

Merlin—The Tall, Yet Sinking Tower

*Based on an Arthurian Legend
Original Script by Joan Garner*

—BACKGROUND INFORMATION
(*genre classification and other data deemed useful*)

Undoubtedly the most famous of wizards, Merlin the Magician's roots gnarl deep into the Arthurian legend. Yet the story of Merlin begins before Arthur, and it's suggested Merlin founded the legend itself.

Merlin contributes mightily to the magic, enchantment, and supernatural slant of the saga. If Arthur is the might and right, Merlin is the mastermind behind it all. And where several historic figures make the composite known as Arthur, so is Merlin an amalgamation of people and supposed events—most notably Myrddin the Wild, a Welch bard who turned into a mad hermit.

Merlin ventures in and out of the many Arthurian stories, and it seems events either go right because he's there dispensing wisdom and magic, or wrong because he's not. Like many characters of the legend, Merlin projects a bevy of diversified personalities from an amused and wily wizard to a cantankerous curmudgeon to a wise adviser and to something of an absentminded professor.

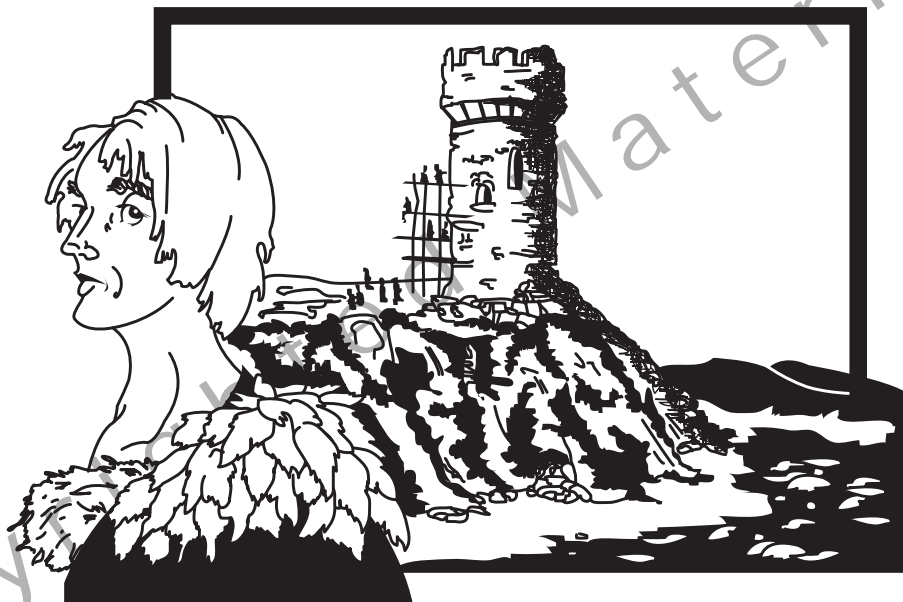
And as noted in David Days', *THE SEARCH FOR KING ARTHUR*, Merlin the Magician continues to materialize in more current narratives. For

example, Merlin serves as the model for J.R.R. Tolkien's Gandalf in *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, and George Lukas' Obi-wan Konobe in the movie *STAR WARS*.

Merlin's wizardly powers change from telling to telling, but his greatest abilities include prophesying, time travel, and spellbinding. In that regard, the intrigue that surrounds Merlin the Magician should endure throughout the ages.

— SYNOPSIS OF STORY

(6th Century England) *This story highlights Merlin in his youth. One of the first accountings tells of Merlin's encounter with King Vortigan whose first intention is to kill the apprentice magician. (Vortigan is trying to build a castle supporting a tall tower he believes will protect him when enemies come calling. But, no matter how many times the king builds his tower, it keeps sinking in the ground and falling down. To fortify the tower, his Soothsayer suggests mixing the building mortar with the blood of one born of a human mother, but without an earthly father.) This would be Merlin. However, being something of a prophet and thus knowing what's going on and what will happen, Merlin uses this knowledge to convenience the king to spare his life. This early story establishes Merlin's mystical aura.*



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STAGING SUGGESTIONS AND HELPFUL HINTS

—GLOSSARY

(terms possibly unfamiliar to reader)

ABUTMENTS—An architectural structure that supports the weight and pressure of an arch.

ALLEGIANCE—Loyalty or the obligation to a sovereign (king, queen, royalty).

LACKEY—A servant and follower.

