

The FIRST CRUSADE 1095

ARDENNES FOREST
BOUILLON CASTLE
SEMOIS RIVER
CLERMONT
CLUNY
MEUSE RIVER

COLOGNE
RHINE RIVER
TOLLENBURG

OEDENBURG

BELGRADE

SEMLIN

NISCH

PHILIPPPOPOLIS

Eastern
Empire

CONSTANTINOPLIE

CHALCEDON

Sultanate of Rum

NICOMEDIA

HERACLEA

CIVETOT

NICAEA

DORYLAEUM

TARSUS

Taurus Mts.

MARASH

EDESSA

ALEPPO

HAMAH

EMESSA

DAMASCUS

JERUSALEM

BETHLEHEM

Syrian
Desert

Sicily

Creta

Cyprus

TRIPOLI

BEIRUT

SIDON

TYRE

ACRE

JOPPA

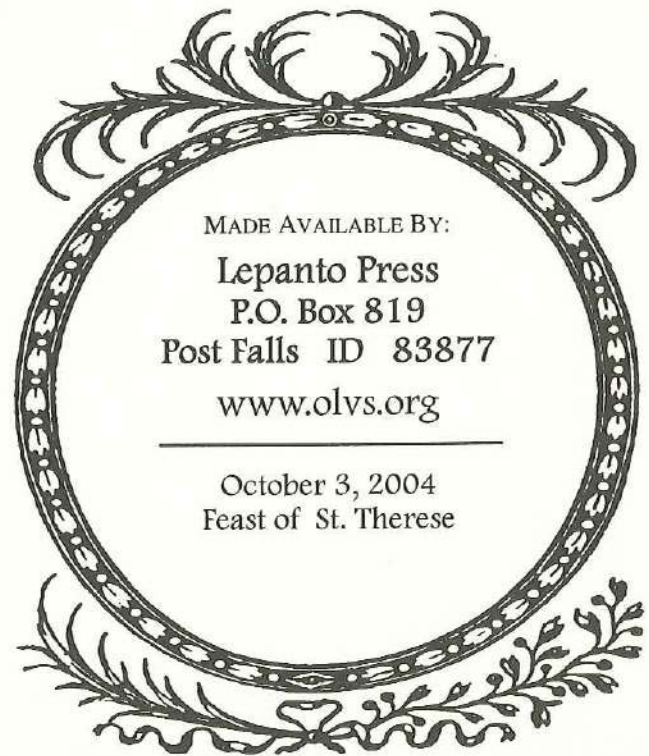
Mediterranean Sea

CAIRO

THE BLUE GONFALON

MARGARET ANN HUBBARD

Illustrated by Shane Miller

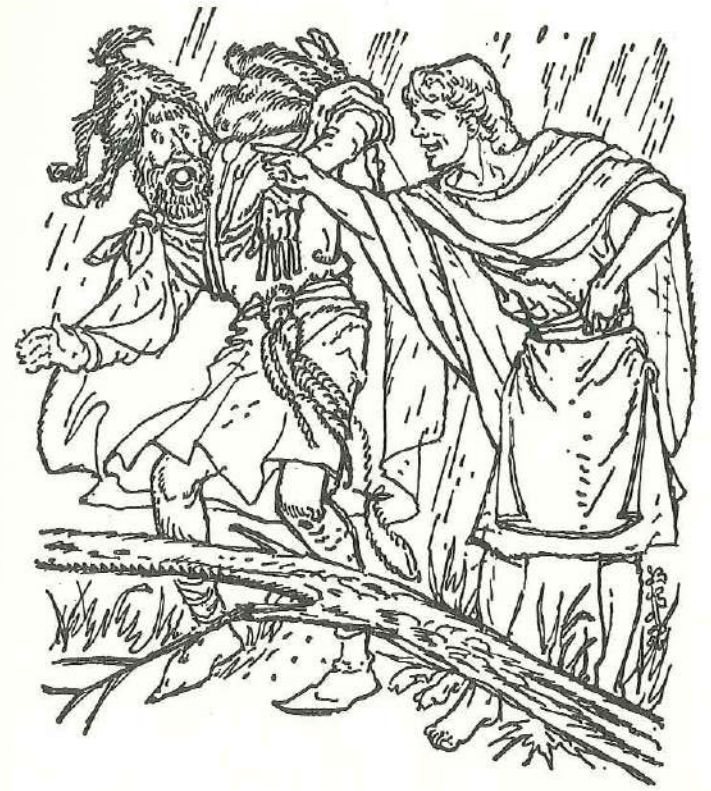


To Godfrey's dear friend and mine,
Florence Melander



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CHAPTER ONE THE POACHER

The rain itself made more noise than Bennet. High up in the lofty awnings formed by the pines the dripping began, coming down branch by branch until it fell finally in leathery plops all over the forest floor. Bennet was barefooted and his doublet was as soaked as the cedars, so he made no sound whatever as he slipped through the underbrush. The worst trouble he had was to keep from laughing because Old Barb looked so funny up ahead, hopping along lopsided as if he were constantly jumping over puddles. He had walked that

way ever since he had come back from Rome with the lance wound in his thigh. The wound had healed badly—Lord Godfrey had said it was a miracle it had healed at all, the way Old Barb lived—but it hadn't slowed him down. He was still the craftiest poacher in the whole Ardennes Forest.

That was why Bennet was so jubilant over catching him red-handed. With four rabbits slung on his back, his stout slingshot looped over his shoulder and a couple of snares in his hand, Barb would have quite a chore convincing the sheriff that he was merely out for a stroll. Not that Bennet had any intention of getting the sheriff. By the time he'd run clear back to the castle, hunt up a marshal or a bailiff and be back here, Old Barb would have disappeared like a magician's trick. He could smell danger, he had often told Bennet, better than a fawn sniffing the wind for its mother.

Only not right now. He was a little too confident of being alone. Although the woods had opened out into a fairy-sized meadow, the old fellow never stopped to glance around, a mistake Bennet would be happy to point out to him later. The enormous cap he wore looked like a complete animal, bobbing along. He had made it out of the whole skin of a kid with the little hoofs dangling at the back and the weather-beaten tail sticking up on top. His own shaggy white hair straggled out like part of the matted fur. His breeches and short tunic were of leather, either tanned by himself or stolen from the tannery, dark now from the wet. Even with the woods still in the bareness of early spring, Old Barb was so forest-colored he'd be invisible in the thicket. Catch him now, Bennet decided, don't take a chance.

