



THE GIRL KNIGHT

A Never Realm Tale

He barely looked up from his scribbling. When he did glance up his eyes betrayed a mixture of surprise and annoyance. “Begone,” he spat. “There’s no place for the likes of you here.”

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The crows were circling. It's almost as if they knew what was going to happen. In the distance the castle surmounted a low hill, commanding the valley below. Bright red and gold banners flew from her battlements and towers. At the base was an encampment, sprung up like a nest of mushrooms on a damp log. To one side workmen were finishing a railing to separate the jousts into two lanes. By the castle curtain wall, still more peasants armed with hammer and nail put the finishing touches on a viewing stand. A roofed enclosure for the high born, so they might be vexed neither by the sun or the rain. Even over a mile away you could hear the hammering of their work.

The air was crisp and clean. The waving leaves left their scent upon the wind. Tuppence rode in on what could laughably be described as a palfrey. Dark chestnut, it was too wide to ride comfortably yet too slim to be an adequate warhorse. She brushed back her hair. It was almost a match for the chestnut horse's mane. By a lead followed a grey destrier. Perhaps it was the color, but it seemed too old to be an adequate horse for a tourney. In every way, she appeared to be an unbonded knight without a house, except she was quite clearly a girl. And a rather attractive one as well.

The other knights pretended not to notice, while the squires went right ahead and stared without shame. They had no standards to live up to ... unless, of course, someone knighted them. Tuppence rode to the castellan's tent. A tall pointed canvas edifice of white and red vertical stripes. Outside were several squires bearing messages or bribes. Their eyes looked her over in the same way as the other squires, but without their masters present, they were less furtive about it.

Tuppence stopped and slid off the horse, tying the leads to a convenient tree. The squires were required to wait until called on, but knights were under no such obligation. Tuppence strode into the tent without so much as a second thought. The castellan wore an oversize jerkin. It might have fit him once, but those days were long past. Now it seemed more like he was wearing an oversized tablecloth than a jerkin. He barely looked up from his scribbling. When he did glance up his eyes betrayed a mixture of surprise and annoyance. "Begone," he spat. "There's no place for the likes of you here."

Not even phased, Tuppence returned his glare. "I'm here for a place in the tourney."

The castellan growled. "You no knight. You're not even a man for heaven's sakes."

From behind her came a third voice. This one from a towering giant of a man with rather handsome features. "What's the matter with you, Phillip? You never heard of the Knights of the Grey Silk?"

The castellan snorted derisively. "Queen Droga was a madwoman who was afraid of shadows. If you knight all your handmaidens, it doesn't make them fighters, Lord Hightower."

Hightower's expression changed from mirth to aggravation. "Mind what you say. Such comments against the king's grandmother could be considered treason." He fingered the hilt of his sword. "Besides I think the twelve assassination attempts on the royal family might have had something to do with the whole affair, don't you?"

"Bah," the castellan cried out, "the truth of it is, she's no Grey Silk. There hasn't been one of those for a generation."

"Your open mind is exceeded only by your age," Hightower snorted.

Tuppence didn't appear too happy. But she held back her simmering rage, removing her hand from the hilt of her sword. Either it was the castellan being ornery or her defense being mounted by a man, it was hard to tell. Lord Hightower pointed to Tuppence's sword. "Can you not see the royal falcon on the pommel? I'd say you are mistaken. There is at least one member of the order and she's standing before you."

The castellan turned grim. "She could have stolen it."

"True," Lord Hightower replied, "But the only way you could prove it is to demand to see her papers. If you ask for her's you must ask for everyone else's as well. I bet you can imagine how happy such a demand would make all these other knights ... and how long you'd stay employed."

Phillip growled. "Look at her ... how does she expect to fight in ... in ... well look at her," the castellan stammered.

Hightower stood back a pace. "I admit she's a little underdressed ..."

"Underdressed," the castellan squeaked out, "she's practically nu..."

"What do you care?" Lord Hightower replied, "You'd get paid if all the knights were dressed in rags. Gold is gold. I'm sure you already have taken a bribe or two to arrange for the right opponents to be matched." Phillip appeared insulted at the insinuation. "Don't give me such a look," Hightower spoke before he could utter a complaint. "I know what goes on in this tent ... and better than most."

