



The Peasant's Fell Bargain

Martin Buinicki

Night after night, Henry dreamt of ravens.

They began as mere shadows at the blurry edges of his nightmares, rustling feathers the only sign of their presence.

But more and more arrived as the nights wore on. Each evening he'd stumble onto the straw pallet he shared with his wife Bess, muscles aching from a long day in the field. The moment he fell asleep, the birds came, filling the black slashes of dead tree branches or slowly crossing the dreamscape skies above him. The ravens were always silent, their coal-black eyes watching without blinking.

Watching him.

"I'm not surprised," Bess said when he finally told her at the end of another long day. She was a thin, fidgety woman whose skin seemed to tremble on her bones. "Much time as you're out in the fields. Them crows' cackling is enough to drive a body mad. I wouldn't pay it no mind." She looked over to where their youngest son, Michael, watched intently from the fireside, his face grimy with soot. "Now what are you staring at? Get on outside and see what's keeping your brothers. It's time for them to come to supper."

Henry's first-born and namesake, and their second son, Stuart, worked in the Lord Ferustian's stables. Michael was only nine, so he spent his days scrubbing pots and pans in the kitchens before coming home for his meager dinner. Henry glanced over at his youngest son, and their eyes met. Henry gave him a quick nod, and the boy jumped up from where he sat cross-legged on the dirt floor and ran out of the hut.

Michael was like that, Henry thought. Quiet, uncomplaining. Always quick to help out. He deserved better than what he had.

Henry sighed, staring down at his chafed palms. When the lord's man came and said he was looking for laborers, Henry thought their lives were sure to improve. Even a few coppers a year would help when the winters came. Their village sat at the edge of the mountains, and the rocky land was stingy, only giving up crops grudgingly. The corn and wheat grew short and sickly. After Henry paid the rent, there was little left to live on, let alone save.

Yet what he made farming was a king's ransom compared to what the boys brought home. They were being robbed. But anyone who so much as raised an eyebrow to the lord might find himself driven off the land. Or worse.


Henry felt snared as sure as a rabbit. At thirty-five, he was already an old man, his body breaking under the strain of trying to support his family. What would become of them?

He sat in the lengthening shadows of the firelight, frowning. A familiar knot in his stomach pulled tighter.

He didn't know how long he sat there, gazing blankly into the fire as the logs slowly turned to ash. Long enough for the shadows to grow and melt into the late-night gloom.

"Now where are those boys?" Bess exclaimed nervously. Henry could hear the edge in her voice, concern doing battle with irritation.

"I'll see to them," Henry said shortly, rising from his stool with a groan. Old before his time, that's what he was. Thin and flimsy, like a scythe sharpened too many times, too many seasons.



He hadn't even reached the door when it burst open. Henry and Michael were nearly carrying Stuart, who hung between them like a scarecrow.

Thick dark blood, already beginning to clot, oozed slowly from a deep cut in his forehead. His chin rested against his chest.

Henry swore and rushed to help lower his son onto the pallet where the boys slept. Bess was beside herself. "What happened? What happened to him?"

Henry looked at his oldest boy, his mirror image, almost a man grown. Now, however, his son looked small, like the child he used to be. His face flushed—was it anger? Shame? His father didn't know.

"Lord Ferustian came to the stables. Stuart and me, we were almost done for the night, but his Lordship wanted to go out. When we fetched his horse, he said he didn't like the look of its coat. Said we'd been shirking. Stuart couldn't help it, he talked back, and the Lord...he hit him with his walking stick. Beat him to the ground. I wanted to help, but his man stopped me. Told me to get Stuart out of there if we wanted to live."

"I'll kill him, I swear I will," the older Henry growled, stalking to the door. Bess intervened.

"Now, Henry Stenor, you just use your head! His Lordship will cut you down where you stand! And then what'll happen to us?" Her voice choked, and a sob escaped her lips. "Oh, it isn't fair."

Then she collected herself and turned to their oldest boy. "Go and eat some supper. I've saved some stew for you. Michael, fetch me a cloth and some water. I've got to see to Stuart."

The older Henry stood in the middle of his hut.
Helpless.

Late that night, as Henry tossed and turned on his mat, the ravens spoke to him. In his dream, he was scrambling up the side of a steep rocky mountain, the pale moon casting just enough light for him to see black wings fluttering all around him. Ravens filled the tree branches, the sky.

He was looking for something. What was it?

