

THREE DAYS AND TWO KNIGHTS

An Amusing Arthurian Adventure

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For those unfamiliar with Arthurian romance, a few words may be helpful before reading this book. The tales of King Arthur are legendary and reputed to have taken place in the waning days of Roman rule in Britannia, roughly around the year 500 AD. However, they were recorded primarily in the 14th and 15th centuries, a time of chivalry, full plate armor, and medieval feudalism. Because of this, they have always taken place in an anachronistic paradox, occurring simultaneously in the 5th and 14th centuries—by this I mean that the knights are equipped as and behave as ideal chivalrous vassals of about the year 1350, but the physical setting is assumed to be long, long in the past, about the year 500. It would be analogous to retelling the story of William the Conqueror using actors equipped with modern military technology and openly referencing any historical event between 1066 and today whenever it was pertinent to the theme or plot. I have exerted every effort to maintain this paradox that is foundational to the genre.

And with that, I ask you to draw your swords, consult your maps, and let your imagination lead you where it will.

Prologue

Few tales tell of heroes and dragons, kings and giants, magic, miracles, a banshee, and the undead. Fewer still are those told with the skill to evoke tears of sorrow and induce those of laughter. I, Aelfric the Entertainer, glorious, immortal, and peerless—author among authors!—bring to your armchairs just such a tale, learned from the ancient writings of those heroes who were involved—at least, those who survived. It is a tale that began during a bleak time in our great nation of England.

King Arthur, of whom you have certainly heard, was betrayed by that incomparable (and insufferable) Frenchman, Lancelot, and his own promiscuous queen, Guinevere. Bereft of both love and friendship, Arthur took solace in hunting, which, though it may seem strange today, was entirely natural at the time—it appears that all knights and kings loved hunting almost as much as (and indeed, in no small number of cases, more than) their wives and kingdoms. In any case, a ‘small’ party including only Arthur, his dogs, and a few select retainers (who of course brought their own retainers) decided to hunt the moors of Scotland for a monstrous boar named by the locals “Unghtoosk.”

The boar, nearly as old as the king himself, was big as a bear, gray-backed, covered in thick bristling hair, and possessed a pair of terrible yellow-white tusks that it sharpened daily on rocks within the shadow of its cave. It had bright yellow eyes and when it snorted in the early morning of early autumn, breath curled out of its nostrils like smoke from an ancient dragon.

Unfortunately, Arthur never managed to set an eye upon Unghtoosk (rather, a young knight of Celtic descent named Clyde undertook the slaying of the boar, a matter of another tale entirely), for before he ventured far into the moors of Scotland, Arthur himself became the hunted . . .

Unbeknownst to the king, a secret alliance had been gathering against him. For those unfamiliar with the story, Arthur himself was, as so many ‘great’ rulers are, more or less a pawn of his intelligent and powerful advisor, Merlin, whose untimely disappearance left a large gap that could not be filled. Ultimately, only through the prowess of his military—namely in the person of Sir Lancelot—did Arthur maintain control over his kingdom. Now, without the brains or the brawn, so to speak, Arthur began to amass rivals.

The most famous members of the ‘secret’ alliance against Arthur were Mordred, Arthur’s son *and* nephew (you don’t want to know) and the sorceress, Morgana le Fay, Arthur’s half-sister and Mordred’s aunt¹, both of whom had allies across the moors of the North. Mordred had the sworn allegiance of a minor lord named Malestair and of an aspiring warlock who called himself Rabordath, while Morgana le Fay had done a favor for the local banshee, who haunted the area with her legion of skeletal minions—literally a legion, the remnants of two cohorts of a Roman army from the time of Hadrian. This alliance decided to take advantage of Arthur’s exposed position and capture him on the hunt.

¹ It was Morgana who instigated Arthur’s incestuous relations with his half-sister, Morgause, and Mordred was the ensuing offspring (to be fair, I did warn you that you didn’t want to know).

Perhaps before I get to the battle and Arthur's hopeless stand on the foggy moors, a bit of information on these three local figures would be in order:

Malestair, the bastard son of Sir Maleagant, was one of the more competent and ambitious servants of Mordred. Tall, swart, and skeletal, possessing a type of physical strength that can only be termed 'sinewy,' and a type of canine cunning that is best labeled 'lethal,' he had, if anything, an inflated idea of his importance. When drunk or possessing time for self-indulgence, he wrapped himself in wolf skins, smiled vaingloriously, stroked his long blonde moustache, and dwelled upon the events of his life, thinking of himself (not entirely incorrectly) as a powerful villain in some troubadour's romance—one whose arrival in the song is always heralded by a few menacing and low notes of the viol.

Arthur granted Malestair lands in the North because of his capability to crush the constant rebellions of the local population—combat and tactics being two of the skills at which Malestair excelled. (If Arthur had a gift, it was in delegating authority to people of ability—a valuable trait in a ruler, but almost completely negated by the king's utter failure as a judge of character. All he ever succeeded in doing was appointing enemies to the positions for which they were most suited and from which they could do him the most harm).

