

Arthur, Warrior Chief.

1.

Anthony cycled to the top of the rise and stopped. Ahead of him, the narrow private road wound down a gentle slope. At the bottom of the slope, in a damp hollow, was Pendine Hall.

Despite the cold drizzle, Anthony was in no hurry to continue his journey. For one thing, his legs ached from the slog of pedaling his mum's ancient bicycle up the sloping drive. For another, he didn't want to spend a boring evening with Mr Rhys.

Mr Rhys lived in the house next door to Anthony and worked at Pendine Hall, the old manor house at the edge of the village where Anthony lived.

Pendine Hall had recently been turned into a museum. Anthony's teacher, Miss Green, had promised the class a trip to Pendine Hall in the Summer Term, when the end of year tests were over. Anthony was already planning ways to get out of it.

Anthony hated going to museums, old churches, libraries and art galleries - all the places Mum thought were really interesting and would do him good. Anthony didn't like Mr Rhys, either, which was a pity because Mr Rhys was Anthony's new babysitter.

"I don't need a babysitter," Anthony had insisted. "I'm in Year 6 now. I can look after myself. No one else in my class has a babysitter. Darren Crockett spends whole nights on his own, and he's a year younger than me."

"I don't care what Darren Crockett does," said Mum firmly. "I've got to work late every night next week, and Mr Rhys has agreed to keep an eye on you. You're to go to Pendine Hall after school."

"Ohhhh, Mum!" wailed Anthony. "It's miles away and my bike's broken."

“That’s OK, “ said Mum. “You can borrow mine.”

“Ohhhh, Mum!”

Reluctantly, Anthony pushed off and let the ancient iron bulk of the bike carry him freewheeling down the narrow winding road towards Pendine Hall. He put on the brakes and slithered to a stop on the wet gravel in front of the house. Close up, the house with its pillars and broad steps looked larger and grander. It also looked shut.

Anthony gazed up at three rows of windows all shuttered, not a chink of light.

“Great!” thought Anthony. “There’s no one here. Now I can go home and watchTV and eat crisps!”

A man’s voice came from behind him: Anthony! Welcome to Pendine Hall.” It was Mr Rhys. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long. I was just checking the outbuildings. Let’s go inside out of the cold and wet.”

Mr Rhys opened the big door and led Anthony into a large, dingy lobby. The walls were the colour of stewed tea. Even through the thick soles of his trainers Anthony could feel the chill of the stone floor.

“We’re trying to keep the house exactly as it was when the last owner died,” said Mr Rhys. “Come on I’ll show you around. I think you’ll find it interesting.”

‘I doubt it,’ thought Anthony. Reluctantly, he followed Mr Rhys through the lobby and up a large, curving flight of stairs.

“I’m the Keeper,’ said Mr Rhys, over his shoulder. “That means I look after the collections in the house - the armour, the paintings, the books, the stuffed animals. I also help people who want to know about the past. I try to help them understand what it was really like to live one hundred, five hundred - even a thousand years ago. Do you like stories about the past, Anthony?”

“No,” said Anthony.

“Pity,” said Mr Rhys. “This house is full of stories, if you know where to look.”

At the top of the stairs was a set of brown-stained double doors. “This is the main saloon. The room was supposed to be used for entertaining important guests,” said Mr Rhys. “But the last owner kept his collection in it.”

He flung open the doors and led Anthony into the saloon. Anthony could sense it was huge. He couldn't see much because the shuttered windows made the room dark and eerie.

As he walked, shining eyes seemed to follow him across the dark room. Anthony realized with a shudder of fear that they weren't alone. An enormous crowd of people must be standing in the room, motionless, silent and watching.

Mr Rhys switched on the lights from a panel at the far side of the room.

It was the biggest room Anthony had ever been in. It was much bigger than the school hall. He and Mr Rhys were alone in the room. The eyes which Anthony had seen were staring out from dozens of cases of stuffed animals which were crammed against the walls, piled one on top of another. Above the stuffed animals were paintings of men in long wigs and ladies in velvet gowns with lace collars. It was a room full of dead things - dead birds and animals, and long dead people - and they all looked horribly alive.

“It can be a bit creepy at first, but you'll get used to it,” said Mr Rhys.

‘I don't want to get used to it,’ thought Anthony. He tried to ignore the accusing stares of the motionless hares, owls and weasels.

‘Anthony, come and look at this.’ Mr Rhys was in the centre of the room standing next to a snooker table which was covered by a vast white sheet.

Something long, thin and metal was resting on the edge of the table. "What is it?" asked Anthony.

"Would you believe long lost treasure?" said Mr Rhys.

Anthony looked at him suspiciously.

"Yes," said Mr Rhys. "It does seem a bit childish, but -" He lifted up the long strip of discoloured metal. "It could be..."

"Could be what?" asked Anthony.

"Have you ever heard of the lost treasures of Britain?" asked Mr Rhys.

"The sword, the sacrificial knife, the cauldron?"

Anthony shook his head. "Sound made up, like fairy story stuff."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it," agreed Mr Rhys. "But have you ever seen what happens when you put sodium in water?"

"Sorry, what?" Anthony was finding it hard to follow what Mr Rhys was saying. He seemed to jump from one subject to another without any connection. Fairy story treasure, chemistry and the old lump of iron he was still clutching: none of it made any sense.

"I'll show you," said Mr Rhys. He put down the piece of metal and walked briskly out of a small side door. When he came back, he was carrying a thick drinking glass half-filled with water.

