

The Fox of Bannockburn

This is a story about a brave boy called Ruaridh who went into the encampment of the English Army on the night before the Battle of Bannockburn.

Ruaridh took with him his trained raven called Tark to carry back messages to his Uncle James, known as The Black Douglas, one of the most important Generals serving King Robert the Bruce of Scotland.

The red-haired boy wore the clothes of a peasant boy and carried a scribe's pouch so that he could write messages to send back on Tark's leg.

But Ruaridh met difficulties.

The great oak tree he used as his hideout was also chosen as the place to pitch the King's Tent. Ruaridh found himself perched above King Edward the Second of England and his Close Order Knights.

He dropped his pouch from the tree. Tark flew off and left him. He could not whistle to call her back. To do so risked discovery.

Ruaridh had important news that The Black Douglas needed. This was information that could affect the outcome of the Battle. Time was short.



A story by John Bonthron

This story was written for Ruaridh, a boy who knows a lot about the Battle of Bannockburn.

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The Black Douglas

'Well, Ruaridh, do you think you can do it, laddie?'

'Yes, Uncle James, I'll take Tark with me and send her back with a message.'

'Right, off you go, before it gets light.'

Lord James Douglas, known to all as The Black Douglas, was one of the most important Generals under Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland. Lord James and Ruaridh's father were cousins.

The Black Douglas had encamped his men amongst the trees at the top of a slight slope leading up from the Moor of the Burn of the Bannock. Most people had already adopted the shortened name, the Moor of Bannockburn or even just Bannockburn.

The Black Douglas had ordered his soldiers to hide in this wood to give them protection from the feared arrows of the Welsh Archers with their powerful longbows. Like the English Cavalry, the Welsh Archers were very important to Edward the Second, King of England.

Lord James sat on Negron, his jet black stallion.

Ruaridh, (the Red One), served as the most junior of his Uncle's squires, (personal servants). The slim boy wrapped his black cloak around him, pulling its hood up to cover his bright red hair.

'Take courage Little Fox. For Scotland and for Freedom,' said the Black Douglas quietly, in his deep voice.

It was two hours after midnight: the sky was overcast and inky black - a perfect night for a spy to go about his work.

Ruaridh smiled nervously. Although it was scary going out alone at night, the Little Fox disappeared silently into the gloom, moving like a black ghost.

Tark the raven was sitting on the right shoulder of the tall Knight. From the darkness Ruaridh gave a short piercing whistle to call the bird to action. The Black Douglas smiled, making him look less fierce.

'Off you go Tark, go with our Little Fox and bring me back his messages.'

The large bird flapped her wings then leapt off her master's shoulder and swooped low over the dark moor before soaring up to circle high above the boy, watching from the night sky as Ruaridh picked his way slowly

Edward the Second. It would become a family heirloom which Ruaridh would inherit again when he was much older.

His younger sister Anya did not believe Ruaridh when he told her everything that had happened. She said that he was making it all up, and that it was a big fat fairy story.

But Anya was impressed by the bracelet. Ruaridh let her wear it, sometimes.

And he gave her the green cap with the red tassel to keep for herself. She said it gave her magic powers, that it helped her to see fairies and elves in the woods. She said when she wore it she could sing much sweeter than anyone else.

But Ruaridh refused to let her ride his palfrey.

No one but the Fox of Bannockburn was allowed to ride Stella.

And Ruaridh trained Tark to watch over the little horse, to act as her guardian.

After all, Stella had been taken once before from a careless owner.

Homecoming

A few months later, the contingent under the command of Lord James Douglas, travelled towards the Douglas lands to the south. There would be further fighting in the months and years ahead, but for the present it was time to head for home to rest up, to recover from wounds and injuries, repair weapons and equipment.

The boy sat astride Stella and rode at the side of his Uncle, The Black Douglas. Ruaridh rode bareback. He had the purple caparison folded and stowed in his back sack, as a present for his Mum. It was made of the finest cloth and she might remake it into clothes for herself. The Fox carried the Blackstaff like a lance, its knobble resting on his right foot, its sharp point upwards. Tark sat on his right shoulder, sometimes nibbling gently at his ear. Tucked inside his shirt was the Bishop's green cap with its red tassel which The Black Douglas had retrieved from the Scottish Bishop. On his wrist Ruaridh the Fox of Bannockburn wore a golden bracelet bestowed on him by his grateful King.

ooOoo

When Ruaridh reached home, his father Kenneth the Wise smiled broadly when he received the gift of a valuable silver goblet bearing the personal crest of

towards the Burn of the Bannock where the entire English Army was encamped.

