

I

The Beaver Hunt

Lanz stumbles then spies the foot put down to block his passage:

“Welcome, *Mestre*, what a long absence! What’s new in Gaul?”

His heart beating fast, he knows not what to say; her beauty inflames and despite the commotion his tongue unties:

“Many things, *ma dameisele* Gwenhevre... the construction of St-Denis by Abbot Suger, that of Our Lady in Noyon,* the incredible royal portal of Chartres,* and the façade of Nostre-Dame-la-Grande in Engoulesme* and...”

“No, no, dear, gentle Master, let’s forget iron and stone monsters rising to the stars; let’s return to earthly flesh and bone. What’s new in Gaul?”

Lanz hesitates, careful what he says to his precocious pupil:

“So, what’s new with the French...? King Louis VII and Eleanor of Aquitaine announced the birth of their daughter, Marie, the princess royal.”

Gwenhevre laughs good-heartedly then changes the subject:

“Let’s forget French royalty and talk about honest folk.”

Le Mestre loves madly his pupil, first her joy and keen mind; he ends up saying anything:

*[**Noyon** : derived from the Gaulish *Noviodunum* “new fortress” ; **Chartres** derived from the Gaulish tribe *Carnutes*; **Engoulesme** from *Iculisma* or *Ecolisna* meaning unknown]

“Let’s see... Peter the Venerable announced to Heloise the death of her castrated husband, Abelard, the great humanist, and...”

“Nay, sweet Sire, for shame! What a carnal crowd! Forget the clergy in Paris* and their university scandals! We have our own despicable scene right here. He is holy who has his feast day. What’s new in the provinces? Our burghers brave it all, but their success displeases our Viscount of Avallon*!”

Eyewitness to the destruction he will report, Lanz replies:

“For the viscount it was the last straw. Enraged over their rebellion, Thamory revoked in a flash the Charter of Bevres.* Throughout their history, these brave men and women had known multiple invasions, including those of the Romans and the Franks. Located in a deep valley, their land is fed by numerous rivers and remains a haven for guilds, protected by the Lou Pendut in the north, the Bois de Monteclin in the west, the Wault* du Chat noir, and the Brulis in the south.”

“Continue, dear *Mestre*. Are the burghers still putting up a fight?”

“The town was destroyed in three days; all goods and possessions will be confiscated!” Gwenhevre fell silent, very pale and attentive.

“Until then, we saw only a perpetual fair, Bevres spilling over with riches, but now all industry has frozen, tables covered with silver coins but without any money-

*[Paris = *Lutetia* : *Lutetia* derived from the Gaulish meaning “muddy”; the Gaulish city was located in front of a marsh; **Avallon** from the Gaulish *aballo* “apple”; **Bevres** from the Gaulish city *Bebra* from *bebro* “beaver”; **wauld, wault** = forest, derived from the Frankish *wald, walt* ‘forest’]

changers, the most varied kinds of shops without a soul in sight – overflowing with helmets and hauberks; over here, saddles and shields; over there, leather harnesses, spurs, swords, textiles; even a foundry, as well as a factory for metal cups, tankards, bowls, rings and precious necklaces.”

“For three days, the Viscount’s men sought the mayor. At prime the third morning, the town crier had shouted out the ban, and all the people were gathered, ‘If we do not recover the mayor this day all Bevreis will burn alive.’ We saw a gathering of the condemned – expectant mothers, children, old folk – with no means to console themselves. Many wept and wept, but not one said a word to the knights.”

Moved by the horror, *le Mestre* collects himself and then resumes:

“After the mayor’s escape, Thamory’s men beat up a merchant who had begun a jig, shouting loudly, ‘run, save yourselves!’ Before dying, the dancer said he would join the circle of ancestors, hand in hand, but these knights only know how to dance to Thamory’s orders.”

Le Mestre stared into Gwenhevre’s eyes, adding:

“The merchant was drawn and quartered on the wheel, his four pieces still exposed. Then the knights mutilated seventy burghers and began to hang the others, making less of a bloody mess, and God knows, these noble knights finished off the old men, women, and children – at the stake! According to Thamory, canceling the Charter

of Bevres will set a fine example for all free cantons, so they dare not insult him again nor toss rocks into his garden.”

“*Me sire le Mestre*, the burgomaster, is he still alive?”

“Like a fish in water, *ma dameisele*.”

“In fact, a farmer saw him escape into a beaver dam. Is it possible? In the same valley we find these ‘kidneys of the river,’ giving their name to the town of Bevres and to the second river that nourishes Paris, that flourishing city, blooming to a mighty ninety thousand inhabitants! Visitors call Parisians ‘half-beavers.’ Such is their reputation!”

