Helping your children choose books they will love

I reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Sword and the Circle

Written by

Rosemary Sutcliffe

Published by

Puffin Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



1. The Coming of Arthur

IN THE dark years after Rome was gone from Britain, Vortigern of the narrow eyes and the thin red beard came down from the mountains of Wales, and by treachery slew Constantine of the old royal house and seized the High Kingship of Britain in his place.

But his blood-smirched kingship was little joy to him, for his realm was beset by the wild hordes of Picts and Scots pouring down from the north, and the Saxons, the Sea Wolves, harrying the eastern and southern shores. And he was not a strong man, as Constantine had been, to hold them back.

At last, not knowing what else to do, he sent for two Saxon warchiefs, Hengest and Horsa,

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

and gave them land and gold to bring over their fighting men and drive back the Picts and the Scots and their own sea-raiding brothers. And that was the worst of all things in the world that he could have done. For Hengest and Horsa saw that the land was rich; and at home in Denmark and Germany there were many younger sons, and not enough land nor rich enough harvests to feed them all; and after that Britain was never free of the Saxon-kind again.

They pushed further and further in from the coasts, sacking the towns and laying waste the country through which they passed, harrying the people as wolves harry the sheep in a famine winter; and many a farmer died on his own threshold and many a priest before his altar, and ever the wind carried the smell of burning where the Saxons went by.

Then, seeing what he had done, Vortigern drew back into the dark fastnesses of Wales and summoned his wise men, his seers and wonder-workers and begged them tell him what he should do.

'Build yourself a mighty tower and lie close in it. There is nothing else left to you,' said the foremost of the seers.

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

So Vortigern sent out men skilled in such matters to find the best place for building such a stronghold, and when he had listened to their reports, his choice fell upon Eriri, the Place of the Eagles, high in the mountains of Gwynedd. And there he gathered together workmen from the north and the south and the east and the west, and bade them build him a tower stronger than any tower that ever had stood in Britain before then. The men set to work, cutting great blocks of stone from quarries in the hillsides; and the straining teams of men and horses dragged them up to the chosen place. And there, on the cloudy crest of Eriri, they began to set the mighty foundations that should carry such a stronghold as had never been seen in Britain until that time.

But then came a strange thing. Every morning when they went to start work, they found the stones that they had raised and set in place the day before cast down and scattered all abroad. And day by day it was the same, so that the stronghold on the Place of the Eagles never grew beyond its first day's building.

Then Vortigern sent again for his seers and magicians and demanded to know the cause of the thing, and what they should do about it.

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

And the seers and magicians looked into the stars by night and the Seeing-Bowl of black oak-water by day, and said, 'Lord King, there is need of a sacrifice.'

'Then bring a black goat,' said Vortigern.

'A black goat will not serve.'

'A white stallion, then.'

'Nor a white stallion.'

'A man?'

'Not even a man who is as other men.'

'What, then, in the Devil's name?' shouted the High King, and flung down the wine cup that was in his hand, so that the wine spattered like blood into the moorland heather.

And the chief of the wise men looked at the stain of it, and smiled. 'Let you seek out a youth who never had a mortal father, and cause him to be slain in the old way, the sacred way, and his blood sprinkled upon the stones, and so you shall have a sure foundation for your stronghold.'

So Vortigern sent out his messengers to seek for such a youth. And after long searching they came to the city of Caermerddyn; and in that city they found a youth whose mother was a princess of Demetia, but whose father no man knew. The

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

princess had long since entered a nunnery, but before that, when she was young, she had been visited, as though in a dream, by one of those who the Christian folk call fallen angels, fair and fiery, and lost between Heaven and Earth. And of his coming to her, she had borne a son and called him Merlin.

All this she told freely to the High King's messengers when they asked her, thinking no harm. But when they had heard all that she told, they seized the boy Merlin and brought him to Vortigern in the fine timber hall that he had caused to be set up in the safety of the mountains hard by Eriri. And Vortigern sat in his great seat spread with finely dressed wolfskins and cloth of crimson and purple, and pulled at his meagre beard and looked at the boy through the smoke tendrils of the hearth fire. And the boy stood before him, lean and whippy as a hazel wand, with dark hair like the ruffled feathers of a hawk, and stared back at him out of eyes that were yellow as a hawk, also, and demanded, as a man demanding of an equal, to know why he had been brought there.

