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**Author:** H. B. Hickey

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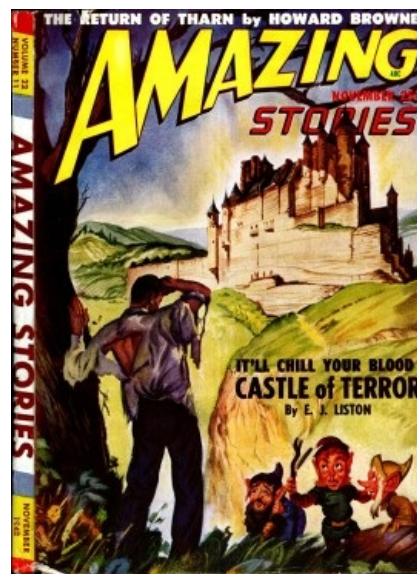
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EYE OF WILBUR MOOK \*\*\*

### Transcriber's Notes

1. This etext was produced from Amazing Stories November 1948. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.
2. Variations in spelling ("gray" vs. "grey") have been retained as they appear in the original publication.
3. Obvious misprints were corrected. Hover over underlined word in the text to see the corrections made. Full list of corrections made is available [at the end](#).
4. For accessibility, descriptions of the illustrations are provided in the "alt" attributes.





There was a cloud of smoke, a horrid visage, and Mook's legs grew weak beneath him.

## The EYE of WILBUR MOOK

by H. B. HICKEY

"Wilbur!" his mother called. "Better get up or you'll be late for work!"

Slowly but surely Wilbur Mook came out of his beautiful dream. And what a dream it was! He had Peter Bellows down and was busily punching his head. What a dream!

Then his mother's voice pulled him away from Pete Bellows and dragged him back to reality. Wilbur opened one eye and looked at the clock on his bedside table. Its hand said eight o'clock.

Wilbur flung off the covers and slid his bare feet into lamb's wool bedroom slippers. If he didn't hurry, Wilbur thought, he'd be late to work. At the thought of facing Pete Bellows' angry stare Wilbur shuddered. It was all right to dream, but real life was quite another thing.

Quickly, he ran water into the washbowl and washed his hands and face. No time to shower or shave. Running his hand over his chin Wilbur found he didn't need a shave anyway. By skipping that operation he could get to the office early.



When the world's most cowardly man met the world's bravest—history was changed

He took a moment to survey himself in the long mirror on the back of the bathroom door. "Every day in every way I am getting better and better," Wilbur muttered. Then he heard his mother's footsteps outside in the hall and he hurried to put on his robe. Just in time he got his head out of the way as the door swung inward.

"You look nice this morning," Mrs. Mook said. "Now hurry before your breakfast gets cold."

He did look pretty good, Wilbur admitted to himself as he looked again into the mirror. At twenty-five his skin was firm and healthy looking, his body straight and neither too thin nor too fat. His reddish-brown hair was free of dandruff, his blue eyes clear.

Only one thing wrong with the picture. He had the soul of a rabbit. He was a coward. There was a tinge of desperation in his voice as he spoke again to his image in the mirror:

"Every day in every way I am getting braver and braver."

Unfortunately it was not true and Wilbur Mook knew it. And the only reason he was not growing more timid, Wilbur reflected miserably, was that such a thing lay outside the realm of possibility.

What was even worse was the fact that everyone else knew it too. It could not have been more evident had Wilbur carried a sign. The only thing he could say was that his mother loved him anyway. Small consolation.

"Read the paper on the streetcar," she said as she helped him into his coat. "And don't run. You know it upsets your stomach when you've just eaten breakfast."

His breakfast had consisted, as always, of orange juice, one poached egg on toast and warm milk. Anything stronger than warm milk, Mrs. Mook had discovered, disturbed Wilbur no end.

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As he walked to the car Wilbur's mind went back over the dream. That was the stuff! And one of these days he was going to make that dream come true. Pete Bellows was going to find out a thing or two.

"Whyncha look where you're goin'?" a shrill voice demanded.

Wilbur stopped abruptly. In his trance-like state he had stepped on the heel of a twelve-year-old boy bound for school. The boy was glaring at him fiercely and Wilbur cringed.

"I'm dreadfully sorry," he said, knowing that his face was losing color.

"Yah!" the boy snarled. "Look where you're goin' and you won't have to be sorry."

For a moment Wilbur feared the boy was going to hit him. Then a call came from down the street as another school-bound lad hove into sight, and the first one promptly forgot about Wilbur.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Wilbur crossed gingerly to the safety island and waited for his car. When it came he found that all the seats were occupied but

he discovered a vacant corner at the front and huddled there.

Unfolding his paper carefully he scanned the world news and found it depressing. It always was, Wilbur thought. He turned to the sport pages for solace. That too was depressing, for it featured the doings of those public heroes who battered each other to a pulp for profit and applause.

Not that Wilbur would have been unwilling to attend a prize fight. No indeed. He would have enjoyed it immensely, except that he could not stand the sight of men beating each other. And the blood! Even the thought of blood made him slightly ill.

He turned quickly to the want ads. Those were always safe, sometimes even exciting. Today there was a man who needed a bodyguard. Wilbur reflected wistfully that he would have made a fine bodyguard, if only things were different.

Actually he was a writer of greeting-card poetry, and as he swung off the car his mind was already busy on a poem for Mother's Day. All he needed was a good last line. So far it went:

"To the Mother so loving and tender,  
On this day that is yours alone,  
Homage I willingly render,  
Ta ta-ta tum ta ta."

