

The Tale of Sir Orin, chapter iii. A quest for knighthood

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Sir Orin rode west from Aelfinfort. With him rode a squire and the damsel who had come with the quest he was to follow. Lady Pieta was devoted to the service of the lady, and had come to the court with news that an unknown terror was at loose in the lands near her home. The local villagers were terrified and all was shut up firm by nightfall, many had fled the area or had taken refuge in the baron's castle where they felt protected by the walls - but even from inside the safety of the walls people disappeared, although the guards on the gates and the walls saw nothing.

They rode through Swandle, and followed the Parravon road until it cleared the Massif Orcal and headed down towards the fords of the Upper Grismerie. Here they turned north, skirting the mountains, until they reached the small barony of Clements-le-Roi, in the very northern most part of Quenelles. In the distant east, the towers of Parravon glowed pink against the dark of the Grey Mountains as they caught the last rays of the setting sun, then vanished in the darkness as they came to the small Grail Convent where Lady Pieta lived.

"Here you can stay the night." she said, "In the morning, you can travel to the castle - they will not permit you to enter after dark and there is little room or food to spare with the townsfolk gathered in there."

"I thank you for your kindness." he replies, "I will remain with you this night and journey on in the morning."

The next day Sir Orin departed early, immediately after the office of Lauds. By the next hour he had arrived at the baron's castle. The guards saw his uncharged blue shield, and one said, mockingly, "Have you come to defeat the monster? We wish you luck, the best of the baron's men have been unable to even find the thing."

Sir Orin raised his helm and looked directly at the guard who had spoken. He spoke quietly, "I have come from the Court of the Duke of Aelfinfort. I will find and defeat this monster." The guard moved away and opened the gates without another word.

The Baron de Clements was scarcely more welcoming. He did not look like Sir Orin's impression of a Bretonnian knight, his spirit seemed broken, and Sir Orin thought there was something strange in his eyes, like fleck of green. The Lady of the court was stunningly beautiful, and seemed much more alive than her husband. She greeted Sir Orin warmly, a little too warmly he thought for a lady already married. Possibly she was just relieved that Aelfinfort had sent help.

After dark had fallen, Sir Orin took a turn around the battlements and through the cramped mini-village that had sprung up in the courtyard. He climbed to the roof of the keep, where he found the Lady de Clements. Quickly he apologised, "I am sorry for disturbing your thoughts. I will leave again immediately."

"Oh no," she said, "don't go just yet. Come, look at the stars. Aren't they beautiful?" She walked over to him and took his arm. "To think there is a vicious killer out there, who could strike at any moment. I'd feel safer if you were here."

"But the Baron..."

"Pah, the Baron is a weakling. You saw how his spirit was broken, he has been unmanned by this terror and dare not leave his hall even to stand on the battlements of his own castle." She turned to face Sir Orin. "I need a real man, not a snivelling coward. Sir Orin, will you be that man? Will you protect us from the evil that that fool has allowed to all-but conquer us? Will you keep me warm at night?"

Sir Orin looked shocked at this speech, particularly the last sentence. Seeing his shock, the lady continued, "Oh, you are an innocent! Do you think that man can satisfy me? Look at me! Look at him! I won't let that coward anywhere near me." She reached out and took Sir Orin's hands. "You, on the other hand, look like a red-blooded young man with plenty of courage in you. Tomorrow I will send for you, be ready to come to my chamber. My lady-in-waiting will show you the way."

She brushed past him then, leaving him standing alone on the roof, thinking about what had passed. Part of him revolted against it, yet a part of him yearned for it. He stood a long time there, looking out over the moonlit landscape, and thinking.

That night, the monster struck again within the castle. A young man, good looking according to his family. He had slipped away from them to meet with a girl, although none knew her name or what she looked like, and when they did not return they feared the worst. A search of the castle failed to find him, and he was declared as the latest victim of the monster.

When the news was brought to him at first light, Sir Orin set out immediately to investigate. He talked to the guards, who swore nothing had entered the castle from outside. He looked closely around the courtyard, but found nothing. Talking to the townsfolk, nobody seemed to know who the young lady was, nobody would admit that their daughter had slipped away for a secret tryst at any rate - but that was hardly surprising.

He went to the stables, and found the horses seemed disturbed. In the hay-loft above, there was a strange smell in the air. He realised that this was probably the most private place the young man could have come to to meet his belle, and where it seemed likely he had met his death. He took his horse out, and rode over to the convent. He broke his fast with the damsels, then said Prime with them before asking a gift of them. This was granted, and he rode back to the castle with it wrapped securely in his cloak behind him on the saddle.

After lunch, a hunting party rode out, with Sir Orin in its number. This was no ordinary hunt though, this was a monster hunt. The woods still seemed to contain game, unusual if there was a wild monster roaming through them, Sir Orin thought, but this game was ignored by the hunters. Indeed, they made that much noise that most of the game avoided them easily and any monster that did not wish to be detected could easily have done the same. Possibly that was the idea.

They returned to the castle for dinner, and after that Sir Orin retired to his chambers, where he made preparations in case the Lady de Clements should summon him that evening. He was not to be disappointed, shortly after dark a light knock came on his door, and he opened it to find a lady-in-waiting stood there. She addressed him softly, "My mistress bids you to wait on her in her chambers, I am to escort you there." Sir Orin nodded, and followed the lady.

The lady of the castle opened her door to them, wearing a cloak over her shift. She bid her lady-in-waiting to leave them along, and brought Sir Orin in. When the door was closed, she removed her cloak and sat down on the bed. Sir Orin bowed, and said, "I have a gift for you, my lady."

"A gift? Goodness, what is it."

"This, my lady." he said, taking a stoppered vial from his pouch. He undid the stopper, then suddenly flung the contents into her face. She screamed in agony and clawed at her eyes. The liquid seemed to burn her like acid, her skin blistered and peeled away. She flung herself at Sir Orin, but he was too quick for her. He had reached behind himself and drawn a wooden stake from under his cloak, as she flung herself forward, he lunged with it to meet her, taking her in the chest with it and impaling her.

"Holy water." he said, looking into her contorted face as she bellowed in rage and agony, "Harmless, beneficial even, to humans, but deadly to vampires. I was given it this morning by the damsels of the Lady. You are the monster, and you will die here now. You have set a glamour on your husband, I saw the flecks of green in his eyes, your death will release him from your spell and this land from your terror." With that, he thrust again on the stake and pierced the creature's heart. It fell suddenly slack, as the door burst open behind him and the guards rushed in.

He turned to them, "The monster is dead, it lies here in this chamber with a stake through its heart."

They looked at the vampire, but failed to recognise its true features as those of their lady. "Good grief," their captain said, "what is it? And where is our mistress? What are you doing in her chamber?"

"That thing, there, was your mistress. It's a Lahmian vampire, an undead creature that assumes the shape of a beautiful seductress. Almost all the vampire's victims were young men, she lured them to their death with promises of pleasure, just as she thought to lure me here tonight. She has set a spell on your lord, her death should have restored him to his former courage."

Indeed, it had done. He was weak, but his spirit was alive once again and his courage was restored. He thanked Sir Orin for what he had done, and that evening he knighted him as a Knight of the Realm. As the charge on his shield, Sir Orin took three scallop shells, to remind him of the blessing of the holy water given to him by the Grail damsels.