

# A Companion's Tale - By Gavin Burgess

© Gavland Creative 2003/2004

First published in electronic format July 2005.

Published by Gavland Limited,

PO Box 5479, Wellington, New Zealand.

<http://www.gavland.co.nz>

**For more about Gavin Burgess Visit:**

<http://www.gavinburgess.com>

**Also Visit:**

[www.gavland.fm](http://www.gavland.fm) - Music Radio From New Zealand

## **Parental Note:**

This story is intended for young teens. It contains content which some parents may deem unsuitable for less mature children. It is suggested that parents review the contents of this publication prior to making it available to their children.

# A Companion's Tale

(Adapted from the book of Tobit being book three of the Apocrypha)

From the testimony of Toby the patriarch:

*'I, Toby, when I was in my own country, being but young, witnessed the fall of the tribe of my father from the house of God. Now all the tribes which revolted bowed down and worshipped evil idols, but I alone went often to the temple of God and gave the offerings as it was decreed. And when I'd come of age I married Anna, a woman of my own people, who in due time gave birth to a son, Robert, whom we nick-named Bob.*

*Although we were soon exiled from our homeland I continued to give gifts to my brethren and food to the poor, my clothes to the naked, and to bury the dead of my nation. And so my good deeds brought me the favour of the King who permitted me to travel to the city of Rages, where I left in trust with Gabael, the brother of Gabrias, a sum of money.*

*It came to pass after many years that one day my son came to me saying 'Father, one of our nation is strangled and his body is lying in the marketplace' so I went out and buried the stranger, and being polluted from touching the dead, I slept that night by the wall of my courtyard. Unknown to me there were sparrows living in the wall, and my eyes, being open, were filled with the warm dung which the sparrows cast, and a whiteness came into my eyes and I found myself blind. In the throws of great sorrow over this affliction I prayed to God to cause me to die and then, with the return of reason, in great fear I remembered my prayer.'*

I remember well the day that Toby summoned his son, my master Robert, into his presence. There was an air of solemnity about Toby due, I assumed, both to his recent trials and to the gravity of the task he was to lay before his son. This is the tale of that task, of the great journey of my master, and of the remarkable events I witnessed as his companion.

Times had become hard in the house of my master's father. Toby's wife Anna had taken on women's works and brought home such wages as she could, however Toby, on account of his blindness, was grieved and could be heard calling out to his god in the night, and he called out for mercy and to be allowed to die. And in this time too, it seems, Toby remembered the money which he'd committed to the care of Gabael, brother of Gabrias, in the city of Rages, and remembering that he'd called out to his god for death he decided that he must send Robert to recover the money held there before his passing came to be.

At his father's bidding Robert set out that day in search of a companion to accompany him on his journey and in this search he was rewarded with the meeting of a most unusual gentleman. He called himself Alan and claimed to be the son of Toby's cousin Alfred however, in keeping with the sensitivity those of my kind possess for such things, I held a deep suspicion that this man was not entirely that which he claimed to be. Toby, though, feeling satisfied as to the suitability of Alan as Robert's travelling companion, proceeded to make agreement with regard to wages and in due course Robert and Alan set out, taking only myself in addition to complete the company.

On the first evening of our journey we came to the Tiger River, a great meandering thread of brown, looping and coiling its way through the rugged landscape, and there, in a small and squalid fishing village, we found lodging. That evening, when Robert went down to the river to wash, a giant fish suddenly leapt out, snapping at Robert's head with its huge and vicious jaw. Alan, looking on, shouted to him, 'Quick! Take hold of it!' and so Robert caught the fish in his hands and dragged it to the shore. Alan again instructed my master and said 'Take the heart and the liver and the gall.' and Robert, wondering at this strange request, but obedient to the instructions of his guide, gutted the fish and, as Alan commanded, put these things away in the pockets of his travelling clothes. That night we ate well, Alan having grilled the fish over a bed of coals, and after sleeping the sleep of truly weary travellers, travelled on in the morning towards Ecbatane.\*

For many days we toiled in the heat of the summer sun, passing through strange lands filled with flora unlike any we'd seen before. Gradually the plant life thinned until eventually we found ourselves entering a vast desert. This we crossed in deathly exhaustion, tongues parched and our bodies heaving for breath, our progress across the bleak wasteland marked only by the sighting of various abandoned vehicles and the occasional forlorn relic of civilization lying long abandoned and half buried in the drifting sand.

At last we drew near to Ecbatane, its imposing stone walls at first sight looming imperious on the horizon and then, as we drew closer, filling the

(\* Once upon a time Ecbatane was a real place. Actually It's still a real place today, except nobody knows where it is, its location having been forgotten somewhere back in the mists of time. – G.B.)

whole of our view, until at length we wearily entered the city itself, passing under the colossal stone arch of the outer wall and through the great iron studded gates, now standing open to admit the traffic of the day's trade. As we slowly wended our way through the bustling city streets, with vendors crying out to right and left and the cobbles clacking under the soles of our shoes, Alan began to speak with my master. 'Brother, today we'll lodge with your cousin Raguei.' After a pause, as if he was carefully considering his words, he continued, 'Raguei has a daughter, Sara, who I'll speak to him about, as it's your right as her kinsman to take her for your wife.'

