

The Thief, the Crier, and those Damned Dark Ages

It was a typical English day in Pillock. The sky was overcast, a chill hung in the air, and a light haze of drizzle drifted along in the currents of a cold but gentle breeze. A river bubbled and hiccupped along the edge of the town, its waters providing fish to a few young lads strewn about its banks as it wandered its way towards the Thames. The little town was built in the shadow of a majestic monastery, and lay along the only road for miles that safely crossed the river. Together, these two features brought travelers through Pillock and provided its inhabitants with some semblance of a living in craftsmanship and sales. The streets of the little hamlet saw little traffic at this time of day, however. The sun was only just beginning its ascent from beneath the confines of the horizon, and most of the peasants were still abed.

In the center of town where two roads met was the square, currently home to a single, lonely figure; doubled over and shackled within a wooden pillory. A filthy length of cloth enveloped the top of his head, its left side covered in dried blood where his ear used to be.

“Mornin, Thief!” cried a second man as he loped his way into the square and approached the figure at its center. “A fine English day, idn’t it?”

“So fine I could just die,” the thief replied dourly.

“Ah, not today my fine fellow, for today, is your lucky day!”

“Oh, is the wood rotting?” The thief gave a small tug against the pillory; the wood creaked, the latch on the side squeaked, but that was all. “Alas, the wood is solid and my luck stays its course.”

“No, no, no, mate. ‘Tis your lucky day because *I* have arrived!”

“Oh, lovely. Where’s the keys, then?”

The man’s face soured a touch. “I’m not here to let you out, Thief. I’m your Crier! And one of the finest in all England, if I do say so myself.”

“Which you do.”

“Constantly.” Brittle brown teeth appeared through a lopsided smile. “You’ve drawn the long straw today, my friend! I’m with you ‘til they let you out of here. You’ll laugh, you’ll cry, and by god when I’m done with ye, you may just learn a little some’in of yourself!”

“Wonderful.”

“Indeed ‘tis! I’m known for me voice, you see. Beautiful and true, ‘tis. I’m celebrated for miles around, the subject of love and adoration. And now, I’m yours for *three whole days!*”

“Ever considered using your voice for some’in more than yelling about thieves in town squares? So many bloody people listen to ye, say some’in worthwhile then.”

“Tried it.”

“And?”

“And nobody listened. Now, would you like to hear some poetry?”

“No.”

“Excellent. This one is of me own makin’. It’s called, ‘The Lord and the Lady!’” The crier cleared his throat, placed a hand on his hip, and raised the other in front of his face as he recited:

*There once was a man from Wenis,
Who had an impressively enormous...
Wit.*

*He courted a maiden, fair and rich,
Seeking her hand though she was a massive...
...ly unpleasant person.*

*Though cupid’s arrow ne’er struck,
They wed, took to bed, and then they...
Fell asleep.*

*Neither was shy, no, neither bashful,
Yet no consecration took place.
They’d married for money, not for love,
And both of them were absolute...
Assholes.*

The crier finished his piece and looked to the thief with an expectant grin, but only silence drifted between them on the breeze.

“They’ve sent you to ruin me other ear, haven’t they?” the thief quipped.

The crier’s shoulders slumped and his jaw drooped slightly. “Uncultured swine,” he said after a moment’s pause. “It’s going to be a long three days with that attitude.”

“And longer still in your presence.”

The sun crept higher in the sky and peasants began to stir within their homes. Smoke from cooking fires filled the air as the townsfolk prepared meager breakfasts composed of what little food they possessed. As the morning wore onward, people emerged from their homes and milled around the town square. Shops were opened and displays were laid out in anticipation of the travellers that Pillock fervently hoped would soon arrive. Living memory could not recall a December this bereft of food and fortune.

As the town assembled in the square, the crier paced a circle around the thief. He periodically clanged his bell and called out,

“Shame! Shame on this here fellow!” Hours crept by in this manner, bringing with them no travellers, no sales, and thus, no food. The peasants’ mood grew ever bleaker.

