

# THE EVIL WITHIN

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Since the publication of *BattleAxe*, Book One of the Aurealis Award-winning *The Axis Trilogy* in 1995, Sara Douglass has become Australia's premier bestselling fantasy author.

She writes: "I was born in Penola, South Australia, raised in Adelaide by Methodist Ladies, condemned by apathy to the respectable profession of nursing, and escaped via the varied kindnesses of the Department of History at the University of Adelaide into the preferable world of writing."

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As Sara Douglass writes very little fiction at shorter lengths, we are very pleased to include this shivery Gothic story about medieval gargoyles, mendicants ... and the myriad manifestations of evil.

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This world, this wasteland, lies heavy with evil. Here writhe serpents, here sting pests, here rot grub worms, here raven wolves, here sin issues in glistening rivulets from the mouths of the dead. Here evil roams on the breath of wind and the dance of dust motes, here evil shrouds itself in the shadows of earth clods and the cavities of human bodies. Here live men and women, the sinful fruit of Adam's weak loins and Eve's vile womb. For her sin, they are condemned to this wasteland, to their toil in the dust, to their scratchings at the boil of plague and the bite of pest. Here, amid all this wretchedness, lies the seed of their salvation and the terror of their damnation: battle the evil without and conquer the sin within; succumb to the evil without, and suffer the worms of Hell for all eternity.

Here, this world, this wasteland.

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It was an age of gloom and despondency. The population of Europe lay decimated by the creeping pestilence, forests encroached upon untended fields, wolves ranged into villages, and the darkness crept down from the mountain slopes even at the crest of the noonday sun.

Night was an abomination, the haunt of demons and devils, incubi and sharp-toothed fairies, and black ravening dogs that had no place on God's earth. Screeches and howls wailed through the most tightly shuttered window, and the most carefully tended infant was vulnerable to forces unnameable.

Hell incarnate roamed abroad, and no pathway was safe, no barred home a haven.

Especially not from the evil within.

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His hands stiff with cold, Friar Arnaud Courtete wrapped his cloak a little more tightly about him and slowly raised his eyes into the wind. Before him a narrow trail wound upwards about the grey mountainside before disappearing into the uncertainty of low rain clouds.

Should he continue? The day was half gone already, and the village of Gebetz an afternoon's walk away. But Arques was already a day behind him, and Courtete had no wish to spend another night in the open.

Besides, he could not turn back. Bishop Fournier would not be pleased.

"Holy Virgin, guide my steps," Courtete mumbled, one hand fumbling at the cross about his neck, and then hefted his staff and stepped forward.

Although Fournier had no jurisdiction over Courtete's mendicant order, he was a powerful and influential bishop, and when he had asked Courtete to visit Gebetz, the friar had little option of refusal.

*But Gebetz!*

Courtete had been there several times in the past, but that had been years ago, and he'd been a young man, both his body and spirit strong. Now his age made his footsteps falter, and a lifetime of priestly asceticism battling frail human need had left his spirit vulnerable.

Courtete hoped he had the faith to endure whatever he might find in Gebetz.

“The priest there is young,” Fournier had told Courtete. “Inexperienced and idealistic. A fatal combination in these malignant days. I have heard Gebetz is troubled.”

“And if it is ‘troubled’?” Courtete had asked the bishop.

“Then send down the mountain to me for Guillaume Maury. I will send him. And his pack.”

Gebetz might only be a small and poor village, but it was strategically positioned, straddling the high trails of the northern Pyrenees. If Gebetz succumbed to godless forces, then the trails would be closed, no man would be able to drive his sheep into the rich summer pastures, nor any pilgrim wend his way to Santiago. The mountain passes would be lost to Christendom forever more.

It was the only reason Fournier was willing to even entertain the idea of letting Maury and his pack move so far from the cathedral.

Courtete shuddered, and hoped that Gebetz wasn't so besieged that it needed Maury and his creatures. Courtete wasn't sure what he feared more — evil in whatever form it took, or Maury and his fiendish spawn.

But was there any difference?

“Holy Virgin, Mother of God,” he whispered, “light my way, guide my feet, cradle my soul, save me, save me, save me ...”

As Courtete climbed further into the mountains, strange shapes danced in and out of the shadows of his wake. Some took the form of fish with the jointed legs of locusts, others were formed like creatures of the earth, but with perverted, elongated or scaled forms and the slavering jaws of nightmares. Still more creatures were vaguely man-like, save for odd horns, or extra limbs, or the half-lumped flesh of the graveyard.

All faded into the mist whenever Courtete spun about, his eyes wild.

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The dusk had gathered and Courtete's limbs were shaking with exhaustion

and fear by the time he rounded the final bend into Gebetz. He stopped, his breath tight in his chest, and looked down from the trail to where the village nestled in the hollow formed by the convergence of three mountains.

It was still, silent.

Had darkness won, then?

Courtete gripped his staff tighter and fought the urge to run.

*Run where? Night was falling, and he was in the mountains!*

Above him a bell pealed, and Courtete cried out. He spun around, frantically looking about him, his staff falling from nerveless hands.

An icy wind whistled between the mountains, lifting his robe and cloak so that the coarse material wrapped itself about his head, obscuring his vision and stifling his breathing.

Courtete's hands scrabbled desperately until he freed his face, his eyes darting about to spot the demon that had attacked him.

Nothing. No-one.

Gebet lay still and silent.

Even the chimneys were smokeless.

Courtete's hand groped for his cross, and he steadied his breathing.

The bell pealed again, and this time Courtete heard a foreboding mumble follow it.

*"Where are you?"* he screamed, his hand now so tightly gripped about his cross its edges cut into his flesh. *"Come forth and face me!"*

Again the peal, much closer now, and a rumble of voice sounded with it.

"Who are you?" Courtete whispered this time, sure that demons slid down the mountain sides towards him, hidden by the gloom and mist.

A light flared some fifteen paces above him, and Courtete's eyes jerked towards it.

The bell pealed again, frantic itself now, as if whoever — whatever — held it had succumbed to the jerking madness, and a rabble of voices rose in the mist.

“Lord God, Redeemer!”

“Bloodied Jesus!”

“Holy Virgin —”

“Save us! Save us! Save us!”

