

The Tale of Sir Robert, chapter ii. The Battle of La Maisontaal Abbey

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The knights' hooves thundered against the rocky turf of the mountain valley. The noise of the charge mixed with the warcries of the knights made the battling skaven and undead pause and look up. For a crucial few moments the combatants froze, unable to see where this new danger had come from and present a united front to oppose it. The Bretonnians smashed into the unprepared and unprotected flanks of their enemy, sending rat-men fleeing and skeletons crumbling to dust.

The first wave of the Bretonnian attack swept all before it, but this could not last. The undead skeletons lacked the self-preservation instinct to flee and had to be destroyed, while there were many more skaven behind those that fled in terror and while the scent of fear led many of them to break there were others that stood firm and prepared to receive the Bretonnians. To his left and right, Sir Robert could see battle being joined in earnest as their enemies recovered from the shock of the charge and began to fight back.

Charging into another body of skaven, Sir Robert felt his lance snap as it pierced the furry body of one of the vermin. Quickly he drew his sword, and saw that on either side of him his comrades were doing the same as these rat-men refused to run. They made short work of them, their swords slicing through the unprotected bodies of their enemy, yet there were more skaven around them now and they had no respite from the fighting.

As his sword rose and fell again and again, Sir Robert began to realise the difference between his previous experiences of skirmishes with goblins in the Massif Orcal and a true battle. This was no short scrap with 5 minutes of fighting before the enemy were all dead or routed, this was continuous warfare with no opportunity for rest where a moments loss of concentration could mean death.

Yet concentration grew harder as the battle wore on. Sir Charles, the next youngest after Sir Robert and a less experienced fighter, was the first to go. A skaven warrior managed to under past his guard and cravenly slit open his horses belly. The beast rolled and Sir Charles was thrown clear, only to be overwhelmed by a tide of stinking vermin, gnawing and ripping at his armour until their teeth bit into his throat and spilled his life blood.

After this they were all more cautious, less inclined to press forward in case a skaven got around their flanks, and as a result their momentum fell further. They now realised that death was possible, and none of them wished to die. Yet as they became bogged down in fighting, death seemed ever more possible. With the force of their charge spent and the skaven fighting back fiercely, they fell into disarray and lost their cohesion.

Sensing this spurred the skaven on to new levels of ferocity, and two more knights errant soon fell. Out of the corner of his eye, Sir Robert could see a unit of spearmen pressing through the skaven throng to come to their assistance, yet he did not now know if they could hold until this relief came. He stabbed at a rat-man that had got behind Sir Tybold then was shocked to find Sir Clarence seemingly sweeping at the legs of his horse - until he saw Sir Clarence's sword pull back red with skaven blood.

A cry rang out 'The standard!', and looking around Sir Robert saw Sir Bleoberis sorely beset by the skaven. As he watched, unable to press through the skaven to come to his assistance, he saw one rat-man grab that standard bearer's foot. Sir Bleoberis struck down with his sword and removed its head but, encumbered by the standard, he could not protect all sides at once. The skaven obviously knew the importance of the banner waving over his head and were going all out to capture it. Sir Robert felt panic rising in his heart. This wasn't supposed to happen! They were Bretonnian knights, they weren't meant to be overwhelmed by worthless rats! The skaven should flee before the splendour of their martial prowess!

Yet the skaven did not flee, they kept coming. Sir Bleoberis' horse bucked as a rat's sword removed its tail, then a skaven knife found the back of its leg and it stumbled, its hamstring severed. Sir Bleoberis vaulted clear and landed on his feet, still fighting heroically. Sir Clarence managed to break through the press and tried to haul him up onto the back of his horse - yet this was to prove disastrous. As Sir Clarence pulled on Sir Bleoberis' arm, skaven grabbed his legs and another skaven took the opportunity to attack from the far side and slice through the saddle straps. Sir Clarence crashed to the ground, trapping Sir Bleoberis beneath him, and both disappeared under a surge of skaven.

At this, panic set into the ranks of the knights errant. A third of their number now gone, they fled before the relief offered by the spearmen could arrive. Sir Robert fled with them, knowing he could not possibly fight alone and not wanting to die on this mountain. His armour had held, yet he bled from many buffets and blows and his horse was weakening. As they fled, the desire to escape gave them new strength and, as if knowing they were heading for safety, their horses found new energy to carry them clear, leaping over the bodies of skaven and Bretonnians as they went.

