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opening extract from

The Dragon Tamer's Castle

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The Dragon Tamer's Castle

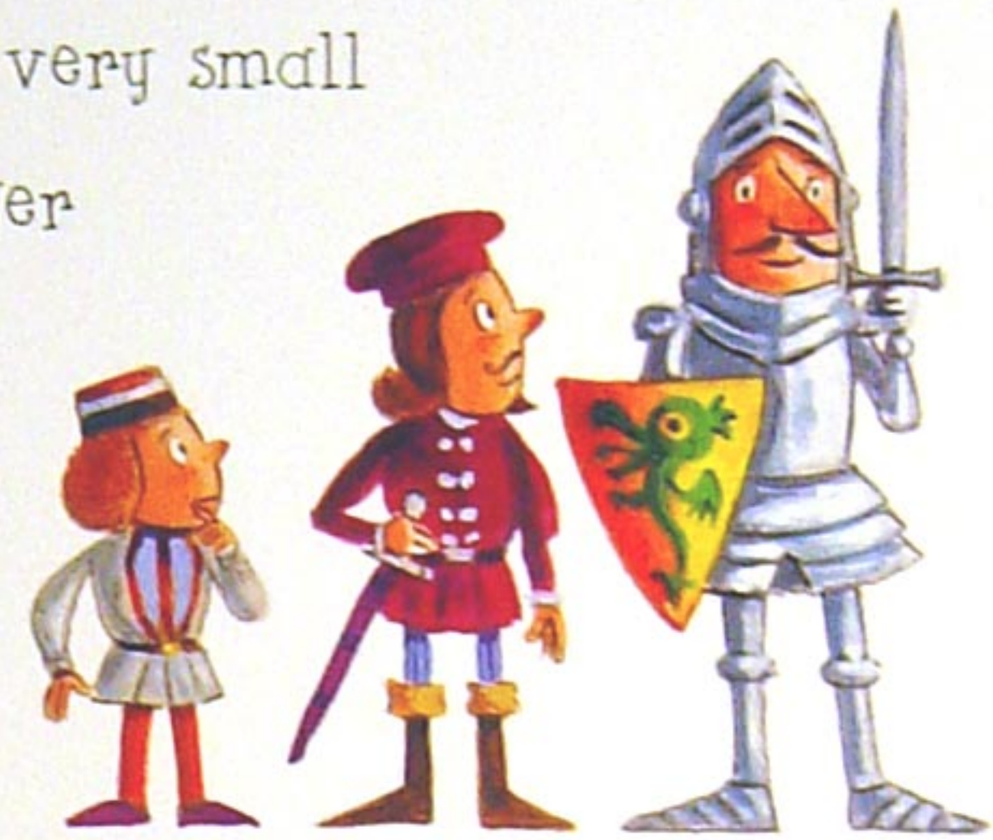


Once upon a time, in the faraway kingdom of Dragonia, lived a little boy called Sprout.

He made his home in a corner of the stables of the great castle of King Dougal.



Sprout was five years old and very small for his age, and sometimes the bigger boys picked on him. They were all pages, training to be squires and dreaming that one day they would become knights. Sprout, too, dreamt of being a knight.



But Sprout had a problem. Sprout had no mother or father to pay for his training. When he was just a baby, he had been left by the castle's drawbridge. He was found there, quiet as a mouse and with eyes as big as saucers, by Cook, who cared for him until he was old enough to dress and feed himself. After that, Sprout sort of belonged to everyone.



The Dragon Tamer's Castle



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And – he sometimes thought, as he fell asleep in his bed in the hayloft – to no one. But Sprout was almost never lonely. Every day, he helped the young squires who were training to be brave knights to strap on their armour. He combed their horses' manes, and polished their saddles, and brought them food, and fetched their swords. Sprout was a very busy boy indeed.





One day, after he'd seen the squires off to a tournament in the next kingdom, he grabbed an apple from a barrel in the kitchen and climbed up to his favourite hiding spot at the top of a tower. There, he saw something exceedingly strange.





Nestled in the battlements was an enormous egg. It was nearly as big as Sprout! Very gently, Sprout rolled the egg down off the high dangerous ledge and onto the soft straw on the floor. Quick as a flash, he dashed to the stable to fetch his blanket from his bed and hurried back to the precious egg. He covered it carefully, like he'd seen the hens do as they cared for their eggs, and hunkered down next to it, never taking his eyes off his special discovery.

