

# A Ghost Story of King's Sleep

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even year had passed to the day -on the same ominous day our saviour Gilles le Breton was born so long ago- since the lord of the land, a cruel and avaricious man by the name of Jacques de Marlais, had died in a revolt of the people he had so unrelentingly extorted for his own greed, and finally to his own ruin. Having no heirs or living relatives the land was handed down by the sovereign into the care of the charge of the previous lord, a man who was his brother by rites of marriage, Pierre d'Aide Avare. True to his guardian, his was an even more harsh rule; the revolt bloodily thrown down, heavier taxes, he even punished the household for their supposedly inability to safeguard their lord. All knights and family had abandoned him over the years -which he did not rue: for now he had less mouths to feed. And now, being an old bitter man, he would reach a cornerstone of his life.

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The harsh wind vainly tried to rip the shutters open in order to let in the wrath of winter. The land had been harrowed with waves of unrelenting snows which now covered the frozen earth. In a room with scant furnishings and bereft of everything save for the most basic needs; the lord of the land sat at a simple wooden table with his master of coin, Robert de Cratchis, meticulously going over all expenditures and income. The entire table was littered with parchments and neat stacks of coins. A lone candle threw long shifting shadows against the walls. The sudden knocking on the door startled both men. The few guards and servants still working in the keep would ever try to stay away from their lord unless it was necessary. Indeed, even guests were near unheard of in Castle Londain as they received no more than the compulsory welcome from the greedy lord.

Pierre grumbled with indignant voice: "Find out who dares to disturb me this evening and send them back into the storm."

The poor Robert instantly rose from his seat, grateful to leave the table as they had sat there since noon trying to discern where two measly coppers had disappeared to. Behind the door stood a handsome young knight with a courtly smile. Frederick was one of the few visitors the castle ever received a year. And every year he would invite his uncle for dinner on King's Sleep Day and every year the latter would refuse. Surprisingly he still seemed to like his uncle ever since he underwent his years as a squire at the castle. "Good evening, Robert." With a glance at the table he added. "Still working this late?" Robert's tired eyes were as good an answer as any. The nephew then addressed his relative. "My esteemed uncle, by this light you are prone to make more

errors. Your gold will be there on the morrow."

"At this rate, Frederick, it won't." The old man didn't even look up from the list of detailed rows to greet his favourite (and only) nephew. "Some-one has dared to steal from me. And if I find out who, they won't enjoy one more blissful day on this earth."

Frederick merely arched his brow at this cold welcome. "Surely no-one would have dared after what happened to the last poor sod who tried." Frederick's riding boots resounded through the chambers as he stood next to his uncle. "But I'm here for another matter. Elise was wondering whether you'd be interested in coming to dinner the day after tomorrow. We have rounded up some of the family to celebrate King's Sleep together. We'd be honoured if you'd come."

"Celebrate the birth of Gilles? Bah, nonsense!" His eyes narrowed and he impatiently waved his hand as if to dispel the notion. "Why would you waste time and money for that? The man has been dead for over a thousand years now. Nay, you'd be better off saving your money, Frederick."

The disappointment was clear in the eyes of the young knight but Pierre didn't even deign it necessary to look up from his taxes. "So you won't come?"

"Nah, that way you'll be better off." He barely heard the slam of the door as his nephew departed, engulfed as he by then was in some unclear calculations.

The flame of the candle slowly dwarfed on to reach the wax-crested chandelier and still lord d'Aide Avare occupied the time of his unfortunate master of coin who wished dearly to be with his family on this holy night. Pierre ignored the first knock on the door, hoping whoever it was would go away. Robert however walked over by the second knock to open the door. A group of knights stood at the door, their cloaks drenched by the snow and bearing simple armour. "Evening's greetings, master, are you the lord of this keep?"

