

An Arrogant Knight

A trumpet blast pierced the air and voices rose in excitement.

‘They’re coming!’

I looked up from my armful of hay to see the first of Sir Henry’s horsemen crest the hill. Hoofbeats thundered on the hard road and my heart jumped at the sound. Their horses! A year had passed since the nobles’ last visit and I had forgotten how tall and sleek their mounts were.

All work ceased and everyone leaned on scythes or rakes, full of the usual remarks about our manor lord and his family.

‘There’s Dame Margaret in the painted carriage. See that little chest she’s holding? It’s the family jewels - never goes anywhere without them.’

‘Humph - she has her jewels, but do we get wages?’

‘Take a look at them horses!’

‘There’s Sir Henry on the black one.’

‘He’s as well-fed as ever, I reckon! Pity the poor horse what has to carry him!’

‘Shh! Watch your tongue, or he’ll have you locked up in the pillory!’

Sir Henry rode in the middle of the long caravan on a huge black charger. I thought the horse did pretty well, considering the size of the rider. The

plump lord's three chins bounced to the rhythm of his mount.

Ahead of him a couple of dozen men rode two by two. Each wore a sword at the hip and some carried spears. Although they wore no armour, I knew that some of them were knights. I stared intently at them as they trotted past, trying to guess which. There was one man with a face as dark and seamed as a walnut, who sat on his horse with dignity. He, for sure! I had my reasons for wanting to know.

Something whacked me between the shoulder-blades.

'Hey!' I yelled, nearly falling forward under the horses.

'Boy! Keep your eyes in your head, if you know what's good for you!'

It was my father, which didn't surprise me. 'Yes, Father,' I muttered, ducking my head respectfully, but I still managed to keep my eyes turned upwards to gaze at the horsemen.

Carts laden with goods creaked by, loaded with everything the nobles would need for a stay of several weeks. I even saw some windows of real glass peeking out from their wrappings.

At the rear of the procession rode a young man and young woman on horseback. She sat side-saddle on a fine white steed, while the youth rode a chestnut charger. His shiny green tunic was so short it barely covered his bottom, but its long sleeves dragged down almost to the horse's belly. His hat looked like a basin perched on his head to catch rainwater. I could tell I wasn't the only one

who wanted to laugh, but we all kept straight faces and bowed or curtsayed as they passed us.

'Who's that?' I whispered to one of the village boys.

'That!' the boy replied. 'Don't you recognise Mistress Lucy?'

Mistress Lucy! I stared after the graceful girl with long dark hair. She sat very straight with her skirts tucked neatly to one side.

Sir Henry and family moved about between his several manors, so it had been a year since I had seen her. Last year she was just a little girl, thin as a hoe handle. She was Sir Henry's only child, and everybody said she was an odd one. You'd often see her out climbing a tree, and she usually carried a book instead of her embroidery.

'And the fellow is a squire called Robert,' the boy added, 'a friend of the family, they say.'

I reckoned the squire was a few years older, about eighteen, and would probably soon be made knight.

As I watched the endless rumbling train of goods and people, I felt a familiar pang. It happened every year when the nobles arrived in their silks on their fine horses. They lived a life of luxury and ease, just because they were born to it. And just because I was born on the wrong side of the stone manor wall, I was the son of a peasant farmer, a villein. I would live all my life in this one small village, working hard on the stubborn land.

I knew that was the truth, but the older I grew, the more I refused to accept it. It was a foolish idea, but I simply didn't want to be a peasant! No, it was

more impossible than that. I had a dream that began so long ago, it seemed it had always been part of me. I wanted to become a knight.

I squinted my eyes shut and saw myself decked out in gleaming metal, charging into battle on a mighty steed, saving villages and perhaps even whole countries by my bravery. I'd come back to Tenham village then; I'd even bring gifts for the ones who mocked me! Once I'd made the mistake of revealing my secret to one of the village lads. Now they all knew, and they wouldn't let me forget it. I pictured the way their mouths would hang open when I rode down the village street in full armour.