The last line would come to him, Wilbur knew. It always did. In the meantime he nodded shyly to the elevator starter and found himself a place at the back of the car. It rose swiftly and his heart pounded.

What if it should stop suddenly between floors? There was a beautiful girl standing next to Wilbur and he thought how fear would flood her face. That was the time when a cool and confident voice could avert panic. But Wilbur was aware that there was more chance that the voice would be the girl's rather than his.

His mind went back to the last line of the ditty he had been composing. He almost had it, then it was gone. He bit down on his tongue in concentration, unaware that he was staring at the girl next to him.

"My devotion you'll always own," Wilbur murmured.

"On such short acquaintance?" the girl smiled.

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**W**ilbur turned pink, then red. He wanted to tell her he hadn't meant it that way, and he found himself wishing he had. She was the kind of girl he sometimes dreamed about, tall and not too thin, with golden hair and gray eyes in which flecks of color danced.

"I meant my mother," Wilbur managed at last.

"How sweet. Now would you mind getting out of my way?"

Wilbur looked down and found that he had somehow managed to walk from the elevator to his office without knowing it. He had his hand on the doorknob.

"I beg your pardon," he mumbled, and flung the door open in what he hoped was a gallant gesture.

There was a crash as the door swung inward for a few feet and stopped. The crash was immediately followed by a howl of pain. A moment later Pete Bellows' flushed and furious face came around the side of the door. He was rubbing his head.

"Mook, you idiot!" Bellows roared. "I ought to punch your nose for this!"

"He didn't know your head was in the way," the girl said.

"Huh?" Bellows grunted. He took a good look at the girl and the anger drained from his face. Without thinking he straightened his tie and slicked back his oily black hair.

"You must be Miss Burnett, the girl the agency said they were sending," Bellows murmured in his most dulcet tones. "Well, well, Wilbur, this is my new secretary."

"But how do you know I'll do?" Miss Burnett said, startled.

"Oh, you'll do. I just know you will," Bellows told her. "You and I are going to get along just dandy."

"My shorthand is a little rusty," the girl said.

"What's a little thing like that?" Bellows laughed, ignoring the fact that he had fired his last secretary because she had misspelled an eight-syllable word.

But the last secretary had worn thick glasses, Wilbur recalled. That would make a difference to Pete Bellows. He was suddenly aware that Bellows was frowning at him.

"Get to work, Mook," Bellows said cheerfully. "Mother's Day is coming, you know."

With what he pretended was a gentle pat on the back Bellows flung Wilbur toward the tiny cubicle he occupied at the rear of the large office. Once Bellows had played tackle on a football team and although he was beefier now he was still very strong. Wilbur almost went through the thin partition.

He bounced off and recovered his balance, then went into his cubicle through the door. It was a windowless hole, lit by a single small bulb. Wilbur worked at an old table which was neatly stacked with sheets of blank paper. He furnished his own pen.

There was a small window in Wilbur's door, but contrary to what a visitor might have expected, it had not been placed there for Wilbur's convenience. The window was the means by which Bellows could watch his poet and be certain that he was working every minute of the time.

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Today Wilbur found himself at a loss for rhymes. By mid-morning he had completed only fifteen poems in praise of Mother. He still had some fifty to go. But instead of writing he too often caught himself listening to what was going on in the outer office.

"Mr. Bellows—" the new girl started to say.

"Call me Pete," Wilbur heard Bellows tell her. "I'll call you Jean. Just one happy family, you know, you and I and Wilbur."

"Does Mr. Mook write all the poetry?" Miss Burnett wanted to know. She sounded quite impressed and Wilbur glowed with a new found pride.

"Just a knack. Doesn't take any brains," Bellows deprecated. "Any fool could do it."

I'd like to see you try, Wilbur thought. You're one fool who couldn't. He thought that was pretty good repartee, even if it was only mental. Wilbur wished he had the nerve to say the words to Bellows' face. But he didn't.

His newspaper, still folded to the classified ads, reposed in Wilbur's wastebasket and his eyes chanced to fall upon it. Something stirred in Wilbur. There had been one advertisement in particular. Just below the request for a bodyguard. He wondered if he had read it right.

Keeping one eye on the window to make sure Bellows did not observe him, Wilbur retrieved his newspaper. Quickly his eye sped down the column. There it was:

Are you timid? Do you lack confidence? I can  
help you. A. J. Merlin, 136 W. Erie St.

Wilbur shook his head and dropped the newspaper into the wastebasket. He was rather inclined to think A. J. Merlin was overestimating his powers. Probably a fake, anyway. Most of those fellows were.

Looking out of his window, Wilbur saw Bellows patting Jean on the shoulder as he explained something to her. He was a fast worker, was Pete Bellows. By the time Wilbur got the next line of poetry written Bellows was asking Jean if he could take her to lunch.

Before answering she turned her head toward Wilbur and he could see that she was none too happy about the offer. She seemed to be trying to think of a good reason for not accepting.

"Well?" Pete asked. Jean looked back at him.

"I—I guess so," Wilbur heard her say. Bellows patted her on the shoulder again.

I wonder, Wilbur thought, what she would say if I asked her sometime? That looked like a question which would never find an answer. It would take more nerve than he had to ask. But the very thought of him inviting a girl like Jean to lunch sent a pleasant tingle down Wilbur's back. He even allowed himself to think that she might prefer a smoother type of man than Pete Bellows. Smoother, Wilbur reminded himself miserably, not mushier.

