

The Tale of Sir Robert, chapter iii. Journey to the Empire

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Sir Robert slowly regained consciousness. He could hear Bretonnian-sounding voices around him, much to his relief. He was alive and safe, even if his head was throbbing and all his limbs ached. Slowly he opened his eyes, squinting against the bright light that filled them. Blurry figures moved around against a stripy background, he appeared to be inside a pavillion. One of the figures saw him moving and hurried over.

The figure said "Ah, you're awake. How do you feel?" He recognised the voice as Sir Orin, the paladin he had been fighting alongside when he had been struck down. "Terrible", he answered, "What happened? Were we flanked? They all seemed to be running".

"Nothing so dramatic, I'm afraid. The top of your standard had been damaged, and it came off as you were celebrating and nearly brained you. You're lucky you've got a thick skull, the healers tell me you should be fine with a couple of days rest."

"The standard?" Sir Robert asked in amazement, "The standard knocked me out?"

"I'm afraid so." Sir Orin replied, "The pole had been damaged just beneath the head, and the bronze eagle snapped off and fell on you. I've never seen anything like that happen before, but luckily you're okay and the battle was won. Krell was struck down, as you saw, but I'm afraid Kemmler held out until nightfall and then escaped. Anyway, you need to sleep. I'll be back later."

Sir Robert lay back on his bed, and quickly slipped back into sleep. When he next awoke it was dark and there was a thunderous drumming noise that made his head throb. The air was smoky and he could see the flickering light of a fire to his left. Turning his head slightly, he saw a cowed figure sat by the fire, stirring a cauldron. He feared that his earlier conversation had been a dream, that he had been taken to some evil place or that this was the underworld.

The cowed figure turned, having heard his movements, and approached him. It held something in its hands that seemed to steam. He shrank back in fear as it drew close, too weak to defend himself against whatever the creature could be planning. It leant over him and spoke a single word in a thick accent, "Zuppa?"

Sir Robert stared blankly at the figure. The voice was heavily accented, but unmistakably human, and sounded kindly. His addled brain slowly came to realisation, the cowed man was speaking Reikspiel and was offering him soup. Confused, he racked his brains for the correct reply, but gave up and nodded his head. This seemed to work, for the man helped him sit up and then gave him the bowl of soup and a spoon.

Sir Robert downed it hungrily. It felt like days since he had last eaten. In fact, he realised, it could well have been days, as he did not know how long he had been lying here. The figure, who Sir Robert now realised must be one of the monks of Taal at the abbey that had been here, offered him bread, which he ate just as eagerly. As he became more awake, he realised also that the drumming was heavy rain beating against the roof pavillion. He also began to remember some of the Reik spiel he had learned at ?lfinfort, and was able to ask the monk his name.

"Brother Johannes", the monk replied, before a moan from one of the other beds drew him away to investigate its source. Sir Robert lay back down. He knew now that he was in a temporary infirmary, and he knew the name of one of the monks tending them. He also knew that the rhythm of the beating rain was very hypnotic and that he was exhausted, before long he fell back asleep.

When he next awoke, it was daylight again and the rain had ceased. A figure in a brown habit, who Sir Robert realised must be another of the monks, was checking the beds. He managed to sit himself up this time, then when the monk came over managed to summon enough Reikspiel to ask for Sir Orin. The monk nodded, and gave him more bread and soup to eat while he waited.

For a long time, nothing happened, and Sir Robert wondered if the monk had understood him, or though he was just requesting food. Eventually, however, Sir Orin appeared. "What's happening?" Sir Robert asked him. "How long until I'm allowed up again?"

Sir Orin, who was obviously fluent in Reikspiel, spoke briefly with the monk, then told Sir Robert that he would be allowed up that evening for the meal, although he was to drink but a single glass of wine and was to return here for the night. In the morning, if all proved well, he would be allowed to leave the infirmary.

Sir Robert next asked about the battle. Sir Orin told him again what he had said earlier, that Krell was felled but Kemmler escaped. Duke Tancred was sending parties out to hunt for Kemmler, but little hope was now held as he seemed to have made good his escape into to Vaults. It was expected that soon most of the party would return to Quenelles, the Parravonians having already left, but that some would be required to escort the monks at least as far as Nuln, and possibly all the way to Talabheim, now that their monastery had been destroyed.

