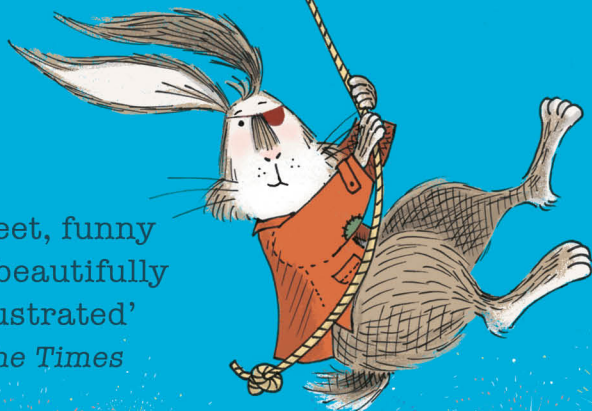


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'Sweet, funny
and beautifully
illustrated'
The Times



THE
ROYAL
RABBITS
OF
LONDON

Illustrated by KATE HINDLEY

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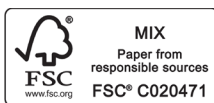
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CHAPTER ONE

In a deep, dark burrow at the edge of the forest, Horatio, the old grey rabbit, heard the rustle of leaves and the patter of paws. He put down his book, ears sharp, and sat up straight in the big, tatty armchair where he had been warming himself in front of the fire.

Horatio was elderly and grizzled, and a stump was all that remained of his hind left paw, but his hearing was as good as ever and he listened carefully as the footsteps grew louder. The old rabbit's heartbeat quickened and he began to slide the handle from his walking stick, easing a blade into the



dim light.

When a rabbit has been hunted by his enemies who want to kill him, he never sleeps easy again. 'Who twitches there?' he demanded, looking over the cracked frame of his spectacles. His voice sounded strangely gruff, more like a dog's growl than a rabbit's murr.

'It's me, Shylo Tawny-Tail,' replied a soft voice nervously. In the doorway, Shylo gave a gentle thump of his hind paw – for that is what polite rabbits do when they arrive somewhere – and twitched his nose.

Horatio relaxed and slid the sword back into his walking stick. 'Come in, young Shylo Tawny-Tail,' he said. But the small, skinny rabbit hesitated for, although he had visited Horatio more than a dozen times now, the old buck was still an alarming sight.

'Don't be afraid! You've come back for more stories about the Old World, have you?' murred Horatio, whose smile revealed a broken yellow tooth.

'Yes,' Shylo replied, lolloping into the gloomy room.

Horatio looked at Shylo's narrow shoulders, his scrawny body, the red eyepatch worn to correct his squint and he had yet to see a weaker and more feeble bunny. But Horatio knew that looks could be deceiving. After all, hadn't he been just as weak and feeble once? Hadn't he then risen to great heights?

He smiled at the courage of the small bunny because not only was it forbidden by the Leaders of the Warren to venture this close to the farm, but it was also absolutely and totally and unmistakably forbidden to visit Horatio.

When Horatio had arrived here all those years ago, broken in both body and mind, not to mention strange in manner, for he belonged to a very different variety of rabbit, they had barred their burrows against him. He had been forced to build a home on the other side of the forest, only a short distance from the farm that nestled in the valley below.

Indeed, fear of strangers was a terrible thing. But Shylo's curiosity seemed so much greater than his initial fear. Indeed,



it was his curiosity that had led the little bunny to Horatio's burrow in the first place and was what kept him coming back again and again.

'So where does your mother think you are this time?' Horatio asked.

'I said I was going to dig up turnips,' Shylo replied, one ear flopping over his forehead in embarrassment because, as lies go, it wasn't a very good one.

'Well, no one will find you in this part of the forest, that's for sure.'

Horatio pointed at the store cupboard with a shaky paw that was always wrapped in a bandage. 'You'll find a bag of turnips in there. I can't send you back empty-handed. You know you could get into a lot of trouble coming to see me.'

'Mother says you're . . .' Shylo hesitated suddenly because what his mother said about Horatio wasn't very polite.

'Mad?' Horatio finished the sentence with a chuckle, then erupted into a fit of coughing. 'I know what they say. That

I've lost my mind and that my enemies will find me here and put everyone in terrible danger. Fear is born out of ignorance, Shylo Tawny-Tail. Don't ever forget that. Your Leaders don't know any better.'

Shylo gazed at the long scar on the old buck's cheek, the bandaged paw, the ugly stump of his missing fourth paw and his left ear which seemed to have been almost entirely bitten off, and he understood why other rabbits were afraid of crazy Horatio. The old rabbit looked like he'd had a fight with Tobias the farm cat, and won. But Shylo had discovered, quite by chance, that the battle-scarred buck was really a surprisingly gentle rabbit once you got to know him.

Horatio took off his glasses. 'Sit down, Shylo. Now where did we finish last time?'

