

The Spirit of the Season

A ghostly Christmas story

by Rob Keeley

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In the Great Hall of Holiley Castle, a feast was about to begin. It was three days after Christmas, but no one in medieval England was too far from another festival, and already there was Childermass to celebrate. And the Earl of Stapleton believed in doing things in style.

The Earl and his family were dressed in their finest clothes. Feasting was a time for business as well as merriment, and there were several important people here tonight: great men from King Richard's Council, and from the Church. They joined the Earl at the head of the procession entering the hall. They moved towards the top table on its raised platform. Others walking behind would be seated lower, until the family retainers reached their trestle tables in the December draught that managed to break through the great doors.

Standing beside the Earl was the odd figure of a boy dressed as a bishop, in full robes, with cope and mitre. Three other boys walked behind, pages dressed in the Earl's red and gold livery.

The hall was even more richly decorated than usual, packed with ivy and holly and dozens of candles whose light bounced off the sturdy stone walls. In the massive fireplace burned a fire large enough to warm more than a hundred people.

Everyone waited until the Earl took his place, then his chaplain said a Latin grace. Everyone sat.

Immediately the servers entered, bearing dish after dish for the first "remove". The dishes came from the castle kitchens, a safe distance from the hall, and had to be kept covered. The Earl did not like his pottage to be cold.

The pottage was served, along with salted meats and fish, sausages and patties. Then the page-boys set to work, serving the Earl, his family and the most important guests. None of the boys was more than twelve, and young Malin was hardly any taller than the table, but all of them needed a careful eye and a steady hand, especially with the pottage and the wine.

“Shall we hear a song from you later, Francis?” The Earl’s youngest daughter murmured the question to a boy whose thick, blond hair reached almost to his neck. The boy smiled and bowed, delighted to be noticed.

“Yes, my lady. Following the second remove.”

His smile faded as he saw the way that Anselm was looking at him. Although only the same age as Francis, Anselm was much taller than the other page-boys, and made sure that they knew it. His dark hair was cropped short and his eyes burned jealousy at Francis.

Once everyone at the top table was served, the pages bowed towards the Earl and withdrew to the ante-room. But they would have much more to do, before the night was up.

“Shall we hear a song from you, Francis?” Anselm stepped over to Francis with a nasty smirk. Malin was grinning. So were some of the hall-boys who had been assisting at other tables.

Francis was sitting on one of the wooden benches and nervously strumming a lute. All pages were supposed to learn music and the arts, to become courtly men as well as warriors.

Anselm would much rather have been practising with a sword or a bow.

“Tis well you can play. You certainly can’t fight. Or ride.” He gave Francis a shove. Francis yelped and almost fell off the bench.

Anselm turned to the other boys.

“Have you seen him fire an arrow? It’s said he killed a wood-pigeon. On the next estate!”

The other boys were laughing. As the son of a Baron, Francis was the most noble of all of them, but no one showed him any respect when the Earl wasn’t around. Nervously, he played another note.

“I wrote this myself. I thought the young ladies might like it.”

He cleared his throat.

A fair young maid did cross a brook

A step towards her love she took

But on the match, her father frowned

“*She fell into the pond and drowned!*” sang Anselm. The other boys jeered. There was no risk of anyone hearing them. The noise from the feast was colossal.

“Oh, I knew it!” howled Francis. “I knew it was wrong to perform today.”

“Uh?” Anselm sat heavily on the bench beside him. “Why today?”

“Childermass,” Francis reminded him. “The Feast of the Holy Innocents. When King Herod had all small children done to death. For children, there could scarce be a more unlucky day.”

“Huh!” Anselm made as if to push Francis again, then laughed as the smaller boy squirmed. “I’ll never understand you, Francis. The manners of a woman and the beliefs of a peasant.”

“It *is* an unlucky day,” one of the hall-boys said.

Anselm gave him a look. He was no older than the hall-boy, but he was of noble rank, and common boys were supposed to know their place.

“My father beat me twice this morning. So I could feel the Holy Innocents’ pain. I have not sat down since sunrise!”

“It’ll make your soul stronger,” Anselm said. He looked at Francis, who was fingering the small cross he wore around his neck, and muttering something in Latin. “What words are those?”

“*Veritas vos liberabit,*” Francis said. “They’re the words of my family. Supposed to bring good luck.”

“Perchance they’ll make you sing in tune.” Anselm grinned again. Francis gave him a sour look.

