

A Voice of the People

"Sarpeth! Sarpeth! Sarpeth!" the villagers chanted enthusiastically, their silhouettes backlit by torches that flickered and spat in the evening's light rain.

The unpleasant weather did nothing to dampen the mood of the village folk though, for they were well pleased that the famed Acedian Friar, and celebrated hero of the Crusade had decided to visit with them this evening. Few dignitaries, and certainly none of note, had ever visited the quiet village of Rushwater. His arrival would give them a sense of pride that would last for generations to come.

"Sarpeth, Sarpeth, Sarpeth!" came the cries once more, but more insistent, more needful. There was a small village of less than sixty people, but all were present; from Old Meg the wise matron to the Gobleys' newborn babe. None wanted to miss even a single word from the Friar; for they had all heard the tales of his cheerful disposition, his warm voice, and most important of all – his great love for the common folk.

Carpenter Jeb, the younger, had crafted a small stage for the Friar to address the people. Goody Ullefor, wife of the most prosperous farmer in Rushwater, had made a large vat of lemon-sugar; from which the children of the town were greedily helping themselves to great handfuls, much to her chagrin. Mayor Ronker, a man of few airs and graces, had been preparing for the visit for over a month. The entire village had participated in the festivities of the evening in some way, every person eager to be a part of the story of this night.

A ripple of excitement ran through the crowd, even as the weather deteriorated and the heavens opened in full. A huge man, wearing the poor-quality travelling robe of an Acedian friar, was gingerly making his way onto the stage. The timbers groaned under the stress of his weight, and many eyes turned to Jeb the Younger, who shrugged nervously under the scrutiny. "No one told me he was such a biggun!" he squeaked. The crowd roared with laughter; the good nature of the evening remained impervious to any such problems.

On the stage, Friar Sarpeth's own thunderous laugh joined with the people of Rushwater. It was a jolly sound, with a warm and deep basso rumble, and the people were immediately put at ease to hear it. "Brothers and sisters," Sarpeth boomed, "I thank you for your hearty welcome, despite the foulness of the weather. You do credit to the saying that 'a noble heart always knows the warmth of a summer's evening', though I confess, I could sorely do with a touch of that heat right now!" The crowd gave him a good natured peal of laughter.

"Peace, my friends, *peace*," Sarpeth rumbled. On that last word, the crowd went oddly silent. A tiny hint of a smile formed on Sarpeth's broad and full lips. "Before we continue," he said, "Let us pray." The people of Rushwater fell to their knees with their hands clasped before them. Sarpeth began intoning the words to the Prayer of Thanks:

"Sleeping Gods: you that made the world entire, and set a bounty at our feet, we thank you. To you whose slumbering breath is the wind on our crops, and whose errant tears form the rain on our fields, we offer our eternal gratitude. We shall do honour to you in our words and in our deeds." Sarpeth took a momentary pause. "May they slumber forever," he called out.

"May they never wake," came the collective reply.

Sarpeth raised his hands and the people stood. A feeling of excitement hung in the air, almost palpable. "Brothers and sisters," Sarpeth began, "I wish to tell you a story from my travels. As you know, long I have journeyed, and far, bringing the word of truth to the ears of heathen folk in distant lands." A cheer rose up, interrupting the Friar. Sarpeth raised his hand in acknowledgement, an awkward smile upon his face. "*Peace!*" he commanded in his curiously deep voice, and again total silence reigned.

"I met upon my travels many friends, and I was blessed to help countless souls onto the path of righteousness." His hand stymied another attempt at a cheer. "But not all souls possess the insight to embrace the truth. Some must be led to it as surely as a mule is led into the fields." He allowed the people to murmur their agreement before continuing.

Commented [A1]: Query: 'evening' is here, but sometimes 'night' is used. Please decide what time of the day it is, and if necessary, if/when evening changes to night. (See relevant highlights in red)

"I was in a great city, beyond the vast northern ocean, and was ministering to the poor and the oppressed, such is my way. A Prince of the city, a merchant of supreme wealth, sent a Page with a command of summons." Sarpeth puffed up his chest and adopted a haughty pose. "Beggaman priest," he said to me. 'My Master demands your presence, and with great haste. He wishes to know why his people flock to you and spurn his beneficent wisdom.'"