PERCEPTION—Insight. Recognizing a situation.

PREPOSTEROUS—Not possible. Beyond reason.

WANING—A gradual decrease in amount or degree such as enthusiasm or support for something.

— CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

MASTER ARCHITECT: (Male) A competent and confident professional though frightened of his fate knowing what has happened to his predecessors.

KING VORTIGAN: (Male) A selfish and domineering king focused only on his wants and wishes. Droll and sarcastic in personality.

SOOTHSAYER: (Male) No more a soothsayer than the rest of us, this fellow does his best to convince everyone he knows his craft.

WELT: (Male) A common peasant of common sense and humble deed—maybe a little scraggly.

NIMUE: (Female) Merlin's future love is a prisoner here; beautiful in face and gentle in spirit.

REDMOND: (Male) A brave and honorable knight.

MERLIN: A quiet presence, **MERLIN** knows he's superior to all, but always extends an effort not to be especially arrogant.

— PRESENTATION SUGGESTIONS

(6th Century English Clothing and Items)

COSTUMES

MASTER ARCHITECT—Square cap. Worn tunic with fancy belt. Tights or stockings.

KING VORTIGAN—Crown. Armor and cape.

SOOTHSAYER—Coif cap. Long cloak with hood over long tunic and tights or stockings.

WELT—Short tunic with rope belt. Tights.

NIMUE—Veil. Long bliaut of any color. Tights.

REDMOND—Helmet and long mail tunic. Tights.

MERLIN—A long, ragged cloak decorated with shredded strips of cloth. Short tunic with fancy belt. Tights or stockings.

PROPS

SMALL TABLE—standing in front of the **MASTER ARCHITECT**.

PARCHMENT PAPERS AND SCROLL—Parchment-like papers with castle blueprints drawn on them.

SOUND EFFECTS

Hammer and saws banging about behind the audience. Clanging items in a box. When the tower supposedly falls, roll the box with the objects across the floor behind the audience.

STAGING

Movement of these **PLAYERS** isn't vital, but keeping **MERLIN** offstage until his entrance will help build his mysterious aura.

STAGING

STAGE RIGHT

STAGE LEFT



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SCRIPT

SETTING

An open field in England. 6th Century.

(KING VORTIGAN and the MASTER ARCHITECT stand behind a small TABLE. SCROLLS lie on the TABLE. The MASTER ARCHITECT holds open a SCROLL while KING VORTIGAN looks on. The SOOTH-SAYER, WELT and NIMUE stand off to the side and listen.)

* SOUND EFFECTS

Construction noises up and behind the audience. Noises start loudly and then lessen when the dialogue begins.

(The MASTER ARCHITECT points to the SCROLL.)

MASTER ARCHITECT

I have had prime timbers set in the corners of the foundation here and here.

KING VORTIGAN

And this will hold the tower this time?

MASTER ARCHITECT

It should, Your Majesty.

VORTIGAN

Mm... The Master Architect before you assured me the abutments would hold and that tower fell. And the Master Architect before him assured me the stone cast foundation would hold and *that* tower fell. My faith in Master Architects is waning.

MASTER ARCHITECT *(Pointing outward.)*

But you can see for yourself, Sire, the tower is the highest it's ever been. The timbers have succeeded where the other building ideas have not.

VORTIGAN

They had better succeed. I'm beginning to lose my patience with Master Architects.

WELT *(Aside to NIMUE.)*

"Beginning to lose his patience." As if King Vortigan had any patience.

SOOTHSAYER

Hold your tongue, Welt. Hold your tongue or lose it should King Vortigan hear you.

WELT

I'm a nothing, Soothsayer. What I say or do won't stop the sun from rising or the oceans from ebbing.

SOOTHSAYER

True enough. On the other hand, I *am* the king's soothsayer. If this Master Architect should fail like the others, Vortigan will come to me for answers.

WELT

And if you haven't any, it will be *your* head.

SOOTHSAYER

I haven't kept away from the chopping block all these years by being stupid, Welt. Expecting this very thing, I've placed a plan into action. You'll see in due time.

NIMUE

I don't see how anyone can keep their head around that tyrant. You—me—anyone.

SOOTHSAYER

Nimue, King Vortigan holds you hostage to keep your father's loyalty. He fears Lord Ardente will turn and join Prince Uther like so many others have. More and more are marching behind Prince Uther against Vortigan. Why do you think he's trying to build the tallest tower on the highest rocky hill in the country? He wants to protect himself from his enemies.

