

# **Questing the Beast**

*the bombastic autobiography of King Pellinore,  
King Arthur's oldest and grumpiest Knight*

## **Part One**

We are introduced, and it does not go well.

## Chapter I

### *Tell us about the Beast!*

I am upset. I do not like speaking to you. You do not like reading my words. And yet here we are.

It appears, to our mutual displeasure, that I am destined to froth up until the day you cease to resist, for the more I attempt to repair you and your wobbling, nay collapsing, civilization, the more futile I understand my effort to be, and simultaneously the greater the agony you feel at my barbs, for in them you recognize yourself, oh yes you do, my Squires, and you know how futile it is to deflect them, to deny them, and how, deep down and even shallow up, you know that one day, one glorious day, when you at last shall have changed, why then and only then will my pontifical work cease, the world will be in a better place, and you and I shall at last be done with each other, an inspiring parting to which we both aspire, do we not?

*{We do, Pellinore, indeed; to that parting we aspire. We long for nothing more than to learn from you our faults, our shortcomings, and our ignorances, such that despite our fervent desire to wish you into irrelevance as a relic, a pedant, a curmudgeon, a cynic, a downright unpleasant fellow, not to mention an over-punctuationalist with no self-restraint when it comes to allegories, multi-level symbolism, first-person-plural parentheticals, and run-on sentences which cause us, in spite of all your shortcomings and long goings, to stick by your linguistic side, and glean from you however begrudgingly and ill-temperedly, that which we know in the end will improve us*

*and our world but more blessedly allow us to be rid of you at last, so for that reason alone,  
Pellinore, yes, we do aspire to learn from you.}*

But it is not simply a matter of paying close attention to me, and, you know, passing a quiz, for your slothfulness is severe, your shortcomings endemic, your education lacking, and your ability to reason dormant, perhaps atrophied to the point of irresuscitation. In short, there is much work to be done. By you.

Just to be clear. I shall take no pleasure in this. I do not enjoy having to lecture at you. I don't really like you. Honestly, between you and me, I would be indifferent to your fate of ignorance except for the fact that until you have killed the Questing Beast, you are lodestoned to me and I to you. Here's the pact: Kill the Questing Beast, and I shall cease to haunt you.

*{Gladly! Show us the lair of the Questing Beast, give us the appropriate weapon, we shall kill it for you, and you may leave us alone.}*

Oh, my dear, eager Squires, first *you* must *find* the Beast. That is the whole point. You must discover yourself where the Beast lives. You have hidden Her, not I. You are not aware you have hidden Her. You are ignorant as to what She looks like. Are you not?

*{We are, Pellinore, we are ignorant. We are lost, lost without you! Show us the way!!!!}*

Well, now you're merely pandering.

*{True, Pellinore, you see through us. You are wise in all things!!!!}*

I am. But your flattery will cut you no corners. It is not a guessing game. At the moment, I truly do not know where the Beast is, and sadly it has fallen to you discover Her hiding place. It is you who must do the questing now. And I will thank you not to use quadruple exclamation marks. I may be hobbled, but I am not punctuationally deaf.

*{But we like exclamation marks!!!}*

They are not becoming.

*{You are depriving us of our emphasis!!}*

I am depriving you of your tendencies to exaggerate.

*{Do forgive us, Pellinore.}*

Aha. Well done. No exclamation marks at all. However, you shall have no forgiveness from me. That is not my role in your life. What you have done, you have done. I shall hope to lead you to understand why you make the decisions you do, and most importantly, why you will make different decisions henceforth. Would that I could spare you all the pages through which you about to slog, but alas, if you are to kill the Beast, read them all you must.

*{We actually do want to kill the Beast, Pellinore. You have intrigued us.}*

(Pause as Pellinore scrutinizes the above retort, looking for irony or sarcasm. But finding none, Pellinore continues.) You have at least heard of the Questing Beast?

*{A murmuring. Some of us have, some of us have not. But all of us have looked it up and can come to little consensus as to its meaning. Is it an actual beast, or a metaphor? We're confused. Can you give us a hint? Coordinates on a map, maybe? Do we need to buy guns? Some of us are very keen to buy guns and go out and shoot something.}*

No, no, it won't come to that. It's not about that.

*{More murmuring. You have suddenly lost nearly 90% of your followers, Pellinore. There are few of us left.}*

What if I allowed you metaphorical guns?

*{Then a metaphorical few more have returned to the fold. Tell us about the Beast! We have heard it has the head of a serpent, the body of a lion, the flank of a leopard, and the hooves of a Stag.}*

Not at first. When first I saw the Beast, she had a hold of my brother, Pellas. He was eleven, and I was nine. We were fishing. I turned my back for a brief moment, and the next thing I knew, I heard violent splashing sounds, and Pellas was shouting for help because he was drowning. Well, I say my back was turned, but actually I had waded to shore to fetch more worms or somesuch. Let me set the scene for you.

