

PIPING IN THE YULE TIDE

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Somewhere out there in the universe, there once was a small, feudal society, approaching the verge of modernization. Luckily for our allegorical purposes, the members of this society spoke twentieth century English and celebrated Christmas. We begin our tale just outside the entrance of the palace belonging to King Membleton and Queen Sophie.

"Howdy there Sidney!"

Sidney looked up and saw Cindy, one of the royal servants, smiling at him from a high window.

"Yo ho ho!" Sidney yelled back.

"Seems like we've got a bit of a water shortage in the palace today, huh?" Cindy shouted.

"Yeah, what's going on up there, anyway?" Sidney asked. "I can't believe that both the Queen and King are bathing on the same day!" He picked up one of the water jugs from the cart he was pushing. "I'm sure that if I lift any more of these bottles, it's going to permanently pretzel up my spine."

"Oh, don't be feeling so sorry for yourself, Sid boy," Cindy retorted. "Remember that I have to carry around these ugly urns too. What's happening is the beginning of the big clean-up session to prepare for the Yule Feast next month."

"Oh, of course," Sidney muttered to himself, "straining our backs once again for our majesties' vanity." He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I'll see you inside," he yelled to Cindy.

Sidney had to make a few careful maneuvers to drive his large cart between the pillars of the castle. On his way to the kitchen, he noticed the King's conference room door was closed. The muffled voices inside belonged to King Membleton and his three sons: Jimbo, Mickey, and Rollo.

"You might as well forget about it, Rollo," Jimbo laughed. "Who cares about the poor little serfs anyway. Our nobility is never gonna go for your goofball plan."

"I'm afraid Jimbo's right," the King agreed. "You know; it takes a lot of taxes to keep this castle in regal condition. My informants tell me that some of my vassals are already talking about a coup-de-ta." His Majesty nervously rubbed one of his rings. "There's just no way I could ask them to supply labor and materials to build plumbing for their serfs. Looking at this from a purely selfish point of view, I want to keep my head right here on its shoulders where it belongs. If the nobles want their serfs to live in high style, that's their business--not mine."

"Oh, Father!" Rollo argued. "Nobody's going to cut off your head for building a plumbing system. Think of how convenient it will be to have fresh, clean water from the river piped into every home in the kingdom. You have to admit that eventually we will need to modernize our society, and the time of the Yule Feast is perfect for showing our people how much we appreciate them. You could be a hero and make a great announcement on Christmas day. Think about all the glory you'll receive!"

"That is, if I'm still alive." King Membleton shrugged his shoulders and winked at Jimbo. Jimbo responded by mimicking his father's gestures.

"Okay, look at this way," Rollo persisted. "If our people don't have to carry water back and forth from the river, imagine how much extra work they could do for you and your nobles. And think about how much valuable property could be saved by having a plumbing system in the kingdom to help put out fires."

The King grinned.

"And, of course, you and your vassals will be getting plumbing too," Rollo continued. "Just imagine how this modern comfort could liven up next year's Yule Feast. You'll probably end up being the envy of other kings for miles around."

"Well, I certainly can see raising taxes to build a plumbing system for the castle here," King Membleton replied. "But since not one of my vassals has yet seen fit to install plumbing in his own manor house, how can I force any of them to provide it for their serfs?"

"Because they would be getting the pipes too; that's what I keep telling you!" Rollo argued. "The system would like a big Christmas present from our kingdom to all our people."

The King rubbed his beard for a moment. "Okay, I tell you what, son. You have my permission to go out into the kingdom and ask my vassals for voluntary contributions to build your grand plumbing system. If you can get the households of thirty-five of my fifty nobles to offer gold or supplies for this venture, I will require the other fifteen to do so as well. And, keeping with your 'big present' theme here, you will have until Christmas day to deliver these promises of help."

"Well Bro, looks like you're gonna be a little bit busy this next month," Jimbo joked.

"Yes, and I certainly can see you're not going to be of any help either," Rollo growled. "What about you, Mick? Can I count on you to talk your rich friends into kicking in some help for this project?"

Mickey looked at his father. "Well, this is a really bad time. Maybe I could help out in a couple of weeks."

"Oh well," Rollo shrugged. "I guess I'll see you all later."

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Rollo went immediately to the palace garden to ask assistance from his mother, Queen Sophie. He found her busily directing the royal gardeners in their preparations for the Yule Feast. Like her son, Mickey, the Queen told Rollo it was "a bad time" to offer him her help.

