be—who couldn't read, although he wasn't as stupid as he seemed—sound more articulate than he knew how to be.

Sometimes, when he was in a particularly good mood, Merlin would condescend to admit that he simply didn't know the answers to my questions.

“When I first saw you,” he told me, once, “I could feel the magic in you, although you could not feel it in yourself and let it ebb away unused—but that is not proof that you were stolen from your crib by the fair folk. None has been seen in these parts for eleven summers now, as much to my relief as my regret, but the flight of years is nothing to them, who do not age as we age, nor mature as we mature. You might only

have been touched as you lay on your sleeping mother's breast by some passing elf, moved to a moment's curiosity."

"But I wasn't at my mother's breast for long," I reminded him. "Whether I went by way of Faerie or not, I was with the Sisters of Saint Syncletica before I was weaned—and what you felt as magic, Mother Leocadia perceived as sin."

I had no memory of the first time Merlin had come to see me, although he told me on the second occasion that he had come before. It seemed to me then that it might have been Merlin's interest that set the sisters against me, for they lacked the kind of sensation that would have allowed them to feel magic in me, but I dared not say so to him. I dared not say: "You should have taken me with you when you first saw me rather than leave me to play the devil's child in a nunnery for nine long years." That would have seemed ungrateful, and he was not a man to tolerate much in the way of ingratitude.

He might have guessed what I left unsaid, though, for what he said in reply to my remark was: "If Mother Leocadia saw sin in you, sin there was and is. I do not care about that. Your slyness is useful to me, as long as you are careful to lie, spy and steal on my behalf. If Mother Leocadia had told me that you had become a virtuous child, fit only for the church, I would have rejected you myself."

How much truth was there in that, I wonder? At the time, I assumed that Merlin had taken me for an apprentice because of the magic he had felt in me when I was a baby—magic that had left its imprint on me, even though I had never knowingly worked a spell or cast a curse.

Now... I don't know.

If Merlin hadn't come to see me in the convent soon after my abandonment there, drawn by rumors of my changeling nature, then he certainly wouldn't have come to see me thrice more, or summoned me to Camelot to be his servant—but the magic that had once been in me might have had nothing to do with it. I might simply have been a convenient age, and free of any potentially inconvenient family ties. Perhaps he really did want to replace honest Harl, his former apprentice, with a more sinful boy, who would take to eavesdropping like a duck to water, and spread rumors very cleverly, without ever suffering the least pang of conscience.

If it hadn't been for me, Merlin would have been lost. His legs had grown weak, and without stronger legs the secret passages he had inscribed in the plans of Camelot's four towers would have been almost useless to him. Anyone could have fetched his meals from the kitchen and carried his slops to the cesspit, but he needed someone to serve as his eyes and ears who could walk without making a sound, remain motionless for hours on end, and draw true inferences from surreptitious glances and hasty mutterings.

If it hadn't been for my careful observations, Merlin might never have known that everything he held dear was imperiled by Guinevere's affection for Lancelot—and if it hadn't been for my cunning as a messenger, he might not have been able to place as many obstacles in the way of their affair as he contrived to do. The dream of Camelot might then have died long before I killed it with my carelessness.

Had I not been so preoccupied with my own mystery, I might have played an even greater part in his schemes than I did—but I hadn't learned to look forward instead of back. I couldn't forgive Mother Leocadia for what I saw as persecution—and if the cause of that persecution was my expulsion from the land of the fair folk, after one of them had taken the trouble to steal me, I couldn't forgive that either.

I yearned to know the truth. I burned to know the truth. What a stupid fool I was!

I know the truth now. Yes, I had been a changeling, stolen from my crib on the instructions of Morgana, whom Merlin called Morgana le Fay. Yes, I had been returned to the world far sooner than the majority of my kind. No, it wasn't my fault. I hadn't been tried and found wanting; I was merely a pawn in a scheme, plucked at random from the world.

I know all that, now—and I know, too, that if I had known it then, I might have acted very differently when Morgana came to Camelot. But if I had been more content as a child, or as Merlin's apprentice, I wouldn't be here now. I wouldn't be able to tell you the bare bones of my story, let alone to employ the insight of four worlds to the task of putting flesh on the bones.

If I hadn't been such a stupid, spiteful and ungrateful fool then, I wouldn't be such a knowledgeable, thoughtful and magically wise fool now. And that's the kind of fool this story needs, as a teller and a hero.