The Pots

As he neared the Burn of the Bannock the ground underfoot was boggy, but the boy did not sink into it because he was light and nimble-footed. He had to watch out for The Pots. These were deep holes, almost as deep as Ruaridh was tall, and covered with bracken and twigs to disguise them. At the bottom of most Pots were sharp pointed wooden stakes or bundles of bramble bush branches with sharp thorns, or a live adder ready to strike and sink its venom into a leg or foot. If a man or a horse stood or slipped into a pot, it would usually cause a broken leg or a deep and disabling stab wound, and possibly death.

Ruaridh knew where most of The Pots had been dug. These Pots were Uncle James' idea, and Ruaridh had helped his men dig them. The Pots were there to slow down and disrupt the charge of the English Cavalry and Infantry which would follow on foot behind the horses. The plan was that by slowing the English Army as it tried to cross the Moor of Bannockburn, it would be easier for the Scottish Archers to hit them with their arrows, by shooting down on them from the woods above. The Scottish Archers had only short bows and could not fire their arrows very far. It would be many years before

'On them! On them! They fail!'

The Scottish Infantry raced downhill to harry their English foes, killing and disabling hundreds.

It took two days for Robert the Bruce and the Scots to win the battle of Bannockburn. It would be recorded in history as one of Scotland's most famous battles.

It was a decisive battle, given impetus for success by the brave action of a small red-haired boy, his plucky horse and his clever raven. Few people would learn of the important role played by Ruaridh the Fox of Bannockburn.

standstill, then hauled the corpse the ground and hacked at it into many pieces.

"Scotland! Freedom!" shouted King Robert at the top of his voice.

Only now did the other Scottish troops now realise what was happening.

The Scottish Schiltrons, (men with very long spears), ran into the path of the other fifty English Knights and, footing their spears, sloped them at an angle pointing them forwards, forming a protective wall in front of their King.

Many of these English Knights could not stop their charge quickly enough and were impaled on the Scottish spears. Those who were lucky enough to wheel round and retreat were shot at by the Scottish Archers.

The English Infantry force that had been running up the hill behind their Cavalry panicked and turned back, running headlong into their fellow soldiers still running forwards. In those days soldiers did not wear uniforms and in the confusion quite a few English soldiers fought each other. And many died under a hail of Scottish arrows. Others limped away with broken legs or arms, some with arrows sticking into them.

All along the Scottish lines the war cry went up:

Scottish Archers got the more powerful longbows, the most fearsome weapon of those times.

In the darkness The Pots were very hard to spot, even though Ruaridh had good night sight. To help him carried "The Blackstaff". The Blackstaff was very old. It had belonged to Ruaridh's famous ancestor, Sir William Wallace. It was more than twice Ruaridh's height and was his most precious possession.

He used it to test the ground ahead, feeling for Pots. To do this he prodded the ground with the pointed end which was sheathed with a strong iron tip, and could be used as a spear. The other end was much thicker and ended with a large hard knobble. When swung with force this knobble end could be used to crush a skull or break a leg.

The Blackstaff was a gift from Ruaridh's father Kenneth Wallace - Kenneth the Wise, as everyone called him. He was very clever and a clear thinker. Ruaridh was following in his footsteps.

In a previous battle Kenneth had suffered a serious injury to his ankle and was at home recovering. But he was not idle. His task was to guard the family home near a place called Douglas, far to the south of Bannockburn. It was a hard task because Kenneth had sent most of his able-bodied men with Ruaridh to help The Black Douglas.

There were many English sympathisers called reivers skulking around, trying to steal cattle, sheep and other livestock from the Clan Douglas lands.

Ruaridh had not yet had to use The Blackstaff as a weapon. Like his father and his Uncle James, the Little Fox preferred using his brain to avoid direct fights. But if required he intended to use it. Being a spy was very dangerous work: if he was caught the Little Fox would suffer extreme torture followed by a very gory death.

Under his cloak Ruaridh wore the clothes of a peasant boy, even though he was of noble blood. He was called the Little Fox because he was very practised at sneaking behind enemy lines. Tonight was the most crucial spying mission he had ever attempted.

It was certain now that there would be a battle later that day. It was Sunday 24 June, in the year 1314. In those days that was Midsummer Day.

This date had been written into an Agreement and signed by Edward Bruce, the brother of King Robert. This was a bad agreement and allowed the English Garrison who held Stirling Castle, time to send for help. During the last few weeks the English Army had been assembling.

