

The Dispossessed Knight's Tale

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The following forms a sub-plot to the thread "A bretonnian revolution? (discussion and planning)" and was written by me over a 24-hour period between 31st December 2009 and 1st January 2010.

The story revolves around a dispossessed knight, named Toustain de Mont Briècque, who is from the small town of Mont Briècque in southern Carcassonne and located in the foothills of the eastern Irrana Mountains, near to the Nuvolone Pass.

I hope you enjoy the story, and your comments and feedback, via the RP thread, will be most welcome.

Sir Guy (aka CitadelSix / Geoff Buss)

For a great many generations, Toustain's ancestors had held a very large estate and a strategically important castle that guarded the western approaches of the Nuvolone Pass. The estate was a very rich one and blessed with a good location, soil and climate, so that its main source of revenue was from the vineyards that covered most of its acres and the fine wines - produced by its presses, that were much sought after in both Bretonnia and Tilea to the south. The estate and castle's position being close to the Nuvolone Pass worked in great favour to the holder, for the castle not only controlled the Pass from a military aspect but also from a major trading one as well. For the main trade route between the southern regions of Bretonnia and Tilea was through the Pass.

When Toustain had just turned twelve years old, his father, Etienne de Briècque - Le Sire de Donjon Briècque and knight of the realm, left to fight in a campaign down in the Southlands, leaving Toustain's beautiful and very capable mother, Lady Marissa, to manage the estate while he was away. However, a little over a year later, another knight also on that same campaign, a Baron Pétois de Quenelles, brought the news of Etienne's death to Lady Marissa. Pétois also carried a letter bearing Etienne's seal, which he handed to Marissa.

The Baron claimed to have befriended Etienne during the campaign and over time they became good friends. Unfortunately, while they were laying siege to a fortress, named Ker Al-Kabir, Etienne was mortally wounded and all his contingent slain. As he lay dying, Etienne dictated a letter to Pétois and asked him to take it to the Lady Marissa. The foot of the letter carried a very shaky version of Etienne's signature, but the wax that sealed the letter closed, bore his crest. The letter gave the Baron custodianship of the Donjon Briècque until the young Toustain reached the age of entitlement to his father's castle and estate. It also stated that the Lady Marissa and Toustain were to remain in residence as the rightful occupants, but that the Baron should be allowed to take up temporary residence, in order to ensure that the castle and estate were properly maintained and run until Toustain came of age. The Lady Marissa was too overcome with grief at the loss of her beloved husband to protest or even discuss the letter's contents, and so the Baron departed for his own stronghold and estates back in Quenelles.

Pétois granted the Lady Marissa a suitable period of mourning for her deceased husband before he arrived back at the Donjon Briècque, accompanied by a contingent of men-at-arms and a group of servants, to take up his temporary residence there. At first, Marissa tolerated the Baron's presence, solely because he was Etienne's comrade in arms. But as the weeks turned into months, without any sign of Baron Pétois being in any hurry to return to Quenelles, Marissa began to resent his presence and his ever increasing interference in the running of the estate. Eventually, her resentment boiled over into ever increasing arguments, disputes and confrontations with the Baron about his gradual replacement of many of Etienne's senior estate workers with his own people.

The remaining estate workers, now labouring under the charge-hands and over-seers appointed by the Baron, were treated harshly and more and more like slaves. When Lady Marissa protested, the Baron told her in sneering tones that, she and her late husband, had indulged their peasants so much that they had become lazy and soft, and so now they needed discipline, hard work and to be taught to respect their betters. The arguments between Marissa and Pétois became more frequent, more public and more heated, until one night, in a drunken state, the Baron decided to show Marissa who was in control. He forced his way into her chambers and brutally raped and beat her, leaving her sobbing, bloodied and violated. Many of Marissa's servants, as well as her personal maid and Toustain, heard her screams and shouts of protest, but were too afraid of the Baron, when he was in one of his drunken tempers, to intervene.

Three months passed, during which time Marissa stayed within her wing of the castle, too humiliated and weakened by her beating and violation by Pétois to venture out. Her only companions and visitors were Toustain, her personal maid, a physician and a few trusted servants. It was then discovered that Marissa was made pregnant by the rape, and just over a month later she miscarried and, despite all the efforts of the physician and maid servants, bled to death from the internal damage she had suffered from the violation.

