

The Emperor of Nowhere



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by Derek P. Blake

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This is a fairy story and a romance, in the best tradition of story telling. It was originally written as the script for a British pantomime, but never hit the stage.

Like every fairy-story and pantomime it has a happy-ever-after ending.

Pantomime (informally, **panto**) – not to be confused with the theatrical medium of mime – is a form of musical comedy stage production, designed for families, developed in the United Kingdom and mostly performed during the Christmas and New Year season. Modern pantomime includes songs, slapstick comedy and dancing, employs gender-crossing actors, and combines topical humour with a story loosely based on a well-known fairy tale. It is a participatory form of theatre, in which the audience is expected to sing along with certain parts of the music and shout out phrases to the performers.

[From Wikipedia]

This short book is dedicated to my long-suffering wife, Dawn, who has to proof read my many scribblings, with brutal objectiveness. For which I am forever grateful.

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Electronic edition

All characters appearing in this work and events portrayed are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Stage Play - Pantomime

The stage script for this work is available in standard script format and contains stage directions. The staging is particularly suitable for amateur productions. The script is available upon application to:
dblakebooks@live.co.uk

CHAPTER 1

A Place at the Palace

In a distant and long lost kingdom, on the western edge of Europe, some six hundred and sixty-four years ago by our reckoning, there lived a young man who was to grow up in a very short space of time. The kingdom was known as Hambel, it was a poor but happy land, whose inhabitants were devoted to their King, and the Princess Royal, Eleanor Korbin. The kingdom was located in the area known today as The Bay of Biscay, in size it was smaller than Wales but its heart was as mighty as great Gaul. The climate was temperate, long hot summers and snow covered winters. The southern most shire of Hambel, where it was joined by a narrow band of land, to Spain, was warm and the living was easy. This shire was the birthplace of Josef the son of the Royal Armourer, Krief. Krief was a master craftsman who could fashion swords from almost any metal, some of these metals were lost and would not be discovered again until the supersonic age. Krief's fame covered most of southern Europe and it is said that the sword makers of Toledo learned their secret craft from this very craftsman. Needless to say Josef grew up with all the knowledge that his father had gained and became, himself an expert in arms. Not the use of them but their making, for Krief, although an armourer, was a man of peace and would never allow his son to learn the art of the swordsman. Josef therefore was also a man of peace, a gentle young person who would not, it was said, hurt a fly, although he had swatted a few. Such is the way of things that destiny decrees otherwise and so it will be for Josef our reluctant hero.

Shortly after Josef's sixteenth birthday his father received a visitor from the royal Palace at Harmony some eighty leagues to

the North West. The visitor sought out Krief, as Dophin, the Kings Man at Arms, had been boyhood friends with the Armourer. Dophin was a tall well built man some two meters in height and although he was dressed in both chain mail and plate armour, he had a pleasant friendly manner. The surprise came when Dophin announced that his visit was because he wanted to meet with Josef. The young lad could not understand why this stranger had travelled all that way especially to visit him, but life was too short to spend too much time worrying over puzzles like that. On the second morning that Dophin was in the village, Josef was summoned to the Berger's Hall to meet this mysterious stranger.

"Ah, I assume you are Josef, the armourer's son. So good to meet you at last" boomed a low and friendly voice as Josef entered the Hall.

As Josef looked up his sight met the embodiment of the voice. Before him was the stranger Dophin, a large man standing on the Berger's dais and towering over Josef and almost half his height in width. His face beamed a greeting as much as his voice, and he seemed like everyone's favourite Uncle with a warm and trusting personality. His skin was bronzed and his clothes declared that this man was not only rich but also important.

"Nice to meet you also," Josef replied a little hesitantly, "I'm Josef son of Krief the Armourer".

"I know who you are lad, that's why I'm here. Come over here and sit down I need to talk to you," said Dophin as he strode down from the dais and seated himself at the large oak table. Josef, as if in some sort of trance almost floated over to the large polished table that was usually used for council meetings, and seated himself beside Dophin. "Good" said Dauphin "would like a drink of beer or some mulled wine perhaps?"

"Yes thank you, I mean beer please" replied Josef " what's this all about?"