“Good afternoon, Pillocks!” thundered a well-dressed man clad in the vermilion livery of a noble. With a strut, he moved through the square with arms held aloft as though he embraced all Pillockdome. A small mumble of greeting rolled around the crowd, unenthusiastic and dismal. “What a bunch of assholes,” the noble growled under his breath as he approached the center. As he walked, an entourage of serfs followed behind. Nearly a dozen men, led by Greg the Farmer, bore a large wooden crate in their arms. They reached a spot a slight distance from the thief and laid their parcels on the ground at their feet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the noble drawled, “I, your most esteemed Lord Pettyworth of Yob Manor, have heard of your plight. I come to remedy your ails and rally your spirit.”

The townsfolk silently looked about the square, quizzically examining the face of each of their neighbors.

“I’ve come to give you shit,” said the Lord as his eyes rolled through the inside of his skull.

“Oh!” cried the tanner.

“Lovely,” stated the blacksmith.

“Ah, shit,” muttered the thief.

With a self-satisfied smirk, the Lord placed his foot on one of the crates in front of him and tipped it over, spilling dozens of tomatoes onto the stonework of the road. “This man,” he said as he gestured towards the thief, “stole from me—I mean, you...he stole from you. Let’s throw fruit at him!”

“Those are tomatoes, lord,” the priest cried out as he gazed upon the small red orbs dotting the road. “Vegetables, they are.”

“’Tis,” the weaver called out, “’tis most definitely vegetable.”

Once again, the Lord’s eyes danced in their sockets. “*Fine*. Let’s throw veggies at him.”

“Nah, nah,” came the authoritative voice of the town’s carpenter, “I think you’ll find that they *are* a fruit m’lord.” The statement pushed the crowd over the edge. In the blink of an eye the entire town began screaming at one another. Mothers railed against fathers, brothers spewed fury at sisters, and one random old lady gave a dog a stern talking to. The thief laughed hysterically and the lord dropped his head to his chest and shook it. The crier picked up one of the tomatoes and, casting a furtive glance around the town, quickly pocketed it.

“Enough!” screamed the lord, his voice rising above the cacophony and silencing the enraged crowd. “For God sake, you’re missing the point, which is, that we are going to throw this fru-... veg-...*this food*...at that damned bastard of a thief!”

As the crier stood perplexed next to the thief, the crowd surged forward and began scooping up every tomato they could get their hands on. All smiles and cooperation, they loaded each other's arms, passing tomatoes around until no one could possibly carry another. Now snarling, they turned towards the thief to begin the pelting. But upon realization that they couldn't throw a single piece with their arms so full, nearly every peasant present simply dropped the mass they held. Tomatoes crashed to the ground in a symphony of overripe splatters and a flurry of bouncing, greenish thuds.

"Morons!" yelled the Lord. "Those weren't cheap, you know!" But the crowd ignored Pettyworth as they stooped to pick up whatever pieces of fruit...vegetable (? that had survived the fall.

"Well, Crier," the thief said slyly, "you said you'd be with me for three days. How about now?"

"I did," the crier replied as he slowly began sidestepping towards the crowd. "But I never said I was an honest man, did I?"

"Coward."

"Yes, but a clean one." Once the crier reached the edge of the circle that had formed around the pilloried man, the crowd unleashed a loathsome hail of gooey red madness. A pungent aroma of acidic tang filled the air. Laughter swelled amongst the peasants, led by the loud guffaw emanating from Pettyworth's breast.

Meanwhile, the pillory trembled under the force of a fierce tomato storm. Some were rotten and mashed into the thief's face with a sloshy splash. Others weren't quite ripe and bounced painfully off of his head. These he hated the most, as they often rolled back into the greedily grasping clutches of an exuberant villager.

"Ouch! My earhole!" yelled the thief as one such tomato smashed into the bloody mass where his ear used to be. "Aim for the right side of my head! The right!"

Clang, clang, clang rang the crier's bell. "Aim for his right side, people," he said around a mouthful of the tomato he now munched. "Let's not be savages."

