

The knight who comes home



Peter Lacey

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800th anniversary of the death of St Robert

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Ready for battle

Nigel was a knight. By the side of the wardrobe he had a hook on the wall where he put his coat of armour. It was always kept shiny. Nigel said it was because you never knew when a dragon might appear, but dragons had not been seen or heard of for a very long time.

Every knight, of course, had a horse. Nigel's had been a present on his twelfth birthday, and they had grown up together. He called him 'Charger', because that's what he did really well. When they were competing in the tournaments Nigel would trot down to the end of the track, turn Charger around, raise his joust, and say 'chaaaaarge....'. Nigel and Charger were very good at jousting, it was their favourite sport. And because Nigel and Charger were so good they began to be noticed by the army generals.

One day the King sent out a message. "All Knights are commanded to join the army to defend the King's land overseas." Nigel was excited. Now he had the chance to be a real Knight. So, he gave his coat of armour a final polish and rode off to join the army.

It was a very long way to where the King was fighting his battles. It took weeks to get there. Part of his journey was in a boat with lots of other knights. It wasn't very comfortable and neither Nigel or Charger had been on a boat in the open sea before. The boat tossed and turned in the swell so much that when they got to the other side of the channel everybody's legs felt wobbly, including Charger's. They all needed a good rest and a big breakfast before they were able to march off again to join the King.

Nigel knew that he had to be brave if he was going to be really helpful. And he knew what being brave meant. That's because of what his mother used to say after his father went away to fight for the King, and didn't come back. "*Be a brave little boy, Nigel*" she would say "*perhaps daddy will come back, but if he doesn't we'll have to do our very best without him.*"

When Nigel and all the other Knights arrived at the battlefield they found a lot of tents and flags. Camp fires were dotted about with men gathered around them talking and laughing. They were camped on a hill, so you could see for a long way. Then Nigel realised that something didn't seem quite right. He looked as far as his eye could see, but there was no enemy anywhere.

Nigel and a few other Knights were given a tent and told where to pitch it. When they had set up camp and lit their own little fire some of the men from the next group of tents came across to tell them what had happened. "*We've been here for about two weeks*", one of them told Nigel. "*The king has been sending out scouts every day to find out where the enemy is, but he didn't want to give up this hill, so the rest of us haven't moved. We've been a bit wary during the night in case enemy spies try to enter the camp, but we had sentries posted, so in the end nothing happened.*"

Then Nigel asked "*So, did the scouts find the enemy? Has there been a battle?*" "*Yes, and no*" came the answer. "*For a while we were getting messages that they were getting closer, but then they stopped. We think they were waiting for reinforcements. Then a couple of days later we heard that they were retreating. So, the King got on his horse and went to the top of the hill over*

there. His herald blew his horn and cried out that we should all gather around to hear what the King had to say."

Nigel asked, "so what did he have to say?"

"It was an impressive speech", said the knight, who stood up and tried to look very kingly. He then pretended to give the King's speech. "You've all been very brave" he began "and I'm honoured that you have been so willing to serve King and Country." He drew breath and continued, "everyone in England will be proud of you when they hear the story. They will be singing about your shining example in the taverns and market places across the empire. You were so impressive in your military exercises that the spies who saw you got scared. The cowardly enemy has fled before you and has been seen sloping off home for fear of the battle." Sitting down again, the Knight continued, "exactly how much of this was true we weren't sure, but the speech had its effect, and everybody felt like celebrating. The King announced a tournament to mark our victory. And that tournament will take place tomorrow."

Nigel didn't know whether to feel disappointed or relieved. He lay in his tent that night remembering the journey, thinking about what he had left behind, wondering about how mother was doing. He felt a longing to see her again.

Then he wondered whether his dad had ever had the same thoughts in a tent on a battlefield so far from home. As Nigel went to sleep he was imagining what it would be like if, instead of a tournament there would be a battle when he woke up in the morning. He remembered looking up at his father on his horse the day he had left. Now, in his mind's eye, he could see him lined up at the top of the hill outside the tent with the other knights, ready to charge. Then a trumpet sounded, a cry went up, and the battle commenced. In his sleep, Nigel saw the charge, but he was left behind in the camp wondering how the battle was going...

When morning came, Nigel heard a different type of trumpet call. Instead of a battle it was the tournament, and Nigel was an expert jousting.

Winners and losers

Nigel and Charger did well at the King's tournament. All the practice he had put in meant that he could match even the most experienced knight. The excitement rose with each round of the tournament. Each time Nigel charged he seemed to be able to pick the perfect spot on his opponent's armour. Knight after knight found themselves unhorsed. When night was nearly setting, Nigel found himself the last man standing and was heralded as the tournament winner.

