

Tales of the Dungeon Keeper™

In each of the Dungeon Keeper's many subterranean lairs is a library, replete with books of ancient lore and black magic. Among the dusty volumes there are also tracts, penned by the Dungeon Keeper himself, recounting the history of those who were foolish enough to leave the world of light and descend into the Keeper's peril-filled abode. There follows one such tale...

The Dreadful Demise of Derek the Dauntless

By Neil Cook

Chapter 1: The Knight's Errand

Derek the Dauntless was snoring loudly as he slept. In his dreams he had just vanquished a mighty host of slavering monsters, riding them down from the back of his pure-bred stallion, severing, skewering and slicing limb from limb and head from shoulder with his trusty blade. Derek's heroism was applauded by a bevy of pert young damsels who, upon dismounting, accosted him and began to remove his armour piece by piece, giggling appreciatively all the while. Their flimsy gowns barely concealed the soft curves that Derek would soon get to grips with. Being a hero was, indeed, a fine life.

Abruptly, Derek was wrenched from the blissful arms of repose with a vigorous shake. Wearily opening one rheumy eye, Derek looked up to see the haggard face of his manservant Clive leering over him.

"Time to get up, sire," Clive rasped from between the stubs of rotting teeth.

"I was about to," muttered Derek in disgust.

"Have you forgotten sire? You're ridding the kingdom of Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs today."

Derek's annoyance at being so rudely disturbed just when things were getting interesting suddenly evaporated. Here, at last, was the perfect opportunity to prove the immensity of his manhood. Then there would be real damsels, rather than mere imaginary girls, beating a path to his door.

Derek was often a little stiff in the morning and today was no exception. He rose with a sigh and, breaking the ice that had formed overnight, splashed cold water over his face and hands from a bowl beside his bed. With Clive's help he dressed quickly and left the bare room for the feasting hall. There had been precious little feasting of late, as Derek had squandered much of his late father's fortune playing cards at The Bull and Frog inn. The castle was in a state of very poor repair; more than one visitor had suffered the unwanted attentions of falling masonry, the moat was blocked with debris and Derek's creditors were closing in like crows on carrion.

Derek began barking orders like an ill-tempered guard dog. "Bring me my breakfast! Have my armour made ready! Prepare my noble steed!"

"Certainly sire," replied Clive dutifully, adding as he turned away, "Shall I insert a broom up my behind and sweep as I go?"

Having broken his fast with a bowl of thin gruel and a wedge of black bread, Derek prepared for the rigours of the day. Too many hours boozing and carousing had put paid to his once lean, sinewy frame and he found it very hard to pull his chain mail hauberk over the large mass of flesh at his stomach. Clive wheeled out his master's armour, which had been lovingly cared for through many months of inactivity by a dedicated young page. It gleamed impressively in the dim light of the feasting hall.

Derek himself insisted that no-one but he should touch his sword, which he took down from the wall and unsheathed dramatically. The desired effect was severely muted by the dirty, rusty, blunted appearance of Derek's weapon. He harrumphed indignantly. "Didn't clean the damn thing after I used it last," Derek said under his breath.

"Your weapon has been idle for some time, although the shaft is showing signs of wear," Clive offered wryly.

Derek regained his composure. "Have it taken to the smithy at once."

"But the smith has refused to have any more dealings with you, sire, until your outstanding bill is paid."

Derek shook with frustration. "I'm soon to risk life and limb facing Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs and all you can do is rattle on about unpaid bills! Tell the man I'll pay him double what I owe him and damn his impudence." He thrust the sword into Clive's hands. Clive in turn handed it to the young page. The lad's face lit up at the chance to handle his master's weapon and he immediately ran off in the direction of the smithy.

"Help me on with my armour." Clive and the remaining servants began to dress their master. As leather straps were tightened and his body encased in metal, Derek began to feel steadily more heroic. A few cretinous slimy creatures would be no match for him!

If he were capable of being honest with himself, Derek would have admitted that the unexpected appearance of Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs was a gift from the gods. Here at last was the perfect opportunity to restore the family name and present himself as a heroic man of action. Even so, the prospect of descending into a dark, wet dungeon to slaughter fanged creatures wasn't entirely attractive. But the thought of the bundles of loot he expected to recover stiffened Derek's resolve. He would rebuild the castle, dig a huge new moat around it, and toss in all the card sharps who had cleaned him out at The Bull and Frog. Who'd be laughing then?

