Opening extract from

# Squire Terrence and the Maiden's Knight

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Published by

**Kingfisher**

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# 1

# TERENCE

Terence crept nervously through the forest, glancing often over his shoulder. He was a slim, agile boy, perhaps fourteen years old – though he did not know his age exactly – and he moved easily among the brambles. He had been prowling the woods since he could walk, gathering food for the hermit's meals. Today, though, the forest that had always been his home was strangely unfriendly.

He had gone out to check his snares, but from the moment he stepped into the woods, odd things had been happening. First, he stumbled over an ancient tree stump, which squatted in the centre of a path that had been clear just the day before. When he picked himself up and turned to examine the stump, it was gone. The wind through the trees sounded suspiciously like someone chuckling.

A few steps farther down the path, Terence saw a face. It was completely green and was framed by wild hair that seemed to be made of leaves and grass, but it was certainly a face: a small, triangular, impishly laughing face that disappeared a moment later. For a moment Terence stared; then he hurried away in a new direction. That had begun a frightening afternoon. A familiar oak had a new branch that, when touched, fell to the ground and slithered away like a snake. A squirrel sat on a rock beside the path and sang like a nightingale. A tortoise scurried by him, as quickly as a hare. And everywhere was that impish chuckle and that face.

Terence's fear grew with each passing minute. Once, looking over his shoulder, he walked right into a tree. Behind him a merry little voice chuckled and said, "Ho ho, little one. That one wasn't even me."

Terence started like a deer and ran, but the grinning face followed. At last he stumbled into a little clearing in the heart of the forest, and the voice said, "Right then, here you are. I've done with you for now." At once Terence felt the eerie presence withdraw. The forest was calm and pleasant and comfortably dull. He took a deep breath and gazed ahead.

Beneath a great oak in the centre of the clearing lay the largest man Terence had ever seen. Behind him, three huge horses cropped grass, and beside the man were a few scattered rabbit bones next to a smouldering fire. A broken snare, one of Terence's, lay nearby. Terence hesitated at the edge of the meadow.

"This your snare, boy?" the stranger asked without opening his eyes.

Terence jumped, but he answered, "Yes, sir."

"You'd do better hunting with a bow, but I can't complain. A meal is a meal." The man still had not moved.

"Yes, sir." Terence could think of nothing else to say.

"Come here, boy." As he spoke, the man sat up, and Terence saw his face. He was surprisingly young, perhaps only five or six years older than Terence himself. His red beard was still thin. He waved Terence over and picked up a bent staff with a string tied to both ends, and several shorter sticks. He handed them to Terence. "I owe you something for the rabbit. Would these do?"

Terence held them awkwardly, and the man's gaze sharpened. "Haven't you ever seen a longbow before?"

"No, sir."

The man stared, then took back the bent stick. In one swift motion he fitted one of the short sticks on the string, pulled it back, and released it. The stick flew across the clearing and stuck, quivering, in a dead log. Terence stared, and the man watched him sharply. "You really haven't seen one before, have you?"

Terence shook his head dumbly.

"Where are you from, boy?"

"I live with the hermit," he said.

"A hermit? A religious man?"

Terence nodded.

"Good Gog, son, why?"

"My parents left me on his step when I was a baby. He's raised me." The man looked at Terence consideringly, and Terence added, "I hunt for him and do all his cooking."

"If you hunt, then you need to learn how to use a bow. Let me show you. You hold it like this." For the next three hours, Terence learned how to hold the bow, to string the arrows, to hold and release the string, to aim, and how to care for the bow and the string. The stranger was a stern but patient teacher, and if he was quick to rebuke Terence's mistakes, he would also grunt a gruff approval when Terence did something right. At the end of the afternoon, Terence felt sure that he would

never be any good with a bow, but to his surprise the man said, "You're a natural, son. I've never seen anyone do this well so quickly. Soon you'll be hitting rabbits on the run."

The big man began to gather his gear, preparing to go. "Please, sir," Terence stammered. "Thank you."