NIMUE

They're building a castle for a coward.

SOOTHSAYER

Yes, but he *is* the king and has the power and military to enforce his will. Although Vortigan demands your father's allegiance, Nimue, he has no obligation towards you. Pawns are easily eliminated, so I recommend you stay in the shadows. Should you come to the king's attention again, who knows what he'll do to you.

VORTIGAN *(Stilling reviewing the SCROLLS.)*

I see what you've done here. Still, what makes you believe your approach will work when the others have failed?

MASTER ARCHITECT

Your Majesty, with the utmost respect, I can merely look at the previously tried and advise alternatives.

VORTIGAN

Then advise alternatives....

MASTER ARCHITECT

I've seen what hasn't worked. All the methods used should have built you a perfectly fine castle tower. I don't know why the foundations didn't work before. If these special timbers fail, I'm at a loss.

VORTIGAN

If they fail, you'll be at a loss all right—the loss of your head.

*** SOUND EFFECTS**

A tremendous crashing of things in the distance.

VORTIGAN (*Looking out and smoldering.*)

How many times? How many times before someone gets it right? Soothsayer!

SOOTHSAYER

Yes, Your Majesty?

VORTIGAN

What's going on here? Why does the tower keep toppling over?

SOOTHSAYER

Your Majesty, as your soothsayer I haven't the power to tell you why things happen, just the power to tell you what things *will* happen.

VORTIGAN

Then what good are you to me? I think maybe your head should come off, too. I'm so mad—I must sever somebody's head!

SOOTHSAYER (*Trying to save his neck.*)

However, I think I might know why the tower keeps falling. It's the matter of the mortar.

VORTIGAN

Mortar? It's the same mortar I've used to build my other castles.

SOOTHSAYER

Yes, Your Majesty. But in this particular case—since you're not having much luck with it here—might I suggest a stronger if not unusual mixture.

WELT (*Aside to NIMUE.*)

Ah, here he goes. That head of his will be off his shoulders shortly. Listen to this....

SOOTHSAYER

I hear-tell that a mixture of lime, sand, water and blood is the strongest mortar anyone can make.

VORTIGAN

Blood? Whose blood?

SOOTHSAYER

It must be the blood of a man born not of an earthly father.

VORTIGAN

Not an earthly father? What nonsense.

MASTER ARCHITECT

Utterly preposterous.

SOOTHSAYER

This knowledge is part of my craft, Your Majesty. You asked me how to build a tower that wouldn't fall down and I offered my suggestion.

VORTIGAN

Say we were willing to try this special mortar of yours. Where do we find such a person?

SOOTHSAYER

Sensing you might be keen to my proposal, I took the liberty of sending Redmond to fetch a particular youth. They should be here any....

(REDMOND enters from stage left with MERLIN. They cross center stage.)

REDMOND

Soothsayer, here is the lad as you requested.

VORTIGAN

And who is this young man?

MERLIN

My name is Merlin. How may I serve you?

VORTIGAN

You may serve me by donating your blood—all of it, actually.

MERLIN (*Staying calm.*)

I see. Although I'm prepared to give my king my all—which is obviously the case here—I believe I can serve His Majesty better should he deem it charitable to keep me alive.

VORTIGAN

How can you serve me?

MERLIN

Redmond has explained you're having problems building your castle on the rocky butte over there.

(MERLIN points out over the audience.)

VORTIGAN

As you can plainly see by all the broken stone scattered about.

MERLIN

And I assume many have suggested how to build your tower, but no one has said why it keeps falling down.

VORTIGAN

How did you know that?

MERLIN

I'm known by some as a prophet.

REDMOND

He also claims to be a child, though he looks older.

MERLIN

I live backwards and forwards. I can move from one time to another. I measure my age differently than you, and I can look whatever age I wish at whatever time I desire.

NIMUE

You're a wizard.

MERLIN

Among other things, lovely lady.

VORTIGAN (*Studying MERLIN.*)

Your mother was human?

MERLIN

Yes, Your Majesty.

SOOTHSAYER

—And his father was a demon living between the moon and the earth?

MERLIN

Correct, sir.

VORTIGAN

Mm—must be rather unpleasant.

MERLIN

To be honest, it hasn't posed that much of a problem until now.

MASTER ARCHITECT

Son, you said you know why the tower continues to fall. Tell us why.