Courtete slowly let his breath out in relief. It was the villagers who were above him, and no doubt the young priest Bernard Planissole who wielded the bell.

“Holy Redeemer —”

“Crucified God —”

“Drive evil from our homes —”

“And from our fields —”

“And from the paths of the shepherds!”

The bell tolled again, far closer, and Courtete jumped yet again. Holy Mother, he thought, they are engaged in a Perambulation Against Evil!

Was it *this* bad?

Without warning a black figure jumped down from the mist onto the road before Courtete. It was a young, wild-eyed man, black-robed in the service of Christ. In one hand he carried a bell, in the other a spluttering, smoking torch.

He thrust both in Courtete’s face, the bell shrieking and bellowing.

“Get you gone!” the priest screamed. “In the name of God, and of the Son ... and ... and ...”

“And by the Virgin, Planissole!” Courtete said, recovering his own clerical composure and the authority of his age in the presence of the

young priest's panic. "Can you not see that / walk in Christ's footsteps, too?"

And he held forth the small cross from his neck.

Planissole abruptly stopped yelling, although he still tolled the bell. He stared at Courtete, wet black hair plastered across his forehead, green eyes startling in a white face, the flesh of his cheeks trembling, a sodden robe clinging to a thin body.

"I am Friar Arnaud Courtete," Courtete said, extending his hand. "Here to aid you and strengthen God's word in this sorrowful place."

Other figures now stepped out of the undergrowth and mist to stand behind Planissole. Without exception they were stark-eyed and gaunt-cheeked, their faces contorted with the trials of sleepless nights, their clothes clinging damply to bodies shaking with fear, the pale skin of their faces and hands smudged with grime and fatigue, their mouths still moving with invocation and prayer, although no sound issued forth.

*Save us, save us, save us!*

"Planissole," Courtete said as evenly as he could manage, "will you tell me what is wrong?"

Planissole stared, then dropped the bell, put his hands to his face, and began to keen, a thin wail of fear that echoed about the mountains.

The bell rolled over the edge of the trail and bounced down the side of the hill, jangling and clamouring, until it landed in a small gutter that ran beside a row of houses.

There it lay half submerged in grey-streaked sewage, its tongue finally silenced.

Planissole led Courtete through the village, the villagers trailing behind them in a muttering, jittery crowd. Planissole's eyes never ceased to move right and left as they walked, and Courtete found his heart thudding violently every time the breeze billowed the mist about them. Yet he maintained an outward composure, for surely Planissole and his flock were close to a fateful panic. Finally they drew close to the great stone church that stood at the far end of the village. There was nothing beyond the church, save a trail that led yet further into the uncertainty of the mist and mountains.

Planissole saw Courtete study the trail. "No-one has come down that trail for the past week," he said. "And yet there must still be shepherds and pilgrims trapped in the mountains. Dead. Or worse."

Courtete turned from the trail to Father Planissole, but thought it wisest to say nothing, and after a moment the priest led him inside the church.

It was a large, substantial and well-appointed church, catering for the transient population of shepherds and pilgrims as well as villagers. A beautifully carved rood screen separated altar from nave, and carvings of the saints, apostles and of the vices and virtues adorned the sixteen pillars supporting the roof. The windows were small, but beautifully blocked with stained glass, and the walls and roof had been plastered and then painted with stories of the bible.

The smell of roasting pig was entirely out of character.

Planissole's thin face assumed an expression of fretful guilt as he saw Courtete stare at the pig spitted above a fire towards the rear of the nave.

"Forgive our insult to our Lord and the Saints," Planissole said, "but for the past eight days and nights the entire population of the village has lived in this church. It is better protected against the foes of the night. Of necessity we must cook in here as well."

Courtete graced the man with a smile, and waved a vague absolution for the sacrilege.

The villagers had crowded in behind the two priests, and Planissole and Courtete stepped to one side to give them room. Some sank down to rest on piles of bedding heaped amid scattered baskets behind the pillars, several women moved to the fire, setting prepared pots of food among the coals, and the rest grouped about the two priests.

"It is too dangerous to live beyond these sanctified walls?" Courtete asked.

Planissole nodded. "Will you sit?" He waved to the warmth of the fire and they settled down, the villagers spread in a respectful circle about them. "Let me tell you our story."

Even as he took breath to speak, grating noises came from the roof, and an unearthly wailing from beyond the walls.

“Night has fallen,” said a woman some paces away, and she hurriedly crossed herself.

“*Evil* has fallen,” Planissole said softly, and then he began his tale.

\* \* \* \*

It was far worse than Courtete had feared. The corruption had struck four weeks previously, growing progressively stronger with each night and feeding off the fear and helplessness of the villagers.

The village dogs had been the first to sense the demonic onslaught.

“They fled one night,” Planissole said to Courtete. The priest had calmed now the church doors were safely bolted, and Courtete realised that he spoke very well for a simple parish priest. Too well, perhaps. Almost bespeaking an education beyond that of most mountain clerics.

“After the Sabbath sunset the dogs began howling,” Planissole continued, not realising Courtete’s interest in him, “then they ran into the streets, growling and screaming and speaking in strange —”

“*Speaking?*” Courtete said.

“Speaking,” Planissole repeated softly. “They spoke in a language I have never heard before, but which I now believe to be the tongue of Lucifer’s minions. After the passage of the first part of the night they massed and fled into the night... into the mountains.”

“Up the trail that extends beyond this church?” Courtete asked, and Planissole nodded.

“From that night on we have been visited by terror. Great winds that have lifted the roofs of houses and torn the babes from their mother’s arms. Food has rotted within an hour of being cooked, and worms have wriggled from bread freshly baked and broken. Great...” Planissole took a deep breath, and forced himself to continue. “Two days ago great cracks appeared in the fields, and from them periodically has issued the sulphurous stench of Hell.”

“Mother Mary of Jesus!” Courtete cried, “say it is not so!”



“The rents in the earth have deepened, and now they snake close to the village. Out of them crawl abominations.”

“Father,” one of the village women said, “our priest relates only the truth, and only a part of what we have had to endure. Look at us!” She swept an arm about the assembled gathering. “We fear to venture out at night — ‘twould be madness to even think of it! — and during the day we walk the streets and field with our elbows tucked tight against our bodies lest we bump the ghosts who throng about!”

