

Lord Of The Castle

High above a village by the sea, in one of the age-old kingdoms whose banners flew before our land was yet born, there is a castle on a cliff. From the village, whose doors practically touch the sea hundreds of feet below, there is no known road to reach the black stone towers or the fearsome gates of new iron which face directly out upon the deadly drop. So high is that cliff in the bitter air among the clouds that the sea birds fly in swirling flocks just beneath its lip. The village is peaceful, a happy and safe little hamlet, threatened by troubled seas but seldom and by foreign enemies never. Its harbor is as snug for traders and fishermen as any able sailor could hope to find. Some say the reason for peace is that a dreadful power protects the village, the might of the castle's unseen lord. Others claim it is because he lets them alone, never oppressing them with his dark appetites. None in the village know his face, nor seek any further knowledge of him. None would swear that anyone at all lives in the black castle, though their fear to speak of it is proof enough of their belief.

To that land came a stranger one summer, a poet and storyteller with his quill and his instrument of many strings upon his back. He came as the passenger of a merchant ship, and with the modest measure of gold in his pocket he took lodging at the Fisherfolk's Inn. He partook richly of food and drink, buying generously for those whom he met, and so had made himself a host of new friends in the space of an hour or two. He asked for their stories, for he was a gatherer of tales, and put the most fascinating of them to lively tunes. He made much merry and stirred much delight among the villagers by the setting of the sun.

"Friends," said he when the supper hour grew late, "you have given of your hearts and lives to my coffer, and I shall go from here a richer man for the tales you have given me to tell. I would ask a final gift, the answer to the greatest mystery of your village. Having heard it I will depart at sunrise, your humble and eternal servant.

"As the ship which carried me here drew into the harbor, I chanced to be sitting aloft with the watch mate, and what did I spy but two towers of black compassed round with high walls of the same stuff, all fronted with an iron gate of forbidding appearance. Instead of a road leading to that gate, I saw only the deadliest face of sheer rock that ever dashed an unlucky man, with a circle of stones like swords at the bottom, ill masked by the crashing of waves. I saw sea birds circle the place like harpies round a wicked altar. The man who blundered from the gate of such a castle would surely fall to the sharp crags below and have his innards punched out. There, pierced through, he would be a fine feast for gulls, but in no fit state to tell his tale."

The company fell silent for a moment, but tried to renew their merrymaking without paying the stranger's talk any mind. They knew not the answers he sought, or else they guarded them with fearful hearts. The bartender moved to take his cup, thinking he must be drunk to jab at their superstition so recklessly, but the young man held fast to his tankard and shook it in accusation.

"You keep your greatest secret from me, yet what have I done but show you kindness and pay for your ale? You wrong me, friends, and you do me injustice if you reckon me an innocent or a fool. I have heard in parts east and south of here many rumors of your dreadful castle, else I would not have found my way here to look upon it.

"In the desert lands of the bedouin they say that an exiled inquisitor of the Spanish church

resides there, ruling his own cult of misfits and freaks, the children of illicit and incestuous conquest. In the lands of mountain snow they claim the devil himself spends his summers there, hell being too hot even for its own prince. Yet in the eastern gypsy lands I heard my favorite story of all. There they whisper that the hideous immortal creature begotten of Baron Frankenstein, having paid his spiteful creator with vengeful murder, claimed that ancient fortress as a sanctuary from the eyes of the world, building gates against the sea to ward off supplicants and invaders alike. They say he feasts on whatever bird, beast or man is unlucky enough to wander in there, and that he uses their bones to fashion one great ossuary, a cathedral of darkness lined with the skulls and flayed members of the dead. The chapel's inner shine is said to be the most fearsome sight of all, a desecration fit to drive hardy men mad.

"I see none of you will confirm or deny these rumors, yet your trembling gives me pause. It may be that I shall have to settle on that tale and be glad of it. Yet I say that I would give all I had to the man who could show me the way into that castle on the cliff, that I might know its mysteries for myself."

No other at the inn made a reply, though the barkeep was still glad to accept his gold. As the young man surveyed the room in the bleariness of drink, supposing the hour had come to retire as friendless as he arrived, he spied a dark figure in a corner where the candles had burned out, beckoning to him.

