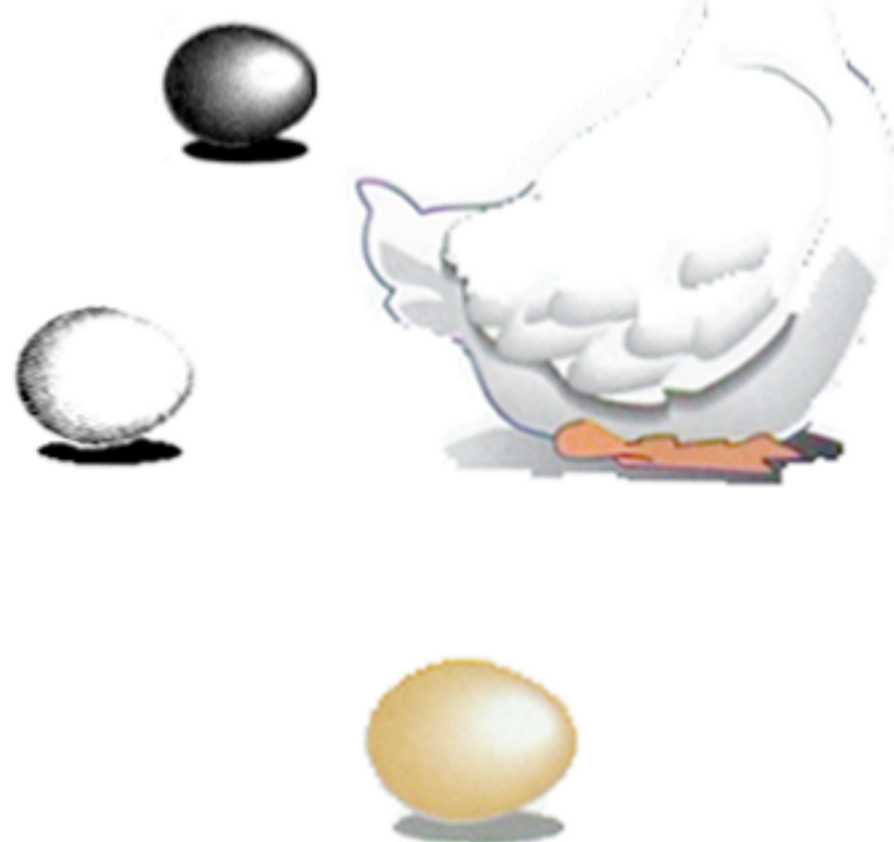




By Dave Kirtley



T

here was a sorcerer at the spring fair.

Father Priam blinked his eyes and stared once more into the crowd. The bailey of Castle Bernlak was a great mass of color and cacophony. Venders hawked their wares and shouted offers at passersby, toothless beggars crouched in niches shadowed by the tall stone walls, and jesters garbed in garish attire flipped and juggled and laughed while performing not far from where rare meats were roasting on spits. Large wagons laden with rickety cages penning chickens and heaped with hay and grain for sale in the marketplace lumbered through the gates. People laughed as cheap wine poured from the fount of the winepress, a luxury which was free on precious few days, this being one of them.

Lord Bernlak smiled openly, his teeth framed by a well-manicured blond beard. His heavy throne had been moved to a wooden stage constructed especially for this occasion—high enough to separate himself from the teeming masses, yet close enough that they felt he was part of their celebration. To this end, he had removed his ornate crown and, instead, ringed his head in a garland of sweet-smelling flowers. The day was pleasantly warm, and he had cast off his heavy royal cloak, choosing to wear instead his fine crimson tunic inscribed with his coat of arms, light and comfortable, yet grand enough for a public appearance. He waved to the crowd and smiled at the people who danced in circles around the fairgrounds. A beautiful day indeed.

"An evil one walks the grounds this day, Your Lordship," came a soft, even voice at his shoulder.

