



THE KNIGHT OF IVY JAMIE M. STEAD
A TALE FROM THE RYNGWOODE

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Welcome traveller, welcome!

Let me fill you a tankard with ale while you take the weight off your feet and grab a seat by the fire.

Now settle in for a tale from the Ryngwoode...



The Ivy Knight.

Or Knight Of Ivy.

Whatever he's chuffing called. I can never remember. There's hundreds of these twats running around with stupid names, hoping for their latest heroic adventure to make it into a minstrel's song.

Okay, I'm being a little unfair here. As far as these pricks go, this one isn't so bad. Not once you get past the arrogance.

A young knight, tournament champion, and favourite with the ladies, this is the story of Sir Denys, The Knight Of Ivy.

Or is it The Ivy Knight...?

Autumn was in full flow. While the trees on the edge of the Ryngwoode were a mix of browns and reds, The Knight Of Ivy looked flourishing in green. With his silver armour intricately etched with a pattern of green ivy, a single, large ivy leaf emblazoned in the centre of his helmet, and green cloak (patterned with gold ivy of course) gently dancing in the breeze, even from a distance it was hard not to know who he was.

Returning home after another successful tournament, this one in Helmsley, Sir Denys was about half a day's horse ride home in Knaresburgh, to the west of the Ryngwoode. His bag of winnings hung from his saddle, full of gold and a few new lady's favours to add to his collection. The money was nice, though he didn't need it, as was the attention of the ladies themselves. But the thrill of the fight along with the cheers of the crowd is what drove him.

The crowd knew he was good. He knew he was good. He didn't need to win every event, just more than anyone else.

The Ryngwoode itself was avoided by even the bravest of knights. A huge expanse of woodland and long abandoned towns and villages, only criminals or the foolish ventured within. And those that dared and survived told stories of sights and sounds not of this earth. Like any sensible person, knight or otherwise, Sir Denys was skirting around the outskirts of the Ryngwoode, following the aptly, if rather obviously, titled Ryngwoode Road.

It was early afternoon, but he was in no rush and the weather was pleasant, and after the tournament it was nice to have some peace and calm. His squire was recovering from an illness back in Knaresburgh, so hadn't joined him for this tournament (it's a wonder he won anything at all with the local squire they assigned to him, he thought). The road was quiet,

the only noise being the wind in the trees and the soft beat of his horse's hooves beneath him.

As the road rounded a corner he could see what appeared to be a broken cart with no horse, and could just about make out the legs of someone propped up against the front of the cart.

Now, as much as I may mock these guys and their names, they are knights and they aren't daft (well, not most of them). Sir Denys knew a trap when he saw one. As soon as he had his back to the woodland, tending to the 'injured' cart owner, he'd be rushed by bandits.

Cautiously, he dismounted from his horse and slowly entered the treeline.

The Ryngwoode stretches from the ruins of the town of Malton in the east, across to Knaresburgh in the west and up north to Helmsley. Every child in the area is told the tales of the monsters and demons that dwell within. This made it the perfect place for criminals to plot and hide. How many bandit hideaways existed within the forest was anyone's guess.

Although he didn't believe in the stories of monsters and demons, he knew of knights much stronger and braver than himself (not that he himself would ever admit to there being such knights) who claimed to have heard and seen things they could not explain within the Ryngewoode, who said no amount of gold would get them to venture back in. *Tricks of the mind caused by shadows probably*, he thought, or traps set by the bandits and reavers who called this place home to ward off anyone snooping about.

He tied Lady Baucent, his loyal horse, carefully to an old fence post just within the treeline, out of sight, and carefully made his way towards the trees opposite the cart.

As he got closer to the damaged cart, he slowly drew his sword, preparing to surprise his would-be attackers. However, the surprise was on him.

Laying before him were the bodies of six or seven men, brutally slain, all missing limbs and some missing their heads. Blood dripped slowly from nearby bushes. The trees painted red. These men, though probably not very well trained, knew how to fight, and judging by how close together their bodies were, they were either taken by surprise or had been surrounded quickly. Very quickly. Either way, they had found themselves up against a much stronger, and faster, force.

Checking over the bodies he heard a cough come from the road, he'd been so surprised by the scene in the treeline he'd forgotten about the body on the road. A body that turned out to be very much alive.

"I can hear you over there boy. Just do it. Finish me off already," said a voice between coughs and splutters.

Sir Denys gripped his sword, preparing himself for the inevitable trap before him, and slowly walked around to the front of the cart.

