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opening extract from

Terry Deary's Knights' Tales: The Knight of Spurs and Spirits

written by

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published by

A & C Black Publishers Ltd

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First published 2009 by
A & C Black Publishers Ltd
36 Soho Square, London, W1D 3QY

www.acblack.com

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ISBN 978-1-4081-0620-4

A CIP catalogue for this book is available from the British Library.

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Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading RG18EX.

Chapter One
Drafts and Deer

England, 1609

The castle is grim. The castle is grey. And the castle has a gruesome tale to tell.



The castle is known as Hylton Castle and it stands – grim, grey and gruesome – on a hillside by the River Wear in the north of England. You can see it there today – a sad shell of a hollow hall.



The castle is cold. The roof is gone, but the sun never shines inside the grim, grey, gruesome walls.

But when the last knight lived there, the castle could be warm. When the fire was lit in the Great Hall, it was warm there by the fire. Tapestry curtains hung on the walls and kept out the draughts.



Chairs had cushions high and soft to keep out the draughts as you sat by the fire ... *if* you were one of the lucky ones that sat by the fire.



Lucky – like the last knight of Hylton, Sir Robert.

Logs as large as dogs flared in the fireplace and sparkled on the tapestry walls. Sir Robert took an iron poker and pushed it into the fire. Then he took a flagon of wine and emptied it into his silver cup.

When the poker was glowing red, he pushed the tip into his wine and watched it bubble and boil, spit and sizzle.



Sir Robert sat back in the chair and sipped the warm wine.

"Marvellous!" he smiled. It was a fat-faced, well-fed, red-cheeked smile.

Sir Robert stretched out a lazy hand and pulled on a rope that hung beside the fire. Somewhere in the castle halls, a bell jangled.

Moments later, the door opened and a girl hurried in. She was dressed in a fine, grey dress with a white, linen collar and an apron as white as snow.



Sir Robert, the last knight of Hylton, looked up. "Ah, Mary!"

"Yes, Sir Bobbert!" said the girl in a voice as dry as hay. Her throat went dry when she stood in the piggy-eyed gaze of her lord, and the words got jumbled in her mouth. "I mean ... Sir Robert, sir, sorry, sir."

"The weather, girl."

"Yes, sir," said Mary, and bent her knees in a low curtsey.

"Yes, sir *what*?" the knight rumbled.

"Yes, sir, whatever you say, Sir Bobbert ... Robbled ... Bobbit."

"I asked you about the weather. What's it like outside?" Sir Robert could have pushed open the shutters on the windows of the Great Hall, but he was too lazy for that.

"Sunny, sir," Mary panted, trying to remember.

"Sunny, eh? Marvellous!"

"And cloudy," she wittered.

"Uh? How can it be sunny if it's cloudy?"

"Sometimes it's sunny and sometimes it's cloudy. It changes. When a cloud crosses the sun, it stops being sunny and when..."

"Enough!" roared Sir Robert.

Mary trembled.

"Is ... it ... raining?" the last knight of Hylton asked slowly, as if he were talking to a slow and slightly stupid snail.

"Not today, Sir Bobble ... but it might rain next Tuesday, the wise woman of Wearside said in the market..."

"I ... do ... not ... want ... to ... know ... about next Tuesday!" he said. "If it is a fine day today, the deer will be out. Tell the Master of the Hunt I will go hunting this morning. Catch us a nice fat deer for dinner."



"Yes, sir," said Mary. She bobbed a curtsey and turned towards the door ... both at the same time. Her ankles became tangled, and she almost tripped over. "Ooopsy-daisy! Sorry, Sir Rubble!"



"And tell that useless stable boy ... Skeleton..."

"It's Skelton, sir. Roger Skelton."

"Whatever his name is ... tell Skeleton to have my bay mare ready, brushed and saddled."

"Yes, your lard-ship ... your lord-shap..."

"And take this wine away ... it tastes of burnt wood," said Sir Robert, passing the silver cup to the girl. "A quick nap and then I'll be ready to ride," he sighed. "Ma-a-a-a-rvelous!"