Sir Orin then surprised Robert by asking him, "Would I be correct in thinking that your father ensured you were taught Reikspiel?". Sir Robert replied that this was the case, although he was far from fluent. "In that case," Sir Orin continued, "you may be given the chance to improve your fluency. I must speak with the Duke." Sir Robert's heart leapt. He hardly dared believe that he would join the party escorting the monks to Nuln, yet that seemed to be the implication. It seemed likely that Sir Orin would be going, he was fluent in Reikspiel and seemed well known to the monks, but that he should accompany him rather than return to the court in Quenelles seemed like an almost impossible adventure. Sir Orin obviously saw the look on his face, for he said "Don't get your hopes up yet. It may be that the Duke will wish to bring you safely back to Quenelles until he's sure of your recovery. You should concentrate on getting better for now and not try and run before you can walk."

Sir Robert sat, wrapped in thought for a minute, before starting guiltily. "What of Donal, my squire?" he asked, "How did he in the battle? Is he okay?"

Sir Orin nodded. "In wondered how long it would take you to remember you had a squire now. He's fine, the squires stood off and rained arrows on our enemies, he saw nothing of the hand to hand fighting. He will be along later to help you dress for this evening. Anyway, I must go now - I have much to see to before the light fails. I shall meet you at dinner."

With that, Sir Orin left, and the monk pushed a cup of sweet-tasting liquid into Sir Robert's hands. He did not get more than half way down the cup before his eyelids drooped and the monk took it from him as he slipped gently back into sleep.

He was woken later by Donal. His squire's face looked anxious, but pleased to see him alive. Sir Robert did not feel much like talking, but Donal was more than happy to regale him with tales of how the battle had been carried, and how the squires' arrows had turned back the skaven tide! He told him also of how the honour among the knights errant had been awarded by general acclamation to Sir Meliance de Couronne, who had been made knight the previous evening along with a half-dozen or so other knights errant who had shown themselves worthy in the conflict. Eventually, Sir Robert was dressed in his finest tunic and hose, with a thick cloak of fine wool to protect him and his sword buckled around his waist, and he was ready to go to the dinner.

The dinner was held in a great marquee that had been erected in the fields of the ruined abbey. Another marquee held the kitchens, and a covered passage joined them so the food could be brought in without being exposed to the elements. The bards were singing tales of the great victory the Duke had wrought, and of the deeds of Sir Etien who was seated next to the Duke at the high table. Sir Orin was there too, away from the positions of highest honour but on the high table nonetheless. Sir Robert was seated near the foot of one of the four long tables, with other knights errant, almost as far from the Duke as it was possible to be and stil be seated, and therefore mercifully distant from the bards.

The dinner passed in a blur. Donal waited on him, and ensured that his goblet was filled with small beers rather than strong wine, as the monks had instructed. Yet he hardly tasted the meats, his appetite not yet being fully returned and his stomach still tender, and although the smells tantalised him they seemed ashy on his tongue. At last the feasting was over, and Duke Tancred rose to speak.

After the usual florid speech that is expected after a feast, the Duke reached his serious business. He announced that the next day they would break camp and would make their way back to Quenelles around the borders of Athel Loren, now haste did not necessitate their passing through that strangely enchanted land. He also announced that Sir Orin Neville-Smythe would be travelling to Nuln with a party of knights to escort the monks to safety, and would then be continuing to Altdorf to take his place as the Duke's emissary at the court of the Emperor. Sir Orin rose and replied in a suitably flowery manner, promising to do his best to forward the interests of Quenelles and Bretonnia, and to cause of united front to be presented to the Undead of the Grey Mountains, that threatened both realms.

Shortly after this the dinner ended with the Duke's cup bearer proposing a loyal toast to the King. Donal reminded Sir Robert that he was to return to the infirmary for the night, but told him that his gear was safe and would be packed in good time, then said that Sir Orin wished to speak with him once he was in the infirmary.

True to his word, Sir Orin appeared shortly after Sir Robert has been helped out of his clothes and back into his bed. He

smiled at the excitement in both Sir Robert's and Donal's eyes, then relieved their anxiety by telling them that he had spoken to the Duke and they were both to accompany him to Nuln and then to Altdorf. They would ride tomorrow after taking their leave of Duke Tancred and would escort the monks as far as Nuln. After this, they would take ship down the Reik to Altdorf and the Imperial court.