Just before noon Pete Bellows came in to get the copy Wilbur had turned out through the morning. At the sight of the tiny stack which had accumulated Bellows' mouth turned down.

"Loafing!" he accused. "Just because I've been too busy to keep my eyes on you!"

It occurred to Wilbur that the only thing he'd seen Pete do that morning was pat Jean's shoulder, and that hardly seemed like hard work. But he didn't say anything.

"Probably reading the paper while my back was turned," Pete went on. He reached down and got the paper and put it in his pocket. "Now, listen to me, Mook. You'd better have some work done when Jean and I get back from lunch!"

Wilbur nodded without looking up at him. He was always afraid to look at Bellows when the burly man was angry. Pete could get a vicious glint in his eye. After Pete had left the cubicle Wilbur sneaked a look after him. He saw that Jean had heard the whole thing. And at sight of the distaste on her face he flushed.

Why couldn't he have told Pete off? Wilbur started to dream about what he should have said. Then he stopped. It was all right to daydream but Pete had sounded sore when he had said he wanted to see some work done. Wilbur put his head down and started writing.

Within the hour he had completed six odes to Mother. One of them, Wilbur knew, he could sell to a magazine for twenty times what Bellows would pay. For a moment he was tempted, even going so far as to pick up the sheet of paper preparatory to putting it in his pocket. Then he thought of what Pete Bellows might do if he found out. Wilbur set the paper back on the pile.

He was just in time. There were footsteps out in the hall and then the door swung open. Bellows and Jean came in. The girl was laughing now, and as Pete helped her off with her coat he was practically breathing down her neck. It looked as though he had made some progress.

"Is it all right if I go to lunch now?" Wilbur asked timidly. He had to wait until Pete had checked over his work. Then he got permission to go.

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U ntil he was outside Wilbur felt hungry. For an hour his stomach had been reminding him that it was time to eat. But suddenly the pangs of hunger were gone. The thought of food was even unpleasant.

Maybe a short walk would give him fresh appetite, Wilbur thought. The day was pleasant and sunny. If he spent a half hour walking he would still have twenty minutes in which to gulp a sandwich. Pete Bellows had decreed that fifty minutes constituted a lunch hour for Wilbur.

It was with no conscious motive that Wilbur headed south. He found himself walking at a gait much faster than his usual one, but attributed that to the fine weather which he assured himself was exhilarating. Before he realized how fast he was going he had covered a dozen blocks.

The neighborhood had changed. Behind him lay the business district with its skyscrapers. All about him were the sagging and unsightly houses of a once fine residential neighborhood which had deteriorated into a slum area. The only places which seemed at all cared for were the rooming houses.

A poem of protest rose in Wilbur's breast, and was stilled as he became aware that he was on Erie street. The street had some meaning for him but it took several minutes before he realized why. Then he gasped. Only two doors from where he stood was 136 West Erie Street!

For a long time Wilbur stood looking at the house. It was an old red brick structure three stories high. The upper two floors appeared untenanted. If they were not, the occupants must have liked fresh air for there were no windows.

Wilbur directed his attention to the first floor. The windows there were too

dusty to see through, but at least there were windows. A fat grey cat sunned itself on the window ledge and regarded Wilbur with unblinking eyes. He shuddered and had to summon all his courage to climb the stairs and look at the card nailed to the front door. A. J. Merlin, the card said, in an unusual script that Wilbur had trouble deciphering.

He raised his hand to knock, then changed his mind. But as he was turning away he heard the door open.

"Looking for me, bub?" a creaking voice said. Wilbur turned around.

He found himself face to face with an old gentleman wrapped in what appeared to be a blue dressing gown with white stars all over it. The old man had a wisp of a beard and white eyebrows that slanted way up at the outside corners. He was wearing on his head a blue dunce cap which also had white stars on it.

"Are you-uh-Mr. A. J. Merlin?" Wilbur stammered. "I mean the Mr. Merlin who gives people confidence?"

"I might be," the old man said cagily.

He stared down at Wilbur, and for the first time Wilbur noticed the old man had eyes as black and mysterious as a pool on a dark night. Those eyes regarded Wilbur, noting his size, weight and general construction.

"Bah," the old man snorted. "You won't do. Not timid enough."

"Yes, sir," Wilbur chattered. He started backward down the stairs and almost fell.

"Wait a minute," the creaky voice ordered.

Wilbur halted in mid-step. The black eyes regarded him. A hand tipped by long, curving fingernails stroked the wisp of a beard.

"On the other hand," the old man said, "you might be more timid than you look. Come on in."

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Wilbur trailed after him down a long dark hallway that was musty with age. At the end of the hall was an equally musty room, sparsely furnished with sagging and broken odds and ends. It was not the furniture which engaged Wilbur's attention, but the other features of the place.

On an ancient stand a sun-dial reposed, and next to it a large and milk-white glass ball. Near the stand a tripod stood over a sheet of metal on which a small fire blazed, and from the tripod a kettle was suspended. Something bubbled in the kettle, something that gave off a strange and noxious odor.

Around the room jugs were scattered, and as Wilbur caught sight of the labels a chill ran up his back. There were such unusual items as *Essence of Dried Toad*, *Basilisk Oil*, *Chimera's Breath-Distilled*.

"Sit down," A. J. Merlin said suddenly. Wilbur sat down with such abruptness that he almost went through an ancient sofa to the floor. Merlin's eyes lit up.