Sarpeth chuckled as he remembered the exchange. "My friends, I must tell you that I didn't even look up to answer. I told the Page that I would not see his Master, and that if he wanted to know the love of the people then all he needed to do was show them respect." The crowd roared in agreement.

The Friar continued. "The Page departed in a foul temper, with many threats upon his lips. The next day he returned, with two soldiers from the house of his Master. Again he demanded my presence: 'Beggaman priest,' he screeched, 'vain fool of the gutter! My Master commands you to attend him on pain of death!' Again, my friends, I moved not, for I have no fear of petty men." Sarpeth stood with his hands at his sides. A serious look had formed on his face, removing the amusement that had previously been there. As the villagers looked upon him, they could not help but warm toward this amiable and honest champion of the people.

"I told the fellow," Sarpeth went on, "that not only would I not go with him, but that his Master would be forced to come before me, in time. The Page bid the soldiers to attack me for my 'insolence', but the common folk all around rose up to protect me. They *resisted*. The soldiers were severely beaten and the Page was sent fleeing back to his Master once more." As the crowd cheered wildly, Sarpeth's face took on a sombre look and his hands extended to request quiet.

"Now, now, my brothers and sisters," he rebuked, "violence is not the way to everlasting happiness! I may be a large man, and in the eyes of some perhaps built for actions rather than words, but I have taken a vow of peace. I urge you all to renounce violence! Those good people were trying to protect me – a noble aim, but they were wrong with their methods."

Sarpeth paused for a moment, allowing the villagers to linger upon his last words before continuing. "I used my powers to heal the soldiers, and I sent them on their way." Sarpeth gazed down upon the shame-filled faces of the villagers. His frown melted away, and a look of forgiveness and love took its place. The villagers' regard for him increased a hundred-fold in that single moment.

"A noble soul is always learning, my friends," he continued sagely. "My love knows no bounds for those who have lessons yet to be learned. Blessed are those upon the long path. Blessed are the people of Rushwater!" The relief the village folk felt at Sarpeth's benediction gave rise to another great cheer; they were glad to be high in the affections of such a great man. Once the vigour of their encouragement had ebbed slightly, he went back to his story.

"Each day the Page returned with more soldiers," boomed Sarpeth jauntily. "Each day a wall of the common folk barred them from my person. In time, even the soldiers themselves joined with their brethren in my defence, and as I foretold, the Prince was forced to come to meet me in the gutters of Cheaptown!" Sarpeth took a satisfied breath as the people of Rushwater hailed the humbling of a tyrant.

His voice took on a defiant tone as he recounted what happened next. "The Prince came before me, decked in finery and many precious jewels. 'Beggaman priest,' he said with a haughty air, 'You have disobeyed my orders, and have turned the people against their beloved father. For this I shall have your head, and the heads of any that protect you.'"

Sarpeth shook his head in feigned exasperation. "I was not perturbed in the slightest, my friends. I did not even pay him the attention of my gaze. This agitated him greatly, so he tried to force his way through with his armed retainers, but the people *resisted* him. They stood strong against him, and the yoke of his dominion over them was broken in an instant." The crowd cheered once again, their own experiences of distant and aloof masters being too similar for comfort.

"*Peace*," Sarpeth uttered; little more than a whisper this time, but no less effective – the crowd went silent as though struck with collective muteness. "They pelted the Prince with rotten food and he was forced to retreat, pursued unto the gates of his Holdfast by my blessed protectors." A note of satisfaction was threaded through his words.

"Three times the Prince sallied forth," said Sarpeth, theatrically raising three fingers from one massive hand. "Three times they forced him back into hiding behind the walls of his Keep." He crossed his burly arms and

smiled. "His fortune and power availed him not within those confines, and as the weeks passed food became scarce. The spectres of hunger and pestilence hung above them, and desperation gnawed at the Prince's heart."