Gwenhevre can’t laugh, wondering what to expect next:

“*Mon Mestre*, when these waterfront animals build dams, something that benefits this fugitive, is their labor out of generosity, or do they toil all night from instinct? Similarly, free municipalities with charters, are they unnatural?”

“*Ma dameisele*, man and beaver are part of the same natural world, entering into a new light these days, everyone will benefit! After all, the burghers hope to have more, that’s only normal, but the nobles don’t like to share their privileges. Our future will open doors, hopefully; the world will adapt to what’s set in continuous motion. This perpetual change defines us at this time. *Ma dameisele*, let me give some examples.”

“In Picardy, they use ingenuity to build cathedrals faster, higher – hydraulic saws and hammers; prefabrication of rosettes in quarries on site; iron bars set in stone walls to steady them up to the stars; the same iron bars secure windows of stained glass, giving whole walls multicolored transparency! To construct faster and faster, these

builders invented universal measurements to use site to site, from one country to another, and workers protect themselves in guilds -- plumbers, blacksmiths, stone cutters -- all well-remunerated, men and women alike.”

“Inventions are changing everything! Building accelerates at lower cost. The hydraulic hammer, invented by Cistercians at the Abbaye de Fontenay, harnesses Nature’s power. Water activates a wheel that rotates a camshaft, and this gear then drives a 300-stone weight hammer to strike iron -- up to 120 strokes a minute!”

“*Cher Mestre,*” she answers, “my keeping too quiet is no better than talking too much.”

“Excesses of the new-fangled *Opus francigenum* leave me cold. Why such absurd heights with lavish ornaments and stained glass? It all distracts from meditation and prayer. In cathedrals people now spend a whole day mouths gaping. And what a waste of good money! Our traditional wooden shrines are being transformed into iron and stone monsters! But iron comes from the Devil and stone has neither spirit nor soul. Why not stick to humble, living wood?”

“But these are indeed marvels,” said the *Mestre*, “and they symbolize the majesty of our heavenly Father, making life on earth more prosperous and pleasant. The possibilities are endless, and to make it a better place for all, the burghers dare antagonize the viscount. The very condition of my faith lies in having these opportunities persist and escalate!” Then Lanz continues:

“Alas! Our noble Viscount is a tyrant! As dispenser of justice he should govern peacefully and serve the people!”

Gwenhevre objects once again:

“*Me sire Lanz*, you have always taught me our intention is more important than the action itself, so let’s look at both sides.” Gwenhevre questions right away:

“Knowing they risked the death penalty by rebelling, how can the burghers claim innocence in this story?” Then Gwenhevre affirms:

“Life is sacred! Standing united against Thamory means losing too much! What? Children were burned alive! And if revolt floods the kingdom, what will become of us, dear *Mestre*, if we dodge this bloodbath? Will we end up more free or less free?”

“By God, from what you say, there’s no way to ensure justice! I can’t listen to this! I’d rather die than retreat. Thamory never tires of spreading villainy, treachery and disloyalty!”

The vault echoed his shrill voice – “*villainy, treachery, disloyalty!*”

Lanz stumbles before this damsel to whom he has taught all his passions: Latin poetry; architecture; scientific thought of Arabia. Lanz imagined one day a blissful life with her, full of marital happiness. Suddenly, without stay he takes stock of reality; his hand falls and grazes a monk’s rough frock, causing him shame.

Only five years ago the Second Lateran Council declared 'invalid' marriages concerning priests, hitherto seen by the Church as 'wrongful' but still possible. In the name of God, Abelard had married his beloved pupil!

Lanz has neither strength nor defense against this woman who rules. He forgets the young maid in her, and the man in him wants only one thing. For her, he would do anything. For this woman, the man burns but feels a mortal, cutting edge for the first time, a chasm growing between him and Gwenhevre. Love laughs at him, sapping all life out of him.

Since the echo, his greatest hope -- still tangible two seconds ago -- turned into a ghost. By St. Peter the Apostle, prayer is useless.

After finding his balance Lanz whispers:

"*Ma dameisele*, mea culpa. May God never show me your death. That would be the greatest pain."

"Prithee, *mon Mestre*, stand in peace..."

The church bell rings -- already none, dinner time.

Saying no more, Gwenhevre gives a curtsey and turns to leave the doorway, never to understand, so it seems, her Master's avowal of love and deep sorrow.