"Watch carefully." Mr Rhys pulled a thick gardening glove out of his pocket and put it on. Then he opened the display case next to him and with his gloved hand lifted out what looked to Anthony like the worn remnant of a stick of chalk.

Mr Rhys dropped the chalk piece into the water. Immediately, it started to bubble furiously and sparks flew out from the chalk. The top of the glass was soon filled with dense, white smoke.

"Sodium!" said Mr Rhys. "Dangerous stuff when it gets near water." He put the smoking glass onto the floor. "Now, what do you know about Arthur, Anthony?"

"I don't know anybody called Arthur," replied Anthony.

"No, not someone you know. I meant Arthur from history."

"Oh, do you mean *King* Arthur?" asked Anthony.

Mr Rhys nodded.

"Miss Green at school told us some stories about him, and the knights of the Round Table. But it wasn't in History, it was English. He wasn't a real king, he was just in stories and stuff like that. He was made up, Miss Green said."

"Hmm," said Mr Rhys frowning. "That's not quite true, Anthony." He paused. "I can assure you, Arthur was real - although he wasn't a king. He was a general, a fighter. And I'm afraid there were no knights of the Round Table, at least not in the sense you mean."

Mr Rhys picked up the long strip of metal again. "The last owner of Pendine Hall collected all sorts of things, most of it rubbish. He didn't know what he had. He just hoarded things like a magpie. But some of things he found may be prices less - like this. It's a sword blade, very old. It's made of a strange metal. I've never seen one like it, but I have heard of one in stories and legends. It might just be from the time of Arthur - the real Arthur - maybe even older. It just might be -"

He suddenly stopped. "Good heavens! Look at the time!" He pointed to the enormous grandfather clock in the corner.

"It's time to lock up and get you home. I've got my bike downstairs, in the back kitchen. We can cycle together."

“But what about the sword and the stuff in the glass?” asked Anthony, intrigued in spite of himself.

“Oh, that,” said Mr Rhys, walking towards the back on light switches. “That can wait until tomorrow.”

2.

The next evening Mr Rhys took Anthony through the side door in the saloon into the small room.

“This is the Keeper’s Room,” he said. “It’s where I hide from the really awful visitors. There was a chap here the other day who begged me for the phone number of the person who’d stuffed all the animals in the saloon. His parakeet had just died and he wanted it stuffed. I tried to tell him that whoever the taxidermist was must have died a hundred years ago, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. In the end I had to give him the number of National Rail Enquiries to make him go away. Tea?”

He poured two mugs and placed them on a small table. Also on the table was the ancient sword blade.

“I was going to tell you the story of Arthur and the sword, and how he became leader of Britain. But you probably know about it already from what your teacher told you.”

Anthony nodded. “Miss Green said there was a magic sword in a stone, and all the knights tried to pull it out. But none of them could. Then Arthur pulled it out. And that showed he was the real king. But I missed the end, because it got a bit boring, and I was messing about and she sent me to Mr Boardman.”

Mr Rhys sighed. “It’s hard to know where to begin. To start with, Anthony, the sword wasn’t in the stone, it was *on* the stone. And there weren’t any knights, because it was five years too early. And...I think I’d better tell you what really happened.

For over three hundred years Britain had been part of the Roman Empire and many people in Britain knew only Roman ways. They had the Roman army, the legions, to protect them from their enemies - the wild Picts who lived in Scotland, and the Saxons who attacked the towns on the South Coast every summer and sailed away with whatever they could steal.

Then, within a couple of generations, it was all gone. The city of Rome itself was under attack, and the Roman Emperor said he could no longer afford to send troops to protect Britain.

With the Roman army gone, the Saxons launched a full-scale invasion.

Someone had to take command and organize an army from all the kingdoms to fight the invaders. A man named Ambrosius tried to form new legions. Some of the people even called him 'Emperor'. But he was poisoned by a rival who was jealous of his power.

The Saxons set up their own kingdoms in Kent and Sussex. British bards sang mournful songs about the 'Lost Lands', but with Ambrosius dead no one seemed able to do much more than that.

Something had to be done. It was Myrddin's idea to hold the Emperor Ceremony.

Myrddin claimed to be the last Druid. No one knew if that was true. (No one could remember what Druids were supposed to do, because it had been three hundred years since the Roman legions had massacred the Druids on the Isle of Anglesey.) But Myrddin had the treasures of Britain: the sword, the cauldron and the knife. Like the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London today, they were a sign: whoever owned them was the rightful Emperor of Britain.

As soon as Ambrosius had been buried, Myrddin summoned all the kings of Britain to meet in the great stone circle on Salisbury Plain. There it would be decided once and for all who was to be the Emperor of Britain.

Just before noon on Midsummer's Day, if you'd stood in the stone circle you could have looked across the great flat plain and seen - coming from every direction along the ancient pathways - groups of men: the kings of all Britain and their bodyguards.

Some were the kings of the greatest kingdoms - Powys, Gwynedd and Dyfed - wearing their richest robes. On horseback came King Marcus of Kernow, dressed in the patched remnants of a Roman general's armour. And there were others who called themselves kings but were no more than thugs or petty warlords who only ruled over one or two wretched villages.

As each king approached he laid down his weapons and entered the circle alone, as Myrddin had insisted. "Thjere will be only one sword within the circle," Myrddin had said, "the sword belonging to the regalia of the Emperor."