After Nigel's victory the other knights created a guard of honour that led Nigel into the centre of the camp, and in to the King's tent. It was the biggest and most colourful tent in the camp, and the feast that lay before him seemed almost overwhelming. The local villagers had been preparing it all day. Secretly they were glad that the army would be on the move again very soon because they had eaten nearly all the food from the neighbouring area. Nigel was given a seat of honour. As well as eating lots of food, songs about his bravery and skill were made up and repeated over and over again.

When Nigel finally got to bed that night, he was exhausted but very happy. Dreams about his father were replaced with dreams about going home. How he wanted to tell everyone about the best tournament he'd ever competed in. A tournament in which the King himself was there to be impressed. He went to sleep very proud of himself, and rightly so.

It didn't take long in the morning to get ready to break camp. Anything that wasn't essential was simply left behind. And they needed as much daylight as possible to march by, so they were off well before mid-morning. The sight of an army on the move was impressive. The flags of the standard bearers went out in front and the thud, thud, thud of about a hundred horses shook the ground. Other soldiers followed with their bows, pikes, swords and shields, and at the rear were the trundling carts needed to carry the bare essentials of the mobile camp.

It still took several days to return to the ships that would carry them back to England. Once again Nigel and Charger found the crossing uncomfortable, but their excitement was still high. Soon they would be back with their family and friends. After they got off the boat the soldiers started to go in different directions. But for Nigel it was over two hundred and fifty miles home, and that would take another two or three weeks. So, there was still plenty of time for adventures. Like the time he spent in London.

Nigel was still travelling with some twenty or thirty other knights on horseback as they approached London. They could see dozens of churches, with St Paul's clearly visible with its pointed windows and tall spire. That evening the knights found a tavern that advertised all the best meat and fish. And of course, there was lots of ale. So much ale, and so much food, that they went to bed very late.

During the evening, they had got talking with a group of locals on another table. Someone called Richard was obviously the ring-leader of the group, and he told them about a new sport that people were getting very excited about. It happened at Smithfield market, only a couple of miles away. Some of the knights knew about the horse market and the races that took place there each week. But Richard said that this game took place on foot with a large ball, very odd! Their horses

were still tired from the journey and needed a rest, so joining in this new game sounded great. Richard was very keen that the knights got involved, and so it wasn't long before they had made a wager. Little did they know what they had let themselves in for!

They had to wait until after lunch for the game. So, they got up late and walked their horses the couple of miles to Smithfield and tethered them at the local tavern. After lunch, the youth of the city started to gather, each with their own ball. They came in groups. There were carpenters, the brewers and the livery men to name just a few. Nigel and the others were beginning to wonder what they'd let themselves in for when up came Richard. He was striding toward them confidently, and he had two large balls, one under each arm.

"Nigel", he shouted. "Good to see you. Hope you're up for this." And he chucked one of the balls to Nigel. It was made of leather and had some sort of animal bladder inside. Nigel went to grab it as it flew toward his mid-rift, but it slipped through his hands and dribbled away on the floor with a couple of small bounces, before it rolled into a muddy puddle.

"Come on then", shouted Richard. "Pick up the ball and get your men over here." The knights were shown where to stand, and all the other groups were positioned at different points around what looked like a large muddy field. They were told to wait for the signal. When the cry went up they were to kick the ball into the middle of the field and chase after it as if their lives depended on it.

They never really worked out the rules, if there were any. It might have looked like hand to hand combat if you'd been there. The goal seemed to be a combination of getting your own ball back and capturing the others. There was a general direction in which the game seemed to flow, and a lot of celebrations when the scrum of men went shouting and brawling out of the big circle that seemed to mark out the playing area.

They were exhausted after the game. Richard came up to the Nigel and the knights at the end and slapped them heartily on the back. "Good sport", he said, "but you were on the losing side!" None of the knights had the energy to ask him why or how, and so they paid their dues and wondered if such a game would ever take off. The following morning, Nigel said goodbye to a few more of his travelling companions, which left half a dozen to head up Ermine Street on the final stage of their journey home.

Coming home

By the time Nigel set off up Ermine Street, which was the main road to the North, it was early September. All around him he could see people busy in the fields, which reminded him even more that he was missing his home and family. The road was straight and direct, which was because of the Romans even if they had left hundreds of years before. But there were times when the going was slow, especially when the rain turned the cart ruts of the road into long muddy puddles. The hours of daylight were also reducing. His final travelling companion left him at Lincoln, still about ninety miles from home. Nigel began to feel lonely.