Now clad entirely in armour Derek was lead out into the courtyard, rattling and clanking as he went. The groom had Derek's horse bridled and waiting and he clumsily made his way toward it. A length of rope was looped under Derek's armpits and the other end flung over a handy beam. Three of the burliest servants took hold of the rope's free end.

"On three lads," said Clive. "One, two, three, heave."

They pulled. They heaved. They hauled. Still they couldn't budge their corpulent master. Eventually, with a supreme effort, Derek was lifted about six inches into the air before unceremoniously crashing back down to the ground. The servants stood around forlornly examining their rope burns.

"By 'eck, he's gained some weight," whispered one.

"I heard that!" Derek snapped. "Stop whinging and get me on my horse."

More servants joined the struggle. Straining every muscle and sinew, they managed to haul Derek a couple of feet into the air before reaching the limit of their endurance. Derek hung like a tin can on the end of a fishing line, swinging gently in the breeze. He began thrashing his arms and legs around. "Get me on my horse! Get me on my horse!" he bellowed. The mid-air tantrum roused a few more servants, who rushed to assist their lord and master.

Eventually Derek was safely seated in the saddle. "About time," announced Derek; the horse's back bowed visibly under the extra weight. "Now, where's that page with my sword?"

"Here I am sire." Derek looked down from his mount. The eager young lad was cradling the sword in his arms. Wide-eyed with awe and admiration, the page offered the hilt of the newly-shined weapon to his master.

Now this was more like the level of respect Derek deserved! "Well done boy," he said with even greater pomposity than usual and, raising his sword, added, "With my weapon I shall this day rid the land of Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs."

A servant snickered. Derek shot an evil glance at the underling responsible, sheathed his sword and spurred his horse. The poor animal broke into a trot; both horse and rider had had very little exercise of late.

"Raise the portcullis," ordered Derek.

The rusty, iron gate was duly raised and Derek dauntlessly bid the confines of the castle farewell on his quest for honour, glory and cash. Stage-managed by Clive, the assembled servants managed a single, unenthusiastic, "Hurrah."

The young page meanwhile, caught up in the drama of the moment, ran after his master shouting, "Good luck sire, good luck."

Derek looked back over his shoulder and raised an arm in salute, immediately became unbalanced in the saddle and lurched alarmingly to one side. He clung onto the reins with grim determination. As his master disappeared forever, Clive stalked up behind the page and grabbed him by the ear. "You little creep," he wheezed, "I know the how to deal with the likes of you," and dragged the youth away for a sound beating.

Chapter 2: The Road to Glory

Derek was on the road to Ye Olde Catacombs at last. It had developed into a clear, warm day and he felt full of the joys of spring. "What a glorious day for a massacre," he mused as he rode, "I almost pity those poor creatures." Derek chuckled to himself and began to whistle contentedly.

"Alms, master. Alms for a poor leper."

The voice came from out of nowhere, bursting the bubble of Derek's self-absorption. He reigned in his horse and looked around. There, by the side of the road, clad entirely in rags and with a hood drawn over his face, stood the dishevelled figure of a leper. The impoverished, diseased man stretched out a rotting hand towards Derek. "Help me sire," he implored, "I have known hunger, thirst and cold. A few pennies from your purse or some water from your canteen is all I ask."

Derek recoiled, screwing up his face in disgust. "Not bleeding likely, you repellent little man. Now be off with you. We don't like your sort around here."

“But sire...”

“But nothing,” Derek cut him off, wagging a gauntleted finger to emphasise his point. “Be off before I take my sword to you. Although,” he added, “I wouldn’t want to sully my gleaming blade on your festering flesh. From the advanced state of your disease it would take only one good kick to loose your head from its shoulders, so be warned.”

The leper slunk off into the tangled briars by the side of the road. Derek spurred his horse on, satisfied that he had dealt justly with the disrespectful vagabond.