One great stone lay on its side, like an altar, within the circle. On that stone lay a sword in a scabbard which was attached to a thin green belt. Beside the sword was a small bronze cooking pot on three stumpy legs, and a broad-bladed knife.

To one side of the altar stone stood Myrddin dressed in a white robe. On the other side of the stone stood the Abbot of Glastonbury.

When all the kings were inside the circle, Myrddin spoke.

"Behold! The treasures of the Emperor of Britain. The sword, Caledfwlch, to defend his poeple. The cauldron of Annfwyn, to give him strength and heal his wounds. And the knife, Camwennan, to show that if he should fail in mind or body, he will willingly give his blod to save the land of Britain.

"This sword, Caledfwlch, is not of this world. It was made from a star which fell burning from the heavens. It will never break, it will never blunt or rust. But only its true owner - the destined Emperor - can take it from its scabbard. It will burst into flames and destroy anyone else who tries to draw it.

"Let the gods show us who is to be Emperor of Britain!"

There was a pause as the kings of Britain looked at each other, waiting to see who would make the first move, then Marcus of Kernow marched forward and stood in front of the altar stone.

"I claim my rightful place as Emperor."

"You're a Christian, aren't you, Marcus?" Myrddin said.

"I am."

The abbot stepped forward. "Hold out your hands, my son. In the name of Jesus Christ, Saint Michael and Saint George." As he spoke, the abbot sprinkled the upturned palms of King Marcus with holy water.

"If you would be Emperor draw the sword!" commanded Myrddin.

Marcus picked up the scabbard and grasped the handle of the sword. He immediately let out a cry and dropped the sword and scabbard.

"Myrddin!" he bellowed. "What Druid's trick is this?"

He held out his right hand. The palm was scorched red and the skin was already starting to blister.

"No trickery," said Myrddin calmly. "It simply proves that you are not the one your god has chosen to be Emperor."

As Marcus strode away from the altar stone rubbing his burned palm, King Urien of Rheged stepped forward. "I'll have none of your Christianity, abbot. I live by the old gods, and my holy man has told me it is their will that I become Emperor."

"Give me your hands," said Myrddin. "I bless you with water from the holy spring on the goddess Sulis." He sprinkled Urien's hands.

Urien grasped the sword. But just like King Marcus before him, he dropped it with a great shout. Crimson burns had appeared on the palm of his right hand the moment he tried to draw Caledfwlch from its scabbard.

One by one, each of the kings came forward. Some were blessed as Christians, tohers were blessed in the names of the old gods. But each man who tried to draw the sword got nothing but a burnt hand for his trouble.

By kate afternoon, fights had started to break out between the supporters of the rival kings. Eventually, only one king remained to be tested. He was an ugly little warlord from a tiny kingdom of three half-deserted villages on the edge of a particularly unpleasant bog in the far west.

“Step forward,” commanded Myrddin. “Are you a Christian or do you follow the old -”

The ritual was suddenly interrupted by a great pounding of horses’ hooves and jangling of harness, as a troop of mounted soldiers burst into the circle.

The horses were steaming and lathered with sweat. Some of the riders had fresh gashes down their cheeks and blood was congealing on wounds on arms and legs.

Their leader, a tall man wearing the tattered red cloak of a Roman cavalry officer, leapt from his horse. He tore off his leather helmet. His face was scarlet with rage.

“Myrddin! What are you doing? There are two hundred soldiers here - just sitting on their backsides, or fighting each other! Doesn’t anybody realize there’s a war on?”

“Show some respect, boy,” snapped King Marcus.

“Yes, Arthur,” said Myrddin. “You may be a good soldier, but you are in the presence of kings. We have met to decide who should be Emperor.

That seemed to enrage Arthur even more. "Emperor!" he shouted. "Emperor of what? I've spent all day trying to fight off three boatloads of Saxons with a handful of men, and there's a whole army - right here - sitting around doing nothing!"

"Oi! It's my turn to try and draw the sword," the short ugly king interrupted.

Myrddin picked up the sword in its scabbard and turned to Arthur. "Whoever can draw Caledfwlch shall be the Emperor of all Britain!"

"You want a sword?" shouted Arthur. "Here - take mine!" He pulled his sword from its scabbard, but below the hilt was only a few centimetres of jagged broken metal. Arthur threw the stump of the sword onto the ground at the little man's feet.

The Arthur grabbed the hilt of Caledfwlch in his gloved fist. "A good British sword should belong to someone prepared to use it for what it's for - killing Saxons!" He pulled Caledfwlch from its scabbard in one smooth movement.

There was a moment of silence, then a gasp of astonishment from all the kings standing in the stone circle.

"That's the sword of the Emperor," muttered the ugly little man. "It hasn't burnt him - he must be the Emperor!"

Arthur ignored the little man. "Stop this madness, Myrddin," he said. "We don't need an Emperor. You'll just make enemies of men who should be fighting side by side. And while the kings of Britain squabble, our enemies - the Saxons and the Picts - steal and murder where and when they please."

"Spoken like a common upstart!" sneered Marcus.

"Spoken like a true Emperor!" said Myrddin.

"Myrddin! Didn't you hear what I said!" cried Arthur. "Look - this is what I think of your Imperial sword -!"

With all his strength, Arthur plunged Caledfwlch into the soft ground beside the altar stone.

There was another gasp from the men in the stone circle. The Christians crossed themselves; the pagans made the sign to protect them against the evil eye.