The High King was not used to being spoken to in that tone, and in his surprise he told Merlin

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

what he asked, instead of merely ordering him to be killed at once.

And the boy listened; and when it was told, he said, 'And so my blood is to be shed that your tower may stand. It is a fine story that your magicians have told you, my Lord King, but there is no truth in it.'

'As to that,' said Vortigern, 'the matter is easily put to the proof.'

'By scattering my blood upon the stones of your stronghold? Nay now, do you send for your magicians, and bid them stand before me, and easily enough I will prove them liars.'

Vortigern tugged at his beard and his narrow eyes grew narrower yet. But in the end he sent for his wise men, and they came and stood before the boy Merlin.

And Merlin looked them over from one to another, and said, 'The Sight and the Power have grown weak in you and your like in the long years since the passing of the true Druid kind. Therefore, because you are darkened to the truth, you have told the King that my blood shed upon these stones shall make his tower stand. But I tell you that it is not the need for my blood that causes his stones to fall, but some strange happening beneath

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

the ground which every night engulfs the work of the day. Let you tell me then in your wisdom, what thing that is!'

The magicians were silent, for their powers had indeed grown dim.

Then Merlin turned from them to Vortigern. 'My Lord the High King, let your men dig beneath the foundations until they come to the deep pool that they will find there.'

So the King gave his orders and the men set to work, and in a while they broke in through the roof of a vast cave; and all the floor of the cave was one deep, dark pool, from the depth of which slow bubbles rose to the surface as though some great creature lay asleep and breathing deeply far below.

Then Merlin turned to Vortigern who had come from his hall to look on, and to his magicians behind him, and said, 'Tell me, oh workers of wonders and walkers in secret ways, what lies at the bottom of this pool?'

And again they could not answer.

And Merlin said to the King, 'My Lord Vortigern, now let you give orders that this pool be drained, for at the bottom of it you shall find two dragons lying asleep.'

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

And when the pool was drained, there, far down among the rocks, lay the two dragons, sleeping; and one of them was white as frost and the other was red as fire. And the King and all those who stood about the pool were struck with amazement. But the magicians had slipped away.

'By day,' said the boy Merlin, 'these creatures sleep as you see them now; but every night they wake and fight together, and their battle lasts until the sunrise gives them sleep again; and their battling shakes the mountain crest, and the earth gapes and closes and the waters of the pool are lashed to tempest; and it is so that the tower that you would build above them does not stand.'

Now the end of the day had come, and the dusk was deepening fast, and even as he spoke the sleeping dragons began to rouse. Fire-red and frost-white coils rippled and stirred and the great heads reared up, and the jaws gaped and began to breathe out thin jets of fire that grew and strengthened to rolling clouds of flame; and with a waking roar that made the very ground thrum beneath the watchers' feet, the two monsters sprang together.

All night long, by the levin-light of their own breath that filled the great chasm and played like

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

summer lightning upon the whipped-up shallows remaining of the pool, the two fought. And first the white dragon had the advantage and drove the red to the far end of the pool; and then the red dragon rallied and turned the fight again; and the water boiled about their lashing coils, and all the crest of the mountain shuddered with the tumult of their battle. And slowly the red dragon drove the white back until he in his turn was at the end of the pool. And then when it seemed that all was over, the white dragon gathered himself and hurled himself yet once more upon the red . . .

But the first light of day was waking in the sky, and the fire of the dragons sank and their movements grew slower, and little by little the great coils relaxed, and they sank to sleep.

Then Vortigern demanded of the boy Merlin the meaning of what he had seen; and Merlin told him that the red dragon was Britain and the white dragon was the Saxon-kind, and that every night they fought out the conflict between the two.