Tuppence no longer held her peace. Drawing a dagger, she swiftly put the blade under the castellan's chin. "Have you run out of ink, old man? Or are you just too lazy to write my name down?" She lifted her dagger and with it the man's chin. "Shall I open up your veins to fill your ink well again?"

Phillip trembled. "Well, you haven't given me your name."

"Tuppence," she replied. "It's spelled with two P's."

"Yes, your ladyship."

"Dame," Tuppence shouted back. "I'm a knight of the realm. So that's Dame Tuppence."

"Of course," the castellan muttered. He scratched her name down on the parchment with his quill. It wasn't the most elegant of writings, but it was the best he could do with his hand quivering.

Tuppence returned the knife to her belt without even looking. She turned smartly on her heels and came face to chest with Lord Hightower. "Are you going to get out of my way, or are you going to stand in the doorway all day long?"

Without realizing it, Lord Hightower took a step to the side. Tuppence pushed him out of the way and thundered through the door flap of the tent.

Lord Hightower's eyes followed her as she receded into the distance. "You're welcome," he shouted after her.



Tuppence finished putting the hammer to the last stake holding up her tent. The voice she heard was more like the squeak of a hinge than a man. "Might I be of some assistance?" She turned to see a short, plumb, bearded little man who seemed without station or position. He had the vocal tone of a servant about him. Tuppence had heard tales of dwarfs from childhood. They were only stories. But if there was any truth to them, this man had to be one. His hair was an almost orange-red and his beard was braided. He seemed more suited to holding an axe than a book ... or a serving plate.

"Go away," she growled, "I've no interest in your protestations of love."

"I admit," the non-descript corpulent man responded, "I do love putting up a good tent, but I have little interest in crowing about it."

"What do you want?"

"Lord Hightower sent me," he practically babbled, "he said no lady of the court should be without a servant."

"Tell Lord Hightower, if he does not leave me alone, I'll stick this sword so far up his ass, it'll be sticking out his nose."

"I understand," he muttered, "still, how can I assist you?"

"What's your name?"

"Alfred," he replied, removing his hat to show a partially bald head. "But you can call me Lunk ... everyone else does."

"Well, Alfred," she wasn't about to call anyone Lunk, no matter how dim they appeared. "There is only room in this tent for one so go aw..."

"Of course," Alfred whispered, "being only a servant, my place would be to sleep with the horses. Now if we can get back to the business at hand. What does the lady require?"

"I'm a knight," she snapped.

"Yes, my lady, but what do you require?"

"I'm beginning to see why they call you Lunk," she grinned. It was the first smile Alfred had seen on her face. It suited her more than the frown she normally wore. "Do you know how to collect firewood?"

"Of course, my lady."

"Dame."

"Yes, my lady."

"Well, don't stand there as if you are waiting for a private invitation," Tuppence snorted in disgust, "Make yourself useful. Go collect firewood."

"At once, my lady."

Tuppence frowned. "And stop calling me that."



The fire burned slowly as the night chill moved in. The smell of the smoke permeated everything, and it hung in the air like a cloud. Its only good effect of the smoke was on the insects, who had gone elsewhere. What remained of a rabbit lay on a rock by the warm coals. Tuppence took to cleaning her sword with a whetstone. A fine silver-gray ribbon flowed over the grip as she held it. “Are you from Silversword?” Alfred asked.

“Not really,” Tuppence replied, stretching out near the fire. “I’m from a little town called Saltwater, by the South Bay. I just worked in Silversword.”

“For the royal family?”

Tuppence looked displeased. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s a serious flaw in my character,” Alfred replied. “Lords and ladies don’t care to answer questions.”

“Good thing I’m not a lady then.” Tuppence waited for a response, but Alfred remained quiet.

Alfred pulled his brown cloak tighter about his shoulders. The fire was warm enough, but it left his back feeling the chill. “What’s it like in the castle?” Alfred continued.

Tuppence remained silent. Alfred looked disappointed. “I was only hoping I could learn something about life in a royal castle. I’ve never been inside a royal castle. I think I could be a servant there. I know it’s not any of my business to ask.”

“Your right.”

Alfred’s face brightened like the sun. “You mean I could be a royal servant?”

“No,” Tuppence replied, “It’s not any of your business to ask.”

