

## The Dubious But True Tale of My Death



It all started the day I was born. It was the end of a terrible winter in the small town of Dogsblood, in the year 760. I was born six weeks premature, and although the midwife saved me, there was nothing that could be done for my Mum. Nobody had any idea who my father was, so I was left to fend for myself in the streets. Suffice to say, that with no one to take care of me, I died. Now, that sounds shocking these days, but back in the eight century, that sort of thing was commonplace. Infant mortality was terribly high, something like sixty percent at the time, if I recall correctly, and adult mortality wasn't so hot either.

Anyway, I got better, and found myself a job. True, I was less than a year old, but being an orphan under such harsh conditions made me into quite a responsible chap at a very young age. As I said, I got a job. I set myself up as a freelance waste-management technician— at least that is what I have called it on resumes since then— the actual job was quite unglamorous, I spent every day from dawn until dusk walking the streets, scooping up what the horses dropped, chasing away rats, and hauling off the victims of the latest plague. Conditions being what they were, waste-management struck me as a very lucrative field, and I wondered why I didn't have any competition. My answer came when the end of the month rolled around, and I went to pick up my wages. Apparently, the local Lord had completely failed to budget any money for that sort of thing.

The years went by, and I grew larger and stronger— so much in fact, that I found myself eight feet tall, and able to crush a human skull in the palm of my hand. This didn't go over too terribly well with the other villagers, so I backed up

a few years until I was of a more reasonable size— four foot two. A bit above average for the day. I kept myself busy as a cat farmer, and made a reasonable living at it. But as luck would have it, one day the Bishop at Skulbarrow declared that all cats were "Creatures of the Devil," and that consequently it was a sin to eat them. My whole stock was rendered worthless, and I was once again out of a job.

A new chance for me came in the form of a great new invention. I was sitting on a tree stump in the middle of town when I first heard about it. An acquaintance of mine by the name of Archibald the Armless came running by in a great state of excitement, and I called out to him, asking what was afoot.

"You 'avent 'erd yet?" he asked me.

I assured him that I hadn't, and implored him to tell me what had him so excited.

"Some chap in Spain 'as invented the rudder!" he told me, flailing his shoulders around for emphasis.

Well, I could understand Archibald's excitement. The rudder! For thousands of years, people had been building boats, but before the invention of the rudder, there had been no way to steer them. Thanks to this fabulous invention, boats were no longer limited to traveling in straight lines— what had been a mere novelty for so many centuries, had been suddenly rendered into an effective mode of transportation. I commented to Archibald what fun it would be to actually build a boat, put a rudder on it, and find out what navigation was like first-hand. I hadn't really been serious, but he jumped on the idea.

"We should do it, we should!" he exclaimed. "With your arms, an' my legs, we could really do it! Wot a team we would make!"

What with all my cats in purgatory, I really didn't have anything better to do, so I agreed to help Archibald build a boat.

Half a year, and two dozen trees later, we were done. It was a beautiful boat. Thirty feet long, a strong mizzenmast with a square-rigged sail, a reinforced hull with a level deck, a small cabin in the aft, and of course, the all important rudder.

Unfortunately, it wouldn't go. We checked every seam, we re-rigged the sail, we moved the cabin to the foredeck. Nothing worked. Archibald was sure that we had made the rudder wrong, but we had no one to ask about such a piece of advanced technology. Finally, I chopped down another tree, and crafted six oars. I attached them to the boat, and hired two strong townspeople to help me row. It was no use. The oars just scraped against the dirt, and the boat did not move. I was ready to give up, but Archibald had a stroke of genius.

"Trouble is," he said "We're going about this all wrong. Wot we need to build is somethin' more suited to this dry terrain."

Following Archibald's direction, I fashioned four wheels, and affixed them to the hull of the boat. Then I build a complicated metal device that would use a

wood fire to boil water, the steam from which would turn a system of wheels and pulleys. I attached this engine to the deck of the boat. Then we upended the boat against a tree by the side of the road, and Archibald would sit in it, waiting for thirsty travelers to come by. When someone would chance by, we would start up the engine, and use its power to crush apples and make cider to sell to the traveler at a tidy profit. The four wheels ended up just getting in the way, so I removed them. Archibald was happy, but I was not satisfied. I wanted to experience real navigation. He tried to convince me to stay.

"Steering a boat cain't be all so much diffren' from selling cider." he would say.

But I would hear none of it. Archibald took on an apprentice, and once the lad had learned the ropes, I left behind my hometown, and set out in search of adventure.

