

Boris Kolar: On Wine, Goats, and Other Scams

an excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

to Katka, Maja, and Božena

Young Erwan

Erwan was ten when he left his beloved Aunt Aurueguen and good Uncle Gwencalon, took Bishop Nicholaz by the hand, stepped through the church door and closed it behind him for the rest of his life. Whenever the Bishop took in a new boy, he trembled with impatient expectation. He would secretly watch the boy from behind the castle stairs and through openings specially adapted for this purpose so they looked out onto the staircase and into the novices' private quarters. He had long sworn that he would pray every night until the change of moon, only then would he allow a boy to hold his hand. But he never lasted more than two quarters in this sweet penance. This time, young Erwan did not let Bishop Nicholaz keep to his pledge for a single day. As soon as he saw him, the Bishop fell in love with the chubby boy, sent to him by the Almighty like a wingless angel, a perfect and immaculate messenger of everything that belongs to the Lord. The instant young Erwan appeared at the castle gates it became clear to everyone, down to the last stable lad and manurer, that this good-natured and friendly boy would one day take over the bishop's staff and the keys to the spacious castle cellars. Good young Erwan was not just a pretty boy with fair, slightly curly hair. Despite his angelic appearance, he came across as a mature and responsible youth. However, what excited Bishop Nicholaz to truly lose his mind over him, was Erwan's immense penchant for everything that was beautiful and good in this world. As if he had been brought to him by heavenly wings and rewarded him with the innocent childish word he was able to rely on more than any from his counsellors and advisers.

By the late afternoon the pastoral and scholarly duties were complete. With his little fingers, young Erwan firmly grabbed the Bishop's hand and led him towards the cleric's private quarters in the remote part of the castle. First they walked under the colonnade shaded by an old chestnut tree. The tree had been growing there even before the holy fathers built the castle complex around it. It was where, when he was

younger, the Bishop had often walked in contemplative silence. Now he had no time for seeking out spiritual tranquillity, for sweet excitement drove his step, through the chapel, straight to the bishop's bedroom. The large bed with a canopy stood close to the wall where the Bishop had had it pushed soon after young Erwan stepped into his life. The forces of lust had receded in the ageing bishop, and the bed had made way for a well-laden table that now stood in the middle of the room. This was where Bishop Nicholaz and young Erwan were hurrying towards. On this clear summer afternoon, the sun cast its rays through the panes of glass in the tall windows, illuminating the table laden with exquisite delicacies and a goblet of sweet wine from Orleans. The food weighing down the table was divine, prepared by the novices under the watchful eye of Master Olier. Olier was a giant of a man, originally called Olivier where he hailed from, somewhere near Paris. Everyone secretly called him Taranis because he would fly into a rage worthy of the God of Thunder. Taranis yelled and cursed the boys' mothers while they were young, until they grew into adult men. Then he was afraid of them, for despite his size, he was a weakling and didn't like to pick fights with those who could step on his toes.

Upon seeing the illuminated table, young Erwan let go of Bishop Nicholaz's hand. He did not hear the master chef shouting instructions or the fearful breathing of the young cooks who ran from pot to pot with pans of glowing coals. Erwan paused for a moment in front of the beauty of the laden table, allowing the white, innocent light to shower over him. Cascading over him were streaks of the same heavenly rays that poured over the partridge breasts, piled around the livers of young bustards, tongues of autumn hawfinches and winter waxwings. Head raised high, tilting slightly to one side, his fair curls fell across his shoulders, the nostrils of his delicate still childish nose flaring, he stepped like a divine taster to the table. Illuminated and angelically beautiful, he then waited there for the blissful smells to be enhanced by the even more exquisite tastes. Bishop Nicholaz could but silently squeal at the sight of the boy who had been blessed by such divine grace. He bit his lips so as not to disturb the heavenly scene. Mutely screaming, maddened by uncontrollable emotions, which he did not try to suppress them, merely sinfully let them creep through his body, up his lignifying legs, clawing through the pit of his abdomen.