“Arthur,” said Myrddin softly. “Come with me. I need to talk to you.”

He led Arthur to the far side of the circle of stones.

“Look at them, Arthur,” said Myrddin, “petty tyrants, bandits and thugs. They can be brave enough when led, but they’ve got brains as thick as these stones.

“Britain needs a leader, Arthur. Be their leader; be their Emperor. Lead them against the Saxons and Picts who are trying to destroy us.”

“No, Myrddin. I said no: I meant no. I’m not a king, and they’d never accept me as their Emperor. I’d have to fight every one of them, and would good would that do?”

“Alright, Arthur, not Emperor,” agreed Myrddin, careful not to provoke Arthur’s quick temper. “But you’ve got a clever mind and a soldier’s cunning: you could be their war leader - their Duke of Battles!”

Arthur hesitated. Myrddin could see his flattery was working.

“Take the sword, Arthur, but use it as you wish. Use it to lead an army that will push the Picts back over the wall and drive the Saxons into the sea.

“Go on, Arthur - take the sword!”

Arthur found himself beside the altar stone again with Myrddin beside him. Arthur reached out once again, grasped the sword by the hilt and drew it from the earth.

2.

The sun was still shining when Anthony arrived at Pendine Hall next evening. As he cycled along the gravel drive, Anthony found to his surprise that he was actually looking forward to seeing Mr Rhys again.

Anthony leaned his bike against one of the stone pillars beside the door. Then he tried the door handle. The front door was locked. Anthony was about to start knocking when he heard the distant sound of a man singing.

Anthony followed the sound around the side of the house. He found Mr Rhys sitting on a wooden garden bench on the terrace behind Pendine Hall.

“Hello, Anthony.”

He went back to singing.

*“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost.
For want of a horse, the king was lost.
For want of a king, the battle was lost.
For want of a battle, the war was lost.
For want of a war, the land was lost.
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail.”*

the nursery rhyme made no sense to Anthony. He ignored Mr Rhys and stred down the long avenue of elm strees to the lake. Beyond the lake, the land rose steeply to Pendine Hill.

There was something very weird about Pendine Hill. Anthony had been told stories about strange sounds coming from the hill at night, and shostly lights moving up and down the steep slopes of the hill in the darkness.

“You’re not listening to me, are you, Anthony?” said Mr Rhys.

“Err, no - I mean, yes,” said Anthony, flustered.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Mr Rhys. “I don’t need conversation, I can amuse myself. You carry on staring at Pendine Hill.”

He pulled a loop of leather out of his pocket and dangled it between his fingers.

“What’s that?” asked Anthony.

“Pendine Hill? It’s a large mound of rock and soil that was built thousands of years ago, and it’s supposed to be haunted.”

“No, I meant that thing in your hand.”

“What, this? It’s a leather stirrup.”

“What? For horse riding?”

“That’s right.”

There was a long pause.

“Mr Rhys...?”

“Yes, Anthony?”

“What was that you just said - about Pendine Hill?”

“Oh, do you mean about it being built thousands of years ago?”

“Yes.”

“It’s true,” said Mr Rhys. “It shouldn’t really be called a hill at all. It’s a fort. It was built long before the Romans came. There are lots of these old forts scattered around the country, and nobody knows for certain who built them.

Arthur used them as bases to fight the Saxon from. It was at a fort called Badon Hill that Arthur trapped the great Saxon army and destroyed it.”

“When was that?” asked Anthony.

“Oh, several years after Arthur took the sword from Myrddin and became the Duke of Battles,” replied Mr Rhys. “It was just as Arthur feared. many of the British kings refused to accept him as their new leader. Some of them did, but for the first few years for every battle he fought against the Saxons he had to fight one against a British warlord.

“Fortunately, Arthur had a secret weapon - this.” Mr Rhys dangled the leather stirrup from the thumb of his right hand. “It may not look like much, but it made Arthur’s army unbeatable in battle for twenty years.

“Battles have always been dreadful things, Anthony, full of fear and panic; the screams of the wounded and dying, and the most dreadful sights imaginable. But there was something particularly frightening about the way battles were fought in Arthur’s time.

“They were almost like rituals, blood sacrifices. As day broke, two armies would line up, facing each other, and form two human walls. Every soldier had a spear and a shield. The nobles and chiefs had swords at their sides as well. Other men had short-handled axes tucked into their belts.

But the battles always started with the spears, with both lines of men crashing into each other. Your spear would be stabbing at the enemy and his spear would be stabbing at you. Your only protection was the shield of the man next to you. His shield was the only thing protecting your right side as you stabbed with your stab; the only thing that could save you from the enemy spears plunging at your chest, throat and stomach - or their swords and axes hacking at your arms and legs. I didn’t matter how brave you were, or how skilled a fighter, if the man on your right in the shield wall failed, you were a dead man.

“Look up at Pendine Hill, Anthony and try to imagine it.”

It's day break. Bitterly cold. There's a damp mist in the air. A huge Saxon army is lined up on the side of a slope similar to Pendine Hill. Below them, in front of a lake, is a much smaller army of Britons. At a signal, both armies get ready to charge. every soldier is praying to whatever god they believe in that the man next to them won't fall, or faint with fear, or drop his shield in panic. Some men are so drunk they can hardly walk - that's the only way they can find the courage to fight. Other men are being sick with fright.

Slowly, as the sun rises behind the lake, the two armies begin to walk towards each other. Their terrible spears are lowered. They get to within a few metres of each other - and stop.