Holding back his laughter, rolling soundlessly heel to toe as Old Barb had taught him, the boy loped through the soggy grass. Only a few yards away from the hurrying old gnome, he stopped.

"Your rabbits or your life!" he shouted.

Old Barb spun around so swiftly that the little hoofs made a clatter, his toothless mouth dropped open and the bushy eyebrows flew almost up under the cap. The rabbits slid to the ground. Bennet let out a roar of laughter.

"Now who's the smartest tracker, you or me?" Bennet demanded in small coughs because he couldn't stop laughing. "You didn't hear me, Barb! You didn't even know I was behind you!"

"Of course I didn't!" the old fellow snapped. "Who taught you, anyway?"

"I caught you fair and square so I deserve the credit!"

"Credit nothing!" Barb's thin jaw chopped as if he were chewing something very fast. He always did that when he was angry. "And don't yell. You want to bring every marshal in Bouillon on the run?"

"I don't care who comes! I haven't done anything wrong!" And in his hilarity Bennet fell to his knees, doubled over in the wet grass.

He knew afterward that he couldn't have been hunched down that way very long before he heard the thump of feet—the space of several breaths, possibly. The sound was alarming because only robbers and poachers came this deep into the forest. And a marshal, Edmond. He came sprinting out through the skimpy foliage, a stocky man in the blue livery of Bouillon, his face swollen red. Bennet was a little sorry. It was one thing to make a game of catching Old Barb but something very different to have Edmond come along. Poaching could be punishable by death if the lord of the manor decided so. Lord Godfrey never meted out such a sentence except for murder or highway robbery. But Barb, an old offender in the forest, could well be thrown into the dungeon and forgotten.

Bennet came slowly to his feet. Edmond, puffing, pointed at a spot beyond.

"What's that? Rabbits, are they? So you've been poaching!"

"Me?" Bennet squeaked. His voice was changing and he never knew how it was going to come out. Slowly he turned, feeling prickles run up under his curly mop and right down his snub nose as if the freckles were dancing. The place where Old Barb had stood was empty. Empty, except for a limp heap of rabbits.