“Josef, your father tells me that he has imparted to you all the knowledge that he has about metals and arms. You are possibly the most expert Armourer in Hambel apart from your father himself” Dophin poured the golden liquid from a large jug and passed the beer over to Josef and continued “It would be silly to leave the two master armourers in the same village and so I am here to offer you the chance of a lifetime”. Dophin stood and wandered over to the fireplace, which was decorated with trophies of the village’s past triumphs and victories. “How would you like to become the Kings personal Armourer? Become part of the court entourage; travel with the King wherever he goes, see the world my boy, well at least Hambel. Think of all the wonderful places that you will be able to see the Seven Wonders of the World, palaces that will astound you. How about it Josef, will you accept the King's offer?”

For what seemed like minutes, Josef sat and stared at Dophin but finally managed to force his mouth open

“Yes, yes. But why me, I mean I know it’s an honour but there must be other people with more experience than me”

“Although we have not met for many years, your father and I have been friends since before you were even thought of, and he has been training you for this moment all of your life. If your father says that you’re the best, well that’s good enough for me”

“Right, how long do I have, I mean, when do I start” corrected Josef quickly, “it’s just that it’s a bit of a surprise you see”

“I’m very well aware of that, just take some time to think it over. I’m here for another two days, as long as I know by then I can return to Harmony and prepare for your arrival,” said Dophin softly, trying to calm Josef’s mind.

“What would my duties be, if I accepted this position?”

“You, as Royal Armourer, would be given free rein to develop arms and weapons for the King and the Royal Guard and the army of Hambel. Admittedly the arms are mostly ceremonial

these days but our spies have sent dispatches to the King recently concerning one of the Spanish Dukes who seems to be intent on annexation. I guess it will come to nothing but we must be prepared. Anyway you will have your own staff and complete control of arms production. As Master at Arms you will report to me and I will give you our requirements. Make no mistake it is a honourable and responsible position and you will be required to swear allegiance to King and Country, it will be hard work Josef.” Almost before Dophin had finished speaking Josef’s answer was on his lips and verbalised on the air.

“I accept the position, I will return to Harmony with you in two days, that way we can get to know each other and you can tutor me in the ways of the Royal Court”

“Splendid, I knew you were the right man. If you’re half as good as your father was when he held the position you will do well enough for me. Welcome to the Royal Court of Hambel, Josef, Son of Krief.”

So it was that the gullible young man of just sixteen became the Royal Armourer of Hambel, a career that would ultimately not only change the course of Josef’s life, but history. The journey to Harmony took some five days most of which were taken up crossing the San Ham Mountain range. The mountains had for aeons acted as a natural rampart protecting the greater part of Hambel from the Spanish and Moorish hoards from the South. Not only by their formidable buttresses and walls but also by virtue of the many legends that proliferate, concerning strange creatures and ghouls. Many an invading army has lost its nerve in the foothills and fled in the face of howls of the east wind. Of course the locals encourage such stories and indeed helped them along their way, not to mention inventing new ones. The many caves that honeycomb the solid rock often generate weird sounds that seem emanate from the very core of the mountains. Some of these cave systems form tunnels, which those intimate with the area can use as short cuts to save the steeper climbs.

Even then one should exercise care as many of the passageways end in dramatic drops hundreds of feet to valleys and dark chasms below. Of course the denizens of that region have signposted each passage with misleading finger-posts, especially for the aggressive stranger or invading army. Some claim that the Swiss took these mountains as their inspiration for the Swiss Cheese, but there are holes in that story too. Each night by the camp-fire Josef and Dophin would talk of the court, of the current political situation, of new ideas for arms, of the past when Krief was The Royal Armourer, and many other subjects that were of interest to Josef. By the time the two reached Harmony they were firm friends with a bond almost as strong as the bond Josef had with his father.

By mid afternoon on the fifth day the two could see the uppermost turrets of the Summer Palace, piercing the sky from beyond the trees. A half-hour later they came out of the forest and for the first time Josef eyes fell upon the most magical scene he had ever beheld. The late afternoon sun reflected in great shafts from the copper clad roofs of the turrets. The hanging banners fluttered in the breeze, creating a cacophony of colour that dazed and excited the viewer. The stone walls glowed in the warm sunlight with a sort of pink luminescence that warmed the soul. The windows glinted like a thousand stars and on the air floated the sounds of happy chattering people, music, laughter and the general hub-hub of a contented population. Josef's heart jumped for joy as the sights and sounds permeated his mind. As they walked along the road that lead up to the main gate, the people who passed them by hailed them with cheerful greetings, at first Josef assumed that they spoke because of whom he was with, but soon he realised that he too was the subject of their good will. Again Josef's heart was buoyed by the comments from these strangers, did they already know who he was, and if they did how was this possible?