Bishop Nicholaz was a generous man, he always absolved young people of sin and often also gave them his blessing. At the castle he entertained Moorish boys, singers from Turin, a scholar from Byzantium and a tall clumsy boy who was rumoured to have the blood of the Caliphs of Almohad, the firm rulers of the rich towns of Maghreb and Al-Andaluz, flowing through his veins. He even tamed the snow-white son of a Nordic marauder, wild as the North Sea during winter storms, the very storms that had once driven the boy into his arms. He had everything, but it meant nothing now that Erwan was here. All this huge collection of young people was superfluous. Bishop Nicholaz was not an evil man who would wish anyone any ill. Especially not the boys to whom he had until now offered a richly laden table and a soft bed. Most certainly not. He wanted only to be blessed by the grace of God, for after death a person's soul cannot count on allies and debtors. That was why he still entertained the young men lavishly, only that he no longer called them his angels and only invited them to join him on the feast days of important saints.

Bishop Nicholaz was being consumed by dark thoughts. He had not produced any heirs, so there were a few bitter contenders for his inheritance at the castle and the rest of the diocese. Each of his boys had a guardian and he knew well this riffraff of solicitors, doctors and teachers with bad breath from the castle staircases and corridors. He knew that their shadows prowled across the castle walls at night, lurking like the shadows of vultures searching for white lambs. Every day these greedy greasy-handed gluttons were fed at the Bishop's table but in reality they were merely a pack of wolves and wolverines. These scabby beasts will pounce on his Erwan as soon as his staff will no longer be there to chase them away. Bishop Nicholaz was tormented by these terrible thoughts. He was haunted by nightmares from which he crawled out sweating and crying, or he tried to escape them by waking up in the middle of the night in order to pray to the Holy Mother for young Erwan.

Relief for the torment of Bishop Nicholaz came unexpectedly. It was a time of fasting and all week Taranis had been pushing the novices to dip their hand nets into the castle pond. They waded through cold ponds, turning stones to find crayfish, proudly raising their baskets if they had anything crawling inside. The castle hunter drove his hounds together with experienced otter trappers along the tracks of a young otter, the dogs chased it into the willow roots where the trackers impaled the beast

onto their long spears and proudly marched with it into the castle yard. Taranis complained to the caretaker that he didn't have enough hands, so they got even the horse groomer and his children to check the beaver traps. It was easier to endure the fasting commanded by the Church if the fish on the table were accompanied by a couple of fattened furry animals that had only the previous day been wading in water.

The Bishop with young Erwan sat at the fasting table. They dipped crayfish tails into the wine sauce of beaver tail stew. They did this in an almost apostolic calm, without any haste, as if in no hurry at all, not even for the next course of beautifully seasoned eels, their jugulars slit alive so their black blood slowly dripped over the deliciously fried and light burbot livers straight into a sweet muscat sauce. The Bishop looked with worry at the blue-eyed, rosy-cheeked boy as he tenderly fed his appetite with mature gestures but the softness of his childish hands.

'My dear Father,' said Erwan. 'Stephen of Cloyes is gathering boys from all over the place. He will lead them to the Holy Land for what knights in iron chain mail on swift horses were unable to achieve will be accomplished by innocent children's hearts. That is what he says, the Lord speaks through his mouth. Instead of with spears, axes and swords, he will equip the army of boys with a shield of faith and justice. This will not only overcome the Saracens but will command the sea which will open up for them and create a path to Christ's grave.'

Erwan looked the Bishop in the eye with sincerity. 'Your Grace, allow us, your sons, to also go to the Holy Land and return the tomb of his son to the Lord in your name.'

Whenever young Erwan was so serious and adult, tears came to Bishop Nicholaz's eyes.

'Oh, Lord, Our Father, how virtuous and honest this child is. How can I protect this young angel who has shed his heavenly feathers only so he might walk beside me now? I ask one thing of you, Lord, protect his soul and I will protect his body. Holy Father, I will defend him more than the apple of my eye for he is more precious to me than my sight.' This was what Bishop Nicholaz kept saying to himself.

The following moment, veiled in a dark shadow, his face was illuminated by a ray of salvation. Oh, how grateful he was for the Lord's benevolence. 'It is true, my dear Ewan,' Bishop Nicholaz replied as a smile turned up the corners of his mouth.

‘Immediately tomorrow I will order a ship to be prepared that will sail to the Holy Land. It will carry with it my gift to be placed upon the Holy Tomb. Don’t you worry, young Erwan, your fate and soft white skin will not be dried by the desert sun. Your feet will not be lacerated by sharp stones, because your own Crusade is right here, this is what I am ordering you.’