A middle-aged man, his clothes hanging about his thin frame all patched and worn, his face weather-beaten, his eyes dull, now stepped forth and spoke. “And yet what this village endures is paradise compared to the inferno that burns within the mountain passes.”

“And you are?” Courtete asked.

“My name is Jaques. I am a shepherd. I wander the mountain trails with my sheep, searching for sweet pasture and a dry place to lay down at night. But ... forgive me, Father ... I cannot speak of it.”

“Jaques, and several other shepherds struggled out of the mountains nine nights ago,” Planissole said. “They were wild with fear. They said that a great dark shape that shrieked and wailed ate their sheep, and while it was so occupied, they fled. They’d run for three days and two nights, not stopping, not daring to.”

“And no-one else has come down from the mountains?” Courtete said, thinking that the dogs had fled *into* the mountains. Was that where the evil was concentrated? *What had they gone to meet?*

“Only one man,” Planissole said, and indicated a curly black-haired young man wrapped in a dark cloak sitting against one of the pillars. “A pilgrim. Winding his way home from Saint James of Santiago de Compostella. He arrived five nights ago. Maybe the Saint protected him through the mountains, for none have followed him out.”

Courtete stared at the man, who nodded politely. He was reasonably well-dressed, but not ostentatiously. A staff and pilgrim’s scrip lay on the floor next to him, and Courtete noticed that there were several badges on the shoulders of the man’s cloak. He’d been travelling a while to have collected so many pilgrim badges, and Courtete thought he was probably the son of a merchant or minor nobleman, on pilgrimage to atone for some

youthful escapade.

Courtete looked about at the fear-worn faces of the villagers, and listened to the howlings and rappings outside.

“Wait here,” he said, laying a hand on Planissole’s shoulder, and he rose and walked with heavy heart to a small window in the back wall of the nave that normally framed the deformed faces of lepers too contagious to be allowed inside for mass.

Now the glass revealed something more horrible even than the contagion of leprosy.

A creature, half donkey, half man, was careering in and out of the thickening mist. Part of one malformed limb had been eaten away.

As frightful as that creature was, to one side something else caught Courtete’s attention, and he pressed his face closer to the glass.

A black imp with thin shoulders, grotesque pot belly, and overly-large hands and feet squatted on the ground, chewing on the stolen flesh.

It looked up from its meal and saw Courtete staring. Its mouth opened in a silent laugh, its shoulders and belly wobbling, and it held out a long-ringed hand in invitation.

*Come join me, priest. We could have fun, you and I.*

And then it dropped its hand to its swollen genitals and rubbed energetically, its face glazing over in lust.

Courtete tried to drag his eyes away, but found it impossible.

The imp’s movements grew more vigorous, as did the whispered words of invitation in Courtete’s mind, and it was only when the imp succumbed so entirely to its lust that its eyes rolled up and it collapsed in a quivering heap on the ground that Courtete could break free from the window.

The friar took a moment to steady his mind and his own physical trembling before he rejoined Planissole and the villagers.

“Bishop Fournier sent me here to help you,” Courtete whispered, then cleared his throat and managed to speak more strongly. “He will spare no

effort to contain this evil, and then to drive it back.”

“I *have* tried everything!” Planissole said. “Every prayer that has ever been —”

“Hush, my son,” Courtete said. “There is yet one more thing we can do —”

“No!” Planissole cried, and the villagers shifted and mumbled. “No!”

“My son, I am sorry, but I must. I have *seen* what... what scurries outside. At first light I will send a man with a letter for Bishop Fournier. He will send Maury ... and his pack.”

“No,” Planissole said yet again, but his voice was very quiet now and his eyes resigned. “Is there no other way?”

“Evil is rampant,” Courtete said, “and it must be driven back by the strongest of means.”

\* \* \* \*

The church was spacious, and there was bedding room for all the villagers, but bedding itself was at a premium, and Courtete shared Planissole’s blankets behind the altar. Although both blankets and Planissole were warm, and Courtete’s limbs and eyes weary from the journey to Gebetz, the scrapings on the roof and the scratchings at the windows and doors kept the friar awake with black memories of the imp’s energetic hand.

Neither could Planissole sleep. “I have heard of Maury,” he whispered, feeling Courtete fidget under the blanket.

“You have not seen him, or them?”

“No. I was educated much farther north, and took my orders at the great cathedral of Notre Dame.”

“Ah, you are of the Parisian Planissole family, then?” No wonder the priest spoke so well! Courtete wondered what one of the aristocratic Planissoles was doing in this God-forsaken parish.

“Yes. I...”

Courtete’s mouth thinned. A sin, then. No doubt the anonymity of the

night would prompt Planissole to confess to whatever had condemned him to Gebetz, and Courtete did not know that he was in a mood to listen to a sinner's babbling.

"I became affectionate towards another novice, Father."

Courtete took a horrified breath, for the lust of one man for another was among the most appalling of sins. How was it that one man could lay the hands of lust upon another man? And force himself into another man's body? Unasked, repulsive images filled Courtete's mind, and he drew himself as far away from Planissole's body as he could. "No doubt the bishop found you rutting beneath the kitchen stairs."

"May God forgive my lusting," Planissole whispered.

Courtete wished he had chosen to spend the dark hours on his knees before the altar, and not behind it, twisted in a blanket with Planissole. "In forty-five temptation-ridden years / have befouled neither my body nor my vows of chastity, Planissole," he said. "God will exact penance as he chooses, you may be sure of that."

Courtete hesitated, then spoke again, his hatred of sodomites forcing the words from his mouth.

"Considering your own sin, Planissole, I find it hard to believe you regard Maury with such abhorrence."

Planissole rolled away and stood up. "I have loved my fellow man," he said quietly, "not coupled with one of the hound-bitches of Hell."

And he walked away into the darkness.

The next day Courtete sent the fittest of the village men down the mountain with a message for Bishop Fournier.

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It took five days for Maury to arrive. In those five days the situation at Gebetz slid from the desperate to the abysmal. No-one now dared leave the precincts of sanctified ground; the entire population of the village, as well as those transients who had sought shelter with them, was confined to the church, churchyard and adjoining graveyard. Beyond these boundaries blackened and blistered imps scurried, even during daylight hours. The legions of the dead blocked the streets, choking the gutters with their

rotting effusions. The tumults of Hell wailed up through the great rents in the earth which now reached almost to the church itself, and at night immense gouts of fire speared into the night.