Bernlak's smile slowly faded as he turned to regard his religious counselor. "You're sure?" he asked.

Father Priam nodded solemnly. "His presence is an affront to all that is good and true. A stench of the unnatural hangs over these fairgrounds. I can sense him. We must be rid of him before anything happens."

"You worry too much, Father. Like as not, this evil stranger has come to enjoy the festivities. I dare say that it must be difficult for even evil to stay away from such a glorious attraction." He smiled and waved to some minor nobles who were passing in front of his throne.

"A sorcerer has come to your fair. I did not abandon my place in the abbey to come here and be your advisor so that you would cast off my advice like your expensive cape! His presence here is no mere coincidence. He has definite intentions—*evil* intentions. Sorcerers are driven by power. Perhaps he finds your throne tempting."

"What can I do? Sorcery is not outlawed in this land."

"A mere oversight and you know it. There are no laws against sorcery

Dave Kirtley submitted this story as an eleventh-grader at John Jay High School in his hometown of Katonah, New York. He has received fiction and science fiction/fantasy writing awards. Dave is also active in high school sports—lacrosse, soccer and volleyball—as well as VAASA (Varsity Athletes Against Substance Abuse), SADD, and AIDS awareness programs. Recreational moments find him playing racquetball, fishing, hanging out with friends, and "writing all the time."

because you had no way of perceiving sorcerers before I came."

Lord Bernlak stared at Father Priam for a long moment. Today his pious advisor had removed the ceremonial headpiece which usually adorned his head, and hair could be seen sprouting from the bald crest customarily shaved by the monks. In unusual fashion his scapular had been adorned with gold buttons and delicate needlework. The richness of his vestment marked him as being an important figure, one who had been sent as a representative of the church to give itself more control in the matters of rulership. Bernlak decided it would be unwise to ignore him. With a resigned sigh, he spoke. "Very well. I agree with you, Father. The sorcerer must be found and imprisoned. Does it lie within your abilities to identify him?"

"No, that I cannot do. He comes twined in an enchantment of misdirection which I cannot penetrate. But there is a sorcerer somewhere upon these grounds, do not doubt me."

"Then we must simply trick him into exposing himself," Bernlak said, rising to his feet. He motioned for his steward to come forward.

"Then I had best remain out of sight," Priam said. "My presence may arouse his suspicions."

"Fine," said Bernlak. He turned to his steward. "Order the trumpeters to get the attention of the crowd. I wish to make a proclamation."

"Yes, sire," replied the steward.

By the time the trumpets blared, Bernlak was prepared to speak. "Beloved countrymen," shouted Bernlak, "the festivities today have been most impressive. But on such a special occasion, I wish to see something even grander. I wonder if any among you could provide a small demonstration in . . . sorcery."

The crowd went dead silent at such an unusual request. Hoping not to lose his momentum, Bernlak quickly continued, "To the one who provides the most impressive demonstration, I shall give a pouch of gold from the royal treasury."

The moment of blissful silence was shattered instantly by these words. With an almost unanimous cry, a great crowd of people surged forward and started to form a knot near the front of the stage, each one clamoring to be the first to perform. Every pickpocket and scoundrel who worked the streets could perform a few tricks with a coin. If the lord would be a fool, so much the better.

The lure of such treasure was great, and soon a small brawl developed, with people actively fighting each other to be the first to crawl up on stage.

With a loose jaw, Lord Bernlak stared at the scene and then motioned for several of his guardsmen to disperse the crowd. With unmistakable vigor, the armed and armored guardsmen waded into the mass of bellicose bodies and soon brought the situation under control.

Bernlak cleared his throat. "The demonstrations had better be good." He didn't say it loudly, but his

voice carried. With the threat of an ambiguous penalty for failure before them, many of those who had clamored to perform withdrew quickly to the back of the audience, not wanting to draw attention to themselves. In the end, only two wanted to be first to perform, and Bernlak decreed that they should perform side by side.