The man, he saw as he drew near, was a hulking fellow in the coarse hooded cloak of a shepherd, yet he had a salty confidence to the set of his jaw. The young man could not quite see his eyes under the shielding of his cowl, but his expression was welcoming enough as he pointed to an

empty seat beside him and a jug filled brim full. The young man was full of thanks, and the big man nodded in polite reply.

"I was afraid I had quite used up my welcome," said the storyteller as he helped himself to the jug.

The big man's lips parted in a friendly grin. The young man noticed that his face was all pitted and scarred, from age or injury or both, and reckoned this to be his reason for going so heavily draped in a house of ease.

"Do not think harshly of these folks, mate," said his host in the booming voice of springtime thunder. "They are of the sea, and seafaring folks is the most superstitious kind of men you may ever hope to find."

He spoke with a lilting dialect, but had a poetic command of his words more lofty than his rude clothes suggested. His accent had a curious refinement to it, at odds with his common oaths and expressions. The young man sat forward, feeling he had struck on the most interesting companion of all.

"Thanks for your kindness to a traveler, friend," said he. "It is true that dwellers on the shore hold tightest to their fancies and idols. But did I truly give offense by asking after the dwellers in that castle?"

"Hard to say," came the reply after a time. "Offense ain't really the word for it. Your questions touch their fear, and that fear is of what they don't know and don't care to know. Questioning the nature of what stands, and what's always stood unknown to them, is nearly a blasphemy. You may as well question the storm as brews the sky, or the depth of the sea below us.

I know some men of learning do question such things, but science ain't a thing prized by such folks as these. They only wish to know what the sea gives, not what the sea is, if you takes my meaning."

The young man saw the reason in it, though it opposed much that he held sacred to himself. At least with that understanding he felt more at his ease, and shared the jug with his new companion down to the bare clay.

"You know these people and pass the time among them," he said, "yet you see them from a higher vantage than they see themselves. You are no mere villager."

"I was not born here," said the big man, "and I have had some small learning, but I am every bit a fisherman and a man of strange creeds as them."

This amused the young man, though the stranger's expression hinted that there was no joke in it. The hard lips set for an instant, then opened with their tone of softness renewed.

"All the same, it's only fair to tell you that there are sure ways to the castle for a man of wit to guess."

The young man set his glass down with a force that shivered the planks.

"Then I have found my guide! I knew you for a man of adventure."

The other put up his hands in denial. "You take me wrong, mate," said he. "I make no offer to guide you. I only wished to let you know for whatever humble satisfaction it gives."

"I'm less satisfied than before, if you taunt me with riddles and vain hope."

"Long years have taught me that true hope's never in vain. If you wish to find your way into the castle, I've doubt you shall. None of these men have ventured there because none of them wish

to see it. That don't mean outsiders never come, them with the same fond wish as yours in their hearts. As far as I can tell, everyone who dares has found the summit and found welcome through them black iron gates."

"It must not be the great feat it seems, then."

"I would not call it easy."

"Riddles again. You speak from experience, no? Have you been there? Have you seen the walls of bone?"

"I may mimic the tones of grand old books, but I am no great wit and a man with no high ambitions left. I share in what the wind and sea offer me. Only I believe in my heart that him who looks upon the mysteries of that castle end his journey a disappointed man."

The young man could not see the sense in this, for surely the discovery of anything, even nothing at all, brought the satisfaction of having dared to find out. He weighed the words of the big fisherman long into the night, after the drinks were drunk and the two men parted friendly company, with the hope of meeting again in a day or two. The young man's dreams in his rough bed were all of soaring, of ascent, of great discoveries, of dark treasures beyond the reach of rumor.

He rose late in the morning, shaking off the last of his drink, and set off blinking in the bright sunshine of day. He went immediately down to the edge of the sea, where foamy breakers lapped and churned without end. Standing as close under the foot of the cliff as he could, he studied it from several vantage points. He looked at the rough wall of rock, which loomed to a frightful height when seen from directly below. He ventured a few paces onto the slab where the

tide surged hungrily among the juts of rock. It was a perfect trap for the unwary climber, yet the words of the big dark fisherman rang true in his heart. He dared, and so stood as good a chance as any of seeing that summit scaled.