Evil reigned.

It would take the infernal to combat this depth of wickedness, thought Courtete as he stood in the churchyard looking down into the village. Prayers to God were useless in the face of this onslaught.

Planissole joined Courtete silently, and the friar glanced at him. Had Planissole's sin attracted this evil? But surely not even the most lascivious of sodomies could attract *this* much horror ... could it?

Courtete returned his gaze to the streets, watching as a horned and turtle-backed demon seized a skeletal wraith and forced it to the ground for a momentary and brutal rape. Both creatures scuttled into the shadows as soon as it was done, but the vision had spread a stain across Courtete's mind and soul, and he wondered if even Maury could remove it.

Or if, perchance, he would add to it.

How *could* a man couple with a creature as foul as that imp had been?

There was a commotion in the street, and Courtete's gaze sharpened. The horned demon, so recently the aggressor, was now jumping from shadow to shadow, screaming as if God himself was after him.

"Oh Lord save us!" Planissole cried, and grabbed Courtete's sleeve. "Look!"

A creature the size of a large calf was bounding down the street. It was horned and bearded, and great yellow fangs hung from its gaping jaws. It had the paws of a dog, the tail of a lion, and the ears of a donkey, but its twisted and grotesque naked body was horrifyingly human-like.

It was female, for thin breasts swung almost to the ground.

With a shriek the she-thing pounced on the demon, pinning it to the ground, and tearing its head off with a single snap of her jaws.

Then she raised her head and stared at the two priests. She half

snarled, half laughed, and bounded back into the village, looking to feed once again.

Another appeared momentarily in the doorway of the village tavern, a male-thing this time, his snake-like head buried in the belly of a yellow-scaled sprite, his talons scrabbling at the wooden doorposts, his body — as horribly human-like as the last — writhing in an agony of satisfaction.

The sprite whimpered, and dissolved, and its killer tipped back his head and howled.

Abruptly Planissole turned to one side, doubled over, and vomited. He coughed, and then straightened, wiping his mouth with the back of one hand.

“Maury’s get,” he said tonelessly.

“Aye,” Courtete said. “The gargoyles.”

As his gargoyles chased demons in and out of the houses and snapped at the heads of imps peering over the edges of chasms, Maury himself scampered down the street towards the church, apparently unconcerned about the hellish battles surrounding him. He was a twisted, wizened old man who leaned heavily on a staff, but he had merry brown eyes and a mouth almost permanently gaping in a scraggle-toothed grin.

Maury found much in life to amuse him.

He stopped before the two priests, and peered at them. “Fournier said you had a plague of evil,” he said. “But I had not thought you would lay such a good table for my pets.”

“Is it done?” Planissole asked.

Maury howled with laughter. “Done? *Done?* Good Father? It will take a week at least to ‘do’ this village. But what have *you* done to attract such wretchedness? Eh? Depravity this dark does not congregate for no reason.”

Again Courtete’s mind filled with the memory of the imp tugging gleefully at its genitals, and to his horror the friar realised that it roused in him more than just disgust. Appalled, Courtete lost his equilibrium.

“And of depravity you would know much, wouldn’t you, Maury?” he said.

Dismayed and frightened by Courtete’s attack — had not the friar invited Maury himself? — Planissole laid a restraining hand on Courtete’s arm, but the friar paid it no heed. “For have you not an *intimate* acquaintance with depravity?”

Maury’s grin faded, and he snapped his fingers. From the window of the nearest house a gargoyle leaped to the ground and scurried over, fawning at his feet. Maury scratched the man-thing’s head, but did not take his eyes from Courtete, and he understood many things.

“They are my beloveds, priest, and they will save you and yours! Do not think to condemn what you yourself —”

“Your sons and daughters do you proud,” Planissole interrupted, stumbling over his words in his haste to soothe, “and for their service we may forgive the sin of their mother.”

Maury’s grin slowly stretched out across his face again as he looked at Planissole. “The sin of their mother, priest? She was no sin to me. She kept me warm at night, and she did not overburden me with useless chatter. And,” he switched his eyes back to Courtete, “she were more willing than any *woman*, more accommodating than any *wife*, and the litters she has dropped have proved more useful to true believers of God than any *priest!*”

“Besides,” Maury’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial level, holding Courtete’s eyes, “*someone* had to couple with her, and I volunteered to save good priests the embarrassment!”

He ran an over-plump and moist tongue slowly around his lips, as if remembering his nights of abandon, and one hand scratched absently at his crotch.

Courtete’s face flamed.

Maury chuckled. “Keep the villagers within the church, priests. I can keep my pets from disturbing them there.”

“But —” Courtete began.

“They’ll hunt down *any* evil, friar. Including the evil that these good

souls harbour within them. Can you claim that any here are free of sin, free of evil? Are they not all sons of Adam and daughters of Eve?"

Maury paused, then whispered, "Are *you* not a son of Eve, friar?"

Courtete dropped his eyes and did not reply.

"And while you huddle within the church, good priests, think about what attracted this evil to Gebetz. See how these chasms reach for the church. Something here is as a beacon to it. Find it. Destroy it."

And with that he was gone.

Back to his misbegotten children.

For two days and nights Maury led them in an ecstatic hunt through the village and its enveloping clouds of sulphurous gases, hunting out the demons, imps and sprites that continually spilled out from the rents in the earth. During that time Planissole kept his flock within the church, only allowing people out four by four to use the hastily dug communal privy pit under the alder by the graveyard. During the day the villagers huddled as close to the altar as they could get, speaking in whispers, their round, fearful eyes drifting to the bolted doors every so often.

At night they were silent, and slept in protective heaps that made Courtete shake his head and mutter prayers over them lest individuals' lusts overcame their need for salvation.

Who knew what wanton communion took place among those twisted bodies?

The five or six shepherds sat by themselves several paces to the west of the altar, and the lone pilgrim, the bravest of all of them, spent his days wandering the church, studying the fine carvings and inscriptions that littered the walls.

Courtete found himself curious about the man, and yet in that curiosity, somewhat unnerved by the man's lack of perceptible fear.