And now at last the English King and his Generals had arrived.

'Remember you're Scottish now, Stella, you're on our side. Stand true, there's a good lassie. Be brave for your King. For Scotland and for Freedom.'

The English Knight was almost upon them. Through the slit in the visor of the Knight's shiny helmet, Ruaridh could see the glint of triumph in his eyes. This bold Knight who had galloped ahead of the others was certain he would kill King Robert the Bruce of Scotland to gain for himself immense chivalric honour; and probably great wealth as a reward from a grateful King Edward of England.

But just before the lance struck at the heart of King Robert the Bruce, Tark soared up into the English Knight's face, screaming:

'TAAARK! TAAARK! TAAAAAARK!'

The Knight was put off his aim. The tip of the lance flew upwards and missed King Robert's head by a mere hand-span. And, as the English Knight hurtled past, King Robert rose to his full height and from Stella's back he smashed Black Bob down on his challenger's head, splitting it into two almost equal parts.

Already dead, with blood gushing up in a great fountain from his head, the English Knight's corpse stayed upright as his horse charged on into the path of the Scots warriors. They grabbed the horse's reins; brought it a

But Robert the Bruce did not flee. He stopped the little horse and turned her head on to the charge of the English Knight, shouting in defiance:

'That's it my wee mannie, come and meet my good friend Black Bob, he's ready to send you to Hell!'

What Robert the Bruce meant was his huge battle axe which Ruaridh had heard was called Black Bob. The King of the Scots was swinging Black Bob round and round above his head. Black Bob had a broad blade of the finest iron, hardened and sharpened so that it could slice through armour if wielded with great force.

But how could King Robert on a little palfrey win against a heavily armoured Knight with a lance, racing towards him at full charge? Surely even Black Bob could not beat that?

Ruaridh could tell that Stella was frightened. The little palfrey was not a fiery war horse. She had not been bred or trained for battle. Stella was a docile, obedient and biddable horse and was very afraid of the two hundred thundering hooves pounding towards her. She began to shy away, distracting King Robert from defending himself. The King needed help to control her. Ruaridh ran forward quickly and grabbed her head rope. He blew in her nostrils and whispered in her ear to calm her down, to give her courage.

The Battle of Bannockburn would pit the smaller Scots Army against the much larger English Army.

Over the last weeks Ruaridh the Little Fox had been backwards and forwards many times across the Moor of Bannockburn, gathering information for Uncle James. On these spying missions he had not written anything down, in case he got caught. Thankfully the Little Fox had an excellent memory.

Crossing the Moor

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning.

Normally the Little Fox went across the Moor of Bannockburn in daylight, travelling alone without Tark, as if he was a peasant boy looking for a lost piglet or goat kid. Sometimes he would jab at the ground, pretending, as if hoping to stab a rabbit or hare. He seldom moved in straight lines, first tracking one way then another, as if hunting. To the English sentries Ruaridh looked small and harmless. Even if he was noticed he was seldom challenged.

But tonight the English were very nervous. He would have to be careful. Being just after the very short Mid-summer's Night, the Sun would be up again soon. For the next hour the night would remain at its darkest, perfect for his purpose, when sentries were often sleepest.

Ruaridh was taking Tark tonight because later, when the fighting started, he would stay behind the English lines. The boy knew the area well and he had a plan. He was heading for the huge oak tree that dominated the Moor on the other side of the Burn of the Bannock, on the English side. The tree stood on a hillock and was the highest point in the landscape, apart from the towering bulk of Stirling Castle which stood in the distance.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, and because he was the only one who had kept his eyes open, Ruaridh spotted an English Knight riding fast up the slight hill towards the woods. Behind him was a large group of English Knights, more than fifty of them. The leading Knight lifted his lance into its holster lowering it to the charge position.

'King Robert, look out Sire, you are in danger!' cried Ruaridh.

Tark cawed loudly and flapped her wings.

Grabbing his battle axe, King Robert sprang to his feet.

'Your palfrey, laddie, bring it here to me.'

King Robert leapt up on Stella and urged her forward.

The English Knight continued his charge, bearing down on his huge dappled grey stallion, his lance pointing firmly ahead.

Ruaridh groaned. It looked certain that King Robert would be run through by the lance and killed outright or mortally wounded, leaving the Scots Army leaderless. If this happened then King Edward of England would surely win.

Many voices were raised by the other onlookers.

'Run Sire, flee! For God's pity, Sire, flee!'

group of Warriors. Uncle James had gone as well. In the excitement and haste Ruaridh had been forgotten.