The man smiled. "You're welcome, lad. And besides, I don't like snares."

"It's late, sir," Terence continued. "Won't you come and stay the night at the hermitage? I'll cook your dinner."

"Eat with a religious man?" The man grinned ruefully and muttered, "What would Mother say?" but after a moment he nodded. "All right, lad. Lead the way." He whistled softly, and the horses trotted over to him. The largest one, a mountainous black horse with a wicked eye, the big man saddled. Then he began loading the other two.

Terence saw a gleaming coat of mail hung with solid metal plates. "Cor, sir! Are you a knight?"

The man grinned. "Not yet, but I plan to be if the king sees fit."

"Which king?" Terence asked. In those days, any great lord who controlled enough land was likely to call himself king.

"King Arthur, lad. The true king."

Terence gaped at him. "Is that where you're going, sir? To King Arthur?"

"No. I'm going to a scabby hermitage to let a scrubby brat cook my dinner. Lead the way, boy."

Getting Terence onto one of the packhorses took time, since he had as little experience with horses as he had with a longbow, but eventually they were under way. Terence was relieved to discover that his mount needed no guidance from him but instead had been taught simply to follow the lead horse. The big man led, with Terence calling out directions from behind.

As they drew near the hermitage, Terence said, "The hermit's name is really Trevisant, sir, but most people—"

He broke off. Next to a slender beech tree, not two yards to Terence's left, stood a small, green, slightly built figure who smiled pleasantly at Terence over a pointed beard. The figure doffed his cap politely, then disappeared, leaving only a wisp of green smoke rising through the branches. Terence choked.

"What is it, lad?" The big man was miraculously holding a sword.

Terence swallowed and said, "Nothing, sir. Sorry, sir."

The man's eyes followed Terence's toward the

beech, but all he said was, "All right."

When they rode into the clearing, the hermit was waiting for them. He extended his arms to the stranger. "Welcome, Sir Gawain – The Maiden's Knight."

The man stared. "Eh?"

"Oh no, you're quite right. I'm ahead of myself, aren't I?" the hermit said apologetically. "That comes later."

Terence wished he had thought to warn the big man. Terence hardly noticed the hermit's peculiarities anymore, but he could well imagine that they might be disconcerting to a stranger. Trevisant, the Hermit of the Gentle Wood, had been given a special gift many years ago. Where most people remembered the past and guessed at the future, Trevisant saw the future clearly but could remember only a few hazy details of the past. Of course, now that he was getting older – some said he was over a hundred years old, though of course Trevisant couldn't tell them – his memory was not what it used to be, and he was likely to forget even the future. Once, helping the hermit look for something he had misplaced for the third time in a day, Terence had said that this great gift of God was a terrible inconvenience sometimes. The hermit had laughed and said, "So are they all,

Terence. So are they all."

"Come in, come in, Sir Gawain," the hermit continued jovially. "Terence, I've packed your clothes already, so you won't have to bother with it. You can't imagine my surprise when I realized that this was the day you would leave. I must have known it, but it slipped my mind."

"Leave?" Terence stared.

"Sir Gawain, you can put your horses out back near the lightning-struck tree."

The stranger looked at him oddly, but said only, "Thank you, sir."

"There's no lightning-struck tree back there," Terence said.

"Hasn't that happened yet? Well then, where did we used to put horses, I wonder." The hermit frowned.

"There's a shed there," Terence said.

"What, is the shed still standing?" the hermit cried. "Then by all means use the shed. Terence, you'll need to start dinner."

Terence went inside. He wanted to ask the hermit what he meant about his leaving, but the old man had disappeared. Terence was mixing spices and adding a few vegetables to a hearty stew when the big man walked in.

"Hello, lad," he said. "That already smells

wonderful. How do you do it?"

Terence grinned and said, "I've had to learn. The hermit can't cook for himself, you know."

Before the man could answer, the hermit himself walked into the room, carrying a deerskin bag. "Don't be foolish, Terence. How do you suppose I managed before you came along, hey?"