At dusk of the third day after Maury's arrival, Courtete wandered over to the pilgrim as he stood by a narrow window in the eastern transept. The window was of rose glass held in lead, but even so Courtete could see the occasional dark shapes cavort outside — whether demons, imps or gargoyles, or even possibly Maury, Courtete did not know.



“Are you not afraid?” he asked the pilgrim.

The pilgrim slowly turned his eyes towards Courtete.

They were the most vivid blue Courtete had ever seen in a man.

“Afraid? In God’s house? No, good friar. We are all safe within these walls.”

There was a faint thump and then a scrabbling on the roof, but both men ignored it.

“Your faith is strong and lively,” Courtete said, and watched the man smile cynically. “May I ask your name, and your origin?”

“My name is Malak. I come from the east, and I travel west.”

Courtete opened his mouth to ask for more specifics, but was halted by the expression in Malak’s eyes. The man had no desire to be further interrogated, and Courtete wondered what he had to hide.

And what an unusual name! It jarred at something in Courtete’s mind, but he could not place it.

“Have you seen the gargoyles before?” he asked. There were several cathedral packs in the east and north of France, and some in the German princedoms and northern Italian states, but if Malak had come from yet further east, this might be the first time he’d encountered them.

“Not this close,” Malak said, and he tightened his cloak about him.

Courtete raised his eyebrows. He was afraid, then! “They are unsettling creatures,” he prompted.

“I find it strange,” Malak said softly, “that men of God fight evil with creatures that are birthed of evil and abomination.”

The rooftop scrabbling came again, but more distant now.

“Good sometimes fails to —”

“Which Pope was it,” Malak said, now facing Courtete again, “that decided that a mating between a man and a hound-bitch of Hell would

produce a creature capable of fighting back the vilest of infamies, the darkest of Lucifer's creatures?"

"I don't know who —"

"And what kind of man *willingly* consents to plant his seed in a creature so hideous I find it difficult to imagine he could even contemplate the act of generation, let alone perform it."

There was a horribly uncomfortable quiet as each man stared at the other, each knowing the other's mind was consumed by visions of the loathsome coupling.

"Some men have a taste for such things," Courtete said and, despite himself, glanced out the rose-coloured glass as if he might again spot the imp engaged in its infernal fondling.

Malak laughed softly, as if he could read Courtete's innermost fears. "And where," he said, so softly Courtete had to lean closer to hear him, "does the Church find the hound-bitches of Hell for men to couple with in the first instance?"

Courtete was silent a long time before he finally, reluctantly, replied. "In some places on God's earth the borderlands between this world and the Hellish regions under Lucifer's sway are narrow indeed. Sometimes it is possible to capture one of the Prince of Darkness' hounds."

"Aye," Malak said, "in some places the borders between this world and Hell *are* almost indefinable, indeed." He paused. "*Have* you taken a good look down those chasms outside, my friend? Do you *want* to? Might you see something down there you might *desire*?"

And with that he was gone.

Appalled that Malak could so accuse him, Courtete would have gone after the pilgrim, but just as he took his first step a horrible wailing rose from outside.

"Oh! Oh! Oh, my pretty! Oh my lovely! What do you there! Come down! Come down!"

\* \* \* \*

Courtete opened the door, Planissole at his shoulder, to see Maury standing several yards away, staring at the roof. The pack of gargoyles sat yet further distant, under the low hanging eaves of a nearby house.

They were ignoring the imps that peeked at them from a nearby window, looking instead between Maury and the church roof.

“Something is wrong,” Courtete murmured, and eased out the door. Planissole checked that the villagers were safely grouped about the altar, then followed, closing the door behind him.

The two priests moved to Maury, then followed his gaze upwards.

There was a gargoyle precariously balanced on the spine of the steep roof, the remains of a long-snouted imp under its claws.

It didn't look happy.

It whined, and twisted about slightly, scrabbling with its feet as it almost overbalanced. From where it sat, there was at least a twenty-pace drop.

Maury wailed.

“What is the gargoyle doing up there?” Courtete asked.

Maury twisted his hands to and fro. “She chased the imp up there ... up *that!*”

He pointed to a rough ladder that leaned against the wall of the nave, near where it angled out into the eastern transept.

“*Who put that there?*” he shouted, and turned to Planissole, his face twisting in fury.

Planissole backed away a step. “Several weeks ago one of the villagers was engaged in relaying the slate of the roof. When the evil gathered, and everyone fled inside the church, he must have left the ladder there. But I don't understand why —”

“They *loathe* heights!” Maury said, now looking back to his gargoyle. She was still now, tense. “What if she falls?”

Planissole looked at Courtete, but the friar's face was working with

what was probably disgust as he stared at the she-creature on the roof, and so the young priest gathered his courage and addressed the gargoyle keeper. “Maury, surely you can tempt her down? Speak to her soft words of reassurance? If she climbed the ladder in the first place, then —”

“What if she falls?” Maury wailed again. “How could I bear to lose her?”

And without further ado he hurried over to the ladder and began to climb it himself. “My lovely,” he called, his voice soothing. “My beautiful ... come here to me ... come ... yes, my pet, yes ... come ...”

Maury reached the top of the ladder and held out his hands to the gargoyle. “Come, my pretty, come!”

The gargoyle, reassured by the closeness of her father, slowly inched her way down the roof.

“Maury!” Planissole called. “Be careful! That ladder is —”

The gargoyle’s paws slipped in the slimy residual muck of the imp. She screamed, twisted, fell on her flank, and began to slide down the roof.

Straight towards Maury.

He leaned yet further forward, thinking to break her fall with his arms, but the gargoyle was large, as heavy as a mastiff, and when she crashed into him the ladder tipped back and both Maury and the gargoyle sailed into space.

The ladder teetered, then slapped back to rest against the high guttering.

Courtete and Planissole stared, appalled. It seemed to them that the twisted forms of the gargoyle and Maury hung in space for several heartbeats, then both crashed the fifteen paces to the ground.

They landed in thick mud. There was a momentary stillness, then movement as the gargoyle struggled to her feet and limped away a few feet.

Planissole took one step forward, but Courtete grabbed his arm and hauled him back.

“Maury’s dead!” he hissed. “See how still his form lies?”

