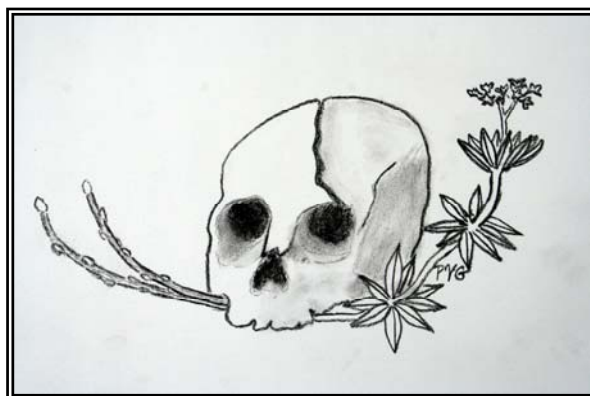


Murders in a medieval abbey township herald the coming of the black plague. The mystery entwines an abbess, a leper, a whore and an undertaker in a tale of twisted medical intrigue.

The Doom of St. Amalie

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at  
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2831.html?s=pdf>



## **The Doom of St. Amalie**

A Plague Town Anthology

Copyright © 2007 Phillip Van Gordon MD PhD

10 Digit ISBN 1-60145-131-8

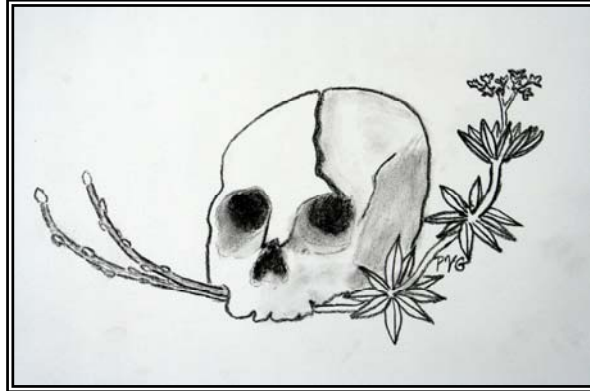
13 Digit ISBN 978-1-60145-131-6

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed in the United States of America

Booklocker.com, Inc.  
2007

Cover Art: *Herbal Remedies*, Negative of charcoal by Phillip Gordon, 2006.



## **The Doom of St. Amalie**

A Plague Town Anthology

by Phillip V. Gordon

## 1- Mortimer



Mortimer mixed the blue powder with the yellow and pounded it with the pestle.

“You best not leave any lumps or grit in that. I ain’t paying for it if doesn’t work.”

Granny Barthalamew spit some tobacco on the wood floor, just missing the rug in front of Mortimer’s apothecary bench. Mortimer continued to ground the powders together slowly.

“Yes, Granny. The salve will work. Just a little bit on top each night for three weeks. Wait for another three weeks... it’ll be gone.”

“It’d better be! If it ain’t gone, I ain’t paying.”

Granny glanced over at the offending wart on her grandson’s finger. It disappeared up a nostril as Newt pursued a booger. The elusive booger was apparently more impressive than the arts of alchemy being performed on the bench top just above his head.

Mortimer added in 3 tablespoons of boiled down urine, collected after a five-pint night at the Grumpy Goat, and knifed it into the

*A Plague Town Anthology*

green powder. He folded the amalgam together, over and over - patiently, until white curls of smoke began to rise from the pale-colored paste. Mortimer set it down at just the right moment, allowing the flash of light to go off while the mortar was sitting on the bench. After the flash, the salve gradually turned translucent with a saffron hue.

Newt let out a gasp. Mortimer smiled until he realized that the boy had captured his quarry: *a truly gargantuan specimen of snot or a lobe of his hypothalamus – hard to tell really.*

Mortimer took a large-mouthed bottle off the open-backed shelves behind him. He cleaned it with a towel and carefully spooned the salve into it. He corked it with a waxed stopper.

“Alright, Granny, just remember to come back here after that wart falls off.”

He handed her the pot. Granny looked at him with her good eye and smiled.

“Well now. Maybe I’ll come back and pay you. Maybe I won’t. If it falls off in six weeks like you said it will, then I’ll pay you. But if it falls off in four or ten, then I don’t think this stuff’s got nothing to do with it. In that case, I’d think you’d be just as happy if I forgot all about the fact that you gave us something to cure a wart but you didn’t know how long it would take to get rid of it. Some warts fall off all by themselves. Any fool knows that.”

“Granny, you don’t have to pay me for the wart remover. You’re right. I have no idea how long it’s going to take. All I know is it takes 3 weeks to get enough of a dose on the wart, and that it usually takes at least 3 weeks for it to work, sometimes more.”

He had her now. Even the glass eye was looking straight at him. *Gods it had taken forever to get her to pay for that.*

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Then...why should I come back? It’s the middle of okra season. I got plenty to keep me busy.”

She’d forgotten to spit. He wondered how much tobacco she could hold in her mouth before it would dribble.

“To get the antidote.”

“What’s an Auntie Dought?”

“Another salve to counteract this one. This one’s so strong that it not only kills the wart, it kills the flesh too. I’ve seen it take a man’s whole hand off over the course of a couple of months. You have to apply the antidote to the place where the wart was for 3 weeks to reverse it before the skin starts sloughing.”

Granny dribbled. Newt was busy stringing his hypothalamus across three fingers and failed to notice as the tobacco juice ran down his backside.

“Sloughing? That don’t sound so good.”

“Oh, it’s not. You see this salve turns the wart bright red. It will stay that way for the entire 3 weeks that you keep putting the salve on it.”

Mortimer's eyes crinkled with pleasure as he waited for that involuntary response.

