

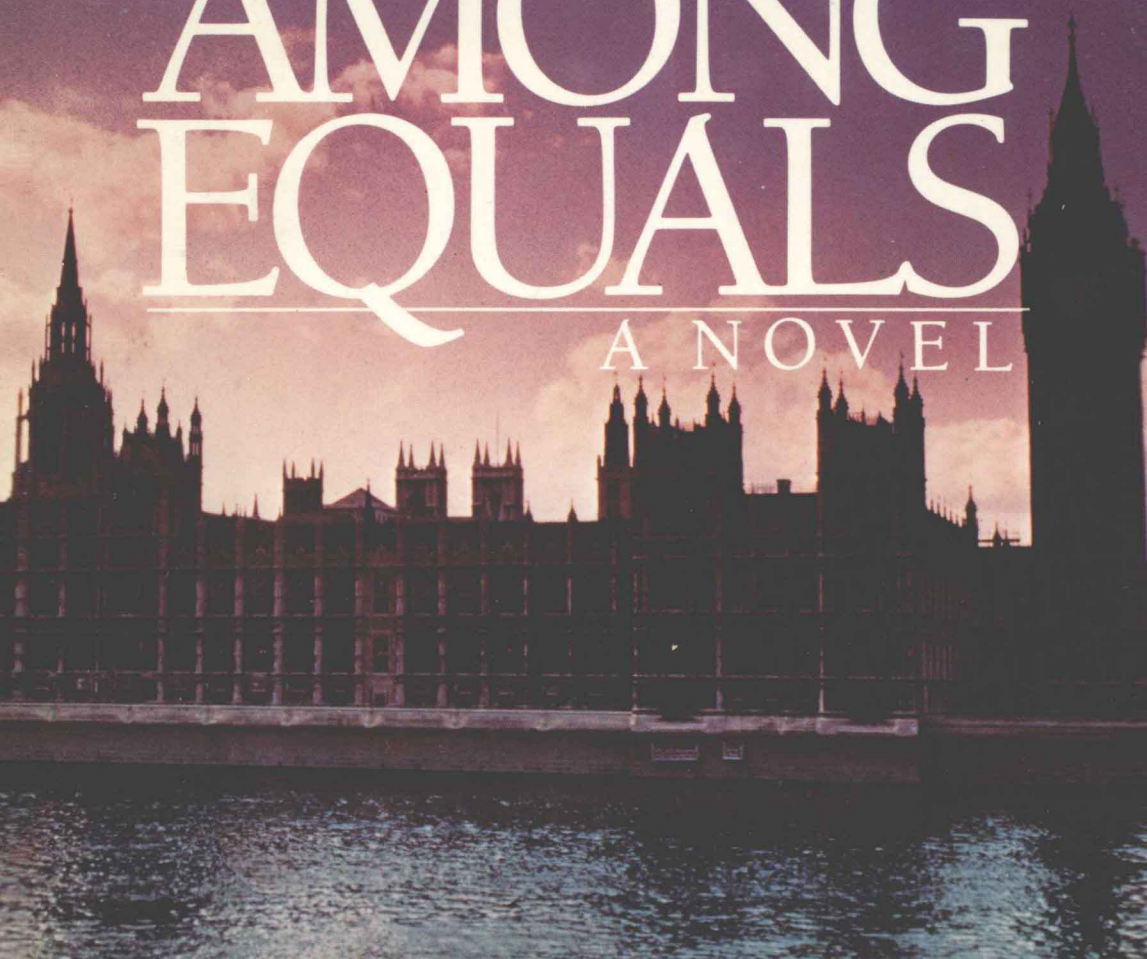
JEFFREY  
ARCHER

AUTHOR OF KANE & ABEL



FIRST  
AMONG  
EQUALS

A NOVEL





# Jeffrey Archer

ALSO BY JEFFREY ARCHER

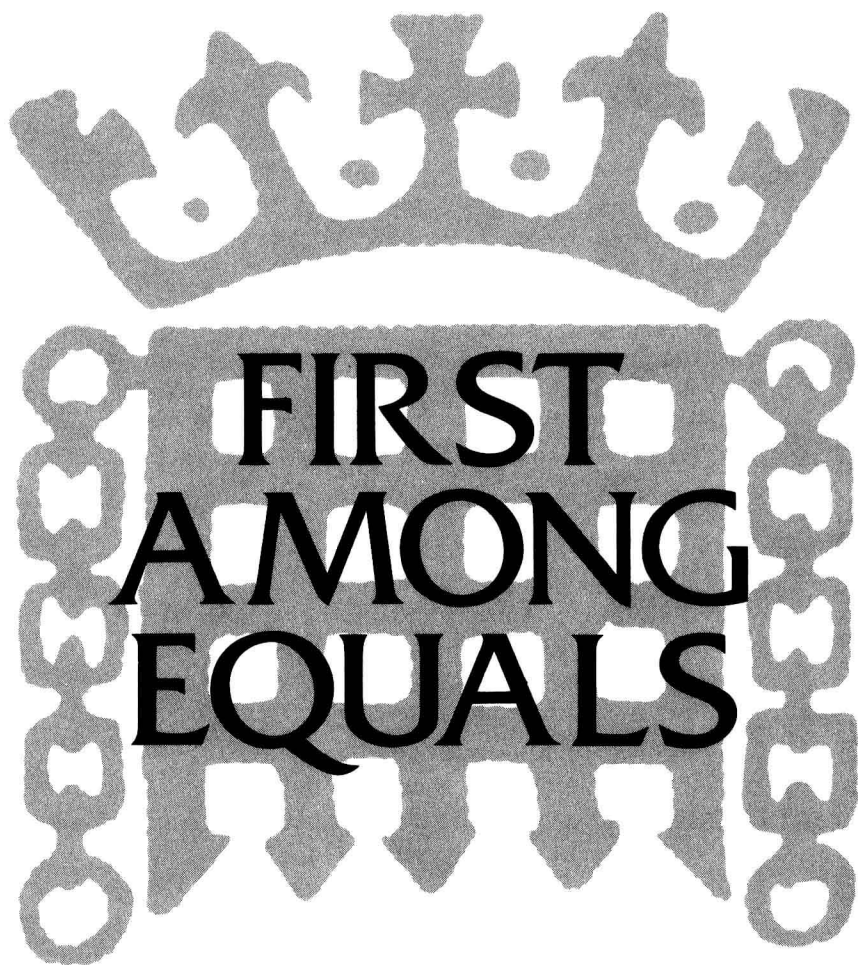
A QUIVER FULL OF ARROWS

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

KANE AND ABEL

SHALL WE TELL THE PRESIDENT?

NOT A PENNY MORE, NOT A PENNY LESS



Linden Press/Simon & Schuster  
NEW YORK  
1984

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Published by Linden Press/Simon & Schuster

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Simon & Schuster Building

Rockefeller Center

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, New York 10020

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Designed by Eve Metz

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Archer, Jeffrey, date.

First among equals.

I. Title.

PR6051.R285F5 1984 823'.914 84-11267

ISBN 0-671-50406-1

**To JONI**



# PROLOGUE

*Saturday, April 27, 1991*

KING CHARLES III made the final decision.

The election had duly taken place as decreed by royal proclamation. The polling booths had been closed, the votes counted, the computers turned off; and the experts and amateurs alike had collapsed into their beds in disbelief when they had heard the final result.

The new King had been unable to sleep that Friday night while he considered yet again all the advice that had been offered to him by his courtiers during the past twenty-four hours. The choice he had been left with was by no means simple, considering how recently he had ascended the throne.