As they retreated, the hissing jeers of the skaven still ringing in their ears, Sir Robert fought to regain control of himself

and of the knights errant. 'Turn', he yelled, 'Shall we abandon our banner and our honour? Shall we leave them in the filthy hands of the skaven to carry back as trophies to their unclean den? Turn, I say, and we shall recapture our honour and make such a slaughter as shall be sung of forever in the halls of Quenelles!' This rallying call steadied the rout of the Bretonnian errants, who quickly saw that if they were driven from the field they would lose all honour and break the vows of knighthood that were still fresh in most of their minds. 'Follow me!' Sir Robert continued, 'We fight to regain our honour, or die in the process!' Turning now, they formed up behind the young knight as he started to ride back into the melee, and they all took up the cry 'Death before dishonour!'

The skaven were by now fully engaged with the Bretonnian spearmen, and the reinvigorated knights errant caught them in the flank. Squeaking and spraying musk, the skaven fled, and Sir Robert bent to pick up the tattered remains of the standard where they had dropped it. As he held it aloft a cheer rang out from the knights errant, and then a greater cheer rang out all around them. At first he thought it was for them, but then he saw that the whole skaven army was routed as their general, Gnowdool, fled the field.

They pursued the fleeing skaven, cutting down many of them as they ran, then turned to face the deadlier enemy they had come seeking. Kemmler's undead horde still stood its ground and the very sight of these unnatural warriors was enough to fill their hearts with dread. Here was death, reanimated in the service of the necromancer. This was the fate that would befall them all if they were to fail here - not only to die, but to be raised again under another's will, to be sent to kill their own families and friends until Bretonnia burnt from the mountains to the sea.

As he looked around, Robert saw that there were new banners flying above the Bretonnian forces that he had not seen in Duke Tancred's army before the battle. His heart leapt as he realised that the forces of Parravon had arrived at some point whilst he was immersed in battle with the Skaven and had added their weight to the Duke's army. 'The tide of battle was surely with them now,' he thought. He raised their tattered banner once more, stained red with blood and brown with mud yet still a proud symbol of their honour recaptured, as they charged into the undead army of Kemmler.

The fighting here was already fierce. The arrival of the Parravonians had left Kemmler surrounded so his forces could not retreat from the field, he was now fighting for his life. Sir Robert saw a unit of mounted wights that were engaged with a group of Parravonian knights errant up ahead. He spurred his horse towards them, and he and his comrades charged into the flank of the wights.

Despite this, the wights did not break, but fought back all the more fiercely. Sir Robert realised that these were much more formidable opponents than the skaven. Yet they did not have the speed of the skaven, nor the numbers to overwhelm a downed knight before he could recover. They were like nothing he had fought before in battle - they were armoured troops most similar to Bretonnian knights. Indeed, as he looked around he realised that many of these wights were almost certainly the corpses of Bretonnian knights, twisted and reanimated by the evil power of the necromancer to betray all they had stood for in life.

His sword rose and fell in a regular rhythm, sometimes cleaving into a wight and severing the spells that animated it, sometimes glancing back off their shields or armour. The fighting became easier as Sir Robert remembered the words of his tutor, Sir Egram de Tors, 'Let the Lady guide your hand. Let the sword be an extension of your arm, part of you rather than a tool.' As the adrenaline of the charge left his body, the cool guiding hand of the Lady took over. His movements became more guided, less impetuous. His sword seemed to flow from his hand, just touching an enemy enough to lay him low rather than embedding itself to the hilt.

Looking to his right, Sir Robert saw a knight slump over his horse's neck. Sir Abelard of Merlebourg fell, his armour pierced front and back by the strength of a wight's sword thrust. While the wight struggled to free its sword, Sir Robert's blade met its neck, chopping through the decayed spine and sinews and through the enchantments that bound it to the world of the living. To his left, he saw another knight errant desperately wrestling with a wight who, both having lost their swords, held the Bretonnian's neck in his bony hand. As he turned his horse to come to the aid of his comrade, he was engaged by another of the hideous creatures and forced to defend himself. Although he quickly despatched his attacker, he was too late and turned to see the wight flinging the Bretonnian from his horse to be trampled by the panicked animal.

