

The Fool of Abbots Leigh

A short story by Justin Newland

The beads of sweat poured off me under my white woollen tunic. All year long, the Abbot had seen how the townsfolk had suffered with yet another famine, another blight. With distended stomachs and uncertain gaits, they staggered around Bristow like drunken fools. Skin hung in ribbons from their emaciated bodies.

That year, the Lord had blessed our young Abbey of St. Augustine with a produce of sorts, a few rough vegetables, a morsel of bread, an egg or two, sufficient for the cook to conjure up a watery stew. The Abbey's bell chimed out and loudly called the townsfolk who came and sat in the Refectory with their rough-hewn bowls and their blunt knives shoved deep into belts of frayed rope. Like ravenous beasts, they consumed our paltry offering. Even when they licked their bowls ripe clean, their hollow eyes and sunken cheeks told us that it wasn't enough.

That was when I first capped eyes on the Fool. Because of the food at the Lord's Table, and the seasonable clime, there followed revelry and devil-making in the market square. He'd more than drunk his fill of ale and lay outside the Inn ensconced in a pool of his own vomit. The townsfolk threw dung and refuse on him as they passed. When he awoke, they mocked his cack-handed body and inveterate shyness. Like an insect, he crawled back to his village, which my lad told me was Abbots Leigh. But I'd seen his wild and feral eyes.

In Cloisters that evening, the Abbot pulled me by the arm and gestured to me to walk and pray with him. He explained that rumours were rife of a debilitating disease that scythed people down like hay at harvest time. People were saying that it was somewhere far away, and yet the destroyer was coming to cast a dark shadow over the rolling hills of England. I was frightened of this unseen foe. As he spoke, I fingered my Rosary. The Abbot knew that I'd been an apprentice to a physic before I joined the mendicant friars, so he despatched me and my lad there and then to care for the villagers of nearby Clifftown.

It was as hot as Hell itself on the day we scrambled up the hill path. That was on the Feast of the Assumption and we arrived in Clifftown in pudding time to celebrate Vespers in the parish church. From there, we walked past the stocks, the rookery and the priest's abode and made our way to the tavern atop St. Vincent's Rock. We supped warm ale under a bright evening August sun, admiring a couple of fork-tailed swallows flying with consummate ease between the gaping jaws of the gorge.

My Lord, it made my head spin to peer down from that high rock. Far below me, like a miniature, was a wooden ship, its sails filled wide and full by the Atlantic Westerlies, jibing up the river to Bristow docks. Perhaps its port of origin was far Bordeaux, Genoa or Venice and perhaps this was the very

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craft from which the Bristow stevedores had discharged the cargo that unleashed the angel of death.

I glanced across to the other side of the gorge at the fair village of Abbots Leigh and that was when I saw the Fool again. He was sitting alone on the stone seat at the entrance to the little cemetery, rocking gently backwards and forwards, lost in his own world. Behind him was a smear of black: a score or more of villagers, with their heads bowed, slouched past him into the cemetery as if he wasn't there. A gust of wind blew their cries of bereavement across the mouth of the gorge and that quickly changed our smiles to frowns. After the Requiem had finished and the grieving villagers had departed, the Fool stood upon the stone seat, cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted in a high-pitched voice:

“Five score and ten.”

“What meanest thou?” I yelled back, wondering how a Fool could count God's numbers. But the gorge was so wide that the wind blew the question back in my face.

“The Fool means nothing,” my lad japed, and nudged his elbow into mine. “Because a fool's nothing begets nothing,” he guffawed. I howled at his jest. But still I was none the wiser for the fool's five score and ten, but not for much longer.

After celebrating Prime the next day, I was called to Old Mother Shipton's. She had raw swellings like red balloons in the neck and groin and in the pits of her arms. In all my time as a physic, I had never seen the like. With care and precision, I lanced each one with the tip of a hen feather. But pain and suffering speak loud and fast; I winced almost as much as she did at the sight of the thick, black blood that exuded from the buboes and grimaced at a smell as vile as Hell itself. Before sunset, Old Mother died, writhing in agony and in her own mire. I mouthed the funeral psalm *sotto voce*.