“But —”

“We’ve got to get back inside. But move slowly, Planissole. Slowly.”

“But we’ve got to see if —”

“By the Holy Virgin, Planissole! Maury’s *dead!* Don’t you understand? He was the *only* one who could control those gargoyles!”

Planissole’s eyes slid towards the pack of gargoyles by the house. They were shifting anxiously, their eyes moving between the body of Maury and the two priests.

One of them lifted its head towards the priests, and snarled.

Planissole took a step back, then one more, then turned and ran. Courtete cursed, and bolted after him. Behind him he heard the pack of gargoyles raise their voices in a shrieking clamour.

“*Lord save me!*” he screamed and, now only a breath behind Planissole, ducked inside the church, slamming the door behind him.

Planissole threw down the heavy bolt. “We’re safe!”

“We’re *trapped!*” Courtete said. “What is to prevent those gargoyles attacking us now?”

“But we are not the evil.”

Suddenly there was a scream outside, and something heavy thundered against the door.

Planissole leaped back, his hand fumbling at his cross.

A murmuring rose among the villagers, still grouped about the altar, then one cried out as a shadow flashed across one of the windows.

There was a howling outside, and numerous claws scratching at the door.

“Why us,” one of the village women cried, “when the village still

swarms with fiends?”

Malak, the pilgrim, strode forth from the group. His face was taut with anger, and his eyes shone very, very bright.

He stopped just before the two priests. “Do something!” he said. “You are responsible for all our safety! Was it not enough to be surrounded by the minions of Hell? Why now are we attacked by those meant to save us?”

“You would do better,” Courtete said, “to go back to the villagers and employ whatever spiritual insight you have acquired as a pilgrim to lead them in a prayer of salvation. Planissole and I will join you shortly.”

Malak stared at him, then wheeled about and rejoined the villagers. He shot Courtete and Planissole a dark look, then laid his hand on the shoulder of a man and lowered his head in prayer.

The growlings and scratchings outside grew worse, more frantic. A dreadful musty odour penetrated the door; it reminded Courtete of the smell of desiccated corpses in cathedral tombs.

“Why hunt *us*?” Planissole cried.

Courtete stepped close to Planissole, and spoke quietly. “Listen to me. We are all sinners, all born of Eve. We all harbour evil within. Even you, Planissole, have freely confessed to ... sordidness.”

Planissole flinched, but spoke with angry voice. “Do you say there is no hope? Should we open the door and let the gargoyles feed at will?”

“*Listen* to me! Maury said that something acted as a beacon to attract this evil to Gebetz. *What*, Planissole? What is there in this village that would attract this much evil?”

Planissole was silent.

“If we can find this evil, and turn the gargoyles’ minds to it, then we may yet be saved. *What*, Planissole? *What*?”

The young man shook his head. “What village sin could attract this much retribution? There has been no great sin committed here. No murders. No invocations to the Prince of Darkness. Nothing but the daily sins of ordinary men and women.”

“No incest? How can you know what goes on in the crowded beds of the village houses? I know peasants.” Courtete’s voice thickened with disgust. “Entire families share the one precious bed. Fathers huddle with daughters, mothers with sons. Flesh is weak, Planissole, and temptation strong. Who knows what happens when a man stretches out his hand in the night and encounters the breast of his daughter, a woman the manhood of her son. No doubt —”

“Your mind is consumed with the temptations of the flesh, is it not, Courtete?” Planissole said flatly. “You accuse all around you of impurity, yet of what do *you* dream at night? The saints? Or of the humping blankets of peasant beds? Do you yearn to lift the corners of those blankets to watch, Courtete? *Do you?*”

Planissole turned away momentarily, taking a deep breath to calm his anger. What is the greater sin, he thought. The sin of the flesh committed yet confessed, or the sins of the mind not admitted? “My parishioners sin no more than those in Arques, Courtete, no more than those in Toulouse or Orleans or Paris itself. I have no reason to put forward for this all-consuming evil that has attacked *us*.”

“What? Are you sure that *you* have not sullied the innocence of a shepherd boy, Planissole? Are you *certain* you have not engaged in an ‘affection’ with one of those young dark-eyed boys? Or were the sheep more compliant, perhaps?”

Planissole grabbed the front of Courtete’s robe. “I do not think it *me* lusting for the sheep, Brother Courtete!”

Courtete blanched, and trembled. “Lucifer himself must be guiding our tongues, Planissole. Fighting between ourselves will not aid us, nor the villagers. My son, I suggest we lead these poor souls in prayer, and hope that the Lord hears our entreaties.”

Planissole jerked his head in assent — and some residual disgust — and let go Courtete’s robe. “You speak sense, Brother. ‘Tis the Lord God only who can forgive sin.”

He walked over to the villagers, and gathered them for prayer. Courtete joined him, and together they led the assembly in a prayer for salvation even as the gargoyles renewed their attack on the church doors.

“From those that reareth wars, from those that maketh tempests, from those that maketh debate between neighbours and manslaughter therewith, from those that stoketh fires, and those that bloweth down houses, steeples and trees —”

*“Free and defend us, O Lord!”*

“From the stratagems and snares of the devil —”

*“Free and defend us, O Lord!”*

“From the onslaught of malignant fiends —”

*“Free and defend us, O Lord!”*

“From ourselves —”

*“Free and defend us, O Lord!”*

As the response faded, Courtete opened his mouth to begin a litany against hopelessness, when Malak laughed loudly.

His eyes were still angry.

“Do you think to drive back such as assaults this church with such pitiful words, priest?”

“It is all we have, my son.”

Malak’s mouth twisted. “It is the evil within that makes the gargoyles attack, Courtete. Perhaps *your* evil. How many of these women have you lusted after, Courtete? And how many of the boys, Planissole?”

He turned and addressed the villagers. “Perhaps we should just throw the *priests* to the gargoyles! Prayer will not save us! Well, what say you? Shall we throw those tainted creatures outside the tainted minds of these priests?”

“Be still, Malak!” Courtete roared, and at the name he spoke Planissole went white with shock. “Can you claim to be free of sin yourself?”

But Malak did not answer him. He was staring at Planissole, and his



teeth bared in a cold smile.

“You know my name, do you not, priest?”

