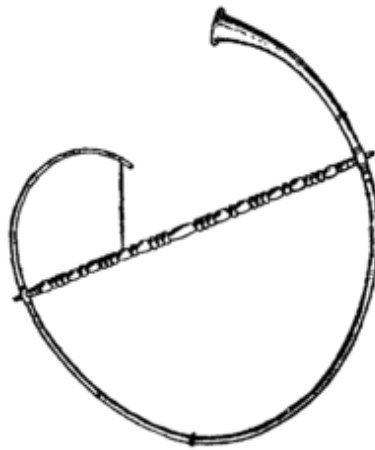


GUILT

By
Stephen Llewelyn



He awoke, eyes fluttering open to a half-light. Face down in mud, there was no pain but no memory either. Raising his head slightly, he saw scratches in the sodden ground next to his hand. As he pushed himself up into a sitting position, the marks became letters – ‘BUCCINATOR’.

The young man could make nothing of that, deciding to file it away for consideration later.

As he stood, a building became visible in the wide valley below, just a few minutes walk away. He set off, without looking back.

Rain again, but he hardly noticed, soaked as he was already. Nearing the building – the hostelry, yes, he remembered now – a realisation struck him. He had been there before.

Flashes and images slewed past the numbness in his mind, dreamlike memories of warm days and a long journey. It was cold here, so cold, and he had travelled so far. Even with movement, there was no warmth to be found.

The distance closed, the building rearing out of the rain.

The front door hung from its hinges. Stepping inside cautiously, for there was little light as darkness closed without, he waited for his eyes to adjust. His vision did not improve, no matter how he blinked or squinted. He wondered at that. Straining, he could just make out smashed pots, plates, mugs, stools, benches, tables and stop...

Bodies – many bodies, broken, torn bloody and worse.

The man stumbled against a post, unbalanced by shock. What had happened here? The destruction drifted out of focus as a veil settled over his mind’s eye; a bright and cheerful filter smothering the now, in warm glow. With this soothing light, further memories came flooding in – singing, laughter, women.

They had travelled all the way to the northern edge of the world, he and his... friends? Or were they comrades? Both, perhaps? Once here – and stuck for the next twenty-five years – making the best of it was all they could realistically do. Getting blind drunk seemed as good a beginning as any. His evening had ended in vomit. He had worn most of it. The recollection brought a smile to his face, and he checked his tunic. Yes, the stains were still there, across his chest. This memory was clearly recent. Vaguely, he recalled being helped to a bunk for what remained of the night.

The smile faded quickly as he made his way through a charnel house to the room he believed to be his; or rather the room in which he had been dumped to passed out. His breath caught upon entering. On the bunk was a buccina, a long, curved war horn. Stooping to pick the up instrument, he felt its weight in his hands and knew it was his. Instinctively knew it. Lifting it to his lips, he blew. The single, baleful note resonated, drawing memories that howled through his mind like furies.

The first recollection was panic and shouting, men running and banging doors, helping hands dragging him indelicately to his feet and shoving him from the room. “Move, or it’ll be a flogging!” A rough male voice bellowed. Then his squad was route marching up to the crags where he had recently awakened, just minutes ago, to answer a call for help.

The soldier stepped out once more into the relentless rain. Lost in memories, he retraced his earlier steps. Ahead, black clouds burdened the dusk, smothering the broken teeth of the ridge in deepening grey.

Was it really only this morning his company had scaled this outcrop in arms? He neared the ridge, his mind conjuring the shades of companions, all jostling for position around him. Also recreated in minute detail, were the armed men bearing down on them from east and west, each mounted and riding bear-backed, screaming hate.

They were strange creatures, those men – feral, painted and vicious. Worse still, they were many. Outnumbered, with the only escape through the enemy or over a cliff, the soldier was ill-equipped and sick. How had he survived?

That was the morning. The evening saw a solitary soldier toiling back up to the crags, slipping and cursing, gradually to be enveloped by the night. He had not noticed the bodies earlier, as he strode away through the heavy rain, disoriented and numb. Now he staggered. They were everywhere.

Panic tore through him like a gale. "If I can just get help," the young man spluttered frantically, over and over, to no one who could hear. "By all the gods, I just need help!"

Reaching for his buccina, he stared along the arc of its length, feeling the many little dents with his fingers; dents he had allowed to happen over the long journey from home and paid for with a beating, more than once. A brief moment of clarity bloomed. The scratches in the mud, where he was startled awake earlier, swam before his eyes. "I'm the buccinator... The bearer of the war horn," he breathed the words, a frigid wind tearing them away, instantly. To the instrument he said, "I didn't have you earlier, when you could have made a difference. I left you behind in my drunkenness. Even the possibility of your call drawing help might have given those savages second thoughts – may have saved my friends' lives."

He took a deep breath and wound the horn again and again, for several minutes. Finally spent, he sat on a rock, looking away from the destruction of so many young lives.

