

Nemesis

Contributed by Geoff Buss - aka CitadelSix
Friday, 28 October 2011
Last Updated Tuesday, 03 January 2012

Well, I didn't expect to have time to write an entry for this year's Anniversary Literature Competition, but here it is - exactly 3,000 words long.

Hope you enjoy it.

Sir Guy

I am Sir Laurent, the Seigneur de l'Embrun, a stronghold on the River Sirthelle in Carcassonne. But that is not where I sit now, on my horse, Gwyntcryf. No. I sit astride my mount on the side of a gently sloping valley somewhere just south of the Forest of Châlons near to Gien. In front of me, at the foot of the slope, is amassed a huge force of beastmen that has recently emerged from the fringes of the Forest. Never before have I seen such a sight, heard such a noise nor smelled such a stench as I smell now. The air is filled with the bestial braying of the horde as it swells in numbers. There must be a thousand score or more of the malodorous beasts. As I await, along with fellow knights of the realm, for the order to charge from our liege lord, the Duke of Carcassonne, I can see far to my left the red and white livery of my bowmen and to my far right, some of my men-at-arms. It can't be long now before we are all engaged with the beasts below that now offend our sense of decency with their disgusting gestures and their foul and base behaviour that is the source of the rank stink that fills the air.

No more than thirty-five days ago, I left Embrun at the head of my retinue in response to my liege's command to assemble at Castle Carcassonne, before marching north to join with the forces of other lords where we now wait and observe the foe. My beautiful wife, Vivienne, and my two sons, Rolan and Artur, and daughter, Matild, had stood atop the barbican of my stronghold to wave their farewells. I led my bowmen and men-at-arms to Castle Carcassonne in good order, reaching there in eight days and where I and my brother knights were offered the hospitality of our liege's castle for the night. The next morning, my retinue of 180 men combined with the others from Carcassonne and together we set out on our march northwards; a total force of over two thousand knights, men-at-arms and bowmen in the Duke's train.

Due to the size of the force and the slowness

of the baggage wagons, we managed to travel only a little over three leagues a day. Hence, it was not until eighteen days or so, after leaving Castle Carcassonne and crossing the River Brienne into Brionne, that we encountered the first signs of destruction left behind by the beastmen horde. A league from a settlement, we saw a flock of carrion birds wheeling in the sky; a sure indication of death. As we drew close, the acrid smell of burnt wood and thatch was carried on the wind. Apart from the harsh caws and croaks of the crows and ravens, all was still. My liege halted the force and, being a lord of humane and honourable nature, instructed a few of us to look for any survivors, in particular women or children.

I and six other knights rode forward and progressed slowly through the burnt-out remains of a large settlement. There remained very little left of the occupants or their livestock; most having been picked clean to the bone by the crows and ravens. More shocking, however, was that many of the human remains we found appeared to have been mutilated: the heads and hands hacked off. Any corpses we did find within the burnt-out buildings, appeared to have died in the flames, their bodies charred and contorted into grotesque shapes by the intense heat of the conflagration that had consumed them. We would never know if those poor wretches had chosen to die in the flames rather than suffer being hacked to death or if they were trapped or forced within those charred ruins. Whatever way they died, it was both violent and terrible and we left that sad place in a sombre mood to continue on our way northwards.

Thereafter, each day we discovered more and more of the same macabre evidence of the slaughter left in the wake of the beastmen as they cut their swathe of destruction across the fair lands of Brionne and onwards into Aquitaine.

Finally, another seven days later, we saw smoke and a large flock of the carrion birds filling the sky a few leagues ahead. As we drew closer, the pungent odour of burnt wattle and daub and thatch filled our nostrils. But a quarter league from the still burning village and farmsteads, we also caught the distinct smell of burning flesh and of fresh carnage.

In case the beastmen were still at large, we entered the devastated area in force and found there a most distressing sight. Bodies were strewn about in profusion, nearly all missing heads and hands; men, women and children without exception. Many had also been flayed of their skin: their raw, bleeding cadavers covered with loudly buzzing swarms of black, carrion flies and insects, as well the ever-present crows and ravens that rose reluctantly into the air from their feasting as we approached. The sharp, metallic aroma of blood was ever present. It was evident that the massacre had not long occurred, and was reinforced by the ground being freshly churned by countless cloven feet, and littered with foul, stinking dung. There were few of us, even those amongst our peasant bowmen, spearmen and halberdiers, who were unmoved by the sight of the infants' and young children's mutilated corpses. It was not long ere an angry murmur soon arose from among those who were told to bury the dead and the mood turned from horror and sorrow to one of outrage and vengeance. As soon as all the dead had been buried in a mass grave and the Lady beseeched to take their souls into her care, we set off in determined pursuit of the beastmen horde.