The splatter and squashing of exploding tomatoes continued for another twenty minutes before the massive crates finally ran dry. When the supply of produce ran out, Pettyworth was the first to turn and leave, heading back out of town to return to his manor for the afternoon. The peasants headed back to their shops, chuckling and smiling as they went.

"Who's going to clean all this up, you reckon?" asked the crier of the thief as he sat down next to him.

"Oh, I'll clean it," said the thief dryly as he wiggled his hands within the confines of the pillory, eliciting a small smirk from the crier.

“So what did you steal, thief?”

“Bread.”

The crier frowned. “Did you take the whole market’s worth? Three days pilloried seems a mite excessive for that.”

“I took it from Pettyworth.”

“Ah. That’ll do it.”

“I farmed a strip o’ land on his manor, you see. Paid me dues on time, all the time. But then one day he comes and tells me the due’s gone up. Takes me last farthing, leaving his pocket stocked and I with naught. So I busted into his stores and took enough bread to feed me family for a few nights till I could find some more money. More refund than theft, in my opinion.”

“Huh.”

“Yeah. The real problem comes after this, though. What do I do next? I’m marked as a thief, I’ve no honor, no way to enter into contract, and no way to work.”

“Hmm. Have you considered running away?”

“To where?”

The crier thought for a moment. “How about France? Head across the channel and find work there. You can tell them that you lost your ear in a tragic tomato-related accident!”

“Oh goody!” cried the thief sarcastically. “Let’s send all our crooks to the continent, why don’t we?”

“You know,” the crier said as a look of inspiration crept across his face, “that’s not a bad idea! But not France...too close, they might come back. What we need is some place further away to drop our crooks off...”

“You know, I imagine that centuries from now we’ll have figured out a less barbaric way to punish criminals than locking them up in some cage. But for now I suppose your idea will have to do, Crier. Out of sight, out of mind and all that.”

The conversation dropped off there as the crier contemplated his brilliant new plan for English criminals and the thief pondered the future. The day waned onwards with the crier occasionally hopping to his feet and ringing his bell.

Clang, clang “Looking for investors! Crooks sent to faraway lands! Invest now!”

The thief giggled lightly as he watched the crier pace his circles, and the sun set behind the buildings.

Hours passed and the moon's arrival above the town sent its inhabitants to bed. An unpleasant stillness now dominated the cold night air, and a pale wash of light flooded the streets of Pillock.

"You have a family, Crier?" the thief asked, his voice echoing through the empty square.

"I've a wife, unfortunately," replied the crier sleepily.

The thief raised his eyebrows slightly and tried to turn his head to face the man next to him. "Then what in God's name are you gonna sit here all night wit' me for?"

"The lady is like God's nails dragged across rough stone, mate. And me father-in-law—who *insists* on living with us—he's no better. So for the sake of a night's peace, I'll stay."

"Might I suggest not reading them any of your poetry? It'd pick up their spirits mightily, I imagine."

"Arsehole," the crier replied with a weak smile. "No, they just...they don't like me much, I suppose. But it's better than being alone in this world."

"It isn't. Divorce her. Simple methinks."

"Oh don't be daft, mate. The Church would never allow it."

"And why not?" the thief spat indignantly. "What're they so afraid of? That one divorce is gonna bring down the entire Roman Catholic Church in England? Ha!"

"'Tis a legitimate fear if you ask me. Such a revelation would expose the whole system as...a little arbitrary, wouldn't you say?" Both men shrugged. "Anyway, I think it's more of a God's wrath kinda deal."

The smile slipped off of the thief's face. "You're probably right. The priest told me that God is going to cast me into hell for stealing the bread, actually."

"Surely not! You've had your ear cut off, you've been slapped in the pillory for days, and you've been pelted with tomatoes. Not to mention the whole 'I'm going to ship you to an island as soon as I get some money' thing! I'd say you've suffered enough."

"Apparently not. I committed a crime against the community *and* against the natural order. So God's pissed and, as far as I understand it, *He* has a tendency to overreact."

"Perhaps," said the crier quietly. "Seems unfair though. Why must God punish you when you've already been punished...I mean, the King is God's representative on Earth, right?"