Lincoln was a good place for Nigel, and Charger, to rest. The last leg of their journey home lay ahead of them and they would need all their strength. The weather got better after a week or so of wind and rain, and this gave Nigel an idea. He was sitting outside the latest tavern that had given him hospitality and was looking up at the stars. Then gradually, as he looked over the flat lands to the east that would eventually take you to the sea, he saw the moon rise. Its silvery light cast shadows around him.

He'd heard of armies doing night marches when they were trying to catch the enemy unawares. Conditions could not be more perfect. Between him and the ferry over the Humber were thirty miles of straight marching. No hills, no meanders, nothing to slow him down. So, he thought, that could be done in one long day-night march. He would alternate between walking and riding so as not to tire Charger too much. The plan sounded good. It would be a little adventure.

The following morning Nigel packed some extra provisions. The weather seemed to be set fair, and so off he went with a determined spring in his step. By mid-day he had passed Owmbly, ten miles north of Lincoln. Then by tea time he approached Hibaldstow, another ten miles and time to tuck in to his provisions and prepare for his night-time adventure.

He waited for darkness, and then for the moon to rise. It was full and began to cast its shadows. Charger was a little confused when Nigel coaxed him onto all fours. But he soon got the idea, and they headed north once more. The moon was shining from the right and Nigel walked on Charger's left shoulder. He needed to watch out for holes in the road, but for a long time his focus was on the sharp outline of Charger's head against the road just in front of them, a shadow cast by the moonshine.

Furlong after furlong, mile after mile, they marched north. Nigel had imagined that he would be sharing his night march with all sorts of animals, but it was really quiet. Occasionally Nigel would spot the outline of a cow lying down in a farmyard, or some goats in a field. But what was most noticeable was the stillness of the night. And that was the overall sense that Nigel had as they made progress. Silence reigned, apart from the noise of their own feet.

Nigel knew that they were making good time. After a while the ground started to undulate ever so slightly. A sign, Nigel knew, that they were approaching Winteringham. That was where they would be able to catch the ferry across the Humber to Brough. And then, as they climbed one gentler incline, the light of the moon could be seen dancing across the estuary that lay ahead of them. It was a short distance down to the river bank, but the tide was clearly out from the

amount of mud flats he could see. There was no point in rushing the final steps. Nigel spied a small clump of trees in which he fancied there'd be somewhere to nestle down and grab an hour or so of sleep. And so that's just what he did. Tired, but very satisfied that he was now only a couple of days' march from home.

Two days later, as the sun was beginning to touch the tops of the trees, Nigel had another river view to gaze on. This time, it was of a much smaller river, the River Nidd. He had taken the road from York that led home via Knaresborough. It was important for a knight returning from service to the King to make his home coming known to the Sherriff. Whilst he had had a real adventure he had also learned what it felt like to be away from home.

Nigel and Charger followed the road down from the impressive castle to the river side, a route he knew well. He waded across the ford that would take him on the most direct route to Plompton, and home. Just a mile or so left. He wondered what his mother would be doing. Would she be surprised? Would she be excited to see him?

He came, at last, to the long drive that led to their small manor house, and paused. In his mind, he mounted Charger and galloped at top speed to the front door. But his body resisted the temptation. And anyway, he was beginning to feel a little emotional. The last few hundred yards seemed to need all his remaining effort. He wondered if he was going to cry through sheer pleasure. The candles in the house were flickering, and he could see the smoke from the fire rising out from the chimney. As he came to the front porch his knees crumbled and he found himself kneeling, with his head bowed. It was Charger who announced their homecoming with a whiney.

Nigel heard footsteps and scurrying in the house. And then the front door opened. Nigel looked up, and to his surprise he saw the image of a man, about his age, but cloaked in a monk's habit. What was the meaning of this?

New beginnings

It was only a moment before Nigel's mother also appeared. As soon as she realised it was him kneeling at the door she gently but firmly brushed the monk-like figure away and fell toward him. They hugged for what seemed like an age. When they got up, arm in arm, it seemed that day had turned to night. The light in the house was now brighter than the fading sun as it set behind the house. The glow from the fire seemed to invite them in to the bosom of the home that Nigel had missed so much.

The monk-like figure turned his attention to Charger, who immediately fell under his spell. Quietly, and without fuss, Charger was led around to the stable.

