

THE WOMAN IN THE CHURCH

December, 1360

It was an unusual sight these fifteen years and more to see a man traveling the road alone—especially a solitary Englishman in the heart of the French countryside. But the peace treaty had recently been signed at Bretigny, and on paper at least there was friendship between the people of the lion and the people of the fleur-de-lys.

The traveler looked about thirty years of age, with a well-knit frame that sat easily in the saddle. One glance at his arms proclaimed that he was a knight, but his arms were not as recognizable as his rank. The shield showed a silver bolt of lightning across a sky black with thunder, or to put it in tournament cant, a field sable emblazoned with a chevron argent. It was not a famous crest. A herald of some worth might look this emblem over and still fail to tell us the chevalier's name. The solitary condition of the rider also spoke to his humble estate. No squire accompanied the knight. He led no packhorse and carried only a small bundle pillion.

The road from English Calais had been quiet as a cloister. It was near Christmastide, and the winter wind

had begun to breathe upon the fields. The knight had many friends in Calais, but he had declined to stay Christmas with them. When they pressed him, he confessed that a burden bore heavily upon his soul. Even though the war had halted, he had a personal quest that lay unfulfilled. He would not explain the nature of the quest, but folk whispered that it had something to do with the small cedar box that he carried carefully wherever he went. It must be a relic, they said, and his quest must be a pilgrimage. Perhaps he was bound for the pope's palace in Avignon, or even for the Holy Land. Others claimed that his quest was of a less spiritual nature. They had heard him ask after the whereabouts of a certain lady—one Jeanne de Vergy. Assumptions ran rampant about the relationship between the two. The knight was known to be unmarried, and though he had at one time paid court to an English maid, perhaps he had re-sworn his homage to this French Jeanne. Although both sets of speculations would prove spurious in the end, they were true in some small measure. He *did* treasure a cedar box and he *was* seeking the aforesaid lady.

Jeanne de Vergy lived in the hamlet of Lirey, a village to the south of Calais that sat on the outskirts of Troyes. The knight was accustomed to travel, and though the weather had grown chill, the road was not hard. Towards the close of the sixth day he entered Lirey, and chancing upon a roadside inn, he accosted a local gossip to ascertain his destination more exactly.

“Lady Jeanne has a house in the southeast corner of the village,” said the host of the inn. “But you’ll not find her there. Not while there’s candles left to burn in the church vestry. She spends all day on her knees in front

of that sheet in the gold box. Pious, you think? Maybe—but not if you hear the bishop talk. A clever fake, he calls it—the work of some godless charlatan! And if the lady’s not to blame for foisting it on the church, at least her husband is—God rest his soul!”

The knight crossed himself in silence at the mention of the dead. Then, bestowing a groat upon his loquacious informer, he betook himself to the church at the center of town. The plaza outside the church contained a few suspicious onlookers, their curiosity and animosity piqued by the stranger’s presence. They were wary to approach the knight, but by means of another groat judiciously dispensed, he induced a young villager to look after his charger. While the French folk gazed inquisitively, he removed the cedar box from the bundle behind his saddle. Then, like one of the Magi that Saint Matthew writes of, he went gift in hand into the dwelling of Christ.

The walls of the little church stood weightily in the old Roman style, with narrow slits for windows that barely admitted the fading light of the wintry afternoon. The seating in the nave would accommodate few. The altar beyond the transept was small. However, a costly triptych painted with gold and vermillion gave evidence of a wealthy donor in the parish. The knight passed beyond this screen into a forest of burning wicks. The corridors of the sanctuary had been silent and gray, but beyond the altar the walls of the apse glowed like a phosphorescent sea. Arranged around a small niche, the candles illuminated an honored reliquary. It was fashioned of dark wood and richly inlaid with gold and ivory.

Enchanted by this glory, the knight barely noticed the worshiper kneeling on the flagstones. There was

little enough to notice. She was a drab, unprepossessing creature with eyes nearly larger than her face. These eyes were her most intriguing and most attractive feature. Her pupils flickered in the candlelight, but the gaze never wavered from its rapt contemplation of the reliquary.