And when he saw how the boy’s eyes filled with tears, he added quietly and softly, ‘And I ask this of you, so you please me.’

Young Erwan slipped from his chair and embraced the rather ample figure of Bishop Nicholaz.

The fate of Bishop Nicholaz’s boys

Bishop Nicholaz never again heard news of his former beloved boys. He forgot about them as they did not weigh heavily upon his soul and did not rob him of any sleep as a bad conscience. But the boys had not all of a sudden been swallowed up by the darkness of the vast Ocean beyond the horizon where everything ends and the sea falls into the depths of the Abyss.

History has found a place for some of the Bishop’s boys and even recorded their destinies in precious books bound in silver. So where did Fate take the young men soon after the mandatory fasting?

The ship bearing the flag of Bishop Nicholaz with surprised Moorish boys, singers from Turin, the nephew of the Almohad Caliph, the scholar from Byzantium and even the snow-white son of the Nordic marauder on board set sail on its long journey across the stormy Ocean. Its cold, grey waters may not have seemed particularly gentle, but for sailors they were a safe haven. Few pirates were brave enough or had the patience to stalk the rare boatmen who would persist on the vast foggy waters of the Cantabrian Sea for weeks. They offered a completely different security to the blue, sunlit Mediterranean. The warm waves between Aragon and the Papal Coast, and onwards towards Byzantium were ruled by the swift sailing boats of Moorish and Vandal pirates backed by Greek merchants from Alexandria. These bloodthirsty vultures had paid informants in every port this side of the Pillars of

Hercules so no well-loaded Catalan *nava* or Latin *conchis* bobbing on the waves of the southern seas would get through unnoticed. The raiders were also very soon onto the scent of the precious cargo sailing under the flag of Bishop Nicholaz. Only that the hungry sea wolves were outrun by the ship's own captain. Even before passing between Sicily and Gozo, he quickly changed allegiance and sold almost the entire cargo of his ship to Count Henry of Malta. It was not for nothing that the Count was also known as Enrico the Fisherman. A pirate of noble birth, he quickly tightened his net, but not too much, in order not to damage the valuable and delicate cargo. Soon Enrico the Fisherman's catch was the talk of all the palaces and residences in the Southern Mediterranean. Bishop Nicholaz's educated and cultivated boys were of interest to every rich pirate, town oligarch or church notable. Everyone who wished to add Glory and Manners to their pedestal of wealth, and especially arouse the envy of their neighbours.

To cover his own expenses, the dishonest captain kept the nephew of the Almohad Caliph for himself, believing the boy would bring him the highest profits. As soon as they sailed into the warm waters of the Mediterranean, the clumsy Almohad prince managed to fall overboard which would certainly not have ended well for the short-sighted boy, had the ship at the time not happened to find itself in a completely windless calm. He was saved by the idle and bored fair-haired boy from the far North. Back home he would have been forging into a warrior and a captain of a *drakkar* longship, wielding his father's battle axe every day while the old man would proudly watch him, growling at him not to wave about the weapon as if he were an old woman. Or he would already be stealing cattle from neighbouring villages with his peers. So jumping into the water and a little heroism brought at least some excitement to his sad world. The young prince, however, turned out to be not a particularly good investment for the ship's captain as, right at that time, the Almohad rule over Spain was coming to an end.

It was the very year that the great Ibn al-Said chose to throw himself off a cliff and disappear forever in the crashing waves of the sea rather than reveal to the Caliph the awful fate he had deciphered from the stars. With the terrible prophecy, good al-Said could never face his student, the Prophet's chosen one, Caliph Muhammad al-Nasir, whom he had for so long been preparing for the role of Lord of the Sky and the

Earth. He preferred to disappear into the depths rather than have his heart break watching the downfall of his master, the master he loved more than anything else in the world, a merciless falcon above the dry sand dunes but also a poet and a master of algebra from the marvellous palaces built on the edges of oases. In front of his master, the scholar would not even dare to curse the year when the Reconquista flared up in the Spanish lands. He covered his eyes to avoid seeing the heroes with the sign of the cross emblazoned on their chests, carrying torches as they rode shoulder to shoulder for the first time against al-Nasir.