The tide of battle swept them apart, and he knew not who gained vengeance against that wight. Yet he knew vengeance was visited, for the wights began to crumble as the Bretonnian's brought their strength to bear. The Parravonians were making good way now, one in particular stood out for his valiant fighting style. He had slung his blue and yellow shield over his back and was wielding his longsword in both hands, carving a path through the enemy with his mighty blows. Often it seemed he was in danger of falling, yet caught himself just in time - or braced himself with a thrust of his sword into one of his opponents.

Sir Robert could see the enemy was in disarray and led a group of his knights around the back of the wight's formation to attack their rear. Now fully surrounded, the wights quickly fell. Sir Robert himself was poised to fell the last of the

enemy, when he was beaten to the strike by the fierce Parravonian he had seen earlier. This knight's armour was battered in many places and his surcoat rent and torn, yet his strength seemed unquenched and his sword split the skull of the wight an instant before Sir Robert's pierced its chest. The Parravonian turned to Sir Robert and said "It's not the Great Boar of Parravon, but it will do for now". Not knowing quite how to respond to this puzzling statement, Sir Robert bowed to his companion, saying "Sir Robert de Giselles. I am honoured and delighted to make your acquaintance." The other bowed back, answering "Sir Cadfael. The honour is all mine, I am sure." Then added, with a fierce gleam in his eyes, "Come, the battle is not yet over and there is much glory left to be won!" So saying, he turned and galloped off to join the other Parravonians, who were now advancing towards a company of skeletal spearmen.

Looking around, Sir Robert saw that the Parravonians easily outmatched the spearmen but were threatened by a unit of undead cavalry that was positioning itself to flank them. Quickly, he raised the standard as a rallying point and charged to intercept them. As they crashed together, Sir Robert felt a sword smash into his shield with such strength that it nearly unhorsed him. Around him many undead soldiers were sent crashing to the ground by the force of the Bretonnian charge, although a few knights also fell. Dazed by the blow dealt to him, he swayed in his saddle and only just recovered in time to divert another blow from the undead champion who led this unit.

He recovered and aimed a blow at his opponent, who turned it away with a sneer. Looking at him, he saw a pale face with dark eyes burning with the fire of damnation and two sharp fangs protruding from his mouth. He froze, realising that this was no wight he faced but a vampire, one of the lords of the night. His opponent saw his fear, and smiled, saying "Well may you tremble, mortal, for you look upon your death. You cannot hold us back, for you cannot destroy us, and what you cannot destroy will destroy you." As the vampire swung again, Sir Robert came back to life, lifting his sword instinctively to ward off the blow, then riposted, managing to cut a ribbon from the vampire's cloak but without reaching its body.

The vampire aimed another blow at Sir Robert's head. He raised his shield just in time to divert the blow, but at a cost. The blow that would have surely split his skull split his shield instead, only being stopped by the boss. The impact numbed his arm which fell by his side as the vampire drew back its sword out for another blow. Desperately, Sir Robert lunged at the vampire, but the other easily caught his clumsy thrust on his shield and turned it aside. The vampire held its arm high, ready for the killing blow, and smiled pitilessly. Sir Robert sat helpless, his shield arm numb and unresponsive by his left side, his sword turned wide by his opponent's shield. The vampire's sword began to descend.

Suddenly its descent was arrested by a mailed hand that grasped the vampire's wrist. As the vampire turned suddenly to its right, a voice said "He's not for you!", then before the vampire could bring his shield back around a sword thrust pierced its breastplate and impaled its heart. The vampire looked shocked and tried to speak, but although its mouth moved no sound came, and it slumped forward on its mount as the knight withdrew his sword and turned to Sir Robert.

Sir Robert recognised the shield, three yellow escallopes on a blue background, as that of Sir Orin Neville-Smythe, a paladin who had been in the service of his father before departing to wander Bretonnia and combat evil, and who was now serving in the retinue of Duke Tancred. Sir Orin addressed him now, asking how he was. He answered that his left arm had been numbed, but that it was now recovered, and proved this was the case by raising it again. His shield, however, was badly damaged. The vampire's last blow had split it down to the boss, and other blows had knocked off corners and left deep gashes. Sir Orin looked on it and said "That is the shield of a warrior who has fought long and bravely. Raise the standard again and I shall ride into battle with your unit, we will head for that knoll where the fighting is thickest, for there I believe either Kemmler or Krell, or possibly both, are holding out still against Bretonnia."