As they approached the heavy oaken gates, Dophin took the lead and was greeted by the guard coming to attention and giving him a reverential salute, which consisted of placing their left fist at the shoulder and inclining the head in a sort of nod. In a friendly manner Dophin acknowledged the salute and ordered the guard to relax as their horses strode past them into the courtyard. Inside other members of the Royal Guard also acknowledged the presence of their commander. Everywhere was mutual respect and friendliness and to Josef's amazement there was no curiosity about himself. It was as if he were expected and was already 'one of the family'. Once or twice Dophin stopped to exchange a joke or give an opinion. As they progressed down the length of the long courtyard the cheery waves became even more frequent and as the door at the far end of the courtyard became more and more obvious as their destination, the guards each side of it came to attention.

"Who approaches?" spat out the guard to the right of the door.

"Master at Arms in the service of the Korbin Family Sovereign of this realm," answered Dophin.

"Do they not recognise you Sir," puzzled Josef.

"Of course they do, but tradition has to be observed. What are we if we do not have our history and traditions," explained Dauphin, "You see it's our heritage that makes us who we are and what we are, in exactly the same way that our parents mould us in their own image."

The door before them swung open and Josef followed Dophin along a passage illuminated by tar lamps. Although the walls were of bare dressed stone the coldness of the stone was broken by drapes, flags and banners, some obviously were very old, and more of the flag was missing than remained.

"Are these a part of our heritage," Josef asked.

"Very much so my boy." was the quick reply "See this *rag* over here, well this is the banner which flew at the head of our first

army when they gained independence from Espero after hundreds of years of oppression. Juan of Korbin, our first King of Hambel swore by that that banner that never again would any subject of Hambel be enslaved.”

“I never imagined....,” said Josef as he swallowed hard in awe.

“Come,” said Dophin urgently, “I have something else to show you.”

Again Josef was forced to almost run to keep up with Dophin as he followed him along the corridor and up winding staircase at its far end. The seemed to climb forever and Josef felt faintly dizzy from the spiralling of the steps. Suddenly they were in a large gallery containing more, but larger, banners each depicting scenes from Hambel’s history. There were suits of armour from various periods, each of which interested Josef, but Dophin ploughed on leaving him further and further behind. Dophin in the mean time reached the far end of the gallery and was standing beside a display case. Josef pulled himself away from a very unique piece of head-wear and joined Dophin at the case. “You can examine every one of those when ever you wish in the weeks and years to come, but I have something here which is of more import than any of that stuff.”

“What is it,” asked Josef.

“This my boy is the scroll on which our very society is built.”

“Is it a design for the palace?”

“No” replied Dophin, with a smile, “much more important than that. This document guarantees the freedom of every Hambolian, it means that you had the right to refuse my offer to come to court. It also ensures that you have the right to become what you aspire to become. This piece of parchment also tells us that no one is above the law, not even the King himself.”

“Well said, Dophin”, rang a voice from behind them.

Dophin and Josef both turned to find a late middle aged man dressed in a dark blue tabard trimmed with gold. The newcomer

had neck length hair and a chin beard of salt-and-pepper hair, he was about the same height as Josef but had a bearing that said authority.

“Your Majesty, forgive me, I did not intend to disturb you”

“You did not disturb me Dophin, I was curious as to who you were talking to with such passion”

“Is, is that the King,” Josef whispered, trying to hide behind Dophin.

Dophin ignored Josef’s question and thrust him forward, “This is Josef, the young man I was telling you about Sire.”

Josef immediately bowed deeply and felt himself start to shake, whilst his face flushed, he Josef, was actually in the presence of The King.

“Welcome to Harmony young man, I hope you will be as much a part of our little family as you father was in his time,” said the King, as he offered his hand to Josef. Josef took the King’s hand and touched it to his forehead as Dophin had coached him.