Sarpeth paused as the wind blew a sheet of rain into the front of the crowd, noting how the villagers barely noticed. "Once more the Page came before me," he continued, "but gone was his haughty manner, replaced by the humility brought only by deprivation. 'Priest,' said he – for beggarman I was no longer, it seemed. 'My Master asks how he may gain audience with you without violence being done upon his person.' I waited calmly for the man to finish speaking before giving my reply. I told him that when his Master came to me with the sweat of a day's work upon his brow; that when he came to me with the hunger of three days without food in his stomach, and when he came to me with the worry of injustice in his heart; that is when I would break bread with him!" The crowd roared their approval with all their hearts, and Sarpeth smiled knowingly back at them, with his expansive chest undulating as he took great breaths. His eyes burned with a righteous zeal.

"And you know what, brothers and sisters?" he thundered. "Three days after, the Prince came before me, carrying heavy pails of water to wash the feet of my protectors. Grime was in his nails and sweat ran down his back from his exertions. His eyes were those of a famished man, and his heart was heavy with the lesson of his own intolerance. This man, who would have taken my head if he could, now took my hand in friendship, and another soul was saved that blessed day."

The crowd applauded with wild abandon and many embraced their neighbours, delighted by the tale. That a man should come to the wisdom of their religion from such a lofty perch was something that they had never countenanced. But the Friar before them – a man of peace, wisdom, and love – had made it possible. *Perhaps, they thought, it could happen for us too? Will he bring us an end to our worries and torments?*

The noise of their revelry continued unabated, and Friar Sarpeth made no attempt to end it. He stood above them, a giant figure in a hempen robe; radiating an aura of quiet command and stirring within the people deep feelings of loyalty and obedience. Eventually, the clamour subsided and they waited upon his words once more. They noted that his cheerful disposition had now clouded over, and they felt some apprehension in their hearts to match his changing demeanour.

"Brothers and sisters," Sarpeth said pensively. "My joy at such happenstance is held in check by the knowledge that this kind of despot is just as common in our beloved land. It pains me to say that close to home, we too have an intimate knowledge of inequality. I know that within your own lives, there are innumerable examples of injustice and I salute you for the dignity in which you bear it. The burden of such crimes always falls upon the downtrodden; such is the shame of the mighty." The mood of the crowd grew sombre as the words of Sarpeth shone a light upon the dark underbelly of Mellorian society.

The Friar shook his head sadly. "I weep for you that suffer so, and if I could only give my worthless life to transform your lot, I would gladly do it. But it would avail us nothing." He exhaled sadly from his broad chest. The children of the village, full of sugar and high spirits, were confused as to the sudden change of mood of their families. Sarpeth stood silently, watching whilst the occasional grumble of the crowd became full complaint, and then transformed into anger.

When he judged the time right he began again, a powerful zeal in his voice, righteous anger simmering just below the surface. "Who among you knows not a maiden that has been abused wickedly by her 'betters'? Who can point to the tradesman that was well and promptly paid for his labours? Who has not lost a son, a brother, a relative to the pointless wars your state embarks on without any consideration for your lives?" Each question led to an angry burst of agreement from the crowd.

Sarpeth went on as the discontent of the villagers increased. "I met a fair lass from a nearby village just last week. She told me of the 'kindness' of the wealthy merchant who took her on as a serving maid. How his hands took liberties with her virtue, and how he promised her the world entire if she would just consent to his whims." Sarpeth spat in disgust as the meaning settled upon the crowd.

"You may wonder what was her reward for giving in to his lustful desire? Let me tell you! She was turned out in the cold when the child she carried was visible to all! Spurned and shamed, with scornful words burning in her heart. Alas..." he said softly, and with such melancholy to draw tears from their eyes, "the blessed babe did not survive this last winter." Again, Sarpeth paused to let the crowd vent their pent up feelings of betrayal, jealousy, and rage. His countenance, which had formerly been gentle and welcoming, became menacing. "Peace!" he commanded, and the crowd slipped into a sullen silence to hear his words. The pressure of them that they felt within their skulls was too much for them to disobey.

"There is hope yet for you all!" roared Sarpeth angrily. The people looked up at him, urging him with their eyes to solve their problems, to free them so that their children might know a better life. It mattered not to any of them that they led a fairly contented life in their village, for they saw only the pain of injustice before their eyes.

