

Bell Ringer

by Walter Goralski

Zal's first day on the job they had 16 customers. Stout Xavier did the heavy work and young Zal rang the bell, a chore he found easy enough, but a bit loud after the long morning shift that started before dawn. Because of the constant wear and tear on the voice, they took turns crying, "Bring out your dead!"

"When did plague start?" asked Zal after lunch, as they trundled a corpse wrapped in stained canvas down from an upstairs hovel over an abandoned tavern. This frail woman could not be expected to carry her burden down to them.

"Years ago," Xavier said. "I should say when you were five or so. It's gotten worse and worse. Back then there were days of sunshine and laughter."

Zal, no more than ten, had no memory of healthy or carefree days. He struggled under the weight although he had the upper portion and had only to prevent their load from pushing Xavier off his feet and down the steps. At one point Zal almost fell onto the body, and then the sweet spices the woman had thoughtfully packaged with her departed did not help. The aroma nearly overcame Zal's intestinal fortitude. Although he didn't lose his lunch, Zal saw, after a close examination of the stains and forms inside, the bag held not one adult, but two children no older than he was.

Xavier waited until Zal had recovered his footing. "Easy now. I don't want to have to break in another assistant so soon after training you to replace Frago."

Once the bag had been safely stored in the wagon, they rode on, the plodding nag not much sturdier than a corpse itself. "That woman," said Xavier. "She lost her husband last month, and her daughter before that. Now she is alone."

"What will she do?"

"It will be better for her now that she is alone, without the children to worry about."

"Surely not!"

Xavier shrugged. "You will find out for yourself someday how hard it is to provide for a family in times of want." He prodded Zal in the ribs to remind him to do his job.

Zal rang the bell and shouted, "Bring out your dead!"

On some streets, either the sickness had passed over or had burned itself out after taking all the dwellings had to offer. These were welcome breaks in their rounds, and sometimes people leaned out of upper windows or hailed them from doorways of multi-story housing.

"Xavier!" a surprisingly spry older woman called to them from a balcony. "How is your wife?"

"She's fine, Mrs. Amily. Just fine."

"Don't bring her anything you pick up from your customers."

"I won't."

"Who was that?" asked Zal as they moved on.

"Who? Mrs. Amily? She's about the oldest woman left alive in this town. Her husband is even older."

"Is he sick?" asked Zal, looking back at the dwelling with concern.

"Oh, no," Xavier told him. "He works in the city. Those who are still healthy make good money. Before long, they will move to larger quarters."

Single-family houses lined the next street the wagon turned down. The horse clopped past weed-choked yards and side passages. Most of the places looked abandoned to Zal, either boarded up or emptied out, the wood frames only shells of what they once had been. The afternoon sky had turned a darker shade of grey, and this street seemed to Zal even more depressing than the rest of the town. "They're all dead here," he said.

"No," Xavier pointed to a house near the end of the block. "I know the man who lives there. He lost a child last week and his wife was very ill. He might need our services. Ring the bell."

Zal did, and this time Xavier cried, "Bring out your dead!"

A man about the same age as Xavier, but looking much haler, came out of the house and almost skipped up to the wagon and its dreadful load.

"How are you, Mr. Drummond?" Xavier glanced at Zal. "No change for the worse in your wife's condition, I hope?"

"No, she's the same." Mr. Drummond looked at Zal too. "Perhaps a little stronger today."

For a moment, Zal thought there must be some stain on his cheek, the way both men stared at him, but his hand came away clean.

"Listen, Xavier." Mr. Drummond looked left and right, as if he were afraid someone might overhear. "Do you think you can visit the old wise woman and fetch me some of that protein powder? You know, the stuff that helped her so much last time. Food is so scarce, that I..."

Xavier did not let him finish. "Ah, my friend, there is no need to explain. I always help when I can. It so happens that the old wise woman lives not far from the place where this sad wagon unloads, and I will be happy to visit her after I deliver my new bell ringer back into the arms of his mother."

"What? That makes no sense," said Zal. "My mom and I live all the way over on the other side of town, and so do you. If this woman lives nearby, then we should both stop before we go home."

"I don't mind riding back, even in the dark," Xavier said.

But Zal had some other creature's comfort in mind. "But the poor horse..."

In the end, Zal got his way, although Mr. Drummond and Xavier looked none too pleased that Zal would be going to visit the old wise woman.

"You must mind me when we go there. No misbehaving," Xavier cautioned.

"I promise," said Zal.

Xavier shook his head sadly. "We must guard the old wise woman's secret well. There is precious little of this protein left, not near enough for all who would want it, and many do not even know it exists. During the sickness, there are few to grow food and fewer

still to transport it and no money at all to buy and sell. The protein powder helps, they say. But no one can reveal where it comes from, or many would stampede there."

Mr. Drummond nodded slowly in agreement. Then an anguished cry from within sent him dashing back into the house to tend to his sickly wife.