King Robert knelt before an elderly man that Ruaridh had been told was a Bishop, although he was not dressed as a holy man but wearing the clothes of a soldier, with a sword at his side. This Scottish Bishop was also wearing a green cap with a red tassel. Ruaridh was sure it was the cap he had taken from under the bush, or one very like it, identical.

Robert the Bruce wore a simple crown of gold on his head to mark him as the King. He was not yet wearing his full chain mail armour. He wore simple leather armour, and over it a yellow tabard with a red lion rampant front and back. Dressed like this there was no mistaking who he was.

Both men had their eyes closed and the Scottish Bishop began what was to be a long prayer. Ruaridh thought about kneeling, like the others around him. But he remained standing, holding Stella's head rope, Tark on his shoulder, watching the scene before him.

It was hard for Ruaridh to hear what was being said in this prayer, because of the shouting and screaming coming up to the hill from the Moor of Bannockburn. The fighting had now started in earnest.

Ruaridh planned to hide high in the huge tree until the fighting was over. Then, when it was safe, he would re-cross the Burn of the Bannock to re-join his Uncle James and the Scottish Army of King Robert the Bruce.

Often battles like this could last for days, but Uncle James had set a trap. If the English Calvary and Infantry could be fooled into charging across the Moor of Bannockburn and get caught by The Pots, this would put them within easy reach of the Scottish Archers.

The Black Douglas had advised King Robert that if it worked, the Scots could win on the first day, provided they could avoid the deadly arrows of the Welsh Archers with their powerful longbows.

Tark

Ruaridh had reared Tark from a chick and trained her as a messenger bird. Tark had been easy to train. Ravens are amongst the cleverest birds in the world. His father had helped him. Kenneth was very good with birds and had many hunting hawks which he used to control crows and buzzards which might kill and eat baby animals.

Tark was still young for a raven, only three years old, but already fully grown. People said that ravens might live until they were thirty or more, if they got a good supply of food and were not forced to live outside during winter. At home Tark slept in Ruaridh's bedroom and got lots of good food. She was in prime condition: strong, alert and willing to obey.

Under his cloak the Little Fox had a small leather bag called a scribe's pouch. Inside the pouch there was a tight roll of thin sheets of parchment, a small metal pot of ink and three quills. There was also a small blade to sharpen the quills. If Ruaridh was caught with these items he would be in mortal danger: they would prove he was a spy. It could mean torture followed by certain death, even though he was only ten years old.

When Ruaridh had new information he would command Tark to fly back to his Uncle James. The raven would

'Yes Uncle James. I was up that big oak. I saw and heard everything. Look, here's the English Bishop's cap, Tark swooped down on him to save me.'

The Little Fox delved inside his shirt and pulled out the green cap with the red tassels and handed it to The Black Douglas.

'By the Good Lord, you were there after all! Well done, Ruaridh Wallace, our Little Fox of Bannockburn.'

The Black Douglas let out a great whoop of joy and threw the cap up in the air. Everyone turned to look at what had made him so happy.

'Wait here, laddie. I may have another job for you. I must tell the King your news.'

Tark bit Ruaridh's ear, but only gently. Ruaridh fished out his last piece of cheese and she held it in her beak like a toy before throwing it up then swallowing it whole.

To Ruaridh it sounded as if the King and his War Council were having a loud argument. Nearly everyone was talking at the same time, shouting.

But then King Robert's strong voice prevailed.

The Bruce gave his orders. His *Generals* dispersed at once, moving swiftly to their horses before riding off at a full gallop, each leaving to take command of his own

James's plan. The War Council were being cautious, unsure of when to mobilise into a full attack.

Tark sat on Black Douglas's shoulder. Ruaridh gave a very short sharp whistle to attract her. The bird swivelled her head and spotted Ruaridh. Calling loudly she flew over to the boy's shoulder. Uncle James turned, saw Ruaridh and smiling, strode quickly towards him.

'Thank the Good Lord you are safe, laddie. When Tark came back without a message from you I thought they must have caught you. What happened? How many Archers?'

'Three hundred and fifty Archers to our left flank. And nearly three thousand Heavy Horse Cavalry, mostly Noblemen in the centre. But Uncle, they have many, many thousands of Infantry. Maybe as many as twenty thousand. And there are more arriving every hour. We are heavily outnumbered Uncle James, it's very bad.'

'No, laddie, it's not as bad as you think. We have the higher ground and they are have made a bad mistake, as we had planned for them. They are coming at us across the soft ground, across the Moor of Bannockburn. And the Pots are taking their toll.'

