

A Knight's Tail Tucked



DILLON HAMILTON

A Knight's Tail Tucked

by Dillon Hamilton

There was only blood and iron left in the field where Sir Lem had rode from. In fact, all that was left of his men was iron and blood. He had only left the deep carnage once he had seen it through. When he spurred his stud, Né, the founder of his stables, away from battle, there were a few red-hot vestiges that spotted the field. Lonesome men facing down a circle of opponents, swinging the same old blade that sang the same old way. But the reasonable men, the men who had fought hardest when the field was thickest, the men who had searched for the center of the fray, refusing to play at the battle's edges, rode off when Sir Lem had, having their fill of the fight to know they would not want to bear and drink from this cup again, or at least not over the same dispute.

Sir Lem and Né rode out of the field, satisfied with their performance. There were dings in the vambraces and peytrals, as there naturally should be in a battle worth fighting, but as they rose to the crest of the ridge overlooking the field, Sir Lem considered the damage to be light and even less than what he could have sustained in tournaments or training. With recent fortunes and discovery of a comfortably shaded road to rejoice in, Sir Lem urged Né into a light trot. News would spread of the victory as fast as Né's hooves could carry them from town to town. There would be a story to be told and Sir Lem was nothing if not a slave to the details. He wanted the right details told for with a story told with the right details came honor and virtue, bestowed to the man willing to do the work. Sir Lem would have that honor and virtue and he would drag Né along with him.

They rode through filtered light until they came to an unshaded patch where the ridge had turned into a wooded plateau. The sun laid bare the scene where a great racket ensued. He had caught the noise with his ears much earlier but had not heeded the warnings and cries hidden within them for the residue of his last battle filled his head.

Vagabonds, all carrying the same swords, the swords of his King's men, surrounded a lavender carriage attached to a dead horse. From within the carriage came the cries and pleas of a mother desperate for any ear to hear. She kept the dark curtains closed and hushed her fearful brood that whined and scurried within like a bag of rodents. Sir Lem rode Né hard into the center of the vagabonds, "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded the vagabonds answer.

"She is the enemy queen and harbors her bloodguiltiness alongside her children. We are the King's men and found her beating her own horse to death along this path."

"Liars!" The mother shouted from the carriage. She opened a curtain only enough to show her face, which was lovely in form and pleasing to all men's eyes. "I am a merchant's widow. Have not merchants served all men without harm. They are but the tools passed between men of varying liveries. And I have done no such thing to my horse. He was battered and bruised by men such as these along my path. I only hope and pray to carry my children to safety. Please, Sir..."

"Sir Lem."

"Sir Lem, please, lend me your horse..."

"Né."

"Lend me your horse, Né. Let me attach him to this carriage and wrest away my children from these vagabonds. When I and my children find safety, I will return Né."

One of the vagabonds lowered his blade and stepped toward Né's snout. "Please, Sir Lem. Allow us to plead our case."

Sir Lem nodded an annoyed approval for he remembered that each should have their day in court.

“We are here by the King’s orders. Though this is not our enemy’s carriage or colors, it is his wife and children within, each of which are trained in his ways. We have followed them out of the enemy camp to this point and would be obliged if you helped us in their apprehension. Your armor and blade attest to your great standing with the King. He has given you many great markings and positions to uphold and we are sure he would lavish many more upon you if you were to assist us.”

Sir Lem wondered about each’s words and positions. He spoke first to the vagabonds with swords. “Why do men draw swords on women and children?” He lifted his brow beneath his helmet. “If you are the King’s men, what need have you of swords against women and children. Have you no trust in yourselves? Have you no honor for the weaker amongst us? What would the King say of your conduct? I would never engage in such villainy!” He pulled at Né’s reins and cozied the stud’s rear up against the carriage. The merchant’s widow smiled thankfully.

Another of the vagabonds stepped forward to protest. “Noble Sir Lem, vanquisher of the nearest serpent, executioner of the recent foe, it is not as your eyes may see it. Look into the carriage yourself and you will find the queen in the queen’s garments. You will find the princes in their garments. You will find the princesses in their garments. You will find all of the looted gold and finery—”

The merchant’s widow interrupted the vagabond. “No, please! Men such as these have stopped me and stripped me along this path. The only thing you will find in this carriage is my and my children’s nakedness. Any gold or finery we might have had has been taken by men such as these.”