Neither side wants to make the first move. So, like two crowds of rival football fans they start to call out to each other - insults, curses: "Your father's a leper and your mother's a pig!" The worst insults they can think of.

Then one insult or curse takes the army's fancy and they begin to chant it together - over and over:

"Saxon cowards!"

"British Scum!"

"Saxon cowards! Saxon cowards! Saxon cowards!"

"British Scum! British Scum! British Scum! British Scum!"

Then someone starts pounding out the rhythm on the back of his shield:

Bam-bam - bam-bam! Bam-bam - bam-bam! Bam-bam - bam-bam!

Bam-bam - bam! Bam-bam - bam! Bam-bam - bam! Bam-bam - bam!

Then someone else starts stamping their feet in time to the curses. Others join in.

And so it goes: for two hours the two armies stand and taunt each other. Then, without warning, a horn sounds and both lines are surging forward. Some men trip and fall, some throw down their spears and shields and run away in blind panic.

Desperately the men left in the wall try to close the gaps, then with a deafening crash both armies smash into each other, spears plunging shields colliding.

Men are now lying on the floor, terribly wounded, screaming, but there's no time to help them. Out come the swords and axes, and the survivors are now trampling on the wounded, hacking and chopping at each other in a frenzy of fear and hatred.

The Britons suddenly fall back, as if they realize they're losing. A horn sounds, and the Britons turn and run, leaving the Saxon victors waving their swords, axes and spears in the air and screaming with delight and relief at being alive.

And then -

Out of the slanting sun, out of a thick copse of trees, come hundreds of horsemen charging towards them armed with long lances. As they gallop into the panicking Saxons, they fight like no horsemen have ever fought before. Their skill is supernatural, inhuman. These horsemen from hell can plunge a long spear into a man, pull it out, and then plunge it into another man - over and over again!

The Saxons turn and try to run back up the hill, but from the woods on the other side of the lake another squadron of mounted soldiers, whirling great battle axes. The weight of the swinging axes should drag them from their saddles, but it doesn't. The Saxons are dumbstruck. They never dreamed that men could fight like this.

Half-way up the hill, the tattered remnants of the great Saxon army form a circle, desperately trying to lock shield to shield. But their spears were dropped after the first charge at the bottom of the hill. They have only

swords, short-handled axes and knives to fend off the dreadful long lances of the Britons.

The leader of the British horsemen, a man in a scarlet cloak, signals his men to form a circle around the Saxons.

In silence and with an awful, deliberate slowness, the horsemen lower their lances at the Saxon circle.

“Spare no one!” shouts the British leader in the red cloak. “Kill them all!”

*There’s one terrible second of silence, then the British leader yells:
“Charge!”*

“And that,” said Mr Rhys, “was the battle of Badon Hill. Five Saxon kings died that day and their great invading army was destroyed - over nine hundred were said to have died in that charge alone.

“It took the Saxons twenty years to rebuild the army they lost that day. The man in the red cloak was, of course, Arthur. And this was the secret of his success -” Mr Rhys head up the stirrup. “It helped his cavalry control their horses and fight the way they did. Sometimes it’s the little things that make all the difference.”

“How?” asked Anthony. “I don’t understand. “

“It’s easy to show, but hard to explain, “ said Mr Rhys. “If you’d ever tried riding a horse without your feet in the stirrups, you’d know what I mean. It’s really difficult to stay in the saddle. You spend most of your time trying to keep your balance and grip the horse with your knees. With stirrups, you have something to support yourself; something to brace yourself against. You can lean left or right. You can turn in your saddle. You can push a lance in and pull it out. You can swing a sword or axe without fearing that if you swing too hard you’ll simply fall off your horse and be at the mercy of the enemy troops.”

He began to sing again:

*“For want of a nail, the shoe was lost.
For want of a shoe, the horse was lost.
For want of a horse...”*

And as he sung, he swung the leather stirrup backwards and forwards in time to the rhythm of the song.

“So, did Arthur win the war?” Anthony asked, when Mr Rhys finished his song.

“No, Anthony. In the end, I’m afraid, the Saxons won. The name *England* means “Land of the Angles” - and that’s another name for Saxons.

“But it wasn’t the Saxons who defeated Arthur, it was his own men: the British. But that’s another story for another day. It’s time to lock up the house and go home.”

4.

When Anthony arrived at Pendine Hall the next day the front door was shut and locked. He rapped on the door expecting to hear footsteps coming down the great stairway and echoing along the lobby.

He waited and waited.

Nothing.

Anthony stepped back and gazed up at the shuttered windows, hoping to see Mr Rhys’s face gazing dwn. He’d really enjoyed the story of the battle and was hoping to hear more about Arthur’s wars.

Then he noticed an empty bottle on the step beside the door. A scrap of paper was sticking out of the top. It looked like a note left out for the

milkman, but Anthony knew it wasn't that; the yellow label on the label had garish red lettering: *Castle Hutton Cherry Cola*.

Anthony pulled the scrap of paper out of the bottle:

I'm in the Kitchen Garden. Follow the path around the house to your right.
It was signed: *R.*

Anthony followed the gravel path around the side of the house. About fifty metres away to his right, Anthony could see the bent back of Mr Rhys stooped over a raised vegetable bed. Even in the biting north-easterly wind Mr Rhys was only wearing a thin T-shirt.

Mr Rhys straightened up. He was pulling up stinging nettles and carefully putting them into a basket on the path behind him as if they were flowers or vegetables.