"Well... either you ain't no bandit, good sir, or you stole yourself some fancy armour," said the man. He was in bad shape, but he had no obvious wounds. He looked to be around sixty years of age, grey beard, and balding. By his clothes he looked to be more than a simple peasant, possibly a lower merchant.

"What happened here?" asked Sir Denys, trying to sound assertive rather than confused.

"Bloody horse kicked me and bolted," the man said, between coughs. "My bones aren't what they used to be. But I suspect you're asking about the bodies amongst the trees... Help me up and I'll tell you all about it, if you wish."

Sir Denys took one last look through the treeline, just to be sure, before sheathing his sword and removing his helmet, his long golden hair falling over his shoulders.

“Ah, Sir Denys, m'lord. The Knight Of Ivy. Forgive me, I should have known from the armour, but like my bones, my eyes aren't what they were, especially today,” the man said as Sir Denys helped him to his feet.

“Can you stand unaided?”

“Just about. It hurts, m'lord, but once I'm up I think I'll be ok,” he said, as he leant on the side of his cart.

“What is your name, my good man?” asked Sir Denys, putting on a softer tone.

“Stephen, sir, of Knaresburgh. I'm a cloth merchant. Finest cloth west of the Ryngwoode. I've supplied your good lady mother many a time, sir.”

“In that case, Stephen, Cloth Merchant of Knaresburgh, we'd best get you home and you can tell me your story on the way. We've enough daylight to spare with no rush, and I'll have someone come back for the bodies at first light.”

Sir Denys helped the merchant onto the cart and walked back down the road to untie Lady Baucent. As the merchant's own horse had bolted wearing its harness, and was nowhere to be seen, Sir Denys threw together a makeshift harness from rope, which he tied to his horse's saddle. He checked the wheels and had Lady Baucent pull the cart back onto the road, before climbing aboard himself.

“Right my good man, I think that should do. Time to be on our way and you can tell me how you ended up laying in the road a few feet away from a bunch of dead bandits.”

The merchant explained how he had been on his way home to Knaresburgh after a successful week travelling the local markets. His stock totally depleted, he had sent his earnings home in advance with his sons, as he always did, for safety.

“I usually try and keep further away from the edge of the Ryngwoode, m'lord, but Old Arthur, my horse, had been acting up, either his age or an oncoming illness, I couldn't tell, so I decided to come this way as it shortens the journey. As you can see, it's been a pleasant day, so I wasn't rushing, but something in the trees felt... off.”

Sir Denys glanced into the treeline, he himself also having an uneasy feeling.

“Old Arthur was starting to get jittery and I started to hear something coming deep from the woods, gave me chills it did.”

“An animal? Or something human, like bandits?” asked Sir Denys.

“Neither, I dare say, m'lord.”

“Neither?”

“It were something inhuman, and like no animal I ever heard. Piercing screams, what sounded like drums, but... faster than any drumming I'd ever heard. The hairs stood up on the back of my neck, and I came out in a cold sweat. Old Arthur got more and more agitated, so I commanded him to go faster. And then it all went quiet.” The merchant looked out across the fields, as if he didn't dare look back into the trees.

Sir Denys wanted to press the man to carry on, but thought best to let the merchant take his time.

After a minute's silence, other than the sound of hoofs on the road and the creaking of the cart's wheels, the merchant continued his story. “I carried on down the road, aware that something were probably stalking me from the treeline. Old Arthur had calmed down by

then but was still walking faster than usual, obviously still agitated by what we'd heard. Sensitive things, animals. Sense more than us, they do." As if on queue he winced in pain, the cart jerking as it hit a hole in the road. "After a few minutes that's when it all happened, and quick it was. From the treeline the bandits appeared, slashing at the reins on Old Arthur, and forcing him to stop. I told them they were wasting their time, that I had nothing of worth, which were true as I'd sent it all ahead..."

"With your sons, yes..."

"Aye, with my sons, m'lord. Anyway, where was I... oh yes, I could tell at that moment that if there was no money they could take then it'd be my life they would have. I cursed myself for being so stupid to come this way on my own, with no guard. I closed my eyes, ready for the sword or axe to end me, and that's when the screaming started again."

"The screaming?" Sir Denys asked.

"Aye m'lord, the screaming and the drumming. The sound filled the air, piercing my ears like an arrow. 'Tweren't the bandits neither, they looked as horrified as me. They started to run back into the trees and that's when I saw what were making the noise. The spirits of the Ryngwoode."

"Spirits?" Sir Denys asked, half mockingly.

