

The Chicken of Doom Saves the Day

by Sarah Todd Taylor

(based on characters in her book *Arthur and Me*)

illustrations by Peter Stevenson

taken from *Arthur and Me*

One night in Castle Camelot the knights of King Arthur's Round Table gathered in the Great Hall to discuss weighty affairs of great note to the Kingdom.

'First things first,' Cei said, taking a swig from a large tankard and belching loudly. 'This chicken business.'

Lancelot rolled his eyes. It was so humiliating. Merlin, the mighty wizard, was terrified of a chicken that roamed the Castle grounds, attacking him every time it saw him.

'Merlin thinks it has some sort of magical powers,' Gawain said. 'He thinks it could be the spirit of a dragon!'

Bedevere howled with laughter. 'A dragon??' he chortled. 'That's the best joke I've heard in a week.'

'He just said that because he's embarrassed to be scared of a chicken,' Cei said.

Lancelot grinned. He was beginning to have one of his ideas.

'It's Merlin's birthday tomorrow, isn't it,' he said.



The knights nodded. A great party was planned for Merlin's birthday. Presents had been bought and Camelot's bard was writing a new song to celebrate the occasion, but one thing still needed to be arranged.

Every year the knights would play a trick on Merlin on his birthday. Last year they filled a pig's bladder with air and put it under his seat cushion so it made a loud farting noise when he sat on it. The year before they put ink round his hat brim. The year before that they drilled a tiny hole in the bottom of his cauldron so it would never be full.

'We're never going to beat the pig's bladder,' said Cei.

Lancelot shook his head. 'I wouldn't be so sure about that,' he said, and he told them his plan.

Meanwhile, out in the woods surrounding Camelot, another group was also planning a surprise. Deep in one of the darkest glades, the dreadful bandits under the watch of Bandit Pete was plotting to invade the castle.

'They'll all be far too busy tomorrow, preparing a party for that idiot wizard,' Bandit Pete said. 'We'll easily creep into the castle and before they know we're even there we'll have made off with all the gold we can carry!'

Bandit Al stroked his long braided beard, hung with mouse skulls, and chortled to himself. 'It'll serve them right for not inviting us,' he joked. 'Very rude not to invite your local bandits, it is.'

'A dreadful faux pas,' said Bandit Colin, who had stolen all the French books from the town library only the week before. 'It means it's rude,' he hissed to Bandit Al.

Bandit Pete drew a map on the rough ground with his cane. 'This is the main gate,' he said, striking an 'X' into the soil. 'As you see, it won't be very well guarded,' he sneered, pointing to a snail that was creeping towards one of the points of the X. The other bandits laughed loudly. It wasn't a very funny joke but if Bandit Pete made a joke it was always safer to laugh. If you wanted to hang onto all your limbs, that is.

'We can easily overpower the guards at the gate,' Bandit Pete went on, flicking the

snail into the undergrowth where it righted itself and shuffled off indignantly.

‘Then what?’ asked Bandit Mick before he could stop himself. Bandit Pete did not like being interrupted.

All the other bandits took a step backwards, but Bandit Pete was too engrossed in his plans to notice Bandit Mick.

‘Then,’ he said, stabbing his cane into the circle on the ground that represented Camelot’s great jewel tower, ‘we head for the gold.’

‘What about Arthur?’ Bandit Colin asked.

Bandit Pete curled his lip into a snarl. ‘He’ll be very comfortable in the dungeons, I’m sure,’ he said, ‘while I sit on his throne!’



The next evening all the knights met in Lancelot’s chamber in the West Wing of the castle. It was one of the most luxurious apartments in Camelot, with a huge wardrobe for all of Lancelot’s clothes. The knights looked a little different this evening. Each of them was dressed like a giant chicken. Lancelot’s costume was splendid. He had silk wings that fluttered as he moved his arms, and on his head was a glossy red velvet comb that flicked from side to side when he walked.

Bedevere’s costume actually looked like a chicken. He had coated his armour in mud and rolled around in the henhouse till he was covered in feathers. None of the other knights would stand near him because of the smell.

Gawain had strapped feather cushions to his arms and had a duster as a tail.

Cei looked like a budgie.

‘Well it’s not what I hoped for,’ said Lancelot, ‘but I suppose if we stick to the darker corridors it could be quite effective. Now you all know where you’re going, don’t you?’

The knights nodded.

‘I’m in the kitchen, aren’t I?’ said Bedevere, thinking of the cake that was being baked for Merlin’s party.

‘I thought I was in the kitchen,’ said Cei. ‘You’re in the Jewel Tower.’

‘No, I’m in the Jewel Tower,’ said Gawain.

Lancelot sighed and rolled his eyes. ‘Right! Let’s go through it once more. Merlin starts his walk in the Jewel Tower, locking it up for the night. That’s where I’ll be, ready to surprise him. Then he goes to the kitchen for a snack, and tonight he’ll be checking up to see whether we’ve remembered to get him a cake. Gawain, you’ll be by the kitchen door, Then he’ll head for the Bard’s chambers because they always have a chat in the evening and Merlin will probably want to find out whether we’ve written him a good song this year. Bedevere, that’s where you’ll be hidden. Then he’ll go to the Throne Room to see Arthur, so Cei, make sure you’re on the corner ready to leap out. All clear? Don’t forget to cluck as loudly as you can.’ Lancelot demonstrated with a deafening ‘SQUARK!!!!’ before falling into fits of helpless laughter.

‘Oh he’ll be frightened out of his wits!’ he guffawed. ‘He’ll think the chicken is really out to get him!’

