

SKIVVY AND CUTTLE

By Joanne Lennon

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I was teaching the stableboy to juggle eggs. He wasn't doing badly, either!

"Relax your shoulders," I told him. "Don't watch the eggs—don't watch anything! Good jugglers are in a world of their own. Now see if you can walk toward me without dropping anything."

I was juggling, too, you understand, so when we started to move, I was walking backward. I couldn't possibly have known that Glod, the Sheriff of Nottingham's bodyguard, would come into the kitchen just then. I couldn't have guessed he'd be stupid enough to stand right behind me. I could have told him that if he left his great feet there, I was bound to trip over them, and *then* I was bound to lose control of the eggs. Obvious, really.

But when I saw the expression on his face, with egg dripping down it, I realized this was not a time to chat. I picked up my skirts and ran. Not *quite* fast enough, but the bruise will heal. It's just a question of staying out of his way for a while. Like maybe the rest of my life.

My name is Skivvy, because that's what I do. I'm the maid-of-all-work in the Sheriff's kitchen, and if there's a dirty job or a bad-tempered kick going, it goes to me. That's it, and all of it, but to stop myself getting dreary, I try to learn new things as I go along. Like juggling—I learned that from some tumblers who were here last year. I've been practicing ever since.

I know all the best hiding places in the castle, and on this day I went right to the roof, up among the gargoyles and the pigeon droppings.

It was a hot, still day. I leaned on the parapet and gazed idly out across the great, green forest. It was nice up here, except for some flies that wouldn't leave me be. They seemed to be trying to bite the stone gargoyles, too, which I thought served them right, the blood-thirsty little pests. I watched one persistent fly buzzing round a little dragon-shaped gargoyle. *Buzz, buzz*. Horrible thing! Finally it settled on the gargoyle's nose, and you could tell it was thinking, I'm going to bite and bite—

Which was when I saw the gargoyle's tongue shoot out, catch the fly, and disappear again. There was the tiniest *crunch* and then—perfect stillness.

I couldn't believe my eyes. But...

"I saw you do that," I said. I didn't seriously expect an answer. And for a second, nothing happened.

Then the gargoyle's eye moved.

Not much. It was just a flicker—a quick glance, no more.

“I saw that, too!” I shrilled.

“Did not,” said a muffled voice.

Pause.

“What did you say?” I whispered.

“I said, ‘Did not.’” He sounded the way you do when you try to talk without moving your lips.

“I did, though,” I said as firmly as I could. “I saw you move.”

Another pause. Then the eye swiveled back again.

“Really?” said the voice.

“Really,” I said.

And then the gargoyle just *sagged!* What had been a stiff, stone statue of a small dragon became... *a real*, small dragon. He draped himself along the warm stone of the parapet, and his eyes looked pleadingly up into mine.

“Please don't tell,” he said.

My knees gave way. I flopped down beside him.

“Who would I tell?” I finally said with a shrug.

The dragon smiled, displaying impressively sharp, little, white teeth. Then he yawned and stretched, for all the world like a long, skinny cat. I reached out a hand to rub him under the chin. Cats like that.

I only just got my face out of the way in time.

“Oops—sorry. That's a ticklish bit,” apologized the dragon as the smoke cleared.

I stared at the scorch marks along the stone and gulped. Little but lethal! He had a sweet smile, though. I grinned feebly back.

“I've been here since I hatched,” the dragon continued. “Mama doesn't see very well, and she thought this was a cliff. I'll be joining her when my wings are strong enough. So far they're only good for little swoops.”

“I wish I could leave,” I sighed. “But it's no good going if you've no place to go. I'd love to see you swoop, though.”

The dragon started to speak, but I stopped him suddenly.

“Sh! Listen! Sounds like someone's being brought in.”

We peered cautiously over the parapet. It was a long way down to the courtyard. But I had no difficulty identifying Glod, especially when he hit the prisoner across the face.

I could hear his sneering voice. “Take the King of the Outlaws away. He can be King of the Dungeons—until we hang him tomorrow!”

“Oh no,” I breathed. “Not Robin Hood!” I stood up.

“Don’t go! Who? Take me, too!” chittered the dragon as he swooped about my head.

“No—you’ll be seen—” I hadn’t time for this.

“Not me!” crowed the dragon, and before I could stop him, he’d wrapped himself round my waist.

Great, I thought, *no one* will notice I’m wearing a dragon.

But when I looked down...no dragon. Just a bit of hemp with a funny buckle shaped like a dragon’s head.

The buckle winked. “By the way, my name’s Cuttle,” he said. “Let’s go!”

Down in the kitchen, everyone was whispering about the prisoner. The servants were all on Robin’s side— nobody had any love for the Sheriff. But what could we do? Well, I thought, letting the other outlaws know what had happened to their leader was a start! I grabbed a basket and headed for the main gate.

“Gathering mushrooms. For the Sheriff’s feast,” I babbled at the guards, hoping they wouldn’t stop to question me. But they were too busy gossiping, and I reached the trees without hindrance.

“So how do we find these outlaws?” came a voice at buckle level.

“We don’t,” I said, walking quickly. “They find us.” And before we had gone much farther, they did. A vision in red leaped out onto the path—red hat, red cloak, red boots, the lot—followed by a group of others who were more normally dressed.

“Hold, little maid,” the vision in red said. “If you seek Robin’s elusive band of Merrie Men, seek no more.”

“Well, *you’re* not hard to spot, for one!” I replied. “And I’m not little.”

“See?” somebody said. “I told you it wasn’t smart letting Will go around dressed like that.”

“Look, Ben,” said the vision. “I *have* to wear red. My name’s Will *Scarlet*, right? It’s not Will Green or Will Muddy Brown or—”

“There’s something you need to know about Robin Hood,” I said loudly.

