

A Great and Glorious Blood

P.F. WHITE

My friends,

Though mine has been a career practically founded upon the appeasement of greater personages, and their attendant egos, I find myself somewhat at odds when it comes to putting pen to paper in regard to the final, and dare I say most dramatic portion of my time of service. On the one hand, there remains a nagging suspicion that, despite evidence to the contrary, some remnant of the Novian empire or the forces that destroyed them will both imbibe these words and become incensed by them. Were such a thing to happen, I would almost certainly face a sudden and most gruesome end.

On the other, far more reasonable hand, I would say that they are largely by now all dead, or worse. In such circumstances, a historian has very little to fear from such critics. Besides, in all likelihood, my own remaining time is now best measured in hours, and as such the fears of the mortal realm appear less troublesome with each passing minute. Time, it has been said, makes few allies, but thankfully outlives its enemies all the same.

That being the case, I would tell you now that the following words are true. The following history is accurate, to the best of my considerable ability, and that which can be reasonably corroborated has been. Indeed, in my final days I have gone to great lengths to do just that. That the royal palace would, as its last service, both house and entertain a slew of passers-by, innocent bystanders, and grizzled survivors that together represent history itself...well, let us simply say that its former occupants would be none too happy about that.

You will, of course, notice some artistic license here or there as the case may be. Like an insufferable party guest you can, if it is your desire, complain about the smattering of poetic language and perfumed sentiment that has been liberally sprinkled throughout what would otherwise be a droll and dreary account. Like a pedant you can point out the instances in which reality almost certainly fell short of the heroic poses and perfectly timed japes recounted within. Contrariwise, like a friend you can stay, listen, and understand the villains, rascals, and fools contained within the tale.

The choice, as always, is yours.

What I recount here I do so as the final and, dare I say, definitive history of the fall of the corrupt, bloated, and almost certainly evil Novian empire. That which I served so faithfully in life, and that which has consumed me, body and soul, I now give to you its last remnants. Make what you can of it, I implore you.

Yours,

Arno Hieronymus Hirsch

Royal Steward, United Novian Empire

Chapter One: Crow

I have heard it said that if a man had a lever long enough, and a place upon which to stand, he might move the heavens themselves. In my experience it takes two men, and blood. Blood is needed for a great many things in this sad, sad life, leastways when it comes to matters of consequence.

It was the eve of Sept Mass when the two arrived in the northern port of Ulsvik. Summer was fading and the autumn had yet to take its bite, though its appetite grew with each passing day. The usual celebrations for the mass had been observed at the palace, with thunderous fanfare, though little enough actual enthusiasm. The peasants, you see, were starving again. This

put rather a damper on things for many guests as talk of dark tidings muttered about in the hot, still air. Not that his august majesty, prince of both land and sky, ruler over water and sand and the almighty representative for this mortal coil, well, not that *he* cared anything about it.

A great feast had been served up on the north lawn, the commencement set for the twilight after the heat had broken. The lawn itself was as green and soft as ever, itself something like three hundred miles from the distant Ulsvik. One could be forgiven in thinking that made what would happen something of a coincidence, rather than an omen. Many thought so at the time, at least. I am perhaps obligated to say something favorable regarding those who did see the events stemming from the arrival of the two as portentous rather than abstract, but as most of those are now dead, well, I feel it in poor taste to stir up their ghosts over trifles.

An even seven hundred guests had been invited to the event, though somewhat fewer than that number had actually shown their powdered faces when the tally marks were made. Of those present, a great effort had been made to embrace the very height of fashion and opulence. Literal miles of colored silks, petticoats, waistcoats, and other such things had been newly woven by a legion of tailors spread across half the empire, in preparation for what would surely be a social event worthy of record. For hundreds of miles in every direction, the lower-classes had been marched out, surveyed and then shorn by the wig-makers and stylists who worked for their betters. For the Sept Mass, a bald pate or a gray hair simply would not do, and all of the noble-blood knew it with a certainty bordering on scripture.

A petty coin was said to be given out in recompense for a good head of hair. This scant payment was oftentimes more than what its recipient would otherwise make from half a year of honest labor. It was a trifle to those of noble-blood, and a lifesaver to those of common lineage. The famine had already reduced their pickings to scraps, and all knew it was sure to worsen before long. Naturally, bandits, landlords, constables and foremen had all taken their due of what little money had been passed around for such things, and more than one throat had to be cut as a result when the coin began to dry up and the Sept Mass drew near. Such was often the price of things in the Empire, and for those of means it was little more than scandalous gossip to discuss it outright.

For perspective, two years ago a duke of well-known character had had his valet shot for forgetting to shine his shoes before the event. It was

considered excessive at the time, but since then had been forgotten by all save those whose lot in life was to take such things. This year, that same duke had thrown out those shoes. Fashion, like the tides, is always fickle.

