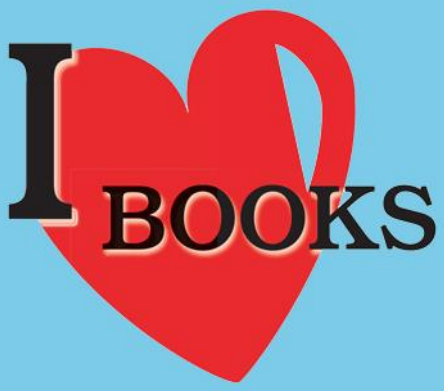



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Opening extract from

# The Knights of the Drop-Leaf Table

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*To Mo and Ella*

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# THE CAST

KING ARTIE

QUEEN GWINNY

## THE KNIGHTS

SIR PRANCELOT . . . . . the keen one

SIR PERCY . . . . . the fussy one

SIR GARY . . . . . the gloomy one

SIR TRALAHAD . . . . . the musical one

SIR BORE DE GANNET . . . ze French one

SIR ANGELA . . . . . she's a girl in disguise

## THE STAFF

OLD TOBY . . . . . the gardener

SHAWN . . . . . the odd job boy

MRS SPUNGE . . . . . the cook

AGGIE . . . . . the serving wench

## THE CASTLE ANIMALS

ETHEL . . . . . the cat

BOB . . . . . the dog

## THE HORSES

STOP-A-LOT . . . . . who stops a lot

LIGHTNING . . . . . the slow one

BREAKWIND . . . . . don't stand behind him

ELTON . . . . . she's a mare

LOUD WINNIE . . . . . the noisy one

GNASHER . . . . . he bites

# Prologue

It was breakfast time at Castle Llamalot, but the King wasn't eating. Most days, he went for the full Olde Englishe. Griffin kidneys, dumplings of boar tail, swan fritters, poached partridge in a pear tree sauce – he could put all that away with no trouble. But not this morning.

"What's the matter, dear?" the Queen asked, as she spread honey on her toast. "No appetite?"

"No," the King said, with a sigh. "Not really. The knights are getting to me."

"Don't eat cheese before bed time," the Queen said. "I keep telling you, Artie."

"No, not the *nights*. The Knights."

"Oh, right," the Queen said. "Yes, well, I must admit, they are rather annoying. Cluttering up the corridors. Leaving their pikes and swords sticking out for people to trip over. And so *noisy*."

"Exactly," said the King. "And they never leave me *alone*, Gwinny! I can't walk anywhere without them clanking after me, demanding things. They want me to send them off on quests or organise another jousting tournament or test them on the Code of Chivalry. I can't even visit the privy without one of them knocking on the door asking if I'll be long because he's written another poem. Listen to this rubbish."

The King pulled a scroll from his sleeve and unrolled it.

*Roses are red, snowdrops are white,*

*You are the King and I am a knight.*

*With a hey-nonny-no and a skip-too-maloo,*

*Here ends verse one, but I plan twenty-two.*

"That's Sir Tralahad's latest." The King rolled the scroll up again. "He's going to set it to music and sing it at the next banquet."

"What – all twenty-two verses?" the Queen said.

"I'm afraid so."

"In that reedy voice of his? Oh, no, Artie! Tell him we don't want music this time. Be nice, but be firm."

"I tried to, but he looked so *hurt*." The King buried his head in his hands in despair. "All of them look hurt when I turn them down, no matter how nice I am. It's driving me up the



wall, Gwinny. I don't think I can put up with much more."

"Ban them from the corridors, then, darling," the Queen said. "You're the King."

"But that's *mean*. Kings shouldn't be mean."

"They're overcrowding the corridors," the Queen pointed out. "It's not mean to ban them. It's practical."

"But where will they go?"

"I don't know. Give them a room somewhere."

"A room?" The King looked up. "Do we have a spare room?"

"I'm sure we can find one." The Queen chewed her toast, deep in thought. "A nice, private little room they can relax in. A comfy

sofa. Candles in bottles. Maybe a small area for dancing. A sort of Knight Club."

"If they relaxed on a comfy sofa they'd never get up again," said the King. "Not in all that armour. And I can't see them dancing either."

"All right, forget the sofa. Give them hard chairs. And a big manly table to sit at."

"They'll only squabble about who'll sit at the head of it," the King groaned. "You know how competitive they are with their manliness."

"Make it a round one. Then they're all equal. It's not catapult science, Artie."

"Hmmm." The King looked thoughtful. "You know, Gwinny, you just might be onto something. Do we have a round table in the castle?"

# Chapter 1
# The Table

"Wow!" said Sir Prancelot, as he pushed back his visor and looked around. "Zounds, odds-boddikins and double *wowzeree*! This is it. Our very own room! What do we think, guys?"

Six knights stood in a cluster of metal, surveying the empty room. Stone walls. Stone floor. A small, grubby window. Cobwebs. Funny smell.

*Hmm.*

"Tra la LAAA!" Sir Tralahad burst out, making everyone jump. "One, two, one, two, TESTING! As I feared. Poor acoustics. Too much echo."