“Uh huh?”

Mortimer so enjoyed this part. He reeled her in a little farther.

“But! Once you stop applying the salve the wart will turn black and begin to die. It turns black from the top down you see.” He

*A Plague Town Anthology*

pointed to an imaginary top of the wart and then gestured way down low to the imaginary bottom.

Granny's glass eye drifted down.

"When the wart falls off, it leaves a ring of dead black tissue and that will just keep on spreading if you don't apply the antidote to it."

Granny swallowed hard. Mortimer bit his cheek to keep a straight face. Granny had just swallowed a slug of tobacco spit and looked a little shocked. She coughed, just once, into the back of her hand and pretended like it never happened

"How much?"

"I told you Granny, the wart remover is free."

"I mean the antidote. Newt is not going to run around town with half his hand a missing."

"Oh. I see. Well, the antidote is actually much harder to distill and ..."

"Stop it... just name your price. If it's too high Newt will just have to live with the thing."

Granny was starting to look a little green – *probably best to conclude this transaction before she gets too green.*

"Well, did you say you had okra coming on?"

"Yes, I did. Why? You want to trade?"

"As it so happens, I am quite fond of fried okra. It will take me 3 weeks to get the ingredients I need to finish the antidote. If you

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

bring me one bushel of your finest okra a week, I will have your antidote ready on the 3<sup>rd</sup> week.”

“Three bushels?!”

“I think 3 bushels for 3 weeks of antidote is fair. Of course if you want to take a chance on only two weeks of antidote...”

“No, three bushels of my finest okra. The deal is done.”

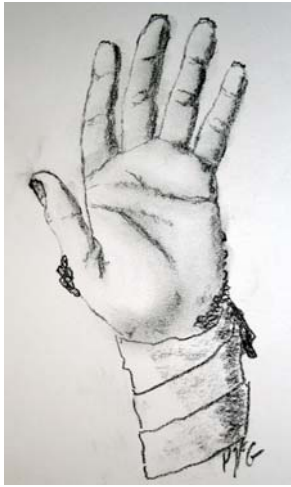
Granny hung her head and turned to go.

“Come on Newt. I think I need to go lie down.”

Mortimer grinned as she walked out. For three bushels of okra he'd managed to get Granny Barthalamew to fall for the old wart remover antidote trick. Of course now he had to go out and buy some lard, distill down some holly leaf wax and mix in some cow bile, but those things cost little more than a few bits of copper and the time it took to gather them. He smiled again as the door to his shop smacked Newt on the behind.

*I've got the tension on that pulley just right. Not a bad way to start the morning. Not bad at all.*

## 2- Zelda



The pulley on the door dropped down, swinging Zelda's door shut with an eerie slam. It had taken weeks to calibrate the weights below the floor, so that the door would pull it slowly, at first, and then the momentum would build, just so, and then BAM!

Only this time a strip of her customer's bandage had gotten caught in the jam. The leper's dress was slowly unraveling as he lumbered towards her table. Zelda realized that the man did not feel the

disrobement of his arm. His gray eyes were intent upon the chair ahead, as if getting there was the central focus of his universe.

"Umm. Excuse me. Sir. I think your sack cloth is caught in the door"

"Uhh. What?"

His voice was the deep rumble of early thunder, heard as a storm rolls across a mountain crest. He was massive and robust, even as his flesh was pustular and angry. He somehow maintained his vitality beneath a ever-festering exterior. He was a living hulk within a dying husk.

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Your arm...Sir...The cloth is torn, and it’s caught in the door.”

Zelda held out her bangled wrist and pointed at the cloth strip that dragged along the floor.

“Hmmm. Go get it out then. If I turn around in here, I’m liable to knock over all of your prayer beads and incense holders in one fell swoop.”

He swayed back and forth expectantly. Zelda looked at him. One eyebrow raised itself ever-so-slightly above the other.

*I wonder what the outside doorknob must look like. Is there a thick layer of pasty goo slicked around it where this shambling mound grabbed and twisted?*

Zelda walked around her tarot table and carefully avoided the customer. She stepped over the piece of cloth to reach the door. She turned the knob so she could move the rest of the cloth into her shop with her slippered foot. This had seemed a tidy solution until she realized that there were in fact several yards of unrolled cloth leading out to the street. With a sigh, she walked around the man again to retrieve a broom from the back corner.

Zelda swept furiously, now blowing out her breath with an “I never” frequency, as she cajoled the cloth into a mound and gradually pushed it toward its owner. At last she had positioned it next to the chair. After returning the broom to its proper place, she peaked in the mirror to check her hair.

*Wouldn’t do to have the white, lye-streaked ones out of place - it ruins the whole feminine-warlock effect.*

The hulk collapsed into the chair. For a moment she was afraid the chair would shatter and the hideous man would decompose into a pile of limbs and torso. When all the motions stopped, it

*A Plague Town Anthology*

seemed that both would survive. Zelda sat down on her stool and prepared herself with her usual mind rituals. She repeated a mantra in her mind:

*I know more about this person than they know about themselves. They are here because they believe that. I am here because I can make money. To make money I must convince them that I know what they need. To convince them does not require that I tell them the truth...It requires that they believe I know the truth.*

“How can I help you?”

She looked into his eyes with an all knowing smile and a sense of calm that even God might have smiled to see. The leper drew a great breath and let it out. Zelda saw droplets of mucus shoot outward from the wrappings over his mouth as he spoke.

“I want you to read my palm....”

“You want me to read your palm?”

He gave one slow nod of his head as if he was one accustomed to ruling others, with only the most minute of body movements. Or, perhaps his bindings were so tight that he could barely move at all.