"Aye, spirits, or demons maybe. They saved my life, so they ain't demons to me. All clad in black, spikes growing from their arms and legs. Under their black hoods I could just about make out their pale faces, with hollow eyes that bled black, the blackness running down their faces. Within seconds they had killed all the bandits and disappeared back into the forest." The merchant took a second to rearrange himself in his seat, his wounds causing a clear discomfort. "Sounds like one of the stories told to scare the children, I

know. And no one down the tavern will believe a word of it, but it's true, as true as I'm sat here now talking to you."

Sir Denys had heard many stories of the Ryngwoode in his life, mainly ones his nursemaid told him as a child to scare him away from the place. None had spirits with hollow eyes that bled black. And he certainly didn't believe they were demons. "A rival gang of bandits maybe? Many take refuge in the Ryngwoode, could be one group encroached on another group's territory."

"Aye, I can see why you'd think that m'lord, but then why didn't these other bandits, if that is indeed what they were, why didn't they attempt to steal from me? They disappeared as soon as they appeared, not saying a word or even glancing towards me. Spirits I say, spirits or protectors."

The two men travelled in silence for a few minutes, Sir Denys thinking the story over and the merchant not wanting to speak out of place. Another few hours and they would be in Knaresburgh. He looked across the flat lands to the north and realised there were no farms or settlements this close to the Ryngwoode anymore, just the odd abandoned windmill or barn, and uncultivated fields. They had also yet to pass anyone on the road. Word of bandits in the area must have spread while both men were away.

"So your injuries, Stephen the merchant, tell me what happened there."

"Well," he started, with an almost embarrassed laugh, "As soon as those bastards were dead on the ground I tried to calm Old Arthur down, he was more agitated than ever by now. And for the first time in his life he kicked me, right in the chest. I'm lucky he's so old, otherwise I dare say I'd have been a goner there and then had it been a stronger horse. I

stumbled back and smacked into the side of the cart, and off he bolted down the road, leaving me to slump down where you found me. And here we are.”

“And here we are indeed,” agreed Sir Denys.

“After all I’d been through and witnessed in those few minutes, being killed by me own horse would have been a shit way to go,” the merchant laughed.

Sir Denys laughed with him. “Very true. Can I safely assume this will be your last journey down this particular road?”

“I’m certainly wishing I’d stuck to my usual route further to the north, m’lord. Although... ne’er mind.” The merchant stopped himself mid-sentence, as if he was about to say something he may regret. “And you sir, what brings you this way?”

“I’m returning home after great success at the tourney in Helmsley,” Sir Denys said, smiling.

“Congratulations m’lord. How successful, if It’s not too brazen to ask...?” replied the merchant.

“I’m not one to blow my own trumpet,” he certainly was, “but other than a fall to the Badger Knight, it was a full win.”

“I missed the events this time around, too busy in the markets, but I’ve seen the Badger Knight fight before and he’s a bloody big bastard, excusing my language m’lord.”

Sir Denys laughed. “He certainly is a big bastard, one of the biggest I’ve ever seen. Strong and a good fighter with it. My own squire had to stay in Knaresburgh, recovering from a summer illness. The priest said he’d be fine but required rest, so I ended up travelling alone, aside from Lady Baucent here. At the tournament they supplied me with a

local lad to squire, never seen a boy fumble so much. I swear I was set up to lose, but I showed them.” Sir Denys winked at the merchant, laughing.

“Days like this make me wish I was a fighter, m’lord. The roads ain’t safe for folks like me no more. I wasn’t born into a house of knights and guards. And I care not for the feasts and politics of the lords in their castles, I just want to live my life and ply my trade in peace and safety.” The merchant paused, an anxious look passing over his face. “If I may speak plainly, m’lord... I feel I’ll be going to petition your good lord father to do more about these bandits and make this road safe again. It’s bad enough we let these reavers have run through the Ryngwoode, but a man should be safe to travel this road. I pay my taxes, all fair, and I should be able to trade my wares out of town without being afeared for me life. Some of that tax money could be spent on helping the good folk of the land, not jousting and feasting.”

“I feel your brush with death today has indeed made you brazen, Stephen of Knaresburgh, a bit too brazen perhaps. Talk like that could send you to a cell,” replied Sir Denys, taking the words almost as a personal insult against his family.