As they left the street, Zal rang the bell and cried out with more fervor, now that he had been trusted with such a great responsibility.

Xavier muttered under his breath about Mr. Drummond for two more streets. Something the man had done had upset Xavier, and Zal fervently hoped it had nothing to do with him.

Xavier reigned in the horse in front of a dilapidated shack at the edge of town. Old tools and mechanical parts littered the overgrown yard inside the paint-peeled wooden picket fence.

"People live here?" Zal wondered.

Xavier got down from the wagon bench and pushed at the gate. It fell down at his touch. "This is the Benson place. Mr. Benson has been sick for a month, and I've not checked him for a few days. If he has died and Mrs. Benson denies it, it will not be good for any of us involved in the deception."

An old woman opened the door and shuffled out of the shack, but only a step or two. "Xavier, you old vulture! What do you want of me?"

"Only the truth, Mrs. Benson, only the truth. Word came to me from the food cart people the other day that your husband has died." Xavier craned his neck to try and see around the woman into the darkness of the house. "You must let me have him."

"My husband is fine," she insisted.

"Then I must see him." He took a step forward.

"He is sleeping." She did not move.

Xavier took a step to go around her. "Then we will wake him."

She moved to block him. "Let him rest, you devil! I'll not yield an inch to the likes of you government workers..."

Xavier grabbed her and she shrieked. He twisted around and held her from behind, seizing her wrists across her chest. She screamed and wailed.

"Zal!" he cried over her shrieks. "Go in and check. And hurry!"

Zal ran inside and immediately came to a halt. The smell alone was unbearable, but coupled with the sight and the sound, he thought he would faint. The fat blue-black flies buzzed all over a faded and broken sofa, which churned and moved with masses of white maggots. The husband had already been reduced to a shapeless mass.

Zal came out to vomit and saw the woman on the ground, shaking. She writhed and cried, covering her face with her hands. Xavier stood over her, denouncing her selfishness. "Wicked woman! You wanted only the double rations your husband brought while he lived. How could you deny others? You risk spreading the disease as well..."

Xavier poured kerosene over the one-room shack and lit it on fire as the wretched old woman rocked and moaned. Zal felt bad, but Xavier told him that this must stand as an example to others. "Don't feel bad," Xavier told Zal as the wagon climbed the slope to their destination. "The food cart people will come and take her to the shelter. Old fool. She should have gone there long ago."

Zal watched the thick smoke climb into the still grey sky, some burning flies shooting like sparks from the cloud. "Is what she did so bad?"

Xavier nodded. "Of course. Technically, citizens have 24 hours to mourn, by national statute, but most do their mourning ahead of time, or kept it short. Even this time of year, with chill mornings, once the beloved departed become a mass of buzzing flies or food for rats or a lure for stray cats and homeless dogs, the family is ready enough to turn to their attentions the survivors. But some would steal from others by pretending others in their care still live."

They burned the corpses at a special place at the top of a hill. No simple flame consumed these tortured souls. This fire sanitized and purified, and special traps caught the ash and special wheels ground

the bones and, unknown to all but a special few like Xavier, the remains made excellent fertilizer in far countries where the sun still shone and children still shouted and played.

Xavier greeted the masked attendants as he and Zal began unloading the afternoon haul. "Good day, Lem." Lem was tall. "And Abner." Abner was short.

Abner let down his mask and grinned with few teeth at Zal. "Fresh meat, I see."

Xavier frowned. "He is under my protection. His mother would skewer me if any harm befell him."

"Okay," said Abner. "But you owe me."

Xavier helped Abner check the bodies and Zal helped Lem. They searched for overlooked valuables, like spare change in pockets or watches. "At one time," Lem told Zal, "They came in fine clothes and sometimes furs. But those days are long gone." Lem examined the teeth. "We take the gold," he told Zal. "We split the profit. You'll get a cut."

Zal didn't protest. That was one of the reason his mother had volunteered him as Xavier's bell ringer.

Lem gave his mask to Zal. He grew nostalgic as they fed the bodies into the maw of the great machine. "Once," he told Zal, "Mighty ships plied the oceans carrying goods. People watched moving pictures on screens as big as walls in their own homes. They spoke on devices connected by the air itself."

Zal did not believe any of it. "Impossible."

"Yet it is true," Lem insisted. "And more besides."

As Xavier had promised, the house of the old wise woman was near the place of burning. To Zal's amazement, she lived in the biggest home he had ever seen. A mansion, really. No, more like a palace.

The old wise woman proved to be no older than Zal's mother, which puzzled him. She hugged and kissed Xavier, which also puzzled Zal, but then she hugged and kissed him too, so maybe that was okay. This lady had rouged spots on her cheeks and garish red lips. Her meticulously curled hair looked fake. Her heavy-lidded eyes

were lined with black and blue. Zal had never seen the likes of it before.