He jerked his unwrapped hand upward and slapped it down like a cold fish on a butcher’s block. Zelda gazed upon it. The grayed flesh was dried and thickened. Puss lined his palm where layers of skin were pulling free. His joints were still mobile, and some of the lines on his hands were still intact. They were more like furrows really, now canyons between the sediment of leprosy. She looked for his lifeline and found it, strong and deep, longer and much deeper than her own – surely the reason he was still alive after such an advanced case of the disease.

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

She looked into his eyes again and knew at once what he was seeking.

“You want to know how long?”

“How long...,” his voice ricocheted around the room, “and will the great mortality free me?”

*The Black Death, he wants to know if the Black Death will kill him.*

Zelda stared at his hand, as if peering into the far reaches of the nether world.

*This isn't going to be a hard reading after all. Here is someone who really needs my answers. Not Ms. Turtledove asking about her daughter's nuptials or Gregory the brewer seeking his uncle's hidden whiskey reserve.*

This was need like she had never sensed. It took all the joy out of it. Zelda thought about what she should tell him. *He wants to die. He wants me to tell him that he will die soon... that the Black Death will come and take him soon.*

Zelda closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. She heard him suck in air and hold it. She let her mind wander. What would it be worth to this man? To be freed of this burden? How could she exact a price? No, even she had some heart. How could she earn her fee? She opened her mind to the plague. How would it come to the town of St. Amalie? Probably by merchants on their way north from the coasts or else by travelers from the far east. It would start slow and then burn like wildfire. People would leave town almost at once and seek lodging in the countryside. Bodies would lie in their beds until the vermin ate them to the bone...

*A Plague Town Anthology*

*Such a nightmare and yet this man, he is called Lazarum... he yearns for it with all his might.*

The twist of her heart told her what she should say, "Your lifeline is strong."

"I know it!" He sobbed the words. Zelda felt as if the rain had burst from the clouds and was pattering all around her.

"I see it continuing, even long after mine."

"No..."

"But! Do you see this crease?" She pointed to it without actually touching it.

"Where the skin has thickened?"

"Yes, I believe that was one of your original palm lines, and it crosses your lifeline here."

Zelda caught herself as she almost touched his palm. Bile rose in the back of her throat as she pulled her hand back. She swallowed and smiled weakly before continuing.

"That intersection indicates something of great threat to your life is going to happen. It is going to happen soon."

"Truly?" He leaned forward, expectantly. Zelda leaned backwards.

"Yes, truly. I cannot be sure that it will be the great mortality, but I have heard that it has struck the monastery at St. Armand the White. That is but one days ride from here – so perhaps that is the calamity that is coming."

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Oh.” He quivered, like a little boy about to taste a morsel. “Do you really think it could be so?”

“Yes, I think it so. But it is not a very deep line, and I must tell you that perhaps you will only get sick and not die from the plague.”

“No! No! That cannot be” For the first time Zelda saw emotion reach the level of his eyes. They widened in disbelief.

“I have heard that people who are not closely involved with the contagion can survive it. As a leper, you will not be intimate with the living who are stricken and thus could last through a weaker form of the sickness... as they say is contacted through the humors of the air. Your lifeline indicates that you could.”

“Curses ....on my soul! How can such an injustice happen to me?!”

Lazarum shot up from his seat and accidentally hit his head against the rafters. The room shook as if the earth itself were trembling, but he seemed not to feel it.

“How can this be? What am I to do?”

Zelda's eyes widened as the room slowly stopped moving. She swallowed her fear as she thought through her next words.

“You could handle the dead. I've heard that the bodies lay in their beds for months - until the vermin pick them clean, because the undertakers fear contagion from the corpses.”

“The dead?”

Zelda threw herself into a trance. She saw the way clearly now. She let the deep rumble of the voice tumble out of her. It rolled

*A Plague Town Anthology*

over Lazarum, startling him for a second. He sat back down in the chair.

“When the Black Death comes, the town will want for undertakers to carry the dead to the cemetery. You must use that great strength of yours to bury the dead – you may eventually become stricken ...but only after you help bring the contagion towards an end. That is the fate your palm lines were meant for me to find – your mercy and our salvation.”

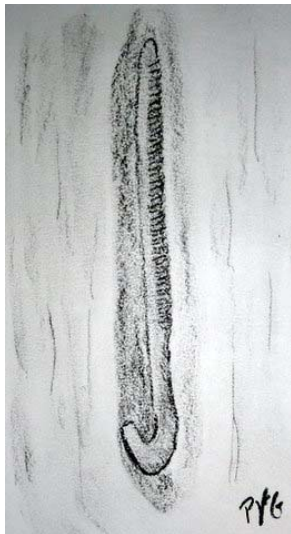
“Oh yes.... It must be God’s will. I cannot take my own .... but if I can serve ....in this way ....to get mercy. I have suffered so long....”

Lazarum clasped his hands together in prayer. Tears began to wet the bandages upon his face. He began to cry in earnest. Silent tears flowed down the giant’s face and stained his bandages.

“All these years of solitude. This disease. Finally, a way . . .

Zelda sat in silence, feeling as if perhaps she wasn’t such a bad person when she told her little lies, and that sometimes it was good to let people cry. She decided that this would be one of those readings where the customer would be allowed to pay what he thought the reading was worth.

### 3- Mother Ebethany



Mother Ebethany watched the spade rise and fall. Each repetition brought another lodestone. *Whose idea was it to consecrate a cemetery in a rock field anyway?*

The leper continued to dig with the same tireless rhythm. This was the seventh grave she'd watched him dig this week. *What could one giant leper want with so many graves? How many times was he planning on dying?*

She bit her fingernails like she sometimes did when Fortenhue was annoyed with her for some silly reason. After all these years, the man still made her feel like a schoolgirl. Fortenhue had that way with her, even now, as he lay in what would surely be his deathbed.