They sat for a moment, the firelight gleaming off both their faces. “It’s about what you’d expect,” Tuppence sighed. “Retainers running everywhere. The halls so thick with minsters, lords, and clergy it’s hard to walk down the hall without stepping on one. Except for fact people are trying to kill you.”

Alfred squinted as if reading the fine print of a book. “Is that why you’ve come to the tournament?”

Tuppence leaned back. “I am used to people trying to kill me. At least at a tournament, they only try to kill you one at a time.” She pulled the whetstone over the steel. “Not to mention the fact you can tell who the ones are coming to kill you at such events by the way they are dressed.”

“Saltwater, aye?” Alfred remarked. “It sounds like Cattlecrossing.”

“Cattlecrossing is inland, up the river. It’s a tiny town filled with broken-down huts and drovers. Saltwater smells better and we have a nicer view of the ocean.”

“But you decided to leave the service of her majesty.”

Her eyes opened like a window in a high wind. “I don’t see it as any of your business. In going in the tent now.” Tuppence uncrossed her legs and lifted the flap of the tent. Walking through, she dropped the flap with a certain amount of finality.

Alfred stretched his arms. "Asking too many questions again," he muttered to himself. "Yea, it's a flaw. But you're bad-tempered."



In the morning, a plain green flag flew from the battlements. It flapped in the half-wind. The air smelled damp. Tuppence walked over to the remains of the fire. Alfred was curled up next to the embers, trying to soak up what was left of the heat. Tuppence kicked him gently in the legs with the toe of her boot, but he didn't stir. She kicked him harder. Alfred awoke with a start, rubbing his eyes. He found himself squinting in the pre-dawn light. "Doesn't the green flag mean the tournament is about to begin?" Tuppence asked.

"No," Alfred replied. "It won't start until afternoon; the green flag is a signal for a specific event."

"What does it mean?"

Alfred rubbed his eyes again, trying to clear the sleep for his mind. "There's to be a grand melee."

There hadn't been a grand melee in the kingdom for over 50 years. The knights tended to argue against it. Too much bloodshed and not enough prize money. Not to mention the absence of individual glory. The knights preferred the type of strategy involved in a one on one assault. And the certainty of knowing who your opponent was going to be because you'd bribed the castellan to make him so. In a melee, you never knew who you would end up facing.

"So, it's to everyone against everyone else?"

"Not exactly," Alfred yawned, "That would be a green and white flag. The plain green one means teams, six on six." Alfred stood up on unsteady legs. "Shall I go and see with which team you are to be fighting with?"

Tuppence continued to run the whetstone down her blade. From the shine and the edge, she'd been doing the same all night. "Why don't you so go that."

Alfred returned carrying a piece of paper. Before handing it to Tuppence he curled his lip at her. "Can you read?" he asked bluntly.

Tuppence snatched the paper out of his hand. "Give me that." She was both terse and annoyed by the mere suggestion of illiteracy. "I don't know who any of these people are."

"I image," Alfred commented, "they are all thinking the same thing about you at this moment."

Tuppence continued to run her eyes over the parchment. "I'm sure you know Lord Hightower. Now, Lord Oliver has three monkeys across his white shield. Lord Asbury has a checked background of white and blue, with a sun in the center. Lord Hightower, of course, an Oaktree with ..."

"Yes," Tuppence frowned, "I know all about Lord Hightower."

"You sound disappointed, my lady."

"I'd rather he was on the other side," Tuppence spat.

"Now Lord Grimsby has a ..."

"I don't care," Tuppence interrupted him, "I'll find them. With any luck, they'll all be standing around when I wipe the smirk off Lord Hightower's face."

"Lord Hightower doesn't smirk, my lady."

"Yes," Tuppence growled, "Yes, he does. And in a completely condescending way."

Alfred looked confused. "I don't understand, my lady."

"I didn't expect you would," Tuppence snarled, "and stop calling me that."



Alfred bowed before Tuppence as the sun beat down overhead. It was almost noon. "Shall I prepare your armor, my lady?"

"I'm not going to be wearing any."

"Begging your pardon, your ladyship?"

"It'll just slow me down." Tuppence tried to explain adjusting her boots. "I can fight, but I'm better when I move."