“You should think about your own soul, Anselm. God hears all your cruelty. Perhaps our boy bishop will punish you.”

“Nicholas?” Anselm’s face twisted into a sneer. “I took no pleasure in serving *him*. Why is *he* at the feast? And as bishop? He’s a page, just like us. But of course, *he’s* the nephew of the Earl.”

“He came to the village today,” the hall-boy said. “To give us a blessing. And a cake. Far too small for the six of us.”

“Why *do* we have a boy bishop?” Malin asked.

Francis eagerly stood up from the bench. He might not have been a fearless fighter like Anselm, but he knew his religion. And he loved sharing his knowledge.

“Christmas is the children’s time. And no one comes to God, except like a child. The mighty will be cast down and the lowly raised to greatness. So, at this time, a bishop gives up

his throne to a boy.”

Anselm didn't look very keen to be cast down:

“After the feast he'll preach a sermon. Reward the servants and mock those of us that God made noble. Sometimes, boys serve punishment on their parents, or tutors.”

“Be ready to confess your sins, Anselm,” Francis said. Anselm scowled. “Come. The Earl awaits us.”

He and Anselm moved back into the hall, and the others followed.

Outside, a full moon shone across the castle.

More hot dishes followed: the salmon and pike, beef and venison. The page-boys had to know how to carve.

It was while Francis was cutting, a little shakily, into a roast goose, and Anselm was serving yet more wine, that they heard the Earl tell a story.

“Always recall a forest ranger. Tenant of mine... years back. He'd spent his last sevenpence on a cooked goose... forgot Christmas was a quarter day, and he had his rent to pay. The fool had let his family feast, and lost their home.”

“So what happened, uncle?” Young Nicholas was looking uncomfortable, and his mitre was slipping across his forehead. He pushed it back.

“Turned them out, of course. A cottage on my estate is not an almshouse. Put him at the mercy of the parish. Served him right.”

He took a mouthful of roast meat.

There was a short break between the second and third removes, and a group of musicians came

to entertain the assembled crowd. Then it was Francis's turn. Nervously straightening his tunic and smoothing his hair, he picked up his lute.

The page-boys and hall-boys went to the doorway and watched.

Within two minutes, gales of laughter echoed back from the hall.

"Who is it?" The smallest hall-boy stepped eagerly across the room. "Jugglers? Tumblers?"

Anselm smirked.

"A fool."

Francis ran back into the room and threw the lute into a corner. He was almost in tears.

"They laughed! They laughed at me! And now I must go out there and serve them with peacock!"

"Well." Anselm went and stood too close to Francis. "It's not the only pretty bird to die tonight."

He sneezed suddenly, and loudly. There was no fire in the ante-room, and the night air was growing colder.

Francis looked repulsed.

"Anselm! Cover your mouth!"

Anselm sneezed again, and didn't. He was enjoying the look on Francis's face as he was splattered.

"You should be careful, master," another hall-boy said. "Sneeze with your mouth open, and the devil can enter your body."

"Ha!" Anselm moved away. "More superstition."

He stood beneath the narrow windows.

“It would be a mighty demon to take possession of me...”

He sneezed, one final time.

At the same moment, a shaft of moonlight fell upon him.

And the other boys stared.

In that moment, it seemed as though the light passed through the window, and entered Anselm’s open mouth. The whole of Anselm’s body seemed to glow.

Then everything returned to normal.

Francis looked shaken, and a couple of the hall-boys crossed themselves.

“Anselm! What...?”

“What’s the matter with you?” Anselm sounded his usual grumpy self. “You’ve work to do, or have you forgotten? Come, Jack, Aelfred. The dishes.”

He strode out of the chamber.

Francis stayed a moment, looking out into the moonlit sky.

The great dishes came next, with all their grand dressings – the peacocks and pheasants and roast boar. The pages were kept ever busier.

The Earl was now talking to the boy bishop.

“I hope you’ll awaken us with a mighty sermon, Nicholas. And bring blessings upon this estate?”

“Yes, uncle,” said Nicholas. He was sounding even more nervous than Francis, and looking very embarrassed in his cleric’s robes.

“He preached in the Cathedral today,” the Earl told his guests. “And took tokens to the poor. Perhaps we should enter you into the Church.”

“My Lord Bishop?” Anselm came up behind Nicholas, with a dish of apple sauce.

Nicholas turned.

And Anselm’s eyes seemed to flash.