It was suggested to me by an old man I met on the road, that the best place to find a real sailing ship with a real rudder would be the ocean. This was the first I had heard of any ocean, and the concept of a large body of water intrigued me, so I decided to find this ocean. As I found out later, I was traveling in entirely the wrong direction to find the ocean, but as luck would have it, I stumbled by chance across something almost as good; the sea.

The sea was beautiful. It was so vast that I could not see its edges, and the whole thing was the most brilliant shade of blue-green, nothing like the grayish brown water back home in Dogsblood. I stood transfixed, staring at the waves crashing against the rocky shore, entranced by the way the water moved as if it was alive. I was so taken in by my first sight of the ocean, that I did not at first see the ships— ships with rudders! Gleefully taking advantage of their newfound ability to steer, Viking raiders had sailed their dragon-ships for hundreds of miles to attack the very coast I was standing on. I watched in fascination as they navigated their ships close to the shore, hoping that perhaps they would take me aboard. They anchored their ships just beyond the shallow water, and then poured ashore in small inflatable rafts. Setting foot upon the sand, they suddenly seemed very disappointed.

"Where is the castle to storm?" said one.

"Where are the maidens to ravish?" asked another.

"Where is the gold to plunder?" complained a third.

"Where are the restrooms?" whined a fourth. The Viking who had spoken first punched him in the arm, and told him to hush up.

"What a terrible place for a raid!" exclaimed the first Viking, who appeared to be the leader. "There isn't anything here except sand and rocks!"

I coughed.

"Well, I won't allow all this effort to go to waste." said the Viking leader. "I refuse to go home empty handed! Come, lads, we will find someone or

something on this beach to take with us."

The Vikings then set to work, picking up rocks off the beach, and loading them into their rubber rafts. I helped them for awhile, but soon grew tired, and fell asleep in the shade of a large boulder.

When I awoke, the boulder was gone, and so were the Vikings. I could just make out their sails on the horizon. Oh what a fool I was, I had missed my chance! I ran down to the water, and leaped in, determined to swim after the Vikings and force them to teach me the ways of the rudder. I swam no more than two strokes before I was met with a shocking discovery that drove all thoughts of the rudder from my mind. The sea was full of salt! I drank another large mouthful just to make sure that I was not mistaken, and still another because I could not bring myself to believe what my senses were telling me. Yes, it was true, there was no way around it. The sea was as salty as a cat was evil.

I spent several days pondering the significance of this new revelation. It appalled me to think that so much totally undrinkable water could exist in the world. I finally concluded that since one could not drink it, the salty sea brought no good whatsoever to mankind. It occurred to me, that I could do a inestimable service to mankind by drying up the whole sea, and reclaiming the acres upon acres upon acres of wasted land beneath its surface.

I set to work immediately. Finding a earthen pot, I used it to scoop up a bit of the sea, which I carried high up away from shore, and dumped behind a small bush. I carried on all through the day, and late into the night, but when I stopped to rest, I was dismayed to discover that my effort had barely made any visible difference whatsoever. Still, determined to succeed, I slept for a few hours, and began work again before daybreak. Another full day of bailing out the sea one pot-full at a time, and I was forced to concede that at this rate, I would never be finished. I left the shore, and traveled inland until I found a village, where I purchased a larger pot. I then returned to the sea, and resumed my ambitious toil.

I was an old man by the time I finished.

I wiped the sweat from my brow, and put down the pot. it had been hard work draining the sea, but it had been well worth the effort. I strolled out across the still-slightly-muddy sea floor. It was really a very nice place. I built myself a small stone house at the base of a coral reef, and transplanted several trees from the mainland— for shade, seeing as the seaweed had fallen into limp piles without the water to support it.

It was a pleasant time for me, there in that little house on the sea floor before the settlers came. Many a night I would fall asleep listening to the chirping of the anemones in the trees, and watching the schools of minnows swim through the night sky, just tiny silhouettes against the moon. The fish were better off too. Without the oppressive weight of the water, they grew larger and healthier.

But after a time, others came. The poor and the outcast, the criminals and the adventurers, leaving behind the high land, and seeking new lives in the vast untamed wilderness of the sea-floor. The people themselves were not so bad, it just seemed that the more neighbors I had, the more alone I felt. I needed something— someone. I felt incomplete. So I said goodbye to my house and my trees and my reef, and returned to the high land.

I searched far and wide for a woman who would have me, but my face was old, and my hair was gone, and my back was hunched from spending the greater part of my lifetime carrying water. The wenches would laugh at me, and the maidens would slap me, and the rest would just say; "Be off, or I'll call me husband!" Apparently, none of them were right for me.