She sighed as she rose from her seat upon the bed. She had chores to do, and the sun was climbing. She fastened together the hooks of her girdle, her collar, her blouse, and her habit. How many hours of her life had she spent locking herself up in all these layers every morning? She placed the dressing hook into a little groove that time had worn into the top of her dresser. She held up the hand mirror, her one vanity, and tucked her stray

*A Plague Town Anthology*

gray locks beneath her wimple before walking out of the dormitory and into the main hall of the nunnery.

“Good morning, Sister Ebethany, are you feeling poorly?” Sister Marguerite was always right where you didn’t want her to be.

“I’m sorry?”

“Well, I assumed since you were so tardy in getting up and starting your tasks that you must have been under the weather. At the age of 57, you are surely entitled to a late morning in bed once in a while. Is your rheumatism bothering you?”

“No. I am well, Sister Marguerite. I’m sorry I concerned you. I spent some extra time in prayer for Father Fortenhue. I fear he is the one you should be worried about.” *...and the fact that I will be the most senior member of this cloister when he passes.*

Sister Marguerite looked thoughtful for a second as she stared at the iron-grated drain in the cobbles between the two of them.

*When was the last time she was at a loss for words?* Sister Marguerite seemed finally about to speak, when a large black creature with a hairless tail dragged itself out of the drain and hid its craven form under the shadow of her skirt.

“Hail Mary full of grace!” Sister Marguerite leapt into the air and landed next to Mother Ebethany, wrapping her arms around her like a constrictor. “Mother of God! Would you look at the size of that thing?” The rat raced down the hall and dove through the grate of another drain.

“Sister Marguerite! Unhand me or I shall have to call a physician to fashion a corset for my broken ribs! Imagine what that might do for my rheumatism?”

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

Sister Marguerite was staring at the far drain where the rat disappeared. Slowly her eyes rolled around to look at the captive abbess she held in her arms. Shock washed over her as she released Sister Ebethany and casually smoothed the wrinkles out of her habit.

“I’m sorry, Mother Ebethany, I lost my composure...”

“Yes. Well I believe the first order of business this morning is for you to get over to the apothecary’s shop and buy us a good quantity of his finest rat poison. Do not let that scoundrel cheat you. He’s good at his craft but he’s even better at bartering.

“Second, I believe you said a few things just now that were unbecoming of a nun, particularly one who serves as the assistant prelate and sister of the treasury to this cloister. I believe a just penance would be for you to complete your rosary bead prayers an additional five times this evening after Vespers.”

“Yes, Mother Ebethany. Will there be anything else?”

“Yes, if you would please get some more of the fever few for Father Fortenhue while you are at Mortimer’s and ...”

“Yes?”

“It’s nothing really. I just want to know why that man, the giant leper, has been digging graves all week.”

“I can answer that for you now. I was speaking with Sebastian, the undertaker, who we found besotted with wine in the mausoleum yesterday evening....” Sister Marguerite looked from side to side.

“Sebastian spoke with the leper while they were digging graves near one another. The leper said that the great mortality is

*A Plague Town Anthology*

coming to St. Amalie....” she paused and looked deep into Mother Ebethany’s eyes, as if this were the most sacred of things that she was about to say, “...and that it was his task to prepare for the dead.”

“The black death? Oh, dear God, have mercy on our children. How does he know this?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps he has had a vision. I have heard nothing in the town, although I’m sure that word will spread now that Sebastian has started drinking again.”

“And we had him off the bottle for almost 12 years. We can only hope that he’s grown too old and too syphilitic to bother the women at Felicity House.”

“Should I give warning, Sister Ebethany?”

“No child, I doubt even the most desperate harlot would let him get cozy. And besides, the truth is, it was only that young one... Lucilla, I believe, that he ever really bothered with. Let us hope his more carnal lusts have burnt themselves out. I believe his repentance has been real in recent years, and there must be some redemptive qualities accumulated to a man his age, although I’ll admit they are hard to fathom.”

“Sister, you know he still...plays with the corpses, especially the pretty ones and the children? I have seen him locking the morgue doors when he goes in – from the inside.”

“Sister Marguerite! Have you seen this for yourself?”

“Of course not! But I’ve heard sounds through the door that could hardly be anything else. I don’t think he needs to grunt like that just to wash the death sweat off the corpses.”

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Oh, dear God, I will do five rosaries myself just for standing here and listening to this, and you shall do five yet again for listening at locked doors. It’s revolting, Sister Marguerite, but on the list of sins that Sebastian has committed in his life time, I think necrophilia is one that Christ will hardly notice!”

Several sisters stopped at various points in their processions about the hall and looked intensely at Mother Ebethany and Sister Marguerite. They all quickly looked away and continued to where ever it was that they were going.

“Will that be all, Mother Ebethany?”

“Yes, I think that’s quite enough for one morning, Sister Marguerite.”

#### 4- Sister Marguerite



Miss Felicity smiled. She did so with her head tilted slightly upward to get the best angle, so that her teeth (green sweaters, rotten spot and all) would best reflect the sunlight. Mortimer stretched his neck to look at the offending canine.

“You see? Itz right in thur. Ouch!” She winced as her tongue touched down on the blackened dot of enamel that spread across half the tooth. “Canch ya dooze sumthin aboutz it? It hurtz sumthin awful.”