Terence grinned. "I've often wondered, sir. How did you?"

"Well, you can't expect me to remember, can you?" In a softer voice, he added, "Don't worry about me, my son. I'll be taken care of when you're gone. Trust me. I know it."

"But sir," Terence said, "I'm not going anywhere."

"What? Don't you know yet?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, you're off to be Sir Gawain's squire."

Terence frowned at the big man. "Are you Sir Gawain, sir?"

"No, lad. Only Gawain. I haven't been knighted, remember."

"What? You haven't even been knighted yet?" the hermit exclaimed. "I'm all in a puzzle today, aren't I? Well, don't worry about it. When Arthur hears about Sir Hautubris, he'll knight you quick enough."

"Sir Who?" Gawain asked.

"Hautubris. No, no. No questions. Just wait."

"Milord," Terence began – somehow just "sir" was no longer enough – "you should know that the hermit sees time backwards. He sees the future the way we see the past and the past the way we see the future."

Gawain looked at the hermit thoughtfully and said, "It sounds like a terrible curse, sir."

"Oh, it has its moments," the hermit replied with a slight smile.

In a few minutes, Terence had placed three steaming bowls of stew on the bare wood table. The hermit blessed it, and all three ate ravenously. When the pot was empty, Gawain leaned his stool back against a wall and said, "Father, I have to argue with you about the future."

"Don't call me Father," the hermit said agreeably. "I'm not a priest."

"All right. Nevertheless—"

"And don't argue with me about the future, either. You can't win. You're about to say that you already have a squire, aren't you?"

"That's right. My brother—"

"Don't tell me about Gaheris. He's a clodpole, Sir Gawain. And you know it."

"Sir—" Gawain began resolutely.

"Can you deny that Gaheris is a clodpole?"

Reluctantly, Gawain smiled. "No, sir, but he's my brother."

"Good heavens," the hermit said shaking his head in amazement, "When I think of the Banlieu affair I don't know where that boy's wits have gone begging."

"The *what* affair?" Gawain leaned forward, his eyes bright.

"Oh, shouldn't I have said anything? Well, I can't help telling this one little story. Gaheris tells this knight, Sir Banlieu, that he'll fight any man alive but he'll never raise sword against the skirts of womanhood – or something like that. You know the way he talks."

"Ay, it sounds like him," Gawain said, his eyes gleaming.

"So, Sir Banlieu comes to fight wearing a skirt he's borrowed from some lady."

"I'd like to know how he got it," Gawain interjected.

"I can tell that, too, but I can see it won't do to tell you about it. Anyway, Gaheris won't fight. Banlieu pops him off his horse as easily as you please and ducks him in the horse pond."

"Well of all the cheek," Gawain said admiringly.

The hermit continued, "Anyway, putting aside

Gaheris's idiocy, you can't think that he would ever be able to cook a meal like this, can you?"

Gawain looked at Terence sharply, his eyes widening. "No, he wouldn't, for a fact."

"Then that's the end of it," the hermit said. "Good heavens, Sir Gawain, when I think of all the troubles you and Terence share, I can't believe you would even hesitate. Think of the shaughuses! Ah, but you can't, can you?"

"Poison eels?" Gawain asked. "What about them?"

"No no, I'm no penny-pinching soothsayer. You'll find it all out in good time." Gawain frowned abstractedly at Terence for a moment, and the hermit added in a gentler voice, "It's not just for your convenience, son. Terence also has work to do. He needs you as much as you need him."

Gawain's frown cleared, and he nodded. "How about it, lad? Would you like to be my squire?"

Terence looked hesitantly at the hermit.

"I told you, son. I'll be fine." Trevisant smiled at him. "But bless you for thinking of me."

Terence looked back at Gawain and said, "Yes, milord. I think I would."

"I'll have to teach you everything, won't I?" Gawain said. "You can't even ride."

"No, milord. But I can learn."

"Ay, I've seen that you can," Gawain said. "We'll leave in the morning."

A horse's hooves thudded out front, and a loud, harsh voice called, "You in the house!"

