

Fighting the sickness

Sunday, 30 November 2014

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Â Winner of the 3rd place in the 2014 Literature Competition

Two

burly men pulled a ramshackle farm cart over the muddy soil, its wheels creaking every few seconds. A moldering pile of corpses strained against the confines of the cart, nearly teetering onto the ground. An older man wearing the tattered vestments of a cleric of Morr was striking a slightly bent fire poker against an upended cooking pot. "Bring out your dead!", he said after every clang of his improvised bell.Â

Every so often the cart stopped so that another unmoving passenger could be dragged aboard. Every last one of the deceased, whether they were high-born or low-born, saint or sinner, would be dumped into a massive hole in the ground which only the most charitable nun could call a grave. But what was perhaps the most depressing aspect of this grim picture was how mundane the priest's cries sounded; as if asking hardworking peasants and affluent noblemen to haul the corpses of their friends and family into the streets and onto a farm cart to be dumped in a mass grave was routine. But the old man couldn't be faulted for that, for in the village of Givry bringing out your dead had indeed become routine.

Only

three weeks ago Givry had been the very model of a Brionnian settlement: white houses with not a spot of dirt on them, lawns with meticulously trimmed hedges and colourful flowers, and with clean streets leading to the village square, with in the middle the piercing tower wherefrom Galadum's family had ruled for three generations. Of course there were no peasants actually living within the village; they would have sullied it with their mere presence. Instead the low-born lived in a nameless shantytown nearby, which was hidden from view by a slim strip of wide oaks so that none had to gaze upon the squalid shacks. This left Givry to the nobility and the merchants, artisans, servants and other peasants who knew how to keep the mud out of their hair. Unfortunately this meant that very few houses were inhabited, but what was important was that the village looked like a slice of heaven.

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That

had all been before the Blazing Pox, which had struck down more than four-fifths of the population. As was to be expected it struck first in the shantytown, but sadly it had not stopped there. Now Galadum had been left as the sole survivor of his family line, as well as one of the few nobles remaining in Givry. The auburn-haired youngster had been thrust into the role of lordship before he could even begin his errantry tour. In the family chapel he had vowed that as soon as the current crisis was over he would hunt down the insidious architects of this plague. Not only as retribution for the dead of Givry, but because he couldn't consider how a nobleman could rule justly without experiencing the perils of errantry. This quest would prove him as worthy of his title and his father's name, if the Lady was willing.

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There were however two things he needed to do before he could begin his quest. First he needed to appoint a competent steward to rule in his absence, for it could take months or even years before he found the culprits. Right now the most suitable candidate for that position was standing beside Galadum, looking alongside him at the improvised hearth. Together they were patiently awaiting the second person who would be indispensable for the continued safety of his fiefdom.

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The soon-to-be steward Odo was quite fit by low-born standards, with a bit of meat on his bones and capable of standing up straight when the situation required it. But to his dismay the Creeping Crippler, another of the many plagues that afflicted the fair dukedom of Brionne, had taken his right arm a few years ago. To his family he had become more of a hindrance than a help, and so Odo had decided to leave the farm and make his fortune in Givry. The bitterness in his voice told Galadum that the decision had been made for him, but it mattered little. The former farmhand had a good instinct for organization, and one way or another always got the job done. Not everyone was happy with how the 'Lame Goat' ordered them around, especially the elderly chamberlain Eustace. While he had a strange taste in moustaches, Eustace had served the counts of Givry faithfully for over two generations. He was dead now, his face nearly scratched to the bone in his desire to stop the painful itch of the Blazing Pox. Odo had taken his place by Galadum's side, who in turn had made it perfectly clear that the commands of this particular lame goat were to be obeyed as if they were his own, in those exact words. In these times, results mattered more than some ruffled feathers.

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'I'm thinking we'll get some rain, m'lord', said Odo while scratching his straggly beard.

'Let us pray you are wrong', Galadum replied. Their hope for clear skies had little to do with what the raindrops would do to them, but more about what it would do to the muddy ground. It was already hard for the few remaining able workers to dig the mass graves; too much rain would make it next to impossible.