Robert shook his head and brought the guests to his master, wary of his reaction. For a while Pierre seemed adamant to not acknowledge them so they'd disappear as ghosts. But the eldest of them addressed him. "Blessings of the Lady upon you, sir. We are knights of the Order of the Gillits who strive to improve the unfortunate poverty of the commoners. We ourselves have sworn an oath of penury so to better aid those..."

"And I gather you want some kind of stipend." Pierre grumbled, impatient for the knight's long and winding speech.

"It is our duty as righteous knights to give something back to those who have given us their loyalty and obedience, especially on the eve of the most holy day of the land: our holy saviour Gilles did not overcome the greenskinned horde by himself."

The old man's thin patience with people who disturbed him was no completely gone and he put them into their place. "By law these are my lands and I'll have you not confuse the minds of the mud-born, you hear? Their lives are owned by their lords who decide how to treat them. It is not your right to meddle in our affairs. Anything I leave them, that ought to be enough. Even more; they ought to be grateful!"

"And if the roles were reversed? Would you not want some way to alleviate your suffering?"

"I'd rather die than to suffer the dishonour of some knight's help without having earned it! In fact, so should they! At least that way there would be less of them and their breeding would be under control." The eldest did not dignify to reply as he stormed out of the room, followed by his two companions.

As Robert returned to the table to take his place but his lord interrupted him. "It's best we call it a day, Robert, those fools broke my concentration with their nonsense and I'm weary now. I'll see you on the morrow."

Gathering all his courage that was left to him, he asked his lord a question to which he could already guess the answer. "Milord, if it graces you, I'd like to have the day off tomorrow. Castle life is slow at the moment and the tithes will be here the day after. I haven't asked you for much this year but I'd like to spent a day with the family."

Pierre had almost replied to deny him his leave but he hesitated. A sudden whimsical feeling had overwhelmed him which he quickly shrugged off but which he could not dismiss entirely. Even more so he didn't feel so great, a cold had crept up to him as wolf in the night. "Sure, Robert, have a day off."

"Yes, sir, I understand." Robert sullenly started to reply until the message drove through. "I... Thank you, milord."

"But you better be here by the fourth bell on Boxing Day or I'll have your hide."

The castle halls were cold and silent. His faint step, tired with age, barely disturbed the peace of the empty corridors. To save the torches, the sconces were empty. The lone lantern of Pierre could undisturbed throw long and eerie-moving shadows upon the dark walls. Once he startled himself as he passed a painting of his former guardian: it had seemed so real. He decided to read a story in the anteroom before retiring to bed.

As he reached the end of a chapter, a slight noise caught his attention. Concentrating to hear it better, it sounded as a rhythmic sound of metal meeting stone. Some-one is in the corridor! Who could that be? No knight would disturb me at this ungodly hour. Memories of the peasant's revolt played through his mind. They had finally braved themselves to come for me. He had always known that those treacherous and ungrateful lowborn would one day come for him. Steeling himself he rose from the chair -the book fell to the ground- and stole to the door leading into the corridor. By now it sounded as if the unknown knight was close. Pierre gripped the handle of the cast iron fireplace poker tightly. Whoever it was, was now standing right outside. With a sudden haul he pulled the door open and swung the poker in a downward arch. With a deafening clang the poker met stone. The light streamed into the corridor but there was nothing to be seen. Bewildered he finally turned back inside. As he was about to reach for the door when it swung itself shut with a loud bang. With a pounding heart he gazed at the door, not noticing that he by now had a guest. Indeed, minutes past until the being broke the silence. "Been awhile, Pierre."

The old lord jerked around: in the comfortable chair next to the hearth there was his old friend. In fact he sat there in the same way he had died on his throne: his helmet still bore the horrendous dent

where a cudgel had split his skull, the chain links between the plates at his side were still crushed and blood stains still soiled his tabard. Yet around his neck there now hung a rusty old chain which reached to the ground. The chains had a lot of odd objects in a smothering embrace.

