

The Pious Path

By Adam Coyne

The small forlorn chapel stood alone against a backdrop of green, the simple stone columns rising out of the ground like fingers reaching to the sky. The vaulted dome perched on top precariously, ready to collapse at any moment. The boundaries of old fields, now overgrown, lead from the chapel grounds to the north; rolling hills to the east. Blazing in the midday sun, an ancient tribal marker daubs the furthest hill; a huge galloping horse cut into the bright limestone. A remnant of the past.

The usually eerie silence is punctuated by a low melodic chant, rising and falling in solemn bursts. The echoes bounce off the walls of the crumbling chapel.

Kneeling by the altar with arms raised to the heavens, a balding man in brown robes sang excerpts from a hymn long forgotten, worshipping in the white light shining through the window. Finishing his chant, the monk pulled a simple pendant from inside his clothes, hanging on a silver chain about his neck. Raising it to his lips, and with eyes thrown to the sky, he kissed it three times and returned it to the folds of his robes.

The man stood with an effort, leaning heavily on a gnarled wooden walking stick. He gripped its carved handle tightly as, with his other hand, he hefted a satchel over his head, hanging it across one shoulder.

With the echo of his final lamentation lingering on the stone, the monk hobbled through the doorway, careful not to disturb the old oak doors now hanging crooked on their hinges.

He sniffed the air with a smile on his face, creases folding over his thin skin. Picking his way slowly through the abandoned fields the man wondered how long it has been since anyone worked here. He let his fingers graze the tops of the long grasses, now overgrown where once plentiful crops grew.

The ground was baked solid by the constant burning sun and for a while the ageing man was able to walk unaided. As he walked through the fields the sound of rushing water grew and the monk shifted his direction to the west, heading for the river that borders the land. His eyes already on the ground watching for roots, a habit of the frail, a glint caught his gaze and he turned toward it, bending cautiously.

To his amazement, half buried in the mud and covered in filth, a small metal bowl lay hidden. He reached for it with one hand, fingers stroking the lip. Suspecting an ambush, he looked around warily, but he was alone.

It took some digging but finally, tugging it free from the ground the monk gasps, a sharp intake of breath the only sound beyond the rushing waters of the river.

Below the bowl the metal narrowed into a stem, widening again to form a base.

"It's a chalice." The monk whispered to himself, his voice cracking in wonder.

Quickly, he took it down to the riverbank and, submerging it into the cool water, began to scrub it clean. He ran his hands over the smooth metal and, through the water, distorted and vague, colours seemed to jump out at him.

Out of the cloud of dirt and mud he pulled the chalice, gazing once more upon his find. Set into the shining metal

below the lip and around the base were brightly coloured jewels. Brilliant sapphires, deep rubies and verdant emeralds revealed now in the blazing sunlight.

"It can't be..." the monk said as he gingerly turned the chalice over and over in his hands. "The holy grail..." His voice trailed off as he realised that in his hands he held one of the forgotten relics of the old world - a treasure few believed to exist outside of stories.

Reciting a quick, fervent prayer the monk finished cleaning the sacred chalice carefully. He submerged it one final time, lifting the cool water from the river and, holding the chalice with both hands, brought it to his lips. He took a single modest draught and poured the rest back into the flowing waters beside him.

As soon as the water touched his lips a shiver ran through his body, starting at his feet and culminating in a dizzying tingle in his head. He shook himself, clearing a ringing he heard in his inner ears.

*The rumours were true,* he thought to himself, wrapping the chalice carefully in a stretch of cloth and packing it tightly into his satchel.

With a final prayer to the gods, thanking them for his good fortune and their good favour, the man continued his slow march, choosing to follow the river's edge for the time being.

The robed man, once again leaning on his walking stick, struggled onwards as the sun left its lofty position in the heavens and began its slow, inevitable decline below the horizon.

As the afternoon waned, he saw ahead of him jagged peaks and a maze of rocky outcroppings. He had hoped to be able to avoid the crags but as he neared it became obvious that beyond crossing the river, there would be no way around.

Deciding it best to find his way through them instead of climbing over, the monk, fingering the pendant hanging at his breast, entered the maze of broken rock.

The sun, still high enough to leave few shadows, reflected off the drab stone crags.

The monk let fate decide his route for him and was happy with the results so far. The sound of some chirping bird and the tap-tap-tap as it worked to free some morsel of food were the only noises he could hear.

That was until an echoing voice reached him from somewhere ahead. He stopped, listening intently, but he couldn't make out any words; only a voice. Then a second, slower and deeper than the first.

The monk walked forward slowly, turning a corner in the path into a wide swathe of bedrock surrounded by sharp rocky

cliffs. He could see the path ahead continued on the other side of the open area. Sat on an outcropping of smooth dark stone were two burly men. Their clothes were ragged and a long sword hung at each of their belts.

"I'm telling ya no! I'da told you afore but you never listened! I ain't eatin' that filth no more!" One of the men was shouting animatedly at the other, who lay outstretched on the hot rock.

He waved the other man off brusquely. "Then starve. See if I care." It was the man with the deeper voice.

The first man balled his fists and looked as if he were about to strike his comrade, but evidently thought better of it. He huffed like a child losing an argument and turned his attention away from the deep voiced man. He caught sight of the monk hobbling forward slowly.

"Oi! Where'd you come from then?!" He dug an elbow viscosly into the ribs of his friend, who sat up quickly, throwing him a scowl. His expression turned to a mischievous grin as he jumped from the rock, landing heavily on the ground in front of the small wizened man. He was the largest of the two by far with tree trunk legs and huge hams for arms.

