FREE LANCE
and the
DRAGON'S HOARD



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This book has dyslexia-friendly features

FREE LANCE and the DRAGON'S HOARD

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"Wake up, Sir Knight! Wake *up*!" My eyes snapped open and I jumped to my feet. I drew my sword, ready for action.

The merchant was standing there. His eyes glinted with terror in the firelight. "It's out there!" he cried. "It's out there!"

"*What's* out there?" I asked. I put my hand on his arm to steady him.

The merchant drew his face close to mine. His skin was wet with sweat, his eyes were wide, his voice was little more than a whisper.

"The dragon, of course," he croaked.

*

I was offered this job three weeks ago. Back then, I thought that being a bodyguard to a rich merchant would be a nice little earner for a knight down on his luck. I should have known it wasn't going to be that simple. It never is.

After all, I'm a free lance, a knight for hire. Trouble always finds me, no matter where I go. Just like now.



I was broke. Skint as a juggler's monkey. Not a penny left. And what was worse, I'd lost my squire, Wormrick.

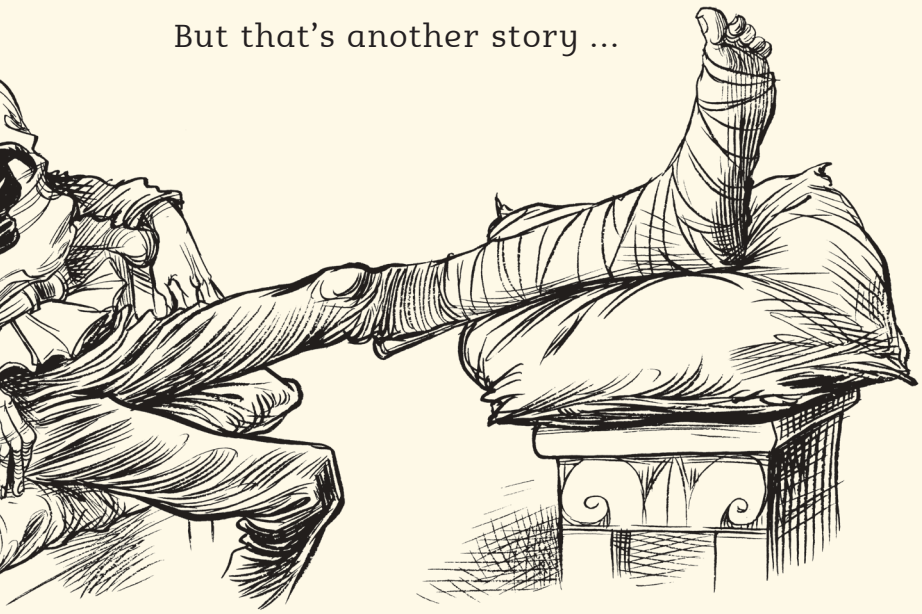
I'd had to leave him looking after his broken leg beside a blazing fire in a fine

inn. He had the last of my gold coins in his pocket.

It was the least I could do after our last little adventure.

That one started with yours truly – that's me – doing a favour for a pretty duchess. I'd agreed to get a solid-gold goblet back for her. It had been "borrowed" by her wicked mother-in-law. The adventure had ended with Wormrick being chased up a set of spiral stairs by a pack of castle dogs – and then falling from the top of the tall tower.

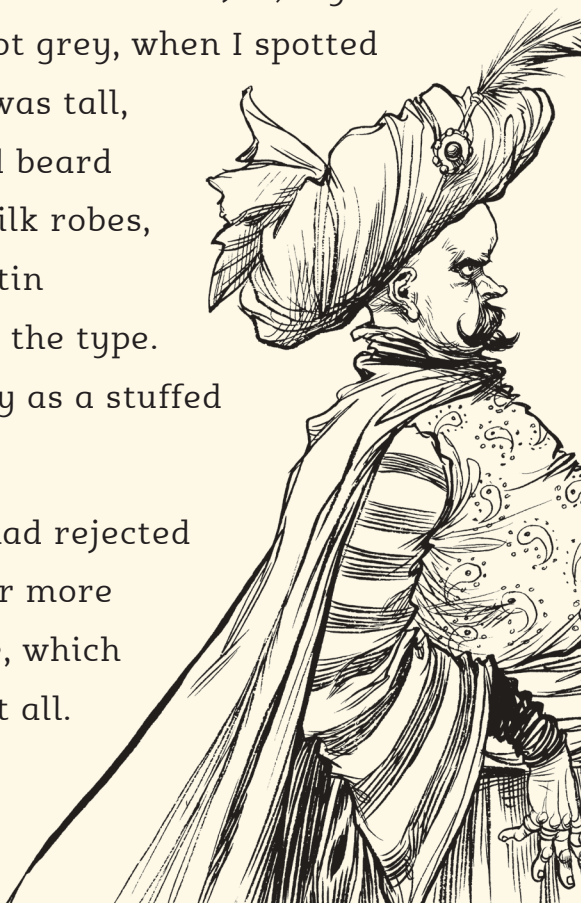
But that's another story ...



So, I'll start with this one.

There I was, in a dusty market in a city down south. I had no squire, no money, and I needed a job – any job. But then, so did all the other knights down on their luck who had turned up in the market square that day.