When Jacques noticed that his old charge was looking at it, he explained. "Every man, Pierre, bears his sins in the afterlife as symbolic burden around the neck. I for instance sinned with my greed. But I'm not here for myself. Your chain is twice as long by now. Your spirit will be so burdened by sins that you'll never be able to find peace. Murder, torture, extortion, greed, insults, neglecting the divine order.... The list is long, my friend, and condemning."

Pierre in the meantime had sat down opposite to the spectre. Stunned as he was, he remained silent and after a while the ghost of the old lord continued. "However it is not too late to repent, my friend. On this most holy of nights, there roam the spirits of Bretonnia. They represent that which once was, is and will be. Show true remorse for your sins and maybe the path to redemption will be opened for you." With those last words the ghost slowly faded with a hearty smile adorning his face, leaving the bewildered Pierre behind, alone with his thoughts.

The moons were hidden behind the dark clouds but they had already started their descent when the old man covered himself with the warm furs and blankets of his bed. His joints were stiff and his limbs felt bereft of warmth. A certain unease had settled in his body. He suspected sleep would be a stranger but before long he fell into a restless dream.

As the first bell of the new day was rung by the town crier, a sudden fey light lit the room which gently woke the lord. Standing at the foot of his four-poster bed, was an armoured knight. The otherworldly light swirled soundless around him. The old man instantly recognised the famous heraldry which adorned his tabard. Before he could bow his head to the first king of the realm, his outstretched gauntleted hand beckoned Pierre. An eerie voice filled the room, hollow as the halls of the dead. "Lord Pierre of house d'Aide Avare, I am the spirit of King's Sleep past. Reflect on your deeds and show remorse."

Suddenly Pierre found himself in a familiar hall but some of the details were off in the dining room of his father's keep: his old heraldry still adorned the walls. Sitting at table was a lonesome child, face sullen and gaze embracing the distance. Pierre's heart jolted as he recognised himself in what seemed a lifetime ago.

"Your father always found more important matters to attend to than sitting down with his son." The hollow voice ascertained. "Even on this holy day he never came."

"I remember that he promised me that year to have dinner with all of us. A lie of course. But he took my sister as well and left me alone in that cold hall." He could not cloak the bitterness in his voice even after all those years.

The scenery shifted suddenly and he found himself in his old study in his father's keep and an adolescent Pierre was sitting at his oaken desk. The old man knew instantly what would happen for his long life had been haunted by the memory time and time. A bright and

beautiful woman entered which made young Pierre smile fondly. But his smile dropped as he saw the welling tears and pale face. "Pierre, I asked my father -and he agreed- to break off the marriage." The tears now poured freely from her eyes. "Please, leave me alone from now on." And then she fled from the room but her sobbing lingered.

"Belle..." Young Pierre held his head in his hands.

"And your work became ever more important to you. Your work which had cost you so dearly."

"It soothed me and forced me to think in numbers and not in feelings. It was the coward's way of course: I should have run after her and make amends." Jacques closed his eyes ruefully and reflected on the slow decades of loneliness. "No use crying over spilt milk, nay?" A lone, spectral tear fell to the floor.

As he opened his eyes he found himself somewhere else, the spirit looking at him from within those dark visor slits. Two caskets covered in flowers stood in front of him in a dark room. He knew where and when they are as it was a recurring nightmare of his. He ignored the coffin of his sire and instantly went to stand beside the smaller one. "She still looks so peaceful." He tried to hold her small hand but his hand touched nothing but air. "She was the only constant in my life, my anchor to the world. My sister was always there to comfort me, it was she who recommended me to Jacques. She who quelled my endless tears for my beautiful Belle. Her death..." Words failed him now as he shed dry tears.

"It was her choice. And it was an accident."

"And my fault. I should have stopped them but I just stepped aside and let them in. She loved that man and she died for that love." Guilt fuelled his tears. "Please take me away from here. These are memories which still tear open old wounds."