But it was too late. The mothers of the heroes from Castile and Aragon were already praying in joint processions. Even the wives of Portuguese knights pleaded with the Virgin to let the hooves of their men's heavy horses trample the Saracens after they are brought down by the battle axes of their mighty Christian allies from Navarre.

The battle in which horses, foaming at the mouth, raised a cloud of sand, soon swallowed both warring armies. Captains could no longer see which way the cavalry was charging, where foot soldiers were breaking through enemy lines or which way their archers were shooting their arrows. The Andalusian dust got into the eyes, stuck to the bloodied Catholic swords and curved Saracen scimitars. The long hours in battle passed veiled from the eyes of those praying to the Lord, the Virgin, or celebrating the *akbar* of their heroes.

Nobody knew which way the fortunes of the battle would turn until the wind picked up and cleared the battlefield of dust. The course of the battle was this time changed by none other than the older brother of al-Nasir, an unfortunate prince whose name was no longer allowed to be as much as uttered at court. The lanky, short-sighted man sensed the chance to respond with a heroic deed to the accusations about his military skills that had for years been thrown at him. He spurred his horse and all alone foolishly rode straight at the right flank of the infidel troops.

Fate ensured that his horse brought him right in front of the gigantic Navarrese king. Sancho of Navarre was allegedly only half human as the blood of an ancient race of giants who once hunted mountain goats on the precipitous slopes of the Pyrenees flowed through his veins. The Navarrese giant was more than twice the size of two tough Castilians. For the ensuing battle, King Sancho had been provided with a herd

of the largest Breton horses, as no single animal lasted long under the immense weight of its rider. When the not-so-skilled Saracen horseman ended up before such a Christian giant, he lost his balance and control of his horse, ending up in the dust. The battle banner of the clumsy Almohad nobleman ended up falling into the hands of the Navarrese, such was *kismet*. Above al-Andaluz, in the scorching summer sun the banners and flags of those who had until now been the Prophet's favourites began shamefully falling. But their sad fate did not write its final chapter on Iberian soil but under their native African sun. The once famous dynasty was finally brought to its knees by their long-term and bitter enemies, the foxes of the desert, descendants of the famous Marin ibn Wartajan.

When History turned a new leaf, the tall and clumsy prince whose father had unwisely fallen under the hooves of the Navarrese king, was worthless. The young man, however, somehow survived his youth and made it to adulthood, even fathering a number of tall, short-sighted and clumsy offspring.

The Moorish boys ended their Crusade in Alexandria. They were bought by that fat Greek, Nikonos, the trader in precious church incense and amber who had amassed immense wealth on the maritime trade routes between Egypt and Constantinople. Word had it that he was always so oiled and perfumed that you could smell him before you saw him. There were also rumours that he had a whole troop of liberated slaves taking care of anointing his hefty body. The strapping young boys were infinitely devoted to him and protected him with their bodies like their dearest lover.

While the Maltese Count sold off the Moorish boys for a profit, he kept for himself the singers from Turin. Enrico the Fisherman had other plans for them. Not only because of their heavenly singing. This only inspired him much later when, in his calmer autumn years, he devoted himself entirely to diplomacy and art. In the bustling fortresses that defended the southernmost islands of Christendom, the vain nobleman waited upon his Saracen rivals as well as his dearest allies. He knew that Mohammedan emissaries would not enthuse over the heavenly voices of boys from Turin, for the Prophet had never heard such singing and apparently thus would not allow it. But Enrico the Fisherman knew his guests very well. They would pretend that they were not at all interested in the boys and their voices. But inevitably plenty of bees always gather around forbidden fruit. Prices rise among competitors, and he

would make money without lifting a finger. Departing merchants would bow to him with even greater respect.