A third vagabond, much dirtier than the rest, stepped forward. “Follow the carriage tracks, Good Sir Lem. Those tracks lead back to the enemy’s camp. Her carriage’s wheels are covered with the dung from the enemy’s horses.”

“How can you tell my tracks from another’s? How do you know this dung from your enemy’s horses and not the dung of your friend’s horses?” The widow shouted.

“I’ve seen many tracks and smelled loads of dung,” the third vagabond answered.

The widow answered quickly. “Your enemy’s horses are as scattered as their tracks upon this road.”

A fourth vagabond, with forearms that nearly filled the sleeves of his robe, stepped forward. “It is no carriage of the enemy’s king, but the craftsmanship and artistry are of his taste and lore. See how the dragon smiles like a friend?”

“As I said before, merchant’s trade with any side of a war and even those who do not war against each other. Though, those who war generally pay more,” the widowed said.

Folding the forearms, a carpenter’s forearms, the fourth vagabond said, “Look, Great Sir Lem, at the expert planing along the planks. This carriage builder left no wobble or warp in the wood. This is verily the craftsman of the enemy king for there are no others in his land with such sure hands.”

“My late husband traded for it!” the widow screeched. The sound was strained but strong like the exultation of a bird of prey. Sir Lem and Né recoiled at the sound. Together they reexamined the carriage and the sound within at length but resolved to cozy up against the planks for its appearance was pleasing and the sounds of the widow and her children tickled their ears. Né’s hock leaned against the spokes of one wheel and the widow stroked his strong neck beneath his armor, causing his muscles to ripple and quiver with excitement. With Sir Lem and Né so

close and comfortable, the widow made her final plea. “I have just as much grievance against your enemy as you. Their king made swift and careless judgment against my husband, who he had hanged for trouble about his scales and a dispute with men who sold hay. He took away my husband’s fortune from me and my children’s inheritance from them. Our home he has turned into a house of pleasure, our storehouse a den for fugitives, our barns lofts for the idlers. He left us only a carriage and the youngest and weakest of our stables, which has died here in the path. We have not had protection since the death of my husband and I only plead for a moment’s worth so that we may flee these blood-lusters and escape with our lives. We know you believe it is honorable to preserve innocent life wherever you may find it. Please, do not sacrifice us to these vagabonds.”

The first vagabond stepped forward once more. He hoisted his trousers by his thick belt and spat before them. “She bewitches the heart through the ears, Mighty Sir Lem. We know your stateliness and position. We know the virtue and honor required by your place in our King’s court, but to allow the queen and her children to flee into the land with your goodwill and approval would bring shame upon our Good King’s name. Do not give her your stud, which would surely send out her venom and brood like fire through tall grasses. Do not even leave her with her carriage lest someone may yet take this path and fall beneath her beguilement. Arrest her and her children, present them to the King, mention not our names or deeds, and take all the glory from the act, but we do beg you as brethren not to send her speedily away.”

Sir Lem snorted, tilted his head, and looked thoughtfully down at the men who were know cleaner than Né’s shoes. “What would become of this widow and her children?” he asked.

“She would face...” the first vagabond started.

“Trial,” the second said.

“Judgment,” the third said.

“Punishment,” the fourth said.

The fifth said, “Which would likely be exile from the kingdom, but I would push for a swift execution and blotting out of their memory from the land.” He peeked at the other vagabonds and proceeded cautiously. “Which is just my opinion and should not be considered a vial option until the King says so?”

The first vagabond nodded his approval. The others followed his lead. Sir Lem leaned away from them and toward the carriage as if they had all emitted their worst stench at once.

“Such barbarism in your voices! You seethe with hate for anything different! Do you not agree that wrong has been done to this woman and her children? Do you not agree they will suffer yet for it and so will their future generations? Where does your pigheadedness end?” Sir Lem threw over his leg and dropped beside Né’s flank. “What small charity is a stud? What small charity is an escape from the likes of roadside ferrets who feed on the fruits that have dropped from carriages passing by? The least I will do is relinquish my stud, pledge my sword, and hold my tongue from such degradations as you flea-ridden furbears dare utter.”