A little further on the road disappeared into a heavily wooded area notorious for bandits, dispossessed peasants and sundry other unsavoury folk. Not that they held any fear for Derek. They would have to be rash indeed to assault a knight in full armour such as he. Still, he gripped the hilt of his sword for comfort. The sun was now high in the sky, the trees not too tightly packed, and the wood actually seemed a very pleasant place. Derek pushed on confidently.

He had traversed the better part of the wood when, up ahead, he noticed a lone figure lurking in the shadows of a large oak tree. Derek readied himself for action. As horse and rider approached, the figure emerged and blocked Derek’s path, standing stock still with his right arm raised. He was revealed to be a frail old man with a bent back, leaning on a long staff for support.

Derek, fearing an ambush, spurred his horse into action. “Giddy up lad, we’ll ride him down.” The horse, out of condition and over-burdened as he was, managed a half-hearted trot. The old man remained motionless, right up until the moment that a collision seemed inevitable when, with more compassion than his master would have shown, Derek’s steed came to an abrupt halt.

Derek was flung forward in the saddle. He regained his seat and stared down at the old man, then nervously cast his eyes skyward expecting the branches of the trees to be laden with waiting bandits. “You there,” Derek pronounced, trying to keep his voice from quavering, “Get out of my way.”

The old man was frail and rake thin, with eyes that bulged in their sockets. He directed his gaze straight into Derek’s eyes. “Doomed,” he screeched, “We’re all doomed!”

Derek recognised the accent; the old man was a Celt from the frozen wastes many miles north of Velouria. “Are you on day release from the lunatic asylum or something?” he inquired.

“Ah, you may well mock,” the old man said sagely. “But the people of this realm are doomed. I have wandered far and seen many fair lands reduced to rubble by the evil of the Dungeon Keeper.”

“Who is the Dungeon Keeper?”

“No man who has set eyes on him ever returned to tell the tale. The Dungeon Keeper is the high priest of evil. He is at home in the shadows, he shuns the light and his servants are legion.”

Beads of sweat broke out on Derek’s brow, but he put the sudden warmth down to the heat of the day. Opening his mouth to speak, only a strangled yelp escaped. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I’m not put off by your old wives’ tales,” he said, secretly bricking it. “I am a knight of the realm and I’ve nothing to fear from beasts that crawl in the dirt.”

“That’s what they all say,” replied the old man dismissively, “Just before they get their arses kicked.”

Outrage at being addressed in such a manner momentarily overcame Derek's growing sense of dread. "How dare you," he growled and spurred his horse into life. The animal lurched forward, striking the old man a glancing blow that sent him tumbling into the dirt. The Celt stood up, shaking a fist at Derek's disappearing figure. "You'll be sorry, you Sassenach gadge."

Horse and rider left the trees behind with the old man's words of warning still ringing in their ears. Derek consoled himself by muttering, "Nutters like that should be locked up. Dungeon Keeper indeed!"

Chapter 3: Trouble Brewing at the Inn

A couple of hours more went by and Derek's horse was wilting from exhaustion. Having failed to reach anything faster than a canter (despite the constant application of Derek's spurs), the horse's speed soon dipped to a trot. The sun had climbed well toward its zenith and, roasting like a foil-wrapped turkey inside his armour, Derek too was reaching the limits of his endurance. As luck would have it, The Bull and Frog was on the road to the catacombs. Horse and rider approached the inn and the smell of warm ale and roasting meat washed over them. "Well, I can't be expected to do battle on an empty stomach," Derek rationalised and brought his mount to a stop.

He removed his helmet, kicked one leg out of the stirrups and fell to earth with a resounding crash. The horse released an audible sigh and arched its back in relief. The commotion alerted the inn-keeper, who appeared in the doorway drying his hands on his apron. "Why, master Derek. Good day to you sire. On yer way to deal with Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs, I presume?"

The inn-keeper presumed an air of familiarity that Derek found both insulting and distasteful. "Not without a bite to eat and some liquid refreshment," he asserted, striding into The Bull and Frog's dingy interior. Waving his hand dismissively he added, "Roast me a pig, bring me some ale and see to my horse."

"I'd like to sire," again the inn-keeper's tone was less than respectful, "But there's the small matter of yer outstanding bill."

"Don't bother me with trifles man. I'm soon to risk death to save the worthless skin of everyone in this village. Now where are my vittles?"