"You really are timid," he said.

"Yes, sir," Wilbur agreed hastily. "Do you think you can help me?"

"Depends. It isn't my regular line. I came here looking for a special kind of person. If you're that person you can help me. In return I'll do the same for you. All depends on how cowardly you are."

"I've never been brave about anything in my life," Wilbur said truthfully.

He went on in detail. In a short history of his life he made it clear that he was a complete and abject coward. He was afraid of anything that walked or swam or flew, no matter how small. He was afraid of dark rooms. A dirty look made him tremble.

"Perfect," Merlin breathed. He rubbed his taloned hands together. "Not a shred of courage in you."

"Is that good?" Wilbur gasped.

Merlin smiled, and with his smile his eyebrows slanted more than ever. His ears were suddenly elongated.

"Ordinarily not," he said. Wilbur had a hunch that this time there would be nothing extraordinary to alter the case.

"I've tried everything," he told Merlin. "I've gone to psychologists, read books, even tried Yoga. Nothing helps."

"Naturally," Merlin said. "I'll tell you why: Everyone is a mixture of traits handed down from his ancestors. Somewhere in every man's ancestry is a brave person. Even if that bravery is hidden, it's still there, and it can be brought out."

"What happened to me?" Wilbur wanted to know.

"You got cheated," Merlin said as though he were immensely pleased. "You got only half the traits, and they were the cowardly ones. That's why you couldn't be cured. There was no bravery in you to be brought out."

"Oh," Wilbur gulped. "I guess I'd better be going." He started to rise.

"Sit down," Merlin said. Wilbur plunked back into the sofa. He watched Merlin walk to the stand and lift the glass ball. The old man peered into the ball and its color changed to rose, then purple. Something was going on inside it but Wilbur couldn't see what.

"Who's this fellow Pete Bellows?" Merlin wanted to know.

Wilbur was astonished. He hadn't mentioned Pete's name. When he told the old man who Pete was Merlin chuckled.

"Thinks he's quite a man with the ladies, doesn't he? I'll fix him."

Merlin made a pass over the glass ball and muttered a few words which Wilbur didn't catch. There was a sudden thump, clearly audible to Wilbur, and Merlin chuckled gleefully.

"What happened?" Wilbur asked.

"The door opened just as he was going by and he walked into the edge of it. He's got a black eye."

"Good-bye," Wilbur said. The hair on the back of his neck was standing on end as he moved toward the door of the room.

"Come back here," Merlin commanded. "You want me to make you brave, don't you?"

Wilbur's mind whirled. He had fallen into the hands of this old madman and now he didn't know how to get away. Who knew what might happen to him? He had to think of something.

"What do you charge?" he asked. No matter what Merlin said Wilbur was prepared to say he didn't have that much. In no way was he prepared for Merlin's words.

"Your right eye."

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A cold sweat formed on Wilbur Mook's brow. His teeth chattered. Down at his little toe a tremor started and worked its way up along his spine. The roof of his mouth turned dry as dust and his throat was parched.

"I haven't got it," he choked. Because he had been ready to say that he had said it automatically. Too late he realized it was the wrong answer.

"Don't be a fool," Merlin told him sternly. "Wouldn't you rather be a one-eyed hero than a two-eyed coward?"

"No," Wilbur said.

Merlin glared at him balefully and Wilbur quailed and cringed. What sort of nightmare had he wandered into? He would gladly have given everything he owned to be back in the office. Even Pete Bellows was better than this maniac!

"Could I please go, Mr. Merlin?" Wilbur begged. "I'll be late if I don't. Pete will be sore."

"Tell you what I'll do," Merlin said, in a manner of one offering an added incentive. "You let me have your right eye and I'll see to it that Bellows falls down the stairs and breaks his neck."

He picked up the glass ball again and Wilbur felt himself grow faint. Now he



was certain that this old man was not only a maniac but a *homicidal* maniac!

"Wouldn't anything but my right eye do?" he asked plaintively.

"I don't think so, but I'll look it up," Merlin said. Out of the folds of his white-starred gown he drew a book. Wetting his index finger, Merlin turned pages until he came to the one he wanted.

"*Elixir of Caution*," Merlin read aloud. "One part *Fawn's Breath*, one part *Dove's Heart-Dried*, one part *Tears of Despair*, and *Right Eye of Complete Coward*. Simmer for one hour with proper incantations."

"But I'm cautious enough already!" Wilbur protested. He got to his feet hopefully. "Well, I guess this has been a mistake. I'd better be running along."

Merlin regarded him with a steady eye and Wilbur wished he could divine what was going on behind those black and glittering orbs. Maybe Merlin was going to let him go. From the way Merlin was nodding his head it seemed that way.

"Very well," the old man said. "But we must have a drink together."

"Oh, I never drink," Wilbur assured him virtuously. Merlin waved aside the protest.

"Nothing stronger than tea," he said.

He went to a far corner of the room and lifted a small vial which was made of some material that shimmered iridescently. Wilbur watched fascinated as Merlin poured a small amount of a smoky liquid from the vial into a pair of tiny cups.

"Are you sure this isn't strong?" Wilbur asked as Merlin handed him one of the cups. Inside the cup the strange liquid bubbled, and from its surface a fine vapor rose.

"No." That was all. Then Merlin went to the sun-dial on the stand and turned it around several times. When he had adjusted it to his satisfaction he turned back to Wilbur and lifted his cup.