From his place in the shadows, Father Priam stared at the two contestants with a scrutinizing eye. The first one, who was clearly the more conspicuous of the two, was a haggard old man dressed in loose, billowing gray robes. From his neck stretched a long, curling white beard, and a tall, conical hat was pulled over his hood. His fingers were long and gnarled, and the veins in his hands pressed against his skin as he grasped a staff which bore a strangely shaped stone at its head.

Standing beside and just slightly behind the old man was the second contestant, a young boy who was fair of hair and skin. He was dressed like any farmer's boy in heavily knitted woolen cloth reinforced by a few pieces of stray leather. He had a large aquiline nose framed by two dark, sparkling eyes, and he smiled constantly.

"Perform," proclaimed Bernlak, "and the winner shall have the promised pouch of gold!"

The wizened old man was the first to begin. He removed the conical hat from his head and, reaching into it, pulled forth by the ears a small white rabbit which he then placed gently on the stage. The small animal scurried about, its beady black eyes darting every which way. The crowd started to laugh.

The old man pulled forth another rabbit and then another. He

placed each one slowly onto the stage. By the eighth rabbit the crowd was no longer laughing. This was no mere carnival trick; it might very well be sorcery. So far, the other contestant had

merely stood, watching his rival. But as the ninth rabbit left the hat, he started making faces at the old man, imitating his stern expression and mimicking his movements. Whenever the old man glanced over at him, he would stand innocently and study the clouds. Once the old man's gaze had left him, he would promptly start up again. This drew wails of laughter from the crowd, offsetting somewhat the unnerving effect of the old man's continual stream of rabbits.

Lord Bernlak intently studied the gnarled old man. He was just starting to give himself away as being a true sorcerer. No trickeries or deceptions could explain the strange powers he exhibited. But that boy could ruin everything. He might even goad the wizard to stop performing.

"Young man!" Bernlak called. "We have yet to see a demonstration of *your* power. I am curious as to the

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esoteric and arcane forces you command."

The crowd laughed.

"Certainly, milord," smiled the boy, performing a low bow. His nonchalance was a spectacle in itself. As the old man continued to draw rabbits, the boy danced to the front of the stage and took a goose from a hapless, brown-haired servant girl. Holding his prize aloft before the entire crowd, he proclaimed, "From this day forth, this goose shall lay golden eggs!"

He handed the goose back to the girl and stood at the front of the stage, his arms hanging at his sides and his face split in a smile, awaiting the verdict of the crowd. There was a great deal of laughter and some good-natured jeers from the depths of the crowd. He turned to Bernlak. "Is this not truly powerful magic, my Lord Bernlak?"

The number of jeers increased and were accented by a few pieces of rotten fruit hurled onto the stage. Through it all the boy just kept on smiling, ducking the occasional article of thrown food. The lord stifled a growl. This young joker was a study in youthful ignorance. Bernlak realized that he would have to end this charade swiftly by drawing the old man out, making him give something away. He turned his gaze to the old man.

Wiggling his fingers, he proclaimed, "Lord Bernlak **will** turn into a frog!"

There was a glint in the old man's eyes as he knelt on the stage. Suddenly there was a great cloud of billowing smoke. The entire crowd drew back as the cloud enveloped the stage. Bernlak and his advisors began to cough. As the smoke slowly dissipated, it was clear that the old man had disappeared. There were a few scattered shouts and a great deal of applause as, a few minutes later, another cloud of smoke appeared, bearing the old man with it. The old man stood there proudly, forcing his bent form into an arrogant posture.

"You call that power?" laughed the boy. "Watch this!"

He pointed his hands toward Bernlak and started wiggling his fingers. Still laughing, he proclaimed, "Tonight, Lord Bernlak will turn into a frog!"

That drew roars of laughter from the crowd, but Bernlak quickly silenced those with a dark glare. "Old man," he spoke, "you have proven yourself worthy of the prize."