After he had left them, the two young men talked excitedly, their difference in rank temporarily forgotten. Sir Robert had learnt some Reikspiel from his tutors, and had seen some maps of the Empire, and knew a little about its politics. Donal, on the other hand, was shocked to hear that they spoke a different language! He had thought that all humans must speak the same tongue and that only the other races spoke otherwise. He was similarly shocked to hear Sir Robert's rather erratic description of the succession in the Empire - how the counts would war with each other until one party came to the fore and that he would be emperor, and how they sometimes spent over a thousand years in ceaseless civil war. Their animated conversation drew the attention of the attendant monk, however, and Donal was shooed out of the pavilion to return to his own quarters.

The following morning, Sir Robert awoke to the sounds of camp being struck. Those who could not yet walk, his fellow knight errant Sir Richard de Parlyon among them, were being lifted gently into biers that could be carried back to Quenelles. He arose, feeling considerably stronger now and easily able to stand and dress himself, and set out to find Donal. He found him loading up a pack-horse with their equipment and supplies, and tried to help him. "No, my lord," Donal hissed, "you must not lower yourself thus where others can see. Come, let me help you into your armour so you can mount up and display yourself with honour."

Sir Robert realised that it must be so; he could not help his squire strike camp without others thinking him to be lowering himself. He allowed Donal to help him on with his armour then mounted his horse and sat there watching Donal pack up. As if sensing his thoughts, Donal turned to him, grinning, and whispered, "besides, if you interfere you'll ruin my system and I'll never be able to find anything in a hurry!". Sir Robert grinned back, and felt relieved although still a bit guilty about not doing a job he would have been expected to put all his effort into only a few weeks previously.

At last the camp was struck. They formed up with Sir Orin Neville-Smythe's contingent of around 20 knights and knights errant, escorting approximately 60 monks and other servants of the abbey with all their baggage and their sacred relics. Sir Orin took his leave of Duke Tancred, then they all saluted him with their lances as they marched north and east towards the Empire.

The first day of the journey passed uneventfully. They ran into a small band of goblins, but these saw what they were facing and scattered before they could be brought to battle. The path they were following soon started descending down a small stream that must, eventually, reach the Reik - they were across the top of the mountains and into the territory of the Empire. That evening, the stream they were following reached the edge of a much larger valley, which it plunged down to meet in a series of waterfalls. They camped that night on the lip of the hanging valley, where the only easy approach was down the path they had been following.

The next morning, they began the descent into the valley below. The path wound its way down the hillside in a series of zigzags which were easy enough to follow on foot, but trickier on horseback. For this reason, the knights dismounted and led their horses down the trail, remounting when they reached the valley floor. The river here was little larger than a stream, far too small to have carved the deep valley it flowed through, yet the valley floor was flat and the track along it easy to follow. They were now only a day or two's travel from the border forts of the Empire, beyond which they would be in the Empire proper and out of this region of bandits and monsters.

That night, possibly, the guard was not as keen as it may have been up in the higher hills, or maybe the night was darker as the moon waned, but whatever the cause the orcs were almost upon them before the alarm was raised and there was little enough time for Sir Robert to buckle on his breastplate and grab sword and shield, to join battle with his arms and legs naked and his head unhelmed.

The action in the dark was brief, but bloody. Foul green faces, their jaws full of yellowed and rotting teeth, loomed at him as he stabbed around. Metal clashed on his shield and fingers plucked at him, yet his guard was not beaten. Sometimes he felt his sword bite home, yet normally he was swept aside by the combat before he knew if his blow was telling or otherwise. Suddenly, all was silent. The orcs had left as quickly as they had come, and the long job of taking stock of the damage done began.

As the first light of morning was brightening the eastern horizon over the woods of the Empire, the party was ready to set off again. Three knights had been slain in the midnight attack, and most were carrying some injury. Four of these were too badly injured to ride and would have to be carried down the mountain - a third of their strength had been removed in one blow, and another third was weakened. Among the dead were those on guard the previous night, who had been overwhelmed in the first rush of the attack.

The greatest blow, however, was the horses. The orcs had cut them free and, driven mad by the smell of the foul greenskins and the noise of battle all around, the pack horses and palfreys had fled. The Bretonnian warhorses had returned when the orcs departed, but the lighter horses were now probably filling orc stomachs.