Indeed, it was what happened. Emissaries were respectful as expected for guests at the court of a powerful count. Enrico the Fisherman would invite them into his beautiful gardens, among showy fountains under the carefully card for palm trees. In long afternoons they feasted on beverages sweetened with dates while one or another would out of politeness retell a pertinent maritime story. But as the afternoons passed, the guests became more and more nervous, shifting uncomfortably. Only Enrico the Fisherman pretended to be mildly bored. As if he had not heard the beautiful singing coming from beneath the vaults down the long corridors and the stone towers. As if there were no heavenly voices echoing from the chapel and even from the fountain beneath the dense shade of the vine. The bewildered Saracens kept turning their heads and stretching their necks but couldn't see anyone. Eventually the Count set a price for the singers from Turin. The merchants were furious, waving their hands and swearing by Fatima that such an offer was outrageous. But in fact they respected the Fisherman for his trade skills and because he never set a price that buyers couldn't pay yet at the same time allowed them to save face. As they left the island pounded by the Libyan winds, they bowed with genuine respect to the great master in the art of trade.

The snow-white Nordic boy was taken behind the walls of an illustrious fort on the coast of Libya. The valuable gift helped Enrico the Fisherman negotiate a deal on an almost unlimited trade route all the way to the Levant. It is said that the Nordic boy grew up into a wonderful young man but that he was never again happy. He did not care for the wealth showered upon him by women or the power offered to him by his masters. His gaze continuously sought only the white mountains and long ice-cold nights of his homeland. There was nothing like that beyond the minarets and groves of date palms. This was why his blue eyes faded away. His youthful body endured for only a few years but with a dead soul a man is merely dead flesh. Before he was twenty, his body was sent to Valhalla on a small ship, or rather a tiny boat, as was his last wish.

The Count was left with the scholar from Byzantium. The boy could not remember his name or did not wish to disclose it. So they called him Theodosius. He

was a peculiar boy who knew how to drive his master into a flaming rage. Nobody at court dared to provoke Count Henry into a flaming rage. On one such occasion he had even decapitated his favourite horse while still sitting in the saddle, because the animal decided to walk off somewhere on its own. The only person able to handle Count Henry was Theodosius with his persistence and even more with his jaunty laughter, with which he could in an instant shake off his master's bad mood. In fact, Enrico the Fisherman was also lenient towards him on account of another trait the young man possessed. The not-yet-thirteen-year-old boy had the attention of all the castle servants, they listened to him and obeyed him, even the guards took his instructions as command. When Count Henry watched him giving orders to the cooks, the washerwomen and the pages, saw how he talked to the captain of the guard, he saw before him a new commander, a serious and responsible man, better than any of his Calabrian captains, those filthy, short-legged dogs whoring their way from one port to the next.

Young Theodosius became even more self-confident after he discovered a game played on black and white squares, a game of two rivals. The figures were enemy armies, opponents with their commanders. Almost instantly grasping the rules of the game, he soon became unbeatable. Count Henry did not want to fight his protégé himself. He preferred to watch how the boy slowly led on his opponents, tricking them into an attack and then struck them from the side, instantly thrashing their defence. Usually his victim would be an old monk. Defeated, the monk would surrender without really knowing where he had made the mistake. When Theodosius began becoming bored on Malta and his commanding ambitions almost led to a conflict between Malta and the fortified southern Sicilian ports, the Count sent him to Rhodes. Enrico the Fisherman had for years been trying to obtain protectorate over the island. It was young Theodosius who finally managed to secure Byzantine support. The mighty Eastern Christian Empire gladly accepted him since the clever and authoritative young man did not seem like some pale papal fawner. With Theodosius at the helm, the town and port flourished, reaching fame and wealth admired by even the Mohammedans, the very ones Bishop Nicholaz had once sent him to fight.

The curse of the doomed Aicelina

Seventeen years had passed since the ship with Bishop Nicholaz's boys set sail. Erwan had not walked under the colonnade shaded by the old chestnut tree for a long time. He had recently completed his studies of theology, philosophy and law. He did not wander around Paris like other students, looking mostly for cheap girls and wine on the tab. It seemed as if he had skipped his teenage years. He was not pervaded by the strength of young men believed to be hidden in the muscles of the heart but in fact at home in the pants. He grew into the large stout figure that men take on only in their late middle age. His abundant body demanded respect, displaying all the wisdom and justice of a scholastic doctor. On that day, Erwan was once again hurrying along a path he had taken a thousand times, one that had always awoken in him a pleasant shudder of anticipation. But this time it was different.

Old Bishop Nicholaz was slowly losing strength. Due to severe gout, he barely got out of bed any more. His bed had been placed in the middle of the spacious bedroom, within reach of the heat from the fireplace, not extinguished even in summer. Erwan entered quietly and stopped at the door. Rays of light fell upon the bed with the sickly old man, in the same manner they had shone on his mentor's table and himself.