I opened my eyes. The daydream vanished. I wiped the sweat from my face. I was only a stinking peasant boy who was laughed at by the whole village because I wanted to be different, to be something God never intended.

As they rode on down the hill, the squire bent his head to say something to Mistress Lucy. His neatly waved blond hair hardly moved. I ran a hand through my own tangled dark curls and wondered why the squire's hair looked like it was painted onto his head. Mistress Lucy tossed her head and laughed, her thin pale face filling with colour.

Suddenly I loathed this squire. Maybe it was the arrogant way he sat his horse. Maybe it was because knighthood would come to him easily, as a matter of course. I didn't imagine then that Squire Robert would ever notice me and dislike me just as strongly.

Hamo's Fury

'Corin, wake up!' I could hear my sister, Amice, calling, but I didn't move.

'Get up, you useless boy!' growled a rough voice, and I felt a vicious tug at my shoulder. I struggled to my feet, nearly cracking my forehead on a beam.

'I'll see you at the hay meadow,' Father added, as he prepared to leave the cottage, 'and you'd better not be late!'

I brushed straw from my tunic and hopped down the ladder from the loft where I slept, into the one large room of our cottage. Amice was crouched by the fire in the centre of the dirt floor, slurping from a beaker of whey.

My mother handed me a cup of weak ale without a word. Her thin lips were pressed together in a way that was usual for her.

'You're always the last up!' Amice chided.

I grinned and winked at her as I gulped the ale. I'm fond of my sister even though I'm much older, thirteen years to her eight. I'm nearly a man now, though, so I don't tell her everything.

She knew I wanted to be a knight, and she was the only one who never teased me about it. But I never told her I had a plan for making it begin, at

least the first small step. And today was the day!

I grabbed a hunk of bread and dashed from the cottage, chewing as I ran. The dawn light was just creeping over the thatched roofs of the houses. Maybe I wouldn't be late!

'Wait, Corin!' Amice shouted. I could hear her bare heels hitting the dirt road behind me but I ignored her and ran faster.

It was an uphill run to the hay meadow. I could see the villagers all clustered around Will, the reeve, who organised the farming. I ran up and stood panting on the edge of the group. My father glanced at me and frowned, but then he nodded slightly. So I wasn't late! That was one less beating, though he'd probably find some reason to hit me before the day was over.

The mere sight of me made him angry. I reckoned it was because God had given him only one son, not enough for a farmer. Even worse, I was too tall and thin, with no strength in my long arms. 'You're just a weakling,' my father always said. It was true, but at least I could run.

Will shouted the signal, and the haymaking began. The men lashed back and forth with their long scythes, the women raked and we children stood the stalks into haystacks to dry. The bright sun made everyone cheery, and we sang or called out jests to each other.

I was well into the rhythm of gathering the cut stalks, not thinking of anything except that this was the nicest time of year. Suddenly a voice bellowed in my ear, 'Sir Corin!'

I spun around with one fist cocked. Annoyed, I

saw it was Odo, fifth son of the village blacksmith, a skinny boy with fiery red hair. He was the only person in the village with time to wander about getting into mischief.

'Oh, it's you,' I said in disgust. The boy was a pest but I dropped my raised fist. I knew from past experience that blows only made him laugh.

Of all the village boys, Odo was the worst with joking remarks about 'Sir Corin'. The other lads would have forgotten the whole thing long ago, except for him.

Odo flung himself to his knees and lifted his clasped hands. 'Oh please, noble knight,' he begged, 'take pity on a poor urchin and give us some work!'

Everyone within hearing laughed, and one boy called out, 'Yes, Sir Corin!'

I pretended not to hear. I wondered sometimes if they wouldn't tease me if I had a normal name, like John or Henry or Richard. I'd never heard of anyone else called Corin.

'Why are you asking me?' I grumbled. 'I'm not the one in charge here. If you want to help, go ahead!'

Odo bounced to his feet and gave me a cheeky grin, wriggling his pale eyebrows. I turned my back on him as rudely as I could and bent to gather the next armful.

I would gladly have traded places with this imp. I was sure I was the only one in the village who thought of things like that. 'God has ordained the proper place for every person,' the old priest always

said, and everyone just went along with it.

