

The Tale of Sir Orin, chapter ii. From Altdorf to Ælfingfort

Contributed by Robert Minchin
Sunday, 16 October 2005
Last Updated Sunday, 16 October 2005

The road up to Axe-bite pass began to steepen after they passed Bogenhafen. At Helmgart they exchanged the wagons for pack-ponies. Orin soon found out why there had been woolen rugs in the wagon he had hidden in in Altdorf, as they travelled higher the temperature fell and they rapped the blankets around them as the rode to try an keep warm. Snow whipped around them, even though he had been born in the shadow of the mountains Orin had never been this high before. The route was narrow and winding, difficult in places for ponies in single file - it would have been impossible for the carts.

Sir Fran  ois dropped back and spoke to Orin, "So, what do you think of the main highway between the Empire and Bretonnia?" Orin looked shocked, so Sir Fran  ois added, "You think this is bad? You should see the high passes into Tilea."

Orin mumbled, "Yes sir." through his scarf. Sir Fran  ois smiled at him, then said not to worry, they should be able to see the pinacles of Parravon in an hour or so, that night they would be warm in a snug Bretonnian castle. Orin had never thought of a castle as 'snug' before, but anything would seem good after this constant icy wind and snow.

True enough, in just over an hour they were able to see the top towers of the city of Parravon. It was still a long way off, however, and Orin did not see how they could possibly reach it by nightfall. It turned out that this was not what Sir Fran  ois had meant. Around a corner in the pass, they suddenly faced a massive fortress, the Castle de Montforte, which guards the descent of the pass into Bretonnia. Sir Fran  ois ordered one of his squires to wind a horn, and an answering note was heard from the castle wall. A voice called out, "Who goes there?"

Sir Fran  ois' herald answered, "The Baron de Giselles and his squires and servants, returning from Altdorf. We seek shelter for the night from the elements, and beg hospitality of your lord."

The guard called back, "Enter then, and enjoy my lord's hospitality." The great doors of the castle opened, and they rode inside. The high walls served not only to repel enemies but also to dampen the wind, although the snow still fell on the courtyard beyond. Sir Fran  ois vaulted off his horse and handed the reins to one of his squires, and disappeared into the keep. The others took the horses to the stables and saw they were groomed, fed, and watered before repairing inside to the warm.

As they entered the hall, all the Bretonnians sank down onto one knee. After a moment's surprised hesitation, Orin copied them, although he did not know to whom he was kneeling. Looking around, he saw that a man in a fine looking blue cloak was seated on a throne-like chair at one end of the great hall, he assumed this was the person they were giving honour to. The man waved, and they stood up. Sir Fran  ois, who Orin now saw was seated to the left of the unknown lord as they looked at him, beckoned him over.

Orin walked nervously across the hall, feeling like many eyes were following him. When he reached him, Sir Fran  ois stood and took his hand, saying, "May I have the pleasure of introducing to Your Grace, my Squire Orin Neville-Smythe, lately of the Empire's Witch Finders. Orin, this is His Grace, the Duke de Monteforte." Orin felt a bit uncomfortable at the bretonising of his name. Sir Fran  ois had told him that it must be so, and he had accepted it, but this was the first time he had been introduced to it, and it didn't feel quite right as yet.

The Duke questioned Orin at length about the Margrave von Strehlheim. The Margrave traded through the pass

occasionally, and had accepted the Duke's hospitality on occasions rather gracelessly. However, diplomacy demanded that on this pass nobles of the Empire be welcomed unless there was good reason, but he was not surprised to find that the Margrave was a servant of dark powers.

Eventually, Orin started to wobble with fatigue. Sir Fran  ois interrupted the Duke, explaining that Orin had been in the saddle all day, and had not yet eaten. The Duke dismissed Orin, instructing him to return when summoned to continue their discussion. Orin gratefully dragged himself back to the table, where he found the other squires and started eating. As he sat and drank, the room began to spin, and he found himself unable to stand. The conversation blurred around him, until the table was cleared and bedding mats brought out. He collapsed onto one of the mats and was fast asleep in seconds.

He woke with a start the next morning, when someone threw a pitcher of cold water into his face. He leapt to his feet, ready to fight his assailant, then wobbled as his head suddenly split with pain. Opening his eyes again, he slowly focused on the face of Sir Fran  ois, standing behind the squire who had thrown the water. "You'd better get moving." Sir Fran  ois said, not sounding particularly pleased, "You've half an hour for breakfast, then the Duke wants to see you again before we leave. You drank far too much last night, I should have thought you would know better at your age."