*{Set. Set. Pellinore, do set.}*

## Chapter II

*Hehmm...options, options....*

My brother and I often ventured to the river which ran to the south of us, the Lystwyth River. At this particular juncture, where it took a bend, it was shallow, narrow, and not very deep: happily, not very dangerous to two young boys. In the middle of the bend, there was a rise of the river bottom, so as to form a very small island, which we called "Ynysoedd," and pretended was much larger. "Ynysoedd" in our local language meant "island." Not very creative, admittedly, but I was *nine*. The island was nearly perfectly square, about four perch wide by four perch long. *Perch? Unfamiliar with that measurement, are you? Oh dear, such a long way to go.* A perch is about sixteen feet, so you see, not very big. The Lystwyth River wasn't more than two-and-a-half perch across at this point (forty feet), but that put the little island about a perch from either shore, so Pellas and I had to wade out to the island to fish. I was cautious when it came to water, but Pellas, ah, Pellas felt no fear. Loved it, in fact! He would spend hours and hours in water; happier in the water than on land, actually. My parents worried for him, sneaking away to the river as he did, at all hours of the night, in all seasons, where they would find him, up to his chin in raging spring waters, or up to his eyes in insect-riddled-barely-scudding summer stagnancies. Even in winter, no ice was too thick for Pellas to axe an hole in which to stand shivering in the frozen icy winter river. I suppose I should have worried along with my parents about Pellas, as well, but he was an intimidating eleven years old, and I thought nothing would ever harm him, which is why it was so surprising to hear him shouting for help.



You must now lower any expectation you have of me diving into the menacing current of the river and heroically snatching my brother by the hair or the ankles and flinging him triumphantly back atop the island. First of all, no flinger I, and secondly no menacing current it; mere meanderers, each. I came splashing back to him and saw that he had snared his foot somehow in the roots along the eastern edge of the island, and in trying to extricate himself, had ended up all betwisted, with his face smack down into the water. I tried pulling at him, but he was larger and beginning to panic, and I needed another option, quickly.

*Another option. Hehmm...options, options....*Hehmm, even by that early summer, I had already developed the time-consuming habit of listing *myriads* of possible options, and analyzing them carefully, before choosing a course of action, so I remember rambling through alternatives which included punching Pellas in the face to knock him out so that he would cease struggling, but would I be able to lift him, or did I need him to stay conscious and sort out whatever clench had hold of his foot? Could I dive down underneath him with a hunched back such that he could crawl atop me, and then, and then...mmm...perhaps he would weigh *me* down and both of us would end at the bottom of the river. Could I shout for help, even though we were a half a league from anyone who might hear us -- and who would that be, a doltish stable boy? What would he do, come a-racing upon a horse, and, then what, plash into the river skimble-skambly, risking bashing my brother on the head with his horse's hooves...although perhaps *then*, with Pellas no longer struggling, the doltish boy and I could get Pellas upon the back of the horse...oh, but that would presume that we could get the horse to kneel, else how would the boy and I be able to get Pellas's comatose body atop the -- *and et cetera et cetera fassa fassa fassa...running*

through options until poor Pellas was dead. *Pick an option, Pellinore! Stop the fassa fassa and do something!*

Noisy the inside of my head. Proclivity to bifurcate thoughts, and then bifurcate the bifurcations, and pursue each to its logical or illogical conclusion or inconclusion. Happily for me, my logical divaricating is as whizzy as quicksilver, and I can puzzle through many possible solutions before acting upon one. Unhappily for you, the description of my thoughts can be...let us say protracted.

I hit upon the (obvious) solution, which was to free Pellas's boot by diving down and tugging it free, perhaps by breaking the roots upon which it was caught. Now, the water in the Lystwyth River here tended towards the sluggish rather than the swift, and so was muddy rather than clear. Therefore, I could not see what was engaging Pellas's foot, but I could feel it. His foot was thrust through a loop of roots, and there was something wrapped around his ankle larger than the loop was wide, preventing him from pulling his foot back through. I broke the loop, and Pellas's foot came free. I wrapped my arms around Pellas and hoisted him back atop the island.

There was a small bloody puppy attached to Pellas's ankle, holding on with his mouth.

The puppy's eyes were still closed -- was it only an hour old? -- and it had a death-grip around Pellas; a life-grip, I should say, as it would have drowned had not I freed the both of them.

Also atop the island were three more bloody blind puppies, minutes old, each about the size of my nine-year-old hand.

"Look, Pellas!," I said, rather disbelievingly, "Puppies!"

Pellas's leg was bloody. His leg was gashed; slashed through the trouser fabric, through the skin.

Was it his blood on the puppy, or the puppy's blood on him?

It was not possible the puppy had gnawed my brother, toothless as it was upon birth. The puppies' mother must be nearby, I thought. As I looked to the east of the island, I caught a flash of something in the water, far away, at the next bend of the river. A cadaver, dark and dead, floated around the crook, thence out of sight. I never saw it again. But it must have been the puppies' mother. Mustn't it?