I crushed an armful of hay angrily, smelling its sweet dusty aroma. It seemed so unfair! Why couldn't God have let me be born in a castle instead? The other lads just accepted the endless dull round of ploughing, sowing, harrowing, weeding. I never understood it.

The sun rose higher, and sweat ran down my back. I slipped my arms from the sleeves of my tunic and felt the air strike my dripping skin, cooling it. Most of the men had already stripped to the waist. I tied my belt tighter and left the tunic hanging around my hips. Just then a whisper travelled up and down the line: 'The bailiff! The bailiff!' Suddenly everyone was working with twice as much energy.

Quickly I bent down, grabbing as much hay as I could in one armful. The stiff stalks scratched my bare chest. The bailiff, manager of Sir Henry's estate, was a hard man who could find fault with anything.

I watched from the corner of one eye as the bailiff rode up the hill on his sturdy grey horse. In spite of the heat he wore a full garment of brown velvet that fell to his ankles, a gold belt and a broad velvet hat with a jaunty green feather. The man was not old but his hair nearly matched the colour of his horse, except it was brighter, almost silver.

He had come to Tenham from Chester three years ago, and no one knew more than that about him. People gossiped that there was something not quite right, for he talked and dressed like a noble, but he'd just turned up one day from nowhere like a travelling pedlar.

'You there - reeve!' shouted the bailiff, whose name was Hamo. 'Come here!'

Will lumbered over, grinning a gap-toothed grin.

'Yes, master?'

'Straighten your lines!' Hamo said sharply. 'You'll miss half the crop, if you let them straggle all over the meadow like that.'

The bailiff glared down at Will, who pulled his forelock respectfully and called the order. Hamo had a way of almost closing his cold blue eyes and staring at you through the slits. With his silver hair and slit-eyed look, he always gave me the shivers.

Hamo seemed satisfied, and he turned his horse towards the manor house. I reckoned the man was going to be even more of a nuisance now that Sir Henry was here - he'd try to impress his lord with how well he ran the place.

A faint breeze stirred the air, and I trembled at its cool touch on my damp skin. I had to talk to Hamo. That was part of my plan, the first step for escaping from my life as a villein farmer. It was not usual for village lads to approach the bailiff, and I had no idea how he would react, but I told myself I was not afraid of this harsh man.

Later, at midday break, I lay in the shadow of an oak at the field's edge, wondering if this would be a good time to look for Hamo. Every spot of shade was filled with exhausted workers. I didn't take any of the warmish cheese when the basket came my way, but gladly took a swig of ale, cool from the clay jug. Feeling refreshed, I jumped to my feet and trotted off in the direction of the manor.

'Hey!' I heard Odo yelling behind me but I shook my head and ran faster down the hill.

'Corin, where are you going?' Amice was suddenly at my side, clutching my tunic in her chubby fist.

'I want to come too!' she begged, jumping up and down. 'Are you going to the river?'

'Let's!' exclaimed Odo, who had caught up with us. 'It's a perfect day for it.'

'I'm not going to the river,' I said to Amice, ignoring Odo. 'Go back and leave me alone!'

'No!' Amice stamped her foot. 'Let me come with you, or I'll tell Father!'

I sighed. I knew she would, if I didn't give in.

'All right. You can come, then.' I meant Amice, but I knew Odo would tag along. 'I'm going to talk to the bailiff,' I added. It was satisfying to see their jaws drop.

'Still want to come? Or maybe you're afraid.'

'Of course I'll come,' replied Odo with a careless grin. 'Why would I be afraid?'

I glared at him. The annoying thing was, he probably wasn't half as scared of the bailiff as I was.

'Why are you going to see Hamo?' Amice demanded. 'He's an evil man! I'm going too,' she added, crossing her arms and pouting.

'I'm going to ask him if I can work at the manor.' Their eyes bulged at that. 'You know he sometimes gets village boys to help out when Sir Henry's here, and I want to get my name in first. Come along for all I care, but stay well back and don't say a word!'