One evening, not long after Marissa's death and when everyone was gathered in the castle's great hall for a banquet, a distraught Toustain dared to publicly confront Pétois and denounce him as a rapist, murderer and usurper. The boy was immediately seized, stripped and then publicly flogged, by order of the humiliated and furious Baron. The bleeding and sobbing lad was hauled off and confined to his rooms, with only a manservant and physician allowed access to attend to him.

By this time, the Baron had taken over complete control of the estate, and began to impose a tyrannical reign on the peasants, estate workers and servants, as well as the remaining members of the garrison Etienne had left behind to protect the castle.

A week or so after Toustain's public flogging, the manservant, by the name of Jacquard, accompanied by two of Etienne's garrison, came to the boy's room in an agitated state. They told Toustain that he had to leave immediately, because they had discovered that the Baron was planning to take him hunting in a few days' time, on the pretence of making a public show of forgiveness. But during the hunt, there would be some kind of accident in which Toustain would either be killed instantly or receive a fatal injury. Therefore, the lad had to leave as soon as possible with the three men and flee to a safe haven. And so it was that that same night Toustain, Jacquard and the two soldiers rode south into Tilea, to seek refuge with a trader, who had a long standing acquaintance with Etienne, and could arrange for them to find other folk who would provide them with safe places to hide and a means to live.

The Baron conducted a token search for Toustain, to keep up his pretence of concern for the missing lad. However, shortly thereafter, Baron Pétois publicly denounced the boy as a trouble-maker and spoiled brat, and that by his running away from and refusal to accept the Baron's custody, he forfeited any rights to inheriting his father's estate and castle. Consequently, the Baron declared himself Etienne's successor, as the current occupant and custodian, appointed by Etienne himself. After all, he had the letter, bearing Etienne's signature and seal, as proof.

By the time Toustain turned fifteen, he had travelled through many towns and cities in Tilea, initially to keep moving in the search of safe havens and later to find work and a living; but always in the company of his three self-appointed guardians. After reaching Verezzo, in the south of Tilea, Toustain settled there after finding work as a stable hand at a wayside inn. Over the next two years, he grew into a sturdy young man and not only learned all there was about caring for horses, but also learned a great deal about the farrier's trade. During this time Jacquard had met a local woman, married and settled down to run a small leather-ware stall in the town's market square, and Toustain's two other companions, Eude and Gui, had taken jobs as watchmen at the town's main gateway.

Shortly after Toustain's eighteenth birthday, a large Tilean mercenary force camped just outside Verezzo, and several of its company commanders came into the town to organise supplies, fresh horses and, as luck would have it,

gather new recruits. And so it was that Toustain, Eude and Gui decided to join the ranks of the Tilean mercenaries; attracted by the promise of a decent wage and good provisioning, the rich spoils of war, and adventure and battles in exotic places.

A year or so later, Toustain and his two companions found themselves fighting as hired mercenaries down in the Southlands. By now, Toustain was proficient in fighting with a variety of hand weapons, shooting a crossbow and handling a pike. He bore a few scars from having to learn the hard way how to fight with these weapons, but nonetheless he was a force to be reckoned with, and Eude and Gui watched him with an almost fatherly pride when he fought alongside them.

Several months after the start of the campaign in which they all fought, Toustain and his two companions were engaged in a battle near a desert fortress, when he caught sight of a contingent from Bretonnia in the distance. A large formation of knights, supported by men-at-arms and bowmen, were charging at full gallop into the foe. However, Toustain soon lost sight of them again when their own mercenary company was called upon to provide a protective wall of pikes against a sudden enemy counter-attack.

Later after the battle was over, and the victorious survivors were setting up camp among the ruins of the conquered fortress, Toustain caught sight of the Bretonnians not too far from where he and the rest of his company were located. He decided to visit the Bretonnians, and along with Gui and Eude for company, he made his way towards them. As they neared the Bretonnian bivouac, Gui and Eude both suddenly noticed that several of the men-at-arms wore the livery and badges of their own lord, Etienne de Briècque. Although their surcoats were tattered, dirty and faded from the effects of prolonged exposure to the strong desert sun and battle, Etienne's crest was still visible on the badges. Both men also recognised one or two faces among these men-at-arms as members of the contingent that had ridden with Etienne and allegedly died at the siege of Ker Al-Kabir.

