

Pursuit

Sir Roger de Laval was troubled. Both his daughter and his squire had been absent from the evening meal and it was unlike either to miss a feeding. Millicent was known to sometimes lose track of the hour when out riding. This was often the case in the summer months, when the light lingered well into the evening—but there had been a storm. He would have expected her to return once the rain had ceased.

The Lord of Shipbrook had summoned Sir Alwyn and Declan O’Duinne to join him as soon as the meal was finished. They would ride out to find their wayward charges and again warn the headstrong Millicent not to stray too long from the castle. It had been three years since they had turned back the last raiding party from the Marches, but this was still a rough frontier.

The two knights and the squire were just leading their mounts from the paddock when a lathered, sway-backed horse trotted into the courtyard and immediately stuck his nose into the water trough. All recognized that this was Roland’s horse. Sir Roger felt his level of alarm rise. The group gathered around the tired horse and searched for some clue as to the absent rider.

“Roger, look here!” exclaimed Sir Alwyn. He pointed to a spot near the edge of the saddle.

Sir Roger flinched as he made out the rude message.

“*Clocaenog!* My God, Alwyn, Millie’s been taken!

“It’d have to be Bleddyn’s men if they come from the Clocaenog,” Alwyn said, grimly. “I thought he’d left us be for good, after we bloodied his last raiding party.”

Roger De Laval thought back to his last encounter with Bleddyn and his raiders. He and Alwyn had cornered them against the River Dee and there was much slaughter, but the leader had managed to swim his little pony across the channel as his men covered his escape with their lives. Bleddyn was not the only raider from the west, but he was the most savage. Rarely satisfied to plunder, he and his men thought nothing of butchering defenseless peasants and burning a hamlet as they fled back across the border.

“Aye, Alwyn, it may be Bleddyn, but may God have mercy on whoever it is,” Sir Roger said, with finality, “for I shall not!”

“What of Roland, my lord,” asked Declan.

“Perhaps, taken as well, or killed,” Sir Roger stated bluntly. “Don’t know how he managed this message—but it had to be him. He’s a brave lad. I hope he lives.” The big knight mounted Bucephalus and motioned to a house servant.

“Tell Lady Catherine what has happened when she returns from Chester. Tell her to remain here. I *shall* return with our daughter.” The servant bowed in acknowledgement. Bucephalus, sensing his master’s urgency reared in excitement.

Sir Roger whirled the great warhorse around to face Sir Alwyn and Declan. By now a half dozen men-at-arms had gathered with their own mounts. “Follow me, lads! We go to hunt the Welsh!” He gave Bucephalus a sharp dig with his heels and led his men into the gathering dusk.

Less than ten miles away, Roland knelt in the cover of the tall grass which grew along the main channel of the River Dee. He faced a dilemma. The ford was an obvious place for the raiders to leave another guard on their back trail. A man concealed on the south bank could spot anyone trying to cross the river. The tide was up and the ford would be at its deepest now. Roland had spied a heavy branch snagged on the bank when he had reached this point half an hour before. It was just what he needed to float across the channel, but he had resisted the urge to plunge in. Instead, he focused all of his hunter's skills on scanning the opposite bank. He would give it a few more minutes and, if nothing was revealed, he would make his way down to the river bank and resume his pursuit.

There! It had been a small movement, of dark against dark, but it was not the natural sway of the marsh grass. Something had moved on the opposite bank. It could have been some creature of the bogs, but Roland knew it wasn't. It was one of the raiders, watching for a pursuer entering the river. Roland exhaled slowly and again calculated his options. He would have to make his way upstream, through at least a mile of swamp, to find a place to cross without being seen. There was no time for such a maneuver. There seemed but one solution, short of giving up his attempt to follow Millicent. He must eliminate the watcher on the other bank.

Having made up his mind, the boy wasted no more thought on the decision. He drew an iron-tipped shaft from his quiver, nocked it and smoothly drew the bow to its full arc. The shot was less than a hundred yards. If the man had not moved again, he would not miss. He released the shaft and focused intently on the far bank.

There was a moment of silence as sound took its time crossing the distance. Then, Roland heard a shriek and a man half rose from the grass by the water's edge. The boy could see his shaft sunk deep in the man's chest. The raider tumbled headfirst down the bank and sank into the muddy water. Roland made a swift prayer to God, to again be understanding, plunged down the riverbank and pushed his makeshift raft into the current.