"Yes," the thief replied.

"And things filter down from there, all the way to us on the bottom rung of the ladder."

“Yes.”

“So, in punishing you, the Lord has already carried out God’s will and you’ll be snug as a bug in a really cozy floor covery-thing...feel like there may have been a rhyme there...”

“Well, the priest said that’s not how it’s going to go,” sulked the thief as the crier mumbled rhymes to himself.

“Bug...tug...lug...jug...snug...snug? Warm...fire... candle...priest...priest!” The crier shot to his feet and began clanging his bell vigorously. “Priest! I need the priest, if you please!”

Angry shouts sounded within the houses surrounding the square as peasants all across town were jolted from sleep. The shutters of a window behind the crier burst open, and the portly red face of the town’s priest appeared in the opening.

“What the hell are you yelling about?” he screamed in anger.

“I have a theological question for you, Father,” replied the crier calmly.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?”

“It’s the Dark Ages, Father. Nobody knows what bloody time it is. Now, as for our little conundrum—aaaand he’s gone.”

The priest’s figure disappeared back into the dark house, leaving the pair of men once more alone. “Do you think he’ll

be back?” the crier asked as he stared at the dark spot where the window still lay open.

“I think he’s gone to get something to throw at you, frankly,” replied the thief, “and I kinda hope it’s a tomato.”

The priest reappeared in the window with a bible clasped in his hand, which he promptly hurled at the crier’s head. “Find your own damned answers, you bastard!” he shouted venomously as his target narrowly avoided the book.

“Told you,” said the thief with a hint of disappointment. *Thwap.* A tomato quickly followed the bible out of the priest’s window and slammed into the crier’s face. “Yes! Thank you, Father!”

“Where is everyone getting these fecking tomatoes!?” spluttered the crier as he wiped the slimy mass of flesh from his eyes. “This is 14th century England...we don’t even have tomatoes, yet!”

“A mystery for the ages,” the thief chortled with satisfaction. The crier cast a glare towards his companion, and then noticed a barrel of water outside the tannery. He crossed over to it and dunked his hands in, splashing the water against his face and cleansing the last vestiges of mystery produce from his skin. After he was done, he walked over to the bible lying on the stones and scooped it up. He gazed over the front cover, admiring the gold lettering dancing across the delicate leather-wrapped cover before opening the book. Graceful letters twisted and turned across the

pages within, and the margins were decorated with ornate images of knights doing battle. The crier let his eyes drift along the words. He mumbled and nodded periodically as his finger came to his lips in contemplation.

“You can’t read, can you?” asked the thief.

“Not a word,” the crier replied and abandoned all pretense that he, a peasant, could actually read. “Nice pictures though.”

“Pictures of what?”

“Knights doing battle with...” the crier screwed up his face as he turned page after page, “snails, mostly.”

“Snails? Why snails?”

“No idea. Seems arbitrary.” With that, the crier closed up the book and returned it to the priest’s house. He gently laid it against the door and returned to his post alongside the thief. The pair remained silent for some time as one stared up at the stars and one gazed down upon the ground.

“I’ve come to a decision,” the thief stated, breaking the quiet.

“Yeah?” replied the crier. “And what decision is that?”

“Once I’m out of here, I’m going to become a highwayman.”

The crier snorted loudly and whipped his head around to stare at the seemingly disembodied head next to him. “You’re going to steal more?”

“Sure, why not? Not like I’ve got any other prospects.”

“See, this is why we need to ship you lot off the island. That whole cage-and-ear thing leaves too much opportunity for recidivism.”

“You’d rather I continue committing crimes on another continent?”

“Naturally.”

“Very British of you.”

“Indeed.”

The thief sighed and attempted to gaze up at the stars, failing, of course, due to the wooden stockade holding his head firmly in place. “World sure looks different from this angle, Crier. Makes you think.”

“Yea? And what are you thinking of now?”

“I’m thinking that all the world’s a coin. We end up on one side or the other by virtue of birth alone, and there’s naught we can do about it after that.”