The inn-keeper wasn't altogether impressed. "Come now sire, there's no need to take that tone. I'm sure we can come to some arrangement." He winked and knowingly raised a finger to one side of his nose. "I 'ear tell the smithy is getting twice what you owe 'im on yer successful return."

"Word certainly travels fast," Derek muttered morosely, already resigned to paying up. "Very well, double it is."

"Well, I was thinkin'. My services 'ave been far more valuable to you over the years than the smithy's, an' if he's gettin' double..." the inn-keeper trailed off, raising his eyebrows to emphasise the point.

Derek leaned in close to the inn-keeper's face. "Don't push it," he hissed through clenched teeth.

The inn-keeper retreated nervously. "Double it is then sire. Very good. I'll see to your food."

With an almighty crash Derek slumped into an unoccupied seat by the fire-side and relaxed. Odd's bodkins, his armour was heavy. A comely, well-proportioned wench appeared, carrying a large tray under her ample bosom piled high with roast pig, bread,

cheese and a foaming mug of ale. Derek smiled contentedly and tucked in. It wasn't long before the pressure of all he'd eaten began to make him uncomfortable, so he removed the breast-plate of his armour before continuing to eat and drink apace. The effect of the heat, the food and the ale soon got to him and he began to feel sleepy. His head lolled onto his chest and he fell sound asleep, snoring loudly.

Derek awoke with a start. The inn was full of people and noise. A thick pall of smoke hung in the air and candle light flickered on the walls. How long had he been asleep? Derek lurched to his feet. At the sound of the disturbance a few heads turned in his direction, showing toothless grins. The inn-keeper appeared, all smiles. "Oh master Derek, you looked so peaceful I didn't 'ave the 'art to disturb yer."

"What time is it?" Derek inquired woozily.

"It be a good few hours since sundown. I don't reckon you'll be venturing through the woods to Ye Olde Catacombs tonight." The assembled throng laughed at Derek's predicament.

Derek's head had begun to clear and he felt his anger rising. "Nonsense," he said with determination, "Help me on with my breast-plate, for I shall this night rid the land of Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs."

At that, the laughter from the crowd of drunken peasants was redoubled. The inn-keeper had an especially hard time keeping his face straight as he tightened the straps on the armour. Derek's immense ego had been seriously dented. "I'll show you, you ungrateful proles," he bellowed, stumbling out into the impenetrable gloom. "At least give me a torch," he demanded. The inn-keeper duly obliged and Derek felt his way tentatively across the courtyard to his horse.

The faithful steed had been fed, watered and rested and was raring to go. But Derek immediately encountered a problem; how was he to get back on his horse? Swallowing his pride, Derek turned and trudged back to the inn. Knocking with a gauntleted hand he called, "Hello there, in the inn, I was wondering if any of you chaps could help me mount my horse?"

There was an explosion of laughter. Derek adopted a hangdog expression. "I'm willing to pay," he added. At that, the laughter stopped and a torrent of ill-clad, unwashed peasantry poured out of the door. Hands came from everywhere and heaved Derek into the air. He was carried at head height to his horse, and manhandled roughly into the saddle. Once settled he raised a hand to silence the crowd as they clamoured for their cash. "On my return you will all be paid handsomely. Fear not!"

With that Derek spurred his steed and was off into the night, chased by an angry mob pelting him with earth, rocks and whatever else came to hand. Not quite the send-off a hero expects, but they'd be sorry when he returned with gold, jewels and who knew what other treasures. The thought kept him warm as the rain began to lash down around him.

Chapter 4: Derek's Doom Approaches

Derek disappeared beneath the eaves of the old forest, holding aloft his flickering torch. The entwined branches of the ancient trees formed an eldritch roof, and the first pangs of fear gripped him. This place had been rumoured to be haunted even before the appearance of Ye Vile Curse That Hath Taken Root In Ye Olde Catacombs. He urged on his hesitant horse, leaning forward in the saddle against the driving rain, little knowing that every step took him closer to his doom. As he neared Ye Olde Catacombs the remains of those who had failed in their assault littered the ground and stone remnants of monuments to the dead sprang up on either side of the overgrown pathway. An

involuntary shiver ran down Derek's spine; suddenly he wasn't feeling quite so dauntless.

