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opening extract from

The Barefoot Book of Knights

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For Emrys, some more stories — J. M.
A Franco e Berlin, amici preziosi — G. M.

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The Barefoot Book of

Knights



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Barefoot Books
Celebrating Art and Story

Tom Comes to the Castle

The castle looked very big and dark when Tom of Warwick first saw it. Like most ten-year-old boys of noble birth, he had been sent away from home to learn about knighthood and chivalry, by becoming first a page and later a squire in the household of a knight. But, after the familiar, comfortable surroundings of his family's manor house, the castle seemed cold and unfriendly.

As a page, Tom knew that he would be asked to do all kinds of tasks, from cleaning the armour of Sir Brian des Isles, whose castle it was, to mucking out the stables and washing up pots and pans in the kitchen. He would also learn how to fight, first of all with sword and dagger and, later, when he was big enough to carry it, with the lance. And he would be taught about chivalry, the code by which all knights lived.

But such things were far from Tom's mind that day. All he could think about were his mother and father and his elder brother, Robert, who was already a squire and might soon become a knight. That was the way of it: at age nine or ten, you became a page; then, at around twelve, you became a squire. If you were lucky, then you got to serve a real knight, looking after his horse and armour and making sure his sword was always sharp. Eventually, if all went well and your family could afford it, you became a knight yourself.

But that was a long way off — maybe another seven years — an age away to Tom. Now, all he could think of was what a big and lonely place the castle looked and how he would have no friends. Even Peter, the servant who had brought him to the castle, would be leaving right away.

Mournfully, Tom followed Peter across the courtyard of the castle towards the entrance to the keep, the huge central building, which was at least five floors high and probably had a dungeon underneath it.



Just before they got to the keep, there was a smaller building, built mostly of timber, which leaned in the shade of the castle's huge walls. Peter led the way in and stood, hesitating, in the doorway. Tom peered around him and saw a long, low room hung with all kinds of weapons and shields and bits of armour. There was straw on the floor and a cheerful fire burning in the fireplace. Several boys, some of his own age, others of maybe fifteen or sixteen, were gathered around, listening to a tall, imposing man with a weather-beaten face. Tom noticed, at once, that he had very large hands and, when he came towards them, he walked with a slight limp.

'You must be young Tom of Warwick,' said the man. 'I am Master William, the Armourer. It's my job to look after the pages and squires and try to knock a bit of sense into your heads.' Although his words were fierce, he smiled at the same time and Tom decided he liked him.

Master William waved his large hands, indicating the whole room. 'This will be your home for the next year or so,' he said. 'You'll sleep here, eat here and learn everything I can teach you about chivalry and knighthood. If you listen well and do as you're told, we shall get along just fine. Any questions?'

Tom shook his head.

'All right, then,' said Master William, 'there's hot food in the kitchens and, later on, you can get some fresh straw for bedding. Hubert here will go with you.'

A boy who looked no older than Tom came forward. They exchanged looks and then Hubert grinned. 'Come on, then,' he said and led the way outside again towards the great high keep. As they went, Tom said, 'Is Master William a kind teacher?'

'Oh, yes,' answered Hubert. 'And he knows a million stories. If you're lucky, he'll tell some of them. We always try to persuade him — especially when he wants to tell us about chivalry.'

Chatting happily, the two boys entered the castle keep and headed for the kitchens. A rich smell of roasting meat drifted towards them and, for the first time that day, Tom felt better. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad here, after all. And he loved stories more than anything, especially ones about knights and enchantment and fighting dragons. Maybe Master William knew some of those?