The old man started to bow but was suddenly restrained by two pairs of gauntleted hands. He glanced about in terror to find himself in the hands of two of Bernlak's knights. The wizard was dragged from the stage. With a nod, the lord spoke again. "This is the prize I give to all sorcerers. This man will rot in the

dungeon. From this day forward, sorcery is outlawed!"

An awestruck silence answered his proclamation. As the crowd slowly withdrew from the stage, Bernlak turned to his religious advisor who had come forth from the shadows. "Are you happy, Father Priam?" he growled. "I've just ruined the greatest feast day of the year and alienated all my subjects."

"But you caught the sorcerer. That is the important thing."

"Yes," said Bernlak absently, "I caught the sorcerer." He stared across the stage. The young, would-be sorcerer stood there watching him. However, as Bernlak's eyes came to rest upon the youth, he hopped down from the stage and merged with the crowd.

Bernlak scowled as he glanced around the room and slumped down in his massive oaken chair, wondering fervently where everyone had gone on the night of the great feast. "Great feast" was certainly a great misnomer this year. Apart from a motley assortment of two dozen drunks, madmen, and lepers, the hall was empty. Usually he had to employ the services of his guardsmen just to keep the destitutes from trampling each other in their eagerness to get at the free food.

Lifting a piece of venison with the tip of his knife, Bernlak pulled the meat off with his teeth and began chewing absently. Strangely, no traveling minstrels had shown up for the feast, and the court jester could not be located. The only entertainment of the entire evening had been provided by Bernlak's own manservant, who had volunteered his meager bagpipe skills. Bernlak had sent him off to bed after his first ballad.

Bernlak noticed that one of the scullery maids seated near the far end of the table was staring at him and fidgeting nervously. He ignored her. After a short time, however, she rose from her seat and walked slowly in his direction. She was a young girl with long, curly brown hair. Dressed in dusty tan-colored clothes, her hands and face were marked with dirt.

"Yes, what do you want?" scowled Bernlak.

"I wish to buy my freedom, milord," she answered.

"You? Buy freedom from me? With what?"

She hesitated for a long moment and glanced around at everyone in the room. Deciding that the assembled poor were either too far away or too inebriated to make a grab for her treasure, she pulled from her shift a very large piece of golden jewelry crafted into the shape of an egg. Bernlak stood up instantly, toppling his chair over onto the floor behind him.

"And whom did you steal that from?" he growled.

"I didn't steal it, milord," protested the girl.

"Then where did you get it?" pressed Bernlak.

The girl was silent. She looked up at Bernlak with wide, fearful eyes.

"WHERE?!" he demanded, shouting.

"From the goose," she said quickly.

"What goose?" asked Bernlak, frowning.

"The one that the (continued on page 20)

The Sorcerer and the Charlatan

(continued from page 6)

magician enchanted . . ." she replied softly.

"I don't remember him enchanting any . . ." Bernlak stopped. "You mean that boy? The joker?"

"He took the goose from me and said that it would lay golden eggs from now on. And now it does!"

"Take me to it," Bernlak demanded coldly.

The air was cold and the sky was dark in the bailey outside the keep. The geese were penned in a large wooden enclosure with their wings clipped so that they could not fly. Bernlak forced open the shoddy gate and entered the stinking enclosure. His boots sank ankle-deep into the odorous combination of soft mud and goose droppings.

"Which goose?" he demanded, sweeping the area with his cold gaze. The girl pointed a nervous finger.

"That one there in the corner," she said, indicating a goose that looked no different from the two dozen others scattered throughout the pen. Bernlak strode over to the goose and swept it off its nest. A single golden egg, smooth and hard, lay cradled within the depression of the straw.

Bernlak's stomach lurched, and an icy grip clasped his spine and would not let go. A lump rose in his throat. "Guards! Guards!" screamed Bernlak. Two guards from the nearby gate drew their swords as they rushed to Bernlak's side.