All eyes stared at Tuppence as she marched into the competition square. Not a little bit of drool found its way down the lips of many a man. Tuppence held her long sword in her left hand and a straight pointed dagger in the right. The breeze draped the gray-silver ribbon over her lower arms. She passed a group of knights loudly arguing with the castellan. They didn't seem happy about the melee arrangement. No doubt more than one of them wanted their coin back. Tuppence marched right past them.

Lord Hightower stood even taller in his armor. The helmet seemed far too tall to be practical. Not to mention it made him easy to spot. The feather adorning the very crest of the helmet waved in the wind. Around him were the other four members of the team. At least two of them had gaping mouths. Another might have as well, but the closed visor kept Tuppence from seeing it.

Lord Asbury's face turned to a frown when he realized Tuppence was heading straight for them. He dropped the point of his sword into the dirt. "Damn and blast it. Did you set this up Hightower, so we would lose in the first round? I have a lot of coin riding on this."

Tuppence placed the point of her dagger right under Lord Asbury's chin, forcing him to elevate his head. "They'll be no talk of losing here. If anyone of you doesn't pull their weight, I'll gut them like a pig."

"Determined," Lord Grimsby remarked.

"And feisty too," declared Lord Oliver, "I like that."

"Never mind what you like," Tuppence spat, "Just see that your blade does its work."

"And me," Lord Hightower remarked, holding his heavy frail before him.

"Do you know how to use that thing?" Tuppence asked.

“He’s better on a horse,” Lord Oliver smiled. “Let’s hope enough of the other side presents their heads to his spiked ball.” The others all grinned and laughed at the jape.

The herald announced the beginning of the rounds. Tuppence watched with some interest. The first three sets of teams seemed to spend more time rolling around in the dirt than actually fighting. It seemed the knights were showing their disdain for the melee event by proceeding in the most halfhearted way possible. The teams proceeded as if they were present at a drunken brawl, rather than at a tournament. Only one man seemed to take the event seriously. He wore well-polished bronze armor and wielded only a spear. Bronze armor had long gone out of fashion due to its weakness against an iron blade, but this one wouldn’t let anyone get close. Swinging the spear one-handed, he’d drive away an attacking blow and then used the shaft to knock them over. Tuppence knew well the technique, using the man’s own attack strength and redirecting the force of the blow into the shaft to knock your opponent down at the legs. She hoped they wouldn’t face him, as he’d be difficult to overcome. The rest of knights would be a simple matter. The crowd cheered wildly for the bronze armored knight and he replied to their adulation by raising his spear high over his head. Pride, Tuppence thought to herself, she could use it against him if they found themselves across the tourney field.

Finally, the herald called their match. The six on the opposing side snickered as she took the field. They’d be easy prey, Tuppence noted. One of them had to hold himself upon his sword as he laughed. The crowd was all leaning in closer to get a better look at what they imagined coming. The lady of the castle stood above her heavily carved chair in the viewing stands. Extending an arm, she held a frilly white cloth at the end of her fingertips. Releasing the fabric, it drifted slowly to the ground. When it, at last, reached the ground, it was the signal to begin.

Her opponents were still laughing when Tuppence began her charge. Not only were they surprised by her speed, but even the members of her own team had to run to keep up. Lord Oliver was the least prepared and they practically left him behind, standing by himself.

When Tuppence reached her first opponent, he was still laughing. She gave him a flying kick with both legs. Tuppence returned gracefully to her legs and assumed a crouching position, but her target went crashing through the fence at the fighting area’s parameter. He broke through the fence backward like a bull in a bad mood.

He picked himself off the ground slowly, but it didn’t matter. Contestants found outside the boundaries were eliminated.

One of the opposing knights seemed to recover his senses and charged Tuppence as if he was on horseback. Tuppence steadied herself and the knight came thundering toward her. At the very last second, she gave him a vicious kick. It was not targeted toward a place most knights would use as an aiming point since in jousting it would be covered by the horn of the saddle. Tuppence, however, had no such qualms. In fact, she usually found it to be a preferred target. She was quite pleased the knight was so accommodating.

He fell to the ground, moaning, holding his hands over his crotch. It would be some time before he could rise again. Turning she blocked a blow from another knight’s two-handed great sword ... which was about to land on Lord Oliver’s head. The foiled knight turned his attack on Tuppence. Their swords clashed together loudly as Lord Oliver grumbled.