A few minutes after Big Ben had struck 6 A.M., the morning papers were placed in the corridor outside his bedroom. The King slipped quietly out of bed, put on his dressing gown and smiled at the startled footman when he opened the door. The King gathered up the papers in his arms and took them through to the morning room in order that the Queen would not be disturbed. Once he had settled comfortably into his favorite chair, he turned to the editorial pages. Only one subject was worthy of their attention that day. The Fleet Street editors had all come to

## PROLOGUE

the same conclusion. The result of the election could not have been closer, and the new King had been placed in a most delicate position as to whom he should call to be his first Prime Minister.

Most of the papers went on to give the King their personal advice on whom he should consider according to their own political affiliations. The *London Times* alone offered no such opinion, but suggested merely that His Majesty would have to show a great deal of courage and fortitude in facing his first constitutional crisis if the monarchy was to remain credible in a modern world.

The forty-three-year-old King dropped the papers on the floor by the side of his chair and considered once again the problems of which man to select. What a strange game politics was, he considered. Only a short time ago there had been clearly three men to consider, and then suddenly one of them was no longer a contender. The two men remaining—who he suspected had also not slept that night—could not have been more different—and yet in some ways they were so alike. They had both entered the House of Commons in 1964 and had then conducted glittering careers in their twenty-five years as members of Parliament. Between them they had held the portfolios of Trade, Defense, the Foreign Office and the Exchequer before being elected to lead their respective parties.

As Prince of Wales, the King had watched them both from the sidelines and grown to admire their different contributions to public life. On a personal level, he had to admit, he had always liked one while respecting the other.

The King checked his watch and then pressed a bell on the table by his side. A valet dressed in a royal blue uniform entered the room as if he had been waiting outside the door all night. He began to lay out the King's morning suit as the monarch went into the adjoining room where his bath had already been drawn. When the King returned he dressed in silence before taking a seat at a small table by the window to be served breakfast. He ate alone. He had left firm instructions that none of the children were to disturb him.

## PROLOGUE

At eight o'clock he retired to his study to listen to the morning news. There was nothing fresh to report. The commentators were now only waiting to discover which man would be invited to the palace to kiss hands.

At nine-fifteen he picked up the phone. "Would you come up now, please," was all he said. A moment later the King's private secretary entered the room. He bowed, but said nothing, as he could see the monarch was preoccupied. It was several moments before the King spoke.

"I have made my decision," he said quietly.





**PART ONE**

**The  
Backbenchers**

**1964-1966**



# 1

IF CHARLES GURNEY HAMPTON had been born nine minutes earlier he would have become an earl and inherited a castle in Scotland, twenty-two thousand acres in Somerset and a thriving merchant bank in the city of London.

It was to be several years before young Charles worked out the full significance of coming second in life's first race.

His twin brother, Rupert, barely came through the ordeal, and in the years that followed contracted not only the usual childhood illnesses but managed to add scarlet fever, diphtheria and meningitis, causing his mother, Lady Hampton, to fear for his survival.

Charles, on the other hand, *was* a survivor, and had inherited enough Hampton ambition for both his brother and himself. Only a few years passed before those who came into contact with the brothers for the first time mistakenly assumed Charles was the heir to the earldom.

As the years went by, Charles's father tried desperately to discover something at which Rupert might triumph over his brother—and failed. When they were eight, the two boys were sent away to prep school at Summerfields, where generations of Hamptons had been prepared for the rigors of Eton. During his first month at the school Charles was voted class president, and no one hindered his advance en route to becoming head of the

student body at the age of twelve, by which time Rupert was looked upon as "Hampton Minor." Both boys proceeded to Eton, where in their first term Charles beat Rupert at every subject in the classroom, outrowed him on the river and nearly killed him in the boxing ring.

When in 1947 their grandfather, the thirteenth Earl of Bridgewater, finally expired, the sixteen-year-old Rupert became Viscount Hampton while Charles inherited a meaningless prefix.

The Honorable Charles Hampton felt angry every time he heard his brother deferentially addressed by strangers as "My Lord."

At Eton, Charles continued to excel, and ended his school days as President of Pop—the exclusive Eton club—before being offered a place at Christ Church, Oxford, to read history. Rupert covered the same years without making one honor roll. At the age of eighteen the young viscount returned to the family estate in Somerset to pass the rest of his days as a landowner. No one destined to inherit twenty-two thousand acres could be described as a farmer.