"Henry," a voice said. It was a cacophony of bird cries, a voice of many voices, as if all the ravens in the world addressed him at once. "What do you seek?"

"I don't know," the man answered, panting. Then he stopped. That was a lie.

The words poured out of him. "I want to get out. Start over. I'm sick of living on someone else's land, doing someone else's work." Then, he cried in anguish and hate, "I swear I'll kill him! How dare he lift a hand to my boy?"

Even in his dream Henry felt rage rising up in him like bile in his throat.

The voice chuckled—a strange, strangling sound. "It took no daring, Henry. You are weak. Powerless." Ahead of him Henry saw a deeper shadow in the side of the mountain, a cave yawning open like a mouth. Ravens were streaming inside, wings flapping silently.

The voice rumbled from somewhere far below the earth. "But I have power, Henry. Oh yes. More than you can imagine."

Then it whispered. A promise.

"And it can be yours."

Henry woke with a start, panting and damp with sweat. Outside the sun was peeking over the horizon, turning the sky a pale pink. On the boys' pallet, Stuart groaned under his bandages. Bess was already up, tending a small cooking fire. She looked at her husband anxiously.

"You all right, Henry? You were moaning something awful."

"Bad dreams," the man mumbled. Sitting up, he rubbed his face with both hands. "Boys got to get up now."

"Stuart can't work today, Henry. He can hardly stand."

Henry felt his fury boiling up again. "You think I don't know that?! But what's going to happen if he's not there? He's got to go!"

"I'll do it, Father," a quiet voice said.

It was Michael. The small boy was sitting up on the straw mattress, arms wrapped around his knees, watching his parents.

"Don't be silly, Michael," his mother answered quickly. "You're too young to work in the stables."

But Henry knew the truth, and he could see in his son's eyes that Michael knew it, too.

"Let the boy go," he said. "There's no helping it."

"I'll be fine, Mother," the boy said quickly. "Henry can tell me what to do."

"Do what?" his oldest brother asked, sitting up and stretching.

"Never you mind," Bess said quickly. "He can't do it, Henry," she begged her husband. "He's too little. Look what happened to Stuart."

The anger inside of Henry exploded. "We've got no choice! Henry can't do it alone, and, if the boys don't go, Lord Ferustian will just find somebody else. Then what will we do?!"

"Uhn...I can do it," Stuart mumbled, struggling to rise.

"Don't be a fool!" Henry shouted. His rage burned white-hot, and he was shaking. He felt like he was on fire. "You two, get yourself to the stables! Henry, you look after your brother, you hear?"

No one spoke, afraid of this new mood. "I've got to get to work," Henry growled. "Bess, see to Stuart." He stalked outside.

He was choking on his helplessness.

Somewhere overhead, a raven shrieked in the morning sky.

The day was long and hot. Henry and several other peasants from the village struggled with their plows. One of the oxen came up lame, and the men were forced to struggle along as best they could, pushing and pulling alongside the remaining animals.

As he worked, Henry couldn't help but notice a single raven always seemed to be watching. Sometimes it flew in circles high above him. Any time he stopped for more than a moment, it would perch nearby.

"Looks like ya've made a friend, Henry," another man joked.

Henry spit bitterly and said nothing.

As darkness fell, he at last returned home. In the cramped hut, he saw Stuart sitting up on the pallet, his eyes dull and unfocused. The bandages wrapped around his head were damp and discolored from repeated rinsing and reapplying. The boy raised a feeble hand in greeting.

Bess spoke rapidly, her voice loud and fast in the still room. "Oh Henry, thank goodness. Please go look for the boys. I've been worried sick."

His jaw tightened. "Leave me be," he growled. He felt his blood pulsing in his temples.

Bess paused a moment, but then she pressed on, needling him. "Henry, you get yourself to the stables and see to Michael. You know you won't rest easy till you do."

"You mean you won't let me," Henry snapped. But he knew she was right.

"I'm sorry, father," Stuart said weakly. "I'm sure I can go tomorrow."

"Hush, now," Bess said to her son quickly before turning to her husband. "Now go on. I'll have supper hot and ready for you, Henry. You'll see."

The manor was almost a mile from their hut, and Henry's anger and resentment only grew as he walked. Why should he and his family suffer while Lord Ferustian lived fat and happy off of their toil? He thought of Stuart's brothers carrying him home, bleed-

ing. It wasn't right.