To assure himself that no other means save magic would avail, he attempted to edge his way around the cliff for hidden passages or secret routes. Not one could he find, and so he resolved to brave the cliff with all his determination. Making his way home along the stony shore, he looked a fair distance out to sea and spied the bulky shape of his fisherman friend in a small boat, drifting placidly with the tide. He raised his hand in salute, yet even though the big man seemed to be looking in his direction, he made no sign of recognition. The young man reckoned the distance and the misty air might impair an older man's eyes.

From the drydock master in the village he purchased a fair quantity of strong oiled rope and a small hoisting tackle. From a small dinghy sitting neglected in the harbor he quietly borrowed half a dozen rusty hooks, stout enough to hold a goodly weight and not likely to be missed for some time. He spent some time fashioning these implements into a crude harness for climbing. The labor lasted into the evening, at which time he stocked himself a few easily carried provisions from the innkeeper's wife. He supped that night in disappointment, for his friend of the previous night did not report to the inn. Still, he slept a deeper and more confident sleep, knowing that his third day in the village would hold the revelations he had come seeking. He dreamed pleasant dreams until the dawn.

At first light he appeared below the cliff. The sea roared, indifferent to the tiny invader. Securing his harness of hooks and ropes, he began to find unlikely grasps and footholds in the

streaked mossy face of the cliff. His progress was slow and slippery, but determination fired his limbs. Before two hours had elapsed he could see the progress he was making.

The implacable surf churned on even at the approach of low tide. He only allowed himself one glance downward, and regretted it. The sharp fingers of rock reached up at him with sleek menace. Gulls roiled in hungry screaming flocks above and below him. He reckoned himself nearly halfway up, but from his limited perspective it might have been less.

Already his mind swarmed with fancies of what awaited him above. He wondered whether the gates would be opened in welcome, or if gaining entry would require further art. Would the lord be within, or would he find empty halls for his trouble? Even so, he might gain a whole songbook simply from this one journey.

His heart and head swelled with pride as he pulled himself higher. It was a moment too late that he realized he had climbed to a new stratum of the cliff where sea birds nested in hollows. All he saw were easier, more pronounced holds for his hands. Thrusting his fingers into the largest of these, he was astonished at a ruffle of feathers and squawks of fury. A frenzied gull came flapping before his face. The bird beat its wings about his ears, blinding him with its frenzy of plumage, yet he managed to bat it away with his free hand.

It was only when more birds joined the attack that the young man lost his grip. He was trying to fix a hook above his head and so pull himself safe above the reach of their attacks, yet they beset him with all their might for flapping and pecking. Their cries blocked out other sounds, even his own groans of fright and pain. He was fully away from the cliff, plunging through the air before he realized he had let go.

It seemed to him that he fell as long as he had been climbing. The impossibility of this had not struck him before the spike of rock did. He felt the crushing impact of each edge as it compressed, twisted, mangled and pierced him. By the time he came to rest, he could not move so much as a finger. The cold briny probing of the surf prickled his warm, flowing wounds. The throbbing pain in every limb commanded motion, yet he could not persuade his body to stir from its perilous position.

He knew he had been badly hurt, but he would not admit that he was doomed. He felt sure that rest would renew his energy and he could begin again. He had been all but promised that those with desire enough would find their way to the black castle. As he reflected on those words, the corner of his eye caught a familiar sight. A boat had approached the treacherous rocks, and the hulking figure inside tied it off, leaping onto the slippery stone with surprising sureness of foot.

The young man, nearly blinded with pain and terror, half drowned with briny foam in his nose and mouth, made feeble attempts to hold out a hand to him whom he took for a rescuer. His voice croaked out, strained and incoherent, as though he thought his friend did not understand the gravity of his plight. The big man strolled about him in a circle, surveying the broken condition of his body, then knelt down to look him level in the face. The young man pleaded with his eyes to be helped and delivered from the deadly place. The black castle he had spurned and nearly forgotten, though when the fisherman spoke it was as though reading his inward thoughts.