At Oxford, Charles, free of Rupert's shadow, progressed with the air of a man who found the university something of an anticlimax. He would spend his weekdays reading the history of his relations and the weekends at house parties or riding to hounds. As no one had suggested for one moment that Rupert should enter the world of high finance, it was assumed that once Charles had graduated Oxford, he would succeed his father at Hampton's Bank, first as a director and then in time as its chairman—although it would be Rupert who would eventually inherit the family shareholding.

This assumption changed, however, when one evening the Honorable Charles Hampton was dragged to the Oxford Union by a nubile undergraduate from Somerville, who demanded that he listen to Sir Winston Churchill, who was making a rare appearance to debate the motion "I'd rather be a commoner than a lord."

Charles sat at the back of a hall packed with eager students mesmerized by the elder statesman's performance. Never once did he take his eyes off the great war leader during his witty and powerful speech, although what kept flashing across his mind was the realization that, but for an accident of birth, Churchill would have been the ninth Duke of Marlborough. Here was a man who had dominated the world stage for three decades and then turned down every hereditary honor a grateful nation could offer, including the title of Duke of London.

Charles never allowed himself to be referred to by his title again. From that moment, his ultimate ambition was above mere titles.

Another undergraduate who listened to Churchill that night was also considering his own future. But he did not view the proceedings crammed between his fellow students at the back of the crowded hall. The tall young man dressed in white tie and tails sat alone in a large chair on a raised platform, for such was his right as President of the Oxford Union. His natural good looks had played no part in his election because women still were unable to become members.

Although Simon Kerslake *was* the firstborn, he had otherwise few of Charles Hampton's advantages. The only son of a family solicitor, he had come to appreciate how much his father had denied himself to ensure that his son should remain at the local public school. Simon's father had died during his son's last year at school, leaving his widow a small annuity and a magnificent Mackinley grandfather clock. Simon's mother sold the clock a week after the funeral in order that her son could complete his final year with all the "extras" the other boys took for granted. She also hoped that it would give Simon a better chance of going on to university.

From the first day he could walk, Simon had always wanted to outdistance his peers. The Americans would have described him as an "achiever," while many of his contemporaries thought of him as pushy, or even arrogant, according to their

aptitude for jealousy. During his last term at Lancing, Simon was passed over for Head of School, and forever found himself unable to forgive the headmaster his lack of foresight. Later that year, he narrowly missed a place at Oxford's Magdalen College. It was a decision Simon was unwilling to accept.

In the same mail, Durham University offered him a scholarship, which he rejected by return post. "Future Prime Ministers aren't educated at Durham," he informed his mother.

"How about Cambridge?" inquired his mother lightly.

"No political tradition," replied Simon.

"But if there is no chance of being offered a place at Oxford, surely . . . ?"

"That's not what I said, Mother," replied the young man. "I shall be an undergraduate at Oxford by the first day of term."

After eighteen years of improbable victories, Mrs. Kerslake had learned to stop asking her son, "How will you manage that?"

Some fourteen days before the start of the Christmas term at Oxford, Simon booked himself into a small guest house just off the Iffley Road. On a trestle table in the corner of lodgings he intended to make permanent, he wrote out a list of all the Oxford colleges, then divided them into five columns, planning to visit three each morning and three each afternoon until his question had been answered positively by a resident tutor for admissions: "Have you accepted any freshmen for this year who are now unable to take up their places?"

It was on the fourth afternoon, just as doubt was beginning to set in and Simon was wondering if after all he would have to travel to Cambridge the following week, that he received the first affirmative reply.

The tutor for admissions at Worcester College removed the glasses from the end of his nose and stared up at the tall young man with the mop of dark hair falling over his forehead. The young man's intense brown eyes remained fixed on the tutor for admissions. Alan Brown was the twenty-second don Simon Kerslake had visited in four days.