Francis watched, as the strange, unearthly light seemed to pass from Anselm into the eyes of Nicholas.

Slowly, Nicholas turned back to the table...

“FRANCIS!” the Earl bellowed.

Francis looked down to see he was pouring a jug of lukewarm gravy into his master’s lap.

“Oh, my Lord! I am so...”

He grabbed a cloth from atop another dish and tried to mop his lordship up. Further down the table, Malin was grinning.

The Earl was not.

“You assault our ears with that infantile dirge! Then...” He saw councillors and churchmen looking on, and stopped. Impatiently, he waved Francis away.

Francis returned to the ante-room in disgrace.

Francis didn’t return to the hall for the remainder of the feast. He knew he was not wanted. It was left to Anselm and Malin to look after the Earl, as the fruit tarts and jellies and blancmanges, and the cheeses and candies and spiced wine were served.

He stood quietly in the doorway as the meal finally came to an end and Nicholas moved from his seat, resplendent in his bishop’s robes, to stand before the crowd. Two guards, armoured men of the Earl, were escorting him, and stood either side.

Nicholas seemed somehow to have changed. He no longer looked nervous, but stood tall

and confident. Even at a distance Francis could see his eyes were shining, just like those of Anselm.

He could see Anselm and Malin, hovering in the background, their work over for now. Anselm looked well enough. After all his bullying, Francis wouldn't have been too sorry to see something happen to Anselm. One day, Francis was going to show him... He'd show him who was worthy to be a knight.

He listened as the boy bishop began to speak. His voice sounded louder than Francis had ever heard it.

“Your Graces, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am honoured to stand before you as your Bishop on this, my final day of office. Blessings be upon you all. In keeping with this great tradition, the mighty shall be cast from their thrones and the humble lifted high. And as such, I invite all the servants here present to be seated at High Table, while the nobles sit below. And the servants to enjoy what food their betters have left behind!”

There was laughter. The King's men and the churchmen looked rather annoyed, but the Earl and his family obligingly rose from their seats and made their way down into the hall. It was the one time of the year when things were turned upside down, and even the Earl was prepared to go along with it... for a short time.

The serving-men and -women were practically running for the platform. They seated themselves comfortably in the cushioned chairs, and made a grab for the fine foods and wine that hadn't been part of their own meal.

“Now,” said Nicholas. “Those evil-doers here present will be punished for their sins. Tobias Burne... come here!”

One of the serving-men jumped. He was seated in the place of one of the Earl's sons, and

was stuffing himself with dates.

Slowly, he made his way down to the boy bishop, while his fellow servants jeered.

“Tobias Burne, you are guilty of failing to clean the stables on five occasions... and failing to clean yourself on seven more! Guards... bathe him!”

One of the guards brought forward a wooden pail of water and hurled it all over the startled servant. He spluttered and coughed. Francis could see Anselm, laughing loudly.

“Next,” said Nicholas. “Come forward, Anselm!”

Anselm stopped laughing. There was more jeering as he was pushed forward. His eyes narrowed as he stood before the boy bishop.

“The Church demands you be punished for your insolence and cruelty to other boys. ‘Tis time you got... your just desserts!”

The other guard brought forward a dish of blancmange.

Anselm found voice.

“No... bleurghh!”

His angry features disappeared as the guard pushed the blancmange straight into his face. The other guard rushed him away, while the servants clapped and cheered. Anselm hadn’t many friends among them.

“But there are sinners everywhere,” Nicholas said, “even among those who are rich and powerful. The Honourable Edwin was seen earlier, kissing Lady Cecilia beneath the mistletoe...”

Masters and servants went “aaah!” as one of the Earl’s sons, and one of the ladies, looked very embarrassed.

“Your penance, cousin,” said Nicholas, “is to stand on the green and sing a love ballad, at

sunrise tomorrow! And all the castle servants may stand and listen!”

There was more laughter. At his trestle table, the Earl was no longer looking quite so amused. Francis was near enough to hear him.

“Boy’s going too far. Meant to be a Bishop, not a Lord of Misrule.”

“And last of all...” Nicholas’s voice grew still louder. “The Earl himself! Come forward, uncle!”

The Earl looked furious. The servants were cheering and banging the high table.

“This has gone far enough, Nicholas. You’ll clean my boots, tomorrow.”

“Come forward.”

Francis blinked. Suddenly, it didn’t sound like Nicholas’s voice any more. His eyes were gleaming more brightly with the unearthly light.