The doors to the catacombs loomed ahead of him. "Get a grip man," Derek mumbled to himself. He threw the spluttering torch into the undergrowth, dismounted and, doing his best to ignore the butterflies formation flying in his stomach, strode up to the large, wooden doors. What was there to be scared of? A few scaly beasts weren't about to get the better of him. He was armed, dangerous and just about arrogant enough to imagine himself indestructible.

There was a sign above the door which read 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here'. Derek rang the doorbell. "Come on, come on," he spluttered impatiently. Suddenly the door swung sharply inward with an ominous 'boom'. Without a moment's hesitation, with all fear put behind him, Derek strode through the door into absolute darkness. The door slammed shut behind him.

At first Derek stood rooted to the spot while his eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom. Presently he was able to make out the bare stone walls of the dungeon's interior, coated with moss and lichen, the low ceiling and smooth stone floor. Even with the visor of his helmet down, and even to a nose inured to open sewers and festering plague pits, the stench was over-whelming.

The corridor stretched ahead of him into gloom, but in the distance Derek thought he could make out the sound of guttural laughter. There was only one direction to take and he took it. Striding purposefully toward the noise, sword at the ready, Derek looked forward to his first kill. The laughter grew louder as the gloom lifted and, up ahead, he saw the narrow corridor open out into a larger room. Flickering candle light cast dancing shadows on the walls and raucous laughter echoed down the corridor towards him. Back to the wall, he edged nearer the opening, unaware that the clattering of his armour had already alerted the occupants to his arrival. "This'll put the wind up them!" he thought, preparing to leap into the light.

A deep breath. Another. Derek burst into the room, brandished his sword and shouted, "Have at you, spawn of Hell."

He was greeted by side-splitting, gut-busting laughter. Two troll-like creatures who'd been lurking in the darkness, alerted by Derek's stealth-tin-can approach, were doubled up in agony, cackling like hyenas at the heroic knight's histrionics. "Mock me will you!" Derek boomed and moved in for the kill. A short scuffle later, the trolls' heads bid their shoulders a fond farewell.

However, the clamour had alerted more of the dungeon's inhabitants to his presence. Two more trolls whose game of cards had been disturbed dropped what they were doing, grabbed their axes and headed for the outer chamber. Far more threatening creatures were also coming Derek's way, hideous horned-and-clawed apparitions the mere sight of which would chill the blood of mortal men.

Unaware of all this, Derek stood in the outer chamber glowing with pride, surveying his handiwork but breathing heavily from his exertions. "Bring them on," he thought, self-satisfied to the point of delirium, "The more the merrier." At precisely that moment, two axe-wielding trolls charged into the room. "Easy meat," thought Derek raising his sword, failing to take into account that his previous victory had been against an unarmed foe.

Suddenly, to his left, a huge, great, bloated beast with more horns than the brass section of an orchestra lumbered out of the gloom. Derek turned his head, his eyes widening in horror within his helmet. The beast was so gross, he doubted that the entire length of his sword could penetrate all that lard and pierce its innards. He gulped.

He heard a noise behind him and whipped round, only to be confronted by a giant figure with scarlet flesh, clad from head to foot in armour and grinning broadly. The creature's teeth were a hideous set of razor sharp fangs, and he carried a scythe with a blade longer than Derek was tall. Any thought of evacuation was hopeless, except on the part of Derek's bowels which duly obliged. He felt his knees turn to jelly.

The trolls cackled as the scarlet figure raised its scythe and swung the mighty blade at poor, helpless, hopeless Derek. He only had time to mumble one final word, "Mummy," before his head hit the floor with a dull thud. Derek's body followed a second behind.

"Tell you wot, 'is mother must be bleedin' ugly," said one of the trolls, to general laughter.

A hit squad of imps appeared. Two grabbed Derek's ankles, another picked up his head and Derek's limp corpse was unceremoniously dragged away. "Tell you wot, the smell of all this blood ain't arf made me hungry," said a troll. "Who fancies a chicken supper?" The other monsters salivated in agreement, and they all scuttled off to the Hatchery.

So ends the tale of the Dismal Demise of Derek the Dauntless.

And so ends the life of any who would dare confront the Dungeon Keeper.

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