

The Final Challenge

by Lawrence Watt-Evans

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The royal funerary rites were long since finished and the crowd along the high street was thinning rapidly, but the last of the auxiliary troops were still straggling past when the old soldier ducked into the tavern. He grabbed himself a tankard of ale from a passing tray, turned to face the crowded room, and hoisted it in salute.

"To the old king!" he cried. "We won't see a man like *him* again!"

Most of the tavern's patrons smiled and murmured agreement, lifting their own drinks in reply.

Not everyone did, though. "You old fool," someone called back, "the old king's dead, and now that he's properly buried, let's drink to his son, the new king!"

The soldier hesitated, startled; for an instant his teeth bared in an angry grimace, but then he turned it into a rather stiff smile. "Fair enough," he answered, "I'll drink the new king's health, for he's a good man, too-- but I'll tell you, good as he is, he's not his father's equal." He swigged ale.

"And how is it you're so certain of that, then?" the other man called belligerently.

The soldier peered over his mug for the source of the voice, and spotted it-- a strapping young man of twenty or so, wearing the livery of the crown prince's personal guard, a uniform that no longer had quite the meaning it had had three days before. He was sitting with three other young men, all three in the attire of other divisions of the royal service.

That explained the fellow's hostility. The soldier knew that this was a hard time for the prince's men, as they sought to prove themselves-- the relative roles of the Prince's Guard and the King's Chosen Regiment were not yet settled. Such uncertainty could make anyone surly; there was no point in arguing with the fellow about it.

"Why, I've served with them both, boy," the soldier called back to the guardsman, "and I'll be glad to tell you all about it, if you'd like. I meant no disrespect to you, or to Prince... that is, King Philip."

"I don't need to hear any tall tales, old man," the guard answered.

"If by that you mean the sort of lies men usually swap in taverns," the soldier said, approaching the guard's table, "why, I don't mean to tell any-- just a few memories about young King Philip, long may he reign, and old King Geoffrey, bless his memory, and every word the truth."

The guardsman hesitated; he glanced around at his companions, judging their reactions, then shrugged. "Talk if you want, old man," he said, "But I don't promise to listen."

"I'd never expected such a promise," the soldier said, sinking into an empty chair across from the guardsman and setting his tankard on the table. He gazed around, as if thinking, and asked, "Ah, where to begin?"

"You say King Philip's no match for his father," the guardsman said challengingly. "I say that's crap. His Majesty's a warrior and a match for any man."

"Oh, he knows how to wield a sword, I'll give you that," the older man agreed, "but a warrior? How's anyone to say, when he's never gone to war?"

The guard's eyes narrowed. "I've seen His Majesty fight, and to my eyes a finer swordsman never lived; certainly no bent old fossil like King Geoffrey could match him!"

"You've seen him *fence*," the soldier corrected. "And in all likelihood you've seen him wrestle and box and ride and shoot and throw the javelin. But you've never seen him fighting for his life, because he's

never had to-- he was born a prince, where his sire was a minor baron's second son who fought his way to the throne."

"What of it, then? All the more honorable, then, to fight for what's his by right!"

"You think so?"

"I know it!" The guardsman made as if to rise.

The soldier did not; he shrugged, lifted his mug and drank, then put the tankard down empty and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The guard hesitated, then settled back into his chair.

"King's son or not," the soldier said, "the old king was one hell of a man, and a warrior to the end, even when he was too old to use a blade."

The guard snorted.

"No, it's true!" the soldier insisted. "Listen, I was at Prince Philip's manhood feast-- His Majesty was still the prince then, I mean no disrespect."

"Go on," the guard said. "I've heard the tale; let's hear your version. You say you were there?"

"That I was, lad, that I was. Not at the head table or anything-- no, I was just one of the guards at the door, the old king had his own old regiment there as an honor, but whether for us or the boy I don't know." He looked down into his empty mug and sighed. "That was when old Geoffrey fought his last battle with the sword, that feast-- you've heard the story, you said. Did you know that the king was more than sixty years of age at the time? Sixty-five, at least, I'd guess-- not the typical thing for the father of a lad just coming of age, but what with the wars and the rest of it, he'd got a late start at siring sons. His hair had gone grey, and his belly sagged, but he was still a fine man, with his own teeth and his eye still bright."