“Aye, m’lord. Be that as it may, at least in a cell I have my life, that which flashed before my eyes today, twice in fact, and it’s made me think. I’d rather lose my head for calling out the wrongs of the world, than lose it to some bandit from the woods. Regular patrols would at least make them think twice about attacking folk like myself.” The cart hit another hole in the road, agitating the old man’s wounds. “And I’m sure some tax money could be spent on some stones to fill these holes the size of pots. Gonna knacker me bloody wheels one day!”

Sir Denys took a second to respond, thinking how he would feel in the merchant's position. "I can't disagree with you there, although I don't think there are the men to commit to such a task. These past years of peace have led to less of a need for trained men-at-arms, and many of the existing soldiers have been sent even further north to help deal with the Scots incursions."

All the lords north of the Humber had been requested by the King to send soldiers to New Castle to help fend off bandits coming over the border. The Scottish crown denied it, but everyone knew these 'bandits' were really highly trained soldiers, probably sent to weaken the northern English forces, ready for another, larger, invasion.

"Forgive me, m'lord. The day's events have taken their toll on me. It's just... it's angered me." The merchant was choosing his words carefully. "I've worked hard, I've brought my children up to do the same. I pay my taxes. And then someone comes along to try and take all that from me. All they do is steal and kill, and where did it get them? They got nothing from me and got themselves killed by the spirits of the wood. No respect for the people. Or the land."

Sir Denys didn't know how to respond. Charging full tilt at an opponent on horseback in front of a cheering crowd was easy. Talking to peasants, merchants or otherwise, about their insignificant problems was hard. He may be a knight, and one of the best fighters in the area (which he wasn't afraid to tell everyone), but it was up to his lord father to deal with this. Patrolling the roads for bandits was beneath a knight like him, but maybe the promise of a word with his father would put the merchant at ease somewhat.

"I'll speak to my father, see what can be done. Maybe an agreement can be made with other local lords to create a regular patrol of the road. A few bandits is no problem for

someone such as myself, but I understand now how afeared one such as yourself would be.”

“Oh thank you m’lord, thank you...” The merchant's words were cut short by a whistling sound and then the dull thud of an arrow hitting the side of the cart. Followed by another. And another.

“Take cover,” shouted Sir Denys, grabbing his shield and jumping off the cart. His eyes darted across the treeline ahead. Two... no, three men charged at him, another three still in the trees, probably the archers.

Blocking the next wave of arrows with his shield, he unsheathed his sword, lifted it high, and, blood now pumping, brought it down on the first bandit, cleaving the man in two from neck to waist.

Blood flooded the air.

He stumbled back in shock. Jousting and tourney fights were one thing, but Sir Denys had never seen this amount of blood before. The tourneys weren’t like they were in his forefathers day, rules had been brought in to appease the church, and although the odd accidental death happened, they were a much less violent place than the battlefield, which he himself had never experienced.

More arrows whistled through the air.

His armour now more red than green, he looked up to see a second man charging with a large axe, bringing it down swiftly on Sir Denys. But age and use had made the weapon weak and rusted. Blocking it with his sword, Sir Denys twisted sharply, shattering the old axe into a hundred pieces. He quickly pulled his sword back and thrust it into his

opponent's belly, twisting it. The man screamed, blood pouring from his mouth, before Sir Denys withdrew his sword and in one strike took the man's head.

Once again blood flooded the air like red rain.

No armour. Old weapons. Obviously untrained. Why would they attack a knight? These were desperate men. Probably hoping they could overwhelm him, take his armour, and sell whatever else they were hoping to find in the cart.

The third man turned and ran towards the trees. Sir Denys wasn't one to stab a man in the back. He wiped his sword on one of the dead men's shirts, as the surviving bandits quickly disappeared into the thick woodland ahead.

Once he was sure they were gone, he turned back towards the cart. "I think it's safe now, Stephen the merchant, though we best be going as quick as possible. Less than an hour and we'll be home."

The old man didn't respond. He sat slumped in the cart, two arrows in his chest.

In silence, Sir Denys laid him down in the back of the cart.

He pulled himself up onto the seat at the front and sat for a moment, looking at the old man and then at the bodies of the two bandits whose lives he took.

Years of training as a boy in his father's castle. Squiring for his uncle at the tourneys. Becoming a knight and fighting in the tournaments himself. None of that prepared him for actually taking a life. And now he had taken two, and allowed another to die under his protection.

He picked up his helmet, staring at the large ivy leaf in the centre, and swore to himself he wouldn't let anything like this happen to an innocent man ever again.

Before setting off home he took one last look into the treeline, thinking he could hear screams and drums in the distance. Whoever, or whatever, had saved the old man earlier was out there, somewhere, in the Ryngwoode.

The End