The feast of Sept consisted of more than a hundred dishes, prepared in seven waves to signify the seven sins of the Great Prince of Sept. It was often thought that this was an ancient custom, dating back to Sept himself perhaps, when in reality it had been only four emperors ago that the practice had begun, initially as a lark, and since then grown into the behemoth we see it as today. Our own distinguished ruler, Emperor Harold Courage Eulo Garamond Princetti (and may the almighty have mercy upon that soul), had for this particular feast ordered every dish prepared seven times its usual size. It was spoken at the time that Emperor Courage (as he liked to be known) was seeking to curry enough favor with the clergy so that they might retire ancient Prince Sept and instead allow Courage to be the name of the eighth month.

That certainly seems unlikely now, given events.

It was some time before the serving of the first course, while the guests still milled about the great lawn, picking at morsels and speaking to one another with crystal decanters in hand, that the Black Ship first arrived in Ulsvik. I was not there, but it is said that no wind stirred its hempen sails, and that its black hull shone with the glint of steel beneath its layers of tar. Smoke followed it, or so they said. Smoke from the fires of hell itself, claimed some. Not that there was any lack of smoke in those days.

A great and dark haze came following the Black Ship, pushed from the deeper ocean and out to land by means unknown. Naturally, bad omens were cited, as well as diabolical intervention. Whether the mist came from heaven or hell I could not say, but that dark and shimmering mass came rushing in across the waters all the same. It hit like a storm, covering the land in its dirty residue while reaching up to block the sky above. The usual course for these things was for the mist to slow down and fade as it crept across the land, dying a weary death far from its home. It had happened before, and like so many who come to our land and suffer for it: the empire cared not. The difference was that this particular mist did not abide such convention.

The dark mass instead rushed its way through barren fields, across church-yards and town squares, down the northern road, through the countryside and its vast plains of stony grass. It heaved and roiled like a living

thing, sometimes surging or turning but always purposeful and aimed square towards the palace.

That is not to say it didn't have other effects as well.

A roadside tavern, momentarily eclipsed by the shadow, was later the setting of a horrendous massacre. Three village wells, their unlucky hamlets already ravaged by famine and taxes, found their water fouled and disease-ridden after the mass had passed them. A madwoman stumbled into a roadside church claiming to have met the devil, her hair and clothes stinking of gunpowder and unclean machines. From these events came whispers among the people, stirrings and mutterings as both noble and commoner alike sat uneasy. All that would come in time though. On the eve in question, the mass continued on its way as yet another unknown shadow upon a land already all too familiar with such things.

As the sunset faded into night, it came at last upon the Emperor's gathering, and the feast that had been ostensibly given to celebrate the most venerated Sept Mass of long departed but never forgotten Prince Sept (may the almighty have mercy on his soul).

"What's all this then?" said a great lord attending the banquet, Nicolaus, I think.

"Is it rain? At last?" asked a shrill woman whom I believe to be a countess of little intelligence.

"Couldn't be rain," said someone feigning wisdom. "It's the eve of Sept Mass. The almighty would not sully the name of Prince Sept with such an omen."

"Shut the fuck up everyone," said Emperor Courage, seeing opportunity. "This can only be a sign. Steward? Get the fuck over here."

At such a glorious summons the humble steward approached his Emperor, hobbling all the while for he had but one foot. A stout peg of polished brass had mercifully replaced the other, but that story is of little enough consequence now.

"How may I-"

"Shut the fuck up," said the Emperor, offhandedly. "Tell me plain, has the Speaker seen this dark cloud thing yet?"

The Steward could only help but reply in the affirmative, for though it was quickly becoming late in the eve, and the sky growing dark, the obscuring mist was of a particular and strange variety. Its consistency was thick, almost like smoke. It clung to the air and coiled about objects in its way,

leaving an oily or dirty residue on all it caressed. It also stuck in the nose and smelled like something foul, rotted, and distinctly industrial.

"That's the Speaker for the Almighty, right you dumb fuck?" clarified the Emperor. "I couldn't give two shits about what the Speaker for the People has seen or not. One of these days I'm going to have his head, you know. I think I will use it to piss in. Won't that be just grand?"

Again, the Steward could only reply in the affirmative. There was little enough point in disagreeing with his august majesty at the best of times, and besides, Emperor Courage did not care what a mere steward thought anyway.

By this point the entire feast, as beautiful and daring as it had been spread out across the grounds, lit against the night by colored lanterns and footmen standing perfectly still to hold gilded candelabras, well, that feast was now nothing but a shimmering curtain of unquiet air and confused but colorful personages lost within it.