"An old man," the guard said derisively. "Like you."

The soldier snorted. "If I should be half so formidable at that age, I'd thank God and sing His praises half the day!"

"Still an old man."

"Aye," the soldier admitted. "An old man-- but the king, and still a warrior. He sat at the high table with his councilors and his old cronies, the Red Duke and Tom o' the Axe and the rest, shouting and drinking and carrying on..."

The guard muttered sarcastically, "Nothing like maintaining the royal dignity." His companions chuckled.

"The old king never worried overmuch about his dignity, true enough," the soldier agreed. "Certainly not then. He was having a fine time, he and his comrades taking turns telling stories. The boy-- Prince Philip, that is-- was seated at the second table, in accordance with protocol, until the stroke of midnight, when he'd be able to take his place with the men, and he had his own comrades about him. Some were men from your own company, some were courtiers and courtiers' sons, and his mother's friends, and his old playmates, all gathered about, making merry. If the truth be told, some were there because of their names and fathers, rather than because the prince actually liked them or wanted them there." He winked at the guard.

"I know the sort," the young man agreed.

"Whatever their excuses, there they all were, drinking and talking-- but being young, few of them had any great tales to tell, and in large part they listened to the boasting of their elders."

"I know that sort, too," the guardsman muttered.

The soldier nodded. "Don't we all," he said. "At any rate, there was one lad there who had drunk perhaps more than was good for him, a brawny fellow of twenty-three years or thereabouts, standing six and a half feet when he was upright, and strong as an ox. Perhaps he was unused to strong drink, or perhaps the excitement overcame him, or perhaps he was just a fool, but when the festivities grew loud, he was loudest; when the boys at the second table became rowdy, he was the rowdiest; and at last, upon hearing Lord Ashleigh's account of the defense of the Crimson Gate, he stood up and announced that the tale was nonsense."

"Was it?" the guardsman asked.

The soldier shrugged. "I wasn't at the Crimson Gate," he said, "nor was this lad-- yet he went farther,

and pronounced all the stories being told at the high table as the self-serving lies and senile exaggerations of useless old men."

"Were they?"

The soldier shrugged again. "The ones I knew first-hand were more truth than not."

"Go on."

"Well, the lords at the high table spoke out angrily, and called the lad a young idiot, among other disparagements, but King Geoffrey called for calm, and for a moment it appeared that reason and good will would triumph. The lords ceased their protests, and the lad found himself standing alone and silent, looking rather foolish.

"All might have been well, had not one of the other boys tugged at the oaf's sleeve and urged him to sit. 'Let the old men remember their days of glory,' the fellow said. 'They're the king's good servants.'

"And at that, the drunkard shouted out, 'They're liars, the lot of them, and the king's the worst of them all!'"

"Hunh," the guardsman muttered.

"Indeed," the soldier agreed. "I can still remember the utter silence, that tension in the air-- ever been in a real battle, friend? No? Well, if you had, you'd know that moment just before the first charge is made, before the first blow falls. It felt much like that-- but in the king's own great hall, and with no armies at the ready, but only a hot-tempered young fool making trouble.

"I watched from my post at the door as the king rose to his feet and faced the youth. Of course, all the others made to rise, too, as protocol demands, but the king motioned them back in their seats.

" 'Lad,' the king said quietly, 'Think well on what you've just said.'

"The young fool shouted back, 'I know what I said; I called you a liar. That's what you are-- a liar, and a usurper, and a coward who'd never dare face me if he didn't sit on a stolen throne!'"

"The boy had courage, anyway," the guardsman remarked.

"But little wit," the soldier said.

"Go on with the story."

"Well, now, you'd expect the king to rant and rage, and order the young man thrown in the deepest dungeon, but in fact he sighed, and he looked the lad in the eye, and told him, 'I know the hot temper of youth, and the courage we all find in strong drink; I suggest you take a moment to reconsider, and perhaps you'll wish to retract what you have said.'"

"Fairly spoken."

"I thought so," the soldier agreed. "I told you, the old king was one hell of a man."

The guardsman gestured for the story to continue.

"Well, as I already said, the hall was silent, so still it seemed that no one even breathed, and every soul present heard the youth pause, and draw a deep breath-- and then not recant, not at all, but instead say, 'I've nothing to retract-- you're a scared old man, afraid to die in an honorable combat.'

