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opening extract from

Blart

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Chapter 1

It should be made clear from the start that Blart never wanted to be a hero. He had not been brought up on tales of bravery and courage in the face of overwhelming odds; he had been brought up on a pig farm. He had not read the myths and legends of the dim and distant past where noble men and women gloriously chanced all for others; he had looked at the pictures in his grandfather's books which were mainly about diseases that pigs got. He had not learnt to ride a horse or to sword fight or to risk his life for the honour of a beautiful woman. He had learnt that if you want to catch a pig you sneak up on it from behind and take it by surprise.

Which is why it is not unusual that, as our story opens, we find Blart leaning over the rail of a large sty with a bowl of potato scraps in his hand preparing to feed two of his grandfather's champion pigs.

'Here, Wattle,' encouraged Blart. 'Come on, Daub. Have some dinner.'

Wattle and Daub did not wait to be asked twice. When

most of your life is spent wandering round and round a manure-filled pen then dinner is bound to be a highlight. Blart watched appreciatively as the two pigs chomped and munched their way through their meal. He felt that there was no more attractive sight on earth.

Eventually, pulling himself away from the pigs' sty, Blart headed back towards the farmhouse. Nature had laid on a beautiful picture for his trudge home. The burning sun setting behind the opposite hill, igniting the lazy clouds which hung idly in the air and reflecting off the river which eased itself through the heart of the valley. The long shadows reaching across the lush fields. The slivers of smoke rising from the chimneys of the village. The horse and cart idling down the road towards home. But Blart looked mainly at his boots. They were muddy boots and hence did not so much as hint at displaying Blart's reflection, which was probably a good thing because Blart was not a prepossessing figure – his head was too big, his eyes were too small and close together, his nose looked as if it had been squashed into his face and his mouth constantly hung half open. Below his dirty neck things didn't get any better. His body managed to be too short while his legs were too long, and this was accentuated by his ill-fitting grey woollen jumper which hung down far too low, combined with his maroon trousers made from the cheapest cloth which were too short and featured holes in most inappropriate places. All in all, Blart's physical appearance was really in need of a winning personality or a variety

of impressive skills to counterbalance it. Unfortunately, he had neither.

However, when Blart stomped into the farmhouse kitchen without wiping his muddy boots at the door, there was something that made even him look twice. They had a visitor. Blart's grandfather disapproved of visitors, on account of the fact that they talked to you and tried to be friendly. He had put it about in the nearby village that Blart had some kind of mysterious and extremely unpleasant disease that was highly contagious to everybody who wasn't a member of his family. This had prevented most visitors coming but it had also meant that Blart couldn't go to school. The only day he tried all the other children ran out of the room screaming, for which they could hardly be blamed as they were only following their teacher's example.

But back to the visitor, who wore a large grey cloak with a hood.

'Blart. This gentleman wants to see you,' said his grandfather.

Blart had never ever had a visitor of his own before. Well, at least not a human one. Sometimes the pigs had managed to get out of their sty and come to find him.

'What do you want?' demanded Blart rudely.

'Boy,' said a terse voice from under the cowl, 'know ye that I have come many miles through many dangers across strange lands and seas to see you today and what I have to say is of great import.'

'Is it about pigs?' asked Blart.

'No,' conceded the cowled figure after a short pause. 'No. It isn't about pigs.'

And with those words the stranger shook off his hood to reveal a bald head and a thin craggy face adorned with a straggly white beard. But what was most noticeable about his face were his eyes. For such an old man he had the deepest, clearest blue eyes. Eyes that briefly silenced even Blart.

'My name is Capablanca and I am the greatest sorcerer alive today,' announced the wizard with more than a touch of pride.

'Do a spell, then,' demanded Blart, who was not the kind of boy to go around believing old men were wizards just because they said so. 'Turn this table into a pig.'

'What?' exclaimed Capablanca.

'Are you deaf?' said Blart.

'No, I am not,' answered Capablanca. 'But I'll turn you into a pig if you won't listen.'

'Wow, great,' said Blart. 'Would you?'

The wizard was taken aback by this response. Sighing, he stood back and went very still. Time seemed to stop ever so briefly in the little room and there was a flash of blue from the wizard's eyes and a swift blast of gushing wind, so swift that it might not even have been there at all. And the table did indeed become a pig. A surprised pig who immediately began to charge round the kitchen.

'Do it again! Do it again!' screeched Blart in delight.

'No,' said Capablanca. 'I shall turn all your pigs into tables,' he added menacingly.

Finally Capablanca had hit upon a way of frightening Blart, who decided to shut up and listen to what the wizard had to say. The pig kept running and both the wizard and Blart were forced against the walls to avoid being knocked over. Gradually, though, before Blart's very eyes, the pig began to look less and less like a pig and more and more like a table, until it was completely a table again.

There followed a long pause and then, dramatically, Capablanca began.

'I have come to take you with me, boy. For it is our destiny to travel to far-flung lands, to undertake deeds of great glory and to endeavour to save the world from a terrible peril.'