After re-uniting with some of their old comrades from among the Donjon Briècque's garrison, Gui and Eude introduced Toustain to them and then exchanged news and experiences, eventually settling down to discuss what had happened since learning of Etienne's death. It was soon recounted, and verified, by several of the men who had been with Etienne at the time of his death, that he had been stabbed from behind while he was fighting, and had died from a deep wound to one of his kidneys. The person who was standing nearest Etienne at the time of his stabbing was none other than his friend, Baron Pétois. It was Pétois who insisted that Etienne should be carried back to the Baron's pavilion by four of his personal bodyguards, to receive attention. It was there that Etienne died. The raconteur of this story added that it was no more than a few days after Etienne's death when Baron Pétois and his company withdrew from the campaign and returned to Bretonnia; the Baron making the excuse that he had solemnly promised Etienne, as he lay dying, to bear the sad tidings in person to his widow and son. At the conclusion of the man's story, Toustain bowed his head and wept, both in grief and in fury at what had really happened. From that moment, he swore to avenge the death of both his parents and reclaim his ancestral home from Baron Pétois.

The hate and fury that now burned within Toustain drove him to act with almost reckless abandon when he fought against the foe. Soon he was hailed by the men in the company as a brave and fearsome soldier. And consequently, over the course of the campaign he grew in stature, respect and reputation among the mercenary companies. It was not long before he was leading his own company in recognition of his deeds and valour. But all the time it was the need for revenge against the Baron that motivated Toustain to be the best he could be as a soldier and to bide his time and gain the means to reclaim his ancestral home.

By the time Toustain had reached the age of twenty-one, he had worked his way up through the ranks to be a commander of several mercenary companies, and fought successfully in several campaigns in the Southlands and Araby. He won many accolades from his peers and seniors alike, was respected and well liked, and counted many as friends among the ranks and companies of Tilean mercenaries. He had also earned wealth, both from his payment as a much sought after hired soldier and from the spoils of war that he was entitled to as a victorious commander. It was at this time, when the campaigning in the Southlands had come to an end, that Toustain decided to return to Donjon Briècque and confront the Baron.

It took Toustain six months to journey back from the Southlands to Ravola at the Tilean end of the Nuvolone Pass. There he left his three mercenary companies, comprising nearly three hundred men, and headed north through the pass with

six companions, Eude, Gui and four of Etienne's original contingent, to provide testimony as to what they witnessed during the siege of Ker Al-Kabir. The three companies that Toustain left camped at Ravola consisted of crossbowman, pikemen and republican guards. They were all professional soldiers and had the experience of fighting several successful campaigns together under Toustain's command; a force with which to be reckoned.

Toustain and his six companions rode into the town of Mont Briècque that lay several leagues north-west of the Bretonnian end of the Pass and near the edge of the Donjon Briècque estate. Here, Toustain and his party stayed for a few days at an inn, so that he could gather news of the Baron from the locals and the innkeeper. Under the name of Vincenté da Trantio, Toustain enquired about the Baron and the possibilities of entering into trade with him, spinning a story about wanting to retire from fighting and starting up some sort of import-export trade operating out of the north of Tilea. He discovered that the Baron now had a strangle-hold over a large swathe of the area surrounding the local estate, as well as his own holdings back in Quenelles. Pétois had become very powerful and controlled the trade route through the Pass, imposing crippling taxes on goods imported from Tilea, as well as taxing any goods coming into the area from other regions of Bretonnia.

It became immediately obvious to Toustain that the Baron was despised by everybody, but that the local population lived in fear of him, because conversations with the innkeeper and local folk, both in the inn's taproom and out in the market stalls, were furtive, conducted in hushed tones and always with the raconteurs watching to see who else might be within earshot. Toustain established that Baron Pétois was nothing but a tyrant, treating everyone beneath him with contempt and the local peasantry as nothing better than beasts of burden, while he gathered more and more wealth to himself through exorbitant taxes or confiscation of goods when the tax money was not forthcoming. Toustain decided then that he would pay the Baron a personal visit.