Orin mumbled an apology, "I'm sorry, sir, we never drank alcohol with the Witch Finders, it was tee-total, I didn't realise how strong it was. I'm sorry."

Sir Fran  ois looked shocked, that a seventeen year old would not have drunk before had not crossed his mind. "Well, you do now." he said, then added more kindly "We've all got to find out sooner or later. At least there's not far to ride today. Anyway, grab your breakfast in the pantry, and then come to the Duke's apartments, up the spiral staircase by the high table."

Orin grabbed his breakfast as quickly as he could. The cook took one look at him and said something he couldn't understand, then gave him two fried eggs and a hunk of bread. She smiled at him, and motioned eating. "Thank you", he said, using one of the Bretonnian phrases he had picked up on the journey, then fled the pantry before she thrust anything else at him. He ate his breakfast, then made his way up the staircase Sir Fran  ois had indicated. He met with the Duke again, and had another long and, too him, boring interview with the Duke, during which he remained standing. When this ordeal was over, Sir Fran  ois congratulated him on his patience, saying "The Duke's a good enough chap, and great to have beside you in a pinch, but he does like to take the long way around and cover everything two or three times. It was interesting to hear that von Strehlheim passed through here last week though, I wonder what he was up to in Bretonnia?"

As Sir Fran  ois had said, they rode only a short distance that day. The weather grew milder as they descended, and the sun was shining warmly when they reached the City of Parravon. Orin gasped at the height of the slender elven towers of the city, and held on tight as they crossed the great bridge into the city, the chasm dropping away below them. Here they met another Duke, the Duke of Parravon, who came out into the courtyard of his castle to greet them. He seemed on good terms with Sir Fran  ois, as the Duke de Montforte had been. Orin knew from his schooling that Bretonnian dukes ranked equivalent to Elector Counts, and wondered how many people, even nobles, would know them as well as Sir Fran  ois seemed to know these two dukes.

The stay in Parravon was uneventful. Sir Fran  ois asked about von Strehlheim, but he had not entered the city either coming or going. That night, Orin was much more careful with the wine and concentrated on trying to follow the fast-flowing Bretonnian conversation around him. He found he was able to understand quite a bit and could follow the gist of what was said.

The next morning they rose early and prepared to depart. They journeyed up the Upper Grismerie, fording it within sight of the trees of the elven realm of Athel Loren. The road then lead west, skirting the Massif Orcal before meeting the river Morceaux at the town of Swandle. They rode straight through this town, without stopping to greet the lord and ignoring the commoners on the street who seemed rather more disrespectful than normal. The road swung inland from the river and over a hill, where standing stones lined the road, then as they crested the rise they saw Ælfafort before them, it's white tower pointing heavenwards and gleaming in the sunshine.

The tower looked similar to the pinnacles of Parravon, albeit on a smaller scale, it was obviously elven. It was stood atop a high prominence of solid, dark rock that towered over the river, and was surrounded by other fortifications of more recent, human, manufacture. Sir Fran  ois gave an order, and a large standard was unfurled. A minute later, the same banner was flying from the top of the white tower. Sir Fran  ois looked at Orin and, gesturing to the tower, said with a note of pride in his voice, "We're almost home now."

Orin served as a squire in Ælfafort for over three years. During that time, he learnt what was expected of a Bretonnian knight, he learnt of the Lady of the Lake and how she cared for the weak and therefore appointed the strong not to tyrannise them but to defend them. He learnt to use the bow, and hunted often with the other squires. He learnt the history of Ælfafort, of the legend of the Swandle Stones as the standing stones along the road were called, of the almost unique arrangement that saw the Baron de Giselles become the Duke of Ælfafort when he stepped through the gates, and of the feud between Giselles and Swandle, with its origins lost in the mists of time.

As his twenty-first birthday approached, Sir Fran  ois asked what he desired that, if it were within his power, he may grant it to him. Orin's answer was certain, "My true desire is to be a Knight, my lord. The boon I would ask of you is that you grant me a quest of knighthood, that I may win my spurs as a Knight of Bretonnia."

Sir Fran  ois looked back at the young man, grown now to his full height and with strong, broad shoulders. "You will make a good knight. I will buckle on your sword at your birthday feast, and I will grant you the next quest that comes to my court after that day."