"I think what you meant to say was thank you," Tuppence barked.

Tuppence and the great sword knight squared off against each other. The knight pressed his attack. He used his strength to force Tuppence to fall back. What blows she could not avoid, she blocked. But the effort was tiring, and it began to show on her face. The knight knocked Tuppence to the ground. She crawled backward to escape as the knight raised his sword over his head.

Without any announcement or warning, the chain on Lord Hightower's flail wrapped itself around the knight's great sword. With one flick of his wrist, he yanked the knight's sword from his grasp. The now disarmed knight gave Hightower an astonished look. Then Hightower punched him in the face with his gauntleted fist. The man fell to the ground like a pile of broken bricks.

Lord Hightower grabbed Tuppence's arm and pulled her to her feet as she groused. "I think what *you* meant to say was thank you."

Tuppence threw her dagger right between Lord Hightower's legs. The knight who was about to attack Lord Hightower from the rear tripped and fell flat over the dagger, landing on his face. "Actually, the phase I was going for was ... you're welcome."

Almost before it began, the fight was over. Six opposing knights lay on the ground. One of them was so insensate, he had to be carried from the field. The crowd roared. Instead of being pleased. The other knights of Tuppence's team looked angry. All expect for Lord Hightower. They walked off the field in a huff. "What's their problem?" Tuppence's face reddened.

"You didn't share," Hightower explained. "You took three out all by yourself. That's half. Men have pride you know."

"And no brains," Tuppence bellowed.

"Yea ... well," Lord Hightower called after her, "I thought all women knew that."



The second event was more traditional ... a straight joust. Tuppence's opponent was fully armored, on a heavy charger. He balanced a twelve-foot-long lance on his hip. His animal was spirited, and he was having trouble keeping it under control. It reared and bucked, ready to charge down the track. The only thing which Tuppence wore which could laughably be called protection was a heavy pair of black boots. Her horse had seen better days. The nag's mane had more grey hairs than dark ones. It appeared as if she would barely be able to trot, let alone gallop. To top it all off, Tuppence carried no lance. She held a double-headed axe which was less than four feet high. This meant her opponent had an eight-foot reach on her.

"Aren't you going to wear any armor for this either?" Alfred protested.

"No," Tuppence replied. "If I lose, all my armor would be forfeit. This way I win, or I lose nothing. My opponent can take the sand in his shoes back to his tent with him for his efforts."

Alfred looked terrified. "You're a stubborn woman."

"What was your first clue?"

The lady of the games dropped her handkerchief to signal the beginning of the joust. The crowd screamed and the Tuppence opposing knight was off at a gallop even before the white cloth hit the dirt. Tuppence's horse pranced forward calmly.

The crowd gasped as the knight lowered his lance. Most of the onlookers expected a gesture of chivalry, but the knight aimed his lance directly at Tuppence's chest. His horse's hooves thundered across the track as the distance closed. In the blink of an eye, Tuppence's horse exploded across the ground. It appeared more like she was flying than galloping. The knight seemed even more determined at this change in events. At the very last minute, Tuppence swung around in her saddle. She was now hanging off the far side of her mount, hidden from her opponent's lance.

For a moment, the knight didn't know how to respond ... and a moment was all Tuppence needed. She passed her opponent and as she did so, rose back into the saddle. Reaching behind her, she caught the knight's neck in the hook of her axe blade. With a yank, she pulled him right off his horse. He was so stunned by the unexpended fall, he simply lay on the ground until the marshal declared Tuppence the victor.

She rode past Lord Hightower as she made her way back to her tent. She bounced as the horse trotted along. Hightower's mouth was still agape for the spectacle he had witnessed. Tuppence smiled. "I think the phrase you are looking for is ... well done."

Alfred smiled too. It was well done indeed.

Tuppence exited her tent for her second and last joust. She wore a gleaming set of armor. The shoulder pads were fluted to resemble the wings of a giant bird of prey. Chainmail covered the joints so the whole affair seemed to fit Tuppence like a glove. The whole assemblage was shined to a high polish and the sun shined off the steel. Her shield displayed a fighting falcon wrapped in silver ribbon. One corner was cut from the shape for her lance to balance upon.

Alfred looked confused. "I thought you didn't have any armor."

"Who told you this?"

Alfred looked disturbed. "You did."