Realizing his family would not be of any help to him, Rollo moved to the next phase of his campaign and gathered together his closest friends in the kingdom. Many nobles, knights, and serfs, men and women, came to hear Rollo's pleas to join him in his quest for modern plumbing. To the prince's disappointment, he could only enlist four crusaders.

Cindy and Sidney were two of those who signed-up for Rollo's team. They were assigned to visit some of the serf villages and organize the serfs into putting pressure on their lords and ladies. These organizers held most of their meetings in secret, while the nobles were asleep.

"You've got to be persistent without being a pain in the butt," Cindy told her audiences. "Each time you carry some water for your masters, you must remind them of something you could be doing instead that they might enjoy more--like double-fluffing their pillows or spit-polishing their armor or cooking them an extra-large goose or something--you know what I mean."

"And it wouldn't hurt to spill a little water here and there while you're carrying it around," Sidney would add. "Of course, make sure you aren't obvious about your spilling, and make sure you apologize profusely when you do spill."

"And especially don't tell anyone that you heard us encouraging you to do these things," Cindy would insist. "You should know; we have permission from Prince Rollo to organize all of you, but we're not sure how many vassals' feathers we can ruffle before the Prince stops backing us up."

As it turned out, most of the serfs didn't really seem to care much about getting plumbing in their villages. Many of them were also afraid that if they became actively involved in the plumbing crusade, their masters would punish them by requiring them to do unpleasant work or extra chores. This did, in fact, happen. Many a "plumber" ended up toting around hundreds of gallons of water or cleaning-up filthy animal pens, day after day.

Prince Rollo's crusade also started out poorly at the upper end of the economic spectrum. Sir Billy and Lady Linda, who resided in the flatlands of the kingdom, were the only two members of the nobility willing to canvass the other masters and mistresses into helping them build the great plumbing system. Many of their encounters went similarly to the following example, which involved the very wealthy, Sir Greg:

"Greetings Lady Linda and Sir Billy," spoke a young servant answering Lord Greg's front door. "One moment please, I will fetch my master."

"Thank you," Lady Linda smiled.

The young servant walked slowly away.

"She must know why we're here," Sir Billy whispered to Lady Linda. "That's why she didn't invite us inside."

"Oh, don't be so paranoid," the Lady scolded. "You've got to be confident!"

After a few minutes, a well-dressed man came to the door. "Ah, Lord Billy and Lady Linda," Sir Greg greeted them.

"Yes, hello," Sir Billy smiled.

"And what can I do for you today?" Sir Greg asked.

"Well, we've come here to ask for your help in our campaign to build a great plumbing system to bring clean, fresh water to all the people of our kingdom," Lady Linda replied.

"I'm sure you've heard about Prince Rollo's plan, haven't you?" Sir Billy asked.

"Yes, I have heard. a little about it," Lord Greg answered.

"Well what it's all about is--" Sir Billy began.

"--I tell you," Sir Greg interrupted, "right now my wife is feeding my sick daughter in the bathtub, and I'm afraid I just don't have any time to talk to you. I'm sorry. Have a good night." Sir Greg shut and locked the door, leaving Lord Billy and Lady Linda to stare at one another on the porch.

The difficulties that these canvassing vassals suffered led them to little success. Their encounter with Lady Jennifer and Lord Rufus is also typical of their frustrated efforts:

"No, I have not heard about this great plumbing plan," Lady Jennifer said. "Please come in, and let us discuss it over a cup of tea." She turned to one of her servants. "Denise, please bring some tea for my guests."

"Yes, my Lady," Denise replied.

"Please sit down Sir Billy, Lady Linda," Lady Jennifer offered.

"Thank you," the canvassers replied.

Lord Billy took a few diagrams from a folder he was carrying. "Well, basically what's happening is Prince Rollo has suggested that we build a great plumbing system to supply fresh water to all the homes throughout our kingdom. It's like a big Christmas present to our people--a modern convenience we and our children will be able to enjoy

for generations. Think about it--all you would have to do is turn on a faucet, and you could get fresh water from the river right in your own house!"

"I've heard of plumbing systems in other kingdoms," Lady Jennifer replied, "but I never figured we could get one installed here. I can see how it would make life somewhat nicer; the master could certainly do with a bit more bathing."

They all giggled politely.

"More bathing?" a voice asked from the next room.

Sir Rufus came into the parlor, carrying a tray bearing a teapot and three cups. "Denise told me we had visitors. I see it's the plumbers who have come to pay us a visit."