"The old barbarian, I suppose he caught them?" the marshal scoffed. "He gets blamed for everything. Where are your snares?"

"I haven't got any snares!"

Edmond pushed Bennet aside. Scuffling his foot through the wet grass, his foot came hard against a hidden rock and he howled at the sharp pain. Balancing on one leg, he pressed the hurt toe in his hand.

"You're the armorer's boy, aren't you? Josef's son?"

"Yes, sir. I'm Bennet."

"Josef's an honest man. Hasn't he taught you to tell the truth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let's have it! Where are the snares?"

In the pouch fastened to Old Barb's belt—how could Bennet say that?

"If the old man caught the rabbits, he wanted them to eat," Edmond sputtered on. "Well, then, why did he dump them here?"

Because he heard you coming, and I didn't. Bennet couldn't say that either. He stared at Edmond's good foot in the soaked shoe. What wouldn't he give to tramp on it hard so it would hurt like the other one, then race off

through the woods so fast that no fat marshal ever would catch him!

"Pick up the rabbits and let's be on our way," Edmond ordered, trying his foot gingerly on the ground. "Walk ahead of me. And no tricks! If you escape I'll summon the archers to hunt you. Straight, now!"

Bennet took hold of the leather thong—no doubt stolen from the tanner—and swung the rabbits to his back. He hated the feel of the soft, dead things. He never had the heart to kill. Watch the animals in the woods, follow them to their dens, lie so still against a log that a little striped skunk would sidle over to him, that was what he loved doing. But not killing.

The marshal had difficulty in keeping up the pace, but Bennet was not concerned for him. He was sick over the thought of having Lord Godfrey know that the son of a member of his household had fallen so low. The Duke of Lorraine was the perfect knight, all of France knew that. Although it had happened when the knight was very young, the story was still told in the armory of how he had been chosen by every tongue to bear the standard of the emperor Henry IV in the decisive battle on the Elster, and he had struck the rival emperor, Rodolf, so furiously with the staff of the banner that Rodolf died a few days later. When Henry needed an army again to march against Pope Gregory VII, Godfrey gathered his forces and was the first to scale the walls of Rome. He had regretted this feat, however, for he was often heard to say that no man should take up arms against the Holy Father. The emperor had given him as reward the territory of Antwerp and the Duchy of Lorraine, making him as powerful as the king of France, but Godfrey took no pleasure in his possessions. He was still worried about the sacrilege of storming Rome. Wrongdoing in any

degree had become repellent to him. And poaching, Bennet thought sadly, was not a small misdemeanor. The master would be sorely disappointed in this son of his faithful armorer. Bennet had no defense. What would his word be worth against Edmond's?

The sun came out and the woods began to steam with an earthy freshness. The long grassy slope crowned by the castle would have been delightful to climb in happier circumstances, for all across it birds were flying up, singing, and grasshoppers were shuttling back and forth. Through the past century, ever since the great stone stronghold had been heaped on the bluff by Godfrey's forefathers, armies of warring barons had stormed up the slope from time to time, shot their stones and arrows against the walls and found them impregnable. Bennet had always seen the castle in the proud light of a possession because in his heart he had sworn fealty to Master Godfrey as his liege lord. Now, with the illegal rabbits on his back, weighed down by the anger of injustice, he saw the mighty battlements as the defeated armies had seen them, impregnable, dark as a prison keep. Even the blue banners flipping themselves dry atop the towers were like tongues stuck out in ridicule.

The sunshine had wakened more than the birds and the grasshoppers. As Bennet approached the gate a half dozen of the younger pages rode out on their small gentle palfreys, took one look at the rabbits and the marshal and swung the horses into a tangled pack in their panic to be first inside with the news. A few ducks in a puddle cocked their heads, quacking. In the courtyard another quacking started, the pages' high-pitched shouts. Deeper voices answered, a few laughs, questions. Poaching? *Josef's* son?

With head hanging, Bennet trudged into the sunshine of the bailey. Not only had a good number of knights assembled

with more joining them, but the tall figure of Lord Godfrey himself was just emerging from the armory with Josef following behind. Godfrey stopped short, a frown on his handsome face, his arms folded, his feet apart as he might have stood on the wall of Rome. The wind lifted his light brown hair from his shoulders, the sun deepened the blue of his tunic and shot bars of light from the silver belt hung with medallions. Bennet came to a stop a few paces off and the rabbits fell with a limp plop against his ankles.