"Filthy," said Sir Percy. He clanked to the window and ran a fussy finger along the sill. "I can't imagine what it was used for."

"Ze store room for ze old, rotten vegetables, by ze steenky smell," said Sir Bore de Gannet, who was French. "You Engleesh. Always ze bad food."

"Some curtains would be nice," said Sir Angela, who was a girl in disguise.

Nobody liked to say anything. One of the rules in the Code of Chivalry was that you had to be polite to girls. Besides, Angela had gone to a lot of trouble. She had cut her hair short and she insisted that they pronounce her name with a hard G, like in Grapefruit. Sir AnGela.

Sometimes, when she remembered, she drew a small moustache on her top lip.

"It's a dump," said Sir Gary, who could always be relied upon to make the worst of things.

"Hey! Guys!" Sir Prancelot cried. "Come on! Where's your gratitude? We've got a room, yah? This is awesome! We can put in a dartboard! A bar! Make it our own."

"I don't know about bars and dartboards," Sir Percy said with a frown. "The room is intended for serious business meetings. A place to discuss important knightly affairs. We need to get some office furniture in." He whipped out a small notebook with a pencil attached from behind his breastplate. "A notice board and a blackboard. An amusing sign that says *You Don't Have To Be Mad To Work Here But It Helps*. An umbrella stand for the swords. I'll make a list."

“Didn’t Her Majesty say something about a round table?” Sir Tralahad asked.

“She did,” said Sir Percy. “And if I’m not mistaken, here it comes now!”

Noises were indeed coming from the corridor. The sound of something large scraping against the wall. And a bad-tempered voice they knew well – Old Toby, the gardener.

“Up a bit, Shawn. To your right. *Right*, I said, dimbo,” Old Toby was grumbling. “No, don’t drop it, don’t drop it, you daft little – hang on, I’m losing it – arrgh! Was that yer fingers? Ah, you’ll live. Right, steady ’er up. Lean ’er against the wall. I’ll get the door.”

The door crashed open to reveal Old Toby and Shawn, the odd job boy. Both of them looked hot, bothered and unhappy. Old Toby was rubbing his back. Shawn was sucking his squashed fingers.

"Aha!" Sir Prancelot cried. "Good day to you, old grey beard. Our thanks for this kind service! How goes it, young shaver?" He reached out his hand in its metal gauntlet to ruffle Shawn's carroty hair. Shawn smacked it away. Not in the mood.

"Whatever," Old Toby growled. "Mind out, we're comin' in."

The knights clanked out of the way.

Old Toby and Shawn went back out to the corridor, then reappeared carrying between them a large and awkward piece of furniture. Everyone craned forward as it advanced into the room.

"There you go," Old Toby said, standing back. "One table. And a blasted pig of a thing it were to get 'ere."

The knights stared. It was a table all right. It was made of wood. The wood had

been polished. And it was big. A big, wooden, polished table. But –

"I don't want to criticise, yah?" said Sir Prancelot. "But we were kind of sort of led to believe it would be round? You know. Like, circular?"

"So?" said Old Toby.

"Well, it's not a round table, is it? It's half a circle."

"That's because it's a drop-leaf," Old Toby said smugly. He might not be a knight, but he knew about tables. "See, one half stays up an' the half with the hinges drops down. So you can get it through doors. It's got a moveable leg under what you pulls out to prop up the flap. Show 'em, Shawn."

In a sulk, Shawn showed them how the table worked.



"See?" Old Toby said. "Now it's round."

"I say," said Sir Prancelot. "That's jolly clever. Look at that, guys! That's brilliant!"

"It's rubbish," said Sir Gary.

"It'd look better with a table cloth," Sir Angela said. "And a vase of flowers."

"I don't *think* so, Angela," said Sir Percy. "I mean Sir AnGela. We're knights, not members of the Queen's sewing circle. But we will need some chairs."

"Chairs are comin'," Old Toby said. "Give us a chance."

"This is a moment we must celebrate," Sir Tralahad said. He picked up his lyre. "I feel a new song coming on ...

*Gather round and hear my fable*

*All about a drop-leaf table,*

*Fal diddle dee and a ninny nonny no …"*

The Queen was right. Sir Tralahad's singing got on people's nerves in a very short space of time. His lyre playing wasn't too hot either.

"We'll get the chairs," Old Toby said, keen to get out as fast as he could. "Come on, Shawn."

"Time for ze lunch, non?" said Sir Bore de Gannet. "Anybody care to join me?"

"We should wait for the chairs," Sir Percy said. "Rude to push off when they're going to so much trouble."

"You Engleesh!" Sir Bore de Gannet grumbled. "No respect for ze proper meal times!"

But he made no move to leave. All of them wanted to try sitting around the new table. Even Sir Gary, for all he'd never admit it.

"*Gather round and hear my fable …*" Sir Tralahad tried again.

"No, Tralahad," said Sir Percy. "Not now."

"Yeah," said Sir Gary. "Put a sock in it."