With a shock he woke in this warm bed, sweating and heart pounding. Was it only a dream? It took awhile before sleep covered his eyes.

Once again the first bell rung in the village and once again Pierre woke because of a strange light. A second spirit now stood at the end of his bed but its heraldry was different. This phantom bore the heraldry of the current king. Once again it reached out to Pierre d'Aide Avare. His voice was more lively than the spirit of the past. "Lord Pierre of house d'Aide Avare, I am the spirit of King's Sleep present. See how your deeds reflect on the world."

The old lord found himself in the snow-covered village at the foot of the castle. They were standing in front of a simple hovel. Unsure of what to do now, Pierre looked at the spirit who merely pointed at the shutters. Glaring through the cracks, he could see the family de Cratchis. Robert was sitting near the fireplace, four of their children were sitting next to him, hanging on his lips. The eldest daughter was helping Robert's wife cooking. Pierre grabbed his youngest son, Timothée, and put him on his knee so he didn't have to sit on the cold floor. His crutch fell to the floor but none cared. Though they lived a simple life, they seemed to be happy. The love for each other was even clear to the shrivelled heart of Pierre.

Suddenly the frail body of Timothée was fraught with a terrible cough.

"The sickness will claim the youngest next week on the morrow. Lest he receives proper care. Care which they can't afford."

"Poor lad, he never had much luck in his life. Robert told me his youngest was a cripple but it never hit me until now."

"Why do you show pity? Earlier you said that it was a good thing that some of the commoners die so that their breeding would under control."

These words left the old lord silent while the scenery shifted. They were in the dining hall of a castle. It was different now but it was the keep of his father, now in the care of Frederick. The table was laid with the most beautiful silver Pierre had seen in a long time and they were caked with the remains of a luxurious dinner. Next to the hearth the old man recognised his nephew and his wife. As they sat together they looked the painting of the perfect couple. Safe for a minor detail that seemed to bother Frederick: his wife tried to cheer him up but the fact that his uncle never accepts his invitation, clearly saddened his nephew.

"Your nephew is the last real family you have on this earth." The spirit looked at Frederick. "Yet you haven't visited him once in your ancestral keep. Have you even met his bride-to-be Elise?"

Pierre did not seem to hear the spectre, entranced by the two. "You know he has the eyes of Beth. Why is this the first time I notice?"

"Maybe because it is the first time you pay attention to him."

The third scene was one of the village once more, the hard roads were empty and deserted. Pierre came aware of a sense of extreme cold. "Why are we here? Is something wrong with Timothée?" The old man wheeled around but did not see the house of his servant.

"Not all people who suffer because how you have treated them, are known to you. As a lord of Bretonnia your deeds ripple through your fief as storm-spurn waves." This made Pierre d'Aide Avare look at his guide. "We are here because of them." The spirit opened his cloak where two small children were sheltering from the cold. Their small faces peered up to the old lord who felt uncomfortable with their staring, big eyes. Their clothes were shabby, dirty and certainly not fit to keep out the season's cold. "Meet Bêtise and Désir. They are doomed to a horrible life under your reign."

Aghast the old man backed away. "Surely there are some who would help these two innocents? Surely there are some who can spare..."

"Spare what?" The spirit interrupted with a sudden severity in his voice. "Your serfs have barely enough to survive themselves. They can't spare anything for two more. But as you said earlier this evening: they should not complain but be grateful." From the pitch black suddenly the town crier declared it to be midnight.

Pierre awoke with a start but he did not doubt his visions anymore. This time he could not sleep and a bell passed. The green faerie fire began to fill the room and another spectre appeared. This knight was also heavily armoured but was more imposing than the others. The knight towered over his bed as a cold shadow. His armour seemed to absorb the green light and quench it. A bland crown signified this to be a regal figure but Pierre did not recognise the heraldry of the fearsome knight. A frightful voice filled with the dark of death called out to him. "Lord Pierre of house d'Aide Avare, I am the spirit of King's Sleep yet to come. Embrace your future."