"What's this, Bennet?" Godfrey asked incredulously.

"Poaching, my lord!" Edmond declared. His chest was high and his ruddy face glowing with importance. "I caught him fairly!"

"What was he doing? Why, he was running with the rabbits on his back!"

Bennet's head snapped up. Before he could protest, Godfrey asked in the same quiet tone, "Was he?"

"Well—he was standing there on the path, but he'd been running!"

"Where were the rabbits?"

"On the ground beside him."

"How far away?"

"A foot or two, Sire."

"How far?"

"I don't see what difference it makes, my lord! They were there and he was there!"

"Is that the truth, Bennet?"

Bennet was too near to unmanly tears of anger to do more than nod.

"Did you catch the rabbits?"

"No, Sire, I did not!"

"Very well. André! Take these things to the kitchen. We don't have to waste the fresh meat. Now, Josef, I'll show you

where I was thinking of setting up a new quintaine for the pages——”

“But—but, my lord——” Edmond sputtered.

“Yes?” The look Lord Godfrey fastened on Edmond was cold and still.

“My lord, *somebody* caught the rabbits!”

“Undoubtedly. But that isn’t Bennet’s concern.”

“Well—no! But it’s mine!”

“Then find out who did it,” Godfrey said, and turned away as if the matter were ended.

A ripple of amusement breezed through the crowd, which was a sizable gathering since by now everyone within running distance had arrived. Edmond, very red in the face, blustered off. Little André, shouting to the other pages to wait for him, dragged the rabbits toward the kitchen. Josef gave his son a long regard before he limped after Lord Godfrey. He was a small man, bowed even shorter by the years he had spent bending over a forge in the blacksmith shop, lame from sitting with one leg curled under him while he oiled mail in the armory. The look promised he would get the truth out of his son about the poaching incident, and then there would be another long lecture about the dangers of running with Old Barb.

“I don’t care,” Bennet muttered. “I don’t care about anything as long as Lord Godfrey believed me!”

“It doesn’t make much difference,” a clear voice said close beside him. “You’re not a page anyway.”

Bennet whirled, his fists hard. Leroy, tall and lithe, stood with arms folded in good imitation of Lord Godfrey, his curly black head well up, smiling with his superior air. Leroy never let anyone forget that he was the nephew of the Duke of Normandy. He had eyes as blue as the livery he kept so clean, and he had a voice which with its sweetness could

draw exclamations of delight from the ladies or goad his fellow pages into fist fights for which he never was blamed.

“You’ll never be a page, or a squire or a knight,” Leroy went on, his soft leather shoe stroking a cobblestone. “Too bad you were born the son of a peasant, but there’s nothing you can do about it, is there?”

A couple of knights had turned, listening in astonishment. Leroy was usually very certain that his baiting would not be overheard, but he hadn’t been able to pass up so perfect a chance to aim a dart at his favorite target. Bennet knew why this young nobleman enjoyed cuffing him down. It was because he could leap to the back of a horse faster than Leroy, he could run longer distances without getting winded, he could turn more somersaults down the long slope behind the castle. Only a few days ago, when the pages had gathered noisily in the armory and were challenging one another to feats of skill, Bennet had darned a heavy shirt of chain armor and danced in it until Leroy reminded them all that the peasant had no business sharing the sports of the nobility, and they had been forced to run him out. Leroy had been more overbearing than ever since then.

Bennet glanced at the knights who stood watching. They knew what Leroy had said. But Bennet would have to be the one to start the fight and he was already in enough trouble. Wheeling, he ran across the bailey and out through the Great Gate, to plunge into the brambles surrounding the castle wall. It felt good to fight something. Scraped and scratched, he came out finally on the precipice above the river.

The Semois was always quiet as it flowed past the village of Bouillon. After the rain it was a clay-colored road. Down by the water the huts stood thickly together, scattering up the lower slope as high as they could cling, a motley gathering of homes and the shops of the silversmiths, tanners,

wheelwrights, and other tradesmen who served the castle. In the willows by the water children shouted and dogs barked. Bennet stared glumly down at his own home, a log house propped against the cliff by means of stout pilings. On its thatched roof a cat sat eating something, probably a mouse she had caught in the straw.