“Thank you your Majesty,” Josef answered with a lump in his throat that turned his voice into a croak, “I will do my best.”

“I’m sure you will Josef,” acknowledged the King, “Next week is midsummer’s day and each year we have a banquet, please, come and join us. It will be a wonderful opportunity to meet everyone and for them to meet you, you will also have a great time.”

“Thank you your Majesty, I would be honoured to attend” was Josef’s reply.

The King then turned, and as he walked into a nearby room said “Look after him Dophin, I feel that this man has a destiny to fulfil. Come back and see me later Dophin, There is a new report to consider.”

“I will sire,” replied Dophin. “He is a King in the true tradition of the House of Korbin. . Now come, I will show you to your quarters and you can settle in.”

Josef's quarters were to his mind palatial. He had expected a sparse room with a cot but in reality it was how he had imagined the King's apartments would appear. The stone walls were covered with a cream coloured substance, which Dophin told him was called 'Plaster' and over this were hung tapestries of rich reds and blues. In one corner was a large cabinet made of teak, with double doors, this was for storing clothes he was told. There were chairs and a strong table, oak chests and a bed with a real horse hair mattress and wool covers. The stone flagged floor was covered with various tapestries, which were called carpets. To the left and right of the large cabinet were doors set into the wall, through the left door Josef discovered his workshop and adjoining it an alchemy laboratory, which he would use to experiment with metals from which new arms would be made. Both rooms were equipped with the tools and machines of the master smith, which Josef had seen in his father's workshop, and other pieces that were strange to him. Through the door to the right he found a large water tank of copper, next to the tank was a stand with a basin, above which hung a highly polished sheet of copper, Josef thought that the tank was for cooling metal. It was over a week before Josef found out that the copper tank was for bathing, a better solution than an annual trip to the river. In the weeks that followed the workshops became as familiar to Josef as his father's workshop had been. Conversely Josef became as familiar a figure around the palace as Dophin himself.

The week after Josef arrived at Harmony the midsummer Festival arrived, an event that would change his life as much as the move from his home village had done. Although Josef had received his invitation from the King himself, he had not thought too much about it. Until that was, the day before the festival, when Dophin asked him what costume he intended to wear at the ball.

"Costume. What costume" replied Josef.

“It is our tradition to attend the midsummer ball in disguise. We dress as one of the fruits or benefits of summer, I am going as the ‘South Wind’,” Josef could not help a small smile at this, but Dophin ignored him and continued, “the wind that brings the bees that pollinate all the blossom, and in turn produce fruit. You should give it some serious thought” advised Dophin.

Josef spent a sleepless night following that, worried that he would chose the wrong costume or worse have no idea at all. In the end the choice was made and it was decided that Josef would attend the ball as Baccus the Roman God of wine. No one however knew what Baccus looked like; so on the day of the ball Josef fashioned a toga and acquired a length of vine from the local vineyard which he used as a belt. There was one redeeming facet to this costume business; at least he didn’t need to wear the uniform that the Royal Taylor had provided him with. On the afternoon he’d gone for a uniform fitting it took him all his time to breathe. Dophin had thought it a great joke, one that Josef had not shared.

Midsummer’s Night was almost the most anticipated night of the year and by eight o’clock the whole court was assembled in the Great Hall awaiting the arrival of the King and his daughter. A group of musicians waited patiently on a gallery above the hall, tuning their instruments and sorting sheets of manuscript. Around the hall long tables were set out in the shape of a horse shoe, not another item could have been placed upon those trestles for they would have collapsed for sure. The hall itself was decked with all sorts of fruit and vegetable, tree and shrub, woven together in great bowers looped between the oaken beams.

Josef was relieved to find that he neither looked out of place nor had he duplicated another’s costume. Soon, as the conversation grew, Josef relaxed however the sudden blast of the fanfare, which heralded the King’s arrival made him jump

with fright, made worse by the fact that he was standing directly in front of the herald's trumpets. Josef recovered his poise quickly, but his hearing took rather longer to recover, enough to witness the entrance of the King. Here was a real king, dressed in all his splendour with crown and chains of gold, cloak, trimmed with rich furs and shoes that a man could use to shave by their reflection. He had a regal bearing that said 'I am a king and I am used to having my commands obeyed'. Yet this was the same man that had invited Josef to this very ball. There was a question that Josef could not answer, was this human side of the King strength or a weakness. Time would eventually answer Josef's question but for now there was another question in his mind 'where was this Princess Royal he had heard so much about? The King was alone! Everyone had told Josef that the Princess would accompany her father and he'd looked forward to seeing this alleged beauty for himself.

