

IV

The Fox Hunt

What's new in the Black Mountain?

Just before dawn, each sound enhances the acute senses of the hunter who feels he too is being observed. At every turn and slope, there are new tracks he must choose to follow: hare; squirrel; field mouse; dormouse. At night who is observing this hunter so intently? Trees of all kinds are monitoring him: birch; *bourgene** --- the black alder of the Morvand; *verne**; yew; silver fir and its varieties -- the *aidin** and the *double**. In springtime sap extends each fiber, top to bottom, right and left, stretching constantly the growing twigs.

Passing a gurgling stream, the hunter is startled by a fallen trunk transforming itself into an enchanted water creature. Everywhere the hunter looks -- benevolent and maleficent trees. He dare not approach the evil ones. Such contact would cause nightmares. Deviously, the old *bourgene* begins to lower her branches to grab the passerby:

“Enemy acoming!”

He scurries faster than wicked branches can reach! All trees are watching, the benevolent ones bowing toward the right path, swaying with the wind, their stems

*[**bourgene** = black alder, derived from the Gaulish *eburigena*; **verne** or **vergne** = alder, derived from the Gaulish *vernos*; **aidin** = fir, derived from the Gaulish *adlinos*; **double** = silver fir, derived from the Gaulish *dubus* 'dark']

flaring into arrays of spring colors, each leaf its own shade of green. The Morvand is extremely wet -- everywhere -- verdant moss; misty vistas; heaps of clouds. There are also swampy stretches and quicksand, but the benevolent ones point to the safest way, the same road chosen by Julius Cæsar and the route for Charlemagne's solemn journey from Spain to Aachen to bury valiant Roland. Knowing the dangers of the Black Mountain, this hunter follows the Gallo-Roman road.

In the fog, around the next bend, dense thickets resemble a downed goddess. Next to her corpse -- a massacre! Roughly-hewn logs freshly fallen, bleeding sticky sap. A pallid scene: white of birch, grey of alder, interspersed with twisted giants, those once-mighty oaks, more ancient than Mary Magdalene.

Suddenly the stream whispers a warning, and leaves rustle an alert: sunrise!

A parliament of finches, jays, redstarts, crossbill, kingfishers, flycatchers, chickadees -- all awaken. Meanwhile the hunter imbibes the smell of wet soil and the morning scent of intoxicating flowers: daffodils and wild hyacinths; marsh lousewort; honeysuckle; orchids; primroses.

In the rays of the rising sun, the hunter's breath vaporizes into miniscule fairies and his appetite redoubles his courage. All of a sudden, he perceives muffled movement of paws, impossible to discern -- rabbit or squirrel? Tiny steps make his mouth water.

To put it bluntly, we're talking about an omnivorous hunter -- a loner -- this red fox who hunts mostly at dawn. His diet varies, but his method does not change. Thanks

to his big ears, the fox can detect prey from quite a distance, approaching it without making a sound. With ears focused, Roussel jumps six feet to land on target, killing his victim with one bite to the neck – be it squirrel or field mouse. On the other hand, our acrobat avoids shrews on account of their smell. Roussel does enjoy tasty birds but removes their feathers before the crunch. But why waste his time chasing mercurial hares, and what predator would dare pounce on porcupines or raccoons, armed with spikes and cut-throat claws?

Respecting seasonal cycles, Roussel consumes insects in summer, such as grasshoppers and crickets, and in the fall he eats seeds, mushrooms and fruit -- blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, cherries, apples, sloes, grapes and acorns. The opportunist adapts, and Roussel can even be a scavenger, content to eat carrion. In any season, like the cats in Avallon, Roussel often plays with prey without killing it, before abandoning his catch altogether.

If one must eat to live, then the playful hunt of a fox is life well lived!

Roussel uses ruse to capture his victims, sometimes playing dead to fool crows, a critter as smart as the fox. Just look at Roussel's mischievous face! Look again, this sly fisher knows how to catch trout, pouncing on them in shallow water.

Roussel, does he have any enemies?

But of course! Next to the Morvand, outside Avallon, farmers despise any fox in their pens, where he gobbles at will. For this reason, hunters from the Castel d'Avallon

let loose their dogs, to rip to pieces the intruders. Thank God! Last spring four foxes were observed killing hundreds of partridges – around 200 per fox.

Goodness sakes! Nobody, neither serf nor sire, can endure such losses in livestock and venison!

During the clear season, from Pentecost to Ascension Day, Roussel often crouches in the field of a half-timbered, thatched farmhouse. Nothing was moving this particular Sunday. Suddenly the fox took off at full speed towards the chicken coop, passing, acre after acre, a series of scary monsters: wheeled ploughs; ploughshares; moldboards to cut and turn the earth, right and left; wooden shovels with sharp iron edges; harrows; axes with cutting blades; and to knock down dead the hay – long-handled scythes with their side handles; sickles; finally, Roussel passed lapwings used to glean the last bits of the harvested victim. But beasts of plough were resting this Sunday under an awning, next to goats and ewe, the latter group separated, on purpose, from the pigsty.

In this region, there are trails aplenty, hamlet to hamlet – from Chaulme-aus-Woupils to Vieus Dun, all the way to Dun-les-Places – with wooden bridges to cross navigable rivers: Yone*; Arrous; Cousin; Auxois. At their banks, barges waited peacefully till the morrow for towing and to pay tolls, still moored and heavily loaded with goods from all corners. These lucrative transport costs also constitute part of

*[Yone derived from the Gaulish *Icauna* ‘talking river’]

Gwenhevre's income, and south of Avallon, fish are abundant -- trout, dace, grouper and monkfish -- all swimming in the Vallee du Cousin, where Gwenhevre is headed this very Sunday to see Alain des Bois, the fisher-hermit, her client.