Toustain and his party arrived at the gates of the Donjon Briècque, dressed in Tilean garb, and asking for an audience with the Baron. When asked for his name and business with the Baron, Toustain told the garrison captain that he was Vincenté da Trantio, a Tilean merchant who sought to enter into trade discussions with Baron Pétois. Toustain and his group were escorted through to the Baron, who was, conveniently for Toustain, holding a banquet in the great hall of the castle. On entering the hall and being greeted by the Baron, Toustain announced to the gathering who he really was and that he was there to provide proof of the Baron's foul deeds and hence reclaim the castle and estate as the rightful heir. After the initial furore in response to Toustain's declaration had died down, the Baron decided to call Toustain's bluff and hear his story, which was duly recounted together with the witnesses' accounts of how Etienne really died. Unfortunately for Toustain, the majority of the people seated in the hall belonged to Pétois' entourage or were his toady acquaintances; but there were plenty of servants and common folk present too.

The Baron denounced the witnesses' statements as complete falsifications, trumped up by Toustain in a futile attempt to discredit and falsely accuse him of deeds he did not commit. He then called Toustain a liar and a trouble-maker, sneering at the fact that he was no more than a Tilean hireling and nothing better than the son of a whore. At this final insult, Toustain made a lunge for the Baron, but was soon overwhelmed by the Baron's bodyguards. To the hoots and jeers of the Baron's guests, Toustain and his six companions were bundled out of the hall and thrown into the dungeon. The following day, Toustain's six companions were taken out of the cell and murdered by the Baron's henchmen, to eliminate the risk of them giving testimony again. Toustain himself was brutally beaten by the same henchmen, while the Baron sat and watched. The young man was then dragged outside and, to provide some entertainment for the Baron's guests, bodily thrown into the castle's midden, as the Baron and his entourage watched from the castle's battlement; Pétois calling down to Toustain to crawl away back to Tilea and never to show his face again in Bretonnia.

Much later, when Toustain regained consciousness, he did indeed crawl away back towards the road to Tilea, where fortunately the next day a Tilean trader found him slumped by the side of the road. It was indeed Toustain's lucky day, had he known it, because the trader had been at the castle and witnessed what happened in the great hall, two days past, and the subsequent dumping of Toustain's body in the midden the previous day. He also knew of Toustain's reputation back in Tilea as somewhat of a hero and a successful mercenary commander. However, the trader was also aware that, when it was discovered that Toustain was no longer to be found on the midden, the Baron had ordered a search of the castle's immediate surroundings, believing that the injuries Toustain had received at the hands and booted-feet of his henchman, would prevent him from getting very far. However, the Baron had not reckoned with the determination that drove Toustain for revenge. The Tilean knew it wouldn't be long before the Baron's men would be searching further afield for the fugitive, because the Baron realised his mistake in assuming Toustain would die of his injuries.

Again, luckily for Toustain, the trader was returning through the Nuvolone Pass to Campogrotta with some large, empty casks among his wagon's load, and so he deposited the badly beaten and semi-conscious young man in one of the empty casks and then continued on his way south back to Tilea.

It took Toustain nearly two months to recover from the injuries he had sustained; plenty of time for him to plan how he would now reap his revenge on Baron Pétois. During his time recovering at a small palazzo of a Tilean merchant friend, Toustain had many visitors, not only from among his Tilean friends, fellow mercenary captains and commanders, but also, as time went on, from an increasing number of folk that had fled south from the Baron's estate and the town of Mont Briècque. Among these people were several of the Baron's garrison, who could no longer tolerate the treatment that they received in his service. One of these same soldiers also warned Toustain that the Baron had heard rumours of his escape to Tilea, and had paid for someone to seek him out and assassinate him. It was these very same rumours of Toustain's escape that had started the increasing stream of 'refugees' from the area surrounding the Donjon Briècque. Toustain realised that if his whereabouts was now general knowledge, it would not be long before the attempt on his life would occur. So, as soon as he was well enough, he began to move between a series of other safe havens only known to a limited number of his closest friends; and never staying for long in any one place.

Meanwhile, Toustain had begun to gather a huge following of peasant folk from Bretonnia, all of whom had suffered terrible hardships under the Baron's tyrannical reign and all of whom had a reason to want to see the Baron deposed. This peasant army gathered itself around the Tilean town of Ravola, at the southern end of the Nuvolone Pass, where Toustain's mercenary companies were based. Toustain sent orders to his company commanders to select suitable men, from among the gathering Briècquean peasant throng, who could be trained to fight with hand weapons and use crossbows. The young man realised that he would need to have a sufficiently large enough force of trained fighters to be able to carry out his plan of guerrilla warfare against the Baron and to inflict a war of attrition on the tyrant's own fighting force. He also knew that he alone could not provide sufficient funds to pay for the equipment and provisions required for his growing army, in addition to paying the mercenaries he retained to train and fight for him. Consequently, he contacted all the Tilean merchants who had a grudge to bear against the Baron, because of the punishing duties he levied on their trade goods. After several months, Toustain had secured the financial support of a good thirty of so merchants to fund all that he needed to make his campaign against the Baron practical.

