



# *The Cloth-Armored Knight*

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Action/Adventure, Magic

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There once was a humble town, hidden among rolling hills and virgin forests, which had cabins and farmhands instead of castles and knights. This unassumingly beautiful town, aptly named Plebsville, was abundant not in silver or gold, but in hardworking, honest citizens. Life in Plebsville was simple, there was a leader, who liked not the title of king, preferring to be called Father by a community he felt to be his children. Father's responsibility was the same as any father, except he was too old to work the fields, too tired to sell his wares, so instead, he settled squabbles between his children, made sure everyone did their share and protected them.

One of the more ambitious children, Thomas Middleton, despite his health, happiness, and safety, was not content with this utopia among the hills. Tom often explained his displeasure to Father in a whiny, yet coherent, manner, "I'll never get to see the valiant knights who defend real kingdoms because I'm trapped here, with nothing more to do than farm, fish, or fall asleep."

Father, in his infinite wisdom, would often reply to these complaints effortlessly, "My boy, I can name a hundred men and women in this very town, who pursue their quest more valiantly than any knight I've ever read about – they wake up each morning to put food in your belly and love in your heart."

Undeterred, Tom looked at Father with his intense gaze, stood tall (well as tall as teeny Tom could) and declared, "Someday soon I will flee this place and go on a journey so heroic that the first king who I may come across will be begging to knight me."

"Well my boy, I suppose you'll be needing this then," Father submitted as he produced a burlap sack from a nearby drawer.

“A sack, you have got to be kidding me, Father, a knight wields a sword and shield, not an empty bag.”

“You are mistaken, this isn’t any old bag, look here.” Father turned the bag over to display an odd symbol, but one which was all too familiar to Tom. It would even be fair to say Tom knew this design like the back of his hand because he had the exact same marking himself in that very spot – a dark circle with two parallel lines running through it. Tom’s father always teased him, accusing him of drawing on the symbol himself with dirt, but at this moment, Tom knew that his mark was unique.

“The bag may have a bottom, but it is bottomless, Tom. Just like the mark on your hand, it has no end, it goes on forever,” explained Father. Tom unconvinced took the largest book from Father’s shelf, and as Father held the bag, dropped it in, much like a child who is too clever for his parents’ tricks. As he suspected, he saw the outline of the book from within the bag, causing it to droop.

“It sure doesn’t seem bottomless to me Father, if this is a trick to make me leave you alone, it sure has worked.”

“You’re forgetting one thing, Tom, I’m not marked like you are, watch, you hold the bag and I will drop the book.”

“If you say so.” And so, the bag and book exchanged hands, and Father dropped the book. Tom waited, for what seemed like an eternity for the book to reach the bottom of the bag, but it never did. As he handed the bag back to Father, the book appeared immediately at the bottom of the bag. Upon being handed the bag once again, the mass of the book disappeared, but as Tom reached in to pull out the book, it materialized in his hand. Tom looked up at Father, softening his previously intense stare, asking a reasonable question, “This is fascinating, but what am I to do with this? I have never read of a knight with a bottomless bag before.”

Father thought for a moment, and answered, “Well I suppose you are going to be the first knight with such an item, but think not of the possibilities of what you can do, and focus on what you shall not do with this bag – you are trying to be a knight after all, and they have quite a few rules to follow.” And with that, Tom returned home to plan his journey.

Upon entering his cottage carrying the unsightly burlap sack, Tom was greeted once by the familiar scent of his mother's stew, and again by his father, who, exhausted from a day in the field, begged, "Oh tell me that isn't more cloth for your cursed suit of armor boy! If you keep handling the needle and thread so often, I fear that you may work the land like a seamstress!"

Tom's mother, who provided him with the materials for his armor from leftover clothing material, gently challenged her husband and replied with a chuckle, "Oh Tom, don't listen to him. He has spent so much time working the field, that I fear he might turn into an ox." Normally Tom would find this to be quite worthy of laughter, but he was determined on this particular afternoon.

So, with the deepest and most serious voice he could muster, Tom declared, "Mother, Father, I must leave for my quest by sunrise tomorrow. I am to return home a knight in no more than a few weeks' time."