Mortimer stood up and rubbed his hair through his skull cap, a motion that looked suspiciously like he was making the skull plates themselves gyrate about. *That one’s a goner, and the rest aren’t far behind. Phew! God, what a stench.*

“My Lady, I’m afraid that tooth must come out or you will certainly loose all the rest of the teeth on that side of your mouth. However, if you do as I say, I may be able to salvage the remainder of that most fetching smile of yours.” Miss Felicity grinned. Mortimer felt a bit ill. *Pouring it on a little too thick, you idiot.*

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“I shall fashion a wire around that tooth with a tight leather thong that can be tied to a door knob. You shall go back to your fine bordello and drink several bottles of your best wine. Afterwards you will have the harlot who least likes you tie the thong to an open door knob and then have you walk slowly backwards until the thong hangs exactly two feet off the floor at its lowest point. This harlot is then to think upon all of the reasons she has to dislike you ... think hard I should say, until she is in a ripe temper, then slam the door shut with all her might!”

Miss Felicity looked somewhat unsure of herself.

“Mortimer, are you sure the tooth must go? What'll my customers think if am to have one of my front teeth missing?”

“What will they think if they're all missing?” *They'll think your breath smells better for one thing and that the bargain they made was a bit sweeter than they expected for the other.*

“Well, aw-right. I guess when you put it that way.”

Mortimer was already unwinding the brass dulcimer wire from the spool he kept for just this purpose. He pulled off about a foot's worth and snipped it with large shears. It did not cut at first, but after several grunts and grinding down on the spring hinge, the wire was finally cleaved. Miss Felicity looked at the thin instrument with suspicion.

“Now open up.”

“What ya going to do with it?”

“I'm going to thread it in and around that rotten tooth of yours, so that it won't come off when you're pissy harlot slams the door! What do you think I'm going to do with it? Now open up!”

*A Plague Town Anthology*

Miss Felicity opened her jaws wide. She looked over the lips of her lower eyelids attempting to see what Mortimer was doing. For his part, he deftly threaded the wire between the rotted gaps of her teeth and back out again.

“This may hurt just a bit, but try not to move.”

He pulled the wire tight against the back of the tooth. Miss Felicity arched her back a bit but kept her mouth still. A soft sigh escaped her lips. Mortimer made an appreciatory grunt for her fortitude then prepared for a second wrap of wire around the tooth. He started speaking as he finished the task.

“Now, once the tooth is out, I’m going to give you an astringent powder. You must first let it bleed for a quarter hour. Then pack the powder into the place where the tooth was.”

He finished double wrapping the tooth then proceeded to twist the wires together and knotted them around the leather thong.

“Use about this much.”

He pinched a quarter teaspoon between his thumb and forefinger to demonstrate and raised it to his own mouth as if he were about to pack his own tooth socket. He paused for a second to make sure that she understood. Miss Felicity was ashen. *She’ll never be able to do it.*

“On second thought, perhaps you should tell the harlot how to do it. Tell her it will hurt like the devil.”

“Vill it?” Miss Felicity had some difficulty speaking with the leather thong hanging out of her mouth.

“No, but that will motivate her to make sure it gets done.”

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Oh.”

“Now thereafter, morning and night for the next three weeks I want you to drink a cup of tea made with one teaspoon of this liquid. One! No more because it’s an extract of dried cherry leaf. That’s a source of arsenic and too much of it is dea...

The door opened. A young nun dressed in a black habit slid through it and closed it back again. She turned and then slowly dropped her eyes to the floor as she spoke.

“Excuse me, Master Mortimer, should I come back later?”

“No, no we were just finished, Sister Marguerite.” Mortimer looked at the nun thoughtfully. *A habit is such a bulky thing. Who would know that she hides the body of Venus under that tent? Wonder what the Abbey needs this time?*

“But Mordimohr, I’m not shoor I undurstan awl of dis instrucshuns. An we aven’t ev’n dish-cushed paydmint!”

“I will call on you tomorrow morning to see how the tooth extraction went.” *All the better to exact payment then, when you’ll be wanting some pain medicine.*

“We can come to a fair fee then. Here is enough cherry leaf extract until I next see you. On your way, Miss Felicity. Keep a stiff upper lip. Especially when that harl... I mean, that colleague of yours extracts the tooth. Ha ha.”

Miss Felicity shot him an evil eye, but he had her hand and was pulling her out the shop forcibly.

“I’ll check on you first thing in the morning. Good day!”

“But Mordimohr, I mush prohtesht...” Her protest was muffled by the slam of the door. Mortimer subtly clicked the lock in place.

“Sister Marguerite, how can I help you?” *Best keep the conversation going for a bit, until we’re sure that Felicity has gone on. Then...*

**“Mother Ebethany requires some fever few for Father Fortenhue and a large amount of rat poison for the Abbey. We’ve seen some fairly big ones just this week... and with the Great Mortality coming, she thinks it best we kill the vermin.” *The way he looks at me...***

Mortimer had stepped over and gently taken Sister Marguerite’s hand. He dropped it suddenly.

“The plague? Who says the plague is coming?”

“The leper, Lazarum. He’s been digging graves in the cemetery for the past 4 days. He says it is his calling to be the undertaker for those who will be taken by the plague. I am surprised you have not heard.”