The raven cried out somewhere above him in the growing darkness, startling him. It sounded like his name.

Was he dreaming?

Up ahead he saw the lights of the manor house and its outbuildings. A low stone wall surrounded the estate. As Henry approached, a bored looking man-at-arms emerged from the wooden gatehouse.

"Your name and your business," the man said. "Be quick about it." He wore crude leather armor with dull metal studs. Henry could see the grease-stained pommel of a short sword at his waist.

Henry choked down his anger. "Henry Stenor. My boys work in the stables. I've come to fetch them."

"Hrm," the guard grunted. "Took your sweet time, Stenor. The Lord's been waiting on you. Stay here." He went back into the guardhouse, then emerged a moment later. A lad in a brown tunic went racing off in the feeble twilight.

Henry stood staring, confused. What was going on? The guard watched him, hands on his belt, disturbingly close to the hilt of his sword. For the first time, Henry felt his rage replaced by a new sensation.

Fear.

Somewhere in the darkness, the raven cried. The call was piercing, frantic.

The boy returned a few minutes later and whispered something to the guard. The man grunted and nodded. "Alright, Stenor. Come with me."

Henry followed him across the dusty courtyard. He could see lights twinkling through the windowpanes of the house. Lord Ferustian never knew the chill of a winter wind, he thought bitterly.

Soon they reached the stables. Henry followed the guard inside, then stopped abruptly. His heart pounded.

The building was well lit by oil lamps hanging from posts between the stalls. Several guards stood in the center, dressed like the one who led him there. Standing before them was Lord Ferustian himself, dressed in a fine silk evening coat and blindingly white stockings. He was balding, corpulent. His flesh was soft and doughy, and his round face twisted in a sneer as he looked at Henry.

"It's about time you showed up, peasant. Do you take me for a fool?"

Henry said nothing. He assumed it was a rhetorical question.

The nobleman roared. "I said, do you take me for a fool?!"

Henry swallowed his pride, looked down at his feet. "No, your lordship."

The other man was not mollified. "I think you do, Stenor. Your sons are supposed to take care of my horses, correct?" He was looming over Henry now. He smelled of wine and perfume.

"Yes, m'lord," Henry mumbled, his face burning.

"So you thought you could send this child to do his brother's work?" He pounded a heavy wooden walking stick on the ground, and a guard shoved Michael forward. The boy's face was streaked with tears. "Thought you'd outsmarted me. Well, I am no fool. And you need to teach your boys their place." He nodded again, and suddenly Henry's namesake was also brought forward. His hands were tied behind him, and one eye was swollen shut. Henry attempted to rush to him, but Ferustian clubbed him in the stomach with his walking stick, doubling him over.

"Now, you listen, you piece of filth. You and your family are to be off my land by sunrise."

Henry gasped for breath. "Bu...but, m'lord..."

“Not another word if you value your life! You are finished here, Stenor. I don’t want to see you or your worthless offspring again.” He turned to his guards. “Get them out of my sight.”

Rough hands grabbed Henry by the elbows and dragged him from the stables. He was vaguely aware of his boys being shoved alongside of him, but he couldn’t see them clearly. He was drowning in pain, fear, and rage.

Bottomless, endless rage.

At the gate, a guard cut the ropes from the boy Henry’s wrists and shoved him at his father. “You lot clear off now. The Lord best not find you in the morning.”

The three stumbled away from the estate and into the darkness. The boys both started talking at once. “I’m sorry, Father. I tried to tell him...” his son Henry said.

“I did my best...” Michael was saying.

“Hush!” their father barked, his voice harsher than he intended.

The raven cried somewhere in the dark.

Henry took a breath. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s that pig. I should never have sent you there. I did this, and I’ll make it right.”

He felt the weight of the lie.

“What are we going to do?! Where will we go?” Bess sobbed when Henry told her what happened. The three boys sat watching them glumly.

“We need to pack up,” Henry answered curtly. “Only what we can carry.”

His wife shook with anxiety. “But it’s the middle of the night!”

“We have to go! Now!” Henry shouted. Then a vision flashed before his eyes.

“I know a place.”

Soon the family was following him through the blackness, carrying their meager belongings wrapped in blankets. Thick clouds hid the moon and stars.

Ahead of them loomed the dark shadows of the mountains. They kept walking, going higher and higher.

At last Stuart stumbled.

“Henry,” Bess cried, her voice quaking, “we have to stop. The boys can’t go on.”

