

MACMILLAN READERS

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

STEPHEN COLBOURN

King Arthur
and the
Knights of the Round Table



MACMILLAN

Contents

<i>A Note About These Stories</i>	4
<i>A Picture Dictionary</i>	6
<i>The People in These Stories</i>	7
1 The Coming of Arthur	9
2 The Sword in the Stone	15
3 Excalibur	19
4 Queen Guinevere	22
5 Merlin and Nimuë	27
6 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight	32
7 The Chapel Perilous	39
8 Tristram and Iseult	46
9 Percivale and Lancelot	56
10 The Siege Perilous	62
11 The Quest for the Holy Grail	66
12 The Breaking of the Round Table	70
13 The Passing of Arthur	77
<i>Points for Understanding</i>	81
<i>Glossary</i>	84
<i>Exercises</i>	89

The Coming of Arthur

Merlin the Magician and King Uther Pendragon

It was a time of war in Britain. There was much fighting and killing. There were many small kingdoms in Britain and each kingdom had its own king. But no king was strong enough to rule all the land. There was no peace in Britain and the people suffered.

Merlin the Magician spoke to the people. ‘One king will come,’ he said. ‘All the land will become one kingdom. And one king will rule in one land. There will be peace at last.’

But who was this king? Perhaps it was Uther Pendragon, the King of Winchester. Uther was a strong king with a large army. He ruled most of southern Britain. Only the land of Cornwall, to the far west, had a king as powerful as Uther. The King of Cornwall was named Gorlois.

King Uther spoke to Merlin the Magician. ‘I will go to Cornwall,’ said Uther. ‘I will make peace with King Gorlois. I will marry one of his daughters and we will have a son. Then our son will be King of all Britain.’

Merlin was silent. He looked at King Uther. Uther was short but he had a strong body. His hair and eyes were as black as the feathers of a raven¹⁰. Uther spoke loudly and roughly. Men were afraid of him because he was always angry. Uther rode a great warhorse and he carried a heavy sword. He could kill a man with one blow¹¹ of his sword.

Merlin was the opposite of Uther. Merlin was tall, but he was not strong. He did not carry a sword. Merlin’s hair was as white as the feathers of a swan¹², but he was not an old man.

No one knew where Merlin came from. Some men said that Merlin came out of the west, from across the sea.

Merlin spoke quietly and said few words. But everyone listened to him when he spoke, because Merlin was wise and clever.

‘Tell me, magician,’ said Uther. ‘Can you look into the future? Can you tell me – will my son be King of all Britain?’

Merlin was silent. His eyes were the colour of the clear blue sky. He did not look at the king; he looked far away. And there was sadness in Merlin’s eyes when he spoke.

‘Yes, Sire¹³,’ said the magician softly. ‘Your son will be King of all Britain. But the unmarried daughter of King Gorloïs is very young. She is only a child.’

Uther Pendragon’s face became bright with joy. ‘Bring horses!’ he shouted to his men. ‘We will ride to Cornwall.’

Gorloïs – King of Cornwall

After many days, King Uther came to the land of Cornwall. He rode to Tintagel Castle, where King Gorloïs lived with his wife, Igrayne. The castle was built of black stone and stood on a high cliff above a dark sea.

‘King Uther, you are welcome!’ said Gorloïs. ‘Eat and drink. We will be friends.’

So Uther and Gorloïs sat in the castle hall and ate and drank. King Gorloïs was an old, grey-haired man, but his wife, Igrayne, was young and very beautiful. Her hair was the colour of gold.

As soon as Uther saw Igrayne, he looked at no one else. He drank more and more wine and his face became red. He stared at Queen Igrayne. But she would not look at Uther. She lowered her eyes. King Gorloïs looked angrily at his guest.

‘Tell me, lady,’ said Uther to Igrayne. ‘How many children do you have?’

‘Three,’ answered Queen Igrayne. ‘My two older daughters are married. My youngest daughter is three years old. Her name is Morgana.’

Uther drank more wine. ‘I can give you a son,’ he said.

When King Gorlois heard these words, he stood up and put his hand on his sword. ‘Uther Pendragon! Leave my house now,’ he shouted, ‘and never return!’

Uther stood up slowly. ‘I will leave,’ he said to Gorlois, ‘but I will return with an army.’

And, so, King Uther made war against King Gorlois. In October, Uther’s army attacked Tintagel Castle. But Uther could not take the castle – it was too strong.

Igrayne – Queen of Cornwall

‘I do not want Tintagel Castle,’ Uther said to Merlin. ‘I want Queen Igrayne. She will be my wife! Winter is coming and my men have little food. I will take the army back to Winchester. But first, I must have Igrayne. Help me, Merlin. And I will do anything that you say.’

‘Tell your men to leave,’ Merlin said. ‘Tell them to move east, back towards Winchester. But tell them not to go far. They must wait in the woods. King Gorlois will see that your men are leaving. He will come out of the castle and follow your army. Then you will go inside the castle and visit Igrayne.’

‘The castle guards will kill me,’ said Uther.

‘I will protect¹⁴ you,’ said Merlin. ‘I will use magic. I will cast a spell¹⁵ and I will change you. For one night, I will give you the face and body of Gorlois. But you must do one thing for me.’

‘What do you want?’ asked Uther Pendragon.

Uther Pendragon's promise to Merlin

'Igrayne will have a child,' said Merlin. 'You will give that child to me.'

'Yes,' said Uther. 'I will give you the child.'

So Uther gave orders to his men: 'Move away from the castle. Move back to the woods.'

The men walked away to the east, back towards Winchester. But they did not go far. Before night came, Uther's men stopped. They waited in the woods.

But Uther did not go with his men. He and Merlin hid in a circle of tall stones and waited. The king and the magician watched the gates of the castle. At last, the gates opened. King Gorlois came out with his men and they followed Uther's army.

Merlin spoke words of magic. He cast a spell. Slowly, the shape of Uther's face and body changed until he looked like an old, grey-haired man. Uther had become Gorlois!

Uther rode his horse to the gates of Tintagel Castle. 'Open the gates!' he ordered the guards. 'I will go to the Queen.'

Uther Pendragon went to the bedchamber of Queen Igrayne. And that night, there was a great storm. The wind blew from the sea and lightning lit the black walls of the castle. The sound of thunder was loud, but the sounds of battle were louder. The armies of Uther and Gorlois were fighting with swords and axes. Igrayne cried out as she slept.

In the morning, Uther was gone. Igrayne went to the eastern walls of the castle and saw her husband's army returning. But King Uther's men were behind the army of Gorlois and they were carrying her husband's body on a shield. King Gorlois was dead. He had been killed in the battle and his body was covered in blood from many wounds¹⁶.

Then Uther entered Tintagel Castle as himself and Igrayne became his wife.