

The Tale of Sir Robert, chapter i. Prologue to Battle

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The messengers arrived at dawn, sparking a flurry of activity in the castle. Sir François cancelled his planned hunting trip and started making arrangements. Messengers had to be sent out, nobles assembled, everything must be in order for the visit of the Duke. However, François suspected that the Duke's visit was not just a courtesy call. This was too sudden, too urgent. Something was happening, and he suspected he could put a name to it - Heinrich Kemmler.

Sir François knew that Duke Tancred had sworn a solemn oath to hunt down and destroy Kemmler shortly after completing his Grail Quest. Indeed, this was one of the factors that had led him and other nobles of Quenelles to petition the King, that Tancred might be prevailed upon to leave his hermitage and take up the dukedom. In a lesser man the fires that Kemmler lit would have burnt up his heart with hatred, but this was not the case with Tancred. For he had drunk from the very same Grail that the Lady of the Lake had first offered to Gilles many centuries previously, and as a Grail Knight he placed his emotions at the service of the Lady. He would not act rashly out of hatred, nor be held back by the terrors the undead held even for stout Bretonnian hearts. He was the man to defend Quenelles, and all Bretonnia, against the evil that had arisen in the Grey Mountains.

And now he was coming to Ælfinfort. He had been up in the north of his dukedom for the last month, reassuring the barons that their continuing fight against the skaven and orcs of the Massif Orcal was not forgotten while he pursued his quest against Kemmler. He had meant to stay for another month, before returning to Quenelles via Giselles, yet he had cut short his stay. François could only presume that he had had tidings of his arch-enemy and was hastening to respond.

At the hour of sexts, when the sun was highest in the sky, the ducal caravan approached from the east, down the road that led to distant Parravon. The sun caught their shining armour as they crested the hill, passing the Swandle Stones that stood as a reminder against the hubris of one of Sir François' ancestors, if the legends were to be believed. As Sir François surveyed the oncoming chivalry he became even more certain that the Duke rode to war, for there seemed to be many more knights in his entourage than there had been when he had passed through a month back on his way northwards.

Less than an hour later, the Duke was answering the challenge of the gate-guard with a loud bellow, and seeking admission to the town and castle. Five minutes after this he was dismounting in the central courtyard of Ælfinfort Keep. A young squire rushed over to help him dismount and then led his horse away to the stables. The Duke strode over to Sir François and, kneeling, addressed him "Your Grace, I seek permission for my retainers to enter thy castle and board here for this coming night. My mission is urgent, and my need pressing, so I ask that thy hospitality be poured out on us, thy humble servants."

Sir François smiled inwardly. Tancred had not let urgency overcome proper manners, nor drive from his head the fact that while Sir François was a mere baron in the outside world, and a baron of Tancred's own duchy of Quenelles at that, within the walls of Ælfinfort he still bore the ancient title of Duke of Ælfinfort and was not bound to receive anyone save the king. François replied, "Your Grace, it is an honour to my humble table that you consider it worthy to favour with thy presence. I bid thee welcome to Ælfinfort, and all those who travel in thy retinue. My fare is put poor, but you are welcome to share in it for as long as it is thy wish to remain."

Duke Tancred stood again, and clapped a hand on Sir François' shoulder. "Ah, my friend. It is truly good to see you again, I only wish I could take your offer at its word and stay a good while at the table I know to have by far the least humble fare in the region! Yet I may only stay one night, word of Kemmler has reached my ears. He is raising an army in the Vaults and is planning to invade Bretonnia."

"I suspected as much," replied Sir François, "when I heard you were returning already. I have already sent messengers to Cinque Damoiselles, Chateau de Morceaux, Gisellebourg, and further afield to Merlebourg, Cantonni, and the others. I hope many lords will join us tonight and our muster will follow you shortly."