There are those souls who would hold such a thing as wondrous, even invigorating. To them the world, with all its myriads of troubles and pains, never ceases to amaze and impress. These fortunate few may ignore the hung and bloated corpse of a traitor, rotting and sun-bleached from its long exposure, and instead concentrate their delight upon a singular jade green beetle that has come to perch nearby. The Emperor's wife, the lady Marie-Gimm Princetti, was one such soul.

"How wondrous!" she said, clutching her delicate hands to her breast. "It is like something from an old fairy-tale! A sign of favor from the old gods perhaps? Maybe the start of some grand adventure?"

"Shut the fuck up," said the Emperor, trying hard to think. No doubt the wine he was drinking would have impeded a lesser man in the effort, but as a true testament to nobility and strength, he persisted.

"Steward, you lazy fuck," said Emperor Courage, "I want you to go and find the Speaker for the Almighty and I want you to rub his nose in this fucking mist. Tell him that, no doubt, the Almighty has grown bored with Sept and seeks a new champion of the eighth month."

He then drank more wine, the nearly priceless vintage spilling down from his mouth to stain his already well-stained shirt. No doubt a lesser man would have noticed or cared for this dishevelment, but not such a leader as Emperor Courage. He smiled then, in that particular and endearing way that

reminded one of a young boy who had pulled the wings off of a dragonfly and was now delighted to watch the creature struggle in agony as it died.

It was then that the crows came.

One of the footmen fell first, the beasts landing upon his face with talons out and beaks pecking. The man exclaimed as he fell, thrashing and cursing as a mass of black feathers tore into the tender meats of eye and tongue. The Emperor laughed at this too.

"Look at that silly fuck!" he said, pointing. "Wrestling with some stupid birds like a shit! Bully on him!" There was an answering chorus, laughter, but it was half-hearted from a few nervous guests.

The footman began to scream, a horrible pain-filled sound. Other birds landed on tables and chairs. Some of the nobility quaked, torn between obsequious duty and a sudden black terror. Some fled openly, while others sought solace in groups. The word *crow* drifted from conversation to conversation, sometimes hissed and sometimes whispered. A terrible din began to split the still evening air.

I believe it was the Speaker for the Divine that kept his nerve, waddled in close, and really looked over one of the beasts.

"These are sea-birds, not crows," he said, the bird staring back at him. It fluttered its tar black wings and a shower of dirt and oily grease followed. "And I think it's soot, or coal dust, covering their bodies black, driving them mad," said the Speaker, nodding his head knowingly. "And they *must* be cleaned at once."

Or, at least, those are the words attributed to him.

The exact phrase may well have been lost, for at this moment several voices added to the orchestra of screams that the thrashing footmen still performed. A woman came speeding past, a bird tangled impossibly in her tall and fashionable wig. She howled like a demon, batting and scratching at the beast. Another man came to hold two birds in one hand, a proverb made flesh as he attempted to grasp or strangle them with his other. He was torn and bloody, with flecks of gore sprinkling about him as his flesh was torn open further with each swipe. Someone, somewhere, was laughing madly. The musicians, to their credit, continued to play on.

Emperor Courage had executed last year's band after one of their members had briefly ceased performing to drink a glass of water. The Emperor claimed the lull had caused him to miss a step of the fabulous new dance he had invented. His bosom companions had told him repeatedly that

he had looked so divinely radiant that none present could have known, but, in his wisdom, the Emperor had the musicians boiled alive anyway.

“My lord,” said a footman, interrupting the Emperor's laughter. He had a torn cheek and his uniform was stained black and red. “It would be best to retire the party inside. For the safety of the guests.”

“Arrest this stupid fuck!” declared the Emperor to no one in particular, looking around for a guard to point at. “He wants to spoil the fun on account of a few fucking birds.”

However, in what was certainly a great and terrible tragedy, no one present was able to heed those words. The situation, you see, had quickly gotten worse.

Nobility ran screaming across the lawn, tearing at their expensive garments in a frenzy and beating at the sky. Murderous beasts descended upon them in a maddening storm of claws and beaks, the stench of blood and rot and oil overpowering all. The banquet tables, stocked with enough food to feed thousands, were now naught but a heaving mass of gorging bird-flesh. Guards armed with ceremonial halberds struck at the creatures as best they could, while officers of the army shouted orders and attempted to organize some sort of defense. A lantern was overturned in the confusion, and the flames quickly spread across the lawn. The first footman to be struck now lay, unmoving, upon the grass. A trio of birds contentedly dipped their beaks deep into his skull.

Just as the Emperor was seized and dragged back into the safety of the palace, far to the north, in the port of Ulsvik, two men stepped off their Black Ship.

The mists parted for them.

The sky held its breath.