"Very underrated plants, nettles," said Mr Rhys. "You can make delicious soup with them - it's terribly good for you, full of iron. Just the thing to keep you warm on a cold day. And you can use them to dye cloth a lovely shade of green. It needn't just be cloth - fur, cloth leather, anything. You could even dye a horse green if you had enough nettles!"

Anthony shivered.

"You look frozen, boy. We'd better go indoors before you turn blue!"

Mr Rhys led the way indoors, up the stairs and through the Grand Saloon. But as they were passing through the Saloon he stopped at a small glass-fronted cabinet.

"Ah! There it is!"

He lifted the lid and took out a piece of green green cord.

When they were seated once again in the small Keeper's Room, Mr Rhys twisted the piece of green cord around the knuckles of his left hand - in and

out, over and under. Then he took two loops onto two fingers of his left hand.

“Things are not always what they seem to be.” Mr Rhys stretched out his hands to reveal a cat’s cradle in the shape of a five-pointed star.

“Now you see it,” he pinched one end of the cord between the finger and thumb of his left hand and flicked the loop of cord into the air. “Now you don’t!” a straight length of unknotted cord landed at Anthony’s feet.

Anthony picked up the cord. It was soft - not like string, more like a thick dressing-gown girdle - and twisting through it was a thin golden thread.

“The cord please, Anthony.”

Anthony placed the cord onto Mr Rhys’s outstretched palm.

“Thank you. And now I think it’s time to tell you about Gawain and the challenge of the Green Giant.”

It was nearly twenty years since the battle at Badon Hill. There had been the odd skirmish with Saxons, and fights with rebel chiefs and warlords, but for the most part it had been twenty years of peace.

Many of the Roman ways had been saved. On feast days and holy days several of Arthur’s men now wore togas. But many even older customs were coming back, and one of these older customs was giving Arthur problems.

Arthur was getting older - it couldn’t be denied. His thick red beard was going grey, and in weapons training he was no longer as quick with a sword or a lance as he’d once been.

Merlin spoke to him plainly: “There are a lot of men in your army who are beginning to mutter about what will happen when you’re no longer Emperor.”

"Myrddin!" Arthur was on the point of losing his famous temper. "How many times do I have to tell you? I am not an Emperor!"

"Of course you're not! Of course you're not!" agreed Myrddin, shaking his head vigorously. "You tell everybody what to do and they do it - nothing like an Emperor at all. No, no no!" He paused. "But you and I can remember what happened when Ambrosius died. And we also know that the Saxons are getting stronger every year. There's another war coming and you may not be able to lead the armies this time."

"I know, I know!" said Arthur, irritably.

"You need to name someone who will succeed you as Duke of Battles."

Arthur said nothing.

"Follow the old ways," said Myrddin, "the ways the clans and tribes understand and respect. Name an heir - Gawain, your sister's son."

"I only wish I could," said Arthur. "But you seem to have forgotten, Myrddin, I have two sisters. What about Medraut, my sister Morgana's son? He's half the soldier that Gawain is, but he'd do anything to succeed me. And Gawain is too modest, he'd never seek to take command."

Myrddin sighed. "Yes," he agreed, "it's always the way."

"Gawain would be the better choice, but what can I do, Myrddin? If I choose Medraut Gawain, my legacy would be a civil war. If I choose Medraut, the army gets a poor commander and we lose the coming war against the Saxons."

"What it needs," said Myrddin, "is some way to prove to everyone - Medraut as well - that Gawain is the better choice. I think we need to look to the old ways once again..."

It was Christmas in the City of the Legions, but there wasn't much left of the great Roman town. The temples had been knocked down and the stone taken by local farmers to build field walls. All the roads and the forum were choked with thistles, hogweed and nettles, and in some places sturdy young trees were growing out of cracks in the pavement.

Since the late summer Arthur's troops had been clearing an area of rubble in the middle of the town, near where the old Roman town hall had been. Then they'd built an enormous wooden feasting hall.

Arthur didn't need a feasting hall, but it was a good way to keep the soldiers busy. Arthur could see how bored his troops had become, and he knew how quickly bored soldiers forget the enemy and start fighting each other. This was the Roman way to keep soldiers busy and fit.

To call it a hall makes it sound grander than it looked. It looked more like an enormous wooden barn. There was great double door at one end, with a row of wooden pillars in front to make it look more Roman and impressive - but it still looked like a barn.

Inside it was dark and foul-smelling. There were no glass windows, only heavy wooden shutters. The only light came from rushes dipped in pig fat, which gave a poor light and stank. In the centre of the hall was the cooking fire. A hole had been knocked in the roof to let the smoke out, but the strong winter wind didn't always draw the smoke out; often it blew the smoke back down the hole. Smoke and cooking smells and the stink of unwashed bodies mingled in a foul fug.

Although it was Christmas, the season of goodwill, tempers were short. Warlords glared at each other across the wooden tables. In the smoky gloom, their men scowled and muttered.

"If that fellow from Gwynned looks at me again, I'll go over there and smash his face in!"

"I'm sure that Powys bloke is laughing at me! One more snigger from him and I'll take my knife to him so fast he'll have second mouth to laugh with!"

Suddenly, the huge double doors at the end of the hall were flung open. Hearing the crash and feeling the sudden chill wind blowing in, everyone turned to see who had burst in.