A smile appeared on Tancred's face for the first time since he had entered the castle. "Well done! I knew I could rely on Giselles to know what to do. You could be a telepath, man, you'd better make sure none of those Reiker witch-sniffer chappies catch up with you, eh! Anyway, I'm getting thirsty with all this talking, haven't you a cup of wine for an old friend?" This was, of course, a foolish question to ask of a Bretonnian noble, and soon they were inside reminiscing over a bottle of the finest Gisellean red. Tancred found that the squire who had taken his horse was Sir François' son, who had been away on a hunting expedition when he had passed through previously, and expressed the wish that he would prove a worthy heir when Sir François left to take the Grail Quest. François, for his part, claimed that thoughts of the Quest were far from his mind and that he did not yet feel led in that direction. The boy was still young, and could not take his place as baron for many years yet, and who knew whether he would still be in any condition to take the Quest by then? Sir Tancred insisted, however, that his physical condition was of little importance so long as his heart remained true. And so they remained debating for a good many hours while the Duke's retinue arranged themselves in billets around the castle and the servants prepared the great feast for that night.

As the sun dipped below the foothills of the Massif Orcal to the west, lighting up the Morceaux like a golden ribbon meandering through the countryside, the nobles gathered in the great hall of ?lfinfort for supper. Abbot Cedric from Cinque Damoiselles was one of the first to enter, with the Lord Constable of Gisellebourg, Sir Filip, close behind him. Various other nobles from the region and from the Duke's party followed them into the hall and took their places at the tables. A gong rang out, and all stood as Duke Tancred and Sir Fran?ois entered and walked together to the high table. As they sat all the others sat as well, and, after the Abbot had offered up grace to the Lady, the feasting began.

Fran?ois' son was serving at the high table, as befitted a squire of noble birth. As he poured out the wine, Duke Tancred recognised him, saying "Ho there, squire, so you're Fran?ois' son eh? You look bold enough, what's your name?"

"Robert my Lord, I'm sorry, your Grace." replied the boy, almost spilling the wine in surprise at being addressed by the great Duke himself.

"Well, Robert, the Duke continued. I'm sure you'll make a fine knight one day. For now, though, take care not to spill my wine!" the Duke snapped, although a twinkle in his eye offset the harshness of his words.

"Yes, your Grace." Robert answered as he moved on to serve the Abbot. As he served the various lords, he heard snippets of conversation about the upcoming battle. He gathered that Kemmler had raised an army in the Grey Mountains and was preparing to march on Bretonnia. He also gathered that his father would be sending a force down, probably under the command of Sir Filip as he could not be spared himself, and hoped that he would be allowed to travel with it. However, he then overheard his father saying something that dashed his hopes to the ground, that he wouldn't ride with the squires. He also overheard Tancred asking if he was ready, and though he didn't hear the answer he assumed that his father was keeping him behind as he thought he was not yet skilled enough to ride out to battle.

As he retired to the servants quarters to eat his own supper, he overheard the other squires who had been serving talking of how exciting it was and discussing how many Orcs they would kill. He was struck by the unfairness of it all. He was as old as the other boys and no less skilled - and he'd managed to remember that Kemmler was a necromancer rather than an Orc Warlord! He didn't feel able to join in the merriment, but resolved to speak to his father at the earliest opportunity.

This opportunity did not come until the evening was drawing late. He was grown tired, yet remained resolute and watchful and did not miss his father rising from the table to visit the garderobes. Swiftly he moved to intercept him on his return, and then asked him for a quick word. He apologised for overhearing the conversation, and told his father what he had heard and that it was unfair that the other squires should go whilst he remained behind, like a coward.

His father reassured him that he thought him no coward, yet told him that these were the sorts of suffering he should expect if he listened in to conversations to which he was not a party. He was ordered to go to the chapel and pray there until his father joined him.

Feeling none the better, he went to the chapel and knelt before the statue of the Lady of the Lake that was placed there. He prayed that his father would relent and let him prove his honour in battle. He prayed for the intercession of Gilles le Breton and of Sir Birinus, the patron of Giselles, and for all the other Grail Knights and holy men and women of Bretonnia. At last, he heard the chapel door open and turned to see his father entering.

"Have you relented, father? May I ride with the squires?" he asked, sure that such prayers as he had prayed could not go unanswered.

"No, you will not ride with the squires." his father replied, "That would be most unfitting for a noble of your stature. Don't you agree, your Grace?" This last he addressed to Duke Tancred, who Robert was mortified to see was standing behind his father and had heard his rash questioning.

He started to stammer out an apology, but the duke interrupted, "Your father is quite right. You shall not ride with the squires. We have talked long and hard and he has convinced me that it would be much more fitting if you were to accompany me as a knight errant."