But then, one day I saw her. She was standing on a balcony, her long auburn hair trailing in the gentle breeze. I looked up into her cool blue eyes, and instantly fell in love. At least, I think they were blue. The balcony was a very long way up, and she wasn't actually looking straight back at me— but I fell in love all the same. The trouble was, she was the King's daughter, and when I knocked on the gate to ask for her hand in marriage, they threw me out, and slammed the drawbridge behind me.

I researched the subject, and found that there were only two ways to marry a princess. The first was to be a king or prince yourself, and then your marriage would be a symbol of the alliance between the two royal houses. The second was to be a warlord so powerful that the King would give you his daughter as a sort of a bribe to keep you from conquering his kingdom.

The first option did not appeal to me. It had been almost fifty years since the death of King Arthur, but the whole sordid Guinevere/Lancelot affair was still very fresh in the public's mind. Suffice to say, I was in no rush to join the ranks of the monarchy. Having only one choice remaining, I determined to raise an army.

Swords, spears and battle-axes were all the rage, but at the time, very little existed as far as armor— Just some simple scraps of hardened leather, or the occasional loose fitting chain-mail shirt that was far too expensive for the average soldier. As a consequence, battles tended to get very bloody, and I found experienced warriors to be in rather short supply. I was unequipped to train soldiers, and I was unwilling to settle for inexperienced ones, so I reasoned that the logical thing to do would be to raise dead soldiers from their graves, and use them to build my army.

I sought out a necromancer, and inquired about his services, but his prices were very steep. He offered to raise one thousand knights from the dead— in exchange for my soul. I had become very attached to my soul over the years, it had a lot of sentimental value to me, so I tried to bargain with him. Fortunately for my soul, the necromancer had flunked out of business school before taking up the dark arts, so with a bit of haggling, I was able to make a deal that was

much more to my liking. He agreed to raise eight hundred knights from the dead, in exchange for a leg of mutton. We sealed the deal with a handshake, he cast the spell, and I gave him the leg of mutton. He was so pleased with it, that he offered to throw in a free bonus of immortality for myself. I thanked him for it at the time, but had I known then what I know now, I would have turned him down cold.

When I walked out of the necromancer's tower, my army was waiting for me. Eight hundred skeletal knights, angry vengeful wraiths waiting for my orders. I immediately began marching them toward the King's castle to demand his daughter's hand in marriage. With a multitude of undead zombie warriors behind me, who could refuse?

We reached the castle, and prepared for an attack, but my plan fell apart just a few hours before the siege of the castle was to begin. I was horrified to discover that the wraiths had suddenly formed a union. They sent a representative to me, a dead chap with a spear and a shield and just a little bit of skin, who informed me of their demands. They wanted hourly pay, health benefits, a dental plan, and a daily peasant sacrifice to appease their insatiable zombie craving for human flesh.

I threw up my hands and gave up. I was in no position to offer a dental plan. I cast one last sorrowful glance at the balcony where I had last seen my fair princess, and I turned, defeated, and returned to my small house by the coral reef.

Forsaking hopes of romance, I bought a dog instead. I still felt hollow and unfulfilled, but at least the dog was a good cook... no, make that an exceptional cook.

I lived there for a time, but there was no joy for me anymore. Even the anemone's songs seemed less sweet than before. After a few years, I just couldn't take it anymore. One morning, I stood up, and just began walking. I would never again see my dog, and I would never again see my house, which my dog eventually turned into a successful bar&grill restaurant.

I walked and walked. Days and years and months went by— although not quite in that order— but I grew no older, for the necromancer had cursed me, yes, I say cursed me, with immortality. I walked all the way to the end of the earth, and then I turned around and walked all the way to the other end. Then I turned left, and walked along the edge until I came to the corner of the earth. Then I walked the length of the earth diagonally, I did the perimeter twice, then walked across the whole length of the earth, zigzagging back and forth. I did the perimeter again, this time walking backwards, and then started to do the zigzagging thing again, but halfway through, I got bored of it all, and sat down. I sat, and sat, and I am sitting here still, and I have no intention of moving for the likes of you. I didn't move when they bulldozed the tree I used to lean my back

against, and I didn't move when they put in the asphalt underneath me, and I am not going to move just because some tourist wants to park here. Yeah, tourist. I can tell that you aren't from around here. All of the locals, they know about me. They know not to try to park here. They park there, or over there. And don't you even think about running me over! It won't work! I am immortal! This is my spot! Ouch!

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