When Helena, Nigel's mother, and the returning knight went inside they talked mostly about Nigel's adventures. The long hours of marching, the sea crossing and the King's camp. They talked a lot, perhaps too much, about the tournament! You could have seen the pride on Helena's face, and so she was indulged with the details. And then there was the journey back, particularly what happened in London. Nigel suggested that they have a go at the new ball game once the harvest was fully in – that would be fun!

Nigel thought nothing more about the monk-like figure until Helena mentioned him again. His name was Robert and he had come to the house early in the summer seeking alms soon after Nigel had left for battle. But Helena had been her usual generous self. In fact, she said that she'd seen a vision. Her vision was very practical and earthy. She saw her small, deserted, private chapel of St Hilda at Rudfarlington being used once again for prayer. And she saw the fields around the chapel being cultivated, and she saw the food given to people when they were in need. And she saw Robert in charge.

When the fire was just a pile of embers they knew it was time for bed. Nigel's room had been kept prepared over those summer months. Once in bed, Nigel slipped quickly into a deep sleep.

The following morning Nigel's mother suggested that he spent some time letting people know that he was back. That meant a walk around the farmsteads on the estate. Not a march, you understand. More of a stroll. And Nigel, of course, was no longer weighed down by armour and provisions. What a relief that was. He met each of the families, all of whom were very welcoming. Some wanted to hear about his travels and offered him some refreshment, but he was conscious of not taking too much time away from the important work of harvest.

Nigel planned a route that would take him north first, toward Knaresborough, and then east, toward the River, where the soils were particularly rich. Then he went south, skirting the boundary of the larger estate of the Percy's at Spofforth and passing the rocky outcrops where he used to play as a child. All this was designed to take him to Rudfarlington in the west of the estate last of all. There, he knew, he would find Robert. Nigel had been thinking about this final visit all day. What would he find? Who was this Robert character? How would he welcome him?

Nigel could see the small chapel of St Hilda at Rudfarlington from a distance. As he approached he noticed the sturdy extension, framed with large beams of wood, next to the chapel. And it wasn't

long before he also caught sight of three or four men busily taking vegetables into the building. Nigel called out to them. 'Ey up', he cried, 'Is Robert at home?'. All the men stopped briefly and talked amongst themselves. One walked over to Nigel, whilst another went off behind the men. Nigel realised later that the other man had gone to tell Robert about their visitor. He also realised quickly that the men wouldn't know who he was.

Nigel and his greeter chatted for a few moments, and then they joined the others. The small group of men explained that normally at this time of the day Robert would be at the Manor House with Helena praying for Nigel's safe return. A vigil that had happened every day since Robert had been welcomed onto the estate. Once they realised that their visitor was Nigel, there was almost a party mood. The workers seemed honoured and privileged to welcome the one who their master had been praying for so fervently.

They soon got the message that Robert was not to be disturbed, being at his prayers. But such was the growing excitement that they were sure that he would sense that something was up. Looking around Nigel noticed that there were only a few things to finish loading into the store rooms, so he suggested they finish the job and then get to know each other a bit better.

Nigel found out that each of the men were new to the area, and that they had a rag-bag of stories to tell. Misfortune, foolishness and sometimes petty crime. What was common to them all, however, was Robert. He was clearly a man who could see the potential in people, not just the mess they seemed to have fallen into. He had also instilled a renewed sense of pride in them through his compassion and the routines of the small community.

As they talked, Robert emerged from the chapel. Nigel stood, and their eyes met. He felt like he knew so much about him, despite only seeing his sandals and the back of his cloak at their brief encounter just twenty-four hours before. Robert raised an arm in greeting, and when Nigel returned the gesture they gave each other an almighty bear hug. "Welcome home", Robert said.

Nigel felt so grateful. Robert had consoled Helena when she had feared for Nigel's life. He had prayed constantly for his safe return. And now Robert and Nigel stood together. Both of them welcomed by a woman with vision and faith. Nigel knew at that moment that for his mother, and for their small community, the work at Rudfarlington needed to be cherished, come what may.

Robert spoke to the men in the little group. "Please," he said, "go and prepare our meal for the evening. I will join you when Nigel and I have spoken." They entered the chapel once more and Robert invited Nigel to kneel at the small altar. He took in the atmosphere, the sense of the spiritual. And then he drank in the words of thanks that Robert spoke, God's presence making a bond of three from which new strength and new purpose could be drawn.

They rose from their knees and sat for a while in the dim light of the chapel. Robert told Nigel about each family on the estate and how many had needed his help. Some stories were short, others longer. Nigel's brief encounters with each family during that day now took on an extra dimension. He now felt fully at home, perhaps even more at home and ready for a new start than he had ever been.