Shylo went to the bookcase and pulled down a large, heavy book and carried it, rather unsteadily, across the room. He perched on the stool beside Horatio and pushed the book, covered in cobwebs, on to the big buck's knee. Horatio read



out its title: *'The Rise and Fall of the Great Rabbit Empire.'*

'You were telling me about the Great Rabbit Empire,' murred Shylo eagerly. 'When the Great Rabbits of England governed much of the Rabbit World. At that time, most of the Human World was ruled by the Great British Empire. As above, so below, I believe you said. Then both empires fell—'

'Yes, the British lost many of the lands they'd conquered in faraway places and so did the Great Rabbits,' Horatio interrupted. 'Now America is the most powerful country in the *Human World* and the American rabbits are the most powerful in the *Rabbit World*. But let's go back to the beginning. Tell me about the oath made long ago to protect the Royal Family. Tell me about that band of elite rabbits.'

Shylo's eyes shone with excitement. 'Many hundreds of years ago, when King Arthur ruled England, he declared that rabbit pie should be the favourite meal of the kingdom. But his seven-year-old nephew, Prince Mordred, loved rabbits. He knelt down in front of the whole court and begged his uncle



to change his mind.

'King Arthur was a wise king who loved Mordred dearly, so, after a little thought, he declared that cottage pie should be the favourite dish instead. Thousands of rabbits' lives were saved and cottage pie did become the preferred meal of the British people. The cleverest and bravest of all the rabbits wanted to thank Prince Mordred and so they took an oath to serve the Royal Family of England. They built a warren beneath the castle in Camelot and called themselves the Rabbits of the Round Table.'

'At the very moment that King Arthur freed the rabbits from the Curse of the Rabbit Pie, something magical happened, didn't it, Shylo?' said Horatio. 'Children and only children were given the ability to see those very special rabbits. But it is a gift that only lasts through childhood. As soon as they grow up, they lose that magic and see just ordinary rabbits, like everyone else.'

Shylo nodded, eager to continue. 'Many hundreds of years

later, when the Royal Family moved to London, the Rabbits of the Round Table became the Royal Rabbits of London. They built a vast warren beneath Buckingham Palace and continued to honour their oath.'

'Indeed,' Horatio interrupted, 'and they will never forget it. You see, without those brave Knights, the kings and queens of England wouldn't exist at all. They have no idea how hard those Royal Rabbits worked to protect them from danger.'

Shylo's one visible eye gleamed with fascination. 'You were going to tell me about the dogs . . . the Pack.'

Now Horatio's face grew very serious and his eyes flashed like knives in moonlight. Shylo thought that if any of his brothers and sisters could see the old rabbit now, they would faint with fear.

The old buck wiped his spectacles with a handkerchief. 'The Pack . . .' he said and his snarl sounded like ice cracking. 'Only one rabbit ever made it out of the Kennel alive,' he said darkly. 'One clever buck, who was only seconds from death



. . . but *that* is another story. The others? Skins hanging on hooks. Dozens of them. Bowls full of rabbit tails; dishes full of rabbit paws. And the smell . . .’

His nostrils flared with distaste and Shylo thought of the most disgusting smell he knew, which was from a rotting pigeon killed by Tobias, and decided that the Kennel must stink even worse than that. He grimaced at the thought, for Shylo had an unusually sensitive nose.

Horatio replaced his spectacles and his eyes looked large and bloodshot behind the lenses. ‘Those dogs can rip a rabbit’s heart out with one snap of their teeth,’ he added grimly and Shylo’s knees knocked together. ‘There are dangers in these forests, from prowling foxes and swooping kestrels, on the tracks from Range Rovers and tractors, and on the farm where Tobias hunts us and Farmer Ploughman’s gun shoots us for his hotpot.’

Shylo shuddered at these words because his father had been killed by that gun when Shylo had been a tiny bunny and

he would always be scared of Farmer Ploughman now.

‘But believe me,’ Horatio continued, ‘when I tell you that there’s nothing that puts fear into the heart of a rabbit more than the yellow-fanged dogs of the Pack.’

Shylo was suddenly afraid because Horatio had switched from speaking about the past to the present. Surely the Royal Rabbits of London and the Pack had vanished in the mists of time? ‘But they no longer exist, these dogs . . . do they?’ His voice came out as a squeak.

Horatio saw that he had frightened the little bunny and was sorry. ‘I think it’s time you went home, young Shylo,’ he said, patting his paw. ‘I’ve got some more newspapers for you. Rabbits read so little these days, but all wisdom comes from reading.’

He handed Shylo a crumpled pile of newspapers and grinned crookedly. ‘I stole them from the farm. That Tobias is a menace. Better watch out for him.’

‘Thank you,’ Shylo said, stuffing them under his arm.



'Now don't forget the turnips and try not to get caught on your way home.'

Shylo scampered back to the Warren as quickly as he could because his imagination had begun to conjure up snarling dogs behind every bush and tree.



When Shylo reached the Burrow, he scurried down the tunnel and gave the bag of turnips to his mother. She looked at the small sack of rotting vegetables and sighed.