'Oh, *tempus fugit!*' he sighed to himself before stepping closer to Bishop Nicholaz. He knew how happy the old man would be to see him.

A gentle smile appeared on the Bishop's face upon his protégé's arrival. He raised his shaking hand enough for Erwan to kneel before him and kiss it properly.

'My dear Erwan, God has granted my wishes. You have arrived in time, for the Lord is calling me, louder and louder. My strength is failing me and soon I shall be granted the mercy of being delivered from this terrible torment tearing away at my limbs alive. Listen to me carefully, my son. Awaiting you in the town of Avignon are the Bishop's staff and estates which grow the noblest vines that produce the best wine in all of Christendom. The sea is near, so there is always plenty of healthy salt, the cooks in those places know their art well. I am not worried because you are leaving this rainy Breton wilderness, God has punished it with the Gauls and then with

Meriadoc's Celts, may they all be damned at least as much as the dog-headed Plantagenets and all the others who came across the sea with them.'

The weak old man's voice faltered for a few moments, enough for him to gasp for the air he had only a moment ago been exhaling with concealed anger.

'My good Erwan, now listen to me. I absolve you from the name with which you were carried away from your Holy Baptism. From this day may you be known as Bishop Yves, arbiter and defender of the poor. May people upon hearing your name remember justice and not revenge. Now go, my son.' Visibly exhausted, Bishop Nicholaz leaned back on his pillows. Despite the table being almost empty, with only the occasional bowl of thick soup or nourishing bouillon being brought to it, the room filled with a bright light as it always had.

Yves received the Bishop's staff and the title deeds for the estates around the restless Avignon during Pentecost, so he travelled to the town on the Rhône at the height of summer. The plains of Provence were throbbing in the summer heat, the wheat had been harvested and threshed, when the long convoy slowly moved across the fields. It was led by a dozen heavily armed horsemen. Immediately behind the advance guard were three tall scholars bearing white, gold-lined flags with the Bishop's insignia. They were dressed in long white surcoats, differentiating them afar from the stocky, dust-covered military flag bearers dressed in leather waistcoats. Accustomed to long marches, the robust soldiers alleviated their hardships with their thoughts, already indulging in the whores and richly laid tables in the cellars of Avignon. Behind them, trying to keep up, was the reliquary bearer with the finger of Saint Jerome, the very finger the saint had used to turn the pages of the Holy Bible and wagged at gossiping virgins. The poor man was already very tired from the weight of the chest used as the reliquary, but he didn't dare fall back too far as right behind him were the three pairs of draught horses from the County of Perche pulling the Bishop's carriage. Used to grazing in the dark forests, these strong animals knew no fear, neither before a bear nor before a lance bearing foot soldier. Count Geoffroy had himself presented them to the Bishop so he would not be ashamed of travelling with scraggy, limping Breton nags. At the back were the footmen and oxen harnessed to wagons stacked with food

and all kinds of military supplies. Despite the harsh sun, the Bishop only allowed a rest at noon. Even before the afternoon heat had abated, he relentlessly drove the dusty convoy on towards the town of Avignon because the discomfort of the journey apparently filled him with a fear of illness. In truth he was only driven by his impatience and sweet excitement. What he could see through the window of the episcopal carriage comforted him and filled him with satisfaction. There was going to be a rich harvest. Full stomachs mean peace in the diocese and a peaceful winter.

The town of Avignon was ready for its new bishop. Nobles as well as the townsfolk, the poorest farmers and labourers wholeheartedly called out his name in the streets. People sincerely believed that a man of such large, trustworthy stature, gentle face and excellent appetite would be a good overlord and righteous judge. Still vivid in their memory was the siege of the town walls behind which the Cathars had sought refuge. To this day stomachs in Avignon still grunt loud as pigs whenever the terrible famine that took its toll through the town at the time is mentioned. This was the reason that Bishop Yves took immediate control of the vineyards, wine cellars and granaries. Following the orders by strict administrators and cellar keepers ever since the Bishop's arrival, a whole army of servants spent their time running about the estates, making sure the master cooks had everything available befitting the episcopal table.