"The king answered him, 'There is nothing honorable in such a duel,' but it was clear the youth was determined to have his duel, or else, should the king fall back upon the royal prerogatives and have him imprisoned or slain, to become a martyr to the king's tyranny. I suppose the boy's family or friends had some old grudge against the king that had inspired this; I doubt it could be purely drunken folly, though that was plainly to be the excuse."

The soldier paused long enough to signal for another ale, explaining, "Talking's thirsty work." Then he continued, "The king knew the boy wanted to fight, and he made no further attempt to avoid it. Instead he called for his sword, and ordered that the boy's own sword be found and brought, and then he marched down from the high table to the center of the hall, where there was room to fight.

"Everyone else just watched, the feast forgotten, as the two swords were delivered and the two men faced each other across a few yards of stone pavement.

"Whatever the lad had said, it seemed at that moment that no one could doubt the old king's courage. An old man, past sixty, against this young man in his prime.

"The sight-- Ah, I remember it well! What a contrast! That great hulking youth, glowing with health, took up a formal fighting stance as if he were performing for his fencing master. And the old king stood a

head shorter, his face lined, the tendons standing out as he gripped the hilt, hands shaking, his gray hair partially obscuring his face. He fell from old habit into *his* preferred stance, which was a sort of wary crouch, crooked and graceless. He looked like a troll facing a god." The soldier shook his head at the memory, then swigged ale.

The young men at the table shifted restlessly, and one glanced behind, as if he feared someone might be waiting to arrest him for not objecting to such an unflattering description of the late monarch.

The soldier paid no attention; when he had wet his throat sufficiently he continued, "The youth attacked first, swinging the sword like an axe-- he couldn't be troubled with fencing's fine points, not against a tired old man, not when they were both drunk. He swung with such strength that it would have gone clear through the king-- had it struck him. The king stepped aside, though, and deflected the blow, sending it harmlessly aside with his sword.

" 'It's not too late to apologize,' the king said.

"The boy bellowed a wordless challenge, and attacked again, this time showing some pretty skill-- in fact, now that he knew a single blow would not serve, he put on a display of the finest fencing-school flutters and flourishes that ever I saw, the blade weaving about like a snake, fast as a cat's paw striking. The king gave ground, turning each attack with his own sword, or else contriving not to be in quite the spot where the blow fell, but it appeared that only by great effort and astonishing luck did he turn the attacks.

"At last, the lad had the king backed up against a pillar.

" 'Your last chance,' the king said.

"The youth laughed, and roaring with confidence, he lunged forward in a simple thrust-- and fell to the floor with a look of dumb amazement on his face, having been run through the heart once the king had his measure."

The soldier shook his head and smiled.

"Old Geoffrey knew it's not youth and strength that make a warrior, nor a king," he said. "He gave that boy his chance several times over. He never lost his temper, never did anything rash, never let his enemy know his strengths."

"You mean his weaknesses."

"No, no-- I mean his *strengths*. So the boy ran right into them. The shaking hands, the seeming weakness-- what better way to mislead a foe? And King Geoffrey was brave, but he was no fool; he'd not have fought had he not been certain he would win. Why risk his life when a word would have had the boy arrested and hanged? Oh, a martyrdom might be trouble, but better to face a later insurrection than to die in a stupid brawl. Dead kings do no one any good, most especially not themselves. Geoffrey knew that well." The soldier sighed. "He would never have fought if he didn't know his own strengths, and he knew them well, after all those years. Age and experience outweigh strength and bravado any day."

"So you old men would have us believe," the guardsman said.

"Oh, no," the old soldier said. "Better for us if you don't! Had that young idiot known it, he'd never have challenged the king so openly."

"Ha, a point!" one of the guard's companions shouted, and the four young men laughed.

The soldier did not join them.

"Finish your tale, old man," another said when the laughter had passed.

"Oh, that's all of it, really," the soldier said. "After the king had won, after the boy had died there on the floor, King Geoffrey called for the party to continue, apologized for the unpleasantness, and sent for servants to clean up the mess. And twenty minutes later, at midnight, young Philip came to take his seat at the high table.

"And that," said the old soldier, finishing his ale, "was twenty years ago next month."