“Lady,” said the knight softly, after his own eyes had adjusted to the hazy glory cloud that overspread this place, “Are you Mistress Jeanne of Vergy?”

The bright eyes turned to him and without rising she answered aye.

“I bring a great treasure,” said the knight proffering the small box he carried.

“A treasure?” she repeated, and her tone changed to one of warmth and welcome. “The Lord will bless you and cause his face to shine upon you. He is worthy of all treasures a man can give.” She rose, took the box in her hands, and started to place it before the reliquary. The knight shifted awkwardly before her fervor, and his words fell out in a torrent.

“Nay, there are other treasures better fitting for the Lord of heaven and earth,” said he. “The treasure I bear is of little value to any save one. The widow of Geoffroi de Charny is the proper one to receive this gift. And you, if I mistake not, are she.”

She looked puzzled, almost disappointed that the box in her hands was a gift for her, instead of a tribute to the gold-encrusted reliquary in the niche. He bid her open the box. She loosened the catch and lifted the lid.

Out fluttered a strip of orange satin embroidered with golden stars. The edges were slashed jaggedly as if it had been cut from a larger piece of cloth. Here and there it was speckled with dark red, the dew of a battle long

past. It was a tongue of flame torn from the mouth of a dragon. It was a handful of fire wrested from the hearth of the gods. “How came you by this?” she demanded, and staggering a little, she sat down on a nearby pew. “This was his. This was his! Were you there when he met his end?”

“I was there, I was close by—would to God that I had been far from that place! I was not the one to strike the blow, but even so, it was my hand that killed him. Afterwards, I returned to the place where he lay. I took the thing he most honored to place in the hands of the one he most loved.” The knight inclined his head lower to speak to the lady, for though she was of middle age, she was as small as a yearling doe.

“But you were his enemy! France’s enemy! You say that he was slain by your own hand. Why should you come all this way to bring a scrap of fabric to Charny’s widow?”

“Exactly for that reason, lady—because you are *Charny’s* widow, and whatever was Charny’s, that I shall honor, for I loved Charny as I have loved few other men.”

“What is your name, sir knight?” she demanded almost disbelieving, for her husband was beloved of few Englishmen.

“Sir John de Potenhale,” the knight replied.

“Ah,” said she, and knowledge lit up her face like a paper lantern. “He was your prisoner.”

“Aye, yet also my liberator,” replied the knight. “My enemy and my prisoner, my counselor and my friend. Your husband was all these to me and more.”

“He spoke of you once or twice,” said the lady, “but not enough to satisfy a woman’s curiosity. Come, you

must tell me your story. An Englishman that knew my husband—knew him and loved him—bears a story that my ear longs to hear.” She motioned to the wooden pew begging him to sit down and commence the tale.

The knight hesitated a little. “It is a long story with many threads. Where would you have me begin? Shall I tell you of the day I first met your husband?”

The lady smiled and shook her head. “No, you must begin as he would have had you.” Her companion looked a little puzzled. Surely he must know which day Charny had held as significant as birth, as sacred as baptism, and as solemn as death. She prompted him with a question. “Where is it that the story of a knight must start?”

“With his knighthood,” replied the man, and setting himself down upon the wooden pew he began his tale of arms, of death, of love, and of honor.

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THE LANDING OF THE CONQUEROR *July – August, 1346*

If you would hear of my knighthood, you must first hear of my passage to France, for the one turns upon the other as tightly as a door upon a hinge. It was the fifth of July, 1346, when we set sail, an army of wooden-hulled castles bound for Gascony and France. The forecastle of each fighting cog was crammed with vibrant pennants, high-mettled horses, and eager Englishmen. Our king had determined to be master of your France, but the sea proved to be its own master. Almost as soon as the fleet weighed anchor, the wind began to breathe heavily like a thickset man climbing a hill. The ruffled water pushed back against the coast, and the cogs could make no southwestern progress.

Originally, the king had designed to go down from Cornwall and round the tip of Brittany. Our fleet would carry us southward along the French coast till we reached the sun-kissed lands of Gascony. The ships would enter the sheltered mouth of the Garonne River, and we would disembark on the wharfs of Bordeaux. Gascony was the