As the sun burnt the evening sky, I gazed, frozen in grief, across the unforgiving crags of St. Vincent's Rock. I pricked up my ears when I heard a soft child's voice drift across the empty void.

“Five score and five,” he yelled in that falsetto voice of his.

Five less than last time: I shook to the depths of my soul because then I knew his foolish meaning. That day, five had been assumed up to Heaven from Abbots Leigh. But then I sighed, for I knew that the will of God would soon take the blessed Fool. I crossed myself, unfurled my Rosary, and thrice repeated the Marian benediction for the hallowing of his soul.

Day by day I reluctantly became acquainted with the course and routine of the wretched malady, though it was anything but a routine. The buboes appeared and burst in the villagers like corn poppies blown in the wind, spraying death to all corners, killing kith and kin, squires and villeins, young and old. No one was spared this scourge of God.

One by one, our numbers dwindled, with deaths so agonising as to frighten the Almighty himself, until by Michaelmas, we few in Clifftown were no more than the days in the month of September. To console the remaining few survivors, I stuffed rags down the patient's throats to stem the horror of their screams. When I had no more physic to offer the dying, I'd summon our priest to

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utter the Extreme Unction over their hapless souls and soon after that the warden to dispose of their wracked bodies in his tumbrel.

By All Hallows, a month or so later, the swallows had gone, as had my lad and the priest. The warden too succumbed to the mortal fiend, coughing blood and gore as he recited the funeral rites. The few weary men that remained struggled mightily to break the frost-laden earth with their spades, but we laid the boy to rest in the last spare grave in the cemetery.

I collected the remaining victims in the tumbrel after Matins on the following day and then coaxed the stubborn mule through the tall grass growing uncut on the main street, past the vacant stocks, the rookery, the empty priest's abode and the deserted tavern. Then I dressed the naked dead in handfuls of lime and condemned them to the plague pit which I covered with sods. As my prayers went heaven-ward, my tears bled onto the callous earth.

Yet I was the last in Clifftown to succumb to the invisible fiend. Gritting my teeth, I grabbed the blood-stained hen's feather and lanced a fetid pustule in my neck until it leaked black and green pus over the long grass and windswept leaves. My head and body shook uncontrollably until blackness overtook my eyes.

When I awoke, I crawled on my hands and knees to the gorge's lip. I doubted there was any living soul in the whole wide world to even find me, let alone lay my poor monk's body to rest in God's hallowed earth.

Down, down I peered into the depths, tempted by the appeal of a quick and brutal end. Suddenly, a large bird, a raven as black as pitch, swooped out of the dulled evening light. It alighted on a rock near my swollen, disfigured body and strutted up and down, cronking, bending its head, as if berating me in my moment of weakness. Then I remembered: a solitary raven had jealously guarded St. Vincent's tortured body and now the blue dark bird had come to save mine from falling from the lip of the gorge and into the mire of corruption. Strangely fortified, I closed my eyes to shut out the pain and prayed with fervour for forgiveness.

I coughed more blood onto a bed of golden leaves. Then I heard a voice as sweet as an angel's drift across the ravine, its echo reverberating around the sheer rock faces. The falsetto tone was unmistakable. How was he still alive? Through bleary eyes I saw him standing on the stone seat, arms folded, rocking back and forth. The cold north wind blew up the gorge and whipped his long hair across his face. I cried, "Help me, save me," but the blood and sputum in my throat rendered my plea inaudible.

As if to hear what the Fool would answer, the wind ceased, the raven stopped squawking and a shroud of silence descended on the gorge. Slowly I lifted my battered body enough to watch him spring off the stone seat, click his heels together in mid-air and then shout over to me, "One."

As he turned and walked away into the pallid evening light, I pondered hard what meanest a God who is merciful to Fools.