'Then surely the red dragon had the victory,' Vortigern said, 'and I and my realm have nothing to fear.'

'But the white dragon was gathering his fighting power again when this new day laid sleep once

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

more upon them both,' said Merlin. And he looked as though into a great distance; but a distance that was within himself. Three strains of power ran deep within Merlin; from his mother who was of the Demetii he had the herb skills and the ancient half-lost wisdoms of the Old People, the Little Dark People; and from the old Druid, almost the last of his kind, who had taken and reared and trained him after his mother entered her nunnery, he had star-knowledge and the skills of shape-shifting and art-magic; and both these he could use at will. But from his father he had the power to look into the future as other men look into the past; and this came not at his own will but at the will of the power itself, that was like a great wind that snatched him up into some place where past and future were one. So now he began to shake like a young aspen tree in the wind. And he began to prophesy in a high clear voice many things concerning the red dragon and the white.

And when at last the high wind of prophecy forsook him and he ceased to shake, and looked again out of his own golden eyes and spoke again in his own voice, he said, 'But all these things will be after your time, my Lord the King.'

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

And a pang of fear shot through Vortigern, and he said, 'Then how can they concern me? Tell me now of *my* time!'

'Your time?' said Merlin. 'Your time is short, and ends in fire at the hands of the sons of the dead High King Constantine, Ambrosius and Utha. They have gathered many fighting men in Less Britain, which some call Brittany, that gave them shelter when you slew their sire; and already their ships are fitted out, already they spread their sails to the wind that shall carry them across the Narrow Seas. They will drive back the Saxon hordes; but you they will burn shut up in your strongest tower, in vengeance for their father's murder. Then Ambrosius shall be crowned High King; and he shall do great things for this realm of Greater Britain; but he shall die at the Saxons' hands; and after him Utha shall take the crown; but his days, too, shall be cut short, by poison. Yet after him, to Britain in her need, shall come another, greater than they.'

Then between fear and rage, Vortigern cried out to his guards, 'Seize him! Stop his mouth with your swords!'

But the rim of the sun was lifting above the rim of the mountains eastward, and the first rays shone

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

level into the eyes of King and court and guards, making them blink; and when the dazzle cleared from their sight, the dark gape of the dragon pool had closed over, and only the mountain grasses shivered in the dawn wind where it had been. And of the boy Merlin nothing remained but a kind of shimmer in the air that was gone almost before they saw it; and a voice that lingered after the rest was gone, 'There shall come another . . . another . . . greater than they . . .' and was lost in the soughing of the wind through the grasses.

Within three days Ambrosius and Utha his brother landed on the coast of Britain with a great war host behind them. They marched upon the stronghold to which Vortigern had fled, and sought to beat down the walls; and when the walls proved too strong for them they piled timber and brushwood all round the place and kindled it, and shot fire arrows into the thatch of the tall roof; and the flames leapt up day and night until the stones cracked and flew apart, and the great timbers roared up and crumbled into ash, and the whole tower was eaten by the flames as by a dragon, and Vortigern with it; and so their father Constantine was avenged.

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

Then Ambrosius was crowned High King, and with Utha his brother he turned upon the Saxons, and by long and desperate fighting drove them back from the lands that they had overrun.

But the time came when Utha, leading his troops up through Wales to meet a Scottish thrust from the north-west, saw a great star blazing in the night sky above his camp fires. And from the star shone a beam of light which became a dragon all of misty fire as though the star-trace that men call the Milky Way had gathered itself into the shape of a great winged beast. And from the dragon's mouth shone two more rays that bestrode the whole of Greater and Less Britain. Then Utha sent for Merlin, who had been with one brother or the other from the time they landed, and asked him the meaning of the strange lights in the sky. And Merlin said, 'Grief upon me! Grief upon us all! For Ambrosius your brother is dead! Yet the light foretells also great things to come, for in the battle that lies before you the victory shall be yours, and you shall be High King of Britain, for the star and the dragon beneath it are yourself, and the two rays from the dragon's mouth foretell that you shall have a son greater

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

than his sire whose power shall reach over all the lands that the rays bestride.'