He found himself back at the village but the hovels seemed even more haggard and worn. Many were boarded up and some had even collapsed. Three men made their way over a muddy street. The ghostly knight was following them.

"You going to his funeral?" One asked the others.

"Are you daft, man? Hunger, cold and death is all the man ever done for us." The second replied angrily. "He didn't deserve to die in his bed."

"Maybe they'll be handing out soup." The third said hopefully.

"Of course not, he'd never allow his gold to be used for that. He probably threw it all his privy for safekeeping. Probably wanted to be buried naked as well; it's cheaper." They exchanged some mocking laughs.

The black knight had stopped and was looking at Pierre, head slightly cocked. The old knight turned towards him, confused. "Why did I have to hear that? I don't understand."

The sky and hovels meanwhile turned into a barren hallway of some foregone keep. The old lord looked around and saw that he was in the basement of his keep but it looked even more forlorn than in his day. Suddenly two men bursted by, their arms full with loot from the basement. All junk he hadn't had need for in ages but all the same it made Pierre cry out. "Guards! Fetch those thieves!" His words did not echo through the corridor and the thieves did not look back.

Once again the corridor changed to a room in the basement of the castle. A coarsely-carved casket stood bare on the floor and within lay a shrouded corpse. The black knight walked over to it, followed by Pierre. A sense of foreboding crept up his spine. "It is me, isn't it? I die and no-one cares to give me a proper burial. Even more so, they spit on my remembrance by stealing." A gauntleted hand reached down to unveil the corpse but the old knight cried out. "No! Don't! Some things are best left undisturbed."

And suddenly he found himself on top of a hillock which was covered with graves. The snow had returned and turned the graveyard into a eerily peaceful field of crosses. Movement at the foot of

the hill drew his attention. It was Robert and his family. His manservant was carrying a small coffin and his eyes were downcast. With a shock Pierre noticed that Timothée wasn't amongst them and his eyes returned to the casket. Tied to it was the youngest his crutch.

Before he could call out, he was standing in another graveyard, this one more unkempt and silent. Weeds were overgrowing most of the graves. Most of the lily-shaped tombstones stood crooked or even had fallen down. The mourning trees had grown wild and had uprooted and broken many of the covering stones. Pierre had grown cold as he recognised the cemetery as that of the castle. One by one he passed the former lords of Castle Londain. They did not stop at the tombstone of Jacques and Elise as Pierre suspected but moved on to a corner. There was a fresh grave with a badly-hewn tombstone and without a covering nor any flowers. A chain of several yards strewn with many heavy-looking objects was spread unto the dirt. Depressed he discerned his name on the cold stone. The black king now beckoned him towards his grave but Pierre stopped dead in his tracks. "Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point answer me one question." Pierre d'Aide Avare said. "Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"

Still the ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

The unforgiving finger remained on the tombstone as if to invite an inevitable faith.

"I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope!" The old lord asked desperately but no answers were given. "I will honour King's Sleep in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!"

The old man woke in the cemetery of his day, the corner was yet empty but by the moonlight the shadow of a cross fell upon the ground as a reminder.

That morning he woke with resolve in his heart to rectify the mistakes he made. First he surprised his nephew and betrothed in Castle Avare for a King's Sleep Day dinner. He played the part as a gracious old guest by entertaining his lovely hostess by tales of the youth of Frederick, complimented the exquisite dinner and had a nice, long talk with his only living relative deep into the night. The next day he raised the wages of Robert and suggested that they had to take little Timothée to the doctor of the castle on his expense. Indeed, he became a charming old man who showed great compassion to his serfs and servants. When he passed away several years later, the yard of the cemetery was filled with commoners who came to pay their respect (and enjoy the soup served at the funeral). None knew the real reason why their lord had changed but they all called it a true King's Sleep Miracle.