'Oh, Shylo! Is this all you managed to find?'

Why, when all her other children were so quick and bouncy, was Shylo so utterly slow and clumsy? She loved her little one dearly, but every day she worried that he'd be eaten by a fox or lost in some piece of whirling farm machinery.

Shylo flopped on to a chair and pulled out the newspapers



Horatio had given him. This pleased his mother, for her other children never wanted to read anything, preferring noisy games instead.

Presently, Shylo's three brothers and three sisters arrived with sacks full of vegetables stolen from the farmer's fields, which made his little bag of turnips look very sorry indeed.

'Ha! Is that *all* the runt could manage?' cried his biggest brother, Maximilian, scornfully. Maximilian pulled Shylo's eyepatch then released it with a snap of elastic, causing his brother to squeal in pain.

'You're good for nothing, you are! I don't know why you bothered to get out of bed this morning!' And then Maximilian proceeded to leap round the room in great jumps and bounds to demonstrate how fit and athletic *he* was.

'Really, Maximilian, you're such a show-off,' laughed their mother. Shylo could see how proud she was of him and wished that he could jump and bound round the room like that, but all *he* could manage was a rather clumsy hop.

'Enough now, everybody,' she said. 'It's time for tea. Leave Shylo alone.'

'I can handle myself,' Shylo muttered as his siblings took their seats at the table and began to pile food on to their plates.

His mother straightened his patch. 'You won't have to wear this for long, dear,' she said kindly. 'Just until your eye gets stronger.'

Shylo wished he could tell his siblings about Horatio's story of the Pack. *That* would scare them, even Maximilian, who claimed not to be afraid of anything. But he knew he could never reveal his secret meetings with the old rabbit because he'd get into terrible trouble.

'Get some food in you,' his mother added. 'Parsnips will make you big and strong.' But the look on her face told him that she didn't believe it.

Shylo observed his siblings enviously. They were all glossy brown fur and fat white tails, long legs and stiff ears, and



extremely pleased with themselves. He imagined his mother must love them so much more than him. He climbed on to a chair and, with a helpless sniff, searched the almost empty dishes on the table for something to make him big and strong.



That night Shylo sat in the mouth of the tunnel leading into the Burrow and gazed up at the stars twinkling in the satin sky. He wished that he was clever and brave like the secret society of rabbits who had once lived beneath Buckingham Palace and protected the Royal Family of England from danger. He dreamed of a life of adventure. He longed to play a great part in Rabbit History, but he was afraid of getting hurt and being away from his mother.

He sighed. Maximilian was right: there was no rabbit weaker and more feeble than him. Even Shylo knew that his dreams were much too big for his little body.



The following morning, Shylo was shaken from sleep by Maximilian shouting in his ear. 'Shylo, get up! Rats have broken into the Warren! We have to get out NOW!'

Shylo's sister Blythe pulled back his duvet. 'Yes, now! Get up, get up!'

His two other sisters, Elvira and Erica, stood in the doorway, wringing their paws. 'Hurry or the rats will eat us all!'

Shylo leaped out of bed, but was so terrified that his knees buckled beneath him and he fell to the floor with a thud. Maximilian lifted him roughly on to his paws. 'Come on, Runt, or the rats will catch you!'

Shylo didn't waste time finding his clothes. He scampered through the Burrow in his pyjamas. As he charged through the kitchen, he knocked over the jug of carrot juice and it crashed to the ground. Plates went flying and chairs fell back. Desperate to flee the jaws of the fearsome rats, Shylo couldn't escape quickly enough. His heart beat so fast and so furiously he thought it might burst out of his chest.



When he reached the mouth of the Burrow, what did he see but Maximilian and his other siblings roaring with laughter. They were laughing so hard they had to hold their bellies.

'April Fool!' said Maximilian.

'And you're the biggest fool this April,' chimed his sisters in unison.

Shylo suddenly felt very silly in his pyjamas. Other rabbits hopped past on their way to the fields and he saw them giggling behind their paws. He tried to hold back the tears of hurt and embarrassment.

'Where's your sense of humour, Runt?' laughed Maximilian. 'It's only a joke.'

'Yes, it's only a joke,' repeated the others. 'Really, Shylo is no fun to be around!'



At breakfast, Mother noticed that Shylo was quieter than usual, but it wasn't until the evening, when he left the dinner



table early, complaining of a stomach ache, that she realized something was wrong. She found him tucked up in bed, although it wasn't nearly bedtime. She sat down beside him and stroked his forehead. 'What's the matter, Shylo?' she asked gently.

'Nothing,' he replied, not wanting to tell tales on his brothers and sisters. But he didn't have to. His mother knew, as all mothers do, and was sorry.

'You know, one day you'll show them,' she said, kissing him tenderly. 'One day you're going to make me very proud.'

Shylo opened his big brown eyes and a fat tear rolled down his face.

'I believe in you, Shylo,' she added. 'You just have to learn to believe in yourself.'