“Almost there,” Henry grunted. He walked without thinking, his feet moving of their own volition.

Soon he spotted the cave entrance.

Bess moaned. “Oh Henry...”

“We’ll be safe here,” he said. “Come on. We can rest inside.”

The Stenor family stumbled into the cavern and collapsed to the floor, exhausted. It was surprisingly large, and Henry could tell from the echoes that it stretched deep into the mountain.

“We’ll sleep here tonight,” Henry said, “and figure out what to do in the morning.”

Frightened as they were, the exhausted family soon fell asleep in the gloom.

It was the dead of night, and Henry wasn’t surprised when he heard the raven’s voice. In fact, he had been waiting for it.

“Come, Henry.”

Before he knew what he was doing, Henry rose and walked further into the cave. Its tunnels twisted on and on. The blackness was absolute, and yet he passed without stumbling.

Suddenly he sensed an enormous presence standing before him. He could hear the flutter of wings, and a strange chirping sound, like baby birds, filling the air.

“Is this the life you seek for your family, Henry Stenor? Squatting in the dark with nothing but the rags you wear?” The question reverberated in the immense cavern.

Henry didn’t know if he was awake or dreaming. He didn’t care.

"No," he whispered hoarsely.

"You can destroy your enemies, Henry. I can give you that power, and more. You can rule this land. Would you like that?"

"Yes."

"And what would you give me in return?"

Henry paused. He thought of his sons, beaten and bleeding.

"Anything."

There was a loud hissing intake of breath, and then Henry felt sharp talons close fast around his hands. "Anything, Henry Stenor? Even your very blood? Swear to me."

Henry's rage and despair swelled inside him, crowding out everything but his desire to see Lord Ferustian pay. Whether dream or reality, angel or demon, it didn't matter anymore.

"I swear it."

"Father?" a small, frightened voice said from behind him.

It was Michael.

Henry realized in horror that his son had followed him.

"DONE!" The raven's voice boomed through the cavern.

And the truth of what was about to happen came crashing down.

Michael screamed.

"No!" Henry cried, plunging forward blindly.

His son, his son was screaming...screaming...

Then silence.

"Michael? Michael?!" Henry sobbed, choking on his tears. He begged. He pleaded.

There was no answer.

Henry stumbled in the blackness, and a colossal weight fell upon him. There came a rushing in his ears, and a searing wind engulfed him. He was burning. He was drowning. He was falling.

He was changing.

Henry didn't know how long the forces of chaos and hate played over his body. Slowly he became aware of the cold floor of the cave. His nerve endings danced with power.

The raven spoke again. "Rise, Lord Henry Stenorian. Our bargain is struck. My power is yours to wield against your enemy. Take it. Have your vengeance."

Henry felt the tug of a distant memory. "My boy...my boy..."

"Ferustian still draws breath, does he not? It was he who drove you from your home. He lives in splendor while you cower in a cave. Take your vengeance."

The nobleman's sneering face appeared before him, and Henry ground his teeth together.

"Yes, focus on him. You can be there this moment. You know the words. Say the words."

The raven was right. Henry did know the words. They came spilling out of him as he moved his hands in a pattern that somehow felt as natural as breathing. The air crackled, and suddenly he stood in the courtyard of the Ferustian estate.

Behind him a voice cried out in alarm. "Hey!"

Henry spun around, more words coming unbidden. He saw two guards running towards him from the gatehouse, frantically drawing their swords.

Too late.

Electricity arced from his fingertips and flashed through the air, dancing over the men's bodies. They screamed in agony as they collapsed to the ground, twitching and writhing. The sick smell of roasting flesh wafted from their bodies.

To his right Henry saw the door of a low building swing open as two more men in nightshirts stumbled bleary-eyed into the courtyard. They hollered in alarm at the sight of

their comrades' bodies smoking in the dirt.

Henry didn't hesitate. He spoke again, and this time fire flew from his outstretched hands, washing over the men and engulfing the building behind them. It ignited like a tinderbox, and the screams of the burning and dying filled the night air.

Henry stalked to the manor house. As he clenched his right fist and thrust it forward, the front door was blasted into splinters.

The foyer was more opulent than anything he had ever seen. Polished tile glittered in the light from sconces set in regular intervals along the paneled walls. A large staircase stood across from the front door. On Henry's right, a servant emerged from a doorway just as Lord Ferustian appeared at the top of the stairs in a robe. His eyes widened in horror when he saw Henry.