Our force caught up with the loathsome creatures a night and a day later. There were perhaps no more than a hundred score of them; chiefly a mix of what are called gors and ungors, but also perhaps two score or more very large beasts that resembled huge bull-like creatures, called minotaurs, that seemed to be the pack leaders. The smaller creatures mainly scattered in a disorganised rabble when we swept down upon their rear.

However, as a precautionary tactic, the Duke had split our vanguard into three smaller battles, all mounted and with one on each flank and the third in the centre. Consequently, we trapped the majority of the beastmen within the horns of our formation and cut them down like stalks of grain before the scythe. Yet this was not to be so with the minotaurs who were so large in height that they stood as tall as a mounted knight and, in physical stature, as to be able to wield a huge double-bladed war axe in each hand. In addition, each beast bore upon its head a pair of huge horns with a span as wide as a horse is long. They were fearsome to behold and even more so when they roared and bellowed their defiance and counter-charged us with their heads lowered and axes held wide in readiness to wreak havoc upon us.

These huge beasts cut a wide swathe through the central battle, cleaving horses and armoured knights in two with those mighty war axes as if man and animal were made of no more than soft cheese. What knights or horses were not cloven by the minotaurs' axes were impaled upon the beasts' massive horns and tossed aside or into the air with little effort, such was the great strength of these enormous creatures. Some knights managed to bring a few of the beasts down with well-aimed lances through the heads or chests of the bull-beasts, but only to be subsequently slaughtered themselves by the axes of another one of their number. Soon, the vanguard was engaged in a bloody and desperate fight which would have not gone well if not reinforced by part of the centre battle of our Duke's force, comprising another ten score or more knights.

At last we prevailed and brought down the last of the bull-beasts, but at great cost to ourselves. None, save a handful, of the beastmen managed to escape our onslaught, and yet near eighteen score mounted knights and their horses lay dead or wounded upon the field of the engagement; nearly all were the victims of the minotaurs' double-bladed war axes. I can only attribute my good fortune to have escaped unscathed because I was riding in the right flank of the vanguard and so was fully engaged with the elimination of gors and ungors; rather akin to nothing more than a good day's pig hunting. The Lady must have heard my wife's prayers for me and hence watched over me, for I did not suffer any personal hurt.

And so that evening after we had buried our fallen and attended a funeral mass for their souls, I gave thanks to the Lady in the privacy of my own pavilion, attended only by my page and my squire, Quillan and R  nne. Afterwards and much later, as I lay abed, awaiting sleep to take me, I could see the faces of my beautiful Vivienne and my children, and thanked the Lady that it was the poor, unfortunate peasants who had suffered their terrible fates from the savagery of the beastmen, and not those whom I love and treasure so dearly.

The next day, shortly after dawn and when I had broken my fast, I donned my armour with the help of R  nne. As I settled myself astride Gwyntcryf and waited for my helmet, lance and shield, I watched the other knights preparing themselves for whatever the day would bring, and wondered how many of us would see another morning like this, for the sky was a cloudless, deep azure, lit by the early golden glow of the risen sun. The day showed all the signs of being a hot and fine one.

At last, we were all armed and ready to continue our march northwards, all filled with the determination of ridding our fair lands of the beastmen menace for perpetuity. As we rode forth behind our Duke, our pages and squires broke camp and stowed the pavilions and our chattels upon the wagons that would follow in our wake. And we were a glorious sight to behold, bedecked in shining armour, riding mounts adorned in colourful

trappers bearing the bright heraldic badges and liveries of their riders. Banners and pennants snapped in the breeze as they flew from banner staffs and lances. Yes, a glorious sight indeed. And lo, I was one of that same host.

After several hours, the sun had climbed well into the sky and the heat of the day increased so that, encased from head to foot in steel and thick padding, I began to sweat profusely until all the garments beneath my armour were wet and clinging to me. My hair and arming cap beneath my helmet were so wet, that soon my eyes stung with the salt that was carried there by the rivulets of sweat that flowed freely from my brow and scalp. The straps and buckles that held my armour in place began to chafe, and my mouth was parched dry. The Duke must either have experienced the same discomfort himself or realised the predicament of his force and consequently called a temporary halt to our march, so that we might take refreshment and cool ourselves. However, we had to await the arrival of the baggage train, and the barrels of fresh water it carried, before we could slake our thirsts and bathe our heads and faces. While we did all this, a cry went up that a large force was approaching us from the west; its approach revealed by a huge pall of dust raised in the growing heat of the day. It was soon established, however and fortunately, that the Dukes of Brionne and Aquitaine were coming to join their forces with ours, and had sent their heralds ahead to announce their imminent arrival. Soon, we would be a mighty host, many thousand strong.