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The young lord shuddered, momentarily overcome by the sheer amount of pain and grief he had endured in so short a time. While the dukedom was cursed with new diseases every year, unleashed upon the people by jealous monsters, sorcerers and spirits who wanted to corrupt the beauty of Brionne, it had still come as a surprise to him. Both his mother and his nursemaid had always told him how Givry had been blessed by the gods, that the idyllic village would never be touched by plague. Now he was left all alone, the last of an illustrious line of noblemen that stretched back centuries, the fiefdom transformed into a unwashed den of infection.

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It took a few moments for Galadum to compose himself. As he did, he quickly glanced from side to side. Either no one had noticed his brief lapse, or they had chosen not to notice. He resolved to do better in the future. As his father was...had been wont to tell, a noble lord has to lead by example. He could not expect his subjects to do their work while he was somewhere crying in a corner. Especially not when so many had lost as much if not more than him.

“Do you think the abbess was delayed, Odo?”, he enquired.

His aide shook his head. “She isn't the sort to be kept waiting, m'lord. Sides, it looks as if there are fewer bodies waiting to be buried every day. Nother week, maybe two, and this will've passed.”

The slight smile on Galadum's face told the world about how much the young nobleman believed that. Then again, neither of them were the expert here. He would ask the abbess Agnes once she was here. She and her sect of nuns of Shallya had treated plagues great and small for decades, travelling from place to place heedless of contamination or death. If the abbess did not know the answer, she would at least be capable of an educated guess.

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As if she had heard them talking about her - which considering how quickly she noticed it when people were twiddling their thumbs wouldn't surprise Galadum in the slightest - the abbess of Shallya walked into the street. Everyone, even Noel, the priest of Morr, gave her a wide berth in order to avoid her displeasure. If Odo had been the organizer of their efforts of combating the plague, she was the motivator. Her sermons had, through an interesting mixture of praising and bullying, spurred the people to do even more than they did before to help their brethren. It had been at her coaxing that Galadum had opened Givry for all the peasants, the idea being that with superior housing the infected could receive a more humane and effective treatment, and the still-healthy could better stave off the plague. It was a rather pointless act, since the low-born had all but overrun the village already, but she had insisted on his official permission and he had been too terrified of her to deny it.

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“You have my thanks for your quick arrival, mother superior”, he said as she came up to them.

“Would you kindly dispense with the damn pleasantries, Galadum”, she replied in her usual gruff manner. “I have other places to be and people to treat.”

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He inwardly cursed her course manners, and found it vaguely resentful that a supposedly

beneficent abbess of the goddess of mercy could do and say as she pleased while a demanding yet respectful worker like Odo was insulted at every turn. Now however was not the time to reprimand her. It was time for the magnificent speech he had prepared for this very occasion. "Yonder we can see how father Noel and his dutiful charges have to haul another cartload of the dearly departed to a nameless pit on the village outskirts. As each day the cart is filled to the brim with bodies, I find that my conscience grows ever heavier. My grandfather

"Get on with it!", she interrupted with visible anger.

"I wish for your blessing", he blurted out, hoping to avoid her tongue lashing.

Her demeanor changed in an instant from angry to worried. "Have you taken ill? Do you have a fever, or the urge to scratch yourselves anywhere on your body?"

"I do not have the Blazing Pox", he hurriedly assured her. "It's just that aside from father Noel you are the only priest remaining in Givry. Well, there are the other priests, initiates and laypeople in your sect I suppose, but the point is that you are the ranking authority when it comes to the will of the gods, and I wish for their blessing to aid me in my quest."

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What is this nonsense about a quest?"

Galadum blinked a few times, confused at her response. "The quest to find the miscreants who unleashed this plague upon our fair village, of course. I cannot really think of a more noble cause. Furthermore, while a traditional errantry tour for me is out of the question now, I cannot become the count of Givry without some kind of test of my prowess. That is what makes the nobility of Bretonnia truly noble; that we rule our people not just because it is our birthright, but that each generation we prove our right to rule."

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The abbess stared at him for quite some time, apparently lost for words. Then she pulled the rug from under his feet. "Ignoring that I have met many lords in my life and I can truthfully say you have already proven yourself worthy, what on earth makes you think that there is some villain behind the Blazing Pox?"