"Are the puppies all right?" gasped my brother, Pellas.

"Let me get you to shore --"

"No!" said Pellas. "First tell me they're all right."

I looked on top of the island. The three puppies were beautiful with brown glistening fur still moist from birth and the river and my brother's or their blood. They were wrinkled, sweet-

tempered. Probably hunting-dog pups; bassets perhaps, or brindle hounds. They were confused and at the moment gasping, seeking out the mother they did not yet know they had lost.

"They have survived," I said, "but they will not live the night on their own." I went to pull the poor puppy off of Pellas's leg. She was a female, of deeper color not usually seen in brindles, different from the rest of the litter: a dark black sable which did not glisten; a black-undulated coat which absorbed rather than reflected light.

"No don't!" screamed Pellas. Literally screamed.

"I'm going to help the puppy," I said.

"No!" He was frightened by this, or at least agitated. "Leave her alone."

Now, the island we called Ynsoedd wasn't really an island; it more resembled vegetation which had risen above the surface of the river long enough to snag up some drifting twigs, leaves, dirt and the like, which trapped further branches which trapped more silt and soil, such that over the decades, bona fide vegetation, even four trees, had taken root and were going nowhere. The tenacity of Nature, eh? *Nihilo aliquid*: of nothing, something. Where there is the slightest purchase there is the will to live. The meagerest hundredth-of-a-clod of dirt, a grain of soil, cotched betwixt some barren boulders, and a seed shall find its way to it, and from there, in an inhospitable repellent environ which would erstwhile have nothing to do with verdancy, thank you very much, the seedling will spring. And from the seedling the tree, and thence the boulders'

resistance becometh a crumbled moot. A foregone conclusion: *life will have its way; it is just a matter of time*. There is a corollary here, too, however, which I am tempted to overlook or at least postpone opining upon, and that is the terrible *destructiveness* of life. True, true, how many the magnificent and inspiring ambitions and subsequent prehensilities of life where before there was none, but oh, the consequence of the living upon the inert! What destruction is caused by the inexorable *hunger* accompanying every living creature: the eternal munch. I feel a digression coming on. Certainly you must feel it as well.

*{We do, Pellinore, we do. Oh the destructive munch of man!}*

Oh, his solipsism, you mean.

*{Well, we would, if we knew what solipsism meant.}*

Bless you, you naive little things.

*{Thank you. But can't it wait, Pellinore? We want to know what becomes of the puppies. Did they survive?}*

Wait! Let me wrap up the thought I started about the insistence of life.

*{But the pupp....}*

Anon! First the conclusion as to tenacity. And in compromise I shall leave aside the digression about Man's Solipsism.)

*{Though we were so looking forward to that, Pellinore.}*

You really must learn to mask your sarcasm, my little hypocritical Knights in the making. I can see straight through you, so bear that in mind next time you mock me.

{Silence from the Humbled Squires.}

Aha. Good. Silence is as manna to my ears. O dear, a bit mixed, that metaphor. Now, what I'd like to point out is how many creatures and plants in my story synecdochize my observation on grim determination. There was obviously my brother's clinging to life, procumbent and nearly drowning as he was. And the three blind puppies gasping their first breaths of life, motherless, atop the upcrop. And the ferocious fourth sable pup literally clinging to my brother; was it to save herself from drowning? There seemed more to it than that. And the island, Ynysoedd, and the trees, and river, tenacious, tenacious all! In my story so far, only the mother dies. I ask you to ponder that, my Interpolators, and see whether this symbolism yields further resonance throughout my allegorical tale. The fleeting image of her dark cadaver floating round the bend of the river has haunted me lo these decades (so many decades!). I like to believe she knowingly used her last strength saving her children. I like to believe *proprium praemium est sacrificium*: sacrifice for others is its own reward. Pellinorus Autrium! And yet. And yet what kind of reward is death? If I cease to be, whence I can help no longer, or write, or speak, or even think,

what then will be the point? Whither the mother's sacrifice if in her wake her children are too weak or self-insufficient to survive on their own? I would have it have been better to let the doomed newborns go, that she herself might live, perhaps one day to birth another, stronger litter. The three mewling pups alone on the outcrop hadn't a chance for survival. What's the point of giving her life for their imminent deaths? But the fourth pup! The blind, nearly-deceased creature, well, tenacious she, most certainly. Affixed herself to the leg of a human...thereby giving herself a chance. Admirable! Frightening!

(Pellinore sighs.)

You have correctly surmised, yes, the fourth puppy is the very Beast you must seek. She began as a puppy, and oh, would that I had drowned Her that day, the whilst I still could. I could have spared Her all that befell Her and me. I could have saved Her by killing her. But I did neither.

The water, the blood, the wound. Yes, I could have spared us all. But I did not. I failed us all.