‘This is going to be the best Merlin Birthday Joke ever!’ said Cei, and the knights bustled off to get into position.

Outside, in the castle courtyard, Bandit Mick was tying up the gate guards.

‘And the squirrel goes round the tree...’ he muttered as he wound the knot.

‘Shhhh, you idiot!’ hissed Bandit Pete.

‘It’s how I remember it,’ Bandit Mick whispered, looking hurt and forgetting to

tuck the rope in properly and give it one last tug. The gate guards were looking very miserable. Bandit Colin, dressed as an old lady, had pretended to be their granny with some warm cakes for them, and they had let him, and the other bandits, into the castle.

‘Now what?’ Bandit Colin asked, wiggling his way out of the dress and bloomers.

Bandit Pete pointed towards the central tower of the castle.

‘Once we’re inside we split up,’ he said. ‘Bandit Mick, you go to the jewel room, take all the jewels you can and don’t forget the crown. Bandit Al, you go to the kitchen and get us some grub and some wine. We’ll be celebrating later. Bandit Colin, you go and wake the Bard up so we can have a good party. I’ll meet you all in the throne room and we will show Arthur who’s the real king around here!’

Bandit Mick crept up the stairs that led to Camelot’s great throne room. It was very dark and the torches in the walls threw strange shadows on him as he wound his way up and up the spiral staircase. As he climbed higher and higher he got more and more nervous. He was sure that he saw something at the top. Something with a sharp beak and feathered wings lurking in the shadows. When he reached the last stair he peered down the corridor.

‘Is ... is there anyone there?’ he whispered, trembling.

SQUARK!!!!!!

Lancelot leapt out in front of him, waving his huge chicken wings up and down. They cast huge and frightening shapes on the walls and the torchlight flashed off Lancelot’s armour like lightning. Bandit Mick gave a loud shriek of terror and tumbled backwards down the stairs, leaving Lancelot at the top, leaning against a wall and howling with laughter.

Bandit Al sneaked towards the door of the kitchen, hoping that his stomach wasn't rumbling too loudly. His nose was tormented by the delicious smell of Merlin's great birthday feast, and he hadn't had his tea. Inside he could glimpse the great fire with whole pigs roasting over it. He crept closer, his mouth watering.

SQUARK!!!!!!

Gawain threw himself at Bandit Al, clucking wildly and beating him back from the door with his cushion wings. The great fire roared behind him, the flames licking the roof of the kitchen. One of the cushions burst, showering them both with feathers. Bandit Al squealed with alarm and ran away up the steps.

Up in the west tower, Bandit Colin tiptoed nimbly down the corridor that led to the Bard's room, wondering what that terrible noise was. The walls echoed with a terrible wailing sound like a cat having its tail stood on. Bandit Colin reached for his dagger, sure that some dreadful creature must be waiting to pounce upon him. As he neared the Bard's chamber the noise grew louder. Camelot's Bard did NOT have a very good voice.

Bandit Colin put away his dagger and stuck his fingers in his ears. Then he immediately took them out and stuck his hands over his nose instead. The corridor was full of the most dreadful stink he had ever smelled. It made him feel quite ill.

SQUARK!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bedevere lumbered out from the shadows and stomped his feet at Bandit Colin. With every stomp the stink got stronger. Bandit Colin waved a hand in front of his face and backed away.

'The smell!' he cried. 'What on earth is that terrible smell!!' Bedevere took one

step closer and Bandit Colin let out one final 'Eurghhhhh', turned and ran away down the corridor. Bedevere sniffed the air.

'I don't know what everyone's making a fuss about,' he said.

Bandit Pete stood outside the throne room, rubbing his hands with glee. It was all going so well. By now Bandit Mick would have his hands on the crown and all the jewels and gold of the kingdom. Bandit Al would have a feast ready for them, and Bandit Colin would have persuaded the Bard to sing a song in his honour. Soon he would be King. He reached out for the handle of the throne room door.

SQUARK!!!!!!

Cei stumbled out from behind a stone column and ran towards Bandit Pete. The shoes of his armour clattered against the stone floor, echoing round the small corridor so that it sounded like thunder, growing louder and louder. Bandit Pete froze. Something huge and terrible was descending on him. The noise grew deafening. Bandit Pete let go of huge throne room door - and ran.

Outside on the hill overlooking the castle the bandits gathered, out of breath from running and still shaking from the terrible things they had seen.

'An eagle, with lightening flashing from its talons,' cried Bandit Mick.

'No, it was a dragon, rising from the flames,' said Bandit Al.

'I smelt it before I saw it,' said Bandit Colin. 'A creature from the most disgusting pit, I have no doubt.'

They all looked at Bandit Pete. If their brave leader had also been scared, then surely he had seen the most terrible creature of all.

'Well,' he admitted, 'it looked like a budgie to me.'

In the throne room, Merlin and Arthur were sharing a warm cup of mead before the great birthday feast began.

‘Thank you for letting me join you,’ Merlin said. ‘It was much nicer than going on my usual walk round the castle.’

Arthur grinned. ‘That’s all right,’ he said, ‘can’t have you poking your nose into too much tonight - you might find some of the surprises we have planned for your birthday party.’

Outside on the battlements the chicken that hated Merlin strutted about, clucking and grumbling. It poked its head through the window of the Throne Room and squarked loudly at Merlin. He hissed it away.

‘Dreadful creature,’ he muttered.

Arthur looked at the great Chicken of Doom, silhouetted on the castle wall against the glowing full moon.

‘Oh don’t be silly,’ he said. ‘Who on earth could be scared by a chicken.’