Refreshed and cooled, ere long we recommenced our march, each force led by its respective Duke and spread out wide abreast, so that as far as the eye could see to right and left, rode our knightly fellowship, followed by our peasant levies and retinues of archers and men-at-arms, their tramping feet and the hooves of our horses raising a mighty cloud of dust that danced and spiralled with the rising heat of the day.

It was sometime a little after the day's mid-point that we arrived where I now sit, along with many thousands of other knights, awaiting the orders of our liege lords to fall upon the enormous herd of beastmen down in the valley. While I wait, I see the faces of those I hold so dear in my mind's eye, sense the restlessness of Gwyntcryf beneath me and feel the heat and sweat from my body growing within the confines of my armour and padding. I sense the hammering of my heart-beat within my ears and in my temples. My breathing is laboured and ragged. My mouth dry and my mind and body tense with anticipation of the cry from my liege lord, "For the Lady! For Bretonnia and Carcassonne!" And all the while, the beastmen grow in ever-increasing numbers. They must out-number us by four or five to one. But we have justice, retribution and the Lady on our side. We must therefore prevail.

Eventually, the cry goes up all along the front of our host, "For the Lady! For Bretonnia! And for Brionne, Aquitaine and Carcassonne!" Almost as one, those of us in the front rank slap our visors into place, couch our lances and spur our mounts forward into a charge. As we thunder down the slope towards the beastmen horde, their foul, fetid smell and braying cacophony hits us like a solid wall. Through the narrow slits of my helmet visor I can see them start to move en-masse to meet our charge and I pick my target, aiming my lance unerringly at the chest of one of the ungor beasts as it lumbers up the slope towards us.

In what seems to be no more than a split second later, I feel the tip of my lowered lance drive into the chest of my target and the lance shaft shiver with the shock of impact before shattering a moment later into a blizzard of splinters. Gwyntcryf's momentum carries us into the herd, as all around lances shatter and gors and ungors are carried under the

steel-shod hooves of our war-horses, as the beasts fall victim to our initial onslaught.

Now I sweep my sword from its sheath as my mount's speed is slowed dramatically by the crush of beastmen that swirl about me and my fellow knights, as we hack and slash frantically to left and right in a desperate effort to free ourselves from the melee before the next wave of knights sweeps down the valley's side. All around is the din of battle: the screams of wounded and dying knights and horses; the clash of weapons against armour and shields; the braying of our enemies; the sound of my gasps for air inside the confines of my helmet; and the faint hiss of arrows as they arc overhead from our archers' bows and down into the massed bestial ranks.

I manage to disengage from the fight and wheel Gwyntcryf away, felling several gors with desperately wild slashes of my sword as I continue to gasp for breath and almost swoon from the effects of the heat and sweat the physical effort has generated within the steel and padded enclosure of my armour. My mount manages to carry me free just as another knight and his horse immediately to my left are brought down under a relentless flurry of blows from several of the beastmen's primitive war axes and blades. The horse's eyes roll in terror and it screams in pain as it is hacked to death.

As I ride obliquely away up-slope, in order to turn so that I join with the next wave of knights now thundering down towards me, my horse falters then screams in pain as it is hamstringed from behind by a gor's blade. Gwyntcryf's back legs give way and he slumps to the ground. I manage to free my sabatons from the stirrups just before Gwyntcryf rolls onto his side, his legs thrashing in agony and savagely kicking away several of the beastmen that are gathered around. My right leg is pinned beneath the terrified horse however and I lie on my back desperately trying to protect myself with my shield and sword, frantically and wildly slashing at the legs, groins and bellies of my assailants, and managing to eviscerate, disembowel and hamstring several of the creatures.

All my physical efforts have somehow thrown my visor open, thus giving me a wider field of vision, although I still cannot see what is above and behind me. To my astonishment, but great relief, the beasts back away from me and turn their savage attentions to another downed knight close by, so my desperate defensive tactics must have worked. I notice several of the beasts glance in the one direction I cannot turn to see, because the raised visor blocks my field of view. Then a shadow falls across me and a moment later, as I squint up through my sweat-filled eyes, I can make out the massive legs and bulk of a minotaur as it raises one of its massive axes for the killing blow. The axe falls towards me and I cry out, "No! Lady, save me!" just as the next wave of knights crashes into the bestial horde.