The Dropping of a Bird or- The true Story of the Disembowelment of Curdia

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Abstract

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“Nonsense,” said the king. “You have arrived back safely from your mission—what more do you want? Now tell me, are the rumors true—are the Curdles preparing to invade us—do they have a secret new weapon? If so, I will mobilize my forces immediately. Well, speak up, man! This is crucial!”

“Sir, begging your indulgence, I think I had best begin from the moment I first infiltrated Curdia, for the events are strange. Incredible. I can scarcely believe it myself. Though I will set your mind at ease on one point right now. There is no indication of imminent invasion. We needn’t fear.”

“I knew it!” said the king. “God is on our side!”

“Well, sir, if cleanliness is indeed next to godliness, then I can quite see why God wants nothing to do with them. A Curdle’s worth is measured by the distance from which he can be smelled, and I doubt God finds it any more pleasant than I! Really, sir, the stench was formidable—it permeated the whole countryside—everything and everyone.”
“As a matter of fact,” said the king, “now that you mention it . . . do bathe soon.”

“Oh, you’re quite right, sir. I shall. But now to begin. My first contact there was a brutal sort of a peasant—we met quite by accident. He flung a clump of mud at me, thinking I was someone else. I stood there absolutely in a rage while this coarse ruffian just grinned at me; the front of my shirt and trousers was bespattered with mud that smelled as foul as that confounded peasant. Actually, I only assumed it was mud, and I assumed erroneously. That oaf had thrown a fistful of manure at me. You can imagine my chagrin. He had another slimy handful of the wretched stuff poised in the air, undoubtedly aimed at my head, so I quickly made peace, assuring him that I was entirely neutral and knew nothing of what was going on. ‘My dear sir,’ I said to him while taking a few gold coins from my pocket, ‘I was only wondering if you might be able to satisfy a few of my curiosities.’

‘‘Maybe,’ he said, ‘but I don’t want no gold.’ Now this left me absolutely dumbfounded—a peasant who did not want gold. So I asked him what he did want.

‘All I wants is your horse dung,’ he said. Well, I was somewhat taken aback, but nonetheless I promised him all the proceeds from my horse. From then on we were the closest of confidants. Quite an engaging fellow—would have enjoyed our talk if only his odor hadn’t been quite so tart.

Anyway, it didn’t take me long to find out why he had refused the gold coins. You see, in Curdom, their capital city, money is no longer important. Instead, well . . . I don’t know quite how to say this, Your Highness, but . . . well, you see, it’s this way. There’s this fellow named Juniper, who is the most successful farmer for miles around, about as successful as a man could be, and very rich—by peasant standards that is—which means that he had amassed the largest manure pile of all. This also entitled him to be mayor of Curdom—it’s a set rule of the town that whoever has the greatest quantity of fecal matter by his front door gets to be mayor. And under Mayor Juniper’s ministrations, the town was apparently a model of peace and efficiency.

‘Now the trouble seems to have begun the morning that this Juniper awoke to discover that there was treachery
underfoot. It seems that a farmer named Thickleby had been accumulating a secret stockpile of animal proceeds and had piled it all up in front of his house during the night. From all reports it was at least a foot higher than Juniper's, who became quite outraged—particularly when the Curdles demanded that he resign his post as Mayor. But Juniper didn't resign—he would rather have been dead than live under Thickleby's mayorship. So he set about building his dung heap even higher than Thickleby's. He neglected all his farmerly duties with the one exception of feeding his animals. The more they ate the more they excreted. He even fed them everything that was supposed to go to market, and he himself ate very little. All his spare money, in fact, every cent he had in the world, went to purchase more animals—horses and cows preferably—they produce more, you know. But that doesn't mean he was adverse to putting even chicken droppings in his pile—it's just that he didn't concentrate on the chickens.

"So soon Juniper's pile again exceeded Thickleby's, and in turn, Thickleby was infuriated. But instead of going about the whole thing honestly, Thickleby borrowed manure from his friends—some say he even stole from Juniper's heap. He even enlisted the street sweeper to brush all the sludge and muck of the street into his pile. Thickleby was evidently unconcerned that his manure thereby became impure.

"Thus it happened that the town became divided: all the leading citizens who were morally indignant over Thickleby's underhanded tactics helped Juniper develop his pile to insure his political supremacy, while the malcontents, the have-nots, all donated their barnyard profits, even their household profits, to Thickleby. Unfortunately for Juniper there were more malcontents than upstanding citizens, so Thickleby's pile grew to gigantic proportions, far exceeding Juniper's.

"Juniper became desperate, almost on the verge of capitulation, when one of his neighbors, an alchemist, discovered a redeeming formula by which the animals' productivity was doubled. The animals understandably got quite thin, but nevertheless they ate well. Thus, once again Juniper
took over the lead, confident that Thickleby would never be able to catch up.

"When Thickleby heard about the potion, he sent spies over to steal it—or at least the formula—and preferably the alchemist. Several subversives were captured and dispatched forthwith into the manure pile as examples to other would-be spies. The security surrounding the alchemist and his formula was impregnable and the spies' efforts were to no avail—that is, to no avail until one of them seduced the alchemist's wife, who thereupon defected with the formula in her girdle. Thus, with both sides having the secret of the potion, the lumpy brown edifices grew and grew—three times as big as a house—until finally they became veritable mountains.

"Meanwhile the ordinary life of the town had become completely overshadowed by the contest. Shops closed, even the winery closed. All available resources were pumped into the mass production of dung, each side racing endlessly against the other. Yet for all appearances, the two sides existed alongside each other quite cordially and Juniper was not overthrown as mayor. They all mixed socially, smiled pleasantly while exchanging spies, and conversed affably at conferences on manure control.

"Then one day everything changed in a split second. One of Thickleby's men was walking down the main road through town when an innocent bird dropping splattered on his nose—whereupon he dashed through town shouting 'Attack! Attack! We've been attacked! Defend yourselves!' And that was it.

"After it was all over I went to see the town myself, Your Highness, and phew! A most stimulating experience! The entire town was polluted with knee-deep rivers of sludge—people were drowning in it, swimming in it—dying of sickness. They were even starving to death, for the survivors were still giving all their food to the animals to provide more materials for defense. I talked with some of the survivors, keeping as far away as I dared, and those of both sides are still praising their leaders for having the foresight to build up their defenses, for of course if they hadn't, everyone might have been annihilated. And too, each side thinks
it has won, but the town is a total loss. And that's the story, Your Highness."

"Excellent work," said the king. "Your service to our cause has been invaluable. And now, as my Minister of Offensive Defense, I order you to begin immediately the stockpiling of this magnificent new weapon."

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**A Letter Home**

_by Martin Legion_  

_English, Sr._

**DEAR Father:**

I am tired. I walk the streets from here to there with a weight on my soles that is dragging me into the earth. I wonder why the people can not see what my shoulders carry, the mass that makes me tired at the end of a day when I have done nothing.

There is so little time and so much to do; so much, I will never do any of it well or really understand it. I wonder what I shall ever understand.

Not people, surely, for they are so far away I can hardly reach them at all. I have the feeling that they all know each other very well, that they are great friends. I think I can reach them if I only change one little thing, but how can I know what little thing to change?

I have felt this way before, when my shoulders droop and my mind can hold nothing for more than a minute, and I