'Now, laddie, look me in the eye. Listen, this is very, very important. Can you swear to me that this information is true?'

happily fly backwards and forwards like this all day long, provided she got a small reward, like an apple or a dead mouse. Like Ruaridh one of her favourite foods was cheese. Ruaridh's pockets were stuffed full of cheese.

The Spy at Work

The Sun was high in the sky. The clouds had gone and visibility was very good. It would soon be noon.

Ruaridh had been in hiding high in the tall oak tree for many hours. He was wedged into a junction where a large branch grew away from the trunk. It was a good place of concealment. His lofty position gave him a fairly good all round view.

At first light, as soon as the Sun had burned away the morning mist, Ruaridh had sketched a map showing where all the English troops were lined up, giving the locations of the Welsh Archers, the English Cavalry comprising of Knights and Noblemen, their squires, and the thousands of ordinary fighting men that made up the Infantry.

When his diagram was ready, he rolled it into a tight tube shape, tied it to Tark's leg then sent her off to Uncle James.

It had been difficult to get up to this spot in the tree and he had needed both hands to climb. Getting The Blackstaff up into the tree with him had proved impossible. To hide it he used a trick he had used many times before. He had stabbed the pole into the ground in the middle of a tallish bush. It now looked like part of

Turning Point

Ruaridh stood on the fringe, behind the elite group of men who served Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland. These men were called the War Council and most of them were *Generals*. The most important of these men was The Black Douglas.

This was the closest Ruaridh had ever been to the King and the only person he knew was his Uncle James. Each time his Uncle turned his head in Ruaridh's direction the boy waved, hoping to attract his attention. But Ruaridh remained unseen.

Although the Little Fox was desperate to deliver his news about the Welsh Archers and the English Cavalry, he knew better than to shout out and interrupt the War Council. The Black Douglas was busy, talking loudly, making jokes and causing everyone to laugh. Ruaridh was disappointed; he began to think that his news was of little importance.

The King's party were watching the fighting below. From what Ruaridh could make out it seemed to be going well for the Scots. But so far the major part of the Scottish Army was being held back, letting the Scottish Archers take their toll on the English Cavalry, firing from the edge of the woods, all in accordance with Uncle

The Scots were in a good mood, laughing and cracking jokes about Eddie the Drunk, as they called the English King.

Ruaridh urged Stella onwards to the King's party.

the bush and remained hidden while still in plain view. Anyone who looked carefully would easily see it. But, as in the past, no one looked carefully and so it had not been spotted.

Unfortunately, in the early hours just after dawn, the King's squires had arrived and put up the King's Tent beside the tree, placed there so that everyone would know where King Edward the Second of England was located. The King's Tent was surrounded by many Knights sitting on their horses, waiting for orders to begin the attack the Scottish Army. Ruaridh thought that some of these Knights would be English Nobles, perhaps Generals, like Uncle James. They were known as Close Order Knights, because they were allowed close to the King.

From his perch Ruaridh could see King Edward strutting about shouting loudly to his soldiers:

Raise the Dragon!

No mercy to be given!

Spare none of them!

Slaughter the Scottish dogs!

Every one of them must die.

In his hand the King carried a silver goblet. It was half-filled with red wine. Every so often he would offer a toast:

Drink the blood of the Scots!

After each toast King Edward took another large gulp of wine. The King had been drinking wine since breakfast time.

Ruaridh had another problem. Directly below him was a small stocky man with a very big stomach. He wore a purple cassock with a long red scarf hanging round his neck.

Ruaridh was not sure, but he thought the man below him might be a Bishop. The tubby man was praying continuously in Latin, asking for God to help King Edward's Army to slaughter the Scots. Ruaridh understood Latin well. He could also speak French and Gaelic.

On his shaven tonsured head he wore a small green cap with a red tassel. In his right hand he carried a black pole with a large golden cross fixed to its top. The pole was very tall, three times the height of the holy man.

When King Edward gave the order, this holy man would lead the English Army on foot for the first few yards, then he would move back to stand beside King Edward, near the rear of the Army, safe from the worst of the danger.

The Little Fox returns

It took Ruaridh nearly an hour to reach the outskirts of the western edge of the woods where most of the Scottish troops were waiting in hiding. Stella had performed well, as he had expected, never once complaining and trotting as quickly as the rough terrain would allow.

Some of the men knew Ruaridh and told the others. He heard them calling out as he passed through them.

'Hello Little Fox, how goes it with you, young Master Wallace?'