The rolling moorland was completely deserted. Unsure what could be achieved by continuing the call, he steeled himself to walk among the bodies of his friends – yes, friends. Indeed, in this wild, inhospitable land of wolves and dark gods, how could he have ever questioned their status? Some of the injuries were terrible; unnecessary and born more of malice than of war. Presently, he came full circle, back to the word scratched in the mud with the body adjacent. The icy drizzle obscured the letters now, making some completely unrecognisable. He turned the corpse's head to face him and stared. Collapsing to his knees, he beheld the dead eyes, somehow fathomless yet lacking the depth of the living. Sitting back on his haunches, he howled at the rupturing skies like an animal in torment. Screaming until his voice cracked, he fell to the ground at last, rocking uncontrollably, sobs almost suffocating.

He knew the face like it was his own, because it had been, once – he was looking at his own corpse. Trapped in the darkest weave of nightmare, he prayed earnestly, hoping against hope that all might still somehow be righted. Lost and indescribably alone, he was paralysed until movement in the distance caught the young man's eye. Stiffly regaining his feet, he wiped away tears to see more clearly.

Miraculously, from the south-west a line of torches flickered brightly, moving like a fiery serpent through what remained of the twilight. With it, came the steady thrum of horses' hooves at slow gallop, coming and going on the wind but growing steadily louder.

He quickly bent to pick up the buccina, prepared his breathing in the way he had been trained, and blew the horn several times. A dozen or so men split from the group for the hostelry, whilst the lion's share of the force continued, heading straight for him; perhaps eighty men and horse in all.

The men slowed and dismounted, approaching the bodies on foot. The buccinator noted similarities in dress between himself and the newcomers; just little differences setting them apart as their own. Though they had obviously heard the horn, they neither saw nor heard *him*. Looking down at the buccina in his hands, he wondered if it, or any of it, was real.

Exhausted beyond endurance, he succumbed to lie in the muck – literally *by* himself. In this half state, his mind fixed upon a lost love; the girl from whom he had been pressed when the soldiers came. Her face was the merest flicker in the darkness closing around his mind. Shutting his eyes tightly, to hold her memory safe, he slipped away.

Warmth, pleasant on the young man's skin. His eyes snapped open to a day bright and cloudless, the sun low in the sky. The Ides of October.

Rising from the grass, he walked to the top of the hill to sit alone on its craggy spine. There he remained, hour after hour, seeing not a living human soul all afternoon or evening. He closed his eyes.

When he awoke, it was to a storm. Torrential rains and gale force winds laid the grasses flat to the southern side of the slope. He crouched and shivered for many freezing hours before oblivion came for him once again.

Each awakening was to a new reality, but never an inch from his situation – the place he had fallen that day, scratching a reminder of what he should have been into the hillside for his soul to bear.

Rain, shine, snow, storm – upon his crag, the solitary soldier endured...

Days blurred until he awoke to something new. His eyes opened to see men, many men. They were everywhere. Mules and ponies laboured, carrying stone to workers making the most of fair weather during the last days of an unusually extended building season. Almost all of them looked like soldiers, so the uniforms were familiar, but not entirely. They were building what seemed to be a huge footing, suitable for a wall fully ten feet wide and already stretching many hundreds of yards away in both directions.

As the sun began to set, he wound his buccina, his one method of communication with the world around him, and laughed, a deep belly laugh, for the first time in what seemed and felt like decades. His mirth, born from relief that he was alone no longer, mixed with the startled reactions of the workers, buoyed him.

The builders left site in a hurry that evening.

When he awoke next, the men were gone and a huge wall crowned the top of his crag. Fifteen feet high and lime-washed white, it was crenulated along the top of its north face and appeared to run far into the distance now. The vast structure was dazzling in the otherworldly light of a westering sun, and to the west, he could just make out an encampment where men and animals laboured still.

“Why am I still here?” he asked of the wind. “All come and go, yet I remain. Why?”

It was the Ides of October. It was *always* the Ides of October.

He cried softly, alone again.

The wall and towers rose and decayed, were renewed and decayed once more. Eventually, they began to disappear, like the stones were being robbed by the people of the land. During his lonely sentinel, he had lost count of the times this dark crag greeted his waking eyes, yet the landscape changed slowly. Buildings coming and vanishing with the movement of man; roads decaying into muck and ridges, moving here or there as they were made, remade and made over by successive generations.

He watched it all, but no longer cried in loneliness; his tears all shed long ago.

One... He closed his eyes.

Ancient lids fluttered open, squinting into the bright sunshine of another pastoral scape of greens and greys under blue – almost unchanged, the Ides of October. However, the lost soldier’s post seemed less lonely than it once had, and he thanked the gods for it. For many dozens of October Ides now, he had seen people come and go in great numbers, all in outlandish barbarian garb. Indeed, there seemed more each year. Even foul weather failed to dissuade or dampen their enjoyment of what must surely have been a wretched journey. It was puzzling, but so glad was he to see them that he simply did not care.