"Hello," Sir Billy and Lady Linda politely echoed.

Lord Rufus put down the tray on the coffee table. "So you've come begging for some gold to lay pipes in the serf villages, huh?"

"Well, the plumbing will be installed in your manor house too," Lady Linda replied.

"There's no need for that bunk," Lord Rufus argued. "Right now we get all the fresh water we need in this manor house the old fashioned way--by having our servants go down to the river to get it."

"But you've got to admit that it takes a lot of time and energy for your servants to fetch your water from the river," Sir Billy replied.

"Yes," Lady Linda joined in, "think of all that extra productivity you could get out of your serfs if they didn't have to spend so much of their time fetching water."

"Okay, I'm sure you know that times are lean right now," Sir Rufus replied. "I pay enough in taxes just to keep King Membleton and his palace looking royal. There's just no way I can give anymore. Sorry."

"Oh well," Lady Jennifer apologized. "Rufus is the man with the purse strings. I'm sorry. I'll have Denise show you out."

By the time the last week of Rollo's plumbing crusade rolled around, the campaigners felt amazed that they actually had convinced three of the kingdom's fifty noble households to offer them their assistance. Rollo and his plumbers went to sleep on Christmas Eve, knowing that only a miracle could bring them the help they needed. As luck would have it, this miracle was about to happen.

King Membleton went to bed early on Christmas Eve. He was very tired, having spent many hours in preparation for the Yule Feast. He fell into a deep sleep only seconds after Queen Sophie kissed him good-night.

"Wake up, Darling!" the King heard Queen Sophie whisper in his ear. "It's Christmas day! As they say down in the valley, it's time to party!"

The King rubbed his eyes. "Morning already? I'm so tired."

"Come on and wake up, you sleepy sloth," the Queen teased.

King Membleton sat up in his bed, rubbed his eyes again, and walked toward the window. "Are you sure it's morning, my dear? It seems to be very dark outside."

"That's because it's raining," the Queen replied.

King Membleton pulled aside his curtains. "Oh my goodness, it's not just raining; it's pouring out there! Oh no. I bet no one's going to want to come to the castle to celebrate a Yule Feast in this weather."

As he rubbed his eyes again, a drop of water fell on his head. He looked up and saw several spots where the rain was leaking through the ceiling. "No no no!" he yelled, "look at all those leaks!"

Suddenly there was a loud knock on the bedchamber door.

"Your Majesties!" a young servant yelled. "There is a strange rain ravishing our kingdom this Christmas morning! It's melting holes in everything!"

The King threw on his royal bathrobe and ran out into the hall.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," the young servant greeted. "It's a terrible disaster going on. Some of your vassals have come to tell you of the devastation they have seen. They are all very upset."

"Yeah, I guess it's a sure bet they're not here to celebrate the Yule Feast this early," the King said, rubbing his eyes again. "Take me to them, please."

As the young servant led the King through the castle, leaking rain was apparent in every room and hallway. Passing by the kitchen, they were stopped by one of the royal cooks.

"Your Majesty," the cook desperately blubbered, "there can be no Yule Feast today. We cannot cook a thing with this nasty water. "

"What are you talking about?" the King asked.

"Look, Your Highness." The cook held up a frying pan full of holes. "And in here." He brought King Membleton into the kitchen and showed him several large puddles around the urns which were storing the water for the Yule Feast. "And Your Majesty, not only can no container hold this bewitched brew, but this water tastes as foul as the sweat under a monkey's arm."

The young servant poked her head into the kitchen. "King Membleton, your vassals are waiting."

"Yes, I know," the King agreed. He left the kitchen and followed her to the conference room. There he was greeted by several frightened nobles and knights, as well as by his sons, Jimbo and Mickey.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty!" they all desperately vied for the King's attention.

"Hold on now," the King raised his arms, "one at a time, please."

"There's a whole bunch of leaks in my room," Jimbo griped. "My stuff is getting all wet!"

"There are leaks in all of our rooms, Your Highness," Lord Greg added. "Leaks in every castle, house, and barn."

"Yes, this is a strange and dangerous liquid raining down on us," Sir Rufus chimed in. "All the crops are dying, the flowers are wilting, and even the wet hair on my head is starting to fall out."

"And certainly not even the thirstiest fool has dared to drink this awful water," Prince Mickey remarked.

"How about it, Dad?" Jimbo asked. "What can we do about this weird juice?"