"You must resist. *Resist!*" Sarpeth barked. A flash of lightning lit up the field, followed by a peal of thunder. The rain continued unabated; the crowd saturated and agitated in equal measure. The Friar's voice seemed to crawl into their hearts and a strong will for disobedience grew within them. "Show your strength by proving who really commands this land. Your supposed masters will threaten you, will try to force you, but always you must *resist* them! Raise no arms against them, for you shall only embolden and unify your enemies. Violence is not the path to freedom, my friends!

"*Resist* them in body, in mind, and in spirit. You must be resolute, good people of Rushwater, for only then will you drag these vassals of darkness screaming into our blessed light!" Voices rang out sharply in agreement, and every heart present was turned to rebellious intent by the possibility that Sarpeth was putting before them. None of them stopped to wonder at why they might need to disobey, but only about how they could do it.

"Go now," Sarpeth screamed, his voice reverberating through the very fabric of the evening's gloom. "Organise yourselves, and prepare for the trials to come. Prepare for your dreams to be realised at long last. *Resist!*" He turned and clambered from the creaking stage, the great clamour of people behind him ignored as he disappeared into the darkness beyond the light of the field.

In the solitude of a forest glade, just beyond the limits of Rushwater, Friar Sarpeth fell to his knees and clasped his hands as if in prayer. A flash of golden light appeared before him, which formed slowly into a portal of energy. It took on the shape of a small pane of mirrored glass; the device Acedians used to communicate with each other over great distances.

In the dimly lit space on the other side of the glass, Sarpeth discerned the shadowy figure of his superior, Master Vespus – known as the Mendicant of Acedia. "Report, Sarpeth!" came a curt instruction from a reedy voice.

Sarpeth ground his teeth the merest fraction in umbrage. "Master Vespus," Sarpeth whispered in a cruel tone, "I have now turned every village in the district against Prince Faverge. The people will refuse to engage in their work, and grain shipments will therefore not make it to Vaetoran, which will cause panic upon the streets."

A branch cracked behind him in the glade and Sarpeth sprang to his feet. He saw a woman of the village, likely seeking him for a private benediction. She froze in panic, having clearly heard the exchange. He stood and fixed his eyes on her. "Come to me!" he commanded. Her body shook as she tried to resist his will, but it quickly subsided and she took a step towards him. Tears were streaming from her eyes and her lips were trying to form words, but they merely came out as an unintelligible spluttering. Sarpeth extended out an arm, with his large palm towards her. "Come!" he said, insistently and impatiently.

Her pace increased and she was soon within his grasp. He looked down at her, breathing angrily from his nostrils. In the cold night air they had the appearance of the smoky exhalations from some fire-breathing monster. "What did you hear?" he questioned the woman curtly.

"Everything, Friar Sarpeth," she answered without a moment's delay. Her panicked eyes widened as she realised what she had said.

He ground his jaw at the reply. "Inconvenient," he hissed. Sarpeth reached down and closed his open hand around her throat. It constricted powerfully, and there was a crunching sound as the cartilage of her larynx was crushed. His cruel eyes watched hers as the lack of breath took its toll. The woman's face quickly turned blue and Sarpeth could feel her pulse racing before giving out as he throttled the life from her body. She slumped as existence left her body and he heaved her dangling corpse across the glade with a grunt of dissatisfaction. With a sneer he turned back to the portal and dropped to one knee.

There was an awkward silence between the two men for a time. "There is no chance that your magic will unravel before our negotiations are concluded?" The disregard in Master Vespus' voice was evident, and he made no reference to what he had clearly seen just happen.

"None Master," replied Sarpeth tersely. "My words have been imprinted in their minds and hearts. They will obey, and yet they will believe they have decided upon the course themselves. It shall never be linked to us."

"Good," replied Master Vespus, in an emotionless monotone. "But what if the disobedience of his people does not provide the Prince enough impetus to accede to our demands?"

Sarpeth laughed; a mean-spirited hacking sound. He moved his hand to his side and his fingers grasped with something heavy and unseen. The glamour of invisibility bound to his mace fell away like liquid as he held it aloft, admiring its wicked edges and the hint of old blood upon the ridges.

"I do not believe he will refuse me," he said, a hard smile on his lips.