“Dismal fuck,” the crier said with a slight tremble in his chuckle as he shifted his weight from one side to the other. His eyes darted to the ground, then to the houses around the square, then to the sky and back again. “Ahem...are you, uh...are you thirsty, Thief?” he asked as his eyes settled once more on the barrel by the tannery.

“Oh. I’ve only just noticed it, but yes, I am. Aside from a bit of tomato I’ve not had food nor drink since yesterday.” The crier rose to his feet and went to the barrel. He grabbed a small bucket that lay at its base and dipped it into the cold water, then returned to the pillory and tipped the bucket for his companion to have a drink.

“Thanks, mate,” said the thief after drinking his fill. The crier responded with a smile, and that was the last bit of conversation they shared for the rest of the night. As the moon arced across the sky, both men tried their best to get some sleep, and both failed.

The sun broke the horizon and kissed the town with light after a very long and contemplative night for the odd pair in Pillock Square. There wasn’t a cloud to be seen, nor any breath of wind, and the air began to warm slightly in the bright rays of sunlight.

And then came Pettyworth.

“Morning, peasants,” he drawled as he approached the two men. “Perfectly pleasant day, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, m’lord,” the crier responded with only a slight rolling of his eyes.

“I say—oh, hello!” The lord noticed the bible leaning against the priest’s door. “What have we here?” He crossed over to it and picked it up. His eyes slipped and slid across the leather binding and ornate gold lettering. Leafing through the pages, he admired the stylish images running along the edges and drooled covetously. Then with a smirk he slammed the book shut and slid it into his coat.

“M’lord,” the crier stated with a scowl, “that belongs to the priest!”

“Your point?” Pettyworth replied with genuine confusion as he made his way over to the barrel.

“Well... you’re stealing it...”

“Poppycock. I pay my pence to the Church like any man. The priest is merely providing a refund.” As he spoke he moved to grab the bucket for some water, but his hand clasped only air. Straightening up, he cast his eyes about the square until they landed on the container lying next to the thief. “How did that get there?”

“I stole it,” stated the thief.

The lord sneered and approached the pair of men, sidling up to the crier and sliding an arm around his shoulders. “Did you give the thief water?”

“Yes,” the crier rasped through a barren mouth.

“And did you take the water from that barrel?”

“Yes.”

“And to whom does that barrel belong?”

“The tanner, sir.”

“And whom do you think owns the tanner? Or, at least, the tannery.”

The crier’s shoulders slumped and his head drooped. “You, m’lord.”

“Precisely,” the Lord hissed as he retrieved his arm. “Oh, Greg!?”

“Yes, m’lord?” said Greg the Farmer as he poked his head out from behind a building at the rear of the square.

“Fetch me a pillory. Ooo, and some tomatoes!”

Later that evening...

Clang! “Shame on these guys!” stated the rather unenthusiastic lad who replaced the crier. Despite the sun having long ago set behind the rolling hills, the kid still hollered away.

“Ugh,” the crier spat from within his newly fashioned pillory, “fucking amateur.”

“They’ll let anyone be a Town Crier these days,” the thief stated with a sad shake of his head.

“What again?” the crier bellowed. “Gotta speak up, Thief! They’ve put you on the side of me bad ear!”

The thief’s head was about level with his friend’s freshly sliced earhole. “Never mind, ya daft shite!”

“You know,” the crier cried as he struggled to turn and see his companion, “if we’re gonna be highwaymen, this whole lack of ears thing could become a real problem.”

“Nonsense,” the thief replied, “we just stand close together, you facing forward, and me, rearward. That way our ears will be on opposite sides, and we’ll hear as one man!”

“Wonderful!”

“But you know what would be really useful?”

“What?”

“Another pair of hands...and ears...to help us out with our thievin’.”

The crier nodded his head and thought for a moment.
“Lad!” he yelled towards the boy who had finally given up and was now seated atop a bale of hay. “Oi, laddie!”

“What?” the young man said sleepily.

“You’ve been hollerin’ all day. You gotta keep your strength up, aye?”

“Aye,” the boy said as he sat forward a little.

“Go fetch some water from that barrel over there.”