The squabbling stopped abruptly.

“He’s in the Sheriff’s dungeon,” I said.

There was a gasp of dismay.

“We’ve got to rescue him!”

“We’ve got to get him out!”

“You can’t get him out without the keys,” I said. “And the Sheriff holds those. You’d need to get very close to get them. Very close indeed...,” I added thoughtfully.

“What is it, girl?” said the one called Ben. “Have you got a plan?”

I nodded. “The beginnings of one,” I said. “But I’d need a disguise—no, a costume. Something showy...”

All eyes moved from me to Will Scarlet.

“He’s taller than she is, of course,” murmured one of the Merrie Men.

“Not a problem,” said Ben. “I can work miracles with a needle.”

Will looked anxious. “What’s going on?” he quavered. “Why are you all staring at me like that?”

“Don’t worry, my deary,” said Ben as he pushed Will back behind some bushes. “It’s all in a good cause.”

“Your Honor!”

Ben had been as good as his boast. He *had* worked miracles.

I stood before the Sheriff’s guests looking as different from Skivvy the serving maid as scissors and needle could manage. My hair was cropped like a boy’s, and Will’s scarlet finery had been altered to my size. His cloak swirled from my shoulders, and round my waist I wore Cuttle as a glittering golden belt. No one would recognize me!

I hoped.

I made my bow. “Your Honor!” I said again. “My magic awaits your pleasure!”

There was a rustle of anxious whispers from the guests. What would the Sheriff’s pleasure be?

“A magician?” he snarled, and I felt the blood drain away from my face. Then his mood changed, faster than a river eel, and he half laughed, half sneered, “Why not? Magician, *amuse* me.”

Trying hard to ignore the threat in his voice, I bowed again and began.

“My lords and ladies,” I intoned, “observe how the magic of the East molds matter and alters reality. Take a belt—”

With a flourish I brought Cuttle away from my waist. He unfurled with a satisfying *snap!* (only I heard the tiny “ouch!”) and then, as I threw him into the air, he curled into a golden ball and landed on my hand.

“A ball” I held him up. “Or is it a flagon?” Cuttle rearranged himself. “Or a silver chain?” Cuttle drooped across my hands. “Or no, a ball after all” And adding two ordinary balls from under my cloak, I began to juggle.

The Sheriff was watching. So far, so good. But Glod, standing beside the Sheriff’s chair, had me worried. He was staring at me, not my tricks. I had the horrible feeling he thought he knew me—and if he managed to make the connection between my face and those eggs, I was in *big* trouble.

Sweat was dripping down my back. I could feel my shoulders hunching and my neck beginning to ache. I knew I was going to drop something—spoil everything. And then, through my panic, I heard a sound.

It was rough, warm, and gravelly.

It was Cuttle. He was purring, from sheer excitement, I guessed, and it was as if somebody were singing in my ear, “You can do it! We can do it!”

I took heart.

“Hay—UP!” I cried as I abandoned the ordinary balls and threw Cuttle high, high into the air.

He uncurled with a squeal of delight and opened his wings. We had tied fire-red streamers to them, and he looked like a miniature phoenix swooping above the banqueters’ heads. He was irresistible!

It was my chance.

I threw myself across the High Table and sliced the thong attaching the keys to the Sheriff’s belt. Grabbing them as they fell, I swirled Will’s cloak up, up, and over Glod. Before he could untangle himself, I clouted him, hard, with a heavy jug. He went down in a satisfying heap.

As I jumped back onto the floor, Cuttle let out a battle scream and dove at the Sheriff. Half the guests clapped and laughed, thinking this a part of the show. The other half were trying to push themselves away from the tables. For an instant, I thought the Sheriff was going to do nothing, but then I saw his eyes go slitty and his hand move from under the table.

I saw the knife.

There was no time to warn Cuttle. The Sheriff would have him in shreds before I could make the dragon understand the danger. So I didn’t try. Instead, I leaped up as high as I could and caught Cuttle by the tail.

He came out of the air backward with a squawk. Still holding his tail and supporting his chest with my other hand, I swirled him round to face the Sheriff.

“Drop the knife, sir!” I cried. “This dragon is loaded, and I’m not afraid to use him.”

And to make sure he knew I meant it, I tickled Cuttle under the chin. The gush of flame that came out of his nostrils burned the food on the table to a crisp and singed the Sheriff’s eyebrows.

His knife hit the floor, just as the great wooden doors of the hall crashed open behind me. I could hear people pounding in. For a moment I had no idea if they were friend or foe.

Then I heard Ben’s big, welcome voice bellowing, “Hold it right there, my dearies! Nobody move!”

At first, nobody did. The rest was my fault. I got excited, you understand, and I must have tightened my grip. It's amazing how quickly tapestries catch fire. But I think it was the way the flame first blasted past his ear that made the Sheriff faint. He didn't hurt himself, though.

He landed on Glod.

In the forest, Robin Hood thanked us all for rescuing him and invited Cuttle and me to stay on with the Merrie Men. We were happy, and the Men were happy. (Except when Cuttle pointed his nostrils at them. They tended to leap sideways when this happened.)

But Will Scarlet *wasn't* happy. He stood there, dressed in borrowed green, looking at the sooty, torn remains of his finery. Even the cloak was beyond repair.

"I'm really sorry, Will," I said. Will sighed.

But then Ben came forward. "I was able to keep some cloth back when I did the alterations," he said. "I made you these. And we all would like to think of you wearing them, Will Scarlet, my deary!"

From behind his back, Ben brought out a seriously scarlet garment.

Red ... underpants!