Despite the loss of the horses, the Bretonnians still had most of their supplies and equipment as they had been unloaded for the night. The monks had to carry what they could of this, for the warhorses would become useless if heavily encumbered, and the rest was piled together and burnt so that it may not fall into the hands of the orcs. Before this, a good meal was cooked for, with the reduced supplies, it would be short rations until they reached a border fort.

Following the morning meal, the party hurried on as quickly as possible. Yet now that haste was even more urgent, to get the wounded to proper treatment and to reach safety before the orcs could fall on them in greater numbers, they were slowed by the lack of pack animals. Sir Orin scanned the horizon before and behind constantly, and as night fell he announced that they would continue to push on in order to reach their destination faster, and to give the orcs less time to gather around them.

Morning found them in a widening valley, and with the first sight of a distant tower below them, still a full days march off if not further. The signs of pursuit were around them now, however. Goblin trackers had been sighted slipping through the undergrowth and the trees on the valley edge moved in ways that could not fully be explained by the wind. Sir Orin had been riding deep in thought for more than a few minutes when he seemed to come to a decision and called Sir Robert over.

"The orcs are travelling faster than us," he told Sir Robert. "They are cutting around us along the edges of the valley in order to get between us and that border post. Our only hope is to reach it by nightfall or we shall be overwhelmed and, much as I wish for a glorious death in battle, I would much rather fulfill my commission to bring these monks to safety and travel to the court at Altdorf.

"However, as I just said, the orcs are currently overtaking us. In fact, at the current rate, there is no way we will reach the tower before they cut us off. Therefore, we need to summon assistance from the tower. I have written a note to the commander of the garrison there, and you will ride ahead to take it too him. Don't think this is the easy option - the orcs will guess what you're about and they will try and stop you. I can't spare many, so it will be just yourself, Donal, Sir Tybold who you served alongside at La Maisontall, and his squire, Patrick.

"Here is the letter. Ride as fast as you can and ensure that it gets through at whatever cost - do not be afraid to retreat towards the tower, but you must break through the orc lines. May the Lady's blessing go with you."

Sir Robert took the letter in silence, saluted, and went to tell the others what they were to do. In a few minutes they were together and received Sir Orin's farewell salute before trotting out in front of the party. There was no sense in galloping as yet, there were still many miles to go and they would need their horses strength later, for now they need to go at a sustainable pace that would see them reach their destination and would leave them with a reserve in case of trouble.

For the first half hour, they rode silently through the woods, peering into the shadows beneath the trees for the gleam of metal that might betray an ambush. Suddenly an arrow whistled through the air and glanced off Sir Tybold's shoulder armour, and with a yell a group of goblins charged out onto the path in front of the knights. Sir Robert spurred his horse forwards and lowered his lance towards the goblins. Sir Tybold joined him, and the squires fell in behind them. The goblins looked suddenly uncertain at being charged by two fully armoured knights on horseback, against whom their arrows seemed to have little impact, and then panicked, scattering back into the trees. The Bretonnians continued galloping as another hail of arrows fell short behind them, eager to put distance between them and the site of the failed ambush before the goblins could summon reinforcements.

It was not long, however, before more trouble befell our heroes. Rounding a corner on the track, they came across a barricade of felled trees manned by large, vicious looking orcs. The knights split, Sir Tybold veering left while Sir Robert dived into the trees on the right. The trees whipped against his armour as a huge greenskin appeared before him, he dipped the head of his lance slightly and caught it in the shoulder, pinning it to a tree before his lance snapped off in his hands. Another orc appeared, he thrust the broken lance in its face, then dropped it to draw his sword. Steering back to the left, he burst back into the daylight on the far side of the barrier, Donal emerging just behind him. The orcs on the barrier turned and started to pursue them, but the Bretonnians dug their spurs in and galloped clear. Behind, they heard yells as Sir Tybold and Patrick emerged from the woods almost on top of the orcs. Looking back, Sir Robert slowed to a trot as he saw Sir Tybold's horse dragged down by the greenskins, before Donal yelled "Ride on, remember the mission!" as he galloped past. Sir Robert reluctantly spurred his horse on and followed Donal, leaving Sir Tybold and Patrick to their fate.