“I have not. You would think the apothecary might be one of the first to hear. Practitioners sometimes see the first cases, the buboes, which people at first think are abscesses in need of a poultice. Otherwise it’s the barber, who they ask to lance them. Who has come down with it then? How many cases do you know of?” *How much time do I have to get my things together?*

Sister Marguerite looked into Mortimer’s eyes, took his hands back in hers, and calmly placed them against her bosom. *I’m here for you.*

“I know of no cases, dearest. The leper has had a vision or heard a voice of prophecy. We have seen no signs of the

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

Mortality at the abbey, and the leper freely admits that he also has seen no cases. None-the-less, he is convinced that the plague is coming to St. Amalie someday in the near future." *But not today.*

Sister Maurgerite gently kissed Mortimer on the cheek. *I'm here for you.*

"We will need that rat poison quickly, and Mother Ebethany expects me to haggle for a fair price." *Make me beg.*

Mortimer took a deep breath, closed his eyes, then released it. When he opened his eyes he found himself staring into Maurgerite's brown orbs. *This is not the plague. Oh no, not the plague indeed. This is an all together different evil but, oh, what a pleasure to be plucked.*

"I can think of better things to do with our time than haggle." *Although there will have to be some give and take involved.*

A soft moan escaped from sister Marguerite's lips. Mortimer touched his lips to them. They kissed for a long while. He lifted her into his arms and carried her to the back of the shop.

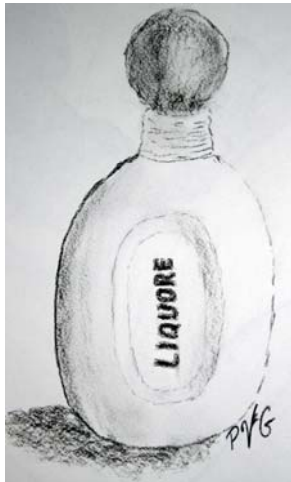
\* \* \* \* \*

Outside, Miss Felicity watched quietly from the stoop, her eye pressed against a crack in the window board. The leather thong lifted slightly as she smiled to herself.

*Mortimer got that habit off faster than Granny Barthalamew can spit tobacco. He's made a habit of this. Heh Heh! A habit of the habit!*

*So he thinks he can just shoo me out like that, does he? Wait until tomorrow morning, and we'll see who gets the upper hand.*

## 5- Aiden



“Aay-den! Is it going to rain ta-day?”  
Sebastian slurred from across the cobblestone wall of the cemetery. “I hear rain is good for the pla-a-a-gue.”

It was a deliberate stutter. He laughed to himself as he took another swallow of wine from the flask.

“So, Aeromancer, tell me, should I stop digging graves today on account of those clouds, or shall I go on about my work?”

Aiden stopped his hobbling to look back at the sot. Sebastian was a revolting man. Well past forty, he’d spent his prime pursuing impure passions. Even in his last dozen years of repentance, he had been a hard man to tolerate. Aiden had never trusted the man around his children. Not after Granny Barthalamew’s oldest grandson had gone missing. *Of course, no one could ever prove that it was Sebastian.*

“Are you a paying customer then, Sebastian?”

“Three coppers, and I won’t tell a soul, Master Limkin...not a soul.”

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Today’s forecast is worth four.”

“I only got three.”

Aiden sighed to himself. “Very well, hand them over.”

Sebastian fumbled for his purse. He carefully counted out three coppers and deposited them into Aiden's gouty hands. Aiden, in turn, fumbled with his own purse and with considerably greater difficulty slid the three coppers into it.

*Oh it's going to rain all right. Frogs and toads by the feel of these joints. Unnh....*

Aiden closed his eyes and bowed his head. He took an accounting of the pain that rippled here and there throughout the joints of his body. *Hmm, yes a soaker.* Once he was sure the desired effect upon the gravedigger would be rendered, he raised his head and opened his eyes.

“Gravedigger, you have my word it will rain before morning. There will be enough rainfall for water to stand in the bottom of the open graves. If it doesn't, I will return your money plus an additional copper.”

Sebastian's eyes grew wide, as if he could feel the tingle of the aeromancer's magic floating over to him.

“If it's as you say, Aiden, then I got a bargain. There's no point in me digging graves today just to have to dig them out tomorrow.”

Aiden smiled knowingly and tipped his head slightly before hobbling on his way. One man's magic was another man's constant painful companion: the needles and hot pokers of gout. He looked at the dirt trail before him, eyeing the ruts and bumps. He had run out of the willow bark powder that Mortimer sold him

*A Plague Town Anthology*

for when the pain got bad. He set his teeth together and resolved to make the long walk to Mortimer's shop. There would be a glass of brandy at the end of this day as well.

As he walked away, Sebastian watched him in silence. He took another long slow swig from his flask. In the distance, the steady clank and thud of a spade could be heard digging into the earth. Lazarum was also digging graves. Sebastian heaved himself off the mound of dirt and walked over to the man in wrappings, who literally had two feet in the grave.

"Hey, Lazarum!" Sebastian yelled down at him.

The leper ceased digging and looked at Sebastian through drooping facial bandages.

"Yes?"

"I just talked to the aeromancer. He says it's going to rain frogs and toads tonight. You'd might as well stop for today; new graves will just tumble in during a rain like that."

"Hmmm. What about the twelve I've already dug?" His voice boomed up out of the squared space.

"Some of them may have slides, but you can usually dig them back out. If they've stood this long, they're probably in good shape, but new dirt is prone to wash away and start things to sliding and falling back in the way it was before."

"Thank you for telling me."

"Yeah, well, we gravediggers have got to stick together."

"Will you keep digging graves when the Black Death comes?"

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

Sebastian looked at the hulk and swallowed spit. He opened his flask, guzzled the contents, and threw it to the ground. After a long inhalation, Sebastian looked back at Lazarum.

“I reckon I will. Don’t get me wrong. It scares me as much as the next man, but I think I’m like you....”

“Like me?”

“Yeah. You know, you’re supposed to dig these graves so God will set you free.”

“Yes?”