The King just stared, dumbfounded.

Hey, what's all the fuss about?" Prince Rollo asked, entering the conference room with Sir Billy and Lady Linda. "There aren't any holes in my ceiling."

"You probably just weren't looking very hard," Prince Mickey rebuffed his brother. "This rain's leaking through everything."

"Well, you can see for yourself if you don't believe me," Rollo replied. Suddenly, without taking a step, the whole group found themselves assembled in Prince Rollo's room. They all could clearly see that there were no leaks in his ceiling.

"It simply must be a fluke," Sir Rufus suggested. "Anyway, we shouldn't be wasting our time here. We've got to find a way to stop this ghastly rain as soon as possible. It won't be long before everything's destroyed."

"Not all of this rain is dangerous," Lady Linda said. "Some of the clouds apparently contain a very beneficial potion. Every living thing on our estate seemed to be bursting with life and vitality this morning."

Once again, without warning, everyone in Rollo's room was suddenly transported to the porch of the manor house belonging to Lady Linda and Sir Billy.

"Everything is very lovely here," King Membleton commented. "There's fruit on every tree, and all the flowers are in full bloom."

And the hair seems to be growing back on Sir Rufus's head," Lady Linda added.

"What's going on here?" Sir Greg asked.

"I'll tell you what's going on," Jimbo replied. "We're all getting soaked standing on this porch."

Once again the group was suddenly relocated. This time they found themselves in the bedchamber of the King and Queen.

"Well," Rollo laughed, "the only thing I can think of is maybe the water is being nice to those of us who wanted it piped throughout the kingdom."

"Piped throughout the kingdom," King Membleton whispered to himself. "The plumbing system?"

"Sure," Rollo replied. "Doesn't that make sense? Fresh, clean water is one of the best friends that any person could ever have."

"Well," the King replied, "what you say seems to be true for the nobility, anyway. Does anyone know what's happening in the serf villages?"

"A lot of good things--for those of us who want plumbing, anyway," Cindy said, entering the room with a tray bearing a teapot and several cups.

"And now you're going to tell us that's why that pot of tea isn't leaking," Sir Rufus scoffed.

"You're not gonna get me to drink that swill," Jimbo groaned.

"The plumbing system must be the answer," King Membleton mumbled to himself. "The plumbing system must be the answer."

"Wake up, Darling!" Queen Sophie whispered into her husband's ear. "It's Christmas day! As they say down in the valley, it's time to party!"

"Huh?" the King replied. He sat up suddenly, wide awake, and rubbed his eyes. "Goodness!" the Queen exclaimed, "you look like you're ready to celebrate a Yule Feast right away!"

The King scurried over to the window and peered out.

"It's only a light drizzle, my dear," the Queen soothed. "No reason to worry."

King Membleton looked up at the ceiling and saw a tiny damp spot. He let out a tiny

shriek.

"Yes, I saw that too," Queen Sophie chuckled. "It's just a little leak. No need to get upset."

"No need to get upset!" the King roared. "Just how many leaks are there in this palace, anyway?"

King Membleton put on his royal robe and ran throughout the castle, checking every bit of ceiling for leaks. He found none and returned to his bedchamber.

"Everything okay, dear?" Queen Sophie asked.

"It will be soon," the King replied. "I've been giving Rollo's idea a lot of thought during the night, and I think I should grant him his request. For the good of the kingdom and all our progeny, I'll tax my vassals to build the great plumbing system. "

"Oh Darling," the Queen smiled, "You're so brave and wise. You know; I had a strange dream last night that gave me a feeling you were going to grant Rollo's request today. I'm sure he'll be very pleased."

"Okay, just please don't tell him or anyone else about this yet," the King requested. "I want to reveal my decision in a dramatic announcement this evening during the Yule Feast. This could be the greatest Christmas present in all our kingdom's history! "

As history turned out, however, King Membleton never got to make his announcement. The miracle ran its full course during that Christmas Eve, and every person in the kingdom dreamt a dream similar to the King's. When the vassals arrived at the palace to celebrate the Yule Feast that day, they each volunteered large contributions for the great plumbing project. Believe it or not, Lord Rufus and Sir Greg were two of the most generous contributors of all. The drizzle disappeared by early afternoon, and the pleasant weather combined with everyone's generous spirits to make the Yule Feast a fantastic success. Best of all, the following year and every year afterward, all the people throughout the kingdom celebrated Christmas with running water in their homes.

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