'All is well, and you, sirs? Are you ready to fight?'

'Aye, young Master, that we are!'

Then they cried up in chorus:

'For King Robert and for Scotland!'

Ruaridh saw one of his father's men.

'Andrew, do you know where my Uncle is?'

'Straight on, young Master Ruaridh, the Black Douglas is with the King. Yonder, at the far side, on the edge of the woods, watching the English getting stuck by the mud and The Pots, I heard. '

The huge man started walking towards Ruaridh.

Ruaridh put on his most proper voice, pretending to be English, and spoke out strongly. He also pointed the sharp end of The Blackstaff at the man, acting with an air of authority to hide his fear. If necessary he would stab at him, aim at his weird eyes, disable him and ride off as fast as he could.

'None of your business blacksmith. Stand down at once. Do you dare to halt the Bishop's squire when he is on an important errand, carrying a message to the Castle? I shall remember your face. Count on it. Get about your work or I'll report you.'

It worked. The man backed away then turned back to his wagon, saying over his shoulder, but quietly:

'Aw right, aw right, keep yer rid hair on yer heid, wee freckally face!'

Since sending Tark, Ruaridh had been watching and waiting for her return. Many hours had passed and, because he had stayed nearly perfectly still, trying not to show himself, he had painful pins and needles in his legs; and his backside was aching. He was worried that when she returned she might attract attention to him, revealing his hiding place.

Tark and the Bishop

In the distance, leaving from the woods where The Black Douglas and his men were concealed, Ruaridh saw the black bird flapping lazily towards him. She could fly fast but she seldom did, nearly always flying slowly like this. It was a good thing, it made her look harmless, just another black bird with no special purpose about her.

At first it seemed that Tark had forgotten where Ruaridh was, because she was flying far to his right and would miss the tree. He did not dare to risk even a short whistle.

As the big bird got nearer he could see she had a message for him. It was tied to her right leg. A right leg message meant top priority.

Then the raven wheeled round in a great curving swoop, diving round towards the oak tree. Ruaridh was hoping now that she would remember not to make her distinctive loud 'TAAARK' call when she saw him.

It went well. Tark landed high above him, in complete silence, at the very top of the tree. She hopped down through the branches to flutter onto his shoulder. Now that she was fully grown she was quite heavy. Her

Authorities, they would be hung, drawn and quartered, and their family with them. It was not worth the risk, however tempting.

Only once was Ruaridh challenged.

The man was big and burly with great hairy muscled arms and dirt-stained hands. He wore the leather apron of a blacksmith. He had a bad squint in his eyes and they flicked continuously from side to side. Ruaridh thought that they were focussed on the King's silver goblet.

The boy felt sure that the man was just about to rush forward to grab at Stella's head rope, knock him from the horse and seize the King's goblet. He might even steal Stella. If he disposed of Ruaridh, who would know, who would tell what had happened? Who among the English would care if they found the body of another peasant boy lying in a ditch after a great battle? This man could even pack up and leave. Taking Stella and the goblet would make it worth his while. The blacksmith would be rich.

Despite his fearsome appearance the man's challenge was half-hearted. There was something about this boy in peasant's clothing that spoke of Royalty, and Edgar the blacksmith recognised it.

'Hoy you, whit ur ye daein oan the Bishop's wee horsey?'

There were small fires burning everywhere, burning off the feathers of dead chickens, pigeons and roasting piglets, already making food for the English Army when it returned later, to celebrate its expected victory. The smell was acrid, and the fumes caused Ruaridh's eyes to smart and stream with tears.

After any battle, most of these people and their families would turn into scroungers, walking amongst the dead and injured left to die on the battlefield, relieving them of their possessions, taking the spoils of war.

In fact one of the problems for the Scots army was that it was short of camp followers. Many of these people had decided to follow the English Army, for they, like Edward of England, were certain that the English would beat the Scots.

Most of the people who saw the small red-haired boy riding a fancy horse did not dare to speak to him. Everyone knew that a boy riding a horse must be of the Nobility. Despite his poor clothes he wore the Bishop's green cap with its red tassel. He carried an expensive looking ornamental silver goblet tied to his belt. And he had a small lance. He must be a boy squire of some kind, they thought. The English were very keen on lots of servants, everyone knew that. To rob him was tempting, but anyone on a horse must be important. Everyone knew that. If they were caught, if someone told the

powerful beak could crush a man's finger, and even break it.

He gave her a lump of cheese then stroked her chest. He untied the cord to free the message. It was from Uncle James, written in his heavy, spidery handwriting that Ruaridh knew well.

