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Opening extract from

Young Merlin

Written by

Tony Bradman

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Young Merlin

by

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Chapter 1
Not Like Other Boys

Merlin woke suddenly and sat up. He didn't know what time it was but it was still very dark. His heart was pounding as if it wanted to explode. His eyes were wide open too, but he could see nothing around him, only the terrible things he'd been dreaming about.

"Blood and death! I can't stand any more blood and death," he moaned. He shook all over, and he felt sick. His skin hurt too –

almost as if it was being burned off by great waves of fire. “Teeth and tails, the red and the white …”

Suddenly a flame lit up the dark around him. What could it be? He looked up – the flame was only a candle. And it was his mother who’d lit it. He was in the hut he and his mother lived in. She came over and sat next to him on his rush bed, with the candle in her hand.

“There, there, everything’s all right now,” she said. She stroked his face with her hand. “You’re so hot! Was it the same old nightmare?”

“I … I think so,” said Merlin as his heart slowed down. His mother’s hand felt cool on his cheek, and he saw her smile in the candle-light.

“Oh, well, it’s gone now,” she said. “It’s a shame you can never remember any of your

nightmares. Maybe if you told me what it’s about you wouldn’t have it so often … It might make it a bit less scary, too.”

Merlin had had the same nightmare many times, ever since he’d been small. But now it came much more often, and left him more upset. So he was glad he couldn’t remember very much of it once he was awake.

“Don’t worry, Mother,” he said. “You can go back to bed now. I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure …” she said, and looked into his eyes for a moment. “You know, you’re very special, Merlin. Now sleep tight and don’t have any dreams at all.”

Merlin fell asleep again at last, but it took a long time. That word *special* kept going round and round in his mind. He was still thinking about it when he woke up in the morning, and it stayed stuck in his head while he ate his thin porridge. His mother

was upset to see her son's gloomy face. She sent him off to fetch a bucket of milk.

It was a damp, cloudy autumn day, and Merlin plodded through the village, feeling worried. He lived with his mother in the far west of Britain. The country around the village was full of steep mountains and deep valleys. They were poor, like all the people in the village, but his mother often told him he was special.

He had no father, but there were plenty of children like him whose fathers had been killed or were away fighting. These were difficult, dangerous times in Britain. Bands of Saxon warriors rode across the land, stealing and murdering, and many Britons were killed in battles with them.

But Merlin had never had a father. Merlin's mother said that he had just ... arrived. Her own family were rich and

important. No one had believed her when she'd said her baby had no father. She couldn't tell them anything more, so they had kicked her out and sent her to live far away. Everyone in the village knew the story of Merlin and his mother. Merlin hated the way people pointed at her and laughed. They made jokes about her too.

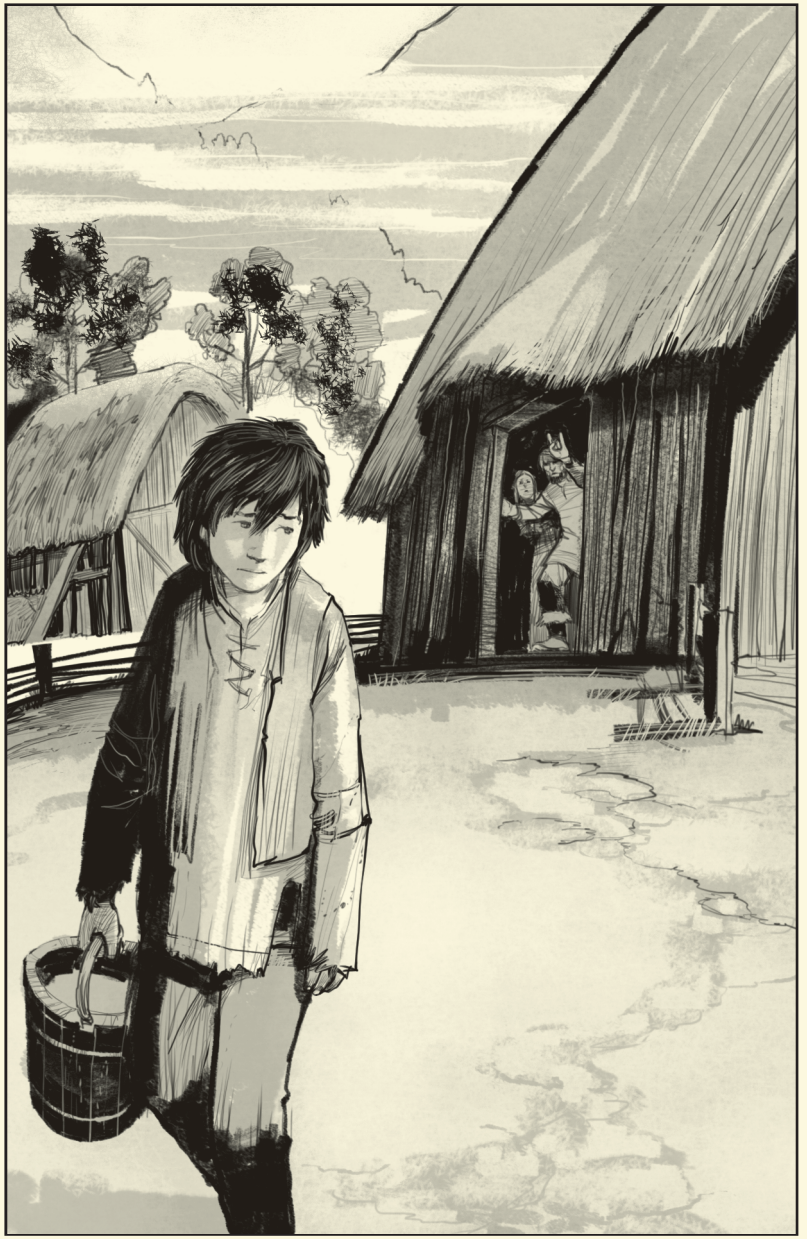
But he hated the way they thought of him even more. The village grown-ups had always been horrible. They whispered and muttered to each other when they thought he wasn't listening. And the children were worse – they called him names and didn't even play with him.

Merlin was at the edge of the village now. He stopped at the farm where he got the milk. There was a full barrel of milk by the door of the cowshed and a big wooden spoon. He spooned milk into his bucket as the cows mooed at him from the warm gloom of the

shed. He left a coin in payment. The farmer and his wife gave him nasty looks from the door of their cottage.

"Go on, be off with you," the farmer growled. He held out his hand with the fingers in the shape of a devil's horns. It was the sign to defend himself and his wife against The Evil Eye – the villagers always made it when they saw Merlin. There was something about him that made them feel very nervous.

Merlin set off home with the bucket of milk. If only he was normal! He often thought he'd give a lot to be like the rest of the boys in the village. But deep inside he felt his mother was right. He knew he *was* different in some way. It was no good trying to pretend he wasn't. The dream told him that, even if he never remembered what happened in it. There were other things as well –



strange, scary things he thought about that he kept secret from his mother.

He pushed down the bad thoughts and walked on slowly. Maybe he could change and then people would like him more. Maybe if he was really nice to them, they would be a bit nicer to him ...

Just then, Merlin heard the sound of hooves pounding across the nearby fields. He looked up and saw a small band of warriors on horse-back galloping towards the village. As they came closer, Merlin saw where they wanted to go. Suddenly he went cold all over – they were heading straight for his hut! He dropped the bucket with a loud clang, and all the milk spilt onto the muddy path.

But Merlin didn't care. He was already running, calling out to his mother ...