Into the smoke and the darkness rode an enormous man on a huge warhorse. Both man and horse were green. Not only were the man's clothes and the horse's tack green, but the skin of the man and the hide of the horse were bright green too.

"So this is Arthur's hall?" bellowed the green giant. "And these are his brave companions?" The giant's voice was a great thundering, rumbling boom. It seemed to come not from his throat, but from deep within his body.

He gave a loud, mocking laugh. "You aren't men! You aren't soldiers! You're nothing but beardless boys, milksops - all of you! Look at how you shake and shiver at the sight of me!"

It was true. Even the bravest soldier was afraid. Some were crossing themselves, or spitting on the ground for luck, or making the sign to keep away the Evil Eye. Those that had them, grabbed for the luck charms that hung at their belts.

Everyone in the hall knew that green was the colour of magic; the colour of creatures from the other world - the world of spirits, monsters and ghosts; fiends that no man-made weapon could harm.

"If there's anyone among you with any courage," boomed the green giant, "I challenge him to a duel!"

Hanging from his side was an enormous two-handed sword. He lifted the sword high into the air and whirled it around his head, like one of the mad Saxon warriors who were always the first to charge into battle and always the first to die.

"I challenge any man here to trade me blow for blow. And you weaklings may have the first blow. I won't resist. You may strike as hard as you are able - but make sure you strike well. For then it will be my turn, and you must accept my blow, unresisting just as I did.

The green giant glared around the room. No one moved.

"You cowards! Is there no one with the courage to accept my challenge? Is there no one who'll trade me blow for blow."

Arthur glanced to his left, where Gawain was sitting; then to Medraut to his right. Slowly and deliberately Arthur started to get to his feet. But before he could challenge the green giant, a voice from his left called: "I, Gawain, accept your challenge!"

Gawain stepped forward. The green giant jumped from his horse, sword in hand, and strode over to meet Gawain. Both men stood in the centre of the hall glaring at each other.

Then, without a word, the green giant handed his sword to Gawain and knelt down.

"Come on!" roared the green giant. "Or has your courage failed you too? Your best blow - now!"

Gawain swung the sword high and brought it down on the green giant's neck.

The huge sword sliced through the giant's neck and the head fell to the ground with a thud.

There was a ragged cheer that quickly faded as Arthur's men realized that the green giant's body hadn't toppled forward. It remained kneeling, headless, beside the hearthstone in the middle of the hall. There was a gasp as the green giant reached out a green hand, picked up his head by its green hair, and clambered to his feet. He held out the head towards Gawain.

“Now it’s your turn to receive my blow. But not here, and not now. Come and find me a year and a day from now, by the crooked bank on the north side of the West River.” He took his sword from Gawain and thrust it back into its scabbard. Then, still holding his head by the hair, the green giant remounted his horse.

“If you don’t keep your word and find me, I will find you, Gawain. Then you’ll die a coward’s death, instead of dying like a brave man and a true warrior.” He turned his horse and rode towards the great double doors of the feasting hall. As he reached the door, he turned and bellowed: A year and a day, Gawain - just ask anyone north of the West River, they’ll show you where to find me. Meet me, Gawain, or be hunted down like a rat!”

Poor Gawain! All that winter, and the next spring, summer and autumn too, he was haunted by what was certain to happen to him when he met the green giant.

Death was his first thought on waking, and his last thought at night before he fell into a fitful sleep. But even when he was asleep Gawain was plagued by nightmares of the dreadful moment when the green giant swung the terrible sword and - off would come his head!

Just before Christmas a small war-band of Picts, desperate for food in the bitter weather, sailed south and raided some of the small villages on the west coast of Britain. So, as luck would have it, Arthur’s men were camped only a few miles south of the West River when it was time for Gawain to set off in search of the green giant.

It took all Gawain’s courage and determination to saddle his horse and collect together his meagre rations.

He slipped from the camp before dawn, unable to face saying his final goodbyes to his friends.

It was the bitterest winter in a century. As Gawain rode north he passed sheep frozen to death in the fields. He spent the night in an abandoned

farm where the farmer and his family had fled south when their stocks of food and firewood had run out.

Gawain didn't see a trace of any living creature until near nightfall, when he saw smoke rising in the distance. He crossed the river by the old Roman stone bridge. Following the plume of smoke, he approached a sharp bend in the river bank. As he got closer, he could hear a high-pitched scraping.

In a hollow, standing beside a spluttering fire, was the green giant. He was turning a great round grindstone to sharpen his enormous double-handed sword.

"Greetings, Gawain!" he bellowed. "Welcome to my humble home! I won't bother to show you around, you won't be here long!" He swung the enormous sword and brought it swishing down in a practice stroke. "Perfect! Won't you join me?"

Gawain dismounted.

"Kneel!" commanded the green knight. "And receive what you deserve!"

Trying to control his fear, Gawain knelt on the stony ground of the river bank. He heard the upstroke of the sword and flinched.

"What's this?" demanded the green giant. "Are you afraid, Gawain? I never showed fear when you struck off my head."

"Strike now!" cried Gawain. "I'm ready!"

The sword went up, and hurtled down, but as it came within a hair's breadth of Gawain's neck it stopped dead. All Gawain felt were two gentle taps, one on each shoulder.

Gawain sprung to his feet, sword in hand. "Enough of these games! Now fight - whoever or whatever you are!"

"Stop!" called a familiar voice.

Gawain turned and saw Arthur standing on the ridge above him. "You've done well, Gawain - better than any other man I can think of. You faced certain death with courage, and fought a creature from the Other World - except, of course, he isn't!"