A knight errant! Robert almost swooned as he heard the words that Tancred spoke, then he had to hold himself back from rushing and embracing his father as tears began to fill his eyes. He steadied himself however and, keeping his voice as steady as he could, replied, "You are too kind, your Grace. I will do my utmost to fulfil your trust in me and complete whatever quest of knighthood you shall ordain."

"The first part will most certainly be to distinguish yourself in battle against Kemmler." his father replied, smiling now, "His Grace departs in the morning, therefore if you are to accompany him you must keep your vigil here tonight. I have spoken with the prior and he will be available in the morning to ensure you are shriven and houseled, then the Duke and myself will see you commissioned as a knight errant. Your arms and armour will be ready for you, but first you must keep your vigil until prime when I shall return. I bid thee goodnight and the Lady's blessings." With this his father strode over

and hugged him, giving Robert a chance to hug him back and thank him without appearing unseemly before the duke. After this both his father and Tancred departed, leaving him to keep his vigil alone.

Robert spent the night in prayer. He asked the Lady of the Lake for the strength to be true to his knightly vows and the courage to face his enemies in battle. Some of the time he spent reading 'Lives of the Blessed', an anthology of the life stories of many grail knights, and meditating on the lessons and inspiration of their lives. The night passed, and in the hour just before dawn when he felt sleep stealing up on him, he thought he heard a voice speaking softly to him, saying "I will guide you through all your trials. Fear not, for I will be with you. I have called you by your name, Robert de Giselles, and you are mine." Comforted by this, he was given renewed energy to overcome his tiredness and in almost no time at all, or so it seemed, his father was at the door of the chapel, summoning him to make haste to the priory.

The Prior of ?lfinfort was a devout and holy man. Being of lowly birth and never likely to make knighthood, he had dedicated his life from an early age to the service of the Lady of the Lake. His devotion to the Lady had caused his fellow monks at the priory, which shared the hill-top with the Keep of ?lfinfort castle and lay within its outer walls, to elect him as their spiritual leader. In his hands was placed the spiritual well-being of all the de Giselles family, and in particular the education of its younger members. It was to this man, known as Father Jean, that Robert came to be shriven this morning. The prior heard his confession, then the young man was bathed and put on a new robe of white cotton as a symbol of the purity of his heart as he embarked upon his career as a knight errant. Thus clothed, he was led out to the yard of the castle where his father helped him dress in his armour, but without as yet any sword or shield.

Next, the whole community of the castle came together in the great nave of the priory where the prior said the high mass of the Lady. After the mass was said and all present were duly houseled, the prior cried out "Who comes forth to seek the Lady's blessing as a Knight Errant?", to which Robert replied, "I, Robert de Giselles, son of Fran?ois, of the line of the Dukes of ?lfinfort, do seek the Lady's blessing as a knight errant."

"Then come forward to the altar then, that you may receive your blessing." the prior commanded. After Robert had approached the altar and knelt by the altar rail the prior addressed the congregation again, asking "Who supports this knight-elect by offering him a shield, that he may be known to all as a knight of Bretonnia?" Sir Fran?ois answered, "I bring the shield, that my son may be known as a knight of Bretonnia. May he bring it ever glory and never tarnish it with shame." Thus saying, he too approached the altar, carrying a shield quartered in argent and azure (that is, white and blue).

The prior addressed the congregation a third time, asking now "Who will bring a sword to be blessed and buckled onto this knight-elect, that he may defend the weak, protect the poor, and deliver ruin on the enemies of Bretonnia?". A quickly muffled gasp went around the community as Duke Tancred stood and replied, saying "I will bring this sword to be blessed, and I will buckle it onto this knight-elect, that he may defend the weak, protect the poor, and deliver ruin on the enemies of Bretonnia. May his arm be ever guided by the Lady and his strength never failing." Nobody, except presumably Father Jean and Sir Fran?ois, had expected the Duke to play such a part in the ceremony and deliver this honour to the boy; it had generally been presumed that Abbot Cedric would perform this service for him. Yet Duke Tancred now approached the altar carrying a sword in its scabbard.