It was a good eight or nine months after Toustain's near death and narrow escape from Donjon Briècque that he put his campaign into effect. During the intervening time, he had had his company commanders split his peasant and mercenary army, now over a thousand strong, into smaller units and trained to fight as skirmishers. The tactic that Toustain had planned was for these units to carry out swift and random strikes against the Baron's troops, his goods wagons and holdings, after which the units would then disperse in order to move less conspicuously and be far more difficult to track to any one place against which a counter attack could be made.

Over a period of several weeks, mounted units were moved first through the Pass under the cover of night and then fanned out into the countryside beyond. Next foot units, comprising mainly of peasant militia armed with crossbows, were moved through by various means, chiefly hidden within traders' box wagons, empty casks or disguised as migrant workers and travellers. After another month, Toustain was notified that all the skirmishing units were in place and ready. While he remained at a safe location within Tilea, and held his pike-men and republican guard units in reserve at Ravola, the lightning strikes started in earnest.

After just a short while, Toustain's hit-and-run tactics began to pay off and the Baron's troops were picked off and slowly whittled down in numbers, while his goods wagons were ambushed and destroyed whenever they were found on the roads out of the estate. Then when the Baron began to send his goods out in heavily protected convoys, the mounted ambushes would just happen at even more frequent but random intervals all along the convoy's route. If the armed escort gave chase, the skirmishers would simply ride off in different directions to make it almost impossible for the Baron's men to engage them. But if the armed escort persisted in pursuing any of the skirmishers, they would either be met by another band of mounted skirmishers or led into a hail of crossbow bolts. And while the armed escort was off in pursuit, it was then that several more of Toustain's mounted skirmishers would hit the convoy's wagons.

Soon the Baron realised that Toustain had gained the upper hand, and so the tyrannical lord switched to reprisals against the peasants, holding them responsible for aiding and abetting Toustain's raiders. Besides they were easier, softer and altogether defenceless targets against which to vent his rage and frustration. So, Pétois began punishing the peasants by burning their dwellings and villages, and beating and torturing any peasants, even remotely suspected of harbouring or helping the raiders, in an attempt to extract information about where Toustain's units could be hiding or operating from. The Baron also sent a force to close off the Bretonnian end of the Nuvolone Pass, in case the raiders were coming through from there. However, all that the Baron's reprisals against the peasant folk accomplished was to create an even greater ground-swell of hatred against him, so that eventually more and more of the common folk began to rise up against the Baron and flock to Toustain's cause.

Within six months of Toustain's campaign of coordinated guerrilla warfare against Baron Pétois, he was besieged within the Donjon Briècque by an army of peasant militia and mercenaries numbering nearly six thousand. It only took another two weeks to starve the Baron into submission and to surrender the castle and its estate to its rightful owner, Toustain. The Baron was hanged from the battlements of the castle, so that all could see that justice had been served for his crimes of rape, murder and extortion. Several of his aides and henchmen were also hanged for the murder of Toustain's six companions and for the brutal treatment and ultimate deaths of the peasants the Baron had had tortured for information.

Toustain took up residence in the Donjon Briècque, installed a garrison comprising a subset of his mercenary units, and had the estate restored back to order and the Pass opened for trade again from Tilean merchants. However, Toustain had unintentionally started an avalanche that now gathered momentum and could not be stopped. Within a short space of time, no more than perhaps seven weeks, Toustain began to receive visits and petitions from other peasants and common folk who were suffering under the harsh or tyrannical regimes of others lords, barons and knights across the southern regions of Carcassonne and Quenelles. The common folk had found a hero and leader who they saw as someone who would help them fight against the unjust treatment they received from the Bretonnian nobility and aristocracy. Toustain had shown these common folk that there was a very effective way of fighting back and winning against Bretonnia's powerful regional rulers. The peasants' rebellion had started and was now too big for Toustain to resist its cause.

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