As Arthur clambered down the sloping bank, Gawain turned and looked hard at the green giant. He was big, but he no longer looked like the giant the Gawain remembered from the feasting hall. And the green of his skin was streaked and patchy.

"But how was he - were you...? I cut your head off!"

"It's not as difficult as you think to make strange things happen in a dark, smoke-filled hall," said Arthur, with a smile. "Give men enough strong drink, or frighten them, and it's not hard to make them believe almost anything. Ask Myrddin."

"But why?"

"It was a test to show to all the kings and chiefs that you have the courage and determination to lead the armies of Britain in the Saxon Wars which will come soon. Here -"

Arthur removed Gawain's belt and sword and tied Caledfwlch on its green and gold belt around Gawain's waist.

"When we return, I want all the troops to see who is to be their new leader."

But when they reached the camp that night, no one noticed Gawain was wearing Caledfwlch. While Arthur and Gawain had been away, Medraut had declared himself Emperor of Britain. He had seized the remaining treasures - the cauldron and the knife - and left the camp, taking with him many of Arthur's best troops.

“And that is enough for tonight,” said Mr Rhys. “It’s time to be cycling back.”

“Oh, no!” protested Anthony. “I’ve got to know what happened next.”

“I thought you didn’t like *history and stories and stuff*,” said Mr Rhys in a voice that sounded rather like Anthony’s.

“I don’t,” said Anthony.

“No,” agreed Mr Rhys, with a smile. “I can see you don’t.”

5.

“It’s getting near the end of the story of Arthur,” said Mr Rhys, when Anthony arrived at Pendine House the next evening for his last babysitting session. “So I thought the best place to finish it would be in the library.”

He led the way up the staircase, opened the door, and led Anthony into a large oval shaped room. The room was full of light. Thousands and thousands of old, leather-bound books filled three walls of the room from floor to ceiling. Large bay windows looked out across the gardens behind the hall.

Mr Rhys walked over to the window and stared out. Come over here, Anthony you can see the lake and the river. Can you see that curved bank down there? It looks a little like a bent elbow or a dog’s leg, doesn’t it? It’s very like the place where the last battle was fought.

“It took Arthur more than a year to catch up with Medraut, and it was a dreadful year. Every day, more men would slip away from Arthur’s army to join Medraut’s rebels. And you couldn’t really blame them.”

Arthur was an old man, and Medraut had two of the great Imperial treasures of Britain. The youngest of the fighters couldn’t remember the days when Arthur had been a hero. Many of them hadn’t even been born when the

Saxons had been massacred on Badon Hill. Joining Medrod must have seemed the clever thing to do - a good career move for an up and coming young soldier.

For a whole year both armies prepared for the battle to come - forging swords, carving shields, casting spearheads, and sending out spies.

In the early spring Arthur heard that Medraut and his army had left their hill fort and were marching south. Arthur marched his men north to try and cut Medraut off.

Arthur knew that his army would be outnumbered, but he still had his cavalry. And Medraut had never seen the point of cavalry - except to take messages and run errands.

Then Arthur's spies told him that Medraut had stopped. He'd made his final camp and was waiting for Arthur to come to him.

As Arthur's army got within sight of Medraut's, Arthur must have realized he was beaten. Medraut had lined his men up on the marshy ground beside a small lake in the crooked arm of the river that fed the lake. Medraut's men were protected on three sides by water. There was no way Arthur's heavy horsemen could attack from the sides or the rear. The ground was too marshy; the cavalry would get bogged down.

"We'll fight on foot," he told Gawain, "in the old way. We'll fight in a pig's snout formation." He picked up a stick and scraped a rough diagram in the ground. "I'll be in the centre. Then on each side of me - but a pace behind - you and Bedwyr. Behind you two, four of our finest hand-to-hand fighters. Behind them another eight, behind them sixteen, and behind them the rest of our men ready to push through when we pierce Medraut's shield wall."

Gawain was appalled at the plan. "But that means you'll be exposed - visible - right in the centre. It'll be an invitation to any young tearaway to try his luck, and get easy fame with a lucky blow."

"I'm only interested in one young tearaway," replied Arthur. "Medraut. This is a quarrel between him and me. It shouldn't need the death of anyone else. If only we could meet man-to-man, in single combat."

At noon Arthur's men lined up as he'd commanded, pig snout formation with Arthur as the tip of the pig's snout.

Slowly the two armies walked towards each other. But for once there was no chanting, no name calling, no cursing. Men looked across the battlefield and saw their brothers or fathers in the opposing line.

In the eerie silence, Arthur stepped forward from the line. He was wearing an open-faced helmet. Everyman on that field could see clearly who he was. His voice carried easily across the marshy space between the two armies.

"Medraut! This is our quarrel! It could be settled with one death, no more. Single combat - to the death. Let the gods decide. Whichever of us lives will be the Duke of Battles, and unite or two armies and all of Britain against the Saxons!"

Then Medraut stepped forward. His helmet had a beaten faceplate of his own features. From behind the burnished metal, his voice sounded blurred and indistinct. "I agree, uncle. We'll meet in the middle with just one spear carrier to serve us."

"Gawain - you be my carrier," said Arthur. Gawain grabbed a second spear from the man behind him and followed Arthur to the middle. Medraut too strode forward. Beside him was his carrier, also wearing a helmet with an elaborate faceplate.