But even more than the news of the excellent way the Bishop Yves managed his estates, word spread about his just judgements. He listened to genuine repentance but severely punished backsliders and fake penitents. The townsfolk initially protested at his verdicts as the guilty were not subjected to bloody quartering, chopping off of limbs or tied to the wheel. The Bishop's soul could not bear the terrible screaming and blood splattering all over the walls of houses, so he had the convicted wretch locked up in a heavy iron cage. The executioner dropped the villain from the arch of the new bridge so they sank into the dark depths of the river and the honest townsfolk instead of gathering in the town square now crowded the banks of the river. He would also not allow the drowned person to be exhibited until they rot away entirely and their body is pecked at and dispersed by ravens – instead, he ordered them to be buried outside the city walls on the second day after carrying out the punishment. People were worried that the punishment was not sufficiently exemplary, that the numbers

of horse thieves and Jewish merchants would increase. But it was not so. The terror of a silent death and talk of the horribly distorted faces of the drowned who had at the bottom of the river come face to face with Satan himself, were more effective than gallows and the axe.

Young ducks were moulting in the summer heat before they would grow new feathers. During this time the castle poulters had their hands full. They would fatten the ducks and geese over the summer, by late autumn plump enough but still young and soft, their necks would be wrung, the pieces of meat preserve in barrels filled with fat. That autumn, however, the master cook called all the apprentices and ordered them to follow the Bishop's example, so the ducks were no longer killed with a hard twist of the neck. Now the poor animals' heads were held in freshly brewed beer until they drowned. As if the young ducks had done something bad in their short lives, perhaps even incited sinful cravings for soft duck meat at the time the papal legate stood before the walls. But the newly-appointed bishop had little time for ducks and poulters. By the autumn he was becoming more and more agitated. The harvest had yet to begin though it seemed the vines would offer him the gentlest of gifts. This would be the sign from God that he has been so eagerly awaiting and praying for every night. He crawled on his knees around the altar of Our Lady praying to her for a good first harvest. In his bedroom he even had the stone thresholds set aside. Beneath them he secretly placed a figurine once pressed into his hand by his beloved aunt Aurueguen. Indeed, the bronze idol had a human body with a ram's head so that any spiteful person would see the fist-size statuette as depicting the Devil. But the Bishop did not betray the Lord. No, he loved Him with all his might. All he was doing was also asking those who could walk about on fern leaves at full moon and those who torch wheat in the fields and love at the bottom of dark rivers or above precipitous cliffs to protect his harvest.

The Bishop deeply believed in a saying used in his native Plougrescant, 'The bag of luck will only be as full as the poor man's stomach at the Master's first harvest.' Evil premonitions haunted Bishop Yves, even though he could not imagine bringing anything but the finest wine in Christendom from his cellars to the table.

To the Bishop's great horror, the evil came true that same autumn.

Misfortune struck just before All Hallows' Day.

Brought before the judge Bishop was Aicelina, accused of once more poisoning the water at the village sources. This time a cow and a couple of pigs had died. Years ago she had been publicly flogged for the same crime, but then only all the chickens in the village had died. Bishop Yves was truly angry when he heard about her repeat offence. How could this woman do this to him right in the middle of his sweet expectation? The mere thought of judgement deprived him of sleep and appetite. But he had no choice. She had screamed and sworn, throwing herself on the ground, tearing away at the ropes by which the jailer and executioner pulled her along through the town, past the Chapel of Saint Bénézet at the bank end of the arch of the bridge that would soon cross the river.

Despite their great love for the Saint, the townsfolk dared not build any further arches of the bridge without permission. Only after the arrival of the new bishop did the work continue to the pride and joy of the people of Avignon who were now fulfilling the vision spoken through the words of a shepherd. They also certainly kept in mind the high income anticipated from the tolls and levies. Right behind the chapel dedicated to the saint, the first new stone arch was already towering over the water, with strong wooden supports stretching towards the opposite bank, ready to support heavy blocks of masonry. Only that now, hanging from the wooden pulleys that helped lift heavy stones into place, was an iron cage. The executioner will release the ropes and send the cage towards the bottom of the river. With the help of oxen, he would only pull the convicted woman's body out of the water the following day, putting her on display for the townsfolk to see before burying the contorted white body outside the northern town walls.