“Well, I think I’m supposed to help you... so God will forgive me.”

“Forgive you of what?”

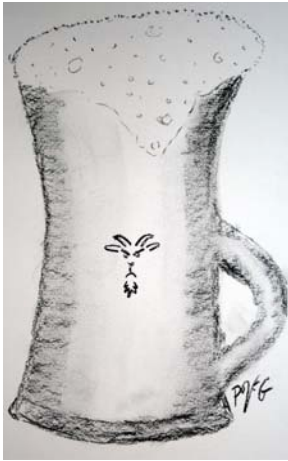
“That’s between me and him.”

Silence filled the space between the two men as Lazarum slowly lifted himself out of the unfinished grave and picked up his lunch bag and spade.

“I’ll see you after the ground dries, Sebastian.”

“Until then, Lazarum.”

## 6- Master Gregory



“Bar keep! I’ll have another.” Sebastian bellowed from the end of the bar.

Gregory squinted his eyes ever so slightly above the tub of ceramic pints he was washing. He nodded slowly. A sober man would know that a line had just been crossed, but Sebastian was oblivious. Gregory glanced at Mr Limkin, checking to make sure his brandy snifter wasn’t empty as he pulled a draft of barley beer.

“No, no! I want the dunkleweisen.”

“You’ll get barley ale, or you get put out on your arse, Sebastian! My name is Gregory, and anyone who’s had too much to remember it is cut off from The Grumpy Goat’s finest. I’ll not sell my precious to a man who’s too drunk to taste it.” Gregory stared into Sebastian’s blood shot eyes, daring him to make an objection.

“But...” Sebastian whined. A man clearing his throat brought his attention to the half dozen men in ‘The Goat’ who had been among those with the torches and pitchforks six years ago. He swallowed his words.

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“As you say, Master Gregory...how much for this near beer, then?”

“Just two coppers.”

Gregory lumbered back to his wash bin. Aiden Limkin smiled between gritted teeth and took a sip of his brandy. The rain would fall any minute.

“Have you seen Mortimer today, Gregory?”

“Can’t say as I have, Aiden. Why do you ask?”

“I need him to sell me some more willow bark shavings. He’s the only one who seems to know how to prepare the damn things such that they actually work. My pain has been fierce as of late.”

“Did you go to his shop? It should have been open this afternoon. In fact, I’m pretty sure I saw Miss Felicity going in there while I was sweeping off the porch...Right after lunch, it was.”

“Yes. I hobbled all the way over there and banged on his bloody door, but he had his curtains drawn and he didn’t answer. I can only assume he was out in the field harvesting... something that only blooms or emerges or whatever this time of year.”

“That why you’re knocking back so many of those brandies tonight?”

“That would be one of the reasons.”

“You need a room for the night?”

“Perhaps that would be a good idea.”

*A Plague Town Anthology*

Gregory leaned over the bar and began to whisper, "You need somebody to help keep you warm?"

Aiden felt a smile creep across his lips in spite of the pain.

"Tempting, Gregory, but we aeromancers must be devoted to one mate in life. If we are unfaithful, we lose the gift. It is part of our vow when we join the guild. Even in death, we must be faithful."

Gregory got a distant look on his face and nodded his head in shrewd acquiescence.

*The crap I end up telling people. Isn't it enough that my Leona was everything...that I'm in pain, and I doubt I could, even if I wanted.*

Master Limkin stared into his brandy as Master Gregory motioned to the scullery boy and had him move a frame and feather tick into the downstairs guest room, the one that sometimes doubled as a cask room. He knew better than to ask if Limkin wanted one of the nicer upstairs rooms.

Thunder rumbled among the clouds then reverberated down the mountains that circled St. Amalie. Aiden listened to the special moment of silence that followed. He'd come to recognize it in his bones, these magical punctuations...the calm before the storm. Then it happened; the water poured forth from the clouds.

*I'll be keeping all the money I earned today.*

All talking stopped. Sebastian and several others in the tavern raised their mugs to Master Limkin in a silent toast. Aiden nodded his head sagely and, judging his services now officially discharged, he lifted himself out of his chair.

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

“Believe I’ll call it a night, Gregory. How much do I owe you all together.”

“Half crown will set us right, Aiden. The tab is a half crown and two coppers.”

“Here’s a whole crown. Tell you what, how about if you give me a good price on a flask of brandy? I could use it to get me through until Mortimer gets me some more willow shavings.”

Gregory took a hard look at Aiden. He bought his brandy from the monastery of St. Armand the White at 2 pence a flask and hauled it all the way back himself. Eight coppers profit was less than a sixth of the profit he’d make if he sold it twelve shots to the flask, but he could see the pain in the man’s eyes.

*He’s a good customer; it’s a favor I can afford. Besides, he’s already had four shots.*

“Alright then, a whole crown for your tab plus a flask.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The door of the Grumpy Goat slammed opened and a flash of lightning silhouetted the gnarled man who lurched through it. He was dripping with rainwater. He stumbled back struggling to close the door against the storm hurling itself into the tavern room.

“Christ, One Tooth, you gave me a fright!” yelled a young farm hand that lived on Granny Barthalamew’s farm. Rauole did a lot of hard labor in return for a share of the crops and sales. Newt was sitting at the table next to him sipping barley beer and enjoying his favorite pastime of personal orifice exploration. Normally Granny would never let Rauole bring Newt to a tavern,

but she'd been under the weather most of the week...ever since the last time she'd been in town. Newt's answers to questions about Granny's health this evening had all been the same: "tobacki-colimoribis".

Sebastian was nursing a near beer, his second. He had sobered enough to know that he didn't want to go out in that storm just yet, despite the fact that he was increasingly less comfortable with some of the other patrons.

