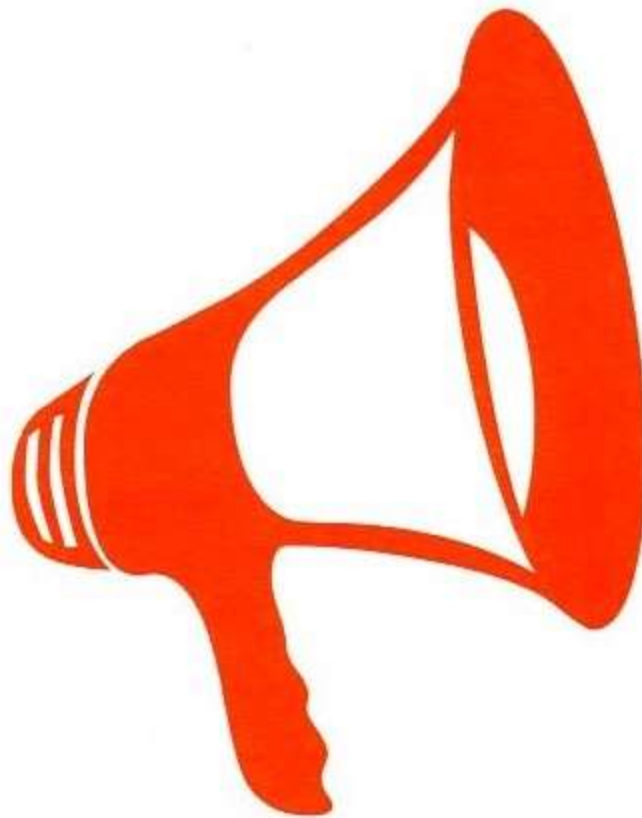


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The Peasant Revolt

Every guard on the battlement saw the peasants coming. The moonlight on the flat, grassy landscape revealed the amateur army's approach.

The captain of the guard stood in the drum tower and looked between the crenellations at the approaching mob. He glanced at the tense face of the guard beside him and said "Stay at your post."

The captain strode down the catwalk to the narrow steps.

The guards met him at the gate. He told them, "Stand back. Don't alarm them." he turned to the group as they approached the portcullis.

"Captain Drake". A tall man, unshod and dressed in rags, pushed to the front and leaned against the grating. Drake nodded. "Andrew."

Andrew withdrew a pouch from his shirt and worked it though the gap in the iron gate.

Drake shook it open and peered at the coins. "The baron is in the stable," he said, looking up. "The baroness is still in the tower. Couldn't be helped. But she'll be easy prey once your're done with the baron." He looked back at the other guards. "All is in order. Open it."

Drake and Andrew stood back as the portcullis rose. As the mob swelled through the gap and into the bailey, Andrew clasped Drake's shoulder and whispered, "May God the Father bless your name."

Drake ducked into the stairwell and watched the peasants stream by, their shouts rising to a steady roar.

Andrew ran with the crowd, storming through the nighttime yard, scattering startled dogs that had been sleeping in doorways. Tradesmen who woked and lived with in the castle walls shrank back or picked up pitchforks to join in the riot.

Andrew helped them tear the stable door off its hinges. Two strong boys dragged a writhing creature from the haystacks along one wall. The peasants jeered and screamed their laughter at their weeping baron. They flung dirt and animal dung at him as they dragged him out into the night. Horses ran from the stable and then circled back at a distance.

Andrew planted his feet and crossed his arms, watching as they held the baron down on the butcher's block.

Harlan, one of Andrew's kin, joined him. Andrew squeezed his shoulder.

"We've done it! Just look at him. He and his vain wife will never harm us again."

Harlan leaned close to his face. "What about the king?" His eyes were bright with anxiety. "How can we be sure the next landholders he sends will be any better to us than these two?"

"They will be. After seeing what we can do, they will be."

Harlan wiped his sweaty face with his palm. "Are you sure they can't punish us?"

Andrew seized his shoulder again. "It's the guard that makes all the difference! If the guard weren't for us, we'd never have come this far. How will the king punish us, or how could the new baron? They'll have to treat us as fellow men from now on, or we'll just do it all again, and the guard won't do a thing to help him. No, Harlan. Our victory is secure now."

The baron screamed, the ax fell, and the cheers rose. Andrew and Harlan joined in the chants of the baroness' name.

The baroness gripped a handful of her silk skirt in one hand and pressed the other hand to her throat. The crowd moved toward the keep in the moonlight, and she breathed faster. Someone near the front of the crowd was hefting a head up and down on a pitchfork, in time with the chants of her name.

The baroness looked over her shoulder and smiled at Captain Drake and his men. "Between their pay and mine, you've earned a fortune tonight," she said.

Drake smiled back at her. "A lady's ransom."

She stepped back to that the guards could take aim with their crossbows at the peasants nearing the keep.

"They'll soon realize we've betrayed them and run back to their hut," Drake told her. "Without the guard on their side, they'll never try it again. Then you'll have what you always wanted – your own barony."

The baroness gazed out at the body beside the chopping block and smiled in the darkness.