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Galadum opened and shut his mouth a few times, unsure of how to respond. "There has to be a villain. I mean, I guess it could be a daemon or other malignant spirit rather than a witch, a mutant sorcerer or other mortal, but there has to be someone or something behind it all. Isn't it a principal tenet of the clergy that plagues are sent to us because of divine displeasure or daemonic design?"

She looked at him almost pityingly. 'Lad, there's a huge gulf in between what we say and what we believe. To say nothing of what is actually true, of what is based on reality. I have spent almost thirty years treating countless victims of diseases you've never even heard of, and I can assure you that many did not deserve their fate, whatever which way you want to look at it.'

'But there are villains in the world, champions of the Dark Powers who cultivate pestilence and contagion as if they were flowers!', he vehemently argued. 'There are many stories about them in the pages of history books and the mouths of minstrels. Lady's sake, just two years ago the duke himself hunted down that cabal of necromancers that was behind the spread of the Blight of Mistrust! Are you telling me that in all your life, you have never encountered one of these vile enemies of mankind or their concoctions?'

'Oh I have, lad', she said, her expression darkening at if she briefly recalled a nightmare. 'But even those bastards do not cause suffering solely to cause suffering. They do so to kill great lords and ladies, to steal or destroy wealth and precious artifacts, or to turn others to their cause. Givry is nowhere near important enough for any of that to happen here.'

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Galadum gave out an incredulous guffaw. 'You hear that Odo? Our village is not important enough to be attacked. I'm sure the people will be happy to hear that they aren't really ill!'

'Attacked by who, Galadum?', she asked sharply. 'No beastmen, greenskins, mutants or anything else but other humans have been seen. Neither has there been any rumours of sorcery, or possession, or cultist gatherings. Who or what where you going to hunt down, exactly?'

'I...I don't know yet', he admitted. 'But I have made a solemn vow that I will find whoever is responsible for this plague.'

The abbess pressed onward without mercy. 'Damn all good that will do you if you don't know where you're going or who you want dead.'

'Odo has a lead', the young lord insisted. 'A shepherd's wife said that her brother was behaving strangely in the forest. Isn't that right, Odo?'

Galadum looked at his trusted servant expectantly, who looked unhappy at being dragged into the discussion. 'She said that she thought her brother was acting strangely, m'lord. Cause of a girl he loved, she said. I don't think there's anything behind it.'

â€“Oh,
don't give me any of that! It's the best lead we've got!

â€“By
the sounds of it is the only lead you've got', the mother superior riposted.

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Galadum
knew he was losing his temper, but he couldn't stop himself. How could they be so blind to the suffering of his subjects, those who trusted him to protect them from danger? It was inconceivable to do nothing, to let this travesty go unpunished. He held his tongue with what he considered a heroic force of will, and walked back to the tower that was now his and his alone. He angrily waved away Odo as he tried to follow his liege. Perhaps they would come to see the light if he left them to their own devices for a while.

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The
two peasants could only look on as the young count walked away from them, and from accepting the possibility that his friends and family died from a simple illness.Â

Â The abbess sighed with despair. â€“Another
victim.'

â€“Where?'
Odo asked with worry. â€“Not m'lord I hope?'

â€“Yes,
but not of the Blazing Pox. He is gripped by the glamour of chivalry, that malady of the mind which makes his life an epic, where everyone is either a shining hero or a hideous monster, a chaste damsel or a vile schemer. Bravery and justice are rewarded, while villainy and cowardice are punished. The Blazing Pox must be some evil scheme directed at him and his family. Otherwise what would that say about him, if his entire life could end up in shambles without the world noticing or caring?'

The
former farmhand pondered that for a while, before finally replying. â€“You have thought about that a'lot, haven't you mother Agnes?'

She
professed the truth with a slight smile. â€“Galadum is not the first victim of chivalry I've seen, and I doubt he will be the last. And most likely it will get the young fool killed for his trouble.'

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Odo couldn't think of what he could say to that, so as was his wont he said nothing. After a while he left the abbess to her own devices, and went to search for his lord. As for Agnes, she stayed there for quite some time, creatively cursing the goddess Shallya that she only taught her followers how to heal the body, not the

mind.