

The Ramshackle Headsman

by Stefan van Dusen

It was a dreary dawn even by the standards of Littlekeg. A morose sky stormed and wept like a petulant god, and the nor'easter wind cut like a slaver's whip, blowing the rain under the hoods of the men-at-arms as if to spite them. Somewhere from within the courtyard of the squat and square keep a dog was whimpering.

Vincent Vosper was deep in a bottle again — a beggar's red that tasted like pig-swill but could be bought just as cheaply. 'Vosper of the Vineyards', the townsfolk named him, 'with a nose near as red as the wine he drinks'.

Let them march on three campaigns with Red Rory of Dalving Hills, let them see that I've seen, and mock my drinking then, Vincent brooded. The memories of the battles had come back like an arrow last night, so Vincent Vosper would flush them out. The headaches and the retching hurt less than the memories.

It was almost true, about the nose. Vincent's nose was particularly red (and overlarge, as women told him), his hazel eyes nearly covered by his hedges of eyebrows. His short, salt-and-pepper hair was covered by a woolen hood, his brown gambeson stained from wine and ale, and his roughspun trousers had seen better days.

The only handsome thing that Vincent Vosper owned was his sword — a castle-forged bastard sword of a silvery colour, good black leather on the hilt and a prayer carved into the blade. Such a handsome weapon was made for men of higher birth than him, but dead knights didn't make protests, and the army of Red Rory of Dalving Hills had slain many knights.

Vosper had few skills, but using that blade was one of them. He had known three professions in his life: beggar, soldier, and currently, headsman. In fact, he was meant to apply his latest trade in three hours. A brigand had been apprehended on the outskirts of Littlekeg, and brigands' heads were made for keep spikes.

That the man had his reasons, Vincent did not doubt. With the state of the King's laws, honest men had to resort to thieving and waylaying to feed the sons needed for the King's wars.

The whole damn realm will be beheaded or beggared by the end of it all, it seemed to Vincent. Such thoughts were dangerous to voice aloud, he knew. King Daran von Wegberg was not a monarch who suffered criticism with piety. Under the new laws, it was even treasonous to “imagine the death of His Majesty.” Vincent was unsure as to how His Majesty intended to enforce that decree, but if any ruler could manage it, it was Daran von Wegberg.

Vosper was wakened from his musings by the horse in whose stall he was slumped. It was a tawny mare, led by that pox-scarred boy that smelled of cheese. Back from the farrier, with a drunken headsman in the stall, the horse and boy alike made noises of surprise.

"Bloody suns!" the boy cursed. "You make an ugly sight, Vincent. By the gods, you reek as well. If Sir Utho saw you like this -- "

"Sir Utho has not left his quarters in three months," Vosper butted in. "I doubt he'll make an appearance today. Cannot the horse wait? I've a headache like a war-drum."

The boy sneered. "Drink less and the pounding will subside. And no, the horse shan't wait. You'll be off to your duties and me to mine."

Vincent grunted in contempt. With a stiff back he rose and brushed the hay from his buttocks, taking his sword as he went.

There was some truth to what Reeks-of-Cheese had said. Vincent Vosper had come out of the wars penniless, without home or kin, and no prospects on the horizon. What he had was a fine sword he knew how to use, recurring nightmares and a fearsome need for wine. Most would have turned him away from their towns (no one needed another mouth to feed), and most did. But at the far-flung group of hovels and a less than stoic keep named Littlekeg, an aging debtor of a knight named Sir Utho Bradley had welcomed in Vincent, given him clothing and food and bed, however poor they may be, and gave him a headsman's letter of mark.

"Littlekeg has been without a decent headsman for nigh on seven years, and our noose-rope has rotted from the damp," Sir Utho had said. *"Skilled workers will always find bread and ale at my hearth."*

It had been an act of great charity, as Littlekeg had seen but two executions in the past ten

years. Vincent Vosper should have been doing what little he could for Utho Bradley in his sickness, not passing out in his stables.

In a moment of rare clarity, Vincent mused, *I should bathe. I ought to pass for a real headsman in the first execution of my career.*

The washerwoman protested when Vincent insisted that he be given the hot water that was normally allotted to the confessor's bedsheets, but yielded in the end. Vincent rubbed himself red with a rag, using soap, such was his desire for cleanliness. He brushed what knots and lice from his hair he could, scrubbing the vomit from his boots and dampening the stains on his gambeson. Vosper of the Vineyards even rubbed his teeth with mint leaves, though it did naught to remove the yellow and brown. Next he took a whetstone to his sword, making it shine like silver dinnerware.

I might well be a baron, Vincent thought with pride.

As he redressed himself, a page found him. It was time. Vincent hooded himself and left the keep.

The town of Littlekeg was a small one, with rammed earth buildings, thatched roofs, and muddy streets. Weeds and tough grasses grew every here and there, and the stench was even worse than the stables. The Bradley family liked to claim that the name of Littlekeg came from the long-since abandoned brewery, but everyone else swore it came from the size and smell of the settlement.

The execution platform was in need of repairs, and in short order the brigand standing atop it would need a grave. A priest was already giving the boy last rites, and despite the heinous weather a small crowd had gathered. This was like to be the most excitement they would have in a fortnight.

As Vincent Vosper joined the sombre gathering atop the platform the young brigand turned to him, his eyes falling on the sword.

"You," he said. "You... you bastard! How did you come by that sword?!"

Vincent had never heard a headsman answer such questions of the condemned, so he remained silent.

The brigand, who couldn't have been older than twenty, pressed on. "That belonged to Sir Garrick Livingston! I was his squire! My master died in the Yellow Ford Massacre, a hundred leagues from here! Where the bloody suns did you get the sword of Sir Garrick Livingston?!"

Vosper froze in his tracks. He searched the boy's eyes. Eyes he had dreamt of last night, only in his dream the squire of his foe had been dressed in chainmail and a green tabard, not a brigand's rags. After a pause he felt obliged to speak. "I might ask how a squire of the Livingston family came to be stealing purses and sheep outside Littlekeg. For that matter, how he survived the dagger I put in his ribs."

Realization donned on the boy's face. "It was you? You slew Garrick the Gallant?" He seemed more distressed now than when he was being given last rites. "He had so much to give this realm, and you make a profession of taking."

"If memory serves Sir Garrick took his fair share as well. Taxes and servants, and enemy heads," Vincent Vosper countered. "He didn't seem so gallant with his innards spilling from behind his breastplate."

At that the brigand lunged, and had to be restrained by the two men-at-arms on the platform.

The priest whispered his Vosper's ear, "This was to be a quick beheading, not a theatrical show before the town. Do not prolong any man's suffering, headsman."

Vincent Vosper nodded. "Hold him down."

The men-at-arms forced the squire of his foe onto the chopping block.

You'll die this time, boy. You'll haunt my dreams no longer.

Vincent Vosper, Headsman of Littlekeg, raised a fine, stolen sword high above his head, and brought it crashing down.