Planissole slowly sunk to his knees, his face now rigid with dread. He opened his mouth, but no sound came forth.

Courtete stared at Malak, then at Planissole. “My friend,” he said gently, “what is it?”

“Malak,” Planissole whispered harshly, “is an ancient word for angel.”

He threw himself to the stone flagging, prostrating himself before the angel.

“Save us! Save us!”

Malak the angel stepped back and laughed. “Nay, not I!”

Courtete fought down the cold terror within — had the angel seen the visions of the imp that filled his mind? — and addressed the angel as calmly as he could. “What do you here? Why do your immortal feet tread this earth?”

“I come bearing word from God, to all sinners on earth.”

“And that word is ...?”

“The word is being acted out about you, Courtete. Sin inundates this wasteland, and grows worse each day. The evil within, within you,” the angel pointed at Courtete, “and within you,” his finger stabbed towards Planissole still face down on the flagging, “and within all of you,” the accusing finger swept over the huddled, frightened villagers, “has grown so great that Lucifer’s legions have surged out of Hell to greet it! God’s wrath increases with each imp that scampers into the light of day, and He has grown of the mind that He should abandon you to your fate.”

“No!” Courtete cried, and also fell to his knees. “Say it is not so! What must we do? How can we save ourselves?”

The angel stepped forward and grabbed Courtete’s hair, twisting his face up. “Are you prepared to throw yourself to the gargoyles, Courtete? Will you sacrifice yourself for these villagers as Christ sacrificed himself for mankind? And you, Planissole? Will you also let the gargoyles tear you

apart as Christ endured the spear and nails for your sakes?”

Both Courtete and Planissole were silent. Then, “If it will save these good folk, then, yes, I will so offer myself,” Planissole said, rising to his knees.

His voice was almost joyous.

After a momentary hesitation, Courtete also spoke. “And I.”

“Then spend the night in prayer,” the angel said, “in the hope that God will accept your souls. At dawn I will open those doors and you will step forth to assuage the anger of the gargoyles.”

\* \* \* \*

The interior of the church was shadowed, the only light cast by the flickering candles on the altar.

No-one slept.

The villagers and shepherds were now at the rear of the nave, seated stiff and frightened against the back wall, as far from the angel as they could get.

He, for his part, sat cross-legged in the very centre of the nave, staring towards where the folded rood screen revealed the altar.

There knelt the two priests, their backs to the angel, deep in prayer.

Or so it seemed.

“Something is not as it should be,” Courtete murmured.

“Be joyful, brother. We will save the villagers with our deaths.”

“No, no. It is not a lack of acceptance that makes me so uneasy. There is *something* not right.”

Planissole decided not to reply, and the silence deepened between them.

Eventually Courtete whispered again. “If he is God’s messenger, then why does he linger *here*?”

Planissole was silent.

“Should the angel not be out, spreading God’s message? Is that not his mission?”

Planissole began murmuring the Pater Noster, but Courtete knew he was listening.

“Planissole, the angel is as afraid of those gargoyles as we are. He has stayed within this church because he is terrified of them!”

Planissole continued murmuring, but the words of the prayer were broken now. Faltering.

“No angel should fear a gargoyle,” Courtete continued. “Not unless he ... unless he ...”

Planissole breathed in sharply. “Unless he is a *fallen* angel!”

“Angels can sin as much — greater! — than man! Is not Lucifer himself a fallen angel? And does not Lucifer gather to him all angels who have fallen from grace?”

“He is the beacon which has attracted the evil to Gebetz! Our plight worsened significantly after he arrived.” Planissole paused. “Perhaps ... perhaps Lucifer has thought to open Hell about us here so that the angel may join him. Thus the rents in the earth, the sulphurous odours!”

“Aye. Perhaps the angel thinks to escape to the nearest chasm while the gargoyles are occupied with us.”

Planissole grinned in the dark. “I have an idea. One to rid us of angel, gargoyles *and* evil.”

Outside the gargoyles paced back and forth, occasionally scratching at the wooden doors, occasionally howling and screaming their frustration.

They wanted the evil within.

\* \* \* \*

At dawn the angel rose and walked over to the two priests still bowed in prayer. He laid a hand each on their shoulders.

“It is time.”

The two men rose stiffly to their feet. Planissole looked ashen and sweaty, his eyes frightened.

“I ... I...” he stumbled. “My bowels ... I am sorry.”

And he rushed towards some stairs that wound up to a store room built among the roof beams. Beneath the staircase was a small closet with a pot set up for the effluent of mortals; few now wished to venture out to the open privy under the alder.

The angel hissed in frustration.

“He is young,” Courtete said, “and scared. It is to be expected.”

The angel looked at Courtete. The man’s face was calm and relaxed.

“You should, perhaps, exhibit more fear yourself, friar. Too soon you will be torn —” The angel stopped, then cried out in anger. “See! He thinks to escape!”

Instead of stepping inside the small closet, Planissole had leaped onto the stairs and was now climbing rapidly.

“Fool!” Courtete cried enthusiastically: “Accept your fate!”

And he sprinted towards the stairs.

The angel screamed in fury, the unearthly sound echoing about the church, and then he, too, ran for the stairs that now both priests were climbing as fast as they could.

The stairs twisted in a tight, narrow circular fashion, and when the angel reached their base all he could see was the climbing feet of Courtete high above.

Planissole was nowhere to be seen.

The angel’s hands tightened into talons as he grabbed hold of the railings, and he bounded up the stairs three at a time, howling as he climbed.

His face twisted and contorted into that of a bearded demon, his back humped into grotesque lumps, and his clothes burst from him.

Courtete turned as he heard the angel step onto the platform behind him, and almost screamed.

All semblance of the man had gone. The angel had now assumed the form of a multi-armed, pot-bellied, toad-skinned creature.

It snarled, flecks of yellow foam splattering about.

Courtete swallowed, and flung his hand towards the open window. "He's climbed out onto the roof!"

The angel-demon scurried over to the window and looked out, twisting to view the slope of the roof above. "Where?" it growled.

"He ... he..." Courtete found it almost impossible to force the words out. "He has climbed over the spine of the roof. Perhaps he hopes to escape down the ladder on the other side."

The angel-demon hissed, then, its claws scrabbling furiously for purchase, lifted itself out of the window and onto the roof.