Sir Lem drew his sword, a broken pattern of dried blood from the old battle and flaming shimmer. The legends of the sword were true. When he swung it, the force of the sun went with it.

“Do not do this, Sir Lem,” the first vagabond pleaded.

“Bless you, Sir Lem. May you be given the honor of guarding the gates of your King’s cities and a favorable place in his courts!” the widow exalted.

“I ask for nothing in return, fair widow. Take Né. Flee. Live!”

The first vagabond, brave and brutish, tested his edge against Sir Lem's. While they locked in a life-threatening game of shove, vagabonds three and five flanked at the carriage's fore and aft. Sir Lem shrugged off the first and went after the fifth at the rear, while Né made short work of the third near the front of the carriage, stamping out the charge with his front hooves. The first, catching his bearing and the eyes of two and four, rushed Sir Lem again with two and four at his sides. Sir Lem swung a broad warning before their eyes and they retreated. He continued to circle his blade at the vagabonds. They backed down and searched for a way through to the carriage, while Né obediently backed into the harness that mysteriously cinched itself to the stud at the word of the widow. Once cinched, she whispered something from within, something only Né heard and could not disobey. The carriage glided over the muddy path, away from Sir Lem and the vagabonds.

“Do not stop, fair widow! These men thirst for blood and hunger for flesh!”

To Sir Lem's surprise, vagabonds one, two, and four lowered their blades. Vagabonds three and five rolled and groaned in the mud, wounded beyond use. The sound of the scuttling carriage ceased a ways off and Sir Lem peered over his shoulder to check Né's progress. He balked at the sight. The stench of the dead horse at his feet filled his nose. Flies pelted his soiled armor, pinging against it frivolously.

The widow and her children poured out from all the carriages pores. The veils had been pulled back and out came their darkness. She leaned away from the door and though her face still attracted, the deform of her body repulsed. Né heaved for breath and froth seeped out of his armor. He may last to the first town they reach but no further.

The widow shouted from afar but sounded as though she were still in their midst. “What a helpful fool in finery you turned out to be, Sir Lem!”

Sir Lem's sword outweighed his grip and fell in the path.

"That sword is mine for you have pledged it to me," she continued, and the sword suddenly appeared not in the mud beside Sir Lem but in the hands of the queen's children. They all clung to it and went about dulling its edges. "I *am* the queen of which these King's men spoke. I am the owner of the house of pleasure. I storehouse fugitives. My barns are idle." She ran a hand sumptuously down her lumped side. "These are queen's garments. Notice that its hems are dripping with your men's blood and sadly there are still clean patches that I must fill. Né, your stud, founder of your stables, was a great horse. I will make him nice. Your sword, mighty and vibrant in your hands, will be dulled and rounded so that my children may play freely with it. I am grieved that I cannot not take your armor as well." With that, she disappeared into the carriage. One of her children climbed into the driver's seat and drove Né away at a reckless pace.

When they had disappeared along the shaded path, Sir Lem turned to the King's men.

"How was I to know?" he seemed to ask himself.

"You were told," the first King's man said.

"How could she have deceived me so?" Sir Lem asked the air.

"You were pleaded with," the second King's man said.

"But her face. Her nice face..."

"You were begged," the third King's man moaned from the mire.

The first King's man stepped forward. He grabbed Sir Lem by one of his dented vambraces and shoved a sharp, straight, and clean sword into his hand. "Come. Let us tell the throne. He will grant you mercy and restore you to our fight."

Sir Lem looked blankly at the King's men. "No," he said. "I dare not show my face in the gates, let alone His throne room. The court will laugh and mock my blindness."

The fourth King's man, the carpenter, said, "You yourself should mock your blindness in time."

Sir Lem began to back away from the King's men and into the woods, sword in hand, saying, "Woe! To him with fine stud, sword, and standing in court, blindness comes to any on the path who miss the stud-bringer for the stud, the sword-speaker for the sword, the owner of the court for the standing that he gave." Sir Lem slinked into shade and then darkness.

"Will he return?" the second King's man asked the first.

"The emblem of the sword's owner is emblazoned on its hilt. He will also find the emblem on any trees he will run into in that darkness. He will return and be restored as long as he holds the sword and stumbles into enough trees."

###