In any case, Malestair ruled a forlorn and fenny strip of land, populated not only by howling, drunk, full-bearded Scotsman and blue-painted Woden-worshipping Picts, but also by deformed goblins that skulked in the dark places of the woods, hulking stupid-eyed ogres that lurked among the boulders, wagonloads of wandering gypsies and Jews, and (to the medieval mindset) other like manner of creatures that had been exterminated from lower Britannia by Arthur's God-fearing knights. Malestair dispensed his 'justice'—such as it was—from his seat of power, a creaking black armchair within the ground level of a damp stone keep that squatted upon a stumpy hill. The keep became known as "the Devil's Rookery" because it was home to many purple-headed ravens, whose cackling cries could be heard in all corners of the marshland. Malestair built a wooden palisade around the keep, complete with four towers and a gate. Aside from a handful of splendidly dressed knights, his men sallied forth from this strongpoint, wearing no coats of arms, bearing no flags, and abiding no laws, save those which could be enforced at the tip of a sword.

The second member of this tripartite group, Rabordath, was slight, middle-aged, and walked with a chronic limp—a condition for which he carried a cane of witch-hazel topped with an iron sphere and footed with an iron spike. He was one of those wizards whose ambition far outstripped his actual ability. Fond of illusory charms, he mastered a spell that turned his hair and beard into a conflagration of red-orange flame. For years Rabordath could only maintain this magical effect for moments at a time and saved it to add effect to his frequent (and often carefully scripted) eruptions of rage, but during the previous winter he'd managed to cast a permanence charm on it, rendering his hair and beard into undying flame.

Thankfully for him, this illusion was only of the visual kind, and produced neither heat, sound, nor genuine light. While not a particularly practical or useful magic, one can imagine the effect of his infernal countenance on the impressionable with whom he came in contact. They all supposed his powers to be much greater than they actually were. That is not to say that Rabordath was without some efficacy as a magician. He could, in a pinch, produce open flame within a ten-foot radius, cause a stiff wind to blow inside a closed room, briefly turn any stick of about three feet in length into a (poisonless) snake, make writing on parchment emit an eerie scarlet glow, and other parlor tricks of that kind.

However, the main area in which Rabordath claimed a degree of excellence was his knowledge of dragons. His eyes devoured every tome about dragon-lore on which he could lay his

black-nailed and calloused hands. Indeed, in his deeply nasal baritone (a paradox that even I cannot explain—suffice it to say that he had a large and long nose and forehead, and his voice reverberated almost to echo within it), he could recite the last thousand lines of *Beowulf*, and the early parts of the *Volsung Saga* by heart, and he often would do so when he thought that no one was listening. He even made up lyrically perfect alternate endings to each in which the dragons emerged victorious. For example, I believe that in an ironic twist of fate (or fatal twist, if you prefer), Beowulf's dragon wrenched the hero's arm from its socket and used it to club him senseless.

In his mania to know all about these beasts, he'd sought out druids and tortured their ancient knowledge from them. In fact, Rabordath once traveled all the way to Munich to hear the words of a magus who was said to have seen a dragon, though in reality the magus had only unearthed a dragon skull—a five foot monstrosity full of teeth and so heavy that it seemed to be made of stone.

Finally (and I have gone on so long that I will try to keep this brief) we come to the banshee, Asacael. Little is known of her, except that she was dead, had been for a long time, and hated the living with a kind of stark raving insanity. The story goes that as a beautiful young woman, she fell madly (and I mean this literally) in love with a brawny and handsome hero. He, in his turn, lusted irresistibly for her, and during their brief 'courtship,' he mentioned words that sounded to her like 'eternal love,' or some such expression. They shared a brief intimate closeness, but he began to realize that she was, for lack of a more delicate term, insane.

Her lunacy was alternately obsessive, manic, narcissistic, and monogamously nymphomaniacal. These traits benefited the romance for about a month, and then the warrior, being a hero and possessed with an innate knowledge of the world, realized that she was really a bit of a monster. Therefore, he took her to a 'romantic' spot beside a peat bog, where, as he told her, he planned to ravish her. He tied her arms and legs to heavy rocks (this excited her), and then instead of ravishing her, composedly lifted her, rocks and all, with a feat of superhuman strength, and plopped the whole bundle into a deep pool of thick brown peat.

There, while her undying hatred kept her soul alive, she waited, thrashing occasionally, for the acid of the bog to eat through the thick hemp, which happened gradually over about a thousand years. After her escape, she wandered the moors by night, frequently overcome by anguish, and screeching her keening lament, a demon woman bewailing the loss of her lover in agony and wrath. She came to exist as a composite of hate, rage, and sorrow. Her one momentary joy (like the joy of smashing something fragile in a fit of fury—complete with the almost instantaneous regret) was to slay the living.