"Here's how," Merlin said.

Wilbur lifted his cup to his lips and drank. Merlin was right. The liquid seemed no stronger than tea. In fact it tasted much like tea, except that it had a smoky flavor, not at all unpleasant.

"Thank you," he said politely, and started for the door. But he had no more than started than he turned back and sat down again.

It was a strange feeling which assailed Wilbur Mook. His legs seemed weak, yet through the rest of him a strength flowed which was like liquid fire. Then there came a giddiness. His head was feather light.

Merlin receded, not walking but floating back and back. And as his figure drifted away from Wilbur it grew strangely taller. The eyebrows were more slanted than ever and the ears were longer and more pointed. And as Merlin's figure grew larger it began to dissolve.

Now Wilbur's entire body seemed as light as air to him. It felt as though he too could float if he tried. He saw, as through a haze and at a great distance, Merlin bending over the kettle which hung from the tripod.

From inside his flowing gown Merlin produced a wand and a packet. Out of the packet drifted a fine white powder into the kettle. There was a wave of the wand, and out of the kettle poured a thick black smoke which filled the room until there was nothing but blackness.

Wilbur's ears were filled with a roaring. He felt himself lifted and whirled. Around and around he whirled, and faster and faster. He was being sucked into a vortex, pulled down into a black tunnel that was endless.

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**S**omewhere nearby there was a crowd of people. Wilbur knew that because he could hear the murmur of many voices. But when he opened his eyes he found himself in a forest glade. The sun was bright overhead and on a limb above him a bird sang.

He shook himself and looked around. He was not alone. Only a few feet away stood Merlin, still wearing his blue robe and his conical hat. He nodded when he saw that Wilbur was awake.

"How do you feel?" the old man asked.

"Fine, thank you," Wilbur answered without thinking.

It was when he looked down at his body that he sucked in his breath. Not only was he no longer in that musty room, but he no longer wore his own clothes! His body was encased in a gown of brown monk's cloth!

"Your clothes would have been out of place here," Merlin told him, guessing what Wilbur thought.

"But—where am I?"

"Near Camelot," Merlin said. "Better get up now. We haven't much time."

Wilbur got to his feet slowly, his eyes darting about. If he saw a chance he would make a run for it. But Merlin's hand was like a claw on the sleeve of Wilbur's robe.

"You try to run and I'll put a curse on you that will fix you permanently," the old man whispered hoarsely.

Wilbur followed him like a lamb to the slaughter. They took a path that led out of the glade and to a road only a few yards away. Ten yards or so down the road they came on the crowd whose voices Wilbur had heard. His hair stood on end.

They were before the doors of an ancient church. And in the cleared space before those doors milled a strange throng. Men on foot wore robes of the plain monk's cloth and carried wooden staves. Towering above them were mounted men, men dressed in hauberks and doublets of chain mail. All of them had their eyes fixed on something in the center of the crowd.

Then someone caught sight of Merlin and his name was whispered. As by magic the people parted to let him and Wilbur through. For the first time Wilbur saw what they had been staring at. It was a rough block of stone, and buried to the hilt in the stone was a sword!

"Merlin," a voice said, a voice that was heavy and assured.

Wilbur looked up and shrank away from the armored giant on horseback who towered over him and the old man. The giant raised the visor of his helmet and Wilbur beheld a face that was as cruel as a hawk's. Dark eyes gleamed from beneath black and bristling brows.

"What mummery is this?" the dark man asked.

"No mummery, but the good bishop's prayer answered," Merlin said calmly. "Is not the stone inscribed, Sir Kay?"

"Inscribed," Sir Kay echoed. "And its message is that he who withdraws the sword shall be king of England."

His scowl made Wilbur's knees weaken, but Merlin remained unaffected. In fact the old man seemed quite cheerful.

"Excalibur it is called," Merlin said. "He who wrenches it free shall rule."

"Hear me," Sir Kay grated. "If this be one of your tricks, know this: none but a son of Uther Pendragon will reign."

For a moment Wilbur forgot the two. He had caught sight of the inscription of the stone and was reading it. Apparently it was meant to be a poem but it did not rhyme. On the spot Wilbur produced what he thought was a better one. He tried it out, not realizing he spoke aloud.

"Who from this stone Excalibur draws  
Shall be England's king and make her laws."

Sir Kay frowned blackly and his hand hovered near a dagger at his side.

"What have you to do with this, varlet?" he demanded.

"He is but a troubadour," Merlin interjected quickly. "A bard who will sing your praises after the tourney."

"I had forgotten the tourney," Sir Kay grunted. "But see you forget not my warning."

He reined away, knocking people aside like tenpins. Behind him the other knights followed, and after them went the common people. In a few minutes Wilbur and Merlin found themselves alone. In the distance, and in the direction the crowd had vanished, Wilbur saw the towers of a medieval castle.

"Camelot," Merlin told him.

"I don't like this," Wilbur said. "That fellow looked as though he wanted to slit my throat."

"Yours wouldn't be the first one he's slit," Merlin said. "But you stay close to me and you'll be safe enough. Although I must admit that Kay has become quite a problem since his father died."

"Is he a son of Uther Pendragon?"

"Why do you think he insists that none but Uther's sons may rule?" Merlin snarled. "But with a king like him we'd have nothing but corpses around. That's why I needed you."

---

Wilbur was bewildered, but not completely baffled. It had become painfully clear to him that Merlin had found him, not vice versa. The advertisement in the paper had been a trick to lure a timid man. But there was still a little clearing up to be done.