How many Archers on our left flank?

How many Horsemen in Centre?

The Little Fox immediately ripped this message into tiny pieces and swallowed them so that no one else could know what had been asked.

Ruaridh took his time, counting carefully. He made it three hundred and forty three Archers, say three hundred and fifty. To get a better view of the Cavalry he stretched around the trunk of the tree. Tark shifted her weight and nibbled at his ear, tickling him, making him want to giggle. He counted almost three thousand horsemen.

Then disaster struck.

As Ruaridh twisted and eased himself carefully back to the safety of his hiding place, Tark hopped off his shoulder onto a tree branch. This caused Ruaridh to lose his balance. He almost fell out of the tree but he grabbed on just in time.

His scribe's pouch slipped from his grasp and fell. It hit the Bishop, bouncing off his head, knocking his green red-tasselled cap to the ground. The pouch was light and did not do any damage.

The holy man walked backwards, away from the tree, looking upwards.

Ruaridh flattened himself against the trunk, feeling sure that he would be seen.

Tark redeemed herself. She plummeted down at the Bishop with her wings held tightly to her body, as she did when she spotted a mouse or a rabbit.

"TAAARK! TAAARK! TAAAAARK!"

The small round man stumbled away, retreating, afraid of the bird's large beak and her claws. She tried to stab at his bald head but he ducked then swiped at her with his black pole. Still screeching, the large black bird looped away and soared up into the sky.

Ruaridh could have easily called her back but he did not dare to use his special whistle. He watched in dismay as Tark headed back to Uncle James. Then he remembered that he had lost his scribe's pouch and had no means of making a message anyway.

The holy man was back again at the base of the tree, picking up Ruaridh's pouch, looking inside, clearly puzzled.

Camp Followers and Scroungers

For the first part of his journey Ruaridh had to make his way through the groups of bullock carts and wagons that belonged to the thousands of camp followers. These were the people who always followed any army. They provided food and other supplies, for a reward, usually gold or silver coin. The most important amongst them were the blacksmiths who made horseshoes and repaired armour; the farriers who tended the horses; and the fletchers who made arrows and mended bows.

But there was a full range of skills amongst them, providing everything needed to support a large travelling army. Very few of these folk were English by birth. Most were from the southern lands of Scotland or the northern parts of England. These were people used to travelling rough who had taken the chance to follow Edward's Army, seeing it as an opportunity to make some money. Whole families travelled with these wagons or followed on foot, carrying their tools and goods in tough leather sacks. The wagons were pulled by bullocks. Only rich people were allowed horses. These were rough, common people who would easily turn to robbing if the chance arose. Ruaridh knew he was in danger.

forehead, do you? How about Stella? Do you like that? That's it, lassie, Stella it will be. That's your new name. You're a Scottish horse now.'

Ruaridh gave her another mouthful of cheese then untethered her. Taking hold of her head rope he stretched up on his tip-toes and eased himself up onto her back. He was used to riding bareback, without a saddle. In fact he preferred it. Unless a saddle was made to suit a person in could be very uncomfortable and cause riding sores.

Stella did not complain. Using his knees and the head rope, he turned her towards the bush where The Blackstaff stood. He stretched out, tugged it out of the ground. He carried it in in his right hand with the pointed end upwards, the heavy knobble resting on his foot. It was as if The Blackstaff was once again a simple lance, as it had been for Sir William Wallace, those long years ago.

'C'mon Stella, let's go. And just remember, lassie, you're Scottish now, so behave yourself.'

Then he laughed, and in a loud voice called out:

'Well now I've seen everything - a bird stealing a scribe's bag. And this is paper is very good quality too. It's a sign from God, a gift from above. I'll tell the King!'

In his haste he forgot about his cap. But Ruaridh could see it, under a bush, hidden from view.

Spoils of War

The Little Fox had avoided discovery but he had a major problem. How would he get the information to Uncle James about the Archers and the Cavalry? Even if Tark returned, Ruaridh had lost his pouch.

Ruaridh saw the holy man scamper after Edward. He saw the King and his Close Order Knights talking and laughing as the Bishop held Ruaridh's pouch up, dangling it from his cross, waving it for everyone to see. The King and his Generals were too far away for Ruaridh to hear what was being said. The meeting did not last long. It seemed that a decision had been reached.

The King returned to his tent and his squires helped him don his armour.