Tom's parents restrained their laughter and comments of disapproval the best they could, well at least his mother did while trying to explain to him how this undertaking would prove to be both dangerous and unrewarding. But Tom made it clear that his mind was made up and eventually convinced his parents to bless the journey. And so, after a restless night spent imagining what heroics he might get into, Tom rose from his bed and equipped his armor. It was quite the ensemble, with all the elements of a true suit of armor, except composed of a patchwork of materials varying in color and size. Nonetheless, Tom felt valiant, and before he left, he filled his burlap sack with a supply of foodstuffs that seemed endless to his mother. And so, Tom set off, his back to all the people whom he'd credit in the prelude of his knightly memoir.

About a day's ride from Plebsville, there was a kingdom, which was so grand and ostentatious, that it appeared to push at the forests and hills that surrounded it, causing them to recede. This kingdom, which was aptly named Geldhaven, was abundant in both silver and gold but seemed to be quite short of honest individuals. In place of these hardworking folk, there were ones with old money – old money that seemed to grow and bear greater fruit than all the crops in Plebsville, and with a quarter of the labor and care.

In Geldhaven there was an affluent family known as the Highbrows, which consisted of a mother, a father, and three brothers – Cedric, Alexander, and William, all of whom were knights that wore the finest of armor. The father of these three young men, who knew he would soon no longer be around to settle disputes between his boys, decided, in his less than infinite wisdom that, rather than splitting his fortune between his three children, the son who brought back the greatest wealth from his knightly journey would receive his entire

fortune. And so, the brothers, each with their own treasures to chase, set off on horseback on three different paths, wearing their freshly polished armor which so generously reflected the glow of the moon.

William, the youngest of the three brothers, continued on horseback in a directionless fashion. Despite his knightly appearance, his considerable height, athletic figure, and undeniably perfect posture, William felt he lacked the mind of a knight. He often grew tired of the formality of the code of chivalry he was bound to and even outwardly detested the fact that he had a civic duty to serve all within the realm, including the occasional peasant that he may encounter. As he continued riding on, William realized just how clueless he was. His planning consisted simply of traveling in whatever direction his brothers were not, and he was thankful that they hadn't caught on to that fact, for he always seemed to be the recipient of their harsh remarks. But this was his chance to prove them wrong, to show that he was a capable knight. Except, William grew tired now, and figured he would still have time to win his fathers fortune in the morning, so he set up camp, removing his glistening armor, and, taking refuge under a tree which seemed suitable to tie his horse around, he rested for the night.

William awoke the following day with the bright afternoon sun glaring into his eyes which were still strained from the previous night's sleep. Upon looking around, William was convinced that he was still dreaming. His eyes seemed to betray him as he watched Tom, who had journeyed far from Plebsville already since the sunrise, testing the limits of his burlap sack in a nearby opening in the trees by filling it with the largest rocks that he could find and then proceeding to pick it up as if it contained no more than a few feathers. Perplexed, William broke camp, donned his armor, and untied his horse, making his way towards Tom, the little peasant in an outlandish getup who appeared to possess the strength of Goliath within the body of David.

Tom, who appeared to be focused in his experimentation was oblivious to the knight standing before him until the suit of armor spoke, "If you don't mind my asking, peasant, from where do you summon the strength to lift something which undoubtedly weighs twice that of yourself?". Looking up and seeing his blurred reflection in William's armor, Tom could only stand with his mouth agape, honored to be in the presence of a knight. It was only when Highbrow reached for his bag that Tom was brought to his senses.

"Unfortunately, your knightliness, this bag belongs to me and is very special and dear to my heart."

"It is a burlap sack boy; it seems to match the value of the rags you call clothes."

Tom, hurt that a knight would speak to him in such a manner, suddenly became aware of the sun which

danced on his flesh and the temper which began to rise from his toes to each hair upon his head, retorted defensively, "You could not begin to understand the magic the bag... and I possess, and as for my armor, it will soon be of the finest metal rather than cloth."

With great disgust, William snorted, "What magic could be shared between a potato sack and a peasant boy?"

Tom, at the brink of tears, shouted the secret which he otherwise felt was better untold, "This bag has no bottom, I can fill it with whatever I please and retrieve it without the slightest of difficulty... and it only works with my touch!"