The prior addressed Robert again, asking him "Do you swear to uphold the commandments of chivalry: to serve the Lady of the Lake, to defend the domain entrusted to you, to protect the weak and fight for the right, to fight always against the enemies of virtue and order, to never give up the fight until the foe is defeated, to never break faith with a friend and ally, and to always display honour and courtesy?", to which Robert replied, "I do." The prior continued, "Do you swear to abide by the rules of honour, that your sword may break if you should fail to do so?", again Robert replied, "I do." A third time Father Jean addressed him, "Do you swear allegiance to the King of Bretonnia, always to obey him and those who he lawfully sets above you?" Robert replied "I do." a third time, after which the prior commanded him to bow his head while he delivered the blessing of the Lady of the Lake.

As the prior delivered the Lady's blessing to Robert, he felt it rush into him like a hot potion, filling him up from his feet with a tingling sensation that he could not easily describe. He was filled with a righteous joy and a determination to do whatever the Lady asked of him, in the knowledge that if he did the Lady's bidding he would never fail even if the task was seemingly impossible. After the blessing was given, he returned to his feet, standing before the altar with the light of the Lady shining in his eyes.

Father Jean then received the shield from Sir Fran?ois and blessed it before handing it back to the knight, who fitted it to its straps and secured it on his sons back. The Duke of Quenelles drew the sword he had brought to the altar, which shone brightly in the morning light streaming through the stained-glass windows of the priory. This he handed to the prior, who blessed it before handing it back to Sir Tancred, who scabbarded it before kneeling to buckle it onto Robert's belt.

He stood again and Father Jean gave the final blessing, "Today you have received your sword and your shield. Use them well, new knight errant, that some day you may be dubbed a full knight of the realm of Bretonnia. Amen. We pray that all the good men and women of Bretonnia, and all the Grail Knights who have gone before, especially Sir Birinus the patron of Giselles, will intercede for you that the grace of the Lady may favour your cause. Amen. And we ask that the

Lady will always be with you when you call, that you shall never fail in your sacred duty as a knight. Amen." A short pause, then he finished by saying "The mass is ended, go into the world to love and serve the Lady of the Lake."

As they filed out of the priory, Sir François took his sons arm and told him that he must ready himself immediately to depart - his banquet would have to wait until he returned victorious from battle as the Duke meant to ride out at sexts and it was already terce. He told him also that Donal, a boy around a year Sir Robert's junior, was to accompany him as his squire, that his horse, complete with suitable barding, was being made ready in the stables, and that tabards with his colours on had been placed in his quarters.

Sir Robert (as he should now be titled) therefore spent almost the next three hours preparing to depart. He checked, double-checked and triple-checked both his and Donal's equipment and supplies, and the state of the horses and their tack. Lastly he visited his mother and his father and took their leave, and a few minutes before sexts he and Donal turned out in the castle yard to join the Duke's column.

They joined a group of other knights errant and their squires near the rear of the order of march, therefore Sir Robert was unable to hear the words his father said to Duke Tancred as they said their farewells. Soon they were marching out of the castle gate, down the hill and through the town of Lifinfort before joining the road to Quenelles.

They rode first through the familiar countryside he had known all his life. East along the Morceaux to Cinque Damoiselles they went, then turned south up the Giselles towards Gisellebourg. From this road he was able to take a last look over his left shoulder as the tip of the white tower of Lifinfort disappeared behind the shoulder of the hills of the Giselles valley. They continued to ride through the town of Gisellebourg and then along the elf-road across the Hare Brook and out of the barony that would one day be his.

Shortly after passing Merlebourg they left the Giselles and the Haute-Morceaux region that he knew. They rode now though the fertile plains of southern Quenelles, the Massif Orcal fading to blue behind them. They paused for the night here, still within sight of the high tower of Stoarwell on the boundary of Giselles.

The journey to Quenelles took three days. If Sir Robert had dreamed that he was to ride at the side of the Duke and share in his counsel, he was sorely disappointed. The knights errant were all but ignored by the knights of the realm, let alone by the nobles at the front of the march. As they drunk together around their camp-fire at the end of the days journey, Sir Robert was drawn into the camaraderie of the knights errant. The leader of the small band was Sir Clarence of Quenelles, the standard was born by Sir Bleobert, while Sir Tybold was charged with carrying the horn. Sir Robert was the youngest there, but only by a few months from Sir Charles who had been commissioned as a knight errant just before the Duke had left Quenelles to head north.