It had already seemed to me that Alan was exerting far too much control over the arrangements of our travel, although Robert was obviously only too pleased to defer this responsibility. Now I was horrified that he was going even further and attempting to intrude into my master's private life. Fortunately Robert seemed to become quite alarmed at the mention of Sara. 'Sara is a fair and wise woman', Alan continued in response to Robert's alarm, 'and after we return from Rages we shall celebrate your marriage.' This only alarmed my master further and he replied 'I've heard of this woman Sara! She's already been given in marriage to seven other men, each of whom died before the first night of their honeymoon, struck down by a curse. I'm the only son of my father and if I marry this woman I too will die, leaving my parents alone in their old age!' Now this statement of my master's made perfect sense to me, however Alan continued to persuade my master and it was only a short while until he had convinced him not just to marry this woman but that the heart and liver of the fish which he carried in his pockets had the ability to

repel the curse which had caused the deaths of the woman's former suitors. Of the later I too was partially convinced, as I'd been becoming increasingly aware of the stench emanating from my master's garments, however it seemed to me that this stench would equally repel any blushing young bride. On top of this I was still suspicious of Alan who seemed to be much too sure of himself, and in possession of far too much information and influence for one who was merely a servant. My concerns were to no avail however as, once Alan had planted the idea of a family and children of his own in my master's head, Robert seemed seized by passion for this woman whom he'd not yet even met.

Well Raguel welcomed my master with all the love of family, and was full of questions about Toby. He wept, along with his wife Edna, and Sara at the tale of Toby's blindness, but once recovered he entertained Robert and Alan regally, holding a great feast during which Robert, with mounting impatience, begged Alan to speak with Raguel regarding Sara, as he had promised during the journey. This Alan did and Raguel was quick to give his consent, although, to give him credit, he did warn Robert what had become of the seven men. Robert would have none of this however and insisted upon the granting of his request, so that Raguel was swayed to agree to the marriage taking place that very night and immediately ordered for the honeymoon room to be prepared. To this room Sara was taken, weeping, I imagine due to her fear that another fine young man was about to die.

I suppose they remembered to feed Sara while she was waiting in the honeymoon room. They only fed me after all the others had eaten, but then

I'm quite used to this and thought nothing of it. When Robert had finished his meal, which he seemed to do in a time which was only just within the bounds of politeness, he took a burning urn of perfume and into this placed the heart and the liver of the fish. At this Raguel looked first relieved at finally knowing the source of the smell regarding which he had been too polite to speak, and then overcome due to the even more powerful stench of the burning, and finally once again relieved, although also slightly puzzled, as Robert, taking the burning organs, left for the honeymoon chamber. I think at this point Alan began to explain however I'm ashamed to admit that this was when they fed me and I was distracted and quite oblivious to my master's fate for some time.

In the morning Raguel arose early and I found him, just as the sun cleared the hills, in the garden digging a grave. Returning to the house with him I heard him say to Edna 'Send a maid to the room to find out if he's dead. If he is we should bury him quickly so that no-one will know.' When the maid went up to the room, however, she found my master not dead, but asleep with his new wife in his arms, and, although she returned gagging from the lingering smell of fish, her relief was obvious to see. It seemed that Alan had spoken the truth and that the burnt fish organs had indeed repelled the curse. And so began a great rejoicing and feasting that lasted for many months. During this time Alan travelled alone to Rages to collect the money held by Gabael, the brother of Gabrias, in order that Robert could stay longer in the company of his father in law, who would have held him even longer still, such was his desire for celebration. Robert, however, eventually convinced Raguel of the need for us to return to his father's house, if for no other reason than to relieve his parents

worry. It's true, I've heard, that by this time Anna, Robert's mother, was spending her days crying, believing her son to be dead.

All that's left to tell now is that we at last returned home, leaving our travel almost too late and consequently toiling for the last week of our journey through the deepening winter snow. On his return Robert brought with him not only the money from Gabael, the brother of Gabrias, but also his new wife, the blessing of his father in law, and the cure for his father's blindness, for, at Alan's instruction, when he saw Toby in the distance he ran to him and rubbed the gall of the fish into his eyes, causing the whiteness to fall away and leaving Toby able to gaze, understandably somewhat taken aback at first, at the smiling face of his son.

Then, when Robert had told his father the story of our travel, and all that had happened, Toby looked towards Alan and said 'It's all because of you that these wonderful things have happened. Tell me if I'm wrong but I'm certain you were sent by God.' To which Alan replied, 'The words you speak are true. God heard your cries of unhappiness, and those of your daughter in law Sara, and because of your many good deeds he sent me to rescue you from your blindness and Sara from her curse.' And the moment he'd said these things, and you may think I'm mad but I cannot deny what I saw with my own eyes, he disappeared and we never once, any of us, saw him again.

So filled with happiness and wonder we entered Toby's house, Toby, Anna, Robert, Sara and I, and as my master and his family began to celebrate again all the blessings which their god had brought to their life, I took my travel wearied bones to my accustomed place near the fire, turned around twice,

and, glorying in the sweet taste of a marshmallow, which I had found in a snowdrift in the yard, I happily wagged my tail and settled down to sleep.