"Wander off the path there father?" he asked mockingly. The small, gangly man walked casually around the monk, sizing

him up. He kicked at the walking stick as he edged his way behind him.

"No good on your feet so much eh?"

The two men shared a dark look.

"P-please," stammered the ageing man, gripping his walking stick tightly. "Please, my sons, I am on my way through these lands and did not wish to disturb you."

"What's in the bag old man?" the smaller one asked, reaching toward the satchel across his back. "Something for us?" He tugged the strap hard, and the monk stumbled backwards, allowing it to be taken over his head.

"There is nothing. I have nothing, surely you can see that?" The frail man cowered before the huge scavenger, now flexing his ham-arms intimidatingly.

"Nothin' is it? This looks like an expensive nothin'." He pulled the chalice from the monk's pack, eyes wide with lust.

At that moment, a third brute appeared above them, evidently returning from some other mischief. He spoke less roughly than the other two but where the large man was all brawn and the smaller was all hate, this third seemed to be the most dangerous of them all.

"I've told you before. Don't play with them." He said coolly. "Kill him and throw the body into the pit with the others."

The thin man tossed the chalice to the third, who caught it easily.

"I can't let you take that." The old man croaked.

The sound of two swords scraping against their scabbards and ringing as they were drawn echoed across the rocks.

The old man stiffened, one hand holding his walking stick, the other gripping the pendant around his neck.

"Forgive me," he whispered and he closed his eyes.

The small man, aiming a short thrust to the monk's lower back, evidently meant to finish off the helpless man quickly. To his surprise the small man twisted on the spot, dodging the thrust, causing the small bandit to stumble forward, coming shoulder to shoulder and regaining his balance.

The monk's cane crashed into the side of the scrawny man's temple with an ear-splitting CRACK, sending him sprawling to the floor holding his head.

The large man, stunned at what had happened, charged forward, aiming a wide slash at the old man. With lightning fast reflexes, the man brought his stick up and deflected the blow, spinning the brute around. With a powerful kick to the rear, the monk sent him face first into the rock.

"I told you," the leader said, his words oozing venom. "Don't play with them." He shot a disgusted look at the smaller man on the floor. "Get up, fool."

He pulled a pair of wicked looking daggers from hidden sheathes behind his back and rounded on the old monk. The large man threw his sword aside, flexing his huge knotted arms, blood streaming from his nose. The wiry man pushed himself up with his own sword and brandished it menacingly at their foe.

As all three advanced slowly, the monk, with eyes still closed, seemed to grow straight and tall.

With sudden silent agreement, all three rushed towards him with murderous intent.

The huge man had meant to quickly wrap his arms around the monk's neck, holding him from behind as an easy target for the other two. Instead the end of the monk's stick found its way to his gut, jabbing him with such force he doubled over, unable to breath.

At the same time the smaller scavenger aimed an overhead swipe with his long sword, cutting the air so fast it whined audibly. He fell forward, the sword striking the rocky ground, sparks flying from the impact. Blinking, he saw the monk trading blows with their leader, a blur of movements so fast he couldn't see everything. Edging behind his victim he

grinned with glee as he plunged his sword through the torso of the monk, feeling ribs snap and tasting copper on his lips.

He opened his eyes, feasting on the sight of the old, dead man.

His smile faltered as he instead looked upon the face of his comrade, the well spoken leader of the trio, a spastic grin plastered on his face. Confused, the wiry man looked down and saw his blade had pierced his chest and exploded out through his back. He stepped back instinctively, wrenching the sword out and spraying the two of them in warm, fresh blood.

The man dropped his daggers and, after hanging there lifeless for a split second, collapsed to the floor with a sickeningly wet sound.

He looked around for the monk. He had been there a second ago!

Twirling around he turned just in time to see the man leap down from the rocks overhead, swinging his cane wide.

The flash of white light was the last thing the man saw as the stick smashed into the side of his head, knocking him sideways and landing next to the large man, still sitting dumbfounded. He never got up again.

"You have but two choices," the old monk croaked. "Stay where you are and do not move until the sun has set. Or stand and let fate take you on your way."

He looked down at the oaf with creased eyelids pressed tightly together. The big man didn't move a muscle, except an uncontrollable twitch in his left eye.

"Wise," said the man, collecting the chalice and returning it to his pack. Opening his eyes, he seemed to shrink once more, shoulders and neck slumping forward. He gripped his walking stick tightly and shuffled away, leaving the huge man wondering what in the world had happened.

The monk walked through the night over the wide plains and through a small copse of woodland trees until, in the early morning light he came again to an area of bordered fields. Only these were tilled and well maintained. A scarecrow waved in the light breeze in front of a long, low farmhouse. In the distance, a tall wall of grey stone stretched across the horizon, two imposing structures towered over the wide wooden gate.

As he approached, a guard yelled from somewhere above.

"Halt, beggar. No one enters by order of the Night Guard."

A flap opened in the gate and a pair of beady eyes peered out.

"Open the gates!" came a cry from inside. The huge wooden gates creaked open and a young man in tight black leather armour stepped forward.

"Forgive me father, can't be too careful these days." He looked past the monk into the distance. "Surely you didn't walk all this way overnight?! You should have waited until the sun was up at least." Offering the old man his arm he led him past the city walls. "There is talk of a devilish new gang terrorising the crags away towards the old chapel. What if you had been caught by them?"

The old monk smiled. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about me, my son. All you need is a little inner belief."

The city soon swallowed the two of them up. A new day had dawned and the world was just waking up.