They all competed with each other to be the first ready in the morning, to have the best-polished armour, and in as many other competitions as they could possibly think of whilst they had no time to hunt or joust due to the imperative of reaching Quenelles as quickly as possible. On the evening of the second day they could see the spires of Quenelles reaching high into the sky, and by none on the third day they were marching through the gates of the city. Many knights were already gathered there, having responded to the call put out by the Duke's messengers. Emmisaries from the realm of Athel Loren were also there to meet with the Duke, seemingly worried about the threat posed to their realm by Kemmler.

After about four days in Quenelles, the army was mustered to march to war. By this time the forces from Haute-Morceaux had just arrived, having left the day after the Duke but travelled slower due to the presence of infantry in their ranks. Sir Robert had little time to see them except to recognise their banner from afar before the knights errant were ordered to march out. They were all astonished to find themselves being led up the river Brienne into Athel Loren, flanked on both sides by tall, silent woodelves on elven steeds.

The journey under the trees was strangely silent. There was little wish to engage in jokes and chatter with the solomn elves watching, and when they stopped at night they cut no firewood and lit no fires. They turned in early with none of the joviality that normally accompanied a Bretonnian camp. They travelled in this way for a week until they emerged at the foot of the Grey Mountains, where they gratefully took leave of their elven guides - and felt free to breath easily again.

As the sun set over the forest, the Duke gathered his forces together a short way into the foothills and made camp. After the fires were lit for the first time since they had left Quenelles, he called them all together and addressed them. "As you know, we are here persuing the infamous necromancer Kemmler. We have received information that he has been raising an army of undead in the Grey Mountains, preparing to sweep down into Bretonnia. Our friends, the wood elves, therefore gave us safe passage through their realm, that we could combat this menace before it is too late. Now, however, the situation has changed. Not a days march from here is the abbey of Maisontaal and we have received word from the abbot, Bagrian, that it is under siege from a force of Skaven. They are already into the second day of this siege, and fear that the walls will not stand a third. We therefore ride tomorrow at first light to the relief of this abbey and the ruin of the skaven, after which we will continue our search for Kemmler - if the scent of death does not draw him to the battle we go to find."

The knights errant were too excited to sleep much that night. For all of them it was to be their first taste of real battle, although most had fought skirmishes against orcs and goblins and a few had met skaven before - Sir Robert among them. Eventually they did settle down and slept for a few hours before being woken by the sounding of horns as the first light of dawn touched the sky. It was to be a long march in the semi-darkness as the sun remained hidden behind the towering mountains well after it would normally have blessed them with its light. The strange shadows seemed to hide all manner of enemies, and more than once one knight errant or another started as a rabbit shot out from under a rock or a bird swooped low over head.

Once the sun was properly up, they made better time and arrived at the abbey before it reached its zenith at sexts. Here a strange sight met their eyes. The walls of the abbey were fallen, yet the strongly fortified chapel-keep stood still. No enemy was currently assaulting it however, for among the ruins of the abbey's walls and in the fields outside where the monks grew their meagre crops and kept their flocks, the skaven were engaged in battle with the undead army of Kemmler.

The Duke smiled - surely the Lady had favoured them this day to catch two enemies warring in this way. He ordered all to dismount and to bow their heads in prayer for the Lady to bless them with victory and protect them from injury at the hands of dishonourable weapons. While Sir Robert bent his head, there came the sound of approaching horses, as the prayer finished he looked up and saw a questing knight in a white surcoat charged with blue fleur-de-lys addressing Duke Tancred, while other questing knights stood around.

After a short while, the Duke spoke to his forces, saying "Surely here is a portent of victory, aid sent by the Lady to strengthen us in our hour of need! Here is the noble paladin Sir Etien de Rochefort and a company of paladins devoted to the Quest for the Holy Grail. They have been led to our aid by visions sent to them in their dreams, and will lead us to victory today on the field of battle!". Swiftly then, the Duke made his deployments, yet ordered nobody to advance until the signal was given. From his position with the knights errant, Sir Robert could see the battle developing. Although he itched to enter combat, he understood the wisdom of waiting while the enemy forces weakened each other. At last, after what seemed like hours of waiting, the Duke ordered the advance to be sounded and he found himself yelling and screaming with the others as they charged into the valley of Maisontaal to engage with the enemy.