Aicelina only calmed down when she was already inside the iron cage, waiting to be dropped to the bottom of the river. The crowd also stopped cheering, so there was a moment of strange calm. Later they talked of an ominous silence, the birds stopped tweeting, the pigs stopped grunting, the sheep stopped bleating. Allegedly even the waves on the river quietened. At that point the haunting guttural voice of the witch was heard, uttering in an ancient tongue a curse over the Bishop and the town. The people of Avignon did not understand her but Bishop Yves turned pale. This woman was calling him with his real name even though nobody in Avignon had ever heard it.

‘Be damned, Erwan of Plougrescant! And may the town of Avignon forever be damned,’ she hissed with the voice of a snake and a furious lynx. ‘You who closed the heavy church doors behind you, do not think that you can escape me. Neither you nor your seed. You shall suffer for having taken my worthless life and you shall suffer for having lost your greatest treasure. The treasure that was promised to you and which you await because you think it is yours. You will see it, hold it in your hands, but nothing will be left of it. Your greedy lust is only matched by the vanity and rapacity of this town which, under the pretext of a vow to a saint is building the bridge across this river, across my cold grave. But you should know, you greedy scavengers, no stone will ever stay upon stone here, at the place of my execution. Be damned, Erwan of Plougrescant, you and this..’

The executioner released the rope and the heavy cage disappeared into the river before the frightened Bishop could do anything. A cold dizziness suddenly overcame the Bishop. A deathly sweat appeared on his brow and he was barely able to hold on to the masonry railings of the bridge. He did not utter the Lord’s Prayer for the sinner’s soul or ask for her forgiveness. People could see how the ample-bodied judge staggered into the safety of his sedan chair. ‘Take me away. What are you waiting for? Away! Take me to the cellars,’ the cries of the terrified master could be heard.

‘Where? Where should we take him to?’ the bewildered porters asked themselves.

‘To the cellars, to the wine cellar,’ the Bishop was now roaring away with what seemed to be his final strength. The poor porters, startled by the terrifying pain in their master’s cries, picked up the sedan and ran as if being whipped by demons. The townsfolk, having been quenching their curiosity under the town walls and expecting a little excitement with the just judgement, now stood benumbed at the sight of the Bishop’s sedan chair bouncing up and down, the bouncing groans coming from inside fading as it was carried away.

In the cellar, the Bishop immediately ran to the barrel from which they would pour him his favourite wine. It was not a barrel of bull’s blood that would kick you below the knees, knocking you over into the leaves and straw after the first jug. ~~then~~ ~~make~~ You would roll about in the innkeeper’s animal bedding until it brought out in

you a beast with bloodied eyes and sour spit stuck to the beard, grunting like a pig under the skirts of women and pissing into your own clogs.

No, the Bishop's wine gently caressed the roof of the mouth and the tongue, in such a possessive way that it did not even allow the nose to pay attention to anything else but the refined scent of the wine bouquet. It drifted round the mouth awakening memories of early youth or of times when the softness of this blessed drink smoothed a man's cheek and suppled the abdomen. But behind all this gentle scent stood the strong and distinct flavour of a wine blessed by Saint Martin. But now the Bishop was standing, trembling and almost in tears, in front of his treasure. With a deathly fear he held up a goblet of his precious potion.

A piercing scream tore through the underground of Bishop Yves' wine cellars.

'No, dear God! Nooo, please! Leave me these dark cellars, or life is not worth living!'

The man fell to his knees, begging the cellar master to take a taste of his wine, the best wine in Christendom.

'What a disaster, my dear Guido, please, try this wine, tell me, has misfortune merely blinded my senses or has the curse uttered really ruined this divine creation!'

Guido watched his master's torment with surprise, unsure of whether he could be of assistance in any way, so he was glad of the instruction on how to ease his master's pain. With a gesture he was well versed in, he tilted the goblet, but the very next instance with a flash of surprise on his face he hurled the Bishop's precious chalice into the darkness of the underground corridors.

'Lord, may I be quartered by four of Languedoc's strongest horses if this is not the work of Satan! Your Excellency's wine, my Lord, Your Excellency's wine, may I be trampled by a herd of Saracen old hags, Your Excellency's wine is no better than goat piss.'

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