Since all Morvandiaus attend mass, pray to God, and drink too much at table on Sunday, Gwenhevre usually encounters not a soul on the road, but this day, a band of grooms stormed the narrow path, galloping and nearly knocking Gwenhevre off her palefrey.

What a whirlwind! "*Hare! Hare!*"* This cry excited the hounds, interrupted many times over with shouts of "*Taiäut! Taiäut!*"* to animate even more the bloodhounds already harassed.

Hey! Who hunts on Sunday? Her flesh aqiver, Gwenhevre had seen quicksilver pass by on the trail -- two greyhounds and three bloodhounds!

Their prey?

Roussel!

Which one?

Both are one and the same. During his purification adventure, Roussel, formerly the beaver, had turned into a fox. Yes, of course, there'll be transformations aplenty!

Roussel is not the only one who changes forms according to the solar-lunar calendar.

There is a whole tribe of *warouls** in Valous. On horseback -- all alone -- Gwenhevre was

*[**hare** or **haro**, an interjection to excite hunting dogs, derived from Frankish *hara* 'here, on this side'; **taïaut**, a cry to the dogs when the hunted animal is in sight; **waroul**, derived from the Frankish *werwulf* 'man-wolf']

worried about this danger, while crossing overshadowed villages in the Vallee du Cousin: Moulin-Rion; Valous; Vermoron.

In a flash, fury thundered near the village of Vermoron! At terce, Gwenhevre saw morning slip into nightfall. Storm clouds ushered in darkness! Birds scattered, seeking solace under leafy branches. In a wink, stag, deer and wild boar fled meadows finding refuge in secret places. All woodland critters vanished.

It rained hard as nails, deafening and overpowering everything.

Then lightning struck like giant hammers of lead, followed by thunder pounding trees and earth. Downpours soaked animals and plants of the Morvand. Boughs and leaves of the good and evil trees trembled with fear, even those of the wicked bourgene.

What a nightmare!

It was a pity to see them at the mercy of the heavens.

But terror never holds itself accountable and inflicts fearful silence without recourse. That morning, every critter -- breathless and paralyzed -- even our intrepid Gwenhevre, but, gramercy, she emerged unscathed, her will as strong as ever.

To avenge these senseless acts of Nature, Gwenhevre dismounted, all disheveled, and gave vent to her indignation, projecting to the sky a hoarse voice and clenched fist:

“Your threat means less than a fistful of ashes!”

What do you think, dear reader? Was the storm a celestial warning? If not, what was it?

For Gwenhevre, it was senseless.

She saw no purpose to it, only an abuse of Nature without cause. Then, wet to the bone, Gwenhevre remounted and headed toward the Vallee du Cousin to see Alain des Bois, the fisher-hermit, her client.

Before arriving there, her eyes and heart will open wide -- and then, what an immense whirling will erupt inside her soul! For the first time Gwenhevre will flame for a man, for a wild woodsman, and she will know then why Lightning and Thunder warned her.

Love is twofold: ash and sugar; soot and honey; white as snow; red as fire. Love also ensures contentment and misery. In short, there is always a snake lurking under this precious stone. Falling in love results in perpetual disorder; perfect love is even more bitter and sweet, alternatively, sweet and bitter, something impossible to master. This explains the warning of Lightning and Thunder.

How to describe the phenomenon that follows, being two things at once: an optical illusion; an authentic love at first strike?

Along the way, one league from her destination, Gwenhevre experienced a strange effect from the intermittent flashes of the storm, such that her eyes captured images interrupted and successively visible. For example, at each burst of light, Gwenhevre saw in flashing movement a strapping woodsman with mighty legs. She also marveled at his broad shoulders and blacksmith's arms.

But contrary to common sense, the woods-runner wore no shirt or breeches or shoes. His body was brawny, white as ivory and stark naked! A wild man, free as a bird -- his hair spiked from wind and rain, his beard flowing!

Was he himself the hunter or the prey?

Or ... did he land there from an enchantment gone bad?

Or ... was he a stray werewolf from the village of Valous?

Watching him approach, Gwenhevre could see he was not only frenzied but hurt; blood was flowing from the metal barb implanted in his heart. A hunting accident? Who would have shot that arrow?

Suddenly he howled a wolf cry louder than Thunder. Turning round he grabbed a slab six times his weight and lifted it, better than six men would have done it with combined strength. Turning again, dizzy, he began tracking, licking his fingers, ready to devour the beast alive! Finally he slapped his thighs but could no longer stand up, so he crouched and sagged, falling like a rag, losing consciousness.

At four cubits from the sleeping runner, Gwenhevre growled tenderly, consumed by a previously unknown hunger.

“What a man! What to do?”

“Go look for help!” she told herself.

Hey! Will she leave him just like that? Of course not!

After removing her cloak, Gwenhevre dismounted. Dazed by the storm, she had never in her life appeared so stunning! Rosy cheeks, eyes shining, auburn braids falling to her hips. She wore a beautiful white silk gown with tiny variegated blue flowers. Gwenhevre dressed like the courtiers of Avallon! In contrast, the nakedness of the woods-runner, it must be said, caused sensation and greatly impressed the lady! Say, both like to display with flourish, one in silks, the other naked as a worm! Kneeling, Gwenhevre inspected the Sleeper's vital signs before covering him with the cloak – first, she checked his pulse, then his breathing, and finally, her eyes all round – his manhood galore.

Goodness sakes! How wholesome! His natural scent delighted Gwenhevre -- half sweat, half woody sage. She finished the inspection by covering him before remounting. Heart pounding and soaring, she galloped straight to Alain des Bois, the fisher-hermit, her client.