This day, he heard a scrambling from the cliff face and approached to look over the edge. To his surprise, two men in brightly reflective coats and strangely shaped helmets were attempting to scale the cliffs. After a double take, he decided that, no, one of them was a woman. He could hardly believe his eyes. They made use of strange, magical ropes of

many colours, looped through metal hoops and weirdly crafted accoutrements, the like of which he had never seen before.

Over the centuries, a relatively easy path had formed to either side of the crags and he often watched people stroll lengthwise along the ruined wall. However, this latest scene baffled him. Why should they take such a route when an obvious safe path was so near? Why would a woman be dressed as a man and climbing rocks at all, for that matter?

Then, with the inevitability of a falling stone – to his mind at least – one of the fixtures gave way. The man plummeted, twenty feet or more, collecting the woman on his way down. They both screamed, hitting the ground hard at the bottom.

Moans and small, breathless cries reached the top of the cliffs. They had survived – for the moment, at least.

His humanity tormented him; he wished only to reach out to those poor souls, but was powerless to help.

Looking around for inspiration, his eye finally alighted on the buccina. Still propped against a rock – his rock – she was his only companion through these many years. He ran to her, raising the instrument to his lips. She made a braying, parping noise as he blew, which may even have been comical had it not so often been the harbinger of war. All across the known world, down centuries of carnage, through battles and fields beyond counting, her voice had sung death or salvation for someone.

For almost two millennia, that long-gone morning of hangover and vomit still anguished the buccinator. Fretting to the point of near insanity, he had forever wondered whether the buccina, had he born her that day, might have averted the tragedy that was to shape his eternity.

He blew once more, throwing all the pain of two thousand days over two thousand years of sorrow behind the effort. Long forgotten tears streamed down his cheeks as he wound the horn over and over, but this was a new day, a day where the buccina's cry brought help; his call made and answered. Before he knew it, several people appeared on the scene; obviously bewildered by the sound of the buccina, but they were there, and that was all that mattered.

A man atop the crags shouted what must have been words of encouragement and comfort down to the injured people, words the buccinator could not understand. A nearby woman spoke more quietly at a small pink box covered with glittery specs that twinkled like tiny stars in the low sun.

Some tens of minutes later, an enormous flying demon approached from the east to fill the sky overhead. Terrified by what his buccina had summoned, the soldier flattened himself against the wall; Rome's last remnant in the North and his only refuge. The beast hovered overhead like a dragonfly, grown bloated and grotesque. Its bellow and flap chopped the air, all-encompassing as it rebounded from every stone. He could not understand – why was no one else afraid? Many failed even to look up.

The monstrosity opened its maw, but instead of teeth and tongue, he saw yet more men. Disgorged on hugely long ropes, they were lowered all the way down to the bottom of the cliff.

The injured people were drawn up swiftly. Completely defenceless, unable to even cry out, they were swallowed by the monster. The huge beast turned away, the wind beating down on the buccinator as he clung to his wall, leaving an unnatural silence in its wake.

The crowd of watchers divided and divided further until only one remained.

Alone again...

Had he helped those people or damned them? No. He would not go there. Before grief could claim him once more, he took the buccina in his hands one last time and blew – this time her cry was a cry for victory. Help *had* come, the imperilled *had* been saved – he had to believe, even if he failed to comprehend it. However long he had endured or must endure

still, he knew that he had done all he could. At long last, his call had made a difference. The buccinator could lay down his guilt. How he wished he could peel back those centuries of despair to tell his companions, his friends, that he was sorry; he was so sorry that he had failed them on this very hill of blood and screams, all those ages ago.

He looked down from his crag across the wide valley, as he had so many times. These moors, often so bleak, often so brutal, glowed radiant as the sun's late burn drew fresh colours from earth and sky. He had never seen it so beautiful.

His gaze followed the southern slope downwards.

Shock. His jaw dropped as he suddenly saw faces he recognised; laughing, cheering faces that called to him.

Half running, half tumbling down the hill in disbelief, he virtually crashed into the waiting men. Like passing from a room into another room, all was back slapping and banter as it had been so long ago. He wondered how this could be when, slowly, the soldiers parted to reveal his father and mother. Covering the last few steps in long leaps, he clasped them in his arms. Through tears he squinted over their shoulders and then he saw her.

Out of the low sun she walked, luxuriant black hair swaying in the breeze; the girl who wasted away in grief after the army tore away her young man and had gone ahead to wait for him.

He pulled the horn from around his shoulders, kissed his mother's cheek and ran to her with the buccina, his bi-millennial companion, still gripped tightly in his left hand. He reached out and held them both with all his strength. For centuries uncounted, those forbidding moors had been separated from the fields of Elysium by the merest hair's breadth of his guilt.

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