"No," she smiled back, "I didn't say I didn't have any, I just said I wasn't going to wear it."

"And now? What's changed?"

"Do you think the same trick will work a second time?" she replied casually. "Everyone's seen it."

Alfred didn't look impressed. "In case you haven't noticed," he sighed, "your opponent is rather larger than you are. He'll have you off your horse in a moment."

"Then let's hope he's as slow as he is big." Tuppence picked up a lance and mounted her horse as if she was a juggler tossing a ball in the air.

The handkerchief fell and the joust began. Tuppence's opponent showed more caution this time. He allowed his horse to build up a gradual speed rather than letting it thunder across the field in an

uncontrolled manner. He aimed for the old nag's chest. This time, if Tuppence attempted the same trick, she'd wind up under the horse as it fell.

The two horses increased speed as they neared, hooves pounding the earth. At the last minute, he raised his lance for Tuppence's shield. It was a miracle she was able to move even the slightest, so he only struck the edge of her shield. Even so, she was barely able to remain in the saddle. Her lance shattered on her opponent's shield, although without any noticeable effect.

Tuppence was still trying to right herself in her saddle as she threw the broken lance to the ground. She quickly picked up another. "Shall I drop our banner and indicate our concession?" Alfred enquired, concerned she was outclassed by both weight and skill with a lance.

"You do," Tuppence growled, "And I shove the shaft so far up your ass your eyes will pop out of your head."

Since the cloth had been dropped, her opponent was free to charge as soon as he managed to get his horse turned around. At this moment, the knight's horse bolted, and he was already halfway across the field. Tuppence kicked her charger and rode off to meet him. Only this time she held her lance point up. It was the chivalrous act her opponent should have made, but the gesture only proved to anger him.

He kicked his heels into his horse's side and thundered down the path, leveling his lance at the center of her shield. The weight of the lance's impact alone would be enough to break bones and collapse lungs. Time seemed to slow as they approached. The crowd was silent as the grave. Even as the time seemed to be moving like molasses, their reactions seemed equally slowed. Yet they rode forth, slowly closing the distance. Only at the end did Tuppence lower her lance. Her opponent crouched in his saddle, so the lance might pass over his head. But he misjudged the distance ... and Tuppence's determination. Her lance caught the top of his helmet. His lance shattered on her shield, but the blow from Tuppence threw him off his steed and he crashed into the fence separating the two lanes.

Tuppence's shield was destroyed along with his lance and she shook the broken and useless pieces from her arm. Her once shiny armor was dented as well but she was still astride her horse and her opponent was not. The marshal declared her the winner as the crowd cheered.



In the evening, a feast was held in honor of the day's events. Everyone gathered in the castle's main hall. Hundreds of candles lit the cavernous room and both light and shadow danced upon the walls. The feast centered around a large boar, cooked with the traditional apple in its mouth. No weapons were allowed in the hall, which made Tuppence nervous. Each of the winners had a servant standing behind them holding a pole. Atop this wooden shaft was a ribbon for each of the knight's victories. Tuppence's pole held three. Three golden streamers, more than any other knight in the room. At the bottom of Tuppence's pole stood Alfred, a proud smile on his face wider than the arc of the sun.

The ale was flowing freely in the room and no one wanted to miss out on the festivities. Tuppence herself was holding two drinking horns in her hands. Lord Hightower approached and Tuppence handed him one of the drinking horns of ale.

“They say,” Lord Hightower remarked, “That all the important questions, such as the matches between men and women are decided by ale.”

Tuppence gave him a wry grin. “You don’t say.”

“Yes,” Lord Hightower continued, “A suitor gives his intended a cup of ale. If the ale tastes sour, then the match is off. no questions asked. But if the ale is sweet the match is blessed by the gods.”

“Seems an odd tradition,” Tuppence suggested, taking a sip of her ale.

“Perhaps, but it is the tradition in these parts.” Lord Hightower raised the horn of ale to his lips. He tipped back the horn to down its contents in one, but nothing happened. His face displayed a quizzical look. He held the horn upside down, but no liquid was forthcoming. Then he tapped the horn on the edge of a nearby table. Out sild a solid block of honey. It lay on the table in the shape of the horn it had come from, a small drop of liquid dripping to the surface of the table.

Tuppence smiled.