William, whose mind was buzzing with the possibilities of his situation, provided Tom with an ultimatum: "Well you have two options here, boy. The first is I take your arm and the bag with me, leaving you to find your way home to mommy and daddy. The second is I take you with me and you do whatever I say."

Tom, who was thoroughly convinced by both the threat and the prospect of his knightly journey countered, "I shall accompany you if I am knighted at the conclusion of our adventure."

And so, both the cloth-armored and iron-clad knights were off on their expedition, each content having gotten their way. For Tom, however, the journey became less and less desirable, in fact, Tom feared he had become all that a knight objected. As they traveled from kingdom to kingdom, treasury to treasury, cottage to cottage, Tom's bag filled with riches that he knew would someday flood the Highbrows' coffers at the end of their journey. Initially, Tom could stomach what William had done, stealing from wealthy kings and nobles under the cover of night and in quantities that were not deeply harmful, but William's ambition soon outgrew Tom's tolerance. He became indiscriminate with his attacks, entering the cottages of even the humblest of peasants, taking their family heirlooms among other valuables which they had spent their lives to earn. Despite how reprehensible this all was, what bothered Tom the most was the way people looked at him, as he held the vacuum which consumed their meager fortune. They would stare into his eyes, which became blank and unfocused, in a futile attempt to appeal to his humanity. Tom continued on in this way for days, which turned to weeks, and weeks which turned to months, driven only by the fact that he may someday return to Plebsville a knight.

Upon arriving in a kingdom which was rumored to have a talented blacksmith one afternoon, William dismounted his horse at the nearby stables and told Tom to follow him with his bag. As they walked through town, Tom enjoyed the fact that they had yet to speak of money, whether it be how much they possessed or

how much they had yet to steal. As they turned the corner, Tom couldn't help but notice the beautifully crafted shields, swords, and suits of armor, which were on display in the storefront of the acclaimed blacksmith. William stopped and admitted, "I was going to have you steal one of these, but I didn't think any of them would fit you properly, so I guess we'll do this one the honest way," as he motioned towards the suits of armor with his head.

After being fitted with the perfect suit of armor for his less than practical size, Tom produced the stolen riches from his bag to compensate the blacksmith, but he hardly had time to consider what he had done, because, shortly thereafter, the knights, both sporting their armor of the highest quality, continued onwards.

As they traveled on, Tom was struck with an increasingly familiar feeling. They continued to ride through virgin forests and rolling hills and William was deliberately silent. As they came to a river crossing, Tom saw an unmistakable town across the bank and pleaded with William, "We need not steal anymore, you have a fortune so great that you no longer need your father's anymore. Please, this is my home, I cannot return from my journey and steal from the place that raised me."

William snorted, just as he had the day that he first met the peasant in fool's clothing, "Your naivete never ceases to amaze me. There exists a possibility where I can have it all: raid this town, have my own fortune, and then return home to claim my father's, and that is what we shall do." As they approached the river crossing, Tom was mortified, and William's sneer grew steadily across his face.

Tom, in desperate attempt to prolong this endeavor, suggested, "It is best that we remove our armor and place it in my bag so that it is undamaged in these high waters." William, in what was a very rare occurrence, agreed with Tom, removing his armor and relinquishing it to him. They began swimming across the abysmal river, Tom carrying the bag and William clutching his sword eagerly above his head.

William taunted, "This is it, we shall soon reach the end of our knightly excursion, and that bag, which contains a wealth so plentiful, will be emptied under the noses of my brothers."

Tom panted in exasperation, "I simply cannot do this, I will give you this bag and be on my way, never speaking a word of where I have been to anyone."

"I knew you were never suited to be a knight, even in the most literal sense, but no matter, if this is what you wish, then it shall be," William replied as he extended his arm towards the bag, glad that the boy was not

concerned with being paid. And for the last time, the burlap sack exchanged hands, expanding, filling with all the silver and gold that William ever desired, and dragged him into the bottomless river.

Tom swam blindly towards the river bank, unable to see through the anger and tears which had filled his eyes. As he reached the bank, he was guided solely by the smell of his mother's stew, a warm and gentle blend of spices and meat, which never seemed so welcoming to him in his life. Sopping wet and sobbing hysterically, Tom left his knighthood at the bottom of the river and trudged on towards his happily ever after.

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