"Would you please explain what I have to do with all this?" Wilbur asked plaintively. Merlin clawed gently at his beard and shrugged.

"I suppose it would be only fair, after abducting you from the twentieth century and dragging you back here. The point is this: after Uther died there was a squabble over who should be king. We couldn't stand a civil war so the bishop of this church prayed for a sign, and the next day this stone and sword were found here. So far nobody has been able to pull it out."

"You didn't have anything to do with that, did you?" Wilbur asked naively.

"I'm not saying. Anyway, Sir Kay is the logical man for the job, except that he's too quick with his blade. That left only one other, and he's got his fault too."

Wilbur was thinking about his right eye. A little flattery might go a long way.

"I should think you would make a good king, Mr. Merlin."

"My father was an incubus," Merlin said, as though that explained everything. He peered down the road as the sound of hoofs reached them.

Wilbur followed Merlin's gaze and saw a young man on horseback coming toward them from the direction of Camelot. The young fellow wore a shirt of mail but no helmet, and his horse was not armored. Merlin held up his hand and the mounted man drew rein. Wilbur got a good look at him.

He was almost as big as Sir Kay, but with a fair complexion and light hair. He could not have been much over fifteen, despite his size. His manner was easy, giving the suggestion of enormous strength in reserve, yet with a hint of gentleness. But it was his eyes which were his outstanding feature. They were a clear brown, wide, and with an expression of complete fearlessness.

"Where to, Arthur?" Merlin asked.

"My brother Kay has broken his sword. I must get him another."

"Tarry a moment," Merlin said. "I have a question which troubles me. The enemies of our land march against us, and they outnumber us five to one. Were you king, what would you do?"

Arthur laughed, a clear ringing laugh that showed rows of white teeth. His brown eyes glowed with an inward fire.

"Do? I would take the field against them, of course! Even though they outnumber us fifty to one."

Wilbur thrilled to the words. But Merlin shuddered slightly and Wilbur heard a faint groan of distress come from his lips.

"Got here in the nick of time," the old man muttered. He looked up at Arthur and said aloud: "You may have your chance. But first you must make me a promise. You must come to my castle this very night and drink the draught I shall prepare for you."

"I promise," Arthur said unthinkingly. "And now I'll be getting that sword for Kay."

"This looks like a good one," Merlin said. He pointed to the sword in the

stone.

"It does indeed," Arthur agreed. Without a second look he bent and seized the hilt and wrenched it free. He raised the sword in a salute to Merlin and Wilbur, laughed his ringing carefree laugh, and was gone in a cloud of dust.

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Merlin's castle was not overly large, and as far as Wilbur could see after he got inside, most of it was under ground. He and the old man were in a great damp chamber, the walls of which were solid rock. The room was filled with Merlin's jugs, with tripods from which boiling kettles hung, and with great black cats which prowled everywhere. The door was of solid oak and immovable. Wilbur knew; he had tried it once when Merlin had gone out.

At the moment Merlin and he were sitting facing each other on a pair of stone couches. They had been sitting so for some hours and the silence was wearing Wilbur down.

"So Arthur is going to be king," he said at last, in an effort to start a conversation. "He looks like a fine boy."

"He is," Merlin agreed. "Chivalrous and all that. It was foreordained. That's why I had to get back. I knew he was going to be along that road today, and I knew he was going to pull out that sword."

"I thought you said he had a fault."

"What a fault," Merlin sighed. "He's got your trouble, but in reverse. He was born without fear. It's a bad thing for a king to be like that. He'd lead his people into sure death. You heard what he said this afternoon. Even odds of fifty to one mean nothing to him."

For the first time Wilbur saw the whole thing. Until now he had entertained a faint hope that Merlin might not really want his eye. But this was the clincher. The *Elixir of Caution!* Desperately he cast about for a means of escape. There was none. And Merlin was watching him with an eagle eye.

"Maybe," Wilbur offered weakly, "a few drops of my blood would do the trick. You don't want Arthur to get *too* timid."

"Nice of you to think of it," Merlin said. "But I really couldn't fool with that recipe."

Wilbur wished with all his heart that he had the courage to put up some kind of fight. Merlin was an old and feeble man. But he knew his genetics. Wilbur had been born without a gene of courage. Wilbur rubbed his right eye, the one he would soon be without, and felt tears well up. His last glimmer of hope was borne on a sigh.

"Maybe he won't come."

"He'll come all right. Arthur never breaks a promise. That's one of his best points. What I'm trying to do is see to it that he isn't so rash about making them in the first place."

It seemed that Merlin was right, for just then there came to their ears the sound of iron shod hoofs in the courtyard above their heads. The ceiling trembled slightly and a drop of water fell on Wilbur's head. Then footsteps clattered down a long flight of stairs and the door swung open. It was Arthur, and from his appearance it was plain he had been in a fight.

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From a cut alongside his temple blood dripped. His shirt of mail had been pierced at the left shoulder and blood glistened redly there. Some had trickled down and lay in beads like rubies on the gleaming mail. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt and his hair lay in wet clumps, and he was breathing hard.

"What happened?" Merlin asked quickly. Arthur let out a laugh and his eyes glowed fierce.

"A band of varlets tried to ambush me on my way here. Had I not been in so great a hurry to keep my appointment with you I'd have brought you some heads on Excalibur's point."

He held up the great sword and Wilbur turned faint at the sight of the gore along its blade. He put his hand over his mouth and his eyes rolled upward.