The knights errant pressed on, with Sir Orin accompanying them and Sir Robert defiantly holding the standard high above him. A unit of skeletons blocked their passage to the knoll, but the knights made short work of them. They could now see that it was indeed Krell who held out on the patch of high ground ahead, dealing death with his black axe to any Bretonnian who dared to approach. The mighty undead chaos warrior stood nearly eight feet tall in his dark armour, the colour of blackened blood, made seemingly taller yet by the great horns on his helm.

As they engaged with Krell's troops at the foot of the mound, Sir Robert saw a number of questing knights thrusting their way through the press of undead nearby, before the battle came between them and they were lost to his sight. To his left he saw the Parravonian knights errant arrive at the gallop. He winced as he saw Sir Cadfael swing two-handed at a ghoul with such force that the ghoul's body was split in two and the momentum carried the young knight from his saddle to land on another of the creatures, then sighed with relief as he saw him leap up and spit the felled ghoul with his sword before continuing the fight on foot.

A swarm of bats now fell on the knights errant, flapping in their faces and biting at their necks. The bats' teeth were foiled by the armour the knights wore, yet the vision one knight, Sir Richard de Parlyon, was blocked by a bat that attached itself to his face. Thus encumbered he failed to fully parry a spear thrust from a skeletal warrior and was sorely wounded through the thigh before he could recover. The bats were driven off without further loss, but the initiative had been surrendered and the momentum of the Bretonnian charge halted.

The knights errant were pushed back briefly by the undead ranks, but then started to make slow progress forward as Sir Orin took the lead and organised their battle line, shouting instructions in a clear voice that carried through the noise of combat. Ahead, Sir Robert could see the questing knights had reached Krell. The dark warrior cut down the first with a savage blow from his axe that split his breastplate and opened his ribcage, then swung again to bite into the arm of another and force him to fall back from the battle - then to fall screaming to the ground as the evil magic of the axe took effect. The third that stepped forward was their leader, Sir Etien de Rochefort, who parried Krell's first savage blow then stepped inside his guard to land a solid hit on his shoulder. Although the armour turned Sir Etien's sword aside, this was the closest any had got to troubling Krell and renewed the hope of the Bretonnian forces.

Still around Krell, his troops held fast and refused to be overwhelmed by the might and glory of the Bretonnian chivalry, Sir Robert could approach no closer. At the summit of the mound Sir Etien continued to dodge, well aware of the curses laid upon that axe and the fate he was likely to suffer if he allowed even a glancing blow to land. As he twisted and turned, his sword darted and flashed, nicking off the chaos armour of the undead warrior. Here Krell had met his match for skill, indeed he was overmatched for Sir Etien landed many blows, although none telling, while he failed to connect with even a glancing blow that must have pierced the brave Bretonnian's armour and caused him grievous injury.

At last the evil moment came: Krell connected with his opponent. Sir Etien managed to turn the blow with his shield, but the axe split it in twain - just missing the knight's arm. Tossing away the now useless shield, Sir Etien backed off a little, while Krell hefted his axe from hand to hand, that the direction of the next attack may remain unknown. He swung twice right-handed and then, just as Sir Etien darted in again, brought the axe around left-handed to sweep at his waist with a blow that the knight could not possibly avoid.

However, this was not Sir Etien's attempt. He had realised that he could never hope to defeat Krell with his darting hits, they could not pierce the thrice-cursed armour that protected the evil champion, and had decided to risk all with a last desperate attempt to break through Krell's guard.

As the axe came around, he spun inside it, turning with the blow to seize Krell's wrist with his now empty left hand and pull him even further around. Simultaneously, he drove his sword under his left arm and into Krell's breast. Carried by his momentum, there was no way Krell could avoid the blow, and the sword pierced both hauberk and sternum before snapping off at the hilt. Krell's body convulsed, but his momentum carried him on, into Sir Etien, to send them both crashing to the ground, Krell uppermost.

Around Sir Robert and the other Bretonnians, the undead crumbled to dust, and the living creatures that served their evil master ran in panic to be slaughtered by the Bretonnian's swords. All seemed still for a moment, then one of Krell's huge arms rose. For an instant, Sir Robert thought he still lived, but then as the body rolled, all saw Sir Etien struggle to his feet and raise his broken sword in triumph.

A great cry went up of 'Le Doberman!', first from the commoners who stood around, then taken up by the knights as they hoisted their banners high in celebration. Sir Robert followed suit, thrusting the standard high above his head and crying out 'Le Doberman', although he knew not what it meant, until suddenly a great blow struck the back of his head and he had only time to wind the reins around his wrist before he slumped into unconsciousness.