"My friend," he said quietly and with fond warmth rather than sorrow or worry, "I salute you. There are few who have dared give so much for this journey, and as I told you theirs is the greater reward. I know your pain and disappointment must be great now, but I tell you now that

your heart's desire is granted."

"Liar," the young man sputtered through the blood filling his mouth. "Tracherous... tricked me."

"The truth," admitted the other with a look of smiling self-reproach, "is the only trick worth knowing. Years ago it used to pain me, but I regret that the feeling is lost to time."

"Who the devil... are..."

"I am merely a gatherer, a fisherman, as I told you," he said, and cast off the cowl of his cloak. In daylight, there was an even more hideous aspect to his scars. They were not burns or natural wounds, but the marks of a face horribly sutured together, a medical travesty. Surely a head so ghastly could not hold such wisdom, such wit, such crafty guile. Yet as the great forearm descended toward him, the hand touching his forehead almost with tenderness, the limb gave the same appearance of mottled and quilted flesh. It was a nightmare fit to torment murderers and crypt-robbers. A high-pitched moan of incredulity and horror leaked from the young wounded man. The big man showed no embarrassment.

"I cannot confess to being entirely of nature, thanks to the damnable cunning of my father. But over a long life I have learned reverence for nature, which has adopted me for a proper son. I take what the sea gives me, being careful to share my prosperity. One must hold a little back, never taking the whole, for who is entitled to all things?"

"I come every day at low tide to gather bones and flesh and wood, whatever is left here for my by the waves. I must confess the bones are my favorite, for reasons which are already known to you."

Stooping down, he brought up the skeleton of a large fish, trapped in a crevice and unable to swim back to deeper waters. These fragments he thrust into a bag of oiled canvas tied over his shoulder. The young man reached out a finger, identifying and accusing his treacherous friend.

"Do not reproach me," said the monster with the gleeful yellow eyes, "for not admitting it was I who dwelt in that castle above us. I am a simple man and humble, and guard my privacy too jealously. Call it the hard usage of the world that has led me to such retirement. I fear that if the villagers knew more about me, it might harm the peace I have built myself. I have seen so many of them born and dead that if they fear me as some legendary horror, I say let them for the good of their society. As I know them now, they are good to me without taking too much interest.

"But enough. There is just time enough to put your mind at ease. I congratulated you before, but lest there be confusion still in your heart I assure you that as your host, I welcome you into my home. Indeed, you shall abide there as long as those walls stand. I only regret that I cannot escort you there today. It is regrettable that such things take time, yet there are customs to be honored.

"Here you will remain for two days or three, that the sea may soften your flesh and my dear birds take their share of you. But know and believe, by my solemn oath, I pledge to return and gather every remaining bone of you. You shall not adorn any mean room or passageway like a fish or bird or shipwrecked innocent. You are a pilgrim to my abode, and as such you shall form a permanent part of the holy shrine. Upon the very altar will your limbs be fixed and polished for the delight of the eternal ones.

"Thankful though I am to the sea and the birds and the lips of others whose whispering brought you to seek me, I am no less indebted to you for the sacrifice you make in coming to me.

To journey here is no easy feat from any quarter of the world, most of which I have seen in my time. You are truly a valiant man, to be hailed with all due honors."

Then, for the next quarter of an hour the romantic youth, the valiant poet, gave himself to bitter weeping, for there was nothing but to do but weep as he watched the other's ascent into the heavens. Throwing the cloak back away from his shoulders, as the birds circled and screamed and the little boat thumped in its small sheltered pool, the lord of the castle sank his fingers of unimaginable strength into the tiny hollows of the cliff. He climbed with expert swiftness and dexterity, the sack full of bones clanking on his hip. On he went, disappearing into the haze as the tide surged all around the ears of his observer.

It was some hours later that life left the moist eyes of the young traveler, who would have watched with awe as the lone dweller of the black towers made room for him along the panels of a sacred chamber. Lights were burning dim by the time the work was complete. The bone bag was empty, its contents compassing a small column in a larger hall. But in the holy of holies a perfect space was prepared for the latest of the faithful. The lord hummed an impromptu strain on a few lines of Milton, just under his breath, and gave thanks.