The Bishop stood beside him, again praying that God would help the English Army to gain victory. The King and his entourage ignored the Bishop. They were all talking at once about the bird and the pouch, saying it was a good omen, showing that God was on the English side, telling each other and the King that he was right, that they should be bold and charge straight at the Scots Army, that victory was certain now because of the pouch, the good omen.

ducked down to look under the caparison to check. As he had guessed, the palfrey was a mare, a female horse.

She was a dark brown and had a star shaped white mark on her forehead. She was calm, a good sign, and was nuzzling at his pocket. He dug out some crumbs of cheese and she nibbled them gently then licked his hand with her long slippery pink tongue.

She had a large cloud of flies buzzing around her. Her long tail was swishing, and she threw up her head to dislodge them from around her eyes and mouth.

She was a fine specimen, probably about five years old, he thought, in her prime. Ruaridh was a good horseman, riding since the age of three. He knew that even though he was in a great hurry he had to befriend her first, before trying to mount her. She had to trust him.

'Hello bonnie lassie. Oh, you are so, so beautiful. Yes you are. And you are so, so strong. I know you will be fast...'

As he spoke to her he was passing his hands over her, stroking her, wiping the flies from her face, tickling her ears. He blew into her nostrils. She liked that and gave a little snort. He did it again.

'Well, what shall we call you? You can't see yourself, lassie, so you don't know that you have a star on your

of the caparison was hung with red tassels. Ruaridh guessed that it was the Bishop's horse.

Immediately an idea came to Ruaridh.

He knew he could not go in a straight line back to Uncle James with his information. That would mean trying to pass through the English lines and cross the Moor of Bannockburn. Instead he must go the long way round, first heading backwards, away from the Battle of Bannockburn towards Stirling Castle, then heading north and finally approaching the Scottish Army from behind, from the West, travelling in a great loop.

But time was short. The Black Douglas needed the numbers of Archers and Cavalry urgently or it might be too late. Not having this information could change the outcome of the Battle.

The Little Fox knew he could not do this on foot quickly enough. But perhaps he could do it on this horse, if he could master it. Some horses are biddable. Others are stubborn, like Negron, and will only accept one master.

Ruaridh shinned down the tree and dropped lightly to the ground. He scooped up the holy man's tasselled cap and stuffed it inside his shirt. The Little Fox ran in through the front of the King's Tent, grabbed the silver goblet then squeezed out of the slit at the back. To free both hands he looped the silver goblet into his belt. He

One man, not a Knight but a squire in fancy tunic, crouched down onto his hands and knees beside the King's steed to act as a footstool. It took a great effort but eventually they managed to get the King up onto his huge white horse. Ruaridh had heard that King Edward's armour was extra thick and that it weighed three times the weight of an ordinary man. To carry the King and his heavy armour he was mounted on the biggest horse that Ruaridh had ever seen. It was even bigger than Uncle James's steed Negron.

King Edward the Second of England took a final slurp of red wine and then threw his silver goblet into his tent, shouting:

Raise the Dragon.

No Mercy. No Quarter. Send them to Hell!

Death to the Scottish scum!

His Knights and squires shouted back:

For Edward and for England!

The Bishop took the lead, holding his cross high. It still had Ruaridh's scribe's pouch hanging from it. Soon the

whole of the King's entourage had moved off towards the front of the English Army battle lines.

The King and his Close Order Knights had many squires to foot, running alongside carrying baskets of food and wine for them. Few of this special group around the King would actually fight. They were more like spectators, watching the fighting and sending out messengers to tell the troops what to do next.

Now that they had made their decision, the English King and his men were very confident that they would win. They had the Welsh Archers and well trained English Cavalry. In all they had three times the number of men that the Scots had.

King Edward the Second of England and his entourage were already enjoying a party, sure of a quick victory.

Stella

Ruaridh waited in the tree.

The noise was all in the distance, drums beating, sharp whistles piercing out a tune, men shouting. The Battle of Bannockburn was about to begin.

The Little Fox peered around very carefully. So far as he could tell, he was completely alone.

Then he heard a snuffle. But where had the sound come from?

Behind the far corner of the King's Tent Ruaridh saw a tail swishing. Tied to the end of the tail was a red cord, for decoration. The animal seemed to sense that Ruaridh was near. Perhaps it could smell the cheese in his pockets.

A horse poked its head around from behind the King's Tent, looking up. Ruaridh could see now that it was a small horse, a pony or palfrey. It came into full view, trying to come towards him. But it was tethered, its rope snaking behind the King's Tent.

It was draped in a purple caparison, (an ornamental cloth tabard which stretched across its back with holes for its neck, tail and legs). The fringe around the bottom