Bennet knew he should get home before the news of his escapade could reach Mama. But he plunked himself down on a rock and scooped up a handful of wet clay. He worked hard at it for a while, forming a head that to him looked exactly like Leroy. Then he stood up and took a great deal of pleasure out of smashing it flat with his heel. After that he scowled down again at the cat who was now washing her face. Then in long leaps he plunged down the path.

Mama was kneading bread in the flour trough when Bennet, having scattered the chickens in the dooryard, rushed into the house. She turned and brushed back her hair with her elbow, and her mouth was tight. Antoine, who was six, had evidently been telling her something, for he hung his head and sidled around Bennet toward the door. All Bennet could do at the moment was to make a threatening face at him.

"I needed flour from the mill, but you weren't to be found, no," Mama said. "I had to send Antoine and Arabelle for enough to make the loaves."

"I'll get you some more, Mama. Right away." And Bennet made a lunge for the doorway.

But Violette was not the one to let her children off easily.

"Bennet! What is this Antoine tells me about you getting caught by the marshal?"

Bennet let out a long breath as he turned to his mother. She wore a rough wool sack for a dress and she stood bare-

footed on a dirt floor, but from her sons and daughters she commanded respect.

"Answer me, Bennet!"

"It was nothing, Mama. I was tracking Old Barb and he had a catch of rabbits, and when Edmond came along he dropped them and—well, Edmond thought I was the poacher. That's all."

"That's all! This is nothing that you are a poacher!"

"But I'm not, Mama, I hadn't—"

Violette caught her son by the ear and sat him down hard on the bench by the table. The younger children who had been peeking around the door suddenly disappeared.

"So you have been running wild in the woods again with that old barbarian!"

"But Mama, I—"

"Would you have been caught if you weren't there?"

Bennet shook his head carefully. He would have liked to lay his hand over his smarting ear, but that might remind Mama that she had not boxed the other one.

"I didn't do anything bad, Mama. I don't copy Old Barb. I just like to learn about the woods from him, about how to track and where the animals drink and how you can catch fish by dropping a certain bark on the water, things like that."

"You need to know how to catch the fish for you to be a priest?"

This was old ground and Bennet had to make an effort to be patiently respectful.

"I am not going to be a priest, Mama."

"No? Then you will be an armorer, like your father?"

"No, Mama."

"No, no, no! Always it is no, Mama! Then what will you be?" But before he could answer, she held up her floury

hand. "I know, a knight! It makes no difference that you must be nobly born to be a knight, that you must be taken into a nobleman's household at the age of seven to become a page—" Violette narrowed her eyes at her son. "Do you realize you're fourteen now, the age to be made a squire if you were going to be a knight? And what are you? Nothing!"

Bennet watched his mother reach for the gourd of grease and begin clapping a coating on the coarse, dark mound of dough.

"For the son of a peasant there are but two things to be, a priest or a tradesman, unless he wants to till the soil," Violette went on. "In the priesthood a man can better himself; he can help his brothers to better things, find good husbands for his sisters, support his parents in their old age. He can go from the monastery to the chair of the Pope like our great Urban! But for you, no! Because you cannot be a knight you will be nothing!"

Bennet knew his mother spoke wisely. Once in a while a peasant's son was knighted because of his own deeds of courage or because a nobleman owed a debt of gratitude to the father. But Lord Godfrey owed Papa no debt of gratitude, and a deed of courage could not be performed unless the opportunity presented itself.

"Mama," Bennet said slowly, and he got up and went over to lean on the bread trough beside Violette. "Mama, one reason why I want to be a knight—"

"Is what, yes?"

"Is I want to buy you some silk for a dress."

"Finel A silk dress is what I need, like Godfrey's lady!"

But Mama's hard countenance relaxed and she looked at Bennet as if she saw something new in him. She would never show affection toward her children. Gentleness was a thing she knew little about.

"A silk dress," she said. "It would be nice."

Her touch was light as she tucked the linen towel over the bread to keep it warm for rising.

Bennet poked a finger into the flour, withdrew it and watched the hole close up. He wanted Mama to be satisfied with him, even proud. But he was not going to be either a priest or a tradesman even to please her.