Nicholas pointed towards the Earl. Slowly, unable to help himself, the Earl rose from his seat. The rest of the crowd watched dumbly, as if frozen. But the guards were moving forward. They grabbed the Earl by the arms, brought him to Nicholas and threw him to the ground.

“Kneel,” said the voice. “Kneel, sinner. Ten years ago, you threw my family out into the snow, on Christmas Night. My father was your forest ranger, and had been your soldier. He was injured in battle, and as he grew older the sickness grew worse. He could work no longer, but spent his last sevenpence on our Christmas dinner. And for one quarter’s rent, you left him in the cold to starve to death. My mother died of grief, a pauper. I know not what became of my brother, and sisters.

‘I was ten years of age when my mother died. When I came to you to beg for work, your men wouldn’t let me into the castle. In despair, I threw myself from the church tower!’”

The boy bishop beckoned a guard forward. He drew his sword.

“And now you shall be executed.”

The guard raised the sword above the Earl.

“NO!”

Francis ran into the hall. He lifted the cross from around his neck. All he could think of were the only words of hope he knew.

“Veritas vos liberabit!”

The guard stopped. Nicholas’s hands moved to his head, as if in pain.

As Francis watched, another boy stepped from Nicholas’s body, and stood there in ghostly form. He was a peasant boy, in rags, and a pale face showed through the dirt.

He stood glaring at Francis.

“Out of my way, Fitzberranger.”

“Who art thou?” Francis lowered the cross.

“My name was Thomas Woodruff. And you have heard my story. The Earl cared more for his rent than for human life.”

“Killing him will solve nothing.” Francis’s heart pounded. He was trying to sound manly, when he wanted to cry with fear. “I’ve seen my father do such things... maybe one day I will, too. If the Earl dies, a million like him will live. It’s the way of the world.”

“Then change it,” said Thomas. He turned to the guard, and pointed downward.

“We’re boys,” said Francis. “Not men. We’re better than this. Swords and killing can come later. If you kill him, his men will take some awful revenge. On families just like yours.”

He looked around at the frozen figures, the servants at the top table with their food, and the nobles below.

“There might be another way.”

Thomas glared at him. But Francis could see in his eyes that he had been a good boy, who cared about his family. Only anger was making him do this.

As Francis watched, Thomas's spirit faded, disappearing back into Nicholas. When Thomas next spoke, it was again through the boy bishop.

"I hear you?"

Francis stepped nearer, and spoke quietly with the ghost. The Earl still lay upon the ground, as if paralysed.

Then Nicholas – or Thomas – stepped over, knelt and whispered in the Earl's ear.

"And I give my thanks to my nephew," said the Earl. "Our late Bishop..."

There was laughter and applause. Nicholas was standing there, his old timid self. He had taken off his robes and mitre, and had his page-boy's clothes beneath.

Order had been restored, and everyone was seated in their old places.

"For reminding me of those in need," the Earl said. "In the spirit of the season, I therefore give notice that every servant, every tenant of this estate, and their kinfolk, will receive a New Year's gift of roast meat, bread, cheese, ale and wine. And a Merry Childermass – and Christmas – to you all."

The cheer that followed seemed to raise the rafters of the Great Hall.

The Earl blinked, as if he couldn't quite believe what he'd just said.

Francis hid a smile. He had always believed in ghosts – and been afraid of them – but had never known how powerful they could be.

In the ante-room, Anselm was cleaning blancmange off himself, and grimacing. The other boys

were smiling, as Anselm knew.

“Boy bishops! No good can come of it.”

“You’re wrong, Anselm,” said Francis. “Good did come of it. One day we’ll be men, knights of His Majesty the King. And then you’ll see.”

“You?” Anselm laughed. “With your long hair, and womanish songs? You’ll never be a hero.”

From a corner, Francis took one of the wooden swords the boys used to train. He handed it to Anselm.

“Fight me tomorrow. Then we’ll see.”

He smiled as he saw Anselm’s astonished face. He moved quickly away, towards the window.

For a moment, a shaft of light shone upon him. Then it was gone. Francis saw a shooting star race across the sky, and disappear.

He raised his hand in salute.

If you'd like to find out what happened to Francis and Anselm when they grew up, read:

The Sword of the Spirit

And check out the earlier books in the Spirits series:

Childish Spirits

The Spirit of London

Details at www.robkeeley.co.uk

Happy Christmas!