Leaving Zal alone in an enormous room filled with glass figures and pictures of forests and rivers on the walls, Xavier and the old wise woman whispered softly in an adjacent room. All Zal heard was Xavier say, "Not this time, not yet. But maybe soon." Then the two climbed the curving staircase to the second floor. Fifteen minutes later, Zal heard a sharp cry and Xavier came back down, whistling and buttoning his jacket.

Zal and Xavier left with a parcel of the precious powder wrapped in a scrap of cloth. Xavier tucked it carefully under the seat of the wagon. "Drummond will pay us handsomely for this." They rode across the town in the dying light of the clouded sun without a word of conversation.

Tired to his very bones, Zal did not speak to his mother about the day's events, and she did not ask. He crawled off to sleep as soon as he had eaten.

The next day, Zal watched a couple of hollow-eyed men cleaning out the woman's apartment over the tavern. "Has she died too?" he wondered as the men removed broken furniture and piles of ragged clothing.

"No," Xavier laughed. "Without her sick husband and sons to care for, she can take a job in the city now. She's on her way to a better life."

"What a thing to say!"

"But true enough, nevertheless." Xavier reined in the horse and got down. "Let me see if there is anything useful or valuable she might have left behind." And he walked up the steps after the men, who eyed him suspiciously, but did not object when he entered the dwelling with them.

Alone, Zal's mind churned. These were dangerous times, and they had stored some magical powder that supposedly helped avoid or alleviate the plague under the wagon seat. Xavier and Lem and Abner had no problem taking what they wanted. Why should not Xavier's loyal bell ringer not share in some of the benefits of the job?

As he got down, a big black dog with only one eye came up to the wagon and slobbered hungrily. It was odd to see a dog roam free. Most had become dinner long ago. Eyeing the hungry dog, Zal shook out a healthy pinch of the white powder and cupped it in his palm. Should he take it with water?

"What are you doing, you young fool?"

So wrapped up in his theft and the stray animal had Zal been that he had not noticed the silent Xavier returning. The man hit Zal's wrist with his horsewhip and the powder flew everywhere, mostly into the dog's face. The dog ran off, howling and shaking its head frantically.

Zal was terrified. Xavier only hit him three or four times, though, before the man recovered his composure and contented himself with shaking the boy. "Never, never, do anything like that again! Hear me?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Chastened, Zal sat passively next to Xavier for the rest of the morning. He obeyed Xavier's directions to the letter, and neither chatted nor let his mind wander as they gather a half dozen more customers for the wagon ride. If Zal lost this job, his mother would give him ten times what Xavier had meted out.

But Zal's empty mind filled with the truth when they passed the one-eyed dog later that morning. The poor beast lay in the gutter, gasping, froth pouring from its mouth and blood oozing from one wild eye. Zal seized the powder and jumped off the wagon.

"What's this? Get back here!"

"No." Zal held up the package. "Protein powder? More like poison, I say. This is the cause of the plague..."

Xavier shook his head. "You're wrong. The dog could have died of anything, you silly boy."

Zal poured out some powder into his hand. "Prove it! Take some, and I'll believe you."

Xavier sat only for another moment, then jumped down from the wagon, trying to catch Zal off guard. But the boy was too fast for him.

"Come here, boy!" yelled Xavier. "I will not hurt you."

"No!" cried Zal. "You are an evil man! You kill people! All of you!"

"But, don't you see? Only so those who live can grow strong and prosper. In times of hardship, only the strong can survive..."

Zal would not listen. Indeed, the lad flew up and down the street, shrieking at the top of his lungs. "Help me! Oh, help! I know where this plague has come from and who is behind it all!"

No one answered Zal's call. When Zal realized that all who cared were dead or dying, and those who could hear his words were all in on the terrible secret, he fell to his knees and let his tears flow, sobs shaking his thin frame to the core.

"Here, drink this," said Xavier, easing Zal into his strong arms. "You will feel better."

Zal hesitated.

"What? You don't trust me? I told you, I have no desire to break in a new assistant so soon. And you are the best I've had. You're strong...and smart too."

In the end, of course, Zal had to drink something and trust someone. As did they all.

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"What?" asked Drummond when Xavier and his new assistant came to help the man clean out his house. "You have a new bell ringer? Young Zal is gone? He looked so strong!"

Xavier nodded sadly. "A shame. But these are hard times we live in. All of us are at risk."

"Yes," Drummond agreed. "But now you have a pleasant young girl to help you."

The girl at his side, no more than eleven, smiled. "Hello." Her faded dress was short, but clean, showing her scabby knees and sturdy legs.

"This is Jen," said Xavier. "I was lucky to find her. Abner insisted my next assistant be a girl."

"I see," said Drummond, licking his lips. "Well, don't let me keep you. I'm sure lunch will be interesting today."

Xavier slipped an arm around the girl protectively. "Yes, it certainly will be."

"Bye," Jen waved as they drove away. "He's a nice man."

Xavier winked at her. "I know men nicer than that. And generous too."

"My mom said this would be a good way for me to learn the ways of the world."

"Oh," said Xavier. "You just wait."

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