Courtete heard its feet thudding as it climbed.

"*Lord save us!*" he screamed, and slammed the shutters of the window shut.

In an instant Planissole leaped out of his hiding place behind a set of hessian-wrapped bells and helped his fellow priest bolt the window closed.

"Are you sure there is no other way he can get down from the roof?" Courtete gasped.

"No! No... *listen!*"

Something horrible was jabbering on the roof above them. It whispered and shrieked and scampered, and the priests could hear the promise of Hell in its voice.

"Quick!" Courtete said. "We have no time to waste!"

And as fast as they had climbed the stairs, they hurried down.

Once back to the church floor they did not waste a glance at the villagers still huddled in a silent mass, but ran to the door. Courtete put his ear to the wood and listened intently.

“Nothing,” he whispered. “Silence.”

Then something screamed high above them, and one of the village women wailed.

Courtete and Planissole shared a look, then unbolted the door, hurriedly crossed themselves, and stepped outside.

The space before the church was empty.

There were no gargoyles to be seen.

As one, both men turned towards the ladder.

It was swarming with gargoyles. Already the first was clambering onto the roof, another at its tail. As the men watched, the final gargoyle on the ground climbed onto the first rungs of the ladder.

“Sweet Jesu,” Planissole whispered. “Climb! Climb!”

Above, the angel-demon shrieked and gibbered. The men could hear it scrambling about agilely enough, but now four or five gargoyles were creeping their careful way towards it. Not long, and they would have it trapped.

Courtete made as if to move forward, but Planissole held him back with a cautionary hand. “Wait... wait... *now!*”

They darted forward as the final gargoyle made its way onto the roof, seized the ladder in shaking hands, and pulled it backwards until it toppled to the ground.

“Done!” Courtete yelled. “*Done!*”

The gargoyles took no notice, but the angel-demon — now clinging to the cross that rose from the centre of the roof above the nave — began to rain curses down upon them.

“May demons eviscerate you for this! May imps violate your mothers!

May you be cursed to the pits of Hell for... *ah!*”

A gargoyle bit down on one of its arms, and then another sank its teeth deep into its belly, and another its neck.

The angel-demon screamed and tried to tear itself free, but the gargoyles tore deeper.

An arm came free, black blood spraying across the roof.

What was left of the angel-demon tried to curl into a ball to protect its belly — but it was too late, green-grey entrails already spilled about its knees, and the creature slipped in its own mess and was instantly covered by the pack of gargoyles.

The priests watched silently as the gargoyles tore the evil thing apart.

And then ... silence.

Nothing. The gargoyles crouched to the slate, as if suddenly realising where they were. The wind dropped. No howls. No shrieks.

Planissole looked back into the village.

Houses still leaned helter skelter into great cracks in the earth, but now no sulphurous fumes rose skyward. No blackened imps' heads poked above the edges of the fissures.

Lucifer had closed the gates of Hell, his disciple destroyed.

“Praise the Lord the evil was strong enough to tempt those gargoyles to the roof,” Courtete said.

One of the creatures glanced down ... and growled.

“Praise God the evil *above* was the greater temptation,” Planissole said.

\* \* \* \*

Six months later Courtete returned to the village of Gebetz. The sky was lightly clouded, but sun fell on the village, and at the top of the mountain track Courtete stopped and leaned on his staff, astonished.

It seemed that this place did not know the meaning of evil, let alone be a site that had nurtured such horror only a half year earlier. Carefully tended fields spread up the mountains, and where the slope grew too steep for cropping, there flourished sweet pastures.

Within the village itself the houses had been repaired; all stood straight and even. The streets were paved, and flowers grew in window boxes.

People wandered the streets, gossiping or bargaining at the produce stalls, their eyes free of anything save laughter and good cheer.

Courtete looked to the church, and his wonder grew.

It lay swathed in sunshine amid emerald lawns. The doors were flung wide open so that God's goodness and mercy might spill down upon the village.

Crouched about the roof were the immobile shapes of the gargoyles.

Courtete slowly descended into the village, passing a few words here and there with villagers who remembered him.

When he approached the church, Planissole stepped forth and hurried down the slope to meet him.

"My friend! It is good to see you again!" he cried.

Then Planissole's face grew serious. "What did Bishop Fournier say? Was he angry?"

"Nay, Planissole. Do not fret. Fournier was naturally somewhat upset at the loss of the pack, but they were useless without Maury to control them. Tell me, do they give you any trouble?"

"None. At night we sometimes hear them move about, but mostly they crouch at the extremities of the roof, as they are now. In fact, no-one has seen or heard them move for several weeks."

"And the evil?"

"None. No evil dares approach Gebetz now the gargoyles stand sentinel upon the church roof. Even the mountain trails are clear."



Courtete raised his eyes to the roof again, thinking about what he would say to Fournier when he returned to Arques. What a God-given answer to dealing with the problem of evil *and* the perennial problem of coping with the fractious packs of gargoyles! Fournier had ordered another pack from the gargoyle breeding groves of the Black Forest — but why not simply station them on the roof of the cathedral and send their keeper packing?

After all, what God-fearing man could trust someone who *enjoyed* fornicating with a hound-bitch from Hell? Courtete shuddered, and tried unsuccessfully to force the visions of unnatural intercourse from his mind.

“One day,” he said quietly to Planissole, “every church roof in Christendom shall bristle with such as these.”

“And that,” the younger priest replied, “should leave us to devour our sheep in complete freedom, should it not, Courtete?”

\* \* \* \*

## AFTERWORD

I’ve always been intrigued by the idea of writing a story based on the world as medieval people perceived, and literally *saw*, it. To them evil was a very real and tangible entity. Demons roamed forests and the high mountain passes, and angels walked among them as messengers (or worse) of God. Thus “The Evil Within”. It explores the medieval concept of evil, the flawed and sorry souls the Church enlisted in its continual battle against the minions of Hell, and the intriguing origins of some of the more bizarre examples of medieval church decoration. The location and some of the characters of “The Evil Within” were inspired by the good fourteenth-century heretics of the village of Montailou, and especially by that lovable, horrible, ambitious charmer, Pierre Clergue — the one person in history I would have loved to have met.

— Sara Douglass