I was just about to give up and go back to the town stable where I'd left Jed, my pure-bred Arbuthnot grey, when I spotted the merchant. He was tall, with a neat, clipped beard and fine clothes – silk robes, a purple turban, satin slippers. You know the type. As plump and flashy as a stuffed peacock.



The merchant had rejected ten other knights or more before he got to me, which wasn't a surprise at all.

They all looked even more down-at-heel than me. Some had cuts and bruises from old tournaments. And, from the look of their rusty armour and even more rusty swordplay, I could tell that some hadn't been in a tournament for years.

When it came to my turn, the Stuffed Peacock looked down at the sword at my side.

"Can you use that thing?" he asked.





I drew the sword in a flash and – with a flick of my hand – cut the top off the feather in his turban. He gawped at me, a look of astonishment on his face.

"Impressive," he said, as I put my sword away. "You're hired."



It turned out that he was a rich merchant. He had a dozen mules loaded up with rolls of fine silks, jars of expensive oils and sacks of fragrant spices, and he needed to get them safely from the city market to his home town. That's where I came in.

"There are many dangers along the way," he said, his voice hushed, his eyes narrow. "Robbers. Wolves. And maybe worse ..."

"I can handle most things ..." I told him, trying hard to sound cool ... "For the right price," I added.

I needed this job and this merchant looked as if he could pay well.

The Peacock didn't bat an eyelid. "Fifty gold coins if you get me and my goods to my home town safely," he said.

It was a good offer, and I didn't stop to think. That's the problem. I never do.

"Done!" I said before the Peacock could change his mind.

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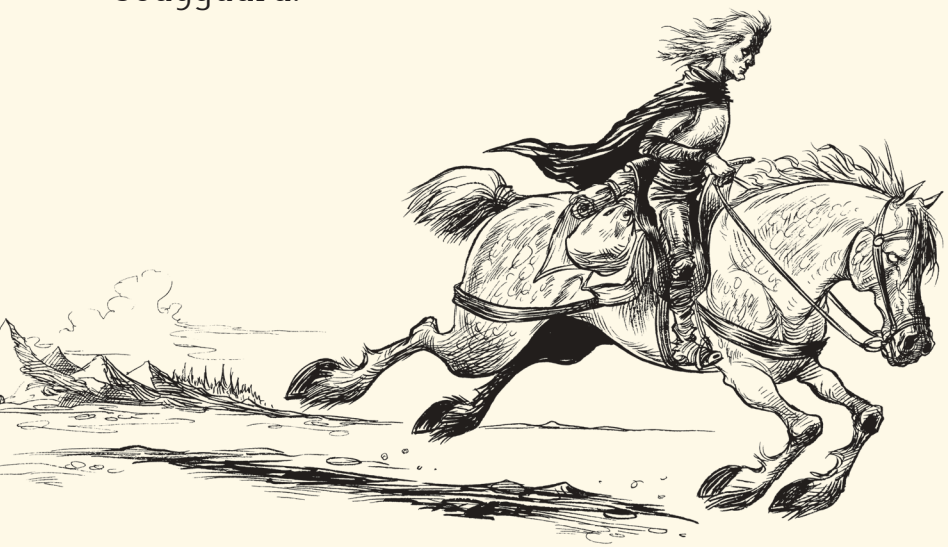
We set off nice and early the next morning. And as the sun rose, the low mist gave way to a bright, cloudless sky. The land grew dry and more empty. Large birds with curved beaks and ragged wings flew across the sky as we left the city far behind us.

It soon became clear that the merchant was right about the road we had to take. There *were* robbers – though they were easy to spot. They hung around at crossroads and in the hills above mountain passes. Robbers are easy to avoid if you check ahead and keep your eyes peeled. You need to travel in the daytime and set up a safe camp at night. The



same goes for wolves, but you also need a good, bright campfire to keep them away.

Of course, with a dozen mules loaded with goods behind us and the Peacock on his jumpy white horse in front, Jed and I couldn't relax for a moment. Back and forwards we went, time after time, to make sure they were all still safe. It made us both very tired. But then again, we'd killed horrible hags and survived blood-soaked tournaments – compared to that, it was easy being a rich merchant's bodyguard.



A fortnight later, we rode up to the merchant's home town. I could almost feel those fifty gold coins jangling in my pocket.

The sun had just slipped down below the horizon when I called a halt. Peacock wasn't happy. He wanted to press on into the night and get back home, which I could understand.

But it was also foolish. Wolves like nothing better than a night hunt, and we were in classic wolf country – a flat, rocky plain, with jagged mountains all around.

There was a chill wind, which stirred up the dust and whistled between the rocks. It was spooky, but I was far too busy to let it bother me.

I had the mules to secure, Jed to settle, a fire to make, the torches to light, a meal to prepare ... As ever, the Peacock said little and did even less.



Even so, I could tell he wasn't happy. In fact, he looked as nervy as a goose in a kitchen. He flapped about as he tied his jumpy mare, Sherazah, to a rock. He muttered under his breath and kept looking behind him.

"Something tells me you're not crazy about my choice of campsite," I said to him later, as I served him a bowl of my Squire's Stew.



He gave a shudder and pulled his cape around him. "This, my friend," he said, "is an evil place."

"Evil place?" I said.

He nodded. "They call it The Plain of the Dead," he said.

"Interesting name. Let me guess ..." I said, trying not to smile. "Now you're going to tell me why."