So Utha grieved for his brother, and rode on against the men of the north and west. And when he was crowned High King of Britain in Ambrosius's place, he took the name of Utha Pendragon, which in the British tongue means Utha Dragon's-Head.

And in battle after battle he fought and defeated the Saxons and the Picts and the men from over the Irish Sea, until all the southern part of Britain was free of fire and sword; and then he drew a breath of quiet and set his mind to keep Easter in London, and make a great thanksgiving feast. And he bade all his lesser kings and nobles with their wives to come and join him there. Now among those who gathered to him in London that Eastertide were Gorloise, Duke of Cornwall, and his wife, the Duchess Igraine. And Igraine was the fairest of all the ladies about the court, and as soon as he saw her, the King's whole heart fixed itself upon her as it had never done upon any woman before, for all his life since he came to manhood had been too full of fighting to have room for love. He sent gifts to her chamber, gold cups and jewels for her neck; and whenever she

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

sat at table or walked abroad she had but to look up to find his hungry gaze upon her.

Then the Duchess Igraine went to her husband and said, 'The King sends me overmany gifts and his eyes are always upon me. Therefore let us leave here quickly and go back to our own place.'

So the Duke gave his orders, and with the Lady Igraine and all their following, left the King's court before he knew it and set the horses' heads towards Cornwall.

And when the King found them gone, he was fiercely angry, and sent after them demanding that they should return. And when they did not return, he gathered his fighting men and marched after them and made war on the Duke of Cornwall.

Duke Gorloise set his lady in Tintagel Castle, which was the strongest hold in all Cornwall, being set on a headland above the pounding sea, with but one causeway leading to it from the mainland, and that so narrow that it could be held by three men against an army. And he pitched his war camp in another strong place inland of the castle and barring the way to the King. Then Utha Pendragon came up, and made his own camp opposite to where Duke Gorloise was. So the fighting began between them and lasted many

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

days. And all the while his hot and hungry love for Igraine tore at the King, giving him no peace, whether in the red heart of the battle by day or in his lonely tent at night. At last, when a week had gone by, he called to him Merlin, who was with the camp. And Merlin came and stood like a tall shadow in the entrance to the tent, with the flicker of the camp fires behind him, not asking why he had been sent for, for he had been watching the great star hanging in the green twilight sky over Tintagel, and he already knew.

'I am sick with my heart's longing for Igraine,' said the King, 'and no nearer to her than I was seven nights ago. You who have the wisdom of the Old Ones, tell me what I must do to come to her.'

Merlin never moved. He knew that the time was come for the beginning of Utha's son, who should be greater than ever his father was. And he said, 'If you will give yourself up to my skills, I can give you the outer-seeming of Duke Gorloise for one night, and take upon myself the outer-seeming of Brastius, one of his household, that I may accompany you. And so you may go to Igraine in Tintagel Castle this night, none stopping you. But there is a price to pay.'

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

'Anything!' said Utha Pendragon. 'Anything under the sky.'

'Swear,' said Merlin.

'On the cross of my sword, I swear.'

Then Merlin came in and stood beside the brazier, looking at him across the little licking flames. 'If you go to the Lady Igraine tonight, your son will be born at Christmas; the son I told you of, when we saw the great lights in the sky on the night that Ambrosius died. And within the hour of his birth you shall give him into my keeping, that I may take and rear him for his destiny.'

Silence came down between them; and in the silence Utha said, 'It will be from Duke Gorloise that you must claim that.'

And back across the small licking birch flames in the brazier he looked at Merlin, with a frown-line deepening like a swordcut between his brows. He had not thought until that moment that any child of his begun as this one was to be, would seem ever after, in the eyes of all men, even in the eyes of the Lady Igraine, to be Duke Gorloise's and not the High King's.

'No,' said Merlin, seeing the thought. 'It will be from you that I must claim it.'

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

And the King believed him. But he asked, 'Why do you ask this price?'