Enough of that. Although it might seem difficult to accomplish, the ambush and capture of King Arthur by these three was a short and bloody affair. The king and his retainers had little chance.

A deep, moist vapor descended on the moors, severing Arthur from his advance guard (namely his nephew, Sir Gawain, who scouted the road ahead). Six leashed hounds led the hunting party, which tracked north along a disused path through the brown and purple heather. As the group wound their careful way down a rocky hill and into a swampy hollow, they came across a scene that seemed from another world. There, strewn across the valley floor, barely discernible through the curling and clumping mist (in fact, only momentarily revealed as the playful wind gusted), was the rotting remains of an ancient massacre. Contorted skeletal forms lay scattered on the ground, still encased in rusting ring-woven armor and open faced helmets, bone-white fingers still grasping swords, spears, and shields (these, curiously well preserved). Their skulls gaped empty-eyed at the trespassers.

Clustered among the rocks in the center of the hollow, where it seemed that they'd fought a desperate last stand, twenty armored skeletons lay piled around a bowed staff. Driven deep into the muddy ground, it stood there, topped with a tarnished gold eagle, marked with the numerals VIII², and hung with rotting crimson cloth. Dew dripped from the banner onto the stones beneath.

The knights drew near, reined in, and dismounted to examine the scene, remarking on the eerie chill and boggish stench in the air. From the central point, they fanned out to inspect the battlefield in more detail, each as his inclination led him. A few minutes after Arthur's party split, a horse neighed from somewhere deep in the fog, and the king called out (in his classic oratory style):

"To me, lads! Gather here, for I fear that foul magic is afoot on the moors of the North!"

Punctuating his shout, several swords simultaneously slid from scabbards, sounding to all like the menacing hiss of a hydra. A bitter breeze blew up from nowhere, peeling the fog away and exposing Arthur and his few dismounted knights. Across the flat, not a hundred yards distant and without a word of direction, a line of forty mounted warriors spurred toward them, naked blades clasped in mailed fists. Hooves thundered and the ground shook. Swords clashed, bones cracked, and men screamed and died.

About fifteen of Arthur's party survived the initial charge, including Arthur, his Seneschal, Sir Kay, and his nephew, Sir Agravain, each towering over the others by a whole head. Excalibur had sliced through the torso of an attacker, and his horse fled, still mounted by a pair of armored legs.

"To me!" Arthur bellowed again, and the remaining knights gathered around the rocks, forming an overlapping shield-wall beneath the ancient Roman eagle.

At that very moment, the skeletal legionnaires began to writhe, rising from the low-clinging mist that re-formed on the swampy ground and brandishing their weapons before them. They came at Arthur's party from all sides, and the sound of clashing iron and steel echoed across the dell. The riders galloped in a wild charge, and after a brief bloody stand, only the king, Kay, Agravain, and one heavy-set serving woman remained of Arthur's party.

A horseman scooped up the woman, her fists flying and legs flailing, but the three knights fought on. Their skill saved them, standing with their backs toward each other, swords flashing, cleaving the helmets, armor, and shields of all who came near. Of the forty horsemen, twelve remained unwounded. They reined in and watched for a moment as the skeletal legion smashed hopelessly against the three legendary knights like the sea upon a formation of stone. Then, as if on cue, the riders turned their mounts and galloped away, leaving the king and his knights to their fate. As one, the mounted assailants disappeared down the valley into the resurgent mist.

The wind died and the temperature fell. Undead legionaries stepped back, hollow sockets staring expressionlessly from helmed heads. They locked their oval shields in a perfect circle around the three knights. Frost crept down Excalibur's gleaming blade.

Agravain lifted his visor to utter a boast, but as he did so a raven fell, lifeless, to slap the mud near his feet. He looked down, then back up, and he saw her. His ears buzzed, his mind tumbled down a deep tunnel into darkness, and his vision—indeed, his very eyes—seemed somehow at a greater and greater distance from his internal consciousness.

² Interestingly, the famed Ninth Legion used the numerals "VIII" on its ensign and equipment while stationed in Britannia. This was, of course, before the entire legion infamously "vanished" during a march across the moors of Scotland. When the legion was later reformed in Belgium, it took the more standard IX as its numeric symbol.

Her damp skin shown rust-brown, the balls of her eyes were russet and half eaten away, her hair was bleached to an orange-red, and her emaciated body hung like a sack around her bones. She stumbled forward, rather than walking, and the prune-like bag of her naked chest expanded and contracted unevenly, as if she were breathing.

A small songbird dropped, *plop*, onto the moor between them, and then the withered woman's chest expanded, groaning and creaking like aged leather, straining almost to the bursting point. Her mouth opened, a ragged circle of sable shadow, and an otherworldly scream—a keening, moaning, wailing, trailing, blast of sound—swept across the hollow.