We set off down the hill, with me nearly running to keep a distance between us. I didn't want them to question me further. I was not about to tell them how desperate I was to be closer to the knights who went everywhere with Sir Henry. I wanted to learn all I could by watching them. I thought that one of them might take notice of me, take me on as pupil and teach me knightly skills.

The bailiff was standing near a copse of trees by the river, talking to a hard-faced stranger, mounted on a black horse. Hamo's horse grazed nearby.

I made a downward swoop with one hand, and Odo and Amice halted. Then I stepped forward and stood in the burning sun a few paces from the men, waiting for them to finish talking. They hadn't noticed us.

'That must be the last, though,' I heard Hamo say. 'I'll have to leave then.'

The stranger nodded and raised a hand in farewell. As he turned the bridle and spurred his horse, he saw me and gave the bailiff a meaning look. Hamo whirled around. I could feel the man's anger reach out and hit me like a fist.

'P-please master - ' I began.

'How dare you spy on me!'

I didn't stop to answer. I took to my heels and ran back towards the hay meadow with all the strength in my long legs. I heard hoofbeats gaining but managed to reach the other side of the hill and fling myself down among the villagers just before Hamo came in sight. I pulled my hood over my face, pretending to sleep. It was hot under the hood and sweat trickled down behind my ears.

Hamo's horse picked its way through the peasants lying on the ground. I kept my eyes open just enough to watch him. He had lost his hat and his face was furious under his silver hair as he searched the crowd, muttering curses. But all boys wearing rough homespun look pretty much alike, and he soon gave it up and galloped back towards the manor.

The Silver Goblet

That night I lay on my pallet of straw in the loft, mulling over the events of the day. The longest day of Midsummer was near, and it was not quite dark. If I turned my head, I could see the sleeping forms of my parents and sister on the cottage floor below.

What a relief that I had outrun Hamo! I sucked in my breath as I thought of it, smelling the onions and apples stored just behind my head. I tried to remember exactly what Hamo and the stranger had said to each other. Something about Hamo leaving. Did that mean leaving the manor, for good? No one would be sorry about that!

It seemed the bailiff had something to hide. I thought it might be fun to find out what it was. I was disappointed my plan had come to nothing, but now that I thought of it, this might be even better. It would be like playing a game, if I could somehow find out Hamo's secret and reveal it. If the bailiff was doing something he shouldn't, maybe Sir Henry would reward me! I had no thought then of just how dangerous this game might be.

I began playing a conversation in my mind:

Sir Henry: 'How can I repay you, Corin, for revealing this Hamo for the rogue he really is?'

I: 'Sire, all that I ask is that I be made a knight.'

Sir Henry: 'Done!' He unsheathes his sword -

A soft noise from the room below cut into my thoughts. I had thought everyone was asleep but I knew the sound; I'd heard it often enough before. It was my mother crying. Father had beaten her earlier that evening with his leather belt. A wife had to be whipped for disobedience, everyone knew that, but as usual this was for some small thing and because he'd drunk too much ale.

I clenched my fists in fury as the whimpering continued. When I am a knight...

A light flared up, piercing the gloom. I raised my head and peered over the loft's edge into the room below. Mother stood just beneath me, a rush-light sputtering in her hand. She was opening the wooden chest which held our few possessions.

At the sight of her face I nearly gasped out loud. Her features were twisted, as if something hurt her. I felt uneasy; it was like looking into the face of a stranger.

She reached into the chest and took out her neatly folded woollen cloak. She unwrapped it and I saw a small bundle of animal skin hidden inside. What could this be?

I held my breath and watched silently, just one eye peeping over the loft's edge, as she untied the cords and lifted something out. At first I couldn't tell what it was; it flashed like a sword as she turned it in her hands.

A silver goblet! Where would my mother have found this thing, a drinking vessel fit for nobles and princes? Our family drank from beakers of wood.

I let out my breath slowly. The blood pounded so loudly in my ears, I was sure she would hear it. Where did this costly goblet come from? And why was she clasping it now to her cheek, tears streaming down her worn face?

I lay back quietly on my bed of straw, but sleep did not come for a long, long time.