"Wipe that blade before this one perishes of fright," Merlin said quickly. Then he became solicitous. "Are you sore wounded?"

"There were only ten," Arthur laughed. "They were too busy defending their lives to do me much harm. Now, where is that drink you invited me here for?"

"It will take a while to prepare," Merlin said. He busied himself with a kettle and some jugs and powders.

Wilbur was turning a pale green from fright. He had to think of something. Suddenly he turned to Arthur.

"You won't like this drink," he whispered urgently. "It may even poison you!"

Arthur stared down at him. "Even so I needs must drink it. I have given my word. A promise may not be broken."

Merlin was coming toward them now and Wilbur saw that the old man held in his hand an instrument which looked like a surgeon's scalpel. He let out a shriek of terror and would have run had his legs not been paralyzed.

"What is this womanly fright?" Arthur asked, wrinkling his nose.

"I need his right eye to make the *Elixir of Caution*," Merlin explained. He laid a claw on Wilbur's shoulder and it was like the hand of doom.

"Yeeow!" Wilbur howled. He began to babble. "You lied to me! You said you'd make me brave! False pretenses!"

He stopped abruptly. Merlin's hand had fallen from his shoulder. There was a sudden silence that grew thick and ominous. Looking up fearfully, Wilbur saw that Arthur had fixed Merlin with a hostile glare.

"Did you so promise?" Arthur demanded. He stood straight and regal. "Answer me, and forget not I am your king."

Merlin's hands made feeble and apologetic gestures.

"What could I do?" he pleaded. "One like him is born seldom. I had searched the centuries, and there was no more time."

He turned to Wilbur and his face betrayed an apprehension that made Wilbur's hopes rise. Arthur did not act like he would stand for any promise-breaking among his subjects.

"Tell you what I could do," Merlin said. "I could put your eye back when I'm through with it. In fact, that's a promise."

"Will that make him brave?" Arthur demanded.

"Well..." Merlin hesitated. Arthur's finger slid suggestively along the blade of his sword.

"I'll look it up," the old man finished hurriedly.

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His hand dipped beneath his robe and came out with the ancient book. A long nailed finger ran through the pages. There was a pause, and then Merlin began to mumble.

"*Elixir of Fortitude*: One part *Eagle's Heart-Dried*, one part *Lion's Breath-Distilled*, one part *Essence of Steel*, hm-m-m." His voice trailed off in a hum, then picked up again. "Simmer for one hour. *Caution*: MUST BE FINISHED BEFORE MIDNIGHT."

"Well?" Arthur said.

"I've got everything except the last ingredient," Merlin said unhappily. Suddenly his face lit up. "We'd better hurry. There is only an hour and a half left."

He scurried to a bottle which hung on the wall and brought it back to Wilbur. "Drink some quickly. You will feel no pain." When Wilbur had gulped some down Merlin took the bottle and handed it to Arthur. "You too."

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Above their heads there was a rumbling and the pounding of hoofs in the courtyard. Quickly Merlin ran to the oak door and slammed it shut. He seemed to be expecting trouble. It turned out he was right again.

More than one pair of feet was on the stone stairway. Loud voices shouted, "Open up!" Wilbur recognized one of the voices and he groaned. Then bodies were hurled against the door.

It held against the first assault, and against the second. The third time there was a splintering of wood. Wilbur held his breath. A hinge had torn loose. Once more there was the crash of armored bodies against the oak and the door flew inward. Sir Kay was inside in a flash, and behind him came five more. The dark man's eyes lit on Wilbur.

"So, varlet!" Kay bellowed hoarsely. "My suspicion was right. You are in the plot against me!"

Without waiting for a denial he flung himself at Wilbur and his sword swished through the air. How he managed it Wilbur never knew, but he ducked in time. The flat of Kay's sword caught him a glancing blow on the head and knocked him off the stone bench.

Then the great room was filled with the clash of steel as Arthur went into action. Out of eyes that were glassy Wilbur saw him decapitate two men with a single stroke. Another fell dead before he could raise his shield. The other two fled with Kay's curses following them. Only Arthur's brother was left.

"Yield," Arthur warned grimly. Kay's reply turned Wilbur's ears red. The two went at it. For a few minutes it was an even battle, and then suddenly both swords came together with a force that drew sparks. Kay was left with only a hilt in his hand.

What happened next Wilbur hardly knew. There was a clang as something bounced on the stone floor, and a great round object that looked like a helmet rolled past him.

"Quickly now," Wilbur heard Merlin say. "There is barely the hour left to us."

Wilbur could hear but he could see nothing. There was a black veil over his eyes. Powerful arms lifted him and laid him on the stone bench. Then there was the sound of bottles being emptied into kettles. Wilbur heard feet approach him but he was too sleepy to care. Something touched his eye but he felt no pain.

In his dazed state time passed quickly for him. There was always the scuffling of Merlin's feet, and now and again the old man's creaky voice rose in weird incantations. Then something hot was pressed against Wilbur's lips.

"Drink," Merlin said. Wilbur opened his mouth and felt a hot liquid gush down his throat.

"I want my eye," Wilbur mumbled.

"Don't worry," Merlin told him. "I'm getting it."

He was taking his time about it, Wilbur thought. He could hear a great stirring going on. There were muffled curses and he heard something bouncing on the floor.

"Darn stuff is so thick I can't tell them apart," Merlin was muttering.

"Hurry!" Arthur called. "The cock crows midnight!"