"Stop him!" he shouted in a high-pitched voice before he turned and disappeared down an upstairs hallway.

The servant hesitated, and Henry's fist flew out once more. Another wave of power exploded from somewhere deep inside him and the man flew backwards, his bones shattering under his skin.

Henry didn't care. He was blood and fire and vengeance.

He was death.

He climbed the staircase slowly, deliberately. Paintings of Ferustian's ancestors hung on the wall. Henry touched each with a finger, igniting it as he passed. Paint bubbled and ran as the burning canvases curled in the heat.

At the top, Henry paused, visualizing Ferustian in his mind's eye. There. He could sense the man in a room on his left. He strode over to it and turned the handle. It was locked.

Henry Stenorian smiled.

He took a breath, muttered a few more words, and then passed through the door like a phantom, resuming his material form inside.

An ornate four-poster bed stood in the center of the room, flanked by small tables with delicately turned legs. A few embers glowed in the fireplace on Henry's right.

Ferustian was nowhere to be seen, but Henry caught the sound of whimpering coming from somewhere nearby.

He smiled again, a grin that would have horrified him only a few hours earlier. He raised his hands, and the bed flew through the air and smashed against the far wall, revealing the large man cowering on his rotund belly, his hands over his head.

"Please," he blubbered. "What do you want?"

"Stand up," Henry ordered. Ferustian got to his hands and knees, cowering.

"STAND UP!" Henry roared. The man jumped to his feet.

"Look at me!" Henry commanded.

The trembling nobleman did, his face filled with terrified desperation. "Now, look, Stenor," he stammered. "surely we can make an arrangement..."

At the sound of the words, Henry felt the last vestiges of his humanity slip away. "I already made a deal," he said grimly, his teeth clenched.

Suddenly the fluttering wings of dozens of ravens filled the room. In an instant they fell upon Ferustian. The man screamed as countless beaks and talons tore and shredded his flesh. He flailed his arms helplessly before falling to the floor beneath the onslaught.

In mere minutes, all that remained of Lord Ferustian was a pile of bones lying on the blood-soaked carpet.

Henry turned and left the room. As he descended the stairs, flames raced up the walls of the mansion.

He walked back through the darkness. As he did, the raven's voice filled his mind.

“You shall have power and wealth beyond reckoning, Stenorian, and your life will be long.” With an intense whisper the voice added, “But if you wish the Stenorian line to rule, you must teach your sons. We are bound by our bargain, you and I, and in time they must keep it, as well. And their sons after them.”

For a moment Henry felt a flicker of outrage, but then it was gone. Gone like the man he used to be.

Gone like his youngest son.

Dawn was breaking as he approached the cave entrance. Before he could enter, Bess came stumbling out, crying.

“Oh Henry, where have you been? Where have you been?! I can’t find Michael! I can’t find him!”

Henry heard the raven’s voice whisper to him, somewhere deep in his mind.

“You know the words, Henry.”

It was true. Ignoring his wife’s cries, Henry uttered an incantation.

Bess stopped in her tracks, confused. “Now, what on earth was I on about?” She looked at her husband, puzzled. “What are you doing out here, Henry?”

Henry’s voice sounded strange to his own ears as he spoke. “I have been looking over this mountainside, Elizabeth. To see where we should build our estate.”

The woman’s brows furrowed. “Our estate?”

Henry smiled. “Of course,” he answered. “I am lord of this land, and it is past time I built my keep.”

The woman smiled back, a bit uncertainly. “If...if you say so, Henry. I just... thought...I had lost something...” she trailed off.

Henry put a hand on her shoulder. “You had a nightmare, dear. That’s all. You must have forgotten the fire at our manor house. Don’t be afraid. We’re all safe now.”

She embraced him. “Oh, thank goodness.” she said. Henry saw his sons emerge from the cave, looking worried.

“Now, you go back inside and wait for me,” he said calmly. “I need to talk to the boys.”

“All right, dear,” his wife said pleasantly. “Boys, your father wants to speak with you,” she said as she passed them.

Stuart and Henry walked slowly over to their father, their bruised faces filled with worry. “Father...” Henry began.

“Quiet,” the Lord Stenorian said sternly. “You must listen carefully. There are things I must tell you both. About our family. And about the future.” He paused.

“And about Michael.”

Somewhere high above them, a raven’s cry rent the morning air.