One of the patrons worrying Sebastian was Constable Garrick. Almost as large as Lazarum, Garrick wore a shirt of chain at all times and was paid a monthly stipend by the merchants and the town-master to keep the peace. His favorite drink was lager. He seemed to especially enjoy the art of belching after quaffing it down in great gulps. Garrick was at the bar talking with Gregory. A quick look of recognition and fear passed between them as the Garrick turned back towards the bar.

Another was Marshall, the tanner, who'd actually prodded Sebastian with a pitch fork twelve years ago. He sat with Jethro, the blacksmith, and his apprentice, Armand, in the back corner. They were discussing the manufacture of a carriage harness that Town-master Gerhard had recently commissioned.

Although Rauole had blurted out the words, a palpable chill now clung in the air. Constable Garrick felt a drop of sweat drip down his temple. Sebastian shivered, and at the same time, young Armand clasped his arms around his torso, warding off the same chill. A look of concern passed between masters Marshall and Jethro. Of all the patrons, only Newt sat oblivious, lost in his endless pursuit of bodily secretions and by-products.

One Tooth walked slowly into the room carrying a satchel. He eyed each of the patrons carefully. The man was in his early sixties and master of his craft. Yet his clothes were thread-bare,

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

his shoe heels worn. In the thin-lipped mouth that was his namesake, there was one single central tooth that jutted up from his bottom lip. He was clearly very close to the end of his career.

Gregory was the first to welcome him.

“What’ll you have, One Tooth?”

“In a moment, Gregory. I’ll need a customer of my own first,” he rasped.

Gregory turned a noticeable shade paler.

“Not me, Master One Tooth, I had mine shorne just a fort-night ago. You can see for yourself, sir,” Rauole volunteered.

“Nor me, sir. Mine was cut just this week!” Armand chimed in.

“Well, if not one of these young men, how about this boy here?” He motioned at Newt. “He looks like he could use a good shearing.”

“He ain’t got no money, sir,” Rauole said sorrowfully.

“Right then, it’ll have to be a shave.”

A collective gasp filled the room. One Tooth looked around the room slowly, eyeing each man, measuring them, until finally he determined who was most in need of his services.

“Well, Garrick, remember the time I cut the dead flesh away from your arm, after that highway robber tried to skewer you with a bastard sword?”

“Yes.... Lastel, I remember.”

*A Plague Town Anthology*

There was a long pause. Garrick did remember. It was more that ten years ago... he thought the wound was the end of him. Blood spewed forth with every heart beat. One tooth had used a hot poker to staunch the wound and placed him on bed rest. For weeks he had cut away the dead flesh. Garrick knew Lastel's attentions had saved him from gangrene.

"You look like you could use a shave today."

*Oh God...best let him save some face.*

"How much would you be wanting for a shave, One Tooth?"

"Enough for a pint of ale and a plate of dinner and three coppers besides."

"Two coppers besides."

"Agreed."

One Tooth immediately set to business. He set his satchel on an empty table and moved a chair. Garrick glanced at Gregory, shrugging his shoulders bravely, and walked over to the chair. Once seated, One Tooth took out and snapped a large cloth then secured it around Garrick's neck. He took out a bar of soap and a flask of water and proceeded to make lather with a horse hair brush in a coffee cup.

There was something very soothing about the quick rhythm with which he stirred this lather and just as quickly shellacked it onto the face and neck of the town constable. When the preparations were complete, all eyes watched as One Tooth unfolded the razor.

As One Tooth prepared for the first stroke, a tremor emerged in his hands. The closer the razor got to the constable, the more

*The Doom of St. Amalie*

widely gyrating and tremulous the razors edge began to undulate. Constable Garrick swallowed hard as he watched the blade come closer to his Adam's apple.

"Lastel?" He whispered.

"Don't talk to me now, Garrick. I need to concentrate. Wouldn't want me to slip."

The razor continued its dance. Garrick's eye's tracked the handle as best he could. The rest of the patrons watched in horror, wondering if this would finally be the moment when One Tooth's hand would slip and cut someone's throat.

The barber forced the razor toward the skin and moved the razor up under the neck for the first stroke. A gasp arose from crowd as he brought the razor away.

"Yeow!" screamed Garrick at the same time. There was blood on the razor.

"What the hell did you do that for?" exclaimed One Tooth.

Looking down at his hand, Garrick saw that there were two fine cuts, one each across the pads of his two longest fingers. He had reached up to protect himself at the last moment. A flush of red spread across his cheeks.

"I'm sorry Lastel. I don't know what made me do that. I'll hold still for the rest of it. I promise."

"You'd better. If I hadn't pulled back when I did, you'd have cut your own finger tips off! You're lucky it's only a couple of nicks."

One Tooth cleaned the blood off the razor. He sharpened it on a strap before resuming the shaving. After a few more minutes of

*A Plague Town Anthology*

tremor-stroke, tremor-stroke, Garrick received his shave with no nicks or additional bleeding. When One Tooth removed the neck cloth, Garrick felt the incredible smoothness of his face with his palms.

“Hell of a shave, One Tooth. Here’s the two coppers plus the third you asked for originally...for saving my fingers. I told Gregory your meal and ale are on me.” Garrick smiled gently as he said it.

The bleeding from his fingers had already stopped.

Murders in a medieval abbey township herald the coming of the black plague. The mystery entwines an abbess, a leper, a whore and an undertaker in a tale of twisted medical intrigue.

The Doom of St. Amalie

**Buy The Complete Version of This Book at  
Booklocker.com:**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/2831.html?s=pdf>