"See that goose there?" Bernlak asked them, pointing. "If you see it, ac-

tually witness it, laying a golden egg, come find me and report."

"Aye, sir. I'll watch that darn little goose just dandy." A smirk crept into the guardsman's face. Bernlak seized him by the front of his tabard and forced him up against the fence.

"Are you mocking me?" he growled.

"No, milord," said the guardsman, swallowing hard. "I'll watch the goose, I swear."

Bernlak released him. "Good. You remember the little whelp who was on the stage today? The one who said he was a sorcerer?"

"Yeah, I remember him all right. The one who said he'd make the goose lay . . ." The guard stopped and gulped.

"Did you see where he went?" asked Bernlak.

"No, milord. But I've heard rumors that the paupers are holding some sort of celebration on Beggars' Mound. Maybe he joined them."

"Why are they up on Beggars' Mound on the day of the spring fair rather than in my hall?"

"Well, milord," answered the guard reluctantly, "I gather that they're a bit, well, afraid of you at the moment."

"You!" said Bernlak, pointing to the other guardsman. "Round up all my knights and guardsmen and have them surround Beggars' Mound. I'm going there now! I want that boy found!"

"Are you sure you don't want to wait for . . ." began the guardsman.

"Go!" Bernlak said sharply. He strode toward the stables. "Groom! Saddle my horse!"

Silence answered from the darkness of the stables. The groom, whose duty was to always attend to the horses, was gone.

Bernlak cursed. "Where is that boy?"

He stood in the dark courtyard, frozen with indecision. "I should wait for my men," he said softly to himself. But a voice at the back of his mind urged him to find out the truth.



Bernlak took a deep breath, then started to run across the drawbridge. Away from the torchlit halls of the castle, the night seemed especially dark and the sky endless. He stumbled on a rock and toppled to the muddy ground, scraping his knee. Pulling himself to his feet, he commenced a stumbling run. His breath came in short, shallow gasps. Coming to a halt, he stood gasping for breath, wrapping his arms around his

sickened stomach.

A dark, humanoid form emerged from the shadows, and Bernlak gasped as he recognized the smirking visage before him. It was as if he gazed into a mirror, a darkly twisted and frameless mirror, for the man who stood before him was Bernlak himself.

"Lord Bernlak, I presume," spoke the man in the voice of a boy, a voice which was, unfortunately, very familiar.

"Curse you!" Bernlak screamed, or tried to. But all he could manage was a breathless croak. He tried to reach out and strangle the sorcerer, but his hands would not reach.

Bernlak started to collapse. His eyes fixed on the man's green tunic, then his silken leggings, and finally on his dark boots standing in a muddy puddle. Bernlak's skin suddenly felt very dry and wrinkled, and instantly the pungent odors of the wet marshland all around him seemed overpoweringly strong. Strangely strong also were the calls of the nearby crickets which almost blocked out the sorcerer's final words.

"Someday, I'll have to recant your foolish proclamation," spoke the man, his voice suddenly dipping, "and release that hopeless fraud you jailed as well. But first I'll have to do something about your friend Priam. He's quite mixed up about things."

"After all," the sorcerer continued, in a flawless imitation of Bernlak's own voice, "sorcery never hurt anyone."

Lord Bernlak hopped away to find some water.

"It's strange," Father Priam muttered to himself, "but I still sense the sorcerer, stronger than before."

Lord Bernlak's eyes drifted over the group of peasants crowding the great hall, all eager to plead their cases before the lord. "Well, he is still around," Bernlak replied. "In this very castle even. Surely the dungeons are not too far away for you to sense him?"

"Yes," Father Priam began uncertainly, "but . . ."

Bernlak turned to face him, his eyes wide like two pools of dark water, infinitely deep. Father Priam felt dizzy and lightheaded, as if he were falling into Bernlak's eyes.

"Yes," Father Priam nodded, "that must be it. He's just down in the dungeon. That's why I still sense him. That's all." ★

A dark form emerged from the shadows.