Terence started to get up, but Trevisant laid a hand on his arm and shook his head. "You go," he said to Gawain.

Gawain nodded and opened the front door. The light was growing dim, but through the door Terence saw a mounted knight in full armour.

"Can I help you?" Gawain asked politely.

"I need food. I've been smelling your meal for twenty minutes now, and I want some."

"Terribly sorry," Gawain said, "but we've just finished it. Terence," he called back, "do we have anything else we can give this hungry knight?"

"I don't want something else, my good man," the knight said. "Because I don't believe you. I can still smell food in there."

Swiftly, Gawain reached over the table to the stewpot. He held it upside down before the knight. "As you see, sir, the pot is empty."

"Are you being insolent, churl?" the knight demanded. "You'll taste my whip if you are."

Gawain shrugged, then took two quick steps forward. He heaved up on the horse's stirrup, and the knight clattered into a heap on the other side of

the horse. Cursing, the knight clanked awkwardly to his feet.

"Now *that*," Gawain said, "was being insolent."

"You'll pay for that, villain," the knight snarled. "No forest churl lays hands on Sir Hautubris without blood."

"Sir Who?" Gawain asked sharply. He glanced at the hermit, who stood in the doorway.

"Yes, yes. This is the one. Watch your head," the hermit said.

Sir Hautubris flashed his sword from his scabbard and chopped down mightily at Gawain's head. Gawain stepped quickly to one side, and the sword buried itself in the dirt next to him. Gawain rapped Sir Hautubris's helm with the stewpot. The visor flopped up and down, and a loud clang rang out.

"Prepare to die, varlet!" Sir Hautubris cried, taking another full swing. Gawain moved slightly and again the sword buried itself in the ground. Gawain clanged the stewpot against the other side of the knight's head. His helm pivoted to the left, so that the right eyehole was over Sir Hautubris's nose.

"Curse it, where are you?" Sir Hautubris shouted. He swung his sword around him in a full roundhouse swing.

"Watch it, you fool!" Gawain called sharply. "You'll hit your horse." Gawain slipped inside the circular swing and plucked Sir Hautubris's sword from his hand. "You're not to be trusted with this thing," he said.

For a moment Sir Hautubris stood shakily in the centre of the yard, readjusting his helm so he could see. Gawain turned toward the hut, and Sir Hautubris tottered back to his horse. Terence sighed with relief, then gasped again, because Sir Hautubris had drawn another sword from the saddle and was charging Gawain's back. Terence tried to call a warning, but Gawain had already moved. Two swords flashed, and Sir Hautubris lay in the dust, his own sword in his breast.

"If I have to kill everyone who smells your cooking, lad, we're in for a long road," Gawain said.

Terence wept when he left the hermit. Gawain waited, patient and unembarrassed, while Terence embraced the old man and kissed him tearfully. Trevisant whispered in Terence's ear, "This is the nice thing about seeing time my way: no regrets," and pushed him gently away. "Now," he said to Gawain, "I haven't granted you a boon yet, have I?"

Startled, Gawain shook his head.

"Come here, then." Gawain stepped forward. "Kneel, boy. You're in the presence of more than you know. More than I know, actually." Stiffly, Gawain knelt in front of the Hermit of the Gentle Wood. "Sir Gawain, so long as you fight, your strength will grow with the sun. It is a gift. You may stand." Gawain rose. "Do you understand your gift?"

"No."

"As the sun rises, your strength will rise. At dawn, you will gain a new strength, which will reach its peak at noon."

"And, if I may ask, will my strength lower as the sun lowers?"

Trevisant chuckled. "No gift is exactly what we want, my son. Try to fight in the morning. And you, Terence." Trevisant held his hand up, palm out. "Serve your new master well. You will find your greatest glory in service." The three of them stood in the fresh morning breeze for a moment. Then Trevisant said, "Right then, off you go."

And as they passed through Terence's familiar forest on their way to King Arthur's court, Terence heard a soft, merry voice in his ear, whispering, "Godspeed, Terence."