'Because you may have other sons. That could mean danger to this one, this chosen one, with a cloud lying over his birth, and because your way of life is not a safe one, and if you die before he is of an age to take the crown, in the struggle for power among your nobles he will be trampled underfoot.'

And Utha saw the truth of this; and he was bound by his blindly taken oath; but more than either of these things, he was driven by his love for Igraine. And he agreed the price.

So Merlin went away, and in a short while returned to the King's tent with many things hidden under his cloak; and he cast a powder on to the brazier that filled the tent with a strange-smelling smoke; and he called up figures in the smoke, and made a magic that was older than the Druid kind. And at moonrise, two who to all outward seeming were Duke Gorloise and Sir Brastius of his household knights slipped out of the camp, and away, skirting the Duke's camp, by secret ways to the gates of Tintagel high on its rocks above the crooning sea.

The gate-guard passed them through, thinking only that the Lord of Cornwall had snatched a

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

few hours to come home to his wife; and they crossed the narrow courts of the castle and climbed the outside stair to the Duchess's chambers. And down below in the walled shelter of the castle garden, a whitethroat was singing as though it were already dawn.

And the Duchess's ladies gave him entrance, thinking only as the men of the gate-guard had done, and as the Lady Igraine thought also when he stood within her chamber, that her lord was come home.

And that night, in the great chamber high above the crooning of the western tide, with the whitethroat singing in the castle garden and Merlin standing with a drawn sword before the door, Arthur of Britain was conceived.

But meanwhile Duke Gorloise had made a night attack on the royal camp, and in the desperate fighting had met his death before ever the King came to the door of Igraine's chamber.

Before dawn the High King took his leave of Igraine, saying that he must return to his men by daybreak; and so, with Merlin, slipped away.

And when soon after, news was brought to her of the night attack and her husband's death, Igraine

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

was struck with grief, and also with a great wonder as to who and what it was that had come to her in his likeness that night. But she kept the matter in her own heart, and did not speak of it even to the nearest of her ladies.

By and by King Utha Pendragon came into Tintagel in his own seeming and as a conqueror, but a gentle conqueror, for truly he was grieved at the death of Duke Gorloise, though glad that now Igraine was free. And when enough time was passed, he began to pay court to her; and though for a while she fought her own heart, it seemed to her that there was something about him that she remembered, and the something was sweet. And so after six months they were married with great rejoicing.

Later, when it was not far short of the time for the Queen's child to be born, Utha asked her one night when they were alone in their chamber to tell him the truth of the strange story he had heard concerning the father of the babe she carried. And at first she was afraid, but then she gathered her courage and told him. 'Truly I do not know, for the night that my lord died, at the very hour of his death, as his knights told it to me, one came to my chamber who seemed to be my lord, and in

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

the dawn he went away again. And in the night that he was with me, the child was begun. There was a whitethroat singing in the castle garden. I noticed it because we so seldom have any birds but gulls and ravens here.'

'I remember the whitethroat,' said the King.

'You?' said the Queen.

And in his turn he told her all the truth.

Then she wept afresh for Gorloise her first lord. But it was on Utha's shoulder that she wept.

At Christmas time the Queen bore her child; a fine manchild. But within an hour of his birth a message was brought to the King that a poor man stood at the postern gate and sent word to him to remember the vow taken on the cross of his sword.

And the King gave orders to two knights and two ladies to take the babe and wrap him in cloth-of-gold and then in warm skins for a winter journey, and to give him to the poor man they would find waiting at the postern gate.

So all was done as he ordered, and the child handed over to Merlin in his beggar's guise. And Merlin took him to a certain good knight called Sir Ector, who lived far away from the court, to be brought up along with his own son in all the

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd

ways of knightly valour and courtesy. And when Ector would have known whose son it was that he was to foster with his own, Merlin told him, 'His name is Arthur, and whose son he is, you shall know when the time comes for knowing.' And Sir Ector asked no more.

And Utha, with his own heart sore within him, was left to comfort the Queen in her grieving.

Text copyright (c) Rosemary Sutcliff. Courtesy of Penguin Books Ltd