MERLIN

You constructed a sturdy enough castle, Master Architect. The trouble is the ground under it.

REDMOND

But it's built on solid rock.

MERLIN

Rock, yes. Solid, no. Below is a vast cavern hosting a deep pool. Drain the pool and you'll find two hollow stones that rumble within the pool.

VORTIGAN

So the earth shakes and the tower comes down.

MASTER ARCHITECT

Preposterous.

MERLIN

You asked.

VORTIGAN (*To the MASTER ARCHITECT.*)

Where's *your* explanation, Architect? (*To MERLIN.*) Why should I believe you, boy?

MERLIN

Why would I lie?

VORTIGAN

Oh, I don't know—to save your neck? Rest assured, if I'm not convinced of your word, I'll slit your throat soon enough.

NIMUE

How free you are with threatening to harm everyone not in your favor.

VORTIGAN

You say another word, and it's back into the shackles for you, Nimue.

NIMUE

I'm not afraid of you. You're just keeping me to make sure my father does your bidding.

VORTIGAN

I'm king. What do you expect?

NIMUE

I expect a king to serve his people.

VORTIGAN

I fear your schooling misguided, precious Nimue. I expect my people to serve *me*. This is the primary principle of being a ruling monarch and one I hold close to my heart.

SOOTHSAYER

Enough of this. We're running out of time. Redmond, cut off the boy's head now.

REDMOND

Your Majesty?

VORTIGAN

No one commands beheading but me, soothsayer.

MERLIN

There's more you should know, King Vortigan. Inside the hollow stones are two dragons; one red and one white. The stones will soon burst apart and the dragons will emerge and immediately do battle.

REDMOND

King Vortigan, your heraldic crest is the white dragon. And Prince Uther's crest is the red dragon.

VORTIGAN

Does this fight of these dragons have anything to do with me and Uther?

MERLIN

His Majesty is a most perceptive man.

VORTIGAN

And who wins this battle, prophet?

MERLIN

The white dragon will finally get his tall tower, but I fear he'll perish in it.

VORTIGAN (*Thinking.*)

Mm... Well, I plan to prove you wrong.

MERLIN

Yes, Your Majesty. Please do.

SOOTHSAYER

Ridiculous. Redmond, kill this false prophet now!

REDMOND

Your Majesty, must I follow the orders of this pathetic soothsayer? After all, I'm a knight not a lackey.

VORTIGAN (*Hesitating.*)

Forget about the boy for now. I'm going to attack Uther before he attacks me—a surprise attack. (*To MERLIN.*) What do you think of that? How can your prophecy come true after that?

REDMOND

An excellent idea, Your Majesty.

VORTIGAN

Of course it's an excellent idea. I thought of it. We'll catch Uther at his own game—and the rest of my enemies. I'll kill them all before they kill me, and then there will be no need to build a tall tower for protection.

(*VORTIGAN exits stage left with REDMOND and the MASTER ARCHITECT.*)

WELT

You're a mighty brave fellow telling the king something like that.

NIMUE (*To MERLIN.*)

Is it true? Will Prince Uther kill King Vortigan?

MERLIN

There's nothing to fear, dear lady. King Vortigan will never return to this place.

WELT

Just how powerful a wizard are you, Merlin?

MERLIN

I still have much to learn. I hope in time I can use these powers of mine to help those around me.

NIMUE

I think you're going to be a great wizard, Merlin.

MERLIN

You humble me, dear lady.

SOOTHSAYER

What utter rubbish. He's no more a wizard than I am.

MERLIN

Sir, you impress me by admitting your own failings.

SOOTHSAYER

Be forewarned. I'm going to reveal you for the impostor you are.

(*The SOOTHSAYER storms out stage left.*)

WELT

You're threatening his job, you know.

NIMUE

Well, I for one look forward to seeing Merlin master his craft. I think I'll keep a keen eye on you with your permission.

MERLIN

With such a beautiful eye gazing my way, how can I not fulfill my destiny?

WELT

I'll remember your name, Merlin, for I believe Nimue is right. I have a feeling you'll be the most powerful wizard of all-time. People will write stories and sing of your deeds and magic through all eternity.

MERLIN

Then I'll strive to be worthy of all that is to come.

(*MERLIN, NIMUE, and WELT exit stage right.*)

END OF MERLIN—THE TALL, YET SINKING TOWER