"Ha well," said Josef to himself, "there will be plenty of time to view this royal icon."

"Josef!" Dophin's voice boomed out from behind, breaking the lad's train of thought. "I don't think you have been introduced to Duncan yet" Dophin continued once Josef's attention had been gained. "Duncan is my Captain of the Guard, he also comes from a country called Scotland, far to the north past Angels."

"Good to meet ye laddie, I've been looking forward to the Armourer's position being filled. I have some ideas I'd like to discuss with ye," Duncan proclaimed as he proffered a hand.

"I would deem it an honour to discuss your ideas Lord Duncan," Josef replied.

"It's just plain Duncan laddie. We're all working to the same end here. If you have the time I will drop in to your workshop tomorrow"

"That would be fine," answered Josef.

"What would be fine?" interrupted a sweet female voice from somewhere behind the mountainous bulk that was Duncan.

Josef could only stammer, “Ss So Sorry, my Lady?”

“I was asking, what this great brute of a mountain goat persuaded you to do?,” the girl with the musical voice said.

“Nothing, just to discuss something,” replied Josef.

“And what exactly does this ox wish to discuss with you?” insisted the girl.

“This is where I abandon ye to yer’ fate my lad,” called Duncan as he retreated into the throng.

“Hello, my name’s Ellen, I haven’t seen you around here before.” she said as an invitation for Josef to introduce himself.

Josef, although he could not see her face, which was covered by a mask, he knew instinctively that she was the most wonderful beauty he had ever met. He needed no further inducement to make himself known to Ellen. So with his heart pounding in his ears he said, “Josef, I’m Josef, the new Royal Armourer”

“Ah, now I remember, I heard my father talking about you yesterday, a bit of a whiz kid I believe.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Josef, “Anyway what do you do around here?”

A slight smile flashed across Ellen’s face telling Josef that he was being played like a fish on a hook.

“I’m a sort of administrator I suppose, you know lots of paperwork and figures, that sort of thing,” she answered.

“ I think that sounds a very important job, I’m not very good at words and figures”

“We each have our own talents and contribute in our own way, no one is more important than the whole” explained Ellen.

Josef felt that this particular conversation was getting a little too deep for him, so to lighten the mood said, “And what do you do for fun, I mean when you get time off.”

“That’s not very often, I suppose I just dream,” Ellen replied in a wishful way.

Josef was amazed, “You cant just dream, you need to get out and have fun. Have you never been out in the forest to collect flowers or cut mistletoe for Cringlemas?”

“No.”

“Have you never laid on your back in the wheat fields, just before harvest and gazed up at the stars in the dark sky?”

“Never!”

“You don’t know what you are missing my Lady” added Josef.

The Lady Ellen looked deep into Josef’s eyes and knew that she wanted him to show her these things, and, she wanted them *now*. Suddenly, for a reason she could not fathom, she was desperate to experience all the joys of life but she wanted this new friend to show them to her, no one else just Josef.

“Will you show them to me, soon?”

“Yes, of course it would be an honour, my Lady” promised Josef.

“When?” asked Ellen “When will you show these things to me?”

“How about now? It’s a wonderfully clear night outside and the stars will be shining bright” Josef said as, without thinking, he reached out and took her hand, then started for the door. Instinctively she followed him; hand in hand they crossed the floor of the great hall, then out through the doors, along the passageways and out into the dark courtyard. Already they could see the stars shining above them but the light from a hundred torches paled them. They crossed the yard, passing the stables and headed for the main gate. The two sentries watched them and laughed, nudging each other over a private joke. As they came into the open the warm summer breeze stroked their faces and inflamed their passion. The land between the castle walls and the forest was planted with wheat and it was to these fields that Josef headed. Almost half way across the field of wheat they collapsed breathless into the tall stalks pressing them into a nest.

For what seemed like an age neither spoke. Josef dreamed of what may be, while Ellen just stared in disbelief at the diamond

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