They were now over half way to the distant tower, and hopefully past most of the orcs. Fate had one last trick to play on them, however, before they could come to safety. Crossing a stream, a rock shifted under Donal's horse, causing it to

stumble and fall. Donal was thrown off and fell heavily, crying out in pain.

Sir Robert immediately reined in his horse, and jumped off the see what the damage was. Donal's left fore-arm had taken the force of his fall and was obviously broken, yet he could have ridden on if his horse had been able to rise. Yet this was not to be, the horse was beyond help with a broken leg and Sir Robert was forced to use his sword to deliver it.

Sir Robert helped Donal onto the back of his horse, then they rode on more slowly. They could hear the sounds of the orcs behind him, yet Sir Robert refused to put Donal off the horse while there was still a chance. Suddenly the pursuit was upon them, orcs on giant, savage boars galloping around the corner behind them. Sir Robert spurred his horse into full flight, yet the boars still gained on them and the situation looked bleak.

Yet ahead of them, a horn sounded, giving them fresh hope of reaching safety. The horn sounded again as the path suddenly opened into a clearing where Empire handgunners were practising their weaponry. They looked surprised at Sir Robert's sudden appearance on their field, yet reacted quickly to the arrival of the orc boar-riders. The noise of their volley echoed around the clearing, and smoke filled the air. When it cleared the orcs were in full flight, leaving half their number dead or bleeding on the floor.

Sir Robert drew his horse to a halt, and spoke to the captain of the handgunners, explaining in his halting Reikspiel that he had a message for their lord and that there was a party of Bretonnians and Taalian monks surrounded in the woods. The captain seemed to understand, although his reply was too quick for Sir Robert to understand much of it.

Donal dismounted with some difficulty, and one of the handgunners who seemed to have some training in battle-field medicine helped splint his arm and place it in a makeshift sling. The captain spoke in rapid Reikspiel to his trumpeter, who blew a complicated series of notes that Sir Robert assumed was a signal. The captain then mounted his own horse and beckoned to Sir Robert to follow him as he started trotting down the road towards the tower.

After about ten minutes riding, they reached the tower, and Sir Robert was quickly admitted to the presence of the castellan. The castellan was armoured, but seated behind a large desk. His helm was off and resting on the desk, revealing closely cropped hair and a well-manicured moustache. When Sir Robert handed him the letter from Sir Orin, he snapped the seal and produced a monocle to read through it. He glanced through it quickly, then read it again more slowly before standing and marching to the door. He stuck his head out and bawled something unintelligible to Sir Robert, then walked back to the desk and picked up his helmet.

Turning to the Bretonnian, and speaking slowly to make himself understood, he told him that they would ride out immediately and invited Sir Robert to join them. Sir Robert accepted without hesitation, yet pointed out that his horse would need some time to recover. The castellan therefore offered him a horse from his stables, which Sir Robert gratefully accepted.

Although the castellan had promised an immediate departure, it was at least half an hour before the knights were mustered. Sir Robert's barding was transferred from his horse to a fresh mount, and he rode with the knights of the Empire when they finally departed.

They rode rapidly, but were not bothered by any orcs as they rode. Ahead of them they soon heard sounds of battle, spurring them on. The Bretonnians had covered a good proportion of the distance to the tower, yet were still a good hours ride from the tower. Eventually they drew close to the battle, and fell suddenly upon the orcs from behind. The orcs saw their situation change suddenly from besiegers to besieged and panicked, scattering into the woods. Seeing the orcs in disarray, the Bretonnians sallied forth from their defended positions and helped pursue the greenskins into the forest.

The battle drew quickly to a close, neither Imperial nor Bretonnian wishing to delve too deeply into the forest while it was infested by orcs. Sir Orin found Sir Robert and congratulated him on getting through, when he asked about Sir Tybold, Sir Robert shook his head and Sir Orin knew not to ask further at this time. Sir Robert then led Sir Orin to the castellan and introduced him.

The combined party of Bretonnians, monks, and Imperial knights pushed on towards the tower. They continued after nightfall as it seemed foolish to invite another attack by camping out when safety was so close, and they eventually rode in through the castle gates about an hour after dark as the moon rose over the distant forests of the Empire. The castellan turned to the Bretonnian knights and said in a strong accent, "Welcome to the Empire."