He did not know how to swim and had never been in water deeper than the shallow mountain streams that ran off the slopes of Kinder Scout. He had crossed the Aire River with Sir Roger and Declan, but the water had hardly reached his waist. Here, the water came up to his neck, even near the shore, and further out the bottom was quickly lost. He was petrified. He flailed his legs, in part to propel himself toward the far shore and, in part, out of fear that some unknown creature from the depths of the river might seize him and drag him under. He had never been so happy as when his feet touched bottom on the opposite bank and he scrambled back onto the marshy ground.

The boy checked his weapons and turned to see what had become of the man he had shot, but the river had already claimed the body. Roland turned back to the muddy trail, which headed through the marsh and toward the high ground visible in the distance. He resumed his steady trot, determined to gain ground on the little Welsh ponies ahead of him. It was now starting to get dark. He didn't expect Millicent's captors to rest and neither would he. He ran on into the night.

The boy had been smart to send the horse back with his message. Roger De Laval hoped it had not cost him his life. Knowing Millie was being taken to Clocaenog narrowed their search. There were few approaches to the River Dee ford where the boggy land was firm enough to support horses, and the Dee must be crossed to get to the borderlands. These paths had been

used by raiders for as long as men had plundered across these wild lands and Sir Roger knew them by heart.

The first path they struck had shown no evidence of any passage but as they approached the next the knight noticed Bucephalus' ears prick up, and reined in the gray destrier. He had learned long ago, to trust the instincts of his horse in hostile territory. Here they discovered a faint trail left by the men who had taken Millie. Much of the sign had washed away, but enough marsh grass had been uprooted to indicate that horses had recently passed this way.

There was no sign of the boy, and this did nothing to ease Sir Roger's anxiety. He urged the horse slowly forward, looking for what had alerted Bucephalus. There, to the side of the muddy trail, sat a man in rough dress, leaning against a weathered stump. He made no move to flee as Sir Roger dismounted, drew his broadsword, and approached.

"You there. Tell me what ye know, and tell it fast or ye're a dead man." No one, looking into the knight's eyes, could have doubted his sincerity.

The man struggled to speak, grimacing and clutching his groin. He held up his hand, signaling a need to catch his breath. Sir Roger waited, idly swinging the broadsword in his huge hands.

"Ye...be the Lord...of Shipbrook?" the man managed.

Sir Roger stepped forward and placed the tip of the blade on the man's breastbone.

"*I ask the questions here!*" he said, with barely controlled rage. "Now speak!" By this time, the rest of party from Shipbrook had gathered near.

"The girl...is unharmed," the man gasped. "Taken...taken to Clocaenog. Will be held...held in safety there."

"*Taken by whom? Held by whom?*" thundered Sir Roger.

"Bleddyn."

"And what will be the ransom, you son of a Welsh dog?" Sir Roger asked quietly, but with clear menace in his voice.

"Bleddyn says she's t' be held safe as...*guarantee.*"

"Guarantee? Guarantee of what?"

"Free...free passage...to raid...Cheshire" the wounded man managed.

Sir Roger and Sir Alwyn looked at each in consternation. This was unexpected.

"Impossible!" Sir Roger sputtered. "We could not betray our own folk, thus!"

Sir Alwyn grasped his friend's arm.

"Roger, it's *Millicent* yer talkin' about here. If we can't get her back...betrayal may be our only choice."

Sir Roger's shoulders sagged, as he realized the awful decision he might be forced to make.

"Then we must get her back, Alwyn—we must!"

From behind Sir Roger, Declan O'Duinne stepped toward the injured raider. He could not wait a moment longer to speak. He grasped the man by his rough tunic and pulled his face close.

"What have ye done with Roland, dog?"

"Roland?" the man shook his head in confusion.

“The boy! What of the boy? Is he dead?”

The man’s head turned to the side and spat on the ground.

“He will be dead...if I get another chance at him! Gave me this...he did.” The man nodded toward his wound. “Tricky, that one...but ye’ll no doubt find his body further along. One of our lads...he’ll get him sure!”

Declan let the man fall back and turned to Sir Roger.

“He lives, my lord! And he’s on their trail!” he fairly shouted.

“By Gad, Roger. He did learn something in me classes!” added Alwyn.

Sir Roger said nothing for a moment, but his shoulders no longer sagged in resignation. Millicent may be in the grasp of his enemies, but she was not totally alone out there. There was a boy—a damned resourceful boy—dogging her trail. There was hope.

It was growing very dark now. He motioned to one of his men-at-arms. “Take this trash back to the castle and secure him,” he said, nodding toward their captive. “Have his wound tended to. We may have more questions for him. If we do not come back within the week...*kill him.*”