"I'm doing my best," Merlin said. He was breathing hard as he bent over Wilbur. There was a quick pressure against Wilbur's eye socket and Merlin grunted triumphantly.

"There!" the old man said. "I've kept my promise. Now I'm going to send you back where I found you, and good riddance. You've been nothing but trouble."

Again something hot was poured down Wilbur's throat. It had a familiar taste, a sort of smoky flavor. Liquid fire coursed through his veins, he felt his body grow light and buoyant, he was floating. Then he was being sucked down into a black vortex and through a Stygian passage. The passage seemed endless but it was not, and at the end was a tiny hole of light which grew steadily larger.

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Wilbur found himself on a sagging porch, before a door that leaned on sprung hinges. His head ached, and raising his hand he ran it along his scalp until he found a large bump. He rolled his eyes upward as though to see where he had been hurt. All he saw was a jagged hole in the porch roof. At his feet was a chunk of plaster.

It took a minute for the realization to filter through that he was standing on the porch of 136 W. Erie Street. Wilbur recalled walking up the stairs. After that everything was a blur. He scrutinized the door. There was no card bearing the name of A. J. Merlin. In fact, there was no card at all!

"Hey, mister," a boy's voice called. Wilbur turned around and saw a tattered urchin regarding him gravely. "Ain't nobody lived in that house for years," the boy said. "It's haunted."

Wilbur shuddered and at the same instant became aware of a peculiar phenomenon. He seemed to be seeing the boy through only one eye. The other was strangely blurred. Wilbur pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his right eye. His vision improved but as he moved toward the head of the stairs he swayed slightly.

"You get hurt or something?" the boy asked as Wilbur came toward him. Wilbur rubbed his head.

"I'm all right," Wilbur told him. He said it partly to reassure himself.

He looked at his wrist watch and found he had only twenty minutes to get back to work. That was puzzling. There was a lapse of time. Being a man of imagination, Wilbur reflected that if he had actually been in the past he would not have used up any time in the present.

On the other hand, it was more probable that he had been hit on the head by falling plaster and had incurred a slight lapse of consciousness, memory, or both. He was inclined to accept that explanation.

At any rate he was going to be late if he didn't hurry, and Pete Bellows would be mad as a hornet. Wilbur speeded up his pace. Then he slowed down again. If anyone should be angry it was himself. He had missed his lunch.

Riding up in the elevator Wilbur checked his watch again and found he was only five minutes late. In his working life that represented two lines of doggerel. It didn't seem like much to get excited about. But Pete Bellows didn't see it that way.

"Mook!" he roared, as Wilbur came through the door. "You're late!"

If he had expected Wilbur to fall into his usual fit of trembling he was disappointed. Wilbur was staring at him.

"Your eye!" Wilbur gasped. Pete's left eye was swollen half shut and had a blue ring around it.

"He walked into the door," Miss Burnett said. "Honest."

Wilbur smiled at her. She was a very pretty girl. Too pretty to be working for a wolf like Pete Bellows. Wilbur had a notion to tell her so.

"I said you're late, Mook," Pete told him ominously.

"So what?" Wilbur asked quietly. "If you don't like it you can fire me. In fact, considering that you find so much fault with my work I'm surprised you haven't discharged me long ago. But I'll save you the trouble. I quit."

Pete was staring at him as though Wilbur had gone mad. Maybe he had, Wilbur thought. Maybe Pete was going to get sore and punch him in the nose. It didn't seem to matter.

"Not only that," Wilbur added. "I'm going into business for myself. How would you like to work for me, Miss Burnett?"

"I think I'd like that just fine," she said. She took her purse out of a drawer in her desk and got her coat and put it on.

Pete Bellows was a stricken man. For once he had nothing to say. His mouth dropped open and he leaned against his desk. "W-wait a minute, Wilbur, old pal," he managed to gasp finally.

"Goodbye," was all Wilbur had to say. He held the door open carefully for Miss Burnett, then shut it behind them as carefully.

Wilbur knew that he was outwardly calm. Inside, he was filled with amazement at himself. Never had he thought to see the day when he would stand up to Pete Bellows. Now he had not only done it, he had got away with it! He took Miss Burnett's elbow. She was looking at him rather queerly, he thought.

"What's the matter?"

"I just noticed the strangest thing about you," she said. "You're the first

person I've ever seen who had different colored eyes!"

Wilbur gasped. His knees felt weak, and out of the past he heard a creaky voice say, "... I can't tell them apart." Now he understood that *Arthur's* right eye had been the last ingredient in the *Elixir of Fortitude!*

Wilbur smiled. There was nothing to be angry about. He certainly hadn't got the worst of the bargain! His shoulders were squared as he helped Miss Burnett into the elevator car.

"Let's go, Jean," Wilbur said.

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#### Transcriber's Corrections

- Changed "widow" to "window" (A fat grey cat sunned itself on the **window** ledge)
- Removed extra "and" (He picked up the glass ball again **and** Wilbur felt himself grow faint)
- Changed "is it" to "it is" ("Excalibur **it is** called," Merlin said.)
- Changed "face" to "fact" (In **fact**, there was no card at all!)
- Changed "handkershief" to "handkerchief" (Wilbur pulled out his **handkerchief** and wiped his right eye)
- Removed extraneous doublequote at the end of the sentence (*Arthur